Zuko and the Secretive Basement

by Sanctified_Jasper

Summary

Zuko managed to survive one year in the world of Wizards, but his mission is far from over. Strange and dangerous happenings are going on at Hogwarts. But not even Hermione can answer Zuko's question: How do you manage to lose an entire chamber?

Or that should have been the blurb, but Dobby made a mistake, and pissed off the wrong Replacement Hero.

AKA:
"Zuko and the time things escalated quickly and the plot was temporarily lost."
Zuko has that Summer Time Sadness

Chapter Summary

Zuko was having a decent, if boring summer, until someone screwed up.

Chapter Notes

BECAUSE I NEED TO KNOW YOU READ THIS:
WARNINGS: Allusions of PAEDOPHILIA. VIOLENCE, threats of violence, kidnapping, hostage holding, accidental attempted murder, well that escalated quickly. Also tampering with mail, which is a crime. Allusions of PAEDOPHILIA.

I wanted to think the tags were enough, but given some of the comments from the last part, it's safe to say not everyone reads them. Nothing happens on screen regarding the sexual assault of minors, but there is a mention of Zuko being aware of them having happened off screen to other unnamed/unseen characters in the ATLA world. (Lockhart is NOT a paedophile in this fic, because I'm so freaking sick of that 'trope.') These references are very brief, and I tried to keep it vague, but they are there (in chapter 2).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zuko lay on the garden bench, in the backyard of number 4 Privet drive. The Dursleys were expecting Important Company, though not for some time yet. Petunia and 'Harry' had spent much of the week preparing the house to receive the guests.

Despite his deficiencies in the art of manual labour, Zuko had cleaned windows, washed the car, mowed the lawn, trimmed the flower beds (after weeding of course), pruned and watered the roses, manured the garden beds and repainted the garden bench. It had been dried well before he'd turned it into a napping place.

Now he lay, soaking in the sun, recuperating his energy, trying to rid himself of the sensation of unease that had plagued him for weeks, and wondering what Katara was up to.

She'd only stayed for a week, careful to keep out of sight of the Dursleys; the waterbender turned fairy had gotten along surprisingly well with Hedwig considering the normal relationship between owls and fairies. Katara had told him she'd return, but he'd yet to see her in the five weeks since they'd said goodbye.

She wasn't the only one he'd had no contact with. More than a month had passed, and he'd yet to receive a single letter since Nicolas and Perenelle had sent him a postcard from their new house in Canada the day Katara had left. (They'd been keeping in contact on the sly since he'd returned their stone several months prior, apparently not even Dumbledore was in the know about their most recent bout of faking their own death. (Something about him 'being an ass'.))

Hedwig had returned from her various letter deliveries seeming harassed, but Zuko had no way to find out what happened to her on her flights. Flights which she wouldn't even be going on, if he
wasn't capable of picking a lock with a liberated paper-clip and a pencil.

Zuko continued to refuse to be ashamed of his eclectic skill set.

He felt a prickle along his spine, the sense that he was being watched. He opened his eyes a fraction, looking through his lashes for the voyeur. There, in the nearby hedge, two large, green eyes.

Moving fast, but not as fast as he had once been, he rose from the bench, crossed the distance between himself and his target, and ripped the voyeur from its hiding place.

The creature he'd captured was demented looking, its eyes so wide they appeared crazed. Beneath his fingers Zuko felt a swell of magic, in response he shunted a needle of chi into the centre, like bending without fire. The magic fell apart, as it did for him when he wasn't careful while trying to cast a spell, and the creature began to scream.

Zuko clamped his free hand around its mouth; across the garden Dudley made his presence known.

“What the-”

“Get back in the house Dudley!” In a few seconds, Zuko had gone from relaxed to under-siege. When he spoke, it was with the authority he'd mastered during his command of the Wani. Dudley scampered to obey.

Zuko had no idea what this creature was, what it wanted, or how it had found him. It was possible it was a friend, but those who meant you well didn't tend to spy from bushes.

Dudley waddled into the house, calling for his mother, Zuko hot on his heels with the creature. Petunia screamed when she saw it, bringing a soapy frying pan up, hefting it like a weapon, ready for use.

Zuko slammed the creature on the sturdy dinning table.

“What are you, why are you spying on me, who sent you?” Zuko removed his hand from the creature's mouth.

“Please mister Harry Potter sir, Dobby is here to warn Harry Potter sir.”

“Warn me about what?” Zuko asked, as Petunia and Dudley waited nervously.

“Harry Potter must not go back to Hogwarts.”

“Why?”

“There is a plot, Harry Potter. A plot to make terrible things happen at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” Zuko noticed his 'relatives' flinching from the corner of his eye.

“Then I have to go back, if I'm not there my friends will be in even more danger.”

“Friends who don't even write to Harry Potter?”

Zuko narrowed his eyes at the Dobby creature.

“And how would you know that?” Petunia and Dudley shuddered in fear at the dark tone in 'Harry's' voice. Dobby squeaked, its eyes somehow widening further. It scrabbled in its filthy pillow case for a bundle of letters.
“Dobby hoped if Harry Potter thought his friends had forgotten him, Harry Potter might not want to go back to Hogwarts!”

So this had been what was upsetting Hedwig, Zuko snatched the letters and threw them onto the table.

Then a horrifying thought struck him, the unease of the last few weeks dropping into his stomach, like a ball of ice-cold lead.

“Katara. The Fairy that left here a few weeks ago, did you hurt her?” Dobby shook, Zuko shook him harder. “DID YOU HURT HER!”

Dobby, screaming, scrabbled in its pillow case again, this time it pulled out a crystal vial, like the ones Zuko used in potions class. Inside, with barely any room to move, was Katara, her wings bent at odd angles.

Zuko's hand wrapped around the vial with deceptive calm, he felt detached from himself as he spoke.

“You are not to interfere with my mail again, and more importantly, you are never to touch her again. Get out.” Zuko shunted another burst of chi into the creature, a final warning, before releasing it.

Glancing to Petunia he said “I have to get her to London.”

Dobby disappeared with a pop, and Zuko rushed upstairs. He emptied out one of the Sunflower Café baskets, stuffing a small cushion inside, with great care he popped the holey cork from the vial and slid Katara out onto the cushion. With less care he wrote a rushed note to the Darlings.

'She's been without Dust for weeks, captured by stranger, just found out PLEASE HELP HER'

“Hedwig, take Katara to the Darlings, please, fly safe and fly fast as you can.”

Hedwig made a noise of understanding and perched on the basket.

“Hold on Katara.” He sealed the lid, and opened the window. Hedwig swept past with such speed, she was gone from his sight in seconds. Turning to his room Zuko ran a frustrated hand through his hair.

“I have to get to London,” he said to no one.

Hastily, he pack a bag with two changes of clothes, a wallet of muggle currency, and a pouch of wizard coins, he added his wand as an after thought and raced downstairs.

Petunia was waiting for him with a sour expression, he cut her off before she could rant.

“I'm sorry I had to bring that thing in the house, I didn't think you'd want me dealing with it in the back yard, where the neighbours might see.”

For a brief second, Petunia's pinched face gave way to an expression of fury.

“A taxi will be here for you soon, it will take you to the train station.” Harry blinked at the unexpected kindness. “Just don't come back tonight, the Masons will be here.”

“I understand.” Zuko took the chance to gather his missing mail from the table, and stuff it in his bag, before the taxi arrived.

The trip to the train station was quite, save a very short discussion between Zuko and the driver.
“You seem nervous, everything alright?”

“I just found out a dear friend is in critical condition, she could die.” ’Or worse.’

Katara had explained to Zuko about the Fairies of Neverland, and their relationship with Pixie Dust, the stabilising properties, and the horror stories of what happened to fairies who went too long without.

The trip to London had never, felt so long.

________________________________________________________________________

Michael was the only Darling in the Travel Store when Zuko finally arrived.

“The other two took her to Neverland as soon as she arrived. Want to tell me what happened?”

Zuko slid down a wall, it had been a long time since he’d last cried, but now his body trembled and his eyes stung. Katara was in this world because of him, had been captured because of him. If she died, it would be because of him.

“There... there was this creature, it called itself Dobby. It's been stealing my mail since summer started, trying to stop me from going back to Hogwarts. It was trying to make me think no one cared about me, that, I don't know, that I had no one. It must have thought... I don't know what it thought. That Katara was trying to contact someone for me? Maybe?” Zuko sank his fingers into his hair, gripping the strands to tight it felt like they'd rip out. “She was stuck in a crystal vial for weeks. I should have known something was wrong, how could I have not known?”

“How could you have known?” Micheal sat down across from him.

“There are Spirits who tell me things, they could have told me.” Zuko felt sick, “but then, Katara doesn't have anything to do with 'my' Destiny, which is what they're interested in.” But maybe it would explain the sense of unease he'd been feeling.

“I'd like to be able to tell you she's going to be alright.”

“Please don't lie to me.”

The duo sat in silence.

________________________________________________________________________

Zuko tried to get his mind off Katara’s condition by sorting through his mail. Half of the mail was the letters he’d sent, the rest had been sent to him. He had a dozen from Neville and Hermione, three from Ron, a few from various other acquaintances, and one from a man named Remus.

Evidently, Remus had shared a dorm room with James Potter, and been prefects with Lily Evans, the man was offering more photos, and stories of Harry's parents during their school days.

Zuko considered carefully, did he want to know about Harry's parents?

He put the question aside for the rest of his mail.

Ron had invited him to stay at his place for the summer, as had Neville, Hermione sent anecdotes about her summer school, and her research concerning the books the Spirits had made her read.

'I get the feeling you already suspected: It's the ring.’

________________________________________________________________________
The second night of Zuko's stay, John returned with news.

“Queen Clarion thinks Katara will be alright, they have her submerged in pixie dust, they're going to leave her there until she can get out by herself. From what I heard, Katara regained consciousness long enough to tell Clarion a 'Yue' had been 'keeping her afloat.' Whatever that means.”

“Yue's a princess from our homeland, she turned into the Moon, they were friends.”

Neither brother was sure how to respond to that. They'd been told, via the Fairies, about Katara's (and by extension: Zuko's) unusual background; but there were just some things that weren't easy to responded to.

Zuko was staring unseeing at various travel brochures, when John spoke.

“You should go home, we'll contact you if we hear anything, but at this point... no reason to waste time here.”

Zuko nodded, the older man was right.

John walked him to the train, and saw him off, Zuko continued to stare at the world, still not really looking at it. Somehow he managed to make it back to Privet Drive, Petunia stuck her head out of the kitchen when he entered the house.

“You're back then.” He nodded in response, Petunia stood awkwardly in the doorway, as if she had something else to add, but didn't know how to phrase it, or make herself ask.

“She's with healers now, they think she got there in time but... it's just a waiting game at this point, she'll get better or she won't.”

There was still something else unsaid, he could see it, but he couldn't bother figuring out what it was, he waited for her to speak.

“What... Who, is she?” The woman seemed genuinely curious. He contemplated how to answer.

“Her name is Katara, she's a Fairy of Neverland, and she's my friend.”

“And that... thing?”

Zuko didn't bother to hide his sneer.

“My contacts say it was something called a 'House Elf,' but according to them, what we saw was radical, and abnormal behaviour.” A silence stretched between them, uncomfortable and heavy. “Was there anything else?” He was sick of waiting.

“The Masons commented on the portrait you sent us for Christmas, asked where we got it.” Zuko understood the question in her statement.

“I made it,” her expression made it clear, she'd been afraid he'd say that. Petunia squared her shoulders, working herself up to say something she didn't want to say.

“Mrs. Mason wanted one for her niece, would you...” as amusing for Zuko as it was, to watch the woman act like she was choking on an invisible lemon, he really didn't want to be dealing with people right now. In an uncharacteristic move, he took pity on the woman.

“I have some wood left from Christmas, if I move some of the things around in the garden shed I
should have enough room. Did Mrs. Mason have a subject matter in mind?”

Petunia somehow managed to look relieved, without losing an ounce of her 'choking on a lemon' expression.

“Apparently her niece is very into...” Zuko wondered if his 'aunt' was in actual physical pain, “mermaids and dragons.” Petunia shuddered.

“Oh I bet Vernon loved that.” The thought of the obese man finding out brought a small smirk to his face.

“He doesn't know, Mrs. Mason approached me about it while the men were talking business, she's willing to pay for a picture a bit bigger than ours.” Then she mentioned how much Mrs. Mason was willing to pay, and Zuko felt his eyebrows shoot into his hairline.

'At least it pays well, and it'll help me keep my mind off of Katara.'

“I'll get started right away.”

There was enough room in the garden shed for his work. Just.

Before he even began to work on the wood, Zuko drew ink portraits of his designs, trying to find something that was just right. Which was much harder for someone he'd never met, than his companions from school.

Added to that delay, Zuko spent several minutes cursing himself out, when he realised: every mermaid he drew bore Katara's face.

In the end, he settled on a design depicting a mermaid, (still Katara,) and an old 'Eastern' dragon (Uncle Iroh), playing Pai Sho on a beach. Even if the game was unknown in this world, it was clear they were playing some kind of board game.

He was finishing the final step of treatment, to protect the picture, when Petunia knocked on the shed door.

“Just a moment,” Zuko called to let her know he'd heard. He'd established with her when she'd brought him lunch the first day of work, some steps required a very still environment, he'd let her know when it was safe to enter, or open the door himself.

Four minutes later he opened the door to Petunia, holding a plate with a sandwich in one hand, and a letter in the other.

“An owl brought this for you ten minutes ago... how's the picture?”

Zuko accepted the letter, opening it as he replied.

“Finished, you can send it to Mrs. Mason tomorrow.”

Petunia responded, but Zuko had no idea what she'd said, the words on the paper drowning everything out.

“Harry, Got word from Wendy, Katara's up and about. She says she doesn't remember much about what happened. Clarion's going to keep her in N.L. until the healers are sure there's no side effects.

The girls send their love. Regards, Michael Darling.”
In the back of his mind, Zuko realised he now understood the expression 'weak in the knees,' as he dropped to the ground, flooded with relief. Petunia's startled squawk of 'Harry!' brought him back to his senses.

“She's going to be alright, she's going to be alright!”

Chapter End Notes

Out Take:
Zuko Potter and the Out Takes - chapter 09: Previously on Zuko Potter
Canon Levels: a completely accurate summary of Philosophical Rock, just in case you forgot anything important

'The Wani' - Zuko's ship has no canon name, but I'm a huge fan of Kimberly T, who wrote some amazing Zuko centric stuff, and called his ship the Wani. I have accidentally stolen that, because I loved it so much it sunk into my head-canon and I didn't realise until editing and deemed it too late to change, and vote we make it canon like Helix from the 212th. (that's a Star War Clone Wars reference... I'll see myself out.)
A few days later, one of the school owls swooped through his window with his school letter. Soon thereafter another school owl swooped through his window, dropped off a letter and, after a quick hoot to Hedwig, left again.

“What was that about?” Zuko and Hedwig stared at each other, but Hedwig refused to divulge the secrets of the conversations of owls. “Right... let's see what we've got,” Hedwig moved closer, as if to read over his shoulder. “It's from Hermione, she's going to London for school supplies next Wednesday.”

He looked at Hedwig, she looked back. He got the impression she would have said 'I shall carry her your RSVP,' if she could talk.

It occurred to him that holding conversations with one's owl, was perhaps not normal, even if half the discourse was imaginary.

“Thanks Hedwig, could you drop by Neville's place as well? Might as well make it a group trip.”

He penned the two notes, and Hedwig was preparing to leave when yet another owl fell through his window. Zuko nudged it with his toe, convinced it had died mid flight, and only luck had brought it to his window.

It moved, a vague wheezing emitting from deep within its feathers.

“Oh...” Zuko shared another look with Hedwig, but she seemed as confused about the situation as he was. Nudging the strange owl again, Zuko noticed a letter attached to its leg. He tried to touch the owl as little as possible while retrieving it.

“Of, it's from Ron... he wants to know when I'm going to Diagon Alley...” Zuko gave his owl a beseeching look, “House Elf stole my mail?” Hedwig ruffled her feathers in a way that indicated amusement.

While Zuko appreciated that Ron was trying to change for the better, and had seen his efforts to that effect: it didn't mean Zuko was ready to be friends with the boy.
“Urgh, hang on Hedwig, I'd better tell Hermione we'll be having a bit more company.”

Zuko stepped out of Gringotts, his morning had been spent going over his finances for the last year. The Goblins claimed to have been sending him quarterly updates, but he'd not received any. There was an official investigation under way.

Checking his watch, Zuko grimaced, he still had over half an hour to burn before he was due to meet up with the others. He hadn't planned on being at Gringotts so early in the morning, but the Spirits had ‘insisted.’

'Now what?' he thought in their metaphorical direction. The response was a reminder of the Invisibility Cloak in his satchel, and a sudden desire to explore Knockturn Alley.

Zuko ducked in, under and around several stacks of merchandise between him and the alley, ensuring he was difficult to track visually for a few seconds. He came out the other side invisible. His training in moving unseen, combined with his cloak, allowed him to navigate to the alley, getting several metres in, undetected, before he realised he had a problem.

Unlike Diagon, where he could avoid bumping into people this early in the day, and where accidental bumps would be ignored in fuller traffic, Knockturn was filled with people, and creatures, who looked like they would slit the throat of any such offenders, before one could mutter an 'excuse me.'

The image he got, wasn't helped by the fact several of the alley goers were selling body parts, one creature even boasting his goods were from genuine muggle children.

His Spirit dictated goal was further down the alley, but the sense of urgency was lacking, he had some time.

A cart caught fire on one side of the alley, people flailed about to put it out. An augumenti spell had it doused in less than a minute, by which time the seller who'd claimed 'genuine muggle children parts' was slumped against the stone wall, his knife, sitting on his carving tray, had a brand new blood stain, and Zuko was escaping across the roof tops.

(It took the people of Knockturn Alley another eight and a half minutes, before they realised the seller was dead. A fight broke out, and a stray shove toppled the body sideways, a smear of blood from the severed cervical column announcing his demise like a sale banner. The alley's denizens descended on the corpse and its wares. When they pulled away, not even the bones were left.

But Zuko knew none of this, as he worked his way inside a store by the name of Borgin and Burkes.)

He was sure, by the feel of the Spirits, that he was there to observe something, not to take part. The sky light he'd used as an entrance gave him easy access to the rafters, perfect for watching over the store and any goings on. The problem was, there was so much dust in the rafters that one wrong move, and he'd give himself away.

He wasn't waiting long; before he had time to finish cataloguing the varied dark artefacts, the door opened, admitting Draco Malfoy and an older version of the boy. Zuko figured it was his father or an uncle. The senior Malfoy made his way to the counter, sparing a lazy glance at the display items, before ringing the small counter top bell.

He turned just in time to see Draco reaching for a glass eye.
“Touch nothing, Draco.” The boy, caught in the act, pouted and whined.

“I thought you were going to buy me a present.”

“I said I would buy you a racing broom,” the elder blond began drumming his fingers on the counter.

“What’s the good of that if I’m not on the house team?” Draco’s sulk dropped dangerously close to temper-tantrum territory, his attitude and question received only a sneer.

A sullen silence stretched between the two wizards, before at last a stooping man appeared behind the counter.

“Ah, Mr Borgin,” the elder Malfoy greeted him.

“Mr Malfoy, what a pleasure to see you again, delighted – and young master Malfoy, too – charmed. How may I be of assistance? I must show you, just in today, and very reasonably priced—”

“I’m not buying today, Mr Borgin, but selling,” Malfoy senior cut in. The smile faded from Borgin’s face.

“Selling?”

“You have heard, of course, that the Ministry is conducting more raids,” Mr Malfoy removed a scroll from his pocket and presented it to Mr Borgin. “I have a few – uh – items at home that might embarrass me, if the Ministry were to call...”

Mr Borgin adorned himself with nose-spectacles, and read the scrolls contents. With care Zuko managed to get himself over the counter in time to see the document was some kind of list.

“The Ministry wouldn’t presume to trouble you, sir, surely?” Mr Malfoy sneered in response.

“I have not been visited yet. The name Malfoy still commands respect, yet the Ministry grows ever more meddlesome. There are rumours about a new Muggle Protection Act - no doubt that flea-bitten, Muggle-loving fool Arthur Weasley is behind it, and as you can see, certain facets of these poisons might make it appear—”

“I understand, sir, of course. Let me see...”

“Can I have that?” Draco’s voice drew the attention of the adults, to where he pointed at a withered hand on a cushion. Zuko had been keeping notice of where the boy had moved, so he was less surprised than the two men, but he was also very annoyed. The Spirits wanted him in this store to witness this deal, and Draco was interrupting.

Zuko bit back all his reactions as Mr Borgin abandoned the elder Malfoy for the young, scurrying over as he exclaimed:

“Ah, the Hand of Glory! Insert a candle and it gives light only to the holder! Best friend of thieves and plunderers! Your son has fine taste sir!”

Ah, so it was Draco’s father, not an uncle.

“I hope my son will amount to more than a thief or plunderer, Borgin.” Mr Malfoy’s tone was so cold Borgin shivered and began backtracking, but the elder Malfoy wasn’t done yet, and his voice turned from cold to frigid as he continued. “Though if his school marks don’t pick up, that may indeed be all he is fit for.”
“It's not my fault,” Draco whined in his defence. “The teachers all have favourites, that Hermione Granger –”

“I would have thought you'd be ashamed that a girl of no wizard family beat you in every exam.”

Zuko took a brief few seconds to feel smug on Hermione's behalf, and quite proud of his companion. Borgin cut through the feeling as he began talking again, in his oily voice.

“It's the same all over, wizard blood is counting for less and less.”

“Not with me,” Mr Malfoy sounded offended at the very notion.

“No, sir, nor with me, sir,” Borgin agreed with haste.

“In that case, perhaps we can return to my list, I am in something of a hurry, Borgin, I have important business elsewhere today.”

Something in his last statement made the Spirits prick up in interest, then fade as the men began to haggle, Zuko allowed his attention to wander towards the younger Malfoy as he walked around the store. As he drew close to a large, black cabinet, the Spirits perked in interest yet again, but presented no sense of urgency or overt importance.

Before Draco could touch the cabinet, his father called to him, done with his dealing at last, with parting instructions to Borgin to collect the items tomorrow, the duo left. As soon as the door shut behind them Borgin broke out into dark and angry mutters, claiming that, if rumours were true, Malfoy hadn't even sold him half of the the dark artefacts in Malfoy Manor.

Zuko waited for Borgin to return to the back room, before leaving through the skylight. He moved across the roofs of Knockturn Alley, watching the denizens selling bits and piece, and bits and pieces of people. An angry glare adorned his face as he plotted the best way to route out the child murdering, child eating monsters of the alley. He missed his Dao, he wasn't sure they'd be enough, but he doubted even magic could save you from decapitation.

He half expected the Spirits to berate him, but from the intentionally passive feeling he got from them, he thought he might actually be able to burn the whole damned alley to the ground here and now, and the Spirits wouldn't even try to stop him.

Zuko met up with Hermione and her parents on the steps of Gringotts, her parents seemed very pleasant... for the two minutes he managed to speak with them, before an entire horde of ginger haired wizards appeared. The onslaught was chaotic, and Zuko, still angered from his discovery of Knockturn Alley's typical business, was hard pressed to not attack at every boisterous gesture the family made in an effort to escape the attention and noise.

It was over sooner than he thought, but not as soon as he would have liked. The group met Neville and his Grandmother as the pair were exiting the building.

When it was revealed Zuko had already procured his money, Neville invited him to wait at a small café nearby, while the two families arranged their money. Zuko's pleasure at his temporary release from the Weasley madness was short lived, as he realised Neville's grandmother was terrifying.

Within an instant, Zuko drew up his best 'prince' manners, and proceeded to engage the enemy. Zuko would be the first to admit he was an awkward person, and suffered in any situation that required him to interact with other people, but his quiet, serious-but-polite attitude seemed to win Augusta Longbottom over well enough.
Though what 'like looking at Frank and James' meant, was beyond Zuko, and given Augusta had muttered it so quietly, that even his abnormal hearing had almost missed it, he wasn't about to ask.

When the Grangers and Weasleys returned, it was decided they would break up into smaller groups, and meet back up in an hour's time at Flourish and Blotts to get their school books.

Mr Weasley was quick to drag the Doctors Granger off to the Leaky Cauldron for a drink. Zuko tried not to judge the man, but the fact Mr Weasley was stopping Hermione's parents from sharing her experiences, and views of Diagon Alley, had Zuko frowning at the man's back.

The twins meanwhile, had spotted their friend Lee Jordan, and taken off after him, Percy excused himself with mentions of needing a new quill, and Ginny and Mrs Weasley were headed to buy second hand robes.

Augusta Longbottom announced she would be 'chaperoning' her grandson and his friends. Ron looked set to argue, but Zuko thanked Augusta for her offer and agreed before the other boy could get a word out.

