Lies
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/21502876.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: No Archive Warnings Apply
Category: Gen
Fandom: Avatar: The Last Airbender
Relationship: Jet & Zuko (Avatar), Zuko & Freedom Fighters (mentioned), Zuko & Azula (mentioned)
Character: Zuko (Avatar), Jet (Avatar), Other characters are mentioned but not like there
Additional Tags: Angst, Zuko needs to stop being so hard on himself, hes a sweet baby and he deserve love, Guilt, Lies, One Shot
Series: Part 1 of Guilt
Stats: Published: 2019-11-20 Words: 1197

Lies
by FoiblePNoteworthy

Summary

Travelling with what remains of the freedom fighters, Zuko is not alone for once. It doesn't feel that way.

Notes

Set after Zuko alone, if Zuko had joined up with the freedom fighters.
After reading the series shown above, I felt like almost literally sick thinking about how guilty Zuko would be as his worldview turned upside down, and every choice seemed like the wrong one.
Inspired by this series https://archiveofourown.org/series/258244 but I could only link it to the first work, but this story would be set more around the 6th one (also you need to read this guys it's not finished yet but still) but this doesn't spoil anything i dont think

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by Byroads by EudociaCovert

Sometimes he forgot about the lies. He forgot that he had betrayed them before he even met them, and that he continued to with every moment that he didn’t fall to his knees and beg for their forgiveness. It would hit him like a physical blow in the quiet moments when he’d let himself forget, and the guilt would curl around him tighter. Choking him.
Sometimes, for blissful half seconds, within their small smiles of comradery, he was Li: he was Earth Kingdom, he was a swordfighter, he hated the Fire Nation.

But he didn’t. At night when they sat around the fire and discussed whatever rumours about the war they’d heard, or speculated over what their lives would become when they were finally safe from the war (safe from his people, safe from him), he would stare into the campfire and try to share in their hatred.

In his mind’s eye, he saw the Fire Nation uniform, and felt fear – that was close enough, he hoped. Thoughts of Father only brought a cocktail of desperation and longing cut through with flashes of pain from over the years, and the sharp image of his hand aflame. The hatred he tried to feel was only reflected back onto himself – if only he wasn’t so weak, his life would never have gone so wrong.

When he thought of Azula he felt mind-numbing terror, had visions of waking up to their camp alight with blue fire, but the figure of sharp cut armour and lightning (and, once, through eyes blurred with sleep, moonlight glinting off a blade hovering above his head - it was pure luck that he survived that night and she knows he knows it) was always replaced with innocent smiles, bright eyes, a little hand in his own on long walks with mother, keeping him warm on a rare cold day (“You’ll get it one day, Zuzu.”).

It was difficult to reconcile who she’d been with who she was now - she wanted to hurt him, but, try as he might, the feeling wasn’t mutual (she was so, so, excruciatingly tiny).

Once again, his compassion - the tattered remains of what mother and uncle had tried to cultivate (not as much as they want him to have, but too much to be of use to anyone; he’d failed them just as much as everyone else) - made him second best, a failure, a danger and a disappointment to all around him.

When she caught him, she would kill him. The best he could hope for was escape (and that was a tenuous hope at best), but she would find him again. Even if some miracle gave him a chance at true escape, he knew he would never take it; he would be too weak to kill his baby sister.

He would be lucky to last the year with her on his tail.

He glanced up at his friends. She would kill them, too, because of his weakness. Innocent and kind, even as they hated him with all they had, and told him a hundred times, to his face, how much he had hurt them and everything he deserved for it. He took in their words and curled them around his heart, crushing it tighter.

He stared back into the fire, then down at his hands. Equally as destructive, but with no potential anything else. He never did any good.

There was only one part of the Fire Nation he could truly hate, so he took all of their words with grace, added them to the warring guilt and anxiety in his stomach, which grew almost as potent as a physical illness when they smiled at him and called him the same as them. (I’m your enemy, why can’t you see that?)

Every day he opened his mouth to tell them the truth, to get rid of them and keep them safe and to get them to leave him alone (alone), just like he wants. He could make it on his own (alone again) just fine. He was weaker when he had something to lose.
“Li?” Jet’s voice pulled him out of his head, “You alright there?”

Zuko met his eyes, soft with concern in a way no outsider (except him) ever saw.

Something inside him ached to tell him everything and have him tell him it was okay, he could stay in their little family, he could be a good person someday, he didn’t need to hate himself.

“I’m Fire Nation,” he imagined saying, “I’m the Prince. My father is the Firelord. I was too dishonourable for even him to accept, and too much of a failure to make it up to him. I’m everything that you hate. I’m a firebender, and a liar and a killer. I’m the enemy. You should kill me.” It would be so easy to say it, to get it all out there. Maybe then the crushing feeling inside would leave with it.

Maybe it would be okay.

The words burned in his throat and his insides twisted. Within his clenched fists, he felt his fingernails cut into his palms, felt them burn into his skin. Couldn’t control it. It had been years, it should be easy, why couldn’t he do this one thing right?

“I’m fine,” he said eventually, crushing down the words for what felt like the thousandth time, “Just thinking.”

Jet’s mouth twisted in doubt. “If you’re sure.” He ended his sentence on an upturn, giving Li a second chance to talk, but didn’t push.

(“I want to ask him about it,” he’d heard him telling the others when they thought he was out of earshot, “I know something is upsetting him. But he’s too skittish.”

“As long as we don’t scare him off, we’ve got all the time in the world,” Smellerbee had said, Longshot nodding behind her. “We can wait for him to come to us.”

“If he ever will.”

“He will. One day.”)

His lungs were full of tiny knives. He couldn’t draw a full breath.

They shouldn’t have that sort of faith in him.

Tell them, ordered a voice in Zuko’s mind, sounding like his father. Tell him. Let them confirm everything. There’s no point in wallowing in questions you already know the answers to. They would never care if they knew, and you would deserve it. They would be safe as soon as they realised how much they hate you.

He opened his mouth to tell him the truth: “I’m sure. I’m fine.” But couldn’t.

“Li-“

"I said I'm fine!” The fire flared up alongside his temper. He couldn’t take this much longer.

He managed to pull the fire back just enough, just in time, that they didn’t make the connection. His hands gripped the log he was sat upon tightly, rough bark splintering, cutting his fingers. He deserved it. If he wasn’t careful, he’d drive them away just being him.

Jet had already turned away, expression hidden, leaving him alone with his thoughts. Zuko opened his mouth to apologize, but closed it almost immediately.
A failure again.

End Notes

considering making like a one-shot collection in this sort of theme, let me know if you’d be interested in it or if there’s anything you want me to explore :)

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