The Walls of Ba Sing Se

by jin_fenghuang

Summary

Uncle never heated his tea, leaving Jet with a rather different obsession. In a city crowded with refugees, ruled by the shadowy hand of the Dai Li and the Bei Fongs, the Freedom Fighters find a new home and a rather unexpected new recruit.
Chapter 1

Title: The Walls of Ba Sing Se
Main pairing: Jet/Zuko

Other pairings: Zuko/Jin, Smellerbee/Longshot, Uncle/OFC
Warning(s): Spoilers for all books

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The Walls of Ba Sing Se: Chapter 1

Jet lay on a rooftop chewing on his straw, arms folded behind his head, the warmth from the tiles soaking through his clothes. Earlier, he had cornered Li, asking him if he’d join the Freedom Fighters. Li had turned him down once more, glaring at Jet before stalking off, but this time there’d been hesitation in his voice. Jet smiled. That was all the in he needed.

He’d followed Li to Pao's teahouse, climbing up gutters, running unnoticed across wooden beams and tiled roofs. In some ways this boiling mess of a city was just like his forest. No one ever looked up.

Jet watched Li through the open window of the teahouse, watched him awkwardly pour tea and clean tables and it struck him, just like it had on the ferry, how out of place Li looked.

Jet shifted his straw from one side of his mouth to the other. If he hadn't seen Li gracefully climb ropes or the way Li'd used his dao to pack food when they'd raided the ship's kitchen on their way to Ba Sing Se, he could have almost believed that this was a different person.

"Tofu! Soft, fresh tofu! Pickles and tofu!" The salesman pushed his cart around the corner, the bang of his knife against a metal plate advertising his presence, echoing down the street. He stopped near the Pao Family Teahouse, cutting and weighing the soft, off-white squares for the customers that had stepped out of their houses at the sound of his arrival.

Jet frowned. If there was one thing he hated about the city, it was the constant noise. It felt a bit like going mad. Voices came from every direction, crowding in, filling his ears, his thoughts. Even late at night there was no peace or quiet. The first night, they'd found shelter in an abandoned warehouse, he had woken up to the sound of the cattle drivers and farmers coming into the city, delivering their wares before the dawn of day. The stomping of the bull-pigs shaking the ground like a battalion of Fire Nation soldiers on their komodo-rhinos brought back all the bitter memories he was trying so hard to leave behind. He had not been able to go back to sleep after that, staring instead at the gray pre-dawn sky, wishing he was back in his forest, back when it all had made sense.

His eyes were once more drawn to the teahouse windows. Li was setting up a pai sho board. The afternoon sun caught the good side of his face, soft golden light touching amber eyes. Fire Nation eyes. Jet had seen many children like him in the occupied parts of the Earth Kingdom. When the Fire Nation army marched through, sooner rather than later, there would be children, unwanted and suffering for their fathers' sins. Jet tightened his grip on the roof. Another thing he would make the Fire Nation to pay for.

The sun was setting, and with the rising darkness the streets lit with the green glow of a million crystal lanterns. The tofu salesman had moved on, and Jet could smell the hundreds of cooking fires set up by the food stalls selling beer and barbeque to people crouching on tiny folding chairs. Their
chatter filled the air like wind rattling leaves.

The smell of roasting meat made Jet's nose tingle and his stomach grumble. He reached into his pocket, counting the meagre change he still possessed, enough for dinner and maybe a bottle or two of beer. It would do. Jet grinned, spit out his straw, and climbed down from the roof.

"We're closed." Li threw the washrag he'd been using to wipe down cups and pots onto the table. "Get out."

"No, you're not. Is that how you treat all your customers?" Jet grinned at Li who glowered at him in return.

"What do you want?" Li leaned onto the table, looking straight into Jet's eyes, challenging.

"Cup of jasmine, please." Jet raised an eyebrow at him, his voice teasing. Li was easier to rile than a nesting moose-lion.

Li grabbed his rag and stalked off without a comment. He returned a few minutes later with a cup of steaming tea on a tray. Jet took it out of his hands, making sure their fingers touched, running his thumb sensually over Li's. Li's eyes went wide and he frantically pulled his hand away, nearly spilling the tea.

"When do you get off, Li?" Jet set the tray down on the table and turned back to face Li, stepping into Li's personal space. "This place closes soon, right?"

"What do you want from me?" Li took a step back, looking lost.

Jet thought the blush creeping up Li's cheeks was rather adorable, especially the way it made his ears glow. "Dinner at one of the barbeque stalls? What do you say?"

"You're crazy." Li grabbed his tray, holding it in front of him like a shield, exasperation in his voice.

"Is that a yes?" Jet took a sip of his tea and admiring Li's lithe step as he walked back to the kitchen. "I'll take that as a yes," Jet hollered after him when Li didn't answer.

Somehow Li'd managed to evade him, probably through the backdoor. Damn that backdoor. Jet filed that info away for future use. He pulled the last bit of meat off the barbeque stick with his teeth, chewing slowly he savored the flavor, then threw the wooden stick behind him, hearing it bounce off the roof tiles and fall into the darkness below. He licked the seasoning off his fingers and waited.

Earlier he'd climbed up to their apartment, knifed open the flimsy lock on the window and nearly knocked over a rather hideous vase someone had placed right under it. He stepped inside and looked around the room where Li and his uncle were staying.

Jet took his time to admire Li's weapons. Li's dao were nothing special, but they were well cared for, a soldier's swords. Jet pushed them back into their sheath, his hand lingering over the hilt, caressing the handle where Li's hands had worn it thin. The dagger, now, that was another matter. Jet weighed
it carefully in his hand, admiring its balance. This was no common weapon, not merely ornamental but also well worked. Jet tried to read the filigreed inscription. It had to be an heirloom of some kind. In times like these, refugees fleeing the Fire Nation, money scarce, people did not weigh themselves down with possessions that could be sold to buy another meal. Jet's hand tightened around the hilt, wondering what had happened to Li's family. There had to be sentimental value attached for Li and his uncle to keep the dagger. Someday he'd make the Fire Nation pay for taking their families from them. Make them pay dearly for it all. Jet put it back where he had found it, placed his straw on Li's blanket and left.

A bit later he was again lying on the roof opposite their window, head resting on crossed arms, looking out over the wooden ridge, waiting for them to come home from work. Jet idly watched as dark houses exploded with light; their inhabitants returning home and lighting cooking fires and candles and it reminded him of nothing so much as an oversized anthill.

He wasn't sure how long he'd gazed off into the night. Nearby a door closed with a bang. With the sound of flint hitting steal the room across the street lit up snatching him out of his daze. A single candle now lit the room and Li was stretched out on his bed, the straw in pieces on the floor. Uncle Mushi was busying himself at the stove.

"Would you like a pot of tea?" Mushi dumped out this morning's leaves, measuring out fresh ones for this evening's brew.

"We've been working in a teashop all day." Li rolled over on his bed, facing his uncle, his voice bitter. "I'm sick of tea."

"Sick of tea? That's like being sick of breathing." Mushi sounded exasperated. He rekindled their hearth fire, reaching for the kettle, only to find it empty. Then frowned; he put the kettle back down on the table and walked over to their waist high earthenware cistern, lifting the lid. "It's nearly empty. Didn't you refill it this morning?"

"I did." Li scowled and ran a hand through his hair. He determinedly got up and grabbed the carrying stick with the two buckets from behind the door. "I'll be right back."

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Like all houses in Ba Sing Se, Li's home faced a public courtyard with a well. Jet slid down the tiled roof, gently descending until his feet securely rested on the eave. He edged along, remembering the drain pipe he had climbed up on to be a few feet to his right. He jumped down the last few feet, landing softly on the paved street.