Zuko also made a mental note, to discuss adding 'how to not be an arse to your elders,' to Ron's studies. (Zuko was something of an expert on what not to say.)

It was pure coincidence that Ron got no say in the attack plan Zuko, Hermione and Neville devised as they discussed their shopping needs.

In a stationary store, Hermione cornered him; so subtle were her actions, he didn't see it coming until it was too late.

“How's Katara?”

He stiffened, shoving down his emotional response.

“She's fine, how's summer school?”

“Good, I've already completed my course work for the year.” She lapsed into silence as she compared parchment stock, Zuko thought she was done with the questioning.

He wasn't that lucky, and he knew he should have known better.

“So how are you feeling, considering Katara.”

He froze, hand halfway to the parchment, squeezed his eyes shut trying to – blockitoutblockitout – stay in control of his feeling. He regretted telling her what had happened with Dobby and Katara.

“Harry,” her voice was so understanding, even though he knew she couldn't begin to comprehend what he felt. She'd been there, though, throughout the year, helping him adapt, figuring things out. He owed it to her to try.

“She's awake and alert, and answering questions, moving around on her own, she's even back to flying short distances. The healers don't think she's suffered any lasting effects from Dust deprivation...”

“But you're worried about something else.”
“She was trapped for weeks, weeks spent in a vial so small she couldn't even move her arms! And I let the bastard who did that to her go! That thing, is still alive and out there, and what if it decides to risk it, and go after her again. What if it goes after her to get to me?! That's what it did, that's why she almost died, because it was trying to get to me!” Zuko struggled to keep his voice down, his hands were shaking with the need to do something, anything, to get vengeance for Katara. (*At night in the pouring rain, Katara so angry, she needed, needed, needed, didn't need this*)

He'd let the chance for vengeance go, in order to get her to medical help, part of him knew he'd done the right thing.

But part of him called for blood, and he wondered if the madness of his family was ingrained in his soul.

He shoved all his feelings down and let them burn, dragging his mask of calm back into place.

“I'll be fine, I always am. I have to be.”

They stood in silence, Hermione holding her hand scant breaths from his, waiting for him to bridge the gap.

Zuko twined their fingers together, Hermione applied a light pressure, he returned the gesture and pulled away. Part of the shadow sitting around his heart, some of the weight on his shoulders, melted away.

Soon enough, the group made their way to Flourish and Blotts. They weren't the only ones, however; a large swarm of people blocked the entrance to the store. A banner caught Zuko's attention with ease.

**GILDEROY LOCKHART**
will be signing copies of his autobiography
**MAGICAL ME**
today 12.30 – 4.30 pm

“We can actually meet him!” Zuko stopped short, looking at Hermione in surprise. He'd never heard her squeal before. It was... alarming. “I mean, he's written almost the whole booklist!”

Augusta sniffed with disdain.

“If you want stories for silly witches, he's quite good; but if you want to learn anything worth its salt, 'The Unabridged Guide to Dealing with Dark Forces' by Madam Penelope Johnson is what you want. That Lockhart's a braggart and a clown. He couldn't cast his way out of a wet paper bag, let alone fight off monsters.”

Hermione opened her mouth to argue, but stopped when Zuko put a hand on her arm, and shook his head. Madam Longbottom's words had been met by the Spirits with approval, and a sensation Zuko could only describe as: raucous applause.

Hermione frowned, giving Zuko a questioning look. He tapped his temple and pointed up, trying to indicate without saying, that the Spirits agreed with Augusta.

Hermione made a querying noise at the exchange, but seemed to come to a realisation at the same time as Hermione.

Ron missed the exchange, too busy muttering unsavoury things about Lockhart.
“Madam Penelope Johnson you said?” Hermione asked Augusta. The older witch blinked at the shift, certain Hermione had been going to argue, fooled like so many young witches. It wasn’t often Augusta enjoyed being wrong, but this was a fine example of such a moment.

Inside the store was madness, despite Augusta’s views on Lockhart, the quartet of students did still have to purchase his books, they were on the school booklist. Grabbing some copies of Lockhart’s books, the group made their way up to where the Weasleys and the Grangers were waiting in line.

“Oh, there you are, good.” Mrs Weasley sounded out of breathe, and kept patting her hair. “We’ll be able to see him in a minute...”

Zuko opened the book he’d grabbed, and began reading.

When Lockhart came in to view at last, Zuko almost gagged. The man was surrounded by pictures of himself, all playing it up for the crowds, winking and smiling. Zuko hadn’t known this level of self-infatuation was possible. Though he had once met an actor who talked to his own reflection, and answered himself. He wondered if Lockhart did that.

Another mental scoff, and he went back to the book, it was campy trash, but he didn't want to put it down.

A short, irritable looking man danced around, taking photographs with a camera that let off purple smoke, every time the bulb flashed.

“Out of the way, there,” he snarled at Ron, moving back to get a better shot. “This is for the Daily Prophet.”

“Big deal,” Ron scoffed, rubbing his foot where the photographer had stepped on it.

Lockhart looked up, having heard Ron’s remark, and spotted Zuko standing nearby. The wizard jumped up and shouted, “It can't be Harry Potter?”

The crowd parted, whispering with excitement. Lockhart dived forwards, seized Zuko’s arm and tried pulling him to the front.

Lockhart’s cologne filled Zuko’s nose, as his book tumbled to the floor under the sudden assault. A forgotten fear reared it’s head, as Lockhart rubbed a thumb along Zuko’s bicep, trying to persuade the boy to move. (Minister Wang’s petal soft hand on his arm, his mother’s poorly hidden terror at the sight, years later in the Earth Kingdom, his knife through Wang’s throat, five children found alive, none of them saved.)

Zuko didn’t even think as he moved, fingers digging into delicate flesh, body twisting and pulling.

Lockhart hit the ground with a loud whump, Zuko let go and backed up, wide eyed, hands trembling. For a moment it seemed that no one so much as breathed, then the photographer snapped a shot, the flash and poof of the camera had Zuko flinching backwards ever further, trying to cover his head.

Augusta Longbottom and Molly Weasley stepped between Zuko and the man.

Behind them Hermione, Neville and the Weasely children formed a loosely spaced guard around Zuko, to stop the muttering crowd getting too close.

Without warning Lockhart let out a laugh, getting to his feet and wagging a finger at Zuko, as if they
were sharing a joke.

“And that’s why he’s the boy who lived!” Lockhart added another laugh, the crowd following suit, laughing and clapping, as if they’d just watched a sparring display, and not Zuko over reacting with violence.

“Ah, Harry, why don’t you come on up, we’ll take a photo and I can make an announcement I’ve been waiting for the perfect moment to make?” Lockhart made a waving gesture, trying to entice Zuko to join him on the stage.

Zuko looked to Hermione and Neville, they looked back. The trio were in the midst of a non-verbal discussion, when Lockhart cut in with “bring your friends of course, it will affect them too.”

An exchange of raised eyebrows later and Zuko, Hermione, Neville and all of the Weasley children were headed to the stage.

Lockhart arranged the children, facing the camera moved to put his arms around the two nearest, but then thought better of it.

“Nice big smiles everyone!”

Zuko settled for a grimace, the flash from the camera almost blinding him.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Lockhart started, “when young Harry and his friends stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, they only wanted to buy my autobiography – which I shall be happy to present them now, free of charge –” Lockhart paused as the crowd cheered, “he had no idea, that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book, Magical Me. Harry and his school fellows will, in fact, be getting the real, magical me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing that this September, I will be taking up the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!”

The group found themselves being presented with the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart.

“That was debasing,” Zuko muttered darkly as they tried to exit the store.

“Look on the bright side,” Hermione’s voice cutting through his growing ire. “At least we didn't have to pay for the books, which are both expensive and, according to Madam Longbottom, full of it.”

Zuko let out a quiet snort, sharing a smirk with the witch.

“Bet you loved that, didn't you Potter?” Zuko raised a brow as Draco Malfoy made his presence known. “Famous Harry Potter, can't even go into bookshop without making the front page.”

“Leave him alone, he didn't want all that!” Ginny's sudden defence of him came as a (pleasant) surprise.

“Got yourself a girlfriend to defend you, Potter?”

“Oh it's you,” Ron sneered as he at last pushed his way through the crowd, to re-join Zuko’s group.

“Weasley,” Draco sneered back. “Good thing you had Potter with you, your family would have starved for a month to afford all those books.” Ron dumped his books into Ginny's cauldron, with his sister's books, and flung himself at Malfoy. Between them, Hermione and Neville managed to hold the ginger wizard back.
Zuko watched, preparing to step in, when Arthur Weasley appeared.

“Ron! What are you doing? It's mad in here, let's go outside.”

“Well, well, well, Arthur Weasley.” Malfoy senior oozed onto the scene.

“Lucius.”

“Busy time at the Ministry, I hear. All those raids... I hope they're paying you overtime?” Lucius reached into Ginny's cauldron, and pulled out one of the older textbooks, one of the ones the Weasley's had had to get second hand. Malfoy tutted scornfully at the book.

Zuko hung back as the elder Malfoy taunted the youngest Weasley. He could sense the Spirits taking interest.

+:Pay attention,:+ the Spirits impressed upon him, +:this moment is important.:+

So Zuko watched closely as the Malfoy handled Ginny's book.

'There,' a frown formed on the young man's face as he spotted a motion out of place. 'Sleight of hand, but for what?'

Things boiled over soon after, and Zuko slid out of the store with the Weasleys.

“Ginny,” a light touch to her elbow brought her to a stop. “Hey, can I take a quick look at the books in your cauldron? Please?”

The young girl squeaked and nodded, looking like she wanted to flee or pass out. Zuko examined the books, all of them but Lockhart's were second hand, but all of them were from the school list... except for one.

It felt like a normal book, but for the sensation of 'oily,' that wasn't quite a physical sensation beneath Zuko's fingers as he held the book; his scar throbbed like an echo. Something about it left him feeling very disturbed.

“Ginny, did you or your mother pick up this book?”

The girl looked confused, and shook her head.

“Is it alright if I hang on to this?” For a second he thought she was going to say something, a protest perhaps, but she nodded again in consent. “Thank you.”

He slipped it into the inner pocket of his jacket and offered her his arm. She'd stepped up to help him in the store, he may as well make an effort to get to know her, he'd decided.

“Shall we?” He nodded towards the backs of the Weasleys, several stores down. Blushing heavily Ginny slipped her arm through his and they headed off.

For a moment Zuko had the strangest feeling, like the Spirit guiding him was slapping themselves in the face, but brushed it off. Why would spirits smack themselves in the face?

Chapter End Notes
I just want to make it clear, Zuko himself was not assaulted. Minister Wang - an OC created so I could make Zuko's reality even more horrible - was a paedophile, who Zuko met when he was a child, but Zuko was too well protected by his mother, who knew exactly what kind of person Wang was (even if she couldn't do anything about him because he was 'too useful to the Fire Nation to throw away').

Zuko only knew that Wang's perfume was cloying, that there was something deeply unsettling about the man, and that his mother was terrified of the idea of Zuko being left alone with him.

Several years later (during his exile), Zuko quickly put together his encounter, with the spate of missing children in the village in the Fire Nation Colonies that Wang had recently been assigned to,
Sometimes, when two people are a little too good at their jobs, they overcompensate for each other, and shenanigans ensue when, in trying to fix things, things are made worse.

Zuko dreamt he was in his workshop at Hogwarts, tea brewed and ready to pour. Across from him sat a Spirit, he recognised her, the foreign Spirit who'd enlisted him as a 'replacement hero.'

“Lady Spirit,” he greeted respectfully.

“Zuko,” she seemed irritated at him.

“This is different, you normally just send me feelings.”

“Yes well... you done goofed, sweetheart.”

“My Lady Spirit?”

She sighed deeply, pressed her hands together and tapped herself in the forehead with her fingers. If Zuko didn't know any better, he would have thought her a mother, praying for strength to deal with her unruly child.

“Look, we chose you because you have a similar broody, secret hero complex, type personality to Harry. The problem is, you're doing your job a little too well. I need you to give the diary back to Ginny.”

“May I ask why, I get the feeling the 'dairy' is-”

“It's plot related! She needs to get possessed by the diary, unleash a giant snake from an ancient tomb and fail to kill several students, a ghost and a cat!”

“You want me to deliberately endanger my fellow students? You want me to risk the lives of innocent children?” Spirit or not, Zuko was ready to fight the foreign woman.

“Oh... wow... when put like that, it really is horrible.”

“I know there is a set path, but given my deviations from it, and surely the others who have deviated as a ripple effect, can you be absolutely certain none of the students will die?” Zuko said, giving logic his best attempt.

“...you... have a point. See the problem comes... there are things... the serpent is supposed to be killed in a battle, where you would have destroyed the book, and in which you would have summoned an ancient, and sacred sword; this would have allowed you to imbue the sword with the strength of the serpent's venom.”

“Why would I need a poison sword?”

“Not a poison sword, a sword imbued with the strength of the venom. I know it sounds like it should
be the same thing, it's a magical difference thing.” The Spirit put her face in her hands and let out a soft 'argh.'

Zuko waited.

“Look,” the Spirit lifted her face, “what are you planning to do for the rest of this year?”

“The diary is clearly evil, my flames didn't affect it, I was going to ask Hermione to help me research the book, and find a way to lock it down or destroy it.”

“Oh, okay, I can work with that. The Serpent in the Chamber of Secrets has venom that can destroy the book, that's why the battle was important. If you can-”

“Wait, how many of these things are there?”

“Hmm?” The Spirit paled.

“You said I was supposed to imbue a sword with the strength of the venom, the venom which can destroy the book, which would have been destroyed anyway. That would mean I would have a sword which can destroy the book and items like it. That wouldn't be important, if I only needed to destroy the book with venom.”

“I done goofed.”

“What?”

“Oh, just wake up, while I find a way to fix your ad-lib. Urgh!”

“What's the matter with you?” At the voice, Zuko looked up from the plate he'd been drying for the last five minutes. Petunia looked at him over her cup of tea.

“Just some stuff, from... 'my side of the family,' it's just... weird,” Zuko gave a half shrug.

Petunia scoffed lightly, from her perspective, everything having to do with 'his side of the family' was weird. She fiddled with her cup, Zuko put down the plate that was well and truly dry.

“What about you, what's going on?”

She grimaced, caught out, spent another half minute hemming and hawing, before beginning.

“You know the phone call I got this morning?” He nodded. “It was about your picture.”

“They didn't like it?”

“They did... so much that Mrs Mason showed it off to a friend and now she would like one.”

“What kind of size and subject matter?”

“Horses, she'd like something to run along a mantle, so about a metre long, maybe ten centimetres high.”

Zuko shook his head.

“I haven't got the wood to match the dimensions, and I'd need references, I'm less familiar with horses and their anatomical structure than I am with... well the more fantastical subject matter.”
Petunia pursed her lips together and let out a quiet “I see.”

“I’d have to contact McGonagall, see about getting into the Forrest to find more wood... is there a library I could get reference pictures from?”

Petunia and Zuko took the train to London, Petunia would spend the day getting reference materials from the library, and possibly using her cut of the Mason’s commission to help buy a new blouse.

One of the ones Petunia had been eyeing for months, but was just a tad too expensive for Vernon to okay the purchase.

Zuko on the other hand, headed to the Leaky Cauldron to meet with McGonagall, who would be side along apparating him to Hogsmead, then escorting him to the Forrest.

Minerva smiled as she saw Harry enter the pub, she’d seen the picture of him and the other students in the Prophet, and heard the rumours about the first attempt to get him in said photos.

Now she had a chance to hear it from a first hand source.

“Professor,” Harry greeted her with a nod and small smile.

“Harry, shall we be off then?” She indicated to the rear exit, and let him take the lead.

“Is there anything I need to do for side along?”

“Just keep your breathing steady, and bend your knees a little. It can be an unpleasant sensation, more so if you're travelling with someone who doesn't often perform side along. I've performed it several times over the last few years, so it should be on the more pleasant side of unpleasant.”

When they landed in Hogsmead, Harry dropped to one knee and breathed with great care.

“Sorry,” Minerva wasn't sure if she should pat him on the back or not.

“It's fine, I don't think any explanation can prepare someone for side along.” He stood with one last deep breath. “Alright, to the Forrest?”

“Yes, Hagrid's agreed to meet us along the edge closest to Hogsmead so we won't need to walk all the way up to the school.”

Harry nodded and the duo set off.

Halfway between the village and the tree line, he began to speak.

“About three weeks ago, I got a visit from a creature, some friends of mine identified it as a House Elf. It had been stealing my mail since the start of the holidays, it claimed to be trying to prevent me from returning to Hogwarts. It said that there was a plot to make bad things happen in the school. I may have already put a stop to the plot by accident, but you should be on guard this year anyway.”

“It didn't give you any more details?” Minerva frowned, trying to call any hint of a rumour to mind that might be this ‘plot'.

“No, but that may have been my fault. It took something other than my mail, when I found out, I reacted...” Harry looked away, ashamed.
“Not well?” Minerva filled in the blank. Harry stopped walking, so she stopped as well.

“Yeah, not well, but perhaps not over-reacting. That creature's actions, almost killed a friend of mine. She's going to be fine, but she was too close to not being fine.”

“We have house elves at the school, they clean the dorms and prepare the food, I'll tell them to keep an eye out for strange elves. Thank you for telling me Harry.”

Hagrid appeared from the trees and called out, wondering what was taking them so long.

The hunt for wood took the trio close to Aragog's territory, Harry noticed the wisps of spider web before either adult.

“How many spiders must live here?” The boy's voice was quiet, but sounded loud in the silence of the territory of the acromantula.

“A few hundred acromantula,” Hagrid admitted, “Aragog's family, I raised 'im as a baby, had to let 'im go though.”

“Why?” A feline McGonagall growled in dark, darting this way and that.

“When I was in Hogwarts, fifty years ago now, there was strange happenings, petrification and the like. Then one of the students died. Head boy at the time, Tom Riddle-” Hagrid noticed Harry's sudden intense interest, different from his casual interest, “-told Headmaster Dippit it was my Aragog what done it, had me expelled. I had to let Aragog go, or they would o' put 'im down.”

“Was it Aragog that killed the student?”

“Nah, Aragog bites 'is prey, not a scratch on the girl. It was like she'd been hit with the killin' curse, but no magical signature.”

“So who killed her?”

“Never found out. After I was expelled, tha' was the end o' tha', would have been the end o' me too, but Dumbledore, jus' a professor at the time, got me an apprenticeship with the grounds keeper, let me stay. Weren't a lot of places for folks like me, still aren't.”

“Folks like you?” Harry looked up at him, confused and curious. Hagrid struggled for something to cover his slip.

“Magicals who don't graduate, or get banned from doing magic.”

“Ah,” something in Harry's face told Hagrid the child didn't believe the cover up, but was willing to let it slide for now.

Zuko considered Hagrid's story during the train ride back to Little Whining. It had seemed to come out of nowhere, not quite flowing the way normal conversations did.

He wondered if the Spirits had taken advantage of a naturally occurring situation, or if they'd somehow managed to orchestrate the entire trip.

The story of the dying girl was somehow important, but the name Tom Riddle had struck a (rather loud) chord, not only with the Spirits, but with him. The book he'd taken from Ginny's cauldron, resistant to his fire bending and kitchen knives, had only one thing written in it. A very smudged line
of letters which Zuko was certain read: T. M. Riddle.

Tom Riddle, head boy of Hogwarts 50 years ago. It was a place to start, and judging by the prickle in his scar, and the Spirits' interest in this Tom, he was either the greatest aide against Voldemort Zuko could ask for, or he was Voldemort.

Or he was relevant in another way and Zuko was far too fond of dramatical sleuth plays, with their many twists and reveals.

(He'd managed to see a few plays by the Blue Lotus Troupe from the Colonies, who'd had a series of crime/mystery plays about a plucky-young-noble-woman and her maid, who went about solving crimes before the (mildly incompetent) local law enforcement. Lady Fisher had made a rather compelling protagonist.)
Mr. Lupin,

I apologise for not replying to you sooner, I have been giving a lot of thought to your offer. People have told me time and again that my parents were amazing people, but they always seem to depict them as untouchable paragons of virtue, not people, so much as the idea of people.

I admit to wanting to hold onto that flawless ideal of them, but I have also decided that I would prefer know the truth of my parents, rather than the unrealistic image that has been built up for me.

Thank you for your offer, I look forward to reading about the adventures, and misadventures, of James and Lily Potter (Nee Evans).

Regards,

Harry J. Potter.

Zuko made an irritated sound as he shifted against the pillar between platform 9 and 10, he'd checked all the sides just to be sure, double checked the time, but no, even half an hour after the pillar's entrance should have been open, it was still shut.

In a casual walk, Zuko rolled his trolley and owl cage to the open end of the station, where the trains exited. A quick riffle through his bag and he had a pencil and paper.

“Can you get to 9 ¾ from here?” He whispered his question to Hedwig, she replied with a soft bark, very clear owl speak for: 'of course I can, I'm amazing at my job.'

“Good, I need you to take this to one of the Darlings, I'll be waiting by the pillar, so if they don't need to send a response, you just wait for me on the other side, alright?”

Hedwig gave him a look, asking: 'and what if they do need to send a response? The humans don't much care for swooping owls in train stations.'

“If they send a response, just perch near this opening where I can see you from the pillar, I'll keep an eye out.”

'Alright then, as long as you have a plan...'

“Cheeky bird,” he secured the note and aided her launch from his arm. He was a little surprised, when he turned back to the station at large, and no one seemed to have noticed him releasing an owl.

'At least Aang would be happy with me talking to animals,' Zuko thought as he returned to the pillar, a faint recollection of the hyperactive Avatar, telling a story about the lemur at an alarming speed, humming in the back of his mind.
It took another fifteen minutes for the pillar to open.

“No idea what that was, it was like someone closed and locked it.” The Darling brothers alternated back and forth every so often, checking the pillar was still open.

There were no more gate malfunctions.

Hermione spent the train ride re-reading Lockhart’s books, cross referencing them with her two Defence Against the Dark Arts textbooks – ‘The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection’ by Quentin Trimble and ‘The Unabridged Guide to Dealing with Dark Forces’ by Madam Penelope Johnson – and shoving note laden sticky-notes onto the pages of the new teacher’s books.

When Zuko asked what she was doing, she replied with a brisk ‘highlighting improbabilities,’ without looking up from her book.

Neville was reading a book on Muggle Horticulture Zuko had picked up for him as a belated birthday gift – he really had to remember those were a thing – and Zuko himself was working on things beyond mortal ken.

Specifically he was immersed in the ‘spiritual entrapment’ portion of his copy of The Unabridged Guide to Dealing with Dark Forces by Madam Penelope Johnson, the pages concerning dealing with spirits (True Spirits and not Ghosts) for various reasons, allegedly such tasks required a ‘level of spiritual understanding’ most ‘wizards of the modern day’ seemed to lack.

When Ron suggested a game of exploding snap to pass the time, Zuko threatened to throw him from the moving train, before he remembered he’d promised to be nice to the boy.

No games of exploding snap were played in their compartment that day, Ron did however go in and out as he swapped between hanging out with the trio, and hanging out with Dean and Seamus elsewhere on the train.

Dessert was from Wendy’s trolley, lunch was from the Sunflower Café, which Zuko had been happy to introduce Hermione and the Longbottoms to during their Diagon Alley excursion. Ron had spent the detour going on about how his mother would flip out, if she knew which end of the street he was on.

Zuko had taken great pride in the fact he hadn't punched the boy.

As the second years followed the older students to the carriages, which would take the not-first-year-students to the castle, Zuko found himself pulled up short at the sight of the strange, equine creatures tethered to the carriages. "Huh."

“Harry?” Hermione's hand hovered over his arm, she'd been hesitant to touch him since the incident at the book store, said something about triggers before changing the subject when he'd asked.

“Sorry, I was just... wondering what those were?” He gestured in the direction of the leathery, winged horses.

“The... carriages?” Hermione attempted to clarify.

“I think he meant those...” Neville also gestured to the beasts, “whatever they are, pulling the
Hermione looked back and forth, between the boys and the beasts.

“There’s nothing there,” she said, sounding like she suspected a prank.

“Hermione,” Zuko began, “take a moment: think about where you are, what you’re here to learn and what we know about things and appearances.”

“Huh... allow me to rephrase: I can’t see anything there. Could you describe them to me?”

So they did, Zuko and Neville both spouting off adjectives, in an attempt to describe the creatures.

“You know what? Nevermind, Harry, just... draw me a picture later and I’ll look into it.”

Watching the sorting ceremony as a second year was interesting, Zuko made sure to clap for every child, always the same volume and energy, until Ginny, whom he clapped just a little louder for.

He gave her a tiny smile, when she glance his way, she turned a concerning shade of red and almost tripped.

One of the other new Gryffindors was a boy named Colin, who reminded Zuko of Aang, if Aang had hair. The hyperactive youth talked quite fast, and wanted to take pictures of 'Harry' to send home to his parents.

“I don’t really like...” The disappointment on the child’s face made him stop his rejection.

“I’m sure you two could take one picture together, I’ll take it so you can both be in the picture,” Hermione volunteered for him. Colin’s face lit up.

“That would be brilliant, my parents don’t think you’re real, so I’d love to prove I've met the hero of the wizarding world!”

Zuko cringed.

“Great...” Sighing lightly, Zuko followed Hermione's directions and did his best to not scowl until the picture was taken. On the bright side, photography was much faster than sitting for a portrait.

The first day of classes started off mediocre enough, double Herbology with the Hufflepuffs, where Zuko met the very talkative Justin Finch-Fletchley, and repotted mandrakes. Transfiguration was spent making buttons, but as the day crept on, Zuko got a bad feeling.

Not one of the Spirit sent ‘everything is about to go to shit,’ bad feelings, just a general ‘something is about to happen, and I’m not going to enjoy it’ sensation.

His premonition was realised in the form of Lockhart's class, or what passed for a class.

Lockhart began with bragging, then a pop-quiz which had nothing to do with Defending Against the Dark Arts, as one might have expected from a class called Defence Against the Dark Arts, no, Lockhart's quiz was all about himself.

Zuko waited until Lockhart was occupied up the front of the classroom and rolled the three page quiz up, stuffing it into his bag. He instead spent the remaining twenty-five minutes doing an ink painting of Lockhart, initialising it H.J.P but leaving off the symbol of his actual name he signed all his other
work with.

When the tests, and Zuko’s picture were handed back, Lockhart riffled through them.

“Tut, tut,” and who actually said ‘tut, tut?’ “Hardly any of you remembered my favourite colour is lilac, I say so in Year with a Yeti.”

He scolded them for not knowing his ideal birthday gift, his seemed more and more disappointed, until he reached Hermione’s papers. Hermione, who’d gotten full marks on the quiz, earned ten points for Gryffindor.

Then Lockhart found the picture. Confused the man looked around the room, Zuko gave him a nod from the back of the classroom. The teacher broke out into a very pleased grin.

“And well done to Harry Potter, thirty points to Gryffindor.”

Beside him Hermione started a whispered conversation.

“Cheater.”

“Full marks?” Zuko shot back, just as quiet.

“Shut up, I read the books, the knowledge was there, it just happened.”

“Riiiight.”

“Shut. Up.”

“As long as you're not falling for his bullshit charms.”

“Not even.”

Meanwhile, Lockhart had put the tests away, and brought out a cage. A cage, full of ‘freshly caught Cornish pixies.’ Which Lockhart released into the classroom.

They grabbed Neville and began to lift him by his ears. Zuko snatched his bag, shoving it at Hermione with a harsh ‘Hide!’ and transfigured his seat into a short staff, before he began jumping across the desks, swatting the pixies with the weapon.

He used the staff as both a vault and balance, using it to gain extra hight as he leapt into the air, landing precision strikes on the pixies, grabbing Neville before he could fall, and landed on a desk, the pole touching the ground to stop the momentum.

“Come on now,” Lockhart called from the middle of the destruction. “Round them up, They're only pixies after all!” Zuko helped Neville beneath a desk, swatting yet another pixie with a twist of the stave.

“Harry's got the right idea! A bit muggle though, don't you think? Peskipiksi Pesternomi!” The man flourished his wand, to no effect, and the pixies soon had it in their grasp and threw it out the window. “Uhhhh....”

“Hermione! I need a spell to immobilise multiple targets!” Zuko called out, getting sick of swatting pixies.

“Immobulos!” Hermione’s spell came flying over the top of her desk, the paralysed pixies floated harmlessly through the air.
“Hm,” Zuko eyes the floating creatures, turning to Hermione, who was peeking over her desk. “I think maybe, we should have started with that.”

“Now you mention it...” Hermione smiled sheepishly.

His work room was just as he’d left it.

No signs of dust or disuse, no cobwebs of neglect. The air was fresh, the boards were clean, the pillows didn't let off plumes when he flopped onto them. It was moments like this, that made him love magic.

Minerva tried not to vomit in her mouth as she read over the 'test.' She'd known Gilderoy Lockhart was a bit useless, but she hadn't realised just how inept and self-centred he was.

“Yeah, I wasn't too impressed either,” Harry poured tea into two small cups, a look of utmost concentration on his face. “If the rest of his classes are like this... I may do something regrettable.”

Minerva let out a heavy sigh.

“Try to get through the second week, maybe it'll get better.”

Harry looked up from the tea, a look of ‘are you serious,’ painted across his features.

“I'll see if I can do something, but Dumbledore is in charge of hires, so if I can’t... at least blame him and not me?”

Zuko felt annoyed as he darted into an alcove, hiding himself behind a suit of armour and his invisibility cloak.

Ever since the first Defence class, he'd been hounded by Lockhart, Zuko had to change course several times a day to avoid the man. At least Colin Creevey had calmed down a little.

Ginny Weasley was a whole other story, the girl switched between quiet squeaking, tripping over things, and 'functioning like a normal human being while simultaneously trying not to vibrate out of her skin.'

Zuko did his best to be patient with her, given her trust in him, concerning the 'mystery book of evil' in her cauldron, which enabled him to cut off the nefarious plot before it began. It didn't mean it wasn't trying though.

Still, the evading of Lockhart was by far the worst, it cut into Zuko's time, meaning Hermione was searching for clues about the diary by herself.

As the 'professor' rounded the corner and disappeared from view, Zuko made a very important decision.

The second Defence class was far less... interesting than the first. It was also more painful.

Lockhart had decided that reading from his books - *theatrical readings* - was the way to go. Zuko tuned the man out and was mid way through a letter from Remus Lupin – a hilarious recounting of a somewhat convoluted prank by 'The Marauders' – when Lockhart called on him.
“Harry! Why don't you come up here and help me?”

Zuko looked up, a deep frown etched on his face. The children in the class, or those looking at him at least, shifted their seats away from him by a few centimetres. While the event had been a year ago, no one had quite forgotten 'The Time Harry Potter Epically Lost-His-Shit.'

His current frown, was very reminiscent of the days before the event.

“Help you with what, professor?”

“Re-enacting this scene. Come on, come up here.”

Behind her hand Hermione whispered: “Regret the picture from the quiz now?”

“I regret letting him live at the book store.” Zuko sorted his things, ready for a quick exit, before indulging the professor, and making his way to the front of the class.

“Good, good, now you'll be the village under the Babbling Curse, and I'll cure you, alright?”

Zuko, with deliberate focus, slipped into his native language, not the common language of the four countries of his home world, but the ancient Imperial language of the Fire Nation.

“*You are a pathetic individual, your very existence offends me. I dream of a day when I may see you struck low, and your taint is removed from this place of learning.*”

“Well done Harry, excellent gibberish, now I'll-” Lockhart stopped. It took a few seconds for anyone to realise what had happened.

Professor! I'm so sorry, you were coming at me with your wand and I just reacted!” Zuko did his best to keep a straight face. “I just, I didn't mean- I'll leave! I dare not be here any longer, who knows what I may do, my hand is possessed by evil! How could I strike a teacher. No! No!” Zuko held a hand up to shush Lockhart as the man tried to speak. “I'll go to my head of house and submit myself for punishment. It's what I deserve.”

Zuko collected his things and was gone before anyone could stop him, leaving behind a coughing Lockhart, a baffled class, and Hermione – hand tight over her mouth – trying not to laugh.

Minerva rubbed the bridge of her nose, a patient Harry sitting on the far side of her desk, observing her.

“You punched Professor Lockhart in the throat?”

“It was more of a tap. He's fine... for a given value of fine.”

“Right, well...” The duo lapsed into silence.

“Professor McGonagall?”

“Yes Harry?”

“I'm... sorry, for causing you trouble... but he was hurting me, in my Thespianism.”

Minerva sighed, she found herself doing that a lot as of late.

“Well, you'll have to be punished. I'm banning you from Defence classes for the rest of the year, and
you'll have detention for the next month.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“You'll be using the Defence Class block for self study, you pass the end of year exam or you will be repeating second year Defence.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Now...” Minerva pulled a plate out of her top draw, “Biscuit?”

“Yes, Professor.”

Zuko noticed, in a vague 'he wasn't really paying attention' sort of way, that he was getting a lot of increased hostility from some (almost half) of the student body, and increased admiration from most of the rest, the remainder changed in no discernible way.

“I feel like something is going on, and I missed it.” He confessed to Neville in the Dorms one night, shortly before he had to leave for detention.

“It's because you punched Lockhart in the throat, his fans are upset, everyone else thinks you're awesome.”

“Huh... oops?”

“We all know you're not sorry,” Neville said with a frown, “also, we're a little jealous you don't have to put up with him any more.”

“Oh, Neville, just because I get to study by myself doesn't mean I don't have to put up with him. He keeps trying to track me down, I've spent more time hiding in awkward places than I ever thought I'd have to in my entire life. I carry my cloak around at all times, just in case.”

“Maybe you should have punched him harder,” Dean offered up from his bed, where he, Ron and Seamus were involved in a -non exploding- game of cards.

“Maybe I should have,” Zuko agreed, forcing himself up and out the door, to his waiting detention. “I'll see you guys later tonight or tomorrow.”
Zuko gathers some facts

Chapter Summary

Zuko gains a few more clues, some of them are even acquired (slightly more) intentionally.

Over the next month Zuko helped Filch clean various parts of the school. The Trophy room, where Zuko found a shield for T.M. Riddle, was cleaned twice.

A picture of said trophy, soon found it's way onto Zuko's workroom boards.

Hermione stared at it from her cushion.

“So, you think who ever Riddle is...”

“He's evil, and he framed Hagrid for a murder Riddle committed fifty years ago.”

“That's... kind of a leap, isn't it?”

“Is it? Hagrid told me it was Tom Riddle, Head Boy, who accused him of the murder. But Hagrid also said, the way the girl died, was inconsistent with the killing method of Aragog, the creature Tom Riddle said did it,” Zuko explained.

“Yes, so he wrongly accused Hagrid, that doesn't mean he did it,” Hermione said, playing devil's advocate.

“Hagrid is nice, any one who implicates him in a murder is not nice. But more than that, it just so happens Tom M. Riddle has the same initials as the evil book. The evil, indestructible book. Nice people don't own evil, indestructible books.”

“Alright, but how does all this, lead back to the Chamber of Secrets?” Hermione pointed to the large 'Chamber?' on the board.

“There's a giant snake in the Chamber, with very potent venom, potent enough to destroy the book.”

Hermione gasped and flailed. Zuko fixed her with a concerned look.

“Hermi-”

“Moaning Myrtle!”

“What?”

“Moaning Myrtle, she'd a ghost who haunts one of the girls' loos. Unlike the rest of the ghosts in the castle, there's no sign of what killed her, and she's wearing a school uniform, outdated yes, but still...”

“You think she's the ghost of the girl killed by Tom fifty years ago?”

“It's possible.”
“McGonagall is the deputy Headmistress, she should have that sort of information, she could tell us for certain.”

“Myrtle,” Minerva looked confused, “yes, she was the student who died fifty years ago, why do you want to know?”

Harry and Hermione shared a look.

“Does this,” the teacher paused to figure out how to ask her question, “does this have anything to do with the plot you mentioned during the summer?”

“Yes,” Harry admitted, “I have reason to believe that Tom M. Riddle may have opened the Chamber of Secrets fifty years ago, killing Myrtle. I also have reason to believe that someone, a very specific someone, had a cursed book belonging to Tom, which holds the location of the Chamber. During the Summer, this person attempted to give the book to Ginny Weasley, I managed to get the book from her before anything came of it.”

“Where is this book now?” McGonagall looked back and forth between the duo, worry evident on her face.

“We've got it locked down for now, but we've had no success in destroying it. We think, we're almost certain, that there's a large serpentine creature in the Chamber, most likely what killed Myrtle. We also have reason to believe the venom of this creature, can destroy the book.”

“How did you come to these conclusions?” Minerva rubbed at her temples, trying to ease the headache that had begun to settle in.

The student duo shared another look, Hermione communicating that what they told the professor, was up to Harry.

“I know what I'm about to tell you will be hard to believe, but I swear to you, it's true.” McGonagall stiffened at the words, Harry's voice took on a tone that told her she was about to hear a massive secret.

“I'll try to keep an open mind.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Harry paused to collect himself. “Do you remember when we hunted the unicorn last year, and I told you: sometimes I Know Things? That I'm being Guided? Over the Summer I got the feelings again, this time they wanted me to pay attention to an interaction, which is when I noticed someone slip a book into Ginny's belongings. I took the book, no one else seems to feel it the way I do, but there is evil oozing off of it. I knew I had to keep it away from Ginny.

“But it turns out, that wasn't what the Spirits wanted. Afterwards I received a... a vision. A Spirit spoke to me, I learned that I was part of an important Destiny, that the plot the house elf spoke of, that I mentioned to you, involved the Chamber of Secrets. I also learned that the creature in the Chamber can destroy the book, but there are more of these artefacts out there. The Spirit spoke of a sword which could take on the strength of the venom, and be used to destroy the other artefacts.

“When Hagrid mentioned Tom Riddle, during the summer, the Spirit gave me a sense the name was important. The book that I took from Ginny, the evil, indestructible book, has only one thing written in it: T. M. Riddle, the same initials and name on an award for special services in the trophy room, from fifty years ago. From when Tom Riddle accused Hagrid of a crime I think Tom may have committed.”
Silence descended in the room, Minerva took a bottle from her lower desk draw, and sloshed a good amount of amber liquid into her near empty tea cup. A long draught later she looked at her students.

“I've never heard of the Sight manifesting in this manner before, are you certain the Spirit you talked to isn't trying to lead you astray, or trick you?”

“I'm certain.”

“But why you?” Minerva cried out, distressed, “you're a child yet, what could you do that an adult cannæ?”

“I didn't choose this, I don't think the Spirits did either.” Harry gave her a solemn look, "Voldemort did, when he came to Godric's Hollow to murder the Potter family. When he choose to go after the Potters he entwined my fate with his, and unfortunately for us, he isn't as dead as he could be.”

“How...?”

“We don't know how he survived his 'death,' we do know he's not alive in the traditional sense though and, according to the Spirits, he plans to start another war, soon.... I also have a theory he and Riddle are related somehow.”

“What?” Hermione gave Harry a sharp look, “you didn't mention that before!”

“Really? I thought I did.”

Hermione shook her head and mouthed the word 'no.'

“You think Tom Riddle might be Voldemort's true name?” Minerva asked, more confused than Hermione. Harry opened his mouth, whether to confirm or correct her she didn't know, as he was interrupted.

“Oh!” Hermione clapped her hand together, looking pleased with herself. “I think, maybe, this is where the Lord of the Rings comes in.”

“What Lord of Rings?” Minerva had never heard of such a lord.

“The Lord of The Rings,” Hermione put emphasis on the 'the's. “It's a trilogy of books set in a fictional world, the premise is that ages before the books take place, there was a war against a powerful sorcerer, who forged magical rings. The rings were given to the three reigning races of Middle Earth, but unbeknownst to them: another ring was made. The One Ring.

“One ring to rule them all.' It had the power to influence those who wear the other rings. It plunged the land into war, but in the end, an alliance managed to stop the Dark Lord Sauron. The King Iseldor managed to cut The One Ring from Sauron's finger, killing the Dark Lord. But he wasn't truly dead, he'd poured so much of himself, of his evil and power, into the ring, that it became like a vessel, or an anchor, keeping Sauron tethered in the realm of the living. Nothing could destroy The One Ring, but the fires of Mount Doom, the volcano in which The Ring was forged.

“If Riddle is Voldemort, then perhaps the book, and the artefacts like it, are his version of The One Ring, except his can be destroyed by venom from the snake monster in the Chamber of Secrets.”

Minerva felt ill, the concept of a magic that could tether the soul after death, to keep it alive rather than letting it move on or become a ghost...

“So these artefacts,” Harry spoke to Hermione, Minerva listening over the sound of blood rushing
past her ears – she was not trained for this – “if we destroy them, we can get rid of Voldemort before he can resurrect properly, stop the war before it starts?”

“It is possible, not probable though. We have no idea the exact number of artefacts, what they or are even where they are, the only things we do know is: they exist and we can destroy them with venom from the monster in the Chamber.”

“Which we don't know the location of,” Minerva reminded them.

“But Myrtle might,” Hermione explained, “or at least she might be able to give us a clue. She was killed for a reason, she might know something, she may not even know she knows, or she may know, but no one may have asked the right question. She's the best lead we've got, whatever the case.”

Minerva drew in a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, I shall look into it.”

Harry and Hermione fixed her with near identical looks, which conveyed a clear sense of 'are you kidding me?'

“Professor McGonagall,” Harry leaned forward, “this is my destiny, my mission. We aren't planning to face the monster yet, we're just gathering intel' right now, so please, don't try to block us out. We'll go talk to Myrtle together, find out what she knows, then reassess the situation. We need the sword before we face the monster anyway, and we have zero leads on that.”

Minerva sighed, rubbing her eyes.

“Very well, but as the responsible adult in this party, I'd still like for you to follow my lead, if I tell you the investigation has become too dangerous, I expect you to stand down.”

“We understand your concern, Professor, now... shall we question Myrtle?”

Minerva's eyes narrowed as the trio stood, she noticed Harry still seemed to be in charge, and he hadn't promised to stand down if the situation became too dangerous. She bit back another sigh as they made their way to Myrtle's toilets. Minerva had done her duty as much as he'd let her, and she knew he was sensible – for the most part – he wouldn't put miss Granger in danger at least.

Myrtle was in her normal cubicle, just floating in a slow spin above the toilet bowl, when she heard the door to the corridor open. Three sets of footsteps entered. Myrtle waited, she liked to wait until someone said something nasty before jumping out and shaming them. As a ghost who'd stayed for revenge against a bully, it was sort of 'her thing.'

“Miss Warren?” The voice belonged to Professor McGonagall, Myrtle stuck her head through the door of her cubicle and gasped.

“He can't be in here, this is the girl's toilets.” Myrtle pointed to the boy who stood between the professor and a female student.

“He's here under my authorisation, as part of an investigation. Now, Miss Warren, I need to ask you some questions of a delicate nature. I don't mean to upset you, but I'd like you to tell me about your death.”

Contrary to McGonagall's apparent expectations, Myrtle's eyes lit up and she flew closer to the trio,
“Excited to finally tell someone how she'd died.”

“Oooh, it was dreadful,” despite her words Myrtle sounded thrilled. “It happened in here,” she floated back her stall, “in this very cubicle. I remember it so well. I'd hidden because Olive Hornby was teasing me about my glasses. The door was locked, and I was crying, and then I heard somebody come in. They said something funny, another language I think it must have been. Anyway, what really got me was that it was a boy speaking. So I unlocked the door, to tell him to go and use his own toilet and then—” Myrtle paused a second before her great finale, “I died.”

“Do you remember the exact details of how you died, what killed you?” The boy was watching her intently, a frown marring his face. He looked familiar to her somehow, like she'd seen him before, but something was... off about him.

“No idea honestly,” Myrtle replied in a quiet voice. “I just remember seeing a pair of great big yellow eyes. My whole body sort of seized up, and then I was floating away...” She smiled dreamily at the memory, before scowling as she continued. “And then I came back again. I was determined to haunt Olive Hornby, you see. Oh, she was sorry she ever laughed at my glasses.”

“Where precisely did you see the eyes?” McGonagall interrupted Myrtle's reminiscing. Myrtle gestured to the sink roughly in front of her cubicle.

“Somewhere by that I think.”

“Thank you Miss Warren,” the two students echo the deputy's thanks, and Myrtle watched on in curiosity as the trio began examining the sink. A few moments later the girl made a noise.

“I don't know if it means anything, but there's an etching of a snake on this tap.”

“That tap's never worked,” Myrtle offered, floating closer. She'd never noticed the snake etching before, but then she'd never looked before. The boy leaned over the tap, turning his head so his ear was almost on top of it, and turned the handle one way, then the other. He straightened, frown still in place.

“I can't hear anything, I don't think the tap was put together properly, but it's not a mechanical lock.”

“Magical then?” The girl asked. McGonagall pulled out her wand.

“Stand back please, I'll try a few spells.”

“Wait,” the girl held up a hand to stop the Professor. She turned to Myrtle as McGonagall lowered her wand. “You said you heard the boy say something, can you describe the language, the sound, can you remember any of the words?”

“Miss Granger?” McGonagall raised an eyebrow at the girl.

“It might be spelled to open for a password, like the House Dormitories, if Myrtle can recall anything, well, maybe it would be faster.”

Myrtle shook her head, “I couldn't really make it out, but there was a lot of 's' sounds, it was like listening to a snake—” McGonagall and 'Miss Granger' both stiffened and shared a look.

“What did you two just figure out?” The boy looked back and forth between the duo.

“A possibly magical language that sounds like a snake?” Granger fixed her gaze on him.
“It would have to be Parseltongue,” McGonagall concluded, the boy raised his eyebrows in silent query. “The magical language that allows wizards and witches to speak to snakes.”

The boy gave a little twitch, almost imperceptible.

“How would one go about learning this… ‘Parseltongue?’”

“One doesn't learn in, Harry,” Myrtle was surprised to hear the headmistress refer to a student by their first name. “It is a magical talent passed through certain bloodlines, it is a well known trait of Salazar Slytherin himself. It has been considered a dark power for many centuries in Europe.”

“…Great, I think I can talk to snakes.”

The females were all silent at Harry’s admission.

“And what make you think that?” Granger asked.

“… Deputy Head Mistress… I’m about to reveal some information which may put you in an awkward position.” The woman closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath, looking for all the world like she was praying for strength. She gestured for him to continue.

“Last school year, I went exploring, I found myself in the forbidden corridor. The tail of the beast was a serpent, it had a snake head… which spoke what I thought at the time, was English.”

Myrtle didn't know what they were talking about, but it sounded scandalous, and the Head of Griffindor's expression said she desperately needed a drink.

“I was a aware you were in the Corridor during the debacle with Quirrell, I was not, however, aware it was not your first time there. Under the circumstances, I don't believe punishing you now would do any good, but please know, I am disappointed that you disregarded your own safety, and the rules set in place to ensure your safety.”

“I understand Professor. Would you like me to try opening the… sink?” His face scrunched slightly, as the absurdity of his question hit him mid sentence.

“Very well, but only to ascertain that this is the entrance, we will not be entering today.”

Harry took a few deep breathes, and focused on the tap, a series of hissing words issued forth from his lips, and Myrtle shuddered at the last words she'd heard before she died. The sink moved back into the wall and sunk downwards, revealing a pipe big enough for an adult to stand in, though not past the first few steps where it turned almost straight down.

“So, it is the entrance, but what's inside?”

“Professor McGonagall,” the teacher turned to Harry, “is there anyway to do some form of recon, get an idea of what's down there, without going down ourselves?”

A frown pulled at the deputy headmistress's lips. She gave the appearance of deep thought for a moment before nodding.

“Expecto Petronum!” A flash of sliver mist darted from her wand and down the pipe. “A patronus is an advanced defensive spell, used to fight off Dementors,” Minerva explained to the curious looks. “A well trained witch or wizard can also use them to carry messages or to scout areas, as long as you
don't worry about being seen. Glowing, see through animals are hardly subtle after all.”

“They sound useful, would you teach me?”

“Me as well,” Granger's hand raised in the air, like a reflex in a classroom, or a nervous volunteer.

“We'll see,” any further discussion was cut off when the glowing wisp returned. The patronus took the form of a house cat, and leapt into McGonagall's arms, nuzzling against her face.

“Its quite a way down, a lot of bones, a bloody big snake skin – it looks like a Basilisk shedding! But I've never seen one that size before! Hm, there's another doorway, snake patterns, most likely enchanted like the tap.”

“So you'll need me to go down with you,” Harry filled in. McGonagall's face scrunched like she'd eaten a thousand extra-sour lemons, but didn't deny it. “Alright, so we have a Basilisk in the basement: how do we kill it?”

“Rooster,” Granger replied straight away, catching the odd looks from the rest of the room's occupants, she huffed. “I read about it the other day in one of Newt Scamander's books.” The girl frowned deeply, “actually, now I think about it, I wasn't really planning to read the book, it just... caught my fancy all of a sudden.”

Harry nodded to Granger's meaningful look, though neither explained what they meant by the odd interaction. He turned back to the Professor.

“So now what, we get a rooster and come back here, or do we get more back up? We still don't fully know what we're walking into, so Hermione-”

“I'm going with you, I'll hang back, but I will be going with you.” Her face told them she would not negotiate on the matter, so he dropped it.