Jet brushed the dirt off his clothes and sauntered into the passageway to Li's house. A single green lantern lit the courtyard, its shadows dancing with the soft evening breeze. Li's buckets and carrying stick were on the tiled ground by the well, but Li was nowhere in sight. And then, very suddenly, someone shoved Jet, making him stumble, his back hitting the wall, and then there was that knife against his throat.

Jet grinned. "Missed me?"

The knife against his throat tightened, biting into his flesh, nearly drawing blood. Then it was withdrawn and Jet found himself pushed against the wall, Li glaring at him. "What's wrong with you?"
"I take that as a yes." Jet reached out and tugged an errant strand of hair behind Li's ear.

"Is this how you get people to join your group?" Li froze at the gentle gesture, knife still at the ready, his grip on Jet's arm like iron.

"Is it working?" Jet smirked, looking way too smug for Li's taste.

"What do you want from me?" He shoved Jet against the wall again for emphasize.

"Bored of serving tea, yet?" Jet drawled, turning the gesture on its head, his hands taking hold of Li's waist. "I could use a man with your talents." His breath hot on Li's skin.

The pressure on Jet's arms eased and Li blinked and gave him a tiny nod. "What do you have in mind?"

"It'll be fun." Jet spun Li around, in a move that was almost dancing, pressing him against the wall, his hand in Li's hair, his thumb caressing Li's cheek. "Just like old times."

Seizing the opportune moment Jet quickly leaned down and kissed him, Li's lips soft under his, their breathing ragged as Jet pulled away. He thought he rather liked that look of perplexed awkwardness on Li's face.

He pushed away from the wall, stepping out of reach with a dancer's ease and was halfway across the courtyard when he turned to a still frozen Li and flashed him a smile. "Tomorrow, after the teahouse closes."

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Zuko watched Jet disappear into the darkness, his mind reeling. It had all made sense, Jet recruiting for his group, wanting another fighter to join them, but then …

He ran a finger over his lips, trying to comprehend what had just happened, trying to understand why Jet had kissed him. What did he want?

Zuko was faintly aware of someone watching him as he finally went over to where he'd left his buckets by the well. Feeling unease and anticipation Zuko leaned over the edge of the well, lowering his bucket into the ground water below.

Someone watched him fill first one, then the other bucket, hook them to the carrying stick and walk back towards the house.
Zuko toed off his shoes and nudged the door to their apartment open with his foot. Uncle was sitting cross-legged on his bed, playing a game of solitaire. Zuko put the buckets down on the floor and unhooked the carrying stick. Uncle was gave him a sidelong glance, pretending to ponder on his next pai sho move.

Zuko upended first one, then the other bucket into their cistern.

"I'm going to bed."

Uncle put down the tile he was holding, turning towards Zuko. "I'm glad you are making friends, nephew."

"He's not my friend." Zuko turned away from Uncle, to hide his blush. Damn you, Jet. He unfastened his robe, pulling it over his head and then tossing it onto the bed. He reached for his nightclothes.

Uncle got up and closed the window, sitting down besides Zuko on the bed, his voice quiet. "Be that as it may, Li, but it has been a week and I think it is time we got our stories straight."

Zuko busied himself with unfastening his shoes. "I guess..."

Fitful dreams kept waking him throughout the night and when dawn broke he lay pondering in the semi-dark, trying to get back to sleep, trying to not think about what his life had become. And most certainly not think about Jet and the way his lips had felt against Zuko's.

He turned onto his side, pulling his blanket over his shoulders, closing his eyes, willing himself back to sleep, not really sure what his future would bring.

Uncle woke him with a hot cup of tea and a steamed bun. Zuko found it a bit greasy and lacking in flavor, but it was hot and there and he'd had worse. His stomach growled and he remembered too many mornings recently without food, so he ate it without comment.

The day in the teashop dragged. Bleary eyed from lack of sleep and not yet used to being on this side of customer service, Zuko had to force himself to pay attention to the patrons. Every carefully placed tea cup, every yelled order was a reminder of how much his life had changed. He told himself he could do this, that he'd adapt. The Avatar was out of his reach for now, he himself wanted as a traitor. As much as he wanted to go home, that road was closed. Uncle was right, he'd have to make a life for himself here. What else was there to do?

There was a kind of monotony to the work that allowed his mind to wander, back to Jet, to his conversation with Uncle the night before. Zuko wiped down tables and served cups of tea, mulling it over, spinning the scenarios off into the possible and impossible, twisting them, tasting all possible flavors of dread his mind could conjure.
By noon his feet were aching and he'd managed to spill tea all over his apron.

Zuko helped Pao close the teahouse for midday, righting chairs and benches, checking pai-sho sets for missing tiles, so that everything would be ready for the guests when they opened again in the late afternoon. Afterwards he took off his apron, hanging it near the window to dry, yawned and sat on a small wooden bench in the back, near the stove, to eat the lunch of rice and vegetables Pao provided his workers. The rice was sticky and cold and the vegetables over-salted. He ate half before he gave up in disgust.

Uncle had left for the markets, leaving Zuko to go home on his own. He walked down the now familiar streets, taking in the street vendors, the gamblers in the narrow alleys, one always standing watch, ready to run for it in the unlikely event of the city watch patrolling this part of town.

At a corner a girl was selling melon slices on a stick, calling out for customers in a clear voice. Her handcart was stacked high with seasonal fruit, a canvas roof providing shade for her and her customers. Zuko dug in his pocket for change, eyeing the pale-green fragrant melons, no bigger than oranges.

A group of kids came running past Zuko, a boy in a blue shirt kicking a tattered ball. It bounced off a door, hit the side of the fruit stand and bounced off down the road. The boy caught it expertly with his foot, kicking it uphill again, his friends following his lead, laughing as they disappear up the street. The fruit stand wobbled and swayed and several melons dropped. One splattered, spilling seeds and red fruit-flesh into the dirt. Two others rolled down the street, picking up speed downhill. Zuko bent down and caught one with his foot, scooping up the other into his arms.

"Thanks." The girl came running and smiled sheepishly at him, taking the melons from him, putting them back onto her cart. There was a shriek in the distance and a moment later several cabbages rolled past them, bouncing off the cobbles, disappearing down the hill. Zuko watched them in sleep deprived fascination.

"That was kind of you." She plucked one of the melon slices from her display and handed it to Zuko. "You work at Pao's teahouse, don't you?"

Zuko nodded. His eyes still on the disappearing cabbages he took it and then looked at the slice of watermelon, a bit confused as to how he'd ended up with it and what exactly he was expected to do with it now. He shook his head, and yawned, trying to free it of the fuzziness that was creeping up. "How much?"

The girl twirled one of her pig-tails between her fingers, and noticing his frown she gave him an encouraging smile. "It's free, silly."

"Oh." He blinked several times and started walking away, then stopped and turned back towards the girl, blushing and fidgeting. "Thanks."

She giggled and watched him as he stalked down the street, still holding the melon in front of him.

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Zuko berated himself inwardly all the way back to the apartment, sweet sticky watermelon juice dripping onto his fingers, running down his hand. It really was a good thing he'd never be Firelord, he thought bitterly, considering he couldn't even handle such a mundane task as buying fruit.

He bit the rest of the sweet red fruit-flesh off the rind, and disposed of it on one of the already
existing garbage heaps, disturbing a cloud of flies.

Zuko stepped through the shady alley into the sunlit courtyard and groaned. In the shade of an old sycamore tree sat Jet, chatting with Mrs Chen, their downstairs neighbor, her fat lapdog sleeping at their feet. Jet was eating dumplings, waving his chopsticks at Zuko when he noticed him walking towards them.

"Li! Come have a seat." Jet patted the stairs beside him. "Mrs Chen's has been kind enough to share her lunch with me." He gave the old lady a warm smile, winked at her and popped another dumpling into his mouth. "You're an amazing cook."