“We don't know how much room we'll have to move down there,” McGonagall began planning, “but I'd like to take Filius along at least, Professor Flitwick is a master of charms and enchantments, he'll be good to have along. Perhaps we should ask a curse breaker along from the DMLE?”

“That sounds reasonable,” Harry agreed. “So in the morning, Hermione and I will collect a rooster from Hagrid, you'll contact the DMLE and Flitwick, and tomorrow afternoon, we'll go hunting.”
"Amelia, this is a surprise, I was expecting one of your Aurors, not the Head of the DMLE herself, how are you?" Minerva waved the woman over to the table she'd been waiting, taking a bracing sip of her fire whiskey as another member of the DMLE popped out of the three Broomsticks' fireplace.

"Your message asked for a curse breaker to visit Hogwarts," Amelia waved to Madam Rosemerta, the bar tender headed over, "This is Thorpe, he's one of our best." The man in question took up a guard position at her back.

"Amelia, love, hello," Madam Rosmerta greeted the woman cheerfully as she arrived by the group.

"Hello Rosie, I'll have a small slosh of fire whiskey please; Thorpe, anything for you?" The trio of women turned to the man.

"No thank you Ma'am, I am on duty."

"So am I," she admitted to Minerva as Rosmerta left to get the drink. "Now, what could you possibly need a professional curse breaker for in Hogwarts?"

"We've found the Chamber of Secrets," Minerva spoke into her cup, ensuring it was placed just so, so that no other patron's might read her lips. Her voice soft enough only Amelia heard her.

"That's a myth," Amelia's eyes widened so far, her monocle almost dropped out, Minerva wasn't one for such tales.

"I'm afraid not, and worse, there's a basilisk inside, unfathomable in size. Flitwick, myself and two others are preparing to go into the Chamber in a few hours. We've already procured ourselves a rooster from the grounds keeper, but the... 'head' of our expedition agreed with me that a professional curse breaker wouldn't be remiss."

"The head of your expedition? Thank you Rosie," Amelia smiled as the bar tender appeared with her whiskey. Minerva waited until she'd left to reply.

"Harry Potter," the deputy headmistress waited for the reaction, and wasn't disappointed.

"HAR- Harry Potter? He's just a Boy! He's my niece's age!"
“He’s also a parsel mouth, and thus the only one capable of opening the Chamber. He and his companion, the brilliant Miss Hermione Granger, were the one’s to figure out the location of the Chamber’s entrance. He’s cautious enough, no need to worry about him endangering others.”

“But he’s a child!”

“He won’t be left behind, if you think you can convince him, you are welcome to try.”

Amelia examined Minerva’s face, then swallowed her glass of fire whiskey in one go.

Meeting Harry Potter had been an... experience, but Amelia could understand where Minerva was coming from now. Unable to talk Mr Potter out of engaging in such a dangerous activity, or leaving his class mate behind, Amelia took it upon herself to help oversee the expedition’s safety.

Following Minerva down the tunnel, the two children, their wand tips bright with ‘lumos’ spells, between the women and the men, Amelia wondered if she should have tried harder to talk the pair out of this.

The tunnel let out into an area filled with animal bones, Harry watched passively as the adults began scanning for traps or spells.

“Damn,” Amelia whirled around at Thorpe’s cursing.

“What is it?”

“These stones, the rock bed it’s... it’s repelling magic somehow, I think it must be a suppression field of some kind but, honestly I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Scales?” the group turned to Harry, watching as he drew his fingers over the cavern wall, eyeing the particulates that come off on his skin. “Is it possible, as the basilisk went in and out of this place, that its scales rubbed against the walls, leaving some kind of... scale residue? The research Hermione and I did, said that Basilisk Hide repels or nullifies magic.”

Hermione looked thrilled by the idea.

“Ooohhh, research project... I’ll have to see if I can get some time in a lab with a good microscope...” Harry smiled indulgently at his companion. Minerva looked thoughtful.

“It does sound like an interesting topic to look into, Amelia, do you think some of the Forensic specialist at the DMLE might be able to-” the professor saw the down fallen look on Hermione’s face when the girl realised she wouldn't be allowed to conduct the research, “point Miss Granger in the right direction for the spell work and such for this type of investigation?”

Amelia raised an eyebrow, but relented.

“Oh, I’ll need samples of the rock, from a few different places in the tunnel...” Hermione said, partly to herself.

“What about the shed skin, to check the scales for signs of wear?” Harry asked.

“Good thinking-”

The children chattered quietly, planning the things they’d need for the research project.

Once the door area had been checked for traps – none found, just more of the strange magic
dampening effect – Harry stepped forward to the door, and stopped, a frown pulling at his mouth.

“Harry?” Hermione made to move to his side, but he stopped her with a raised hand.

“It's... probably nothing... maybe...” he shook his head, as if to clear the thoughts, and let out a hissing like noise, it held a strange cadence, almost but not quite like words. As soon as he finished he spun around to face the others, “GET BACK!” The adults startled backwards, a low rumbling was the only warning they got before the ceiling began caving in. Harry stumbled backwards, through the opening door to the chamber, while the rest of the part darted in the other direction.

The rocks settled, dust coating everything, the five remaining members of the group coughed and spluttered.

“Is everyone alright?” Flitwick called, summoning a new light, which wavered in the dust laden air.

“HARRY!” Minerva swished her wand at the rocks, but nothing happened.

“Magic repellent, we're going to have to move them by hand,” the charms professor put a hand on his colleague's leg, unable to reach her arm.

Zuko tumbled backwards through the entrance, into the Chamber proper, the door closing between him and the rock fall.

Darting back to it, he pressed his hands to the surface, 'Hermione, the professors, the visitors...' his unspoken question was answered by the clear sense that they were fine, followed by another bout of apology, the same apology he'd felt just before the cave in.

“So, I guess I'm fighting the snake after all.” All around the cold hallway like room, torches lit up with a greenish fire, with a quiet 'huh,' Zuko cancelled his wand's 'lumos' and sheathed it. Basilisks were impervious to direct magic, and he didn't have enough magical knowledge to come at magical combat from the side, so the wand would be of little-to-no use to him in this battle. He stepped further in.

In the greenish gloom, and the cavern's dampness, Zuko tried not to think of Ba Sing Se, tried to distract himself by monologuing internally over Slytherin's apparent love for poor lighting choices and dank architecture.

Then he passed through the end of the corridor of pillars, into an enormous chamber, and a large statue came into view. The statue was gigantic, he could barely see the head in the dim light, dozens of metres overhead. His breathing sounded loud in the Chamber, echoing off the walls, but another sound reached his ears, the slithering rasp of scales over stone. The Basilisk.

Zuko’s eyes swept over the room, fixing the dimensions of the Chamber in place in his mind, before he closed his eyes.

'Rip, tear, kill, devour, rip, tear, kill, devour, rip, tear kill, devour,’ the chant wormed its way into his ears as the rumbling of stone sounded from far above, the chant – in that strange translated language that must have been the serpents' tongue – grew louder. Zuko assumed it must have been because a door had opened between it and him.

The Basilisk made a thump as it hit the ground at the statue's feet, he could almost picture it as the faint sound of scales over scales came, not quite hidden beneath its chant.

“You will not harm me, you will not eat me, you will stop where you are.” He spoke to it in Parsel
tongue, hoping it would listen.

It didn't, its chant only grew louder, an edge of madness to the words. The words, while off putting, did let him track the monster's head, he leapt to the side, just clearing the Basilisk's maw as it struck the ground where'd he'd been standing.

Moving with care, he began a game of cat and mouse with the serpent, trying to avoid being eaten and come up with a plan on the fly.

Zuko misjudged one of his leaps, and smacked into a heavy wall of scaled muscle of the Basilisk's coils. As he landed, his hand brushed awkwardly across the left side of his face. He didn't have even a second to feel stupid about how long it had taken to realise, because the giant snake twisted, trying to crush him under its weight. He scrambled out of the way, a new sense of focus coming over him.

He breathed in deep, and settled into a fire bending stance, stoking his inner flame into a blinding white heat.

The Basilisk struck out again, Zuko leapt, upwards and whirling, the hottest flame he could summon flung from his body, so bright he could see it through his closed eyelids. The snake's momentum carried it forwards, even as it screamed in pain, knocking Zuko from the air. He landed poorly on the Basilisk's body, skidding over the scaly skin, and straight into a rock wall as the creature writhed.

As an unavoidable reflex, Zuko's eyes popped open, his gaze caught sight of the head, flailing as it tried to shake the pain, a mask like burn mark marring its face, over both eyes.

'Yeah, I know how that feels,' he smirked and got to his feet, he really needed a weapon.

Above the combatants a different creature burst into the Chamber in a flash of fire and screeching, the Basilisk lunged for it, but the newcomer, a bird of some sort, avoided the attempt with ease. It flew past Zuko, dropping a cloth item down to him. He caught it, and had to do a double take, as he realised it was the school Sorting Hat.

Unsure what to do, he put it on his head.

'Oh great, you again,' the Hat said in his mind.

'Hey! Look, are you here to help or what?'

'Yes, you have shown true dedication to the school... allegedly...' Zuko had just enough time to interpret the Hat's smugness, and pull it off his head, before a sword pommel dropped from inside the Hat. He caught the grip that followed in his hand, and drew the complete sword from the Hat.

The sword was not his preferred style or type, but Piandao had trained him in the single blade before Zuko had taken up his first pair of dao, he could work with this. The hat was unceremoniously tucked through his belt, and he made his way to the Basilisk's head, where the bird had been keeping it busy while Zuko had dealt with the hat. The scales were hard, the sword wouldn't have an easy time piercing them, and the beast was so large the blade wouldn't make it half way through, so cutting the head off was out, even if the serpent had been smaller...

There was one place, Zuko knew, that could be pierced, a place that would be hard to hit, but guaranteed him an instant kill, if he could pull it off. The problem was the fangs in the way.

Zuko whistled, calling the Basilisk straight to him, with adrenaline and enough theory to put it into practice, he dodged to the side as the head passed, jamming the sword up through the gum and to the fang's root. He used the sword as an anchor and leverage to spin, slamming the fang with his chi
augmented kick. The fang popped out, tumbling in one direction while Zuko was slammed another way by the shrieking head.

He let the motion carry him until he could roll back to his feet.

“Alright scale face! One last time!” If anyone were ever to ask him, Zuko wouldn't be able to explain how his brain worked in these moments, when everything became hyper clear, when he suddenly understood just how to move, just where to place his feet so he didn't step on the fangs of the Basilisk's lower jaw, how to twist and thrust just so, so that he avoided being scratched by the upper fangs, and so the blade sunk true, through the soft palate of the creature's mouth, and deep into its brain.

The Basilisk's deceased head crashed into the ground, Zuko wedged in its mouth. For a moment nothing moved, the bird circling the corpse in silence. Then the muffled voice of Zuko came from within the serpent's maw.

“Well, shit... how am I supposed to get out? Oh Spirit's, it is rank in here.”

Hermione couldn't even think about collecting samples as she helped clear the rock from the tunnel, her friend was trapped with a Basilisk, the rooster they'd brought to deal with it crushed to death beneath the rubble. Her brain ran calculations as the remaining group moved stone after stone, figuring out the safest and fastest way to get through.

“Stop! Everyone stop,” the adults paused to look at her, waiting. The sound of scrabbling came from within the rocks.

“Harry?!”

“Still alive,” his voice was muffled and weary sounding, but it was him. Her brain reset its calculations, she all but shoved Madam Bones out of the way, pulling two small rocks from the pile in front of where the Head of the DMLE had been, then moving over to where Flitwick stood.

“Harry! Stay Very Still,” the scrabbling noise stopped, and Hermione shifted a small boulder twice the size of her head, just a touch to the left. The whole pile seemed to move, the adults making sounds off distress. Then the rubble settled again, and Hermione took a single step sideways to where a tunnel had opened in the rocks.

“Harry!”

“Hey, thanks Hermione, I did not want to dig the rest of that.” He looked tired and grubby, but he was smiling at her, she moved back to give him room to crawl out.

“Oh my god! What is that Smell?” Harry pulled himself far enough out to put his hands on the ground, using them as a base he lifted his legs, pulling them out without touching the rest of the stones, and performing a front walkover as soon as his feet cleared the small tunnel.

“That is the smell of victory... and basilisk ichor, blood, sweat and the several hundred years worth of gunk build up in the Chamber.” He pulled a face, letting her know he was even less happy about the smell than she was, before he turned back to the hole and called through. “It's clear, you can come through now.”

A moment of noise later and a phoenix was peeking it head out of the tiny tunnel, holding itself daintily so it didn't touch the residue left by Harry's passing with its feathers.
“Fawkes!” the two teachers exclaimed at the sight of him.

“What are you doing down here?” McGonagall asked it, “and why are you crawling through a tunnel, you can flame teleport anywhere.”

“Oh you- nice, bird, real nice.” Harry gave it a grumpy look, at Hermione's raised eyebrow he rolled his eyes, turning to the deputy headmistress. “I'm guessing this thing can teleport people with it.” she nodded, and he turned back to the phoenix, “but teleporting me would mean getting Basilisk gunk on you wouldn't it, and you couldn't just leave me down there alone could you?”

The phoenix managed to look incredibly guilty for a paragon of goodness.

“Mr Potter, is that a sword?” Flitwick's question distracted everyone from Fawkes.

“Huh?” Harry looked down at his belt and withdrew a sword, it was silver and studded with rubies, “oh yeah, it's really garish looking, but it's a good sword, I'm going to keep this sword.”

“But that's,” the teachers shared a look, “where did you even get that sword?” Harry flinched, looking far guiltier than Fawkes had, slowly he pulled a lump of dirty cloth from his belt, shaking it out lightly. The cloth spluttered and coughed and spat.

“Oh I'm filthy, this absolutely disgusting!”

“I said I was sorry!” Harry shot back, giving the school Sorting Hat an annoyed look, “I'll clean you off, stop whining!”

Madam Bones and Auror Thorpe just stared at the proceedings, wondering if they'd perhaps inhaled something.

Chapter End Notes

So, I got lost in a 'TV Tropes' blackhole the other day, and I thought to myself: "huh, I wonder which tropes apply to the Zuko Potter saga", because I'm really bad at recognising them in my own work, and now I kinda want to know, THEREFORE: anyone have a favourite trope that's shown up in the ZP series? let me know.

ALSO: The main (action/adventure) Plot of Secretive Basement ends here, but there's a few more bits and pieces that happen in the second school year that are canon enough that I felt they should go here, and not in the Outtakes.
Zuko's extracurricular activities

Chapter Summary

Zuko takes care of a few things, and his Destiny Repair Agent hits 'screw it'

Chapter Notes

Apologies ahead of time, this chapter is... well the story flow is a little bit janky. :( See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zuko had been responsible for the upkeep of his own armour during his exile, so he was no stranger to cleaning blood and unspeakables from leather and cloth. With a final pat he set the Hat down to finish drying, and picked up the sword. It took far less time to clean off than the Hat.

It also complained far less. As he swept a cloth along the blade, he took over some etching he hadn't paid attention to earlier, a single word up the length of the blade.

'GRYFFINDOR'

“Huh,” Zuko stopped to take it in.

“Finally noticed did you?” Zuko shot a glance at the Hat, it somehow seemed to smirk condescendingly. “You have one of the greatest swords in the world in your hands, and it takes you hours to notice.”

“And there was me thinking Gryffindor was a stick waving wizard, guy had good taste in weapons.”

“Hardly, that's a goblin forged blade, he went to the Goblins and said... well I'll translate into modern for you, but he basically said 'here's a lot of money, make me an awesome sword that's better than anyone else's.'”

'Goblin...' Zuko made a mental note to ask Flitwick about it later, the Charms Professor was part goblin after all, he might be able to tell Zuko about the forging practices of goblins. Even if he couldn't, Zuko didn't care to deal with the Hat more than necessary.

It was kind of mean.

Zuko turned over for the... twenty-ninth time that night, and sighed deep into his pillow as he gave up on sleep for the time being.

'I can feel you, what is it now? Did I screw up again?' He thought loudly towards the Spirit he could feel like a gloomy weight in his mind, wondering if he should have destroyed the book already.

The response was a wobbly-negative, (he hadn't screwed up again, exactly) and a sense of indecision.
'Is this... about fixing my 'adlib'?'

He got a 'sortofyes' in response. Sitting up, he frowned, what could...

'Have you given up on 'script perfect' then?' That got a clear yes. Followed by a clear no. 'You're thinking about it though.'

A grumpy affirmative.

'Sorry, for making trouble, I thought I was doing what you wanted. I do recall warning everyone I was likely to screw up.'

An affectionate (dis)agreement. A long moment then:

A decision, a sense of 'screw it let's do it.' Zuko let a tiny grin creep across his mouth as he shoved back his blankets, getting dressed and donning his invisibility cloak at the Spirit's urging.

Hermione sat up, from sleep to waking in less than half a second. She had the most sudden and intense urge to go for a walk. Frowning she dressed and rushed down to the common room.

“Hermione?” the whispered voice startled her for all of a second.

“Harry?” he appeared before her as he drew back his cloak. “Why do I have the sudden urge for a midnight stroll?”

“Sorry,” Harry winced as he beckoned her under the invisibility cloak. “The Spirits have decided to... go off script a bit, it feels like it's a matter of 'do it now before I lose my nerve,' kind of thing...”

Hermione scrubbed her tired eyes and sighed, “well then, let's get to it.”

The Spirits led them to the a corridor with a large tapestry, and a patch of bare wall. At the other worldly urgings, Zuko and Hermione walked back and forth along the hallway several times, stopping in surprise when a door emerged from the previously barren wall.

“Magic,” Zuko whispered, leaving Hermione to fill in the blanks from his tone of voice. She nodded agreement into the silence.

The room beyond the door was... to put it one way, a junk room, filled to improbable heights with stuff. Zuko swept the cloak free from their bodies and half folded, half shoved it into his belt, where he could grab it in case of a hiding emergency.

Together the pair began to make their way through the junk piles, looking for the reason they'd been sent.

“Hey Harry,” Zuko turned to Hermione's voice, raising an eyebrow at the witch, who stood staring at something on the side of a trash heap.

“Did you find the... whatever we're looking for?”

“No, don't think so, but I was wondering...”

“You were wondering?” Zuko prompted her to continue.

“Have you ever ridden a bike?”
“Ridden a what now?”

“A bicycle, because I just found one, looks a little old but it seems in good condition.”

Zuko continued to stare at Hermione, unsure how to respond, the girl looked over at him and shrugged, curling in on herself ever so slightly.

“I just... thought it might be fun, we could get Neville to give it a go too, maybe ride around the grounds on weekends and... things...”

“Sure, if we can get it out without toppling the pile, we can keep it in my work room, if that's the only one though, we might have to ask McGonagall if she could transfigure some more, so we can all go riding together.” As the duo manoeuvred the bike free of other debris, Zuko wondered how many times Hermione had reached out, suggesting an activity to her peers only to be turned down, rejected, because she never quite fit 'just right,' because her interests or suggestions never quite matched everyone else's.

Less than half an hour later, Zuko picked up a tarnished tiara from one of the many stacks, a familiar oily-sick feeling creeping along his skin at the touch.

“Hermione,” his first call came out a little hoarse, “Hermione, I've found it!”

Hermione appeared around a pillar of junk a few seconds later, toting a few books in her arms, which she almost dropped at the sight of his face.

“Harry!” She moved towards him, stopping when he shook his head.

“I'm alright, but I think I just found evil artefact number 2 of too many.” He tugged off his jacket and wrapped the tiara, shuddering at the faint, faint echo of ‘ick’ that still seeped through the cloth.

“Let's get out of here, we'll come back another time.” Hermione nodded, and moved to set down the books, “bring them along, we have to drop the bike off at the workroom anyway, right?” Zuko forced a smile to his face.

They both knew Hermione wasn't buying it.

Zuko rubbed at a line of chalk, blending it to create more realistic shadow on the picture of the tiara. Stepping back he considered the drawing, and deemed it 'close enough' to the real thing.

“Please tell me you two aren't going looking for the lost Diadem of Ravenclaw,” he startled at the sound of McGonagall's voice in the doorway of the workroom.

“Professor?” Zuko's eyes slid past his professor to the familiar woman behind her, “and madam Bones, hello again.”

“Mr. Potter,” the DMLE director greeted.

“Sorry professor McGonagall, you know what this tiara is?”

“Aye, it's the lost Diadem of Ravenclaw... why would you know what it looks like, but not what it is?” McGonagall's eyes narrowed dangerously.

“Because it's not lost, it is however as evil as that book I told you about.”

Madam Bones looked confused as McGonagall rubbed the bridge of her nose, the professor waved
the other woman into the room as she moved to the only real chair in the room, and sat down heavily.

“Sorry professor, it just sort of happened.” McGonagall didn't respond, so he turned his attention back to their guest, “Madam Bones, what can I do for you?”

“Miss Granger wrote a letter to me concerning the previous investigation, and its outcome relating to the death of miss Warren, specifically regarding the Expulsion and Wand Snapping of Rubeus Hagrid.” Zuko hadn't known Hermione had done that, but now that he thought of it, he probably should have done the same. “We're planning to hold a small hearing to re-examine the sentence, and given your efforts in the recent investigation, we'd like for you to be there.”

“Of course,” Zuko agreed.

Bones nodded and turned to McGonagall, “I'll see myself down to Hagrid's to give him the news, you look like you need a minute.”

“If you're sure?” McGonagall asked wearily.

“I'm sure, though don't be surprised if I find myself getting lost in the direction of my niece.”

“I'll hold off on the search party,” McGonagall smiled.

Zuko watched the empty doorway for several seconds after the direct left, before walking over to his tea set and preparing a drink for his head of house.

“Sorry professor,” his voice was quiet over the soft clinking of porcelain. “But if it makes you feel any better, the only danger we were in while finding the lost Diadem, was the risk of being caught out of bed after hours. It was a...” Zuko caught her gaze and gestured to his temple, pointing up, to indicate the higher powers. “I would have called you, but it was the middle of the night and, well there wasn't any real danger worth waking you for.”

“Real danger or not Harry, I would have preferred to be woken for these sorts of things.”

He nodded and handed her a cup of tea, “yes professor, I'll try to get a message to you in the future.”

McGonagall took a sip of the tea, it was a little strong and bitter, but not a bad cup of tea.

“Perhaps I should get around to teaching you the Patronus, for messaging purposes.”

“Yes please,” he gave her a small grin as she snorted quietly.

“Is that a bicycle?”

Hagrid's hands shook as the verdict was read, his heartbeat was so loud in his ears he couldn't hear the words. Hermione's short scream pierced straight through the overwhelming white noise, and he turned, uncertain towards his co-worker, the ghost and the two students who'd come with him. Harry had jumped onto his chair in an uncharacteristic display of emotions and let loose a yell of ‘YES!’ as he punched the air.

Minerva was crying and smiling and clapping, even Myrtle was giving a tiny smile as she floated nearby.

Amelia approached the group with scroll in hand, she handed it to Hagrid with a 'congratulations,' and left the group to their celebrating.
With great care, Hagrid unrolled the parchment, it contained a written copy of the verdict.

He could do magic again, legally, with a wand, he could finish his magical education if he wanted to, his expulsion, and the black mark it left on his criminal record was expunged.

For a lack of knowing what else to do, Hagrid joined Minerva in crying.

The group was joined by Flitwick at the Leaky Cauldron for a celebratory meal, while Hagrid discussed his options with his co-workers. He was unsure what to do with his new freedom, but after some brainstorming, Hagrid realised he could take catch-up classes, which would qualify him for Care of Magical Creatures positions with various organisations.

“Kettleburn has been talking about retiring,” Minerva said over her drink, “perhaps you could take over for him.”

“Do ye' think I could?”

“I'm certain we could discuss the matter with him when we return to the school.”

Head Goblin Warvice glared at the young boy across the desk. The young boy glared fiercely back. Beside the young boy, the half-wizard Filius Flitwick also glared.

It was good to see that even if he was a half-wizard, Filius had remembered proper Goblin manners.

“So,” Warvice began at length, “you wish to enquire about renting Goblin Craft.”

“I do,” the young boy – Harry, Warvice recalled – didn't waver, his desire clear.

“And which particular piece of Goblin Craft do you wish to rent, and for how long?”

“The Sword forged for Godric Gryffindor, for the remainder of my God-Brother Neville Longbottom's natural life.”

“Not your own?” A curious request from a wizard.

Harry gave a slight shrug, “I have it on good authority that he'll out live me, and though it is my hope that he will not need the sword after I'm gone, I'm not that lucky to trust in happy endings.”

“You are aware boy, that this Sword was stolen from us long ago, lost to the ages?”

Harry's glare melted into a smirk and her presented a long, cloth wrapped parcel to the Head Goblin. Warvice's gaze flickered to the half-breed, noting the smugness in the wand-bearer's face. With trepidation and hope, Warvice unwrapped the cloth. The Sword he uncovered was as beautiful as he'd always imagined.