"It's good to see a growing lad with a healthy appetite." Mrs Chen beamed at him and then her expression shuttered. "Mine are all out of the house and ..." She blinked away a tear and reached down to scratch her dog behind its ears. The little yappy creature woke up, growled at Zuko and turned on its side, offering its belly up for rubs.

"I'm sorry." Jet patted her hand. "The war has taken so much from all of us..."

"We are here to make a new life, son. That is what counts." She looked up at him, touching his cheek. "Go on then, your friend is waiting."

Jet smiled at her sympathetically, got up and walked over to Zuko, putting an arm around his shoulders. Zuko shrugged him off.

"He's not my ... oh whatever." Zuko glared at Jet, poking him in the chest. "What are you doing here?"

Jet gave him a rakish grin. "Just making sure you don't conveniently forget about tonight."

"I said I'd come." Zuko snapped, caught Jet's gaze and held it. "I keep my promises."

He turned on his heels and started to climb the stairs to their apartment. Jet followed a few steps behind and Zuko had the uncomfortable suspicion that Jet was watching him intently.

"Stop looking at me that way." Zuko turned and glared at Jet.

"Like what?" Jet leaned against the stairwell, deliberately looking Zuko up and down, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

Zuko's eyes went wide and he felt his cheeks burn in embarrassment. He turned away, trying to hide his blush, unlocked the door, hand on the handle.

"Can I come in?" Jet stepped up behind him, running his fingers along the tender skin right above Zuko's collar. Zuko gasped, willing his body not to shiver.

"No." He stepped over the threshold, slamming the door in Jet's face.

Zuko hear him call to him through the door. "Wear something dark."

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Zuko latched the door with unsteady hands and stumbled over to his bed, still feeling the ghost of Jet's fingers on his skin. He lay down on his bed, and fell asleep to the cries of the street merchants hawking their wares.
Later that day Zuko served a cup of lychee tea to a girl with pigtails that looked vaguely familiar. She smiled at him, which puzzled Zuko, but he was too busy helping Pao settle a dispute between a group of customers who were threatening to trash the teahouse over a pai-sho wager to give it further thought. By the time they managed to usher them out without any harm to teahouse or patrons, the girl was gone.

It was a couple hours past dinner when Zuko got off work. The stalls and shops around the teahouse had long since closed and the only places still open were the street vendors selling beer and barbeque on sticks. Zuko walked past people hunched over on three legged stools crowding around low tables. Two patrons were arguing with each other over who had the honor of paying the bill, while a bored waitress watched an order of mutton frying over the hot coal. Jet was leaning against the wall opposite the teahouse, chewing his trademark straw. Zuko briefly wondered where he got the unending supply from and frowned at the inanity of his thought.

"You work too much." Jet pushed himself off the wall and walked towards Zuko. "All fun and no play …"

"Do you even have a job?" Zuko glared at him and refused to be charmed by Jet's easy smile.

"Course I do." Jet put an arm around his shoulder, and they started walking. Zuko let himself be led half down the dark street before he noticed what Jet was doing and stopped dead in his tracks.

"Where are we going?" Zuko turned towards Jet, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"Don't you trust me?" Jet's voice had a strange undertone, as if, even though it was phrased as a question, there could be no doubt about the answer.

"No." Zuko's frown deepened, not liking how much Jet had sounded like Azula when he'd said that.

Jet looked him over, the surprise at Zuko's curt response quickly hidden but definitely filed away for future use. He nodded. "Ever been to the Upper Ring?"

"How do you plan on getting in? We are not exactly allowed to go there."

"But that, dear Li, is the fun I was talking about."

They walked along the tracks for quite a bit, till they reached an earth-rail station. Jet dug in his pocket and took out two Tu-Gui tokens.

"This is it." He gave Zuko a daredevil grin. "Last chance to back out, Li!"

Zuko snatched one of the tokens out of Jet's hand, turned and joined the queue at the turnstile. "You coming, or not?"

They stood on a windswept platform, holding onto the rail, as the earthbender on duty lifted them up to train level.

The train moved smoothly and efficiently, gliding silently through the night. Zuko took in the pattern of streets and houses, baffling at the sheer size of the city, mentally comparing it to the Fire Nation Capitol. Not that he'd seen much of it when he'd still been a prince, but even with his limited knowledge it was clear to him that Ba Sing Se dwarfed his home or any other city he had ever laid
"It is magnificent, isn't it?" Jet leaned in close to Zuko, looking out over his shoulder. "When I was little we lived in a small village a bit up-river from the coast. Nothing as grand as this."

"What was it like?" Zuko turned at him, looking suspicious. "Didn't you say you lived in a forest?"

"I did, afterwards." Jet balled his fist, his voice low. "When I was eight the Fire Nation attacked. Few survived."

Zuko stiffened, uncomfortable with his conflicting emotions. "Was it a military base?"

"No, just a town." Jet tightened his grip on Zuko's shoulder and gave him a grim smile.

"Why would anyone do that? It doesn't make sense." Zuko shuddered, thinking back on Zhao and the dishonorable way Zhao had behaved after the Agni Kai and what he had witnessed during his brief stay on the Commander's ship. As much as it pained him to admit it, even just to himself, honor was often less valued than results.

"What do you mean? It makes perfect sense. All the Fire Nation ever does is destroy." Jet gently touched Zuko's scar. "I'd think you should know that."

Zuko jerked out of Jet's embrace. "I meant that's dishonorable."

"They got you pretty bad, didn't they?" Jet's voice was soft, sympathetic.

Zuko did not answer, suppressing the urge to scream at Jet to tell him that he was a liar and that his country would never do such a thing. He balled his hands at his sides, but no matter how much he wanted to believe that his people would not do that, he found that he had no doubt that Jet's tale was true.

They sat in sulky silence while the train climbed steadily all the way up to the Middle Ring, past lush gardens and brightly lit restaurants and theatres.

"Look, I'm sorry I brought it up." Jet had gotten up and was leaning against the sliding door smiling sheepishly at Zuko. "You still up for sneaking into the Upper Ring?"

Zuko nodded, trying to work up some enthusiasm.

"Then we've got to leave now." He opened the sliding doors, checking the corridor for other passengers, and, finding it empty, slid the doors close again.

Jet opened the window and climbed onto the ledge. He gave Zuko a daredevil grin. "Follow me."
They climbed out of the window and onto the moving train, the wind tearing at their clothes, the city dark and glittering below them.

Jet beckoned Li to follow and was pleased that he did so without question. Maybe there was hope for him joining the Freedom Fighters after all. They swiftly moved towards the back of the train, over the brightly lit passenger wagons onto the cargo compartment.

They watched in silence, their bodies pressed down onto the roof and their faces turned sideways, when at the last stop before the Upper Ring several bored looking conductors entered the compartments, checking the IDs of anyone remaining on the train.

Shortly after the train started moving again Jet elbowed Li. There was a red tinge to Li’s cheeks and his short wind tousled hair made Jet want to run his fingers through it. "Let's check out what the cargo is."

Li nodded his agreement and together they climbed off the train and down onto one of the small platform that connected the cargo wagons. The earthbenders at the end of the train pushed off again and Jet watched Li pull at the padlock on the door, cradling it in his hand as if to weigh it before reluctantly letting go of it. Jet pulled out a set of penknives and offered them to Li, who shook his head.

"You open it."

"Never done this before?" Jet gave him a smug grin, pulled himself up to his full height, trying to look worldly and confident. He shoved his penknives into the lock, shimming it open with practiced ease.

"Not like that, no." Li didn't meet his eyes and Jet found himself wondering how someone who'd so readily agreed to go liberate food from the ferry kitchen would be uneasy over breaking a simple lock.

"I just want to look around." Jet stepped into the cargo wagon. "Not going to steal anything, if that is what you are worried about."