“I hope my returning the Sword has earned me the goodwill to begin negotiations for a rental contract.” Harry's gaze was steady as he waited.

Warvice sneered, “we will of course need to verify the authenticity of the Artefact before we begin, but should the Sword prove True, we will negotiated.”

Harry dipped his head in acknowledgement, “of course Head Goblin Warvice.”

After handing off the Sword for authentication, Warvice turned his glower up to full power and
pinned the young wizard with his full gaze of fury.

“I hope you are aware, that should the Sword be found False, the consequences for you will be most … dire.”

“I am aware Head Goblin, though it is my sincerest belief that the Sword will prove True.”

Silence fell heavy for a long moment.

“We shall see,” Warvice allowed.

Zuko breathed deeply as he stepped onto the cobblestone pavement of the Alley, the cloth wrapped sword secured at his back.

“That was very well done mister Potter,” Flitwick said as they walked away from the looming bank, “very well done indeed.”

“Thank you Professor, I think I may owe my success to you though,” Zuko folded his hands together to stop the minor tremor racing through them, “I would have blundered into so many traps with out your advice, probably been the sole instigator of another wizard versus Goblin war…” Zuko shuddered at the thought.

“Nonsense mister Potter, you handled yourself well, I'm sure you would have managed somehow.” Flitwick made an abortive gesture to pat him on the arm.

“Thank you for your faith Professor, but I am... not good at politics... at all.”

“Agree to disagree mister Potter?”

“...Yes Professor.”

“You know I'm not an expert on law, right?” Hermione looked up from the contract Harry had signed with the Goblins, Harry nodded as he poured three cups of tea.

“Yes, but you have a different way of looking at things, Professor Flitwick already agreed that the contract was decent, but I wanted to know what you think as well.”

Neville murmured a quiet 'thank you' as he accepted his cup of tea.

“I think,” Hermione's tone took an acidic tinge, “that I'd like to know why Neville's life is the existing length of the contract.”


“You don't expect to survive this Destiny business, do you?”

“No,” Harry admitted into the horrified silence, “I don't think I will, and I don't know if my mission will be complete before I go.”

“But,” Neville put down his cup before he dropped it, “why my life?”

Something in Harry's expression softened, and he place a hand on Neville's shoulder, warming him.

“Because you are my God-Brother, you are, in the magical world, the closest legal thing I have to a
family. Because you are my friend, and I have faith in you. Because of the people I'm closest to, you and Hermione will probably live the longest, and Hermione's likely to start an argument with the Goblin nation because their currency system is completely irrational.”

The two boys shared a look at Hermione, who shrugged and sipped her tea daintily, barely flinching at the taste.

“It might not be about the currency,” a small smile tugged at her lips.

A light blush rose on Neville's cheek, and he squared his shoulders, looking Harry dead in the eye. “I'll do my best,” he promised.

“I know you will,” Harry squeezed his shoulder gently before letting go. The warmth of his hand lingered for a long time afterwards.

“Hang on a second,” Hermione did a mental double take, “Neville's your God-Brother?”

“Yeah, found out while I was going through paperwork with Flitwick for my case to keep the sword.”

“But you didn't seem surprised,” Hermione looked at Neville, who was (now) looking a little shocked.

“Well, yeah,” Neville stared at Harry wide eyed, “I've always known, I just assumed you did too but didn't want to make a big deal of it, so I never said anything.”

“Huh.”

The sun had barely risen as Zuko made his way down to the Forbidden Forest, a sack of cut meat in hand. Neville walked quietly beside him, a small book on plants tucked under his arm.

A few steps behind the boys, Hermione and a very tired looking Ginny spoke quietly of first year lessons.

While Hermione had finished researching Thestrals – the invisible winged horses which pulled the school carriages – some time ago, this was the first morning they'd had free to investigate the strange equines since.

They'd found Ginny sitting in the common room, staring into the unlit fire. Judging by the odd amalgam of feeling from the Spirits – apology, dreaming, never-was, almost-was, should-have-been, apology, surprise – Zuko suspected Ginny was dreaming of the things she'd almost experienced at the will of the evil infested book she'd almost kept.

He also suspected that had been as much of a surprise to the Spirits as it was to him.

Zuko's steps nearly faltered as he caught sight of pale, silvery-gold through the trees, surrounded by the black bodies of the Thestrals. As the group grew closer, Ginny gasped.

“Luna!” Zuko put out an arm in time to stop the auburn haired witch from barrelling into a Thestral.

“Easy Ginny, we're surrounded.” Despite the humour in his voice, her eyes widened in alarm and embarrassment, her face blushing deep red.

“Hello Ginny,” the young blond girl turned to face them, a calm, dreamy expression on her face. “What brings you out here so early?”
“We came to see the Thestrals,” Ginny replied as Zuko directed her around the invisible beast, “well, I say see, but only two of us actually can.”

“Oh?” Luna looked between the second years.

“The boys,” Hermione clarified, as Neville stopped her from bumping into a Thestral. “Where are your shoes? You really shouldn’t go around bare foot, your feet will get cold, and you could step on something and hurt yourself.”

The shift in Luna's expression was subtle, but not so subtle that Zuko missed it. He thought Hermione might have caught it, if she hadn't been too busy looking at Luna's feet disappointedly.

“Did you misplace your shoes?” He asked, and watched as her expression took on an intentional air-headedness, “or did someone misplace them for you?”

This time he knew Hermione saw the hint of brittleness lurking in Luna's dreamy gaze. He knew, because he saw her palm her wand.

He waved her closer to the young girl, glancing at Ginny as Hermione stepped through Thestral free space saying “I really must insist on footwear.”

Ginny looked like she was plotting a reckoning. As Hermione transfigured some leaf litter into snug, warm, comfy slippers, Zuko leaned closer to Ginny.

“This isn't a first?” Neville's frown was disapproving and worried, while Ginny's promised retribution as she shook her head in reply.

“Ravenclaw has been picking on her, some of my brothers used too as well. Luna's our neighbour, she and I... we were friends, we've been... less close lately.”

Anything Zuko mighty of said was cut off when one of the smaller Thestrals nudged his hand, snuffling at the bag of meat.

“Bullying?” Flitwick looked shocked. Zuko nodded, looking somewhat apologetic.

“I understand it's not something you want to hear about your own house, but I have it on good authority that one of the Ravenclaw students is being ostracised and harassed by other members of the house.”

MacGonagall and Flitwick both looked worried at his accusations.

“I'll investigate the matter,” Flitwick promised, “but...”

MacGonagall grimaced, the faculty had been trying to stamp out bullying for almost as long as there had been a school.

“I understand,” Zuko admitted, begrudgingly, “you can't watch everyone all the time, and you can only punish those you know have done wrong. People who think they can get away with it, well, there's always someone.”

“What do you plan to do Harry?” MacGonagall asked, sounding concerned.

“I'll leave the matter to Professor Flitwick for now, but if it continues... I'll look into alternative solutions.”
“I hope you'll discuss the... alternate solutions with us before you... put them into effect?”

“Of course professor.”

Somehow neither MacGonagall, nor Flitwick were entirely convinced.

Chapter End Notes

'Warvice' was a name that evolved from a portmanteau (Warvis) that came from Warwick Davis, the actor who played Flitwick. Because I couldn't come up with a good Goblin name, and accidentally stumbled over the best one. ; )
Zuko and the time it wasn't actually a kidnapping

Chapter Summary

Against all reason, Zuko may have become 'the mum friend'

Chapter Notes

I hate this chapter, so much, I think there were... no, never mind, I lost count of the rewrites. Over a week overdue, I need to post this or I will never post again, so, sorry for the poor quality and shortness.

Zuko watched as Hermione's head dropped slightly before it jerked back up, her blinks became the more deliberate kind people used when they were trying to focus their eyes. He cast his gaze over the room.

The rock samples were secure, the swathes of Basilisk hide – both old shed skin, and new, freshly harvested – were under their protective cases, everything was packed away. He turned back to Hermione, attempting to write out her latest set of notes before bedtime... which had been three hours ago.

Hermione's form sagged again, listing slightly to one side. With a quiet snort Zuko left his chair by the door.

He caught her before she could topple over, his touch startling her into a state that was... not 'more awake' so much as 'less asleep'.

“Hey,” he said softly, taking her pen from her hand, “your notes will still be here in the morning, time for bed.”

“Fi'e m'rre min's,” Hermione slurred, trying to combat her tiredness, grabbing in the direction of her pen with clumsy hands.

“The last time you said 'five more minutes',” Zuko informed her, “was an hour ago.” Hermione grumbled and let herself be pulled away from her desk. Realising Hermione wasn't going to be able to stand by herself, let alone make the trek back to Gryffindor tower, Zuko turned and knelt, using Hermione's arms to pull her onto his back.

He tucked his arms under her legs before he stood, hitching her into the best possible position he could without her assistance.

'Now,' he thought, 'for the hard part.' After doing one last check to make sure nothing on Hermione's desk would spill in the night and ruin her research notes, Zuko walked carefully back to his chair by the door and took his invisibility cloak in one hand, trying to keep Hermione balanced with just one arm, while he whipped the magical cloth up and over them.
He had to tug it a few times, the cloak having landed imperfectly on them, before they exited into the corridor. Hermione's new research room, which she had set up with the help of McGonagall, was only a few doors down from Zuko's own workroom, so he felt confident in his ability to navigate them back to the dorms.

Though he'd apparently be sleeping on the floor again.

He muffled another snort of amusement as a wave of nostalgia hit him. How long had it been since he'd last given a carry-back ride to someone? *(His crewman is injured, they'd come across Earthbenders, they have nothing to use as a stretcher, Zuko's the least exhausted, he can carry the soldier, barely older than himself, lopsided weight thanks to the missing appendage/ he's small, his face un-scarred, Ty-Lee on his back, worried about the ankle she'd twisted trying to appease Azula)*

Maybe he could carry one of the couches up from the common room?

Though she wasn't aware of the two week deadline, when it arrived, nothing had changed for Luna. Except for Ginny, who was hanging out with her again. Luna had missed her friend dearly.

As she lay in her bed trying to sleep, Luna heard a noise outside her room. She pulled the blankets over her head and prayed silently, almost sobbing when she heard the door open. A moment later a quiet voice called out to her, and a hand shook her gently through the blanket.

She knew that voice.

“Ginny?” Luna moved the blanket back just far enough to see. At the sight of her friend she flung it back fully, not even considering it might be a trick, and embraced her friend. “What are you doing here? *How* are you here?”

A second voice answered, “we took the alternate entrance, and technically, we're here to kidnap you.” It was the slightly older witch from the forest, the one who transfigure Luna some slippers.

Ginny pulled a face at the older girl, “don't make it sound so bad, *technically*, this is a rescue.”

“I... don't understand,” Luna said quietly into Ginny's shoulder.

The older witch stepped closer and sat down beside the other two on the bed. “Harry is very unimpressed with your house's stance on bullying, and though the teachers have tried, we know it hasn't stopped. So we discussed it amongst ourselves, and we've decided to adopt you into Gryffindor.”

“Right,” Ginny confirmed, “so we have to pack your things and get you out of here before these 'claws know we're here.'”

It was exciting and terrifying for Luna as she dressed in the warm clothes the two girls had brought with them, as she packed what remained of her belongings and followed them to a bathroom of all places. Luna trusted Ginny, but being taken to the bathroom in the middle of the night was very concerning.

Until the older witch opened a window and floated Luna's things with a whispered call of “package retrieved, begin phase two rescue procedures.”

Delight grew deep inside her chest as Luna was carefully lowered out the window by rope, and into the safe grasp of Harry Potter. Together, the four of them made their way across the roof tops, like daring thieves in the night. Like she was precious enough to be stolen.
'At a tower far across the castle from her prison, the princess was lifted up the walls and into the waiting arms of a prince.'

Neville, the shy boy from the forest helped to pull Luna inside the boy's dorm room, he bundled her up with a blanket and a hot chocolate, then turned to receive her belongings.

The other three clambered in the window one by one, Ginny gluing herself to Luna's side when she arrived.

In the safety of the room, Harry and Hermione – she finally remembered the older witch's name – laid out the Luna-Protection Scenario they'd devised. It had been hastily put together, but Luna wasn't complaining.

The awareness that Luna had been 'converted' to a Gryffindor was slow to spread. In fact, it took just over a week before any of the Ravenclaws noticed she'd gone, and it was only because one Ravenclaw student went looking to vent some frustrations on her, that they even realised no one had seen her in the common room in a while.

Flitwick had taken much closer note of the goings on of his house during the time following the 'abduction', and was disappointed in his students.

He charmed the notice boards to begin displaying anti-bullying propaganda, though he wasn't sure it would help.

Zuko watched the trio of witches as they laughed and ran across the yard. Well, Hermione and Ginny ran, Luna riding unsteadily between them on the group's new bike. Neville was around, somewhere nearby, working on an 'extra credit' field journal for professor Sprout.

And Ron...

Ron sat stiffly by Zuko, glowering in the direction of the girls.

“Are you going to tell me what's bothering you?” Zuko asked him when the tension got to be too much. Ron had been an impulse invite, one which Zuko was hoping didn't turn out badly.

Ron looked away, fiddled with some grass before pulling up a handful, then throwing it away.

“I just...” Ron seemed to struggle to get the words out. “Last year, on the train to Hogwarts, I thought...” he glanced at Zuko, then looked away with a huff. “I thought we were friends, you know, I though we... and then Hermione comes along, and she's...” he gestured in her direction, vague, but Zuko knew what he meant. “And then you were her friend, and Neville's friend, and you weren't my friend anymore, and I kept trying, but it felt like I just couldn't get it right!”

Zuko hesitated, not sure if he should interrupt.

“It just...” Ron started speaking again, “do you ever... feel like, there's something that, if you do it, everything will be... right?” Zuko could see an almost begging on Ron's face, the boy desperate for Zuko to understand what he couldn't quite put into words. “It just, sometimes... I get hit by this feeling like, like we're supposed to be best friends, like we would have been, if she hadn't stolen you.”

Zuko startled slightly, then realised that, yeah, that was kind of how it had happened, form a certain point of view, but it hadn't just been that...
“And, for the most part, I get it, we don't fit together as friends, I can never seem to get it right with you. But then, you do keep acting like you're maybe interested in being friends, but then it seems like you aren't, and then it feels like the universe wants me to keep trying, only then you start hanging out with my sister, and Looney-Lovegood.”

“That's one of the problems,” Zuko cut in, Ron flinched and looked away. “Honestly, I think we were doing alright on the train, but then I met Hermione and... it's not that she stole me. Hermione, her personality, it's, it's actually familiar. It feels like I've been around girls like her most of my life.”

“Bossy know-it-alls?”

“No, girls that could kill me without breaking a sweat.” The two boys shared a look.

“Girls are scary,” Ron said, after a moment.

“They really kind of are,” Zuko agreed, “but it's a familiar scary, and it just... it made being friends with her easier. I'm not good at being a friend, not really, and with Hermione, it feels like less effort. I do want to try, with you, but it feels like every time, you find some way to accidentally trigger one of my issues. I don't... I don't like talking about them, it's honestly easier to just be an arsehole until everyone leaves me alone than explain everything, every time.”

“I...” Ron's voice and breath were heavy, Zuko thought the boy might have been tearing up. “Do you want me to stop trying? To... not try to be friends?”

Zuko sighed, and shook his head, “it depends on whether or not you think you can remember a few things.” He got the feeling the real Harry Potter would have been good friends with Ron, that maybe the Spirits were still trying to keep that friendship, even if it couldn't possibly be the same between Zuko and Ron.

“I... can try?”

Zuko considered for a moment, then nodded. “So you may have noticed I kind of have this thing about being touched...”

“Alright, Neville, you're up,” Zuko indicated to the training dummy at the end of his workroom, handing Neville the wooden sword blank as the younger boy stepped forwards. Well, younger from Zuko's perspective. “Just take it easy, one stance at a time, no rush.”

Neville nodded, readjusting his grip on the handle and bringing the sword into the first position of the sequence.

“Mind your feet,” Zuko reminded him quietly, stepping back. Neville looked down and shifted his feet slightly before going back to the first position. The boy had expressed interest in learning how to wield a sword after witnessing Zuko practice with Gryffindor's sword, he was doing surprisingly well.

Zuko liked to think he was doing a good job as a teacher too, certainly he was better at it now than when he'd started attempting to instruct Aang.

Neville swung his practice sword, hitting the dummy with a quiet thunk, focused more on form than power. It took both boys a few seconds longer than it should have to realise the additional thunking, the ones not matching Neville's follow up swings, were in fact a knock at the door.

Neville came to a stop as Zuko stepped quickly over to the door, opening it to find professor
McGonagall on the other side.

“Professor,” Zuko said in greeting, with a mild bow. “What brings you to my office?”

She gave him an amused look, “apologies for barging in-” she paused as she caught sight of the wooden sword in Neville's grasp, but shrugged it off, “-you may recall during the summer you warned me of a rogue house elf?”

Zuko had mostly forgotten the creature, but at the reminder, he grimaced, his mouth pulling into a snarl.

“Aye, him,” McGonagall said drily, “our house elves caught him on the premises a short time ago, I'm planning to call Amelia, Madam Bones, to get this sorted out. She'll likely need a statement from you, would you like to come with me and wait, or shall I send you a message if and when she needs you?”

“Send me a message?” Zuko said, with a tone that asked if that option was actually alright.

“Of course,” McGonagall nodded, hesitating at the doorway, she eyed the sword in Neville's grip again, “I do hope I don't have to hear anything about that in a fight.”

“No professor,” Neville said vehemently, “I mean, yes professor... I, I mean... erm, that is...” Neville turned alarmingly red, “Harry has a contract with the goblins, to rent the sword of Gryffindor for the rest of my natural life, and I figured, if he goes before I do, the sword will come to me, and... well, sword of Gryffindor, I should probably know how to use it.”

McGonagall considered his explanation, looking at Zuko curiously, “and how, Mr. Potter, do you know how to use it?”

“I am the chosen one, blessed by the Spirits,” Zuko knew she'd caught the minor twitch of his lips as he gave his best deadpan delivery. He knew because McGonagall, notoriously stern deputy headmistress and head of Gryffindor house, rolled her eyes, giving an amused huff with a smile on her face.

“Oh is that the reason?” She asked rhetorically.

Both boys nodded.

“Very well then, I'll leave you two to it, but be careful, Madam Pomphrey will be telling me if you two show up, and that's not a reason to not show up for medical care if ye do injure yeselves.” She gave them a stern look, to which they only nodded their agreement. “I'll send you a message if we need you Harry.”

“Thank you professor,” he gave her a small, grateful smile.

As McGonagall walked away, Hermione stuck her head out of her own workroom, "Oh professor, do you have a minute? I just need a signature for a book from the restricted section for my research.”

Zuko gave her a wave, which she returned distractedly, before returning to Neville's sword lessons.

"Alright, where were we?"
Zuko and the calm before the storm

Chapter Summary

With nothing of great urgency to do, Zuko enjoys being a youth. Until he doesn’t.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: this chapter contains implications of a traumatic flashback/panic attack/dissociative episode, but it is literally in the last few lines of the chapter, I’ll mark the segment with a -~*~-

Not a lot of plot here, just kids hanging out, relaxing... letting down the mental defences that kept the waking nightmares at bay...

Bit of a time skip?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry exited McGongall's office, rolling his head like he was trying to crack his neck and release tension.

“That well then?” Hermione asked dubiously, standing from her seat in the hall.

“It was amazing,” he replied drily, “stupendous even.”

She snorted, transfiguring her chair back into a thin blanket.

Harry sighed, sounding tired and worn out, even though he'd merely been talking to Madam Bones for half an hour.

“Well, it is officially, no longer my problem,” Harry's mouth did that tiny quirk that she'd come to realise was his version of a grin when he was tired.

“Good,” with her own restrained smile Hermione added, “now you’ll have more attention to spend on important things, like class work.”

Harry gave a soft, amused huff that was as good as a laugh and Hermione cheered silently.

She'd read his mood right, 'good, well done me. Five points to Hermione for passable social skills.'

“But seriously,” she asked as they made their way to their workrooms, “does this mean it will be safe for Katara to come visit, I know you've been missing her, and I’m rather keen to get to know her properly.”

“She'll be here with the first frosts, apparently,” something softened in the lines of his body as he spoke. Hermione smiled, in these moments it was easiest to forget he was more than he appeared.

She liked these moments.
Ron looked up from his breakfast, eyes darting to Harry. Sure enough, he still hadn't moved, the same odd expression on his face that had taken over six minutes before.

Ron looked over to Hermione, waving to catch her attention, she looked up and raised an enquiring eyebrow. Ron tilted his head at Harry and gave his clearest 'what the hell is that about?' face.

Hermione glanced at Harry, but when she gave Ron her reply, it was a shrug and a face that said 'I'm just as confused as you are.'

“Harry,” Ron called to him, “mate?”

“Hmeh?” The noise that came out of Harry's mouth was confused and distracted.

“Erm... what's, uh, what's in that letter you've got?” Ron asked.

“You have been staring at it for quite a while,” Hermione added.

“My-” Harry stopped, took a few deep breaths like he wasn't sure he was saying things correctly. “My aunt, Petunia... she's um... she's sent me a letter.”

Hermione and Ron shared a look.

“That's... nice of her?” Hermione asked, unsure.

“What's nice of who?” Neville asked as he slid into a chair nearby.

“Harry's aunt sent him a letter,” Ron explained.

Neville gave them a strange look, “I thought your aunt hated magic, how'd she send the letter?”

“Hedwig?” Hermione asked, but Harry shook his head.

“Hedwig does not care for the Dursleys,” Harry folded the letter and put it back in its envelope, staring off into the ether. “My aunt sent me a request on behalf of a, well I suppose they're a client now, but... she's really into maintaining an image of normalcy, and Hedwig doesn't like the Dursleys anyway, so I don't send her around to keep them updated.”

“Petunia Dursely,” Harry said with the kind of weight someone used to impart a great revelation, “normal's number one fan, wanted this commission so much, she braved magical areas to find a postal owl, to send me a letter to ask me to do my magic arts and crafts.”

“So it's a bit weird,” Ron said, not sure he understood the problem, “you're acting like someone just told you fire is wet.”

“Basically,” Harry said with a shrug, like someone had in fact tried to tell him fire was wet. “Aunt Petunia tries to stay as far away from magic as she possibly can, this is like... like... like there's something fundamentally wrong with the universe.”

Harry turned to Hermione slowly, a look of horror forming on his face.

“I broke the universe,” Harry said in a hoarse stage whisper.

“No you haven't,” Hermione said with a stern shake of her head.

“Prove it?” Harry seemed to be begging for her to be right.
Ron tried to hide an amused smile as Hermione floundered.

Neville tapped at the table near Harry's hands, bringing his attention over to Neville.

“Go talk to Malfoy,” Neville suggested, somewhat desperately, like someone grasping for straws... or ideas just crazy enough to work. “He'll still be a berk, if the universe is broken, he won't be... Malfoy.”

Harry nodded and was up out of his seat and halfway across the hall before anyone could get out a reason why that was a bad idea.

“Oh this'll end well,” Hermione sighed.

Harry Potter strode up to the Slytherin table with a determined gait.

“How are you?” he said as he stopped by the boy in question.

“Potter,” Draco sneered back.

Potter hesitated for a second, then, “how are you?”

The Slytherins nearby looked over curiously while Draco's sneer turned into a confused frown.

“Fine?”

“Good,” Potter said lightly, “that's good.”

The atmosphere turned awkward as Potter continued to stand there, seemingly unsure what to say next.

Draco tried filling the silence, “how are you?”

“Uh, you know? I'm... also... fine?”

“Right.”

They watched each other awkwardly for a moment, then Potter nodded.

“Right, well, uh... breakfast is... a meal?” Potter said like he was unsure of the words coming out of his own mouth. “Which I will, let you get back to. This, uh, you?... good, good talk.” Potter gave the most awkward double thumbs up anyone at the Slytherin table had ever seen, and turned and walked away.

“What,” Pansy asked, watching the Boy-Who-Lived leave, “in Merlin's name, was that?”

But no one at the table had any answers.

Over at the Gryffindor table, Granger had her head in her hands and seemed to be weeping, while Weasley and Longbottom watched on, aghast.

When Potter returned to his seat, he was shaking his head and seemed just as shell-shocked as everyone else involved.

“Potter,” Snape's voice carried across the room, “ten points from Gryffindor for disrupting breakfast for other houses.”
Potter raised a hand and gave the professor a thumbs up, before pushing his plate away and hiding his head in his arms in the resulting space.

A series of lanterns illuminated a small alcove on the rooftops of Hogwarts castle, spilling coloured lights across the area in the pre-dawn darkness. Huddled together in an array of blankets and hot packs, six students and a cat waited, their breath fogging up the air.