Li snorted. "Yeah, since I've had such issues with that in the past."

"Hold the door open, will ya. It's dark as a badgermole's ass in here." Jet bent over a wooden crate, inspecting the seal. "Some kind of flying pig."

"Let me see." Li pushed him out of the way and Jet had to move quickly to reach the door before it shut.

"That's the flying boar of the Bei Fong family." Li scratched his head. "I think."

Jet pushed one of the crates against the door, propping it open, allowing a thin beam of light into the wagon. Bei Fong property? That sounded promising. "Let's open it."

Li stepped out of his way and Jet knelt beside the crate, making a satisfied sound as the lock clicked open in the dark. He reached into the wooden box, pulling out a roll of something red, tossing it at Li. "Let's have a look at this outside, shall we?"
"Fireworks." Li caught the roll of red paper tubes, stepping out onto the tiny platform outside the wagon, the black flame on the red wrapping unmistakable, even in the dim light. "Fire Nation," he whispered.

"Give it here." Jet did not wait for a response but snatched the roll of firework out of Li's hand, inspecting the Fire Nation seal, fury rising. He could feel the blood starting to boil under his skin, anger drowning reason. They had to ruin everything. No matter how far he ran, they'd always be there first, poisoning his whole life. He threw the fireworks back into the crate in disgust.

"Traitors." Jet balled his fists in anger, his eyes narrowing. "Collaborating traitors." He fumbled in his pocket for his flint and steel. He'd show them this time. They would not get away this easy. There was no Katara here to stop him. "Let's burn this down."

"What?" Li looked at him, clearly not following, his voice incredulous. "Are you crazy?"

"They're traitors, Li! They deal with Fire Nation scum," Jet hissed, as if it explained all. And it should, Jet thought. "Let's show those traitors how that ends." His voice had an edge to it that made Li shiver and flinch back. In the dark, Jet could make out the dim outline of an unlit hurricane lamp near the door, he reached for it, flicking it open with one finger. The oil lamp inside was full. Jet let out a satisfied grunt. "I want to see this burn, Li! Are you with me?"

"You can't just burn down a whole wagon of fireworks." The disbelief in Li's voice made Jet just that much more determined to follow through on it.

"Watch me." Jet smashed the oil lamp on the floor, crouching down beside it. He fumbled for the flint, sending a spark flying into the darkness. It should have ignited the oil, he was sure of it, but before he could strike the steel again Li tackled him to the ground and he felt the familiar bite of a Li's dagger against his throat.

"You'll burn down the city! The houses are too close together!"

"And?" Jet hissed, struggling against Li's grip. "This is treason, Li. Dishonorable. Don't tell me you approve of it!"

"I'm not going to let you kill innocent people, Jet." Li tightened his hold of him.

"I hadn't taken you for that naive." Jet laughed bitterly. "No one's innocent."

That only seemed to make Li more angry. "What about you?"

Jet stopped struggling for a second, looking up at Li incredulously. "I haven't been innocent in a long time."

"Then." Li's other hand twisted in his hair, smacking him against the wooden floor hard enough to make his vision blur. "You weren't innocent then? When…" Li's face shuttered and he swallowed hard. "When the army burned your village?"

"That's not the same." Jet was struggling against Li's grip again, trying to throw him off.

"Fine." Li's breath was hot on his face, his voice acid with anger. "Go ahead, burn Ba Sing Se to the ground. Kill innocent people, then you can be just like Zhao." Li smacked him against the ground once more for emphasis and then let go, sitting back on his knees.

"That's not..." Jet started to get up on his elbows, outraged and then went limp. He felt as if he'd been doused in ice-water. He continued, his voice small, "That's not what I meant."
"We came here for a new beginning, a second chance. What exactly did you mean when you told me that on the ferry?" Jet noticed that Li was not looking at him anymore, or anything for that matter. "Don you think I don't know what it means to be so angry all you can think about is how to get even for what they took from you?" The anger had faded from Li's voice, he continued in a desperate whisper. "I … I nearly got Uncle killed."

"I, Li …" Jet closed his eyes, memories of his parents and the fire that had consumed his life flooding his mind, making him feel like a heel. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"That was obvious." Li's sheathed his knife, cocking his head at Jet. "I'm going to let you up now. Don't make me regret it."

Jet was suddenly very aware of the heat of Li's body on his. He nodded, wanting to reach out, to touch, to pull Li back down but not sure if his touch would be welcome right now.

Li gracefully rolled to his feet and offered Jet his hand. Jet took it.

"Come on, let's get out of here before we get in trouble."

They put the fireworks back into the crate, locked it and put it back where it had been when they'd first entered the wagon. Li went outside, but Jet remained, taking in the rows and rows of crates.

The wagon stretched at least eight yards, wooden crates packed all the way to the roof, leaving only a small walkway in between. Jet estimated there to be at least a hundred crates. He paled. The combined blasting power would have been enough to take out the wagon and a good chunk of the track, killing Li, himself and everyone on the train, probably setting fire to the wooden houses below. He buried his face in his hands and thanked the spirits that Li had managed to slap sense into him. It was too easy to fall back into old ways. He really needed Li on his side.

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They stood on the tiny platform at the end of the wagon, watching the dark city speed by. There were fewer lights here and less noise; most of the mansions were surrounded by high walls, closing their splendor off from street view. It was such a contrast to the sprawling noise of the Lower Ring that it made Jet feel like he'd entered a different world.

"What are we going to do now?" Li was leaning against the railing, his back to Jet.

"Hey, I promised you a trip to the Upper Ring, didn't I?" Jet tried to put levity into his voice that he didn't feel right now. Li didn't answer.

Jet sidled up to him, putting a tentative hand on his shoulder. "Look, Li …" He hesitated, for once lacking the words to charm that came so easy to him. "Thank you."

Li turned around, frowning, trying to hide his confusion. "What are you thanking me for?"

"For snapping me out of it. I - I've made bad choices before. Thanks for not letting me do something stupid."

Li turned away from him again, staring out into the night, but Jet noticed a faint blush creeping up on Li's cheeks. Jet snuck his other arm around Li's waist, and, to his satisfaction, Li did not pull away. They stood in comfortable silence for a few minutes.
"We are nearly at the station." Jet stepped back and watched Li climb gracefully onto the wagon. When Jet did not immediately follow him, he leaned back down, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"Are you going to show me the Upper Ring, or not?" Li's head disappeared into the darkness again and Jet climbed up behind him.

Up again on the cargo wagon, they pressed themselves down against the roof. There was no smell of cooking fires here, no laughter and music from the restaurants and theatres, just the dark mansions and parks, even the biggest of them dwarfed by the magnificent palace looming in the distance.

The wind had picked up and even though it was a mild spring night Jet could see Li shivering. He inched closer, his mouth near Li's ear, his voice teasing. "You cold?"

Li started to nod, then shook his head in denial. "No."

Jet leaned in, running his fingers along the edge of Li's scar, burying them in his short hair. "Pity, I know just the thing for that."

Li's lips were soft under his and parted with a gasp. Jet teasingly brushed his lips against them, enjoying Li's surprised moan and the rather unexpected shove he received. Suddenly Li was on top of him, holding his hands down besides his head, kissing him with lips, teeth and tongue.

"This is a bad idea." Li whispered and before Jet could answer or even think about what Li might have meant, Li was kissing him again and that was all that mattered for now.

ooooo

Jet's hand had wormed its way under Li's shirt and down his spine, holding him securely in place. He could feel the goose bumps the cold air had left on Li's skin, running his fingers over them, smoothing them with his heat. Jet was panting, grinding up against Li, when the train came to a halt and people with lanterns were moving towards them. Jet reluctantly righted his clothes, watching as the pale inches of Li's skin he longed to explore further, too, disappeared under layers of clothes.