Zuko had lifted his 'don't touch me' ban, for the duration of the outing, since it was really cold out, and his Breath of Fire turned him into a walking heater.

Neville and Ron were as close at they dared at his back, because the girls were currently draped over his front in a tangled pile.

McGonagall had brought a basket with heating-pad-cushioning and insulation, so - with her tiny, cat sized beanie to protect her ears - she was perfectly toasty.

Just as the children around Zuko began to doze off, he spotted sparkling on the horizon. His sudden tensing with anticipation roused the girls, whose questions roused the boys.

“I think I see them,” Zuko said, arm leaving the blankets to point.

“Ooh,” the group watched as the sparkling lights flew across the land. As the lights grew closer, they could see frost and a light snow following in their wake.

The lights split up to cover the Hogwarts ground, the lake, the castle. When they finished and returned to their swarm, a single light broke off and rushed down to the group.

Zuko raised his hand, palm up.

The light settled onto it, and the bright aura faded, leaving an only faintly glowing Katara, who grinned and waved to them all.

“Hey,” Zuko said softly, bring her carefully towards him so he could cradle her safely in his hands.

“Hey,” she said back, the faint sound of crack ice, lapping waves and jingling bells echoing in her words.

“Hermione! Don't tell her that!” In the warmth of Zuko's workroom, Zuko scowled as the group giggled over Hermione's retelling of Zuko's attempt to talk to Draco.

“Oh,” Katara said with a dismissive wave, “don't worry about her ruining your reputation with me Zuko, I already knew you weren't cool.”

Zuko gave a tiny, displeased whine and frowned, but the light in his eyes made it plain to see he wasn't offended in the least.

“So, Katara,” Ginny said, slightly uncertain, “what's it like where you're from?”

“Neverland?” Katara tapped her chin as she thought, “well, it's mostly warmer than here, and there's this group of pirates. Oh! Wait until you hear about their last attempt to steal our Dust!”
what she knew of Harry's home life before Hogwarts.

The trio walked down to Hogsmeade, groups of students ahead and behind them, making their way slowly down to the village.

Although it was not quite lunch time, a few students were already on their way back to the castle, some of whom gave curious glances to the Deputy Headmistress and the Boy-Who-Lived with his glowing shoulder fairy.

She gave those students her best poker face and a pointedly polite nod.

The trio arrived at Hogsmeade, then followed the train tracks past it, until the village was almost out of sight. The closer they got to their destination, the slower Harry seemed to walk.

Sooner than she felt he would have liked, they found Wendy Darling reading on a tree stump, rugged up against the cold, Hedwig perched nearby, almost invisible against the snowy backdrop.

Harry sighed, his breath turning to mist in the cold air.

“Will you be able to visit again this winter?” He asked Katara, who shrugged and raised into the air.

“I don't know,” she admitted, “maybe. It really depends on how much work there is to do, and if Queen Clarion feels it's safe enough. Hopefully next time I won't need the full escort of bodyguards.”

Though Katara smiled, Harry frowned, like he thought Katara should have had more protection, even though he knew the house elf who'd harmed her before, was no longer a problem.

They said their goodbyes, Katara hugging Harry as best as she could despite her small stature, which in this case meant plastering herself to one of his cheeks while he kept his hands cupped gently around her.

As they watched Wendy, Katara and Hedwig take off, Minerva placed a hand on Harry's shoulder, ready to remove it if he showed any signs of flinching.

He stayed still, letting her hand rest, absorbing the heat he put out, even through his thick jacket.

“Why don't we warm up a little before we head back.” Minerva suggested. “Grab a pint of butter-beer and I'll introduce you to Rosie.”

“Is butter-beer alcoholic?” Harry asked her with a curious look.

“Not on your life,” Minerva told him, mild amusement in her tone.

Harry shrugged, “probably for the best, now is not a good time to start drinking.”

“Indeed,” Minerva said drily, leading the way to the pub.

“I feel kind of unobservant,” Harry said suddenly as they neared the town again. “I didn't notice any of the Hogsmeade weekends last year. I feel like that's something I should have noticed.”

“First years typically don't, they have enough on their plate to worry about,” Minerva replied.

“If you say so professor.”

“I do.”
As they entered the warmth of the pub, Harry let out a quiet, pleased hum, basking in the warmth.

“So I'll be able to come here next year?”

“Aye, If you have a guardian's permission,” Minerva explained as they managed to snag a table.

“Either guardian?”

“Aye,” she nodded, eyes flickering to the side as she spotted Rosmerta just as Rosmerta was spotting her. Minerva raised a hand to wave. “Would you like some soup while we're here? My treat? Rosie does a wonderful mutton and carrot.”

Harry considered for a few seconds before nodding.

“That does sound good.”

“What's it like though?” Ginny asked, leaning over her textbook.

Zuko shrugged, “like a small village?”

“Did you visit Honeydukes?” Ron asked, grateful for any excuse to take a break from the study session.

“No,” Zuko replied with a serious face, “we were there to escort Katara, there was no time for such frivolities.”

He reached into his over robe, while maintaining eye contact with Ron. With slow deliberate movements, he with drew a single slim chocolate bar from his inner pocket, unwrapped it and took a bite.

Ron's eyes snapped to the bar, his nose wrinkling as he realised what it was.

“Dark chocolate? You got the chance to visit one of the greatest lolly shops in the world, and you bought dark chocolate?”

“It's so bitter,” Ginny said with an agreeing tone of disapproval.

Zuko nodded, “like my soul.”

Hermione, who apart from her greeting when he'd returned had stayed largely silent, asked, “you didn't really buy a chocolate bar just to make that joke did you?”

Zuko met her eyes, and with a completely straight face, took another bite of his chocolate.

“Of course you did,” Hermione said with a sigh, “why are you this way?”

“I have a tragic backstory that explains everything.” Hermione finished rolling her eyes just in time to see the tiniest quirk of his mouth.

Zuko waited another ten seconds before he reached back into his robe and pulled out the other several chocolate bars he'd procured on his trip.

As he handed them out he said, “I hope I got something everyone likes, I wasn't sure, but
McGonagall said milk chocolate is popular enough for a fall back.”

Luna cheered as she reached out and took a bar, and Neville gave a 'thanks,' which was soon echoed by everyone else at the table as they took their treats.

“Alright,” Zuko said as he began sorting through his own text books, “where are you all on Defence?”

Zuko was packing the latest commission, sent via Petunia, into a box when a knock came at the door of his workshop.

“It's open,” he called out, looking up as the door opened to reveal Ginny, Luna and Colin Creevey, rugged up for the chilly outside weather. “Hey Ginny, hey Luna, and... hi Colin?”

“Hey Harry,” Ginny said, moving forwards to stand by the work desk. “Are you busy?”

Zuko shook his head, “just finished, I'm about to head up to the Owlery though.”

“Oh, well, when you're finished that,” Ginny paused to hand him the packing tape.

“Thanks.”

“Your welcome. Erm, right so, the first years are going to have a snowball fight, but the teams aren't broken up into houses, strictly speaking, and a few of the older students are going to help the other teams, and we were wondering, if maybe, you'd be on our team?”

Zuko shrugged, “sure, I have to warn you though, my snowball fighting experience is very limited.”

“That's alright,” Colin said from the doorway, “I'm sure you'll be brilliant!”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Alright, we're going to need a defensible location with access to plenty of snow,” Zuko said looking out over the grounds, “preferably on higher ground, that'll give us improved visibility of the field while making it harder for our enemies to see over our walls.”

The trio of first years with him shared an amused look and gave sloppy salutes, turning their attention to the grounds.

“How about over there?” Luna pointed to an area on the hillside leading back up to the castle. It was close enough to the other teams building their forts that it would still be considered part of the game, but far enough to make throwing snowballs a true test of ability.

“Looks good,” Zuko said with a nod and began leading the way over to the chosen site. “Now, are there rules on magic use?”

“No magicking anyone directly,” Ginny told him, “we can conjure more snow, not that first years know how, and we can use magic to throw the snowballs.”

“What about building the fort?”

“No one said we couldn't,” Colin said, “and...” he pointed to one of the other teams, their upper year team mate was clearly using his magic to slide snow into a pile, which was then squashed into the shape of a wall.
“Hmm, does it have to be snow?” Zuko asked, thinking of the spells he’d learned from the teachers the previous winter. “Or can we build with ice?”

“Technically snow is ice,” Luna said, “so I don't see why not.”

“Good,” he came to a halt on their chosen site, and drew his wand. “Alright team, begin snowball creation, I'll handle the fort.”

Realistically, Zuko could have done it all by waving his wand, but he decided to use his whole body, shifting through his best imitation of Katara's waterbending. Graceful, fluid motions, sweeping around and up as he placed the walls, thick and sturdy, clear ice coated in opaque white ice to mask their presence.

If he was being honest about it, and he wasn't, he really only did it because bending looked a thousand times cooler than just waving a wand.

Zuko added a long, clear wall, stretching out in front of their fort for many metres. In the face of a physical invasion, it would force their opponents to waste time going around, or lose cover going over. It was also close enough that it was possible to lob a snow ball onto the far side by throwing high but not far, which was why he'd made it out of clear ice, so they could see their targets if they made it that close.

“Hey Harry?”

“Yes Colin?”

“That's a really cool spell.”

“Thanks Colin.”

“Hey Harry?”

“Yes Colin?”

“When do we learn that?”

Zuko looked at Colin and the girls, who'd all paused their snowball making to wait for his answer.

“Uhhh, I'm... not sure?” Before Colin could ask him why he wasn't sure, Zuko explained. “I didn't learn this in class, I learned during Christmas last year, when the teachers were having their ice sculpture contest. I can teach you three later though, if you like?”

“Yes!” Zuko flinched at the sudden loudness of the first years.

“Alright, now,” he looked over their snowball supply, “we're going to need more than that.”

Zuko let the younger children teach him the best way to pack the snow.

--*--

“SURRENDER!!”

The voice of a third year called up from down the hill, and Zuko scowled.
“NEVER!! WE WILL NOT BOW TO THE DISHONORABLE ENEMY!!” Hidden behind the ice wall, Zuko pulled a face. Sometimes when he tried to say things, it turned out really awesome sounding lines, translated poorly into English.

“OH, BUT YOU WILL! YOU WILL SUPPLICATE YOURSELVES-”

“Something's wrong,” Zuko whispered suddenly to his team, “they're distracting us. No one grandstands like this unless they're trying to hold your attention.”

“Want me to look?” Colin asked, eagerly.

'Why,' Zuko wondered, 'what are they planning? There's plenty of snow, and they can conjure more, so it's probably not an ammunition shortage. We've been at this for an hour though, so they're likely tired. Is that-'

“I'm going to look,” Colin leapt up, faster than Zuko thought the could, levering himself up on the wall to see what he could. The first year was already crouching on top of the ramparts when Zuko realised what was going on.

“COLIN-” Zuko's wand was out, he cast a wall of ice between the girls and the hillside behind them as he lunged for Colin.

The wave of icy water caught them both.

Zuko was slammed against the wall, half pulled over by the torrent of water.

He reached for Colin as the younger boy was swept off the bridge and into the Spirit's grasp, into the freezing polar waters below.

Zuko scrambled with the bridge's railing, trying to grab his hand, Zuko could save him if he just gave Zuko his hand!

Someone was screaming.

Chapter End Notes

The Draco and Harry scene VERY nearly began with 'Hello, Harry Potter here...'
Ginny didn't understand what was happening when Harry began casting at them, so she threw herself over Luna just in case. Less than a second later, a heavy torrent of icy water hit the ice wall Harry had conjured.

The water cracked the ice, swirling around the wall to hit their fortress wall. The backwash was less powerful, but still shoved both girls into the wall. Hard.

Ginny managed to absorb most of the impact for Luna, and they floundered in the sudden deep pool of frigid water, trying to push themselves to the surface without tangling one another.

They couldn't think about the snowballs, the small projectiles of compact snow nothing compared to the freezing water which had nowhere to go, the fortress walls too solid and encompassing for it to spill away. Only the sloshing waves that pulled them back and forth managed to make it over the metre high walls.

Using the steps at the walls' base and the hand holds Harry had added in, Ginny managed to shove Luna up onto the walls' wide top, her shaken friend turning to pull her up after.

“Where's Colin?” Luna tried to ask, her eyes catching on Harry's form, lying half on the wall's top, odd wheezing choking noises coming from his mouth. Ginny saw the red speckling the skin and ice near his mouth and covered Luna's eyes.

Some one had started screaming, it pulled her attention further down the hill, where her gaze caught two older students attending Colin's body, Ginny let out a grateful cry when she saw their class mate already trying to push himself up. The screaming was coming from another first year, who was looking not at Colin, but behind Ginny.

Turning to the hill behind the fortress, Ginny saw an older Slytherin running away, only distinguishable by their height and the green on their robes.
Shaking, Ginny left Luna, scampering across the wall as best she could while trying not to fall off, the quiet 'oh' from behind her and the slapping, shushing sounds let her know that Luna was following.

With badly shaking hands, the duo tried to pull Harry onto the flat of the wall, but at their touch he let out a frightened cry, his body twisting as he tried to escape their grasp. As his hand swung close to her face, Ginny managed to get a look at his eyes.

They were wild with fear, and as his motions carried him off the wall and back into the water, Ginny wasn't sure he knew where he was or what was going on around him. ('Oh sweet heart,' her mother had said, tending to her scratches, 'sometimes when an animal is injured, they just can't understand you're trying to help, so they lash out.')</n
"HELP! HEEEEELLLP!!!!" Ginny began screaming out, unsure what to do. She and Luna couldn't try to pull Harry out of the water without being caught up in his volatile thrashing and being pulled in with him, but he wasn't standing up, he wasn't getting above the water line, and she didn't think he had enough air in his lungs because he was breathing blood!!!

Arms were wrapping around her waist and pulling her backwards off the wall, Ginny threw her arms out at the sudden entrapment.

"Ginny!" Her brother's voice was shouting in her ear, his other words lost as he put her down, but Percy seemed to be directing some of the other students, because suddenly the walls of the fortress were being pulled apart and Harry was being washed out into the waiting magical net of another student.

One of the students cast a light at him and Harry stopped moving. Ginny screamed and lunged forwards, but Percy's arms caught her again, and through her distress she could make out him saying things.

'It's alright, they're helping, you have to let them help.'

Ginny's eyes trailed away and found Luna, being held by another student. Luna was crying.

Hermione sat by Harry's bedside, staring blankly at a wall, her wand ready in her hand.

She was angry.

Furious.

Livid.

She'd heard about the first years' snowball fight, but had wanted to work on one of her own pet projects, so she hadn't even gone to a window to watch.

Until she'd felt a sense of sudden fear and urgency. She suspected Harry's mysterious 'Spirits', since it was similar to some of the impulses she'd felt before, like that time she'd had a sudden urge to go for a late night walk, and found Harry in the common room with his cloak.

She followed the feeling, but by the time she'd gotten there, Harry was on the ground surrounded by older students, his lips visibly blue, and his side, his rib cage...

She'd had enough presence of mind to realise the students were helping, but when Lockhart had come bounding across the grounds, a smile and jovial laugh on his lips, saying he could fix
everything in just a moment...

Hermione hadn't given him time to try, the presence from 'on high' rising to a crescendo of 'NO, STOP HIM!'

She couldn't even remember casting the spells before his wand was flying out of his hand and he was dropping to the ground unconscious. She didn't know why, but the image of broken support beams disappearing, the building they were barely holding up collapsing, swam across her mind in the wake of the Spirit's 'shouting'.

She didn't know what had happened to him after that – she didn't care – because Madam Pomfrey was racing across the grounds behind a Hufflepuff who seemed to be showing her the way, shouting to the students, asking for an update on the situation.

Hermione had startled when she heard one of the students mention Colin, but a quick visual check showed he was upright and alert, being looked after by two seventh years.

Glancing about she also spotted Ginny and Luna, huddled together and looking very wet. Knowing she couldn't help Harry, she marched over to them.

“Are you two alright?”

Ginny nodded, but Luna just stared in Harry's direction. Hermione frowned harshly when she noticed the girls' lips were for more purple than they should have been.

“Why are you two still wet?”

“Perc- Percy had to go, they know where the Sly-th, where he went, they had to, to g- aft'r him,” Hermione wasn't sure if the Ginny's speech difficulties were from the cold, holding back tears, or outright shock.

She flicked through her mental catalogue of spells, looking for anything to help. She drew her wand and did her best to get rid of the remaining water. Once the girls were as dry as she could get them, she began warming them up, slowly and in increments.

“Can you two tell me what happened?” Ginny made an attempt to answer Hermione's question, but her words became sobs, and Ginny's crying set off Luna, so Hermione had wrapped them both in a hug, and offered what comfort she could.

When Madam Pomfrey had begun moving Harry up to the Hospital Wing, Hermione had managed to get the girls moving.

She hadn't followed Madam Pomfrey and Harry to the Hospital Wing then, but it had been close. Colin had gone with them, but Hermione had taken the two girls back to the dorms to get cleaned up and into warm dry clothes.

She watched them for any signs of concussion, the way her parents had taught her, but the duo seemed fine apart from the horror of what they had seen.

In pyjamas and warm, fluffy robes with soft, woolly slippers (all enchanted for warmth), Hermione escorted the duo up to Madam Pomfrey's domain, to have them checked over just in case.

The two girls had been given a clean bill of health, but they'd still been told to stick around for observation, and given a small pile of chocolate to work through.
Colin had given a shaky smile from his own bed beside them, working through his own chocolate.

Harry had been separate, still unconscious on a bed hidden behind a screen, after seeing the look on Hermione's face, Madam Pomfrey had sighed, given her a small handful of chocolate, and let Hermione sit by her friend.

As they'd gotten cleaned up, Ginny had given her the gist of what had happened, and now, sitting next to her too pale, too cold friend, lying too still under the swirls and sparkles of medical enchantments, Hermione had to stare at the wall, for fear if she looked at Harry, she'd snap her own wand with the rage building up inside of her.

If she ever found out who was responsible, is she ever got her hands on them... God have mercy, because she wouldn't.

The sound of the doors opening startled Hermione, and she realised she'd been drifting. Voices, babbling and loud filled the room, but Hermione still caught the sound of determined footsteps heading towards their little corner.

Hermione's wand raised, the spell for the strongest shield she knew dying behind her teeth as she realised it was professor McGonagall.

“Professor,” Hermione stood, swaying unexpectedly, her legs stiff.

“Miss Granger, how is he?”

“Unchanged,” Hermione sat back down with a light 'whumf', “Madam Pomfrey checked him...” she tugged at her sleeve, revealing her watch, “fifteen minutes ago, physical recovery is fine, his magical signature is... less so, but she's hopeful he'll be able to wake up in a few more hours.”

A shade of tension melted from McGonagall's form, “good, that's good.”

“How's the hunt for the perpetrator going?”

A look of dark promise and wrath crossed the deputy headmistress's face.

“Nothing,” for a second, McGonagall's teeth looked too sharp for a human mouth, and Hermione was reminded that even a house cat like the professor's animagus form, was still a predator. “The Slytherin student who was supposed to attack from behind was found unconscious, their robe gone.”

“What?” Hermione stood again, “so we don't even know if this was done by a Slytherin... or even a student?”

“No,” McGonagall admitted in a bitter tone, “I've called Amelia, she's already on her way.” She gave Hermione a look and sighed heavily.

“Miss Granger, there is... one other thing we need to discuss before Amelia arrives.”

Hermione felt dread condense in her stomach as a cold, hard sphere.

“Yes professor?”

“It's about professor Lockhart.”

Hermione shut her eyes for a moment, to block out what was about to happen, she took a steadying breath and tried to figure out the best way to explain it.
“Professor, you know I have the utmost respect for you, so I won't lie. I disarmed and stupefied mister Lockhart, I did so under the belief that the actions he planned to take, would have resulted in the death of Harry Potter.”

“Professor Lockhart,” Hermione could see the correction was painful for McGonagall to make.

“He's not though, is he? Mister Lockhart lacks the training and accreditation to be a professor, as does Potions Master Snape, the use of professor is their case is a courtesy title. And while I will loathingly give Potions Master Snape that courtesy, I will not give it to that arrogant fraud!”

“Fraud's a strong word,” Madam Bones said, appearing around the divider panels.

“Amelia, you're here sooner than I expected,” McGonagall said with surprise.

“The 'Boy-Who-Lived' almost killed by a fellow student? Fudge wants this taken care of sooner than possible and kept quiet.” Madam Bones rolled her eyes so hard her monocle almost fell out. “Like a student almost being killed by another student isn't a top priority to begin with.”

Madam Bones focused back on Hermione, “now what's this about a fraud?”

Hermione gave the Head of the DMLE a stern look, “I have compiled some facts which indicate, if not outright prove that Gilderoy Lockhart is a liar and a Fraud, I also have reason to believe his books are mildly enchanted to create artificial obsession by compelling the reader to keep reading, I'd be happy to discuss it further once Harry's attacker has been found and dealt with.”

Madam Bones returned her look with an appraising one, “I'll send one of my Aurors around to collect your evidence when one becomes available.” Hermione nodded in acceptance, and Madam Bones gave her a small smile, “as for the attacker, we’ve already got two dozen Aurors scouring the grounds, and following the trail, I'm just here for some statements.”

“You'd best start with young miss Weasley and Lovegood, and young mister Creevey,” McGonagall said, dipping her head in their direction. Madam Bones stepped back around the divider with a nod to Hermione, and went to speak with the younger students.

McGonagall stepped toward Hermione as she resettled herself on her chair, suddenly feeling very drained, “here,” the professor held out a small bar of chocolate, “Madam Pomfrey's orders.”

Hermione nodded silently, and took the chocolate.

Sensing her student wanted to be alone, McGonagall went to join Madam Bones.

The chocolate was cloying in her mouth, but Hermione choked it down nonetheless.

Zuko was floating, but not in water. At least, he didn't think so.

His eyes felt heavy, and he struggled to open them. When he finally managed, all he could see was the endless blue of the sky above him. The faint hint of brine and sun warmed metal reached his nose, and the vague bobbing he felt suddenly made sense.

He was on a ship.

He turned his head to the side, the familiar shape of the Wani's railing sat not too far away.

He turned his head to the other side, and sitting in his Uncle's favourite spot on the deck, was the Spirit in charge of his adventure in the world and body of Harry Potter.
She looked worn, tired, like maybe she’d been crying, but had stopped at least long enough ago that she’d since been able to apply powders to hide any remaining redness in her face.

“I am so sorry,” she said, “this was never supposed to happen, it shouldn't have happened. This is my fault for going off script. I should never have...”

“My Uncle once said something about how, even by observing a target, we influence what happens.” Zuko slowly pushed himself to sitting. “At least, I think that's what he was saying? It involved something about Koi and shadows and 'the shadow is as real to the Koi, as the mountain is to the man’?”

The Spirit's face scrunched, her head tilting, like she too was trying to figure out what the saying was trying to... say.

“Look, the point is, I'm not Harry, it was never going to be a perfect recreation, not even you could control that.”

The Spirit looked grateful at his attempts to absolve her of blame, but not ready to accept it.

“Besides,” Zuko continued, shuffling over to her, “this is clearly my fault for letting my guard down, I've been relying on you too much, and I let my juvenile desires get in the way of the mission focus.”

The Spirit fixed him with a look, “okay, that's just stupid.”

Zuko returned the look, seeming to catch himself before he could say something as disrespectful as 'you're just stupid' in response.

“Look,” Zuko said, pausing to enjoy the feeling of a sea-breeze caress his face. “It's done, we can't change that, I've lived my whole life without a script to guide me, now I have a part of one, I still have to figure out the between bits on my own.”

“That's great,” the Spirit said caustically, “but that partial script? Has nothing on this, literally nothing even remotely like this was supposed to happen! Even if we parse it down to the most major of plot elements and plot points, I don't know if it will be enough any more!”

“So what? We give up, and you send me and Katara home?” Zuko sounded disgusted at the idea.

“No,” the Spirit shook her head, “that would definitely be bad... as a opposed to possibly bad. We have to see this through, as far as we can.”

Zuko nodded once, solemnly in agreement. “Alright, new plan: you figure out what we can get away with, what we can't get away with, and what we can't do without, and I'll keep myself alive in the meantime.”

The Spirit gave him a faintly pouting glare, “I'm agreeing because it's a good plan, but I want to remind you that I am in charge.”

Zuko affected a dubious air, then waited just long enough for the silence to become almost awkward before saying “yes Lady Spirit,” in his most respectful tone.

Her replying huff was laced with amusement, like she knew he was testing to see what she'd let him get away with, and found it adorable.

They settled into a companionable silence, broken only by the lapping of ocean waves on the Wani's hull, and the occasion call of sea birds.
“You'll have to go back soon,” she said after a while.

“Yeah,” Zuko nodded, but his voice was heavy.

“Alright,” she said quietly, “a few more minutes.”

“Thanks,” Zuko said, lying back and letting the sun and ocean breeze wash over him, lulling him into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Ginny and Luna get a little knocked around by the wave's backlash, but are mostly unharmed, they get out of the water (trapped by the ice walls of the 'fortress' Zuko conjured) and try to get Zuko/Harry more solidly onto the wall so they can check his injuries and get him help.
Zuko/Harry freaks out, still stuck in his flashback, and almost drowns.
Older students, including Percy Weasley show up and sort things out, but the person responsible for the wave gets away.
Colin is found to be alright. (the snow broke his flight/fall)

**
Hermione gets a message from the Spirits, and arrives on scene just in time to stop Lockhart from getting close enough to try his canon broken arm fix on Zuko/Harry's broken ribs.
Madam Pomfrey appears, having been summoned off screen by a Hufflepuff student.
Hermione gets Ginny and Luna dried and into warm robes before taking them to Pomfrey, in the medical wing.
Colin and the girls are confirmed fine, but told to stay for observation, Hermione takes up vigil by the bedside of still unconscious Zuko/Harry.

**
McGonagall arrives, updating Hermione on the man hunt, and the two come to the conclusion it may not have been a student who attacked, as the student supposed to fling snow balls from behind, was found knocked out and missing their robe.
McGonagall also confronts Hermione on whether she attacked Lockhart, and Madam Bones arrives to here Hermione call him a fraud. The head of the DMLE says she'll look at Hermione's evidence and explains that many Aurors have joined the man hunt for the attacker.
Bones then goes to get statements from Colin and the two girls.

**
Zuko has a 'Dream Quest Vision' meeting with the Spirit in charge of his case, aboard a dream version of his ship, the Wani. Both of them blame themselves for what happened to Zuko, and agree to do their best moving forward, since giving up is not an option either want to consider.
Zuko misses Hermione's Summation Gathering

Chapter Summary

We interrupt Zuko Potter and the Secretive Basement to bring you:
Agatha Christie's: Hermione Granger, Girl Detective

Chapter Notes

Any spelling errors or punctuation mistakes beyond my usual are because I wrote this with a Silent Migraine which made me half blind, and I am currently way too tired to edit. My apologies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the Weasley's refusing to leave Ginny, it was easier to talk Hermione into getting some rest. Neville was able to use the large family as a stop gap, reasoning that if someone came in, they'd have to get through four very pissed off red-headed brothers before they even got to Harry.

He hadn't been able to convince her to leave the hospital wing, but Madam Pomfrey had let Hermione use one of the empty beds to take a nap.

He thought she might have been able to go a little longer, but Neville had noticed a manic nervousness in her, when he'd finally been allowed in. Honestly, he thought the Aurors at the doors were a good idea, he just wished he hadn't had to play the 'God-Brother' card to get past them.

(He was also glad he hadn't had to reveal their presence to get Hermione to rest, revealing their presence would have negated the need for the Weasleys, and himself. After all, what were a group of students going to do against people who could get past trained Aurors?)

From his place in what had been Hermione's chair, he could see her not sleeping in the bed across from Harry's.

“Hermione?” Neville called out, trying to keep his voice soft enough to not disturb Colin, Luna and the five Weasleys. “What is it?”

“Something doesn't fit right,” she said, sitting up, giving up on any pretence of sleep. “Something about this feels... off, like... like... urgh, like I don't know what.”

“Do you know what doesn't fit?” Percy's voice startled the pair. Hermione swung her legs around and hopped off the bed, while Neville stood and moved to the end of the divider keeping Harry's bed from view.

“I don't,” Hermione confessed, “but it definitely feels like someone's said something... erroneous.”

“Hmm,” frowning, Percy looked to his sister and her year mates. “Do you three feel up to going over things one more time?”
The trio shared a look, and nodded.

“And,” Hermione cut in before they could start, “could you start all the way at the beginning, start at the start of the snowball fight.”

While not entirely sure how the snowball fight could help, the trio shrugged, then one by one, they went over the story, from Harry conjuring the ice fortress, giving the best description they could of the ‘battle.’

Then they got to The attack, and Ginny faltered a little.

“It's weird,” Ginny said, brows scrunching in concentration, “I didn't mention it to the Aurors, but, it seemed like the attack came from close behind us-” Percy's eyebrow quirked. “- but by the time Luna and I got up, and I looked back, it was so hard to make out much more than tall-ish, and wearing Slytherin robes, because he was so far away. It was like he'd started running as soon as he was done, like he didn't even stop to check he'd hit us.”

“From the upper years on scene were able to ascertain,” Percy said, “the perpetrator was fairly close, if Colin can recall the exact place he landed, or if one of the other students can, we might be able to work in reverse, figure out the power of the spell, and the angle it was released from, give us the exact position of the attacker.”

Hermione was nodding, but the others were giving him odd looks, so Percy cleared his throat, blushing and said, “of course I'm sure the Aurors have already done that.” He straightened his robes to give himself something to do.

“So, then what happened?” Ron asked Ginny, trying to get them back on track.

“Then we tried to help Harry,” Ginny had to pause, tears returning to her eyes, “Merlin, it was awful he seemed so scared and, and I just don't understand how he was hurt so badly when even Colin was mostly fine.”

The twins, strangely silent, looked like they were plotting retribution.

A quiet 'a-hem' from Madam Pomfrey's office door caught their attention, and the group turned to see the healer watching them.

“As much as I hate to share such details with children, I have no doubt Mr. Potter would be getting it from me when he wakes up, and sharing it with you all anyway.” Madam Pomfrey walked over to the group and raised her hands to illustrate her words. “The breaks in his ribs all seem to come from a reasonably thin line, based on witness statements and Mr. Potter's injuries, I suspect he hit the top of the wall, right along the edge, rib cage first.”

Hermione winced, steeling herself for the rest of the report.

“A few of his floating ribs were dislocated, which I believe may have happened from being dragged over the rim, they might not have, but given the breaks... well, one thing lead to another.” Madam Pomfrey paused to check how the children were handling the news, they were all pale, but determined to hear. “He's also sustained an injury to his head, an impact that could have happened at any point, but based on the muscles strain in his neck, likely happened just before he was shoved by the water and dislocated those ribs. The bite to his inside cheek and tongue most likely occurred at the same time.”

Hermione frowned.
“Madam Pomfrey?” she said quietly, half distracted.

“Yes miss Granger?”

“Given the severity of the groups injuries, do you think you could calculate...”

“Calculate?”

Hermione shook her head, “sorry, no, you'd probably need the spell strength for that, I just wondered what their injuries might have looked like if they hadn't been shielded or standing.”

“Less actually,” Pomfrey said, surprising Hermione. “What I've calculated of the force from the existing injuries, and how far young mister Creevey was thrown, I estimate if the children had still been crouched, we would have seen bruising, some mild pressure fractures, but certainly nothing of this severity. Honestly if Harry hadn't hit the wall's lip-”

“That doesn't make any sense!” Hermione hissed, “it's like...” She ran through the facts of the scenario, trying to make sense of it all. And then her mind tripped over the switch, and the mental light bulb flared.

“Son. Of. A. BITCH!”

“Miss Granger!” Madam Pomfrey yelped, scandalised.

But Hermione wasn't done.

“How did Lockhart get there so fast? How did he know?” The group looked confused.

“Maybe he was nearby?” Ron suggested. The twins looked at each other and shrugged, nodded, because 'yeah, that made sense.'

“He was,” Hermione said, “he was very near by.” She took off, slamming out of the doors, she startled to a stop in the hall, finding herself surrounded by Aurors. Thinking quickly, she said “Get Madam Bones, I know who the perpetrator is, have her meet me here, I need to get some proof.”

She took off running, ignoring the calls to wait.

“And have someone find Lockhart, he's a key witness!” She shouted back over her shoulder.

“Sorry to keep you all waiting,” Hermione said as she strode back into the hospital wing taking stock of the waiting Aurors, “I realised when I was already halfway to picking this up, that I should have asked to do this in a separate room, but on the other hand, I have always wanted to have my own summation gathering. So, I'm about to channel some Agatha Christie.”

Madam Bones raised an eyebrow, and Lockhart tried to look like he'd understood what she'd just said. Hermione glanced to her friends, who were clustered even more tightly than before, except for Neville, who stood with Madam Pomfrey at the end of the divider hiding Harry from sight.

“Now, you're all probably wondering what's in this box,” Hermione hefted the heavy looking box in her arms, before shoving it at the nearest Auror, who took it after a second of flailing. She turned back to Madam Bones, “that's the proof I spoke of earlier for that other matter, since I've realised it has become somewhat more relevant.”
“Oh?” Madam Bones side eyed Lockhart.

“Indeed,” Hermione confirmed before telling the Auror to ‘keep that safe.’ He nodded and moved back, letting his colleagues in the room shift to cover for him.

“So!” Hermione clapped her hands, “we had, what we thought was a wilful attempted murder!”

Madam Bones went to speak, but Hermione cut her off, “trust me, it’s convoluted, but there’s a reason you haven’t found the perpetrator yet...” She looked Madam Bones in the eyes, then glanced meaningfully at Lockhart.

The Head Auror seemed to get the message.

“Alright Miss Granger,” Bones said, “tell us what you know.”

“So I thought something about the story sounded kind of fishy, and not just that there was an attempted murder on Hogwarts grounds, but one that was just so... sloppy. See, after talking with Madam Pomfrey, I can confidently say, that if Harry hadn't been standing exactly when he was standing there, he would have been fine.”

Madam Pomfrey confirmed, “bruised, with a few mild fractures.”

“Right, so it just seems like an odd way to try and murder someone, so... accidental. Luckily though, we were so close to this ward that a student was able to summon Madam Pomfrey in time. And of course, Mister Lockhart was on the scene right away.” Hermione gave him a look, “what were you doing so close at hand, sir?”

Lockhart laughed, “I was just out patrolling the school, you know how we teachers are, student safety first.” He chuckled again.

“Would you have been able to help though, I wonder, do you have medical training, sir? I know you had your wand out before you were attacked, what spell would you have used to help Harry with his broken bones?” Hermione tried not to let her confusion show at the last question, prompted by someone (something?) from ‘on high’.

Hermione glanced to Pomfrey as Lockhart answered, so she was able to see the Healer blanch at the name of the spell.

“Madam Pomfrey?”

“Oh that would have taken care of the broken bones alright,” the Healer hissed, “by removing them!”

“Oh dear,” Hermione said in false shock, “Mister Lockhart, you almost accidentally killed Harry Potter.”

Hermione waited for it to sink in, then dropped the bombshell.

“Twice,” she turned to Madam Bones, “you see, Lockhart has never patrolled the school, the closest he’s ever come is when he’s gone looking for Harry who avoids him like the plague. All year, Lockhart has been attempting to cosy up to Harry, to leech off of Harry's fame with the wizarding world, because that's what Lockhart does, he steals fame from others.”

Hermione nodded in the direction of the box, “I've given you the evidence for that. See, here's how I believe it happened: Lockhart went looking for Harry, and either he heard someone say they saw
him go that way, or he stumbled upon the snowball fight, and realised Harry was there. And he thought, 'how can I use this to get closer to Harry'. Then a miracle struck, he stumbled onto one team's plan to attack the group from behind. And Lockhart took over, knocking out the Slytherin student and stealing their robe, because while an attack from behind was good, snowballs weren't as devastating as Lockhart needed.”

“Miss Granger,” Lockhart tried to schmooze.

“Shut up,” she said, giving him her best imitation of her mother's 'warning pointer finger'. “Lockhart wanted to ingratiate himself with Harry, so he used a blast of water which would have caused only mild injuries, a bit of bruising, nothing more, especially if the fortress walls had have been made from compact snow instead of disguised ice.”

Lockhart began looking queasy, his air of self-assured-ness melting.

“The reason the perpetrator was too far away from the site to be seen clearly, was because he took off as soon as he finished casting, too cock-sure to check his handy work, and because he wasn't expecting such a horrific fallout.

“After getting out of sight, Lockhart stashed the robe, and circled around through the castle, coming out the door not too much later, there to lend a hand to the sill students who'd been one-upped by a mean and dastardly Slytherin senior.”

Lockhart scoffed, “miss Granger, you are clearly confused, the shock-”

“ Detain him,” Madam Bones' voice cut him off. He didn't have time to react before he was being man handled, his wand removed by deft hands. The head of the DMLE looked Hermione in the eye.

“If you're wrong about this, you'll be in a lot of trouble,” Bones said.

“I'm not wrong,” Hermione met the older witch's gaze with no doubt. “If you ask the portraits, they might be able to give a statement,” she shrugged, “if any are cognisant enough.”

“In that case, we'll be calling on you for the trial, accident or not, he almost killed the saviour of the Wizarding World. We'll also waive any attempts he might make to press charges for assault in regards to whomever knocked him out, since by all accounts, it prevented him finishing the job.”

“I'm sure the person responsible would be glad to hear that,” Hermione's gaze didn't waver, and Madam Bones smirked.

“Alright Aurors, I want the guards back on the doors, and people sweeping for that robe while we take Lockhart back to HQ for questioning.”

The Aurors escorted Lockhart from the room, the man with the box of evidence staying at the far end of the group from Lockhart.

“I'll be in touch,” Madam Bones said while she exited the room. Hermione nodded back just before they lost sight of one another as the door shut.

With a sigh of relief, Hermione turned around, tension melting from her shoulders.

She flinched at a burst of sudden applause from the rooms remain nine (awake) occupants.

“Shhhh!” She hissed, “Harry needs his rest!”
The group quieted down and Neville stepped forwards, taking Hermione gently by the arm to lead her back to her bed.

“That was brilliant,” Ron whispered to her as she passed him, “terrifying, but brilliant.”

She gave him a weak smile, letting it drop as she rounded her own divider panels which had been set up by ‘her’ bed.

Hermione let Neville help her into bed, only realising as she slid back under the sheets that she was still clad in only the medical robe Madam Pomfrey had loaned her to sleep in.

Belatedly humiliated, Hermione flopped down, squishing her face into her pillow to hide her embarrassment...

… and woke groggily the following morning.

Sitting up, she tried to wipe the sleep from her eyes, swaying gently in place, it took her far longer than it should have to realise what she was seeing across the way.

In the bed opposite her, watching her with amusement as Madam Pomfrey examined him, was a very awake Harry.

“Morning,” he said, his voice soft, “heard I missed you throwing you intellect around yesterday.”

“You actual dumbass,” Hermione couldn't stop it, the tears of relief spilled from her eyes and she sobbed, the last of her lingering fears melting away like frost in the summer sun.

Chapter End Notes

Pomfrey sharing is out of character I know, but... the Spirits prompted her to do it.
Chapter Summary

Amelia Bones and Minerva McGonagall find something troubling in Harry Potter's memory evidence.
Zuko and Hermione ad lib a scene.
You can miss people you haven't lost.

Chapter Notes

Week late I know, last week was horrific (mentally speaking), and I couldn't get the chapter to work from that headspace. So I took a break, ended up scrapping just shy of 1,500 words from the original draft. Still not sure if I hate this or if I've just got bad associations with it now. Either way: sorry about this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Amelia and Minerva let the world re-materialise around them for the fourth time, the snowy slopes outside Hogwarts forming once more.

Before memories could be submitted for evidence, Amelia had to ensure the veracity of the copies. Minerva meanwhile, was acting in her legal capacity as Head of House for (technically) all four students involved (If one didn't include the Slytherin student who'd didn't even recall being knocked out,) and Deputy Headmistress of the school.

The pair had already finished examining Colin, Ginny and Luna's memories, and now that Poppy had cleared Harry for mental evidence gathering, they were going to examine his.

They would be going through to check for tampering, and selecting the most relevant moments for use in the case against Lockhart.

As they walked through Harry's version of the events, both women frowned.

Magical memory evidence revealed a lot more then just what was seen and heard, each person's memories revealed their focus in subtle ways. The ways and places people paid attention to the details of their surroundings.

Harry's memory moved through events with a familiar form of focus.

Enemy locations, strategic locations, the first year trio. His focus was too well focused on too many things at once.

This was not the memory of a twelve year old boy.

This was a memory like theirs after the war, this was the memory of someone who had seen things, things no child should have seen. But they both remembered Harry crawling free of the rubble in the
Chamber, a slain Basilisk left behind him, more annoyed then rightly shaken or afraid.

(“I don't like explosions,” Harry had told McGonagall in his first year. "I have a destiny," he'd told her months later, "a duty.")

As the memory progressed, and the time of The Incident drew near, Minerva and Amelia braced themselves to once again witness Harry's injury, knowing this time would be the worst. The other three hadn't been properly centred on him, that part of their memories hazy and out of focus.

Minerva looked away, unwilling to watch, instead she looked up the hill.

Her gasp drew Amelia's attention from the children, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement turned, and cheered.

Harry had somehow been aware of Lockhart. Not only that, but for a second it seemed, Harry had turned to glance in his direction, Lockhart's face snapping into high definition within the memory.

“We've got the bloody bastard!” Minerva cried, just before the sickening crunch-crack met their ears. They turned back to Harry, and the world flickered.

They were still on the hillside, but another place was superimposing itself over the memory, drowning reality out.

A young man stood on a bridge with an somewhat older man in a strange uniform, his red styled armour so different from the younger man's white clothing.

The young man was really still a boy, but he stood ready to fight despite his clear injuries – the burns across his face, both new and old, his wheezing breath and blood speckled lips.

The world was awash with freezing water, an eerie glow suffusing the icy liquid.

A pillar of water – a giant beast made of the raging Ocean – moved on, leaving the young man on the bridge. He lunged for the other man, who was now tight in the inexplicable grip of the water.

The young man reached out, trying to pull the other free, though they had seemed to be enemies mere seconds before.

The other man sneered, hatred in his eyes, and pulled his hand back.

The younger man wailed and tried to clamber over the rails, to reach for the man who had refused rescue.

A voice called out from a nearby chasm in the wall of ice.

The memory, both of them, dissolved.

Minerva and Amelia found themselves standing by the DMLE's evidence Pensieve, both shaken.

The superimposed memory had held such fear and terror and helplessness.

Worse, it was not an unheard of phenomenon.

Nor was that fact the apparent owner of the post-traumatic flashback, had been nowhere to be seen in it.

It was just a terrifying explanation: the boy in the Hogwarts' hospital wing, the one who'd given them
the memory, was not Harry Potter.

“Poppy,” the woman in question looked up, raising a eyebrow in question as Minerva entered the healer’s office. “I need to speak with you about a student's medical records.”

“Those are confidential Minnie,” Poppy reminded the other woman sternly.

“I'm aware, but in this case... I'm acting as both legal magical guardian, and Deputy Headmistress.”

Poppy frowned but relented, “whose records?”

“Harry Potter,” Minerva noticed the way Poppy stiffened ever so slightly. “What is it? What's wrong?”

“I...” Poppy met her old friend’s eyes, “I don't know, but the soul damage was... I can't explain the level of damage his soul has undergone. But then, I've never had the chance to examine someone who's survived the Killing Curse before...”

Minerva stepped forward, pulling the spare seat out and sitting. She took Poppy's hand in her own.

“Poppy, I need to know: is the patient cleared for questioning under Veritaserum?” She looked sickened by her own words.

“Minerva!” Poppy looked aghast, shocked at the idea. “Why would you need...?”

“Amelia and I, we've... we've found something in his memory testimony.”

Both women were silent for a long moment, before Poppy spoke up, looking slightly sick at her decision.

“He could handle it, but I'd need to be there in case of... complications.”

“Thank you Poppy.”

Amelia flicked through the medical records with the trained eye of an investigator.

“No signs of polyjuice, nothing that would indicate a disguise of some kind...”

“He does seem to be Harry James Potter,” Poppy agreed, “physically, at least.”

“And spiritually?” Amelia asked.

“Inconclusive,” Poppy admitted, “there's no soul record of him as an infant, at least, not one I could find, but he was born while the war was still on, so if James and Lily had had his soul imprint taken, it may have been destroyed. Even if it wasn't, Harry is the only known survivor of the Killing Curse, and his soul shows some form of damage I'm not familiar with, it might be the two are related, we just don't have the information.”

“We'll have to question him then,” Amelia said after a pause.
Minerva hummed quietly, thinking.

“Opinions?” Amelia asked with a smile.

“Aye, I have opinions,” Minerva said. “If this is the Harry that I've gotten to know over the last year and a half, he might understand the need to question his identity, but he won't appreciate being forced to answer.”

“You're saying we shouldn't use Veritaserum?”

“I'm saying we should keep it as plan 'B',” rubbed her eyes tiredly.

“A dicta-quill loaded with Liar's Ink then?” Amelia asked.

“It would certainly be safer,” Poppy said, “no need to worry how it might interact with his system.”

Amelia looked between the two other women, and nodded her agreement.

“Alright, that'll be our plan 'A'.”

Minerva could see Harry's suspicion as soon as he entered the room. She cursed quietly in her mind, she had wanted this to go as smoothly as possible.

(Shes was still hoping someone would burst through the doors to tell her it was a mistake, an old memory left in the Pensieve. She knew it wasn't, but she wished.)

Amelia sat beside her, a small stack of folders on the table before her.

“Please take a seat,” the Head of the DMLE said to him, gesturing to the chair across from them. He spared a glance and nod of acknowledgement for Poppy on her chair by the end of the table, then sat.

“Beginning interview,” Amelia said, setting the dicta-quill to work. She rattled of the case number, the time and date of the interview, and the location. Well as best she could anyway, the women had chosen not to perform this interview in an interrogation room back at the Ministry. Instead, they'd set up in one of the smaller empty classrooms around Hogwarts. (Depending on the outcome, the interview might never make it to the official record.)

She added the names and authorities of herself and the two Hogwarts staff members before speaking to Harry directly.

“Please state your name for the record,” Amelia said, all business.

“Harry James Potter,” Harry answered as instructed. Poppy wasn't at an angel to see the transcription easily, but Minerva and Amelia were. Their eyes darted quickly to the parchment where the dicta-quill was working. On the page Harry's answer sat in yellow-green ink.

He was telling the truth, sort of.

“When were you born?”

“31st of July, 1980.” The ink was a lemon-lime that held more than a hint of green. He was telling the truth, but again he was also with holding something. Amelia fought to hide her frown. The only...
information she could think of was the time of day, but that shouldn't have affected the liar's ink like that.

“Where were you born?”

“...I'm told I was born in Godric Hollow.” Green, a true green, the statement was completely true.

Amelia and Minerva shared a look.

“How long have you been attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?”

“Uh... about a year and a bit? No... uh, closer to...” Harry trailed off, squinting at the wall over their heads for a moment as he calculated down to the weeks and days. Both answers came back as truthful, as green.

Amelia sighed, she'd have to get more in depth with the questions if they wanted to get to the bottom of this. “Have you ever left the country?”

“No to my knowledge.” Still green.

“Do you have any aliases?”

“Yes,” green, the women cheered silently, finally making progress, “The-boy-who-lived, boy, freak, The Chosen One.”

Lemon-lime, the information was incomplete.

Amelia tried not to frown too heavily, trying to find a way to get him to slip up, without letting him know this wasn't a normal follow up interview.

____________________

“Hermione,” Zuko gave the girl a tired smile as she met him outside the 'interview room'. “You didn't have to wait for me.”

Hermione stood, pushing herself away from the wall she'd been leaning against, and closing her book with a soft snap. “I know, but considering your recent results when left to your own devices... indulge my hovering for a while?”

He gave a small, amused huff and nodded.

The pair fell into step as they walked away from the room, heading back towards the Gryffindor dorms. Something faint caught at the edge of Zuko's hearing. He turned his head and focused, the sound becoming clearer once he was actively listening for it. It was the pad of a cat's paws on stone.

Hermione made a small sound, he glanced at her just in time to catch her closing her mouth. It seemed like she'd been about to say something, but stopped herself, perhaps having noticed how distant his attention was.

“What's wrong?” he asked, reaching out to brush her elbow with the back of his hand.

“Other than your recent near death?”

“Yeah,” Zuko nodded, “other than that.”
"...I just got a teacher arrested for attempted murder. It... if the DMLE hadn't been right there, I think... I think I might have taken more drastic actions."

"Aww," Hermione blanched as she looked at Zuko, but he couldn't help the sappy look on his face, he really appreciated the sentiment. 'Vicious' was a language Zuko was familiar with, and the idea that someone would 'take more drastic action' on his behalf was touching.

"Please don't do that," Hermione said, gesturing to his face and moving slightly away from him as they walked, "it's creepy."

"Sorry," he shrugged, "but really, I'm touched."

"In the head maybe," Hermione retorted drily, and Zuko forced his gait to pause, a plan forming in his mind. Hermione frowned at his apparent 'stumble'. "I'm sorry I didn't mean-"

"No, it's fine, you're not wrong, I..." Zuko focused his hearing behind them, and sure enough, the cat was still following. He'd done his best to send his idea to the Spirit who watched over him. The feeling he'd got back was something he could almost visualise: "Your call," said with a shrug.