"That's gotta be the Bei Fongs." Li gestured towards the people efficiently unloading the crates onto carts.

"You up for a bit of an adventure?" He mouthed and Li nodded.

"You want to follow them, don't you?" Li gestured towards the carts. "Check out where they keep the contraband."

Jet gave him a daredevil grin. "You in?"
The Walls of Ba Sing Se Chapter 4

Chapter 4

The heavy weight of Jet's arm had settled across his shoulders and Zuko considered shrugging him off. Especially since the old woman knitting socks on the seat across from them gave them rather curious, indulgent glances. She was also chatting amicably with Jet. Zuko felt a pang of jealousy; not for Jet paying her attention, but for the effortless grace he managed to charm everyone he met. In the end he gave up on moving Jet's arm, mainly because Jet was warm.

Zuko wondered if this godforsaken city even had something resembling summer. He was wearing double layers and still the cold seemed to creep in and settle, never really leaving him. He hadn't realized how much he'd been relying on his firebending to stay warm before coming to the city, but right now the risk was too high. He was still mentally kicking himself for nearly giving himself away in the cargo wagon. What had he been thinking, even considering firebending a lock? Uncle was right. The moment they were discovered they'd have to face an angry lynch mob in the street, or worse, deportation to the Fire Nation and they were even less kind to traitors.

Traitor. That word still tasted like ash in his mouth, leaving him tense with impotent anger.

The train rattled past the main Middle Ring station and Zuko swore he could see his breath in the air. He snuggled deeper into Jet's embrace, convincing himself it was for warmth only.

At least he finally understood what it was Jet wanted from him, though it still kind of puzzled him why it was him he wanted it from.

Zuko had lived three years on a military ship, with port visits short and far between; he knew what his men got up to in their bunks, be it from homesickness, boredom or lack of female companionship. He himself had never partaken, his station and age made that impossible, but he was no fool and the desires of men were no mystery to him.

The train stopped and the sudden light and noise spilling in from the station briefly snapped him back to the present, and he managed to make an appropriate admiring sound as Mrs Ni showed them the portrait of her three year old granddaughter. The train moved on into the night and so did his thoughts.

Earlier they'd followed the men, who had to be part of the Bei Fong clan, to a dark warehouse, climbed onto the roof and watched them unload crate after crate. Jet had wanted to go in right then and there through the tiny attic window but Zuko, afraid to be caught in a situation where firebending was his only means to escape, had insisted that it was too dangerous with the Bei Fongs still in the building and them being unarmed but for a dagger. He'd braced himself for the seemingly unavoidable argument, but to his surprise Jet had not thrown a fit over it, but had taken one look at Zuko, and nodded.

Zuko barely suppressed a yelp as Jet squeezed his shoulder, his fingers digging into the flesh. Zuko turned his attention toward them, catching the last of what the old woman had said. He dutifully reached out and took one of the proffered shiny, wrapped candies. He unwrapped it, popped it into his mouth and chewed, the sweet meaty flavor overwhelming his senses and he gagged.

He spit the candied beef-jerky into his hand, coughed and mumbled, his cheeks flaming. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude."
"Oh, don't worry, deary. Too spicy for you?" She gave him an indulgent look and started rummaging in her purse.

"Yes." Zuko lied between coughs, wishing he'd had something, anything, to get that taste out of his mouth.

He got up and threw the half eaten candy out of the window, wiping his hand on his trouser leg. He glared at Jet's barely suppressed laughter.

That laughter turned into full fledged giggles when the Mrs Ni patted Zuko on the cheek and gave a couple of milk candies 'to make it better' before she got off the train just before the Lower Ring.

"Stop mocking me!" Zuko snapped and got up again, resting his arms on the window ledge, glowering out into the night. It took all his willpower not to give into the firebending his temper preferred as an outlet for his frustration. Instead he gripped harder onto the ledge, grinding his teeth in frustration, taking long, deep calming breaths. He closed his eyes and felt the shifting of the train under his feet.

When he opened them again had passed the wall, the wall, descending into the Lower Ring and Zuko noticed the change from brightly lit houses to sprawling apartment blocks. The train stopped at a switch, waiting for the one going up-ring to pass. The houses right next to the track had been divided and subdivided countless times, leaving rooms no bigger than two adjacent bunk beds with a few precious inches in between. Tattered curtains did nothing to keep privacy but only advertised the abject rundown poverty of the area.

Zuko watched a family of four crouch awkwardly on the two lowest bunk beds, sharing a meager dinner. The parents looked tired but the children were worse. No one that young should have eyes that hollow. They seemed empty, even from the distance, as if all hope had been drained from long ago.

We did this to them, Zuko realized. He thought back to that girl on the plains with the burn on her leg and he felt a pinch of guilt for having taken their ostrich-horse.

"You're cute when you glower." Jet stepped up behind him and put his arms around Zuko and for the first time in his life Zuko acknowledged the war as something real, not just a background noise to his own hunt for the Avatar.

"Why's the Earthking letting this happen?"

A shiver ran down his spine and Jet pressed his lips to Zuko's neck.

"The Earthking? What do you want him for? He just sits in his palace all day and does, I don't know, … kingy stuff." Jet ran the tip of his tongue along the outer shell of Zuko's ear, making him squirm.

"It's wrong. That's not how it should be." It struck him, once again, how different this place was from his home, how distant the Earthking was from his people, all cloistered away in that high-walled palace of his, never venturing out. Zuko turned in the embrace, looking straight at Jet. "A king should take care of his people."

"That's what we're here for, Li." Jet ran his hand down Zuko's jaw, burying it in the short hair at Zuko's nape, and kissed him.

And Zuko made a decision. The Avatar might be out of his reach for now, but this city wasn't and as long as he was here, he could at least gain back what was left of his honor. He and Jet would make sure that those profiteering from the war paid for their crimes.
"Uhm," Zuko said, running a nervous hand through his hair. They stood at the small alley that led to the public courtyard of his apartment block and he had no idea what was expected of him now. He fidgeted. This was about as bad as that time his crew had all chipped in at that godforsaken port town and gotten him a … lady of the night.

Zuko blushed at the memory and the months of barely hidden snickers he'd had to suffer for well … not doing anything. He fidgeted again and was about to back away into the alley when Jet solved the situation in typical Jet fashion. Zuko found himself backed against the wall, a hand under his tunic and Jet's mouth on his. Not that he minded.

Hands explored and between kisses Zuko tried to ignore what he knew they must look like. Half undressed and panting hard, rutting against each other where anyone could come by, anyone could see them. Like a sailor after long overdue shore leave and a cheap streetwalker; utterly undignified. But Jet's hand, hot against the hardness between his legs, made thought if not impossible, the least desirable of his current options and his whole world focused only on getting just a bit closer, kissing just a bit harder, riding that amazing, unprecedented wave of pleasure to the end.

Only when Jet fumbled with the fastenings of his trousers did Zuko pull back.

"Not here. Anyone can see." Zuko took hold of Jet's hand, pushing it away. Jet twined their fingers together and licked the hollow of Zuko's throat making him gasp.

"Didn't bother you a second ago." Jet's thigh rubbing up between Zuko's legs, slowing down his thoughts into a moan. Zuko had no idea how much time passed, the noises of the night city an ever constant hum in the background.

The breaking of glass and loud angry yelling startled them apart. Then a woman was screaming and another joined in. The sounds of domestic fighting echoed into the night, with more voices joining in. Lamps were lit and people gathered at windows, ready to catch whatever free entertainment the city would provide.

Zuko shook his head, his hands flat against Jet's chest, pushing him off of him. "We should stop."

"Afraid your uncle will see us?" Jet teased.

"Oh spirits, no!" Zuko exclaimed and cringed. He hadn't even thought of that mortifying possibility. He rolled his shoulders, wincing at the sore spot where he had leaned against the rough wall. "Besides, this is uncomfortable."

Jet sidled up behind him, offering a massage that turned into a caress and chuckled. "A real bed it is, my prince."

Jet's choice of words hit Zuko like a blow to the gut. This was going to be that little desert village all over again, who he was forgotten, drowned out by the past he had left behind. Zuko closed his eyes, hoping the darkness hid part of his reaction.

"I have to go," he ground out, turning towards the courtyard.

"Li?" Jet caught his hand, pulling him into a reluctant embrace, looking like he was going to say more, but didn't.
And Zuko let himself be pulled, not willing to give up what little comfort was to be had before Uncle and he were forced to move on again.

"I have to go, I have to work tomorrow," Zuko said but didn't make a move to pull away.

"Yeah, me too."

Zuko snorted. "Sure, you do."

"Hey, no fair." Jet pulled him in for another kiss. "I help set up market stalls."

Zuko rolled his eyes but said nothing.

"I'm thinking about paying the Bei Fongs a visit. Need to talk to Smellerbee and Longshot first, but..." Jet had, from somewhere, produced a straw and was chewing at it in a thoughtful way. "Will you join us tomorrow night?"

"Yes." Zuko tried to place the weird butterfly feeling in his stomach at the brilliance of Jet's smile, not sure what to make of it all. So he turned away and started walking. When he looked back, just before entering the house, Jet was gone, the alley dark and deserted, but he could not shake the feeling of someone watching him.

Unable to shake that certain feeling of unease, Zuko climbed the stairs to their apartment two at a time, only feeling slightly better when he heard the definite click of the lock snapping in place.

The overwhelming smell of soy-sauce and honey filled the tiny place and Uncle was standing bent over the tiny stove, brushing a pungent liquid onto a golden-brown duck. He was humming "The Long Way to Ba Sing Se" under his breath, tapping his foot to keep the rhythm.

"What the spirits are you doing, Uncle?" Zuko gestured at the pots, mortar and cooking utensils strewn about.

"Ah, nephew. Did you have a good night?" Uncle put down the dripping brush and picked up a fan.

Zuko made a noncommittal sound, flopped down on his bed and folded his arms behind his head, watching Uncle dry the most recently applied layer of duck marinade with his fan. His mind drifted off to the events of the evening, trying to make sense of the whole mess. He startled when Uncle pulled the apartment's single stool up next to his bed, staring pointedly at his neck.

Zuko blushed and resisted the urge to cover whatever it was with his hand.

"Nephew," Uncle's expression was an odd mixture of pride and worry. "I think we should wait before we take on the wonderful, yet difficult task of caring for little ones, don't you agree?"

"You're not making any sense, uncle. What children are you talking about?" Zuko frowned. Why was it that even after all these years Uncle's ominous advice still didn't make the slightest bit of sense to him? Then he shuddered, unbidden images forming in his mind. With Uncle it paid to be sure.

"You are talking about children, aren't you?"

"Nephew." Uncle patted Zuko on the arm. "I'm sure as you have noticed this is a big city full of..." He hesitated and Zuko cringed as Uncle winked and went on, "great opportunities."

"What's your point, Uncle?"

"You are a handsome young men, my nephew, and there is many a flower in this city ready to be
picked."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Do we have to have the 'when mommy turtleduck loves daddy turtleduck' talk again?"

"WHAT? There is no mommy turtleduck, Uncle!" Zuko blushed to the root of his hair, all too vividly remembering that mortifying little talk. He jumped hurriedly from the bed and went over to the dresser to splash water at his burning face in a vain effort to hide his embarrassment. When he looked up in the small mirror above the basin, he groaned. Behind his left ear, just a bit below his scar, bloomed a rather purple telltale mark were Jet ...

Zuko hung his head, and ground his teeth in frustration.

"I'm going to bed," he snapped at Uncle and started to change into his night clothes, trying to ignore Uncle's suddenly all too knowing grin.

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The next morning, Zuko tried to cover the telltale mark on his neck with a scarf and pretended to have a cold. He suffered Uncle snickering at him all the way to the teahouse. Pao himself was less than happy about Zuko's 'cold'. He kept wanting to take Zuko's temperature, worried that Zuko would contaminate the tea, infect the paying customers, want time off and worst of all, potentially give his cold to Uncle, costing Pao valuable business.

Uncle, to Zuko's growing annoyance, watched all this with thinly hidden mirth, right up until Pao started burning foul smelling incense to kill the vapors. That was when, Uncle put a friendly arm around Pao's shoulders and led him into the back room.

Zuko spent the rest of the morning pointedly pretending not to notice their snickering.

When Uncle and he went home for lunch, Mrs Chen was sitting on the bench under the sycamore tree, knitting a multi-colored scarf. Zuko greeted her with a nod and stepped into the stairwell, but Uncle stopped and started chatting with her. Zuko sniffed the air. Was that jasmine perfume? And oh, Spirits, why? Uncle puffed up his chest, leaning seductively against the tree. Zuko took a closer look at Mrs Chen, noticing that her hair was put up in a fancy way and that she was blushing and giggling at Uncle's jokes. Zuko turned and without wasting another second strode up to their apartment trying to burry the memory of Uncle and Mrs Chen making cow eyes at each other.

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When Uncle came in a bit later, Zuko turned to face the wall, feigning sleep.

The weather had warmed up a bit and the walk back to the teahouse was rather pleasant. The afternoon sun was low in the sky and there was not a cloud in sight. Zuko had forgone his scarf, preferring instead to scowl at anyone who so much as looked at his neck.

A block or two from the teahouse, Uncle stopped bought a slice of melon from a street vendor, while Zuko stood in the sunlight, trying to soak up as much warmth as he could.

"What a nice young lady." Uncle winked, shoving a slice of watermelon into Zuko's hands. "She
said this is for you."

Zuko turned back to the stall and nodded a thank you to her, thinking her face vaguely familiar.

When they turned the corner to the teahouse, Pao was standing at the entrance, holding a fish bowl and talking deferentially to three strangers. Uncle took hold of Zuko's arm and pulled him into a doorway. They watched as Pao, fish bowl held awkwardly in his hands, kowtowed to the woman in expensive-looking silk robes. Her jade hair-piece was carved in the shape of a flying boar. It sparkled in the sun. She stepped into her waiting palanquin and was carried off down the street with people hastily making way for her. Zuko frowned, wondering what business Pao could possibly have with the Bei Fongs.

Pao did not say a word about what happened in the street, just placed the fish in a prominent position near the door, ordering Zuko to take care of them. Zuko tapped the glass, watching the tiny golden fish swim up to the surface expecting food. They were actually rather pretty.

After the teahouse closed, Zuko hurried home, telling Uncle that he was late meeting friends. Uncle had not seemed at all but surreptitiously asked Zuko when he planned to return, as he had invited Mrs Chen over for dinner.

Zuko ran up the stairs, to their apartment, bolting the door securely and drawing the curtains for whatever protection from wandering eyes they might provide. He then changed into the dark clothes he'd worn the night before, folding his work clothes neatly at the end of his bed. Zuko pushed his bed away from the wall, prying a floorboard up with his penknife, removing a cloth-wrapped bundle. Grabbing his dao he was out of the door again before Uncle had even entered their courtyard. He found a dark alley and strapped his dao across his back, then unwrapped the wooden mask, putting it on.

The Blue Spirit climbed up a drain pipe and disappeared into the dark.
Chapter 5

There were squirrel-pigeons nesting in the rafters of the abandoned warehouse. Not sleek chittering wood squirrel-pigeons, but urban ones, watching them with nasty, beady yellow eyes. The air smelled dry and acidic from their droppings. Jet tried not to breathe too deeply.