"McGonagall, she and madam Bones, I think they saw my War Ghost in my memory of what happened."

"War Gho-" Hermione stopped walking, turning to Zuko suddenly, one arm going up in front of him to stop him without having to grab him. "You had a traumatic flashback during the attack? Why didn't you tell me?"

"People have been watching me since it happened, and it was a 'Zuko memory',' Hermione startled visibly. While she knew the whole truth now, they didn't really talk about his life pre-Harry. He raised his hand, pushing a lock of his hair behind one ear to disguise the 'we're being watched' hand sign he'd taught her when they'd begun talking about more 'top-secret/destiny' things.

"Is that what the interview was really about?" she asked, forcing herself not to look for their voyeur.

"I think so," Zuko said, "there were a lot of identity based questions, far more than you'd expect for a simple follow up."

"Familiar with those are you?" Hermione meant it as a joke, he could tell by her tone of voice, but a wince slipped through his mask. "Oh, you... which side?"

"Typically asking the questions," he gave a shrug. "I managed to answer 'around' the questions, because... how am I supposed to, to explain... how do I tell McGonagall that the entire Potter family may as well be gone. I can't just march up and tell her 'oh, well, really bad shit is going to happen because Voldemort is an evil spirit son-of-a-bitch who can't be killed by normal means, and Harry's life was so shit, that he was so unprepared for what was coming, that the Spirits in charge of Destiny decided to use me as their 'sacred weapon of choice' in the war to come'."

Hermione looked caught off guard, trying to follow along with what Zuko was trying to do.

"Harry," the pieces slotted together rapidly in her mind, and she prayed they were on the same page, "reincarnation is not unheard of. I'm sure if you explained that you have memories of your life before being Harry, that professor McGonagall will understand."

"Will she? Will she understand that since 'Zuko' was older than 'Harry'... Will she understand that there may as well be nothing left of 'Harry's' identity. Not that I'm complaining exactly, the Dursleys are not nice people, I'm sure I'm not missing anything worth missing, but sometimes I feel like a
“And if you don't tell her something, any version of the truth, how long will she wonder. How long will you make her feel like she failed to protect—” Hermione brought her hands up to add finger-quotes, “‘The real Harry Potter’ from ‘your’ schemes, never realising that you didn't kill him, or abduct him, or whatever horrible thing she must be thinking.”

For a moment, Zuko let himself feel and show the weight he experienced, the press of destiny upon his shoulders. He slumped, putting his face in his hands.

“Hey,” Hermione's fingers brushed his forearms, “do you want a hug?”

Zuko looked up.

“Yeah, yeah, that sounds really good.” He let her slip her arms around him, and reciprocated, folding his arms around Hermione return.

“Good?” Hermione asked, meaning both the hug and if she'd played the scene correctly.

Zuko nodded, face turned into her neck, “good.”

'Hugs are amazing,’ he thought, 'I should really do this more often,' conveniently ignoring his normal dislike of physical contact.

All they could do now, was wait to see how McGonagall took the conversation she'd just overheard. Hidden in Hermione's hug, Zuko heard the feline-shaped professor make a small distressed noise, and flee back down the hall.

Zuko let the hug continue for another two minutes.

It was a really nice hug.

“Reincarnation?” Poppy gasped, trying to recall anything she'd read on the research.

“Aye, that's what they said,” Minerva clasped her hands together, trying to still the tremors.

Amelia tapped out a random rhythm against the desk top with her fingers, reading over the interview, “you're sure they weren't trying to mislead you?”

“No, I was well hidden, and I can't see when they would have had time to plan such an elaborate ruse.”

“Unless this 'Zuko' has been planning this story since he arrived,” Amelia pointed out.

“I doubt that,” Minerva said, “Harry and Miss Granger have been close since they arrived in first year, them and young Neville Longbottom. One of them would have noticed if their friend suddenly changed, Miss Granger certainly has an eye for such discrepancies,” she gave Amelia a bemused look.

“True enough,” the Head of the DMLE allowed, “see if I don't snatch her up for my investigation division.” But she still had to play devil's-advocate, she still had to ask the doubting questions. “But what if 'Zuko' arrived before first year?”
“Then what was the point?” Poppy asked, “if he didn't have to explain a discrepancy in behaviour, why bother with the ruse at all. Why pretend to be Harry Potter for that matter, he doesn't go around trying to grab fame.”

“True,” Minerva agreed, “he does prefer to keep to his small circle of friends.”

She thought of Neville and his nervous disposition, so adamant that he'd approached Harry about learning the sword, of Luna Lovegood, now a permanent resident of Gryffindor.

Of the day Minerva and Filius had taken Harry and Hermione back down to the Chamber for rock samples, the boy nothing but encouraging for Hermione's thirst for knowledge.

Of the youngest Weasleys, one of whom had Seer's nightmares, and the other who hadn't endeared himself well to Harry and struggled with classwork, but both of whom now seemed at ease in the group, and with themselves.

Harry, or Zuko, or whoever he was, didn't seem to be collecting a group of child soldiers.

“I'll keep an eye on him,” Minerva said after a moment of contemplation, “for now, I feel confident we've uncovered the mystery.”

“Alright,” Amelia nodded once, “but if anything changes, I'll be more than happy to come back with high strength Verituserum.”

“Agreed,” Minerva said.

“Well if that's sorted,” Poppy interrupted, “how did Harry look? Do you think I should call him back to medical for another night's rest?”

Minerva snorted, “I think he'll be fine Poppy. I, on the other hand, could use a bit of medicinal.”

Poppy and Amelia both raised their eyebrow in question.

“I've got a nice scotch if you two would like a bit of something for the headache.”

“I'll take a double,” Amelia said as she stood, packing away the interview transcript.

“Triple,” Poppy answered, already heading for the door.

Hogwarts was mostly empty, students gone for Christmas Holiday, when McGonagall finally approached him.

“Harry, I think I need to make a confession,” she said, coming to stop beside him on the castle ramparts. A nice view of the snow covered Forbidden Forest sprawled out before them. “After the interview, I... may have overheard somethings.”

He didn't say anything, only nodded in acceptance and waited.

“Will you tell me about Zuko?” He was still her student after all, and if his destiny was really that unavoidable, she wanted to be there for him.

He drew in a deep breath, gazing thoughtfully at the Forest, and when he breathed out, a long sighing breath, flame danced through the air rather than the cloud of mist she was expecting.
“Sure,” he nodded.

She hadn’t lost Lily and James's son, not really, there was just more to him than she’d known.

(Somewhere deep down, it ached anyway.)

Chapter End Notes

there wasn't supposed to be this much drama after the Basilisk, damn it

Out Take:
Zuko Potter and the Out Takes - chapter 10: Health Inquiry
Canon Levels: like, 94% certain this totally happened somewhere between the scenes of chapter 12 of Secretive Basement
Zuko becomes a gym teacher

Chapter Summary

In the wake of Christmas holidays, the school attempts to get back to... 'normal'...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“But it's definitely weird right?” Zuko asked Hermione as they made their way to class, “I'm not imagining it?”

Hermione shrugged, “I mean, you two have always been oddly close for a student and teacher, in a non-bad-touch way.”

“I know,” Zuko tried not to let his frustrations get the better of him, “but this is different. I made it weird by telling her about my 'tragic backstory'.

“Well, what else were you going to do? Can't take it back now.”

Zuko grumbled, and slouched, doing an amazing impression of an actual, normal teenager in despair of his parental figure.

“Just let it play out,” Hermione advised him, “it seems to be all you can do for the time being.”

Zuko sighed, “yeah.”

“Okay,” Dean Thomas said from a few metres ahead, “can we talk about the fact that Harry seems to be actually going to Defence Class?” Dean made eye contact with Zuko to make it clear he was talking to him, rather then about him.

Zuko replied with a single shouldered shrug.

“With Lockhart gone, I have no real reason to avoid this class, and I kind of want to see what the Ministry replacement is like.”

“Fred and George said he's just been giving everyone exams,” Ron said, not looking forward to their class.

“Trying to figure out what we know and how much Lockhart failed to teach us I expect,” Hermione replied.

“Well,” Zuko said, “as long as he's more competent than Lockhart.”

The other students snorted.

“I'm more competent than Lockhart,” Neville joked, “that's not the hard part.”

“True enough,” said an amused voice from the door to the Defence classroom, and Zuko and Hermione startled slightly. It dawned on them, that 'Thorpe' wasn't necessarily the Auror's only name, nor his family name.
“Auror Thorpe,” Zuko greeted the man with a nod.

“Mr Potter,” the man replied, “I'll have to ask that you refer to me as instructor Viculus for duration of my assignment here.”

“Of course instructor,” Zuko stepped into place next to the Auror, out of the way of the students being directed into the classroom. “How long are you expecting this assignment to last?”

“About a month, I'm mostly here for evaluations while the folks in charge try to find someone to unfu- ahem, to fix the education problem created by Lockhart.” The duo shared a beat of silence, then: “I understand you were excused from Defence class for the duration of the year, should I take your presence to mean you intend to return?”

Zuko shrugged again, “I mostly came to see who the mysterious instructor Viculus was, but it might be a good idea for me to take the Ministry approved evaluations.”

“I'll find you a spare paper,” Thorpe instructor Viculus offered.

“You don't look happy,” Ron said, looking like he was prepared to hide behind someone.

“I suppose,” Zuko admitted, “there were just some questions on the exam that had me stumped, I thought I'd been progressing well in my personal studies, but I guess not.”

“I wouldn't be so sure,” Hermione cut in, one arm around a very sad looking Neville, “don't forget, I double checked the lesson plans for you, and I'm fairly certain the exam wasn't a strictly second year exam, I think they're that concerned about knowledge discrepancies, that they asked us third, fourth and even fifth year questions.”

“Really?” Neville asked, hopeful. Hermione nodded, projecting an air of certainty.

“That's a relief,” Seamus said, sagging against Dean, who made a noise of agreement while trying to shove Seamus off.

“You'll have... possibly not noticed also,” Hermione said, “that the exam was solely on spells, there were no questions on creatures at all.”

“You think the reason the evaluations are set to take so long is because there's more exams to go?” Zuko asked.

“I do,” Hermione confirmed, “I don't think we're supposed to know about it, so we can't go studying to make up for the lost lessons, it would skew the results.”

“How d'you mean?” Ron asked.

“I don't think it's just our intelligence, but the overall education we've been... 'receiving' that they're testing.” Hermione shrugged, trying to fumble her way through an explanation, “they want to know what Lockhart and Quirrel and whoever came before, what they actually taught us, not just what we've learned ourselves, though that is important too. At least, I think so.”

Zuko hummed, “McGonagall mentioned the position of Defence teacher was allegedly cursed, no teacher has lasted more than a year at the job. Rather than work out some kind of rotating teaching roster to try to combat the curse, Dumbledore just scraped the barrel for anyone stupid enough to fill
the position. You think there's a chance the MLE will take care of *that* while they're at it?"

Zuko wondered if Remus - the school friend of Harry's parents - might have been a good candidate for the position. The man did seem to know an awful lot about defending against the dark arts, and he had mentioned something about a teaching degree and work as a substitute at muggle high schools.

Although, Remus had also mentioned one of the reasons they'd never met, and why Remus had had to seek employment in the muggle world, was because of his lycanthropy, so Zuko wasn't sure it would be a perfect fit, even if Remus *was* a good Defence teacher.

"-don't think we can actually fail the exams if that's the case," Dean said, breaking into Zuko's train of thoughts. Zuko assumed he'd been talking about the 'real purpose' of the exams.

'I need to get more sleep,' Zuko told himself as he realised he'd been chasing his own thoughts.

More exams *had* followed, some on paper, some with a wand. The latest exam though, was one no one but Zuko had even suspected. He thought Hermione might have, if she hadn't been intentionally ignoring the possibility out of sheer spite for the involved skill set.

Despite the fact that not everyone played quidditch, there was still a require uniform for it for flying lessons, and for the majority of students, it was the closest they owned to athletic wear. Lined up in their quidditch uniforms, Zuko thought Lavender was about to crying.

"Oh. My. Morgana! There's *mud!*" She sounded so disgusted by the idea of it, that Zuko had to shove his hand over his mouth and nose to stifle the snort of amusement that threatened to break free.

It wouldn't do to let people think he had such an easily satisfied sense of humour.

The shared bemused looks Hermione, Neville and Ron gave him, let him know he'd failed in that stealth particular mission.

"Alright, everyone is to get into line by *that* starting line," instructor Viculus pointed across the quidditch pitch lawn to the visible line on the grass. The one that sat perpendicular to the entrance to the obstacle course. "When I give the signal, each of you will try – one at a time – to make your way through the course. If it takes you more than twenty minutes, then you will be removed from the course. This will not constitute a failure, it only means you will have to come back and do it again."

Groans broke out amongst the second years, the only year level on the pitch. Someone's voice managed to make it out over the general rabble.

"Why do we even have to *do* this? This is muggle nonsense."

"Glad you asked," Viculus called back, silencing the children. "This," he gestured to the obstacle course, "is a... 'child friendly' version of the Auror training course. Or do you plan to stay still while something is attacking you?"

Everyone was silent for a long minute, then Viculus clapped his hands loudly.

"Right, who's first?"

Zuko was already raising his hand as every other second year took a step back.

Viculus nodded, "alright, there's three official paths you can take, just make your way from one end
“Yessir,” Zuko replied. (He'd never really had to say that, 'yessir/nosir' before the Wani blew up, before he'd pretended to be someone else, someone wet behind the ears and on his first real mission, to hide from Zhao in plain sight.)

Zuko got enough time to stretch his muscles before Viculus blew a whistle, and he had to go.

Climbing, jumping, twisting, falling, dodging sudden spell bursts, the course was over far too quickly for Zuko's tastes. He was glad for the lack of constant war, honestly, but the lack of reasons to be out and about, to move and push himself, it chaffed at him a little.

McGonagall had been almost hovering over him since he'd told her a version of the truth, worried over him, and he'd tried to be on his best behaviour to try and put her at ease. Pushing himself as hard as he could through the course was... euphoric.

As he jogged back to the group, Viculus's wide eyed, slack jaw expression made Zuko huff in amusement. The Auror had been there for the first expedition into the Chamber of Secrets, he knew 'Harry' was a capable young man, but apparently he hadn't actually understood before this moment.

Viculus cleared his throat and turned back to the other students, “don't, uh, don't worry if you, if you can't-”

“Don't worry sir,” Hermione cut through the man's jilted speech, “none of us are delusional enough to think we could do what Harry just did, he's a freaking ninja, his reality is not the same as ours.”

Zuko gave her a pout, mock-offended.

“Right,” Viculus said, shaking his head, “right... who's next?”

Amelia Bones looked up as Thorpe Viculus entered her office.

“Ah, Thorpe, how goes the evaluations? How have you managed to delay our need to find a new teacher today?”

“I...” Thorpe started, then stopped, he walked over to a book case and pulled on a thick red binding. An entire shelf swung open, and Thorpe helped himself to a glass of very strong alcohol. “I set up a training course, a replica of the one from training room epsilon-omicron.”

Amelia's eyebrows raised, and her eyes widened so fast she almost lost her monocle, “that's a bit unfair.”

“Harry Freaking Potter,” Thorpe began, setting his glass aside in favour of drinking straight from the bottle, “is most assuredly 'The Chosen One'.

“Oh?”

“He beat the long standing record on the course.”

“Which one? Speed, hits?”

“He holds all the records now,” Thorpe whispered like a man who'd seen the face of God. “His spell work and theoretical knowledge were already so far beyond his peers... are we sure he's human? How can any twelve year old...?”
“You said yourself,” Amelia smirked knowingly, “Harry 'Freaking' Potter, is most assuredly 'The Chosen One'."

Thorpe shook his head, “I can't believe an idiot like Lockhart managed to almost kill him.”

“Well,” Amelia said, “Harry wasn't exactly expecting an attack, and he still managed to react in time to try and protect the first years with him... by completely ignoring his own safety.”

“He's twelve,” Thorpe flopped into the nearest chair, put the mouth of the bottle to his own, and began drinking.

Zuko tried to ignore the giggling behind him as he supervised Hermione through the very simple obstacle course McGonagall had helped them set up. He really should have seen it coming, Zuko knew he should have known better, but somehow, he hadn't expected Hermione's drive to be the best, to expand into physical fitness.

She hated gym class at muggle school with a fiery, loathsome passion. She'd told him so on several occasions.

Yet she'd come to him once their results were posted for the physical exam.

“Help me,” she'd said, trying not to grind her teeth at her score, just below average for their entire grade. (Once Zuko's scores had been removed from calculations for fairness of course.)

She'd made progress over the past week, not much, not enough to satisfy her need to be better, but she had made progress.

The girls behind him giggled again, even at a distance, he could hear them whispering.

“You ask him.”

“No, you ask him.”

Zuko sighed heavily, “Hermione, when you get to the platform, take a breather.”

“Yep,” she called back, annoyed as she struggled up the short rope net. She made it to the platform and sat, trying to steady her breathing, looking up – and glancing past him – Hermione grimaced and gave him a thumbs up, letting him know she was on the same page. She settled into her breathing exercise and Zuko turned away.

“Ladies!” He called to the small group of girls in their quidditch uniforms, “can I help you!!”

The girls blanched, and scrambled forwards, blushing, and Zuko knew he'd made a mistake.

“Hi Harry,” one of the girls he didn't know well enough to name off the top of his head smiled at him, “so we were just wondering if you could help us train too?”

“He'd be happy to,” Hermione called out from her platform, and Zuko turned, eyebrow raised. The look of discreet smugness on her face let him know why: this was pay back for the snort he hadn't managed to smother when she'd fallen face-first on her first day of training.

Zuko turned back to the group, “I would,” he said, trying not to sound bitter about it, “why don't you ladies head down to the warm up area and Neville and Ginny can walk you through some basic stretches.” He gestured back down the course, to the grassy area where Neville and Ginny were
helping Ron, Luna and Colin through some stretches.

Neville was already familiar with the process from his sword training with Zuko, and Ginny? Well she'd taken to physical activity like a turtle-duck to water.

“I hope you all took note of your results from the exam and know what you want to work on, I'll be over to talk to all about it when Hermione finishes the course.”

The girls giggled and wandered off to the warm up area. Zuko turned back to Hermione, who was outright grinning at him. He fixed her with a dark look, pointed at her, then hitched his thumb towards the end of the obstacle course in a very clear 'you, get going,' gesture.

Sniggering, Hermione began her careful trek across the thin beam suspended between her platform and the next.

McGonagall and Flitwick were laughing at him, Zuko knew it, he could tell by the way they kept glancing at him while they created a third copy of the basic obstacle course, their breath hitching, bodies flinching in the way a hidden laugh caused the body to twitch ever so slightly.

But also (mostly) because they'd outright laughed at him when he'd come to them with his problem.

The first group of girls to join hadn't been the last. In fact, after some of the other students had seen him helping one of the girls with her basic side plank, he'd experienced a rush of other students asking for personal lessons.

He hadn't quite understood why until Hermione had pointed out that as part of 'helping' the student to figure out how to hold her body, Zuko had put his hands on her waist and held them there for several long seconds.

“I'm twelve,” Zuko had hissed in response as he realised why the other students were set on 'personal' lessons, “what is wrong with these people!?”

“Alphabetically?” Hermione had asked drily, before working out what was effectively a class schedule for Zuko's 'new students'.

Watching as McGonagall and Flitwick settled the last few platforms in place, Zuko thought bitterly about asking them to increase the difficulty a little, to make the course 'not worth it' for the people who were just here to be close to him, but the course was already – apparently – too difficult for some of the students, including some who genuinely wanted to 'get in shape'.

'I'm starting to think my idea of easy, and everyone else's idea of easy, might be very different things in this world.'

“It's not that bad,” Neville said as he blocked a strike from Zuko's practice sword.

“It's not,” Zuko allowed, “but I'm getting worried about the increased giggling.” He moved to block Neville's counter-strike.

“Well, you know what's coming up right?” another strike and counter.

“No?” Zuko gave his friend a confused look.

“Wait, really?” Neville looked amused, and barely brought his sword up in time. “So what do you
think of Viculus's replacement?"

Zuko's eyes narrowed at the obvious subject change.

"He seems alright," Zuko shrugged before blocking, "he certainly explains the spell theory well enough."

"He's only temporary though, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he'll be gone in another month, replaced by a different Auror, apparently they still can't find someone to take over the post full time."

Neville's practice sword made glancing contact on Zuko's thigh, and Zuko smiled.

"Nice job," he said, before going back on the offensive.

Zuko woke midway through February on high alert. There was something in the air that seemed to be building. His friends seemed far too amused for the early hour of the morning, and Zuko kept his attention roving as they headed down to breakfast.

A lot of people in the great hall were sneaking him glances as he ate his breakfast, it was turning his stomach, he felt like an unseen threat was looming over him, and there was nothing he could do, because he didn't know where it was coming from.

Shortly before the morning mail delivery, everyone around him suddenly scooted away, leaving a large area between him and the next person. Hermione inexplicably pulled out a parasol, opening it to shield her head from... nothing.

Zuko frowned, his brows furrowing.

The sound of wings flapping caught his ear, it sounded like the normal mail delivery had doubled, maybe even... tripled?

Zuko looked to the open window where the shadow of the mail owls drew closer.

He looked at Hermione, grinning beneath her parasol.

He glanced at Neville, who so far over, Zuko wouldn't quite touch him if he extended his arm fully.

"What is this?" Zuko hissed as the owls dove through the window, so thick in the air that the light was blocked out, a large mass heading straight for him. As letters began to drop towards him, he slid under the table, listening wide eyed as the letters fell like rain. Soon envelopes began spilling off the table and onto the floor, many of them a garish shade of pink. It felt like longer, but it was only a few minutes before the rain of letters ceased.

Zuko didn't dare move, he knew this trick, a rear scout at a distance would catch anyone who moved early thinking the entire force had gone by. Zuko wasn't that stupid, he wouldn't fall for it!

Hermione leaned down, trying not to knock the small pile of letters that had landed on the seat.

"Happy Valentine's Day Harry," she said, far too amused for her own good.

"What. In. The. 'Lair. Is Valentine's Day?!" He demanded, his voice an angry growl. Hermione's expression turned sombre as she realised she may have screwed up.
"I'm sorry, I didn't think it would be this bad," she said quickly, a choked sound of surprise dying in her throat as several owls dropped to the ground to off load packages by Zuko's seat. "It's a romance holiday."

"Holiday?" He asked in disbelief, and she nodded, "as in annual?"

"That's right, February 14th, every year."

"No," he said, denying her words, "this wasn't a thing last year, I don't remember this being a thing last year."

"Erm, actually," Hermione winced, "it was, do you remember those badly written poems with no sender you got in February last year?"

Zuko took a moment to think, blanching as he recalled the few letters he'd received from unknown senders filled with some of the worst poetry he'd ever read. He'd assumed they'd been sent to the wrong person since they'd been addressed to: My Beloved, or something equally as ridiculous.

"Harry?" Ginny's oddly timid voice came from behind him, he quenched the fire that had begun dancing around his fist as he turned to her. She'd slipped under the table rather than trying to contort herself to peer under the tabletop like Hermione, who had far more space to work with. "I'm sorry, I didn't know so many people were going to send letters this year, or I wouldn't have, and I'm sorry for the ones last year, I was just... I grew up on stories of the Chosen One, of The-boy-who-lived, and he was like some fairy tale dream I thought I always wanted and... I'm sorry."

Zuko sighed and patted her on the head awkwardly, "it's alright, mistakes happen. But, I will have to punish you all for this."

"All?" Hermione asked.

"You and Neville and anyone else in on the 'let Harry be buried alive in letters' plan," he said, turning back to his year mates.

"Punished how?" Neville asked in strangled voice, his head ducking down to look at Zuko.

"You all get to help me with this," he fixed a manic expression on his face, and gestured at the table above him, and to the letters and parcels he could see on the seat and floor before him. His manic expression dropped for his more serious 'planning' face. "We're going to need some baskets, like a lot of them."

Hermione winced as she calculated the best way to deal with the mass of letters, and Neville slid out of his seat, giving Zuko and Ginny a way out that wouldn't involve knocking over the letter pile on the chair.

As Zuko stepped clear of the seat, he turned to help Ginny out, and noticed Dumbledore chuckling. 'How dare he,' Zuko thought, 'I gave that man the woolliest of socks for Christmas, and he laughs at my suffering? You have gone too far old man, I will not forgive this betrayal.'

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who missed it, there is now an Outtake for Secretive Basement
(chapter 12) it is chapter 10 in Zuko Potter and the Outtakes, 'Health Inquiry'. I have no excuse for this chapter's lateness...
That's a lie, I have several, but I'm not going to worry about it, sorry for the delay.
Finding a balance between 'time skips' and 'slice of life since the year's plot is over' is trickier than it looks :('}

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