The Freedom Fighters, or what was left of them, stood waiting in the dusty attic, in the shadows just outside of the light streaming in through the broken cargo gate. Noise and light filtered in from the street below. Ba Sing Se was crawling with refugees, people living in subdivided dorm rooms, with little to no privacy. Bunk beds, eight to a room, were the norm, not the exception. Yet, there were a couple of places like this, empty houses with the air of dereliction to them. They were too evenly spread through the Lower Ring to be coincidental.

Jet and Smellerbee had had a look around inside earlier. The warehouse, for all purposes and appearances seemed to be abandoned, and but for a couple of dusty crates, empty, making it perfect as hide out place for the Freedom Fighters.

"I don't like this." Smellerbee gestured at the house in general. "And I don't think we should trust Li. We hardly know him." She folded her arms across her chest, glowering up at Jet, radiating annoyance. "Why'd you have to invite him along to begin with? And he's late."

"He'll come." Jet chewed on his straw, watching the road below. If one didn't look too closely, the people hustling and bustling about could pass for happy. Stalls were set up, the smell of roasting barbeque filled the air. The darkness, with its glittering lamps and wavering shadows was good at hiding the weariness in people's faces and the cheap bai jiu sold from big earthenware jugs was making the laughter shrill and the song loud.

Li was right; the Earthking was far and someone had to care. To change things for the better. They'd make a difference here, he and his Freedom Fighters, prove Katara wrong. These are my people now, Jet thought, and he held onto it; it was a good thought.

The calls of the street-vendors echoed down the street. Many had staked out a tiny square, hawking cheap trinkets, homemade food or whatever possessions of theirs they hoped to sell to make a little money. Jet noted grimly that there were few beggars., The guards saw to that.

"We've been waiting long enough now. Longshot, what do you think?" She looked over at Longshot for support and got an approving nod.

"See!" she snapped at Jet. "Longshot agrees. We should just go without him. What's so great about this guy anyway?"

Jet locked eyes with her, his voice firm. "We will wait for him. Discussion over."

Smellerbee kicked at the dirty floor, her expression mutinous, but she did not challenge him again. They waited in silence for a few more minutes, and then Longshot caught Jet's attention, pointing upwards, telling him that they were being watched. Jet surreptitiously reached for his shuang gao, when a dark clad figure silently landed in a graceful crouch a few feet away from him. Jet swung his swords and the stranger backed away, the moonlight revealing a blue demon mask. Longshot and Smellerbee were at Jet's side instantly, fanning out to surround the attacker. Who, Jet noticed was not drawing his dao. Dao, now that Jet had a good look at them, looked an awful lot like …
"Li? Is that you?" Jet lowered his shuang gao to a less threatening position, congratulating himself on his ability to judge people. He liked being right.

"Hey! I'm sorry I'm late," a familiar, grumpy voice exclaimed. "Pao had me go through the pai sho sets again."

"You're the Blue Spirit?" Smellerbee squeaked, her eyes wide.

"Yes." The dark figure removed his wooden mask, revealing Li's frowning face. "How do you know my name?"

"You gotta be kidding me." Smellerbee blushed to the root of her hair.

Jet took one look at Smellerbee, whose arms had dropped to her side, her weapons dragging in the dust, and back at a defensive looking Li. He burst out laughing, teasing her, "I can pick them, can't I?"

"What's so funny?" Li snapped, annoyance obvious in his stance and voice.

"Smellerbee, do you want to tell him, or shall I?"

"Fuck you, Jet." She stalked over to a window, turning her back to them. Longshot sighed, gave Jet a look, and followed her, putting a reassuring arm around her shoulder.

"Want to tell me what all of this is about?" Li had crossed his arms in front of his chest, the Blue Spirit mask wrapped up and stored away in his backpack. "If you don't want me here, I can leave."

"What? No!" Jet walked over and put his arm around a reluctant Li, pulling him a bit further away from Longshot and Smellerbee. "Don't be stupid, of course I want you here."

Li seemed to relax a bit, his posture less tense. He let Jet manhandle him away from the group.

"This is kind of awkward." Jet grinned, his tone belying his words. "You helped Smellerbee's village a lot." And at Li's puzzled face explained further. "The small port town, taken by the Fire Nation about half a decade ago, Smellerbee is from there."

"Oh." Li nodded and looked shiftily to the left. "I know the place."

Jet gave him a friendly pat on the back. "You're kind of a hero there, didn't you know?"

"I guess so." Li looked adorable when he blushed trying to hide his pleasure at being praised. "What's that got to do with Smellerbee?"

Jet guffawed. "She's got your wanted poster taped above her bed."

"What?" Li's eyes went wide. "Which one?"

"There's more than one?" Li nodded and Jet was impressed. He himself had only managed two so far.

"The one where Zhao offers a special reward for your capture."

"Oh, that one."

Jet wondered if he was imagining the relief on Li's face. He filed that information away for future investigation. There was something Li was not telling.
They took the same way into the upper city Jet and Li had taken the night before, staking out a compartment in the Tu Gui and climbing onto the roof before they reached the Upper Ring.

Smellerbee was giving Li the occasional odd glance, but had refrained from commenting on the Blue Spirit, only glaring at Jet every now and then.

Jet had pulled a reluctant Li against his side, claiming this was part of their cover. Li had uttered a token protest and now was once more staring out into the dark city, only occasionally batting Jet's hands away when they got too adventurous.

Conversation had died down. After a couple of minutes of awkward conversation even Jet had given up on jollying them along. He settled for watching Li. He'd never met anyone who could be read so easily. Li's emotions washed over his face with tidal force, hiding nothing, and Jet marveled at that, wondering how someone that incapable of lying was able to keep a secret as big as the Blue Spirit.

A lot of things made more sense now to Jet. Li's extraordinary proficiency with his dao and the way he had unblinkingly agreed to liberate food on the ferry. Jet grinned. Who would've thought he'd catch himself a celebrity vigilante, and a modest one at that? Jet had been somewhat surprised at Li's reaction to being called a hero. Most people would have been proud, Jet thought, but not Li. Li's disbelief in even the tiniest bit of praise was endearing in a way that made his heart ache. It made him wonder what other secrets Li had, what life he had left behind to think himself to be so utterly unworthy of approval.

Just before they reached the station Li was opening his backpack, unwrapping the mask, when Jet pulled him close and kissed him. Smellerbee squeaked. Amused at Li's scandalized expression, he teased, "One for the road. Can't do that with that mask in the way."

Li frowned. "My scar… It's too recognizable."

Jet reached out to caress it, but Li flinched away. "Don't."

"I won't, I promise." Jet reached for Li's mask, admiring it, handing it back to Li.

"If you ever want to talk about it? I'll listen."

Li turned his face away, but Jet gently caught it, running his caressingly thumb over Li's jaw. "Tell me when you're ready."

"We're almost there," Smellerbee's tart voice rang clear through the night. "Cut it out, or do you want to get caught?"

"Yes, ma'am." Jet laughed and kissed Li one last time before they rolled into the station.

Li led the way across the rooftops, mainly, so Jet told himself, because he'd climbed up the drainpipe first. So Jet followed the Blue Spirit, running surefooted along the narrow ridges with Smellerbee and Longshot not far behind.
Closely following Li did have unexpected advantages. Jet admired Li's sleek, graceful movements and the way his trousers hugged his ass.

Every now and then Li would stop, orient himself and set back off, making a 'follow me' gesture without so much as looking back to see if they were keeping up. The unthinking assumption was starting to grate on Jet, his enjoyment fading to a low, simmering annoyance.

At the end of the roof of a stable, half overshadowed by an ancient sycamore tree, Li halted again and this time had crouched down low, turning to them, a finger pressed to his mask in a silencing gesture. He pointed at the shadows below. Within a second, all four of them were flat on the roof, breathing shallowly, trying to make out whatever it was Li had seen in the dark.

A group of men was moving silently and efficiently in the shadows of a wall, their faces covered in soot, the soles of their shoes wrapped in cloth. Jet grudgingly admitted that he had missed them.

The Freedom Fighters waited a couple of minutes after the men had disappeared into the night before they started to move again, slower this time. The moon was setting, but still bright enough for them to see by. Jet marveled at how easy it was to move across the city over the rooftops. Not really surprising in the crowded lower rings, but even here, in the Upper Ring, one could easily stroll across the whole ring without ever touching the ground. Traditional courtyard houses connected to walls that circled stunningly kept gardens. A lot of the mansion seemed empty, and Jet made a mental note of their location. A luxurious hideout where one was least expected could come in handy.

The Bei Fong warehouse lay dark and seemingly deserted. Iron bars had been worked into the walls as an afterthought, their outline visible through the plaster, giving it extra protection against earthbenders. They'd circled the premises twice already, but there were no guards, not even a goose-dog to keep watch.

"Come on, you piece of …" Jet cursed softly, he was trying to jimmy the lock with his pen knives, but it was giving him trouble. Smellerbee and Longshot stood watch and Li… Li had wandered off to the other side of the building, Jet noted in annoyance.

Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and nearly jumped. "Spirits! Warn a man, will ya? Can you not just make a little noise?"

"Sorry." Even with his mask on Li managed to look sheepish. "The other doors are locked tight. Any progress with this one?"

"Give me a minute," Jet hissed, shoving his knives into the lock with force and wiggling them impatiently. Li stepped back, watching him over his shoulder. It made Jet bristle and he was about to snap at Li for hovering when the lock finally gave way with a soft clicking noise. "Finally! That's one of the finest locks I've ever seen. And I've seen quite a few," Jet added defensively.

"Let's go!" Li ordered and Jet wondered when command had slipped from his fingers. He turned to see Smellerbee and Longshot looking at him, waiting for affirmation. Jet waited a moment for emphasis then nodded his approval of the order and followed Li into the warehouse. Maybe it hadn't, after all.

The place was dark, not as dark as the attic had been, but stuffed to the rafters with a maze of crates and boxes. Li was standing a few steps from the door, looking at Jet, hand on his dao.

"What are we here for?" Li suddenly sounded unsure of what to do, only his voice betraying his nervousness, his face hidden by his mask.
"Let's have a look around, shall we? I'm sure we can find something worth our time." Jet gestured for Smellerbee and Longbow to start searching the crates on his left. "Li, go through the ones near the window. They look official." Jet flexed his shoulders; it felt good to be the one giving the orders.

Ignoring the big crates full of bottled moonshine, he chose a smaller one at random, levering it open with the hilt of his shuang gao. It contained a rather impressive variety of weapons. Jet pulled one ornate dagger out of its sheath and inspected it; disappointed at its mediocre craftsmanship, he put it back and closed the lid. Weapons that were more decorative than useful, what a waste.

The crate he opened held cloth pouches with dried thorny plant chips. Jet sniffed at one. It smelled slightly sweet, like over-ripe fruit. He'd come across recreational substances before and boy if he'd ever seen one, this was definitely one. Not really sure what exactly it was or did, only that it looked like potential fun, or at least a potential bribe, he pocketed one pouch. He opened another, smaller crate, whisking under his breath.

"Li, come over here, you have to see this." Jet grinned and flipped through one of the books he'd taken from the box he'd just opened. "I didn't know you could do that with a pentapus."

"Could do what?" Li knelt beside him, craning his neck to see, his voice mortified. "Spirits, why?"

Jet snickered and stared at the Blue Spirit mask, imagining the exasperated blush creeping up on Li's pale cheeks. Sometimes Li was adorably innocent. Jet put the book down and picked up a promising looking scroll and unrolled it.

"That … is that the Fire Lord?" Li snatched the scroll from Jet's hands, looking at it in abject horror. "That's disgusting… what is wrong with these people? I don't want to see this!"

Jet raised an eyebrow at Li and took one more curious glance at the box, but Li was right, it was disgusting. How could anyone sink so low as to draw or, he shuddered, pay for this filth? What kind of sick person got off to Fire Nation porn? Even if it showed the Fire Lord in chains.

"We don't have time for this," Li snapped, his hand crushing the scroll before he threw it back into the box with a disgusted sound, slamming the lid shut. He took a couple of deep breaths then reached into his bag. "I found these."

Li handed Jet a stack of official looking documents.

"Bingo." Jet opened one of the little green booklets. "Work permits. Are there any more where these came from?" Jet reached for his satchel and put the documents inside.

"Not in the crates I opened. There's counterfeit Fire Nation money, though." Li looked for a second as if he was going to ask for them back but then lowered his hand. "What do you want them for?"

"These are worth more than money, Li. Don't you have one?" Jet was starting to wonder just how desperate Pao had been, if he'd hired someone without proper documentation.

Li shrugged. "Me? I don't know, Uncle takes care of those things."

"These," Jet patted his bag, "open the door to a new life. Do you know what I do, every morning after I get up? I join the hundreds of men and women at the edge of the marketplace, hoping to secure a job for the day, to make enough money to feed themselves for one day. And yet, I walk by shops looking for help. It's those damned work permits." At Li's blank look he explained, feeling in his element, somehow refreshed at finally having a cause again. "No permit, no job. For many, it's worse here than what they fled from. At least on their farms they had enough to eat. Try raising a hog-chicken here…"
"Oh." Li said and nodded, lapsing into silence and after a minute or so started to fidget. "I think the office is over there."

Li turned on his heels and walked away from him towards the other end of the warehouse. Jet watched him go, wondering what had gotten into him. That damn mask hiding Li's face was starting to grate on Jet. Body language alone was not enough to read Li properly. Then he shook his head, deciding that he could worry about that later and knelt to open another crate. He was about to go through what looked like another shipment of recreational drugs when there was a crash and Li came running towards Jet, carrying a leather pouch.

"Get Smellerbee and Longshot. We are getting out of here." Li came to a skidding halt and tossed the pouch at Jet, who caught it awkwardly; it felt warm and seemed to contain coins. "Now!"

Jet slammed the crate shut with a bang, his temper and voice rising.

"You know, I've had about enough of you giving me orders." Jet glared at Li and didn't budge. He squared his shoulders, daring Li to challenge him. "I invited you along as a part of the Freedom Fighters. We've been doing this for years now. We don't need you to tell us how to do our job."

Li just stood there and Jet could barely suppress the urge to rip that damned mask off Li's face.

"What? Are you crazy?" Li balled his fists, his posture tense.

"If you can't be part of the group, you can leave," Jet snarled, his hand settling on his sword.

"Fine. You know what, that's a great idea. I'm leaving," Li snapped and started walking away, turning around after a few steps, facing Jet, his voice cold. "There are four dead guards in that office. Do whatever you want with that."

"WHAT?" Jet kicked a crate, pissed at the dead guards, pissed at Li for being a little shit about this and most of all pissed at himself for letting Li get to him.

He sprinted after Li and caught up with him, grabbing Li's arm. Li shook him off violently, stepping back, his hand on his dao, his posture defensive. "What do you want?"

"Why didn't you say that instead of just ordering me around?" Jet snapped, still glaring at Li, damning that stupid mask for covering Li's face. "Are you trying to get us killed? Believe it or not, but I've got to think about more than just my own ass. If his majesty the Blue Spirit can't be part of a team…"

"What the hell is wrong with you? I wasn't ordering you around; I was telling you a fact." Li's voice was short, his enunciation clipped with barely suppressed anger. "You know what, you can give the order to leave or not. I'm out of here."

Li was out of the door and swallowed by the darkness before Jet could get in another word. Pushing back at the anger that was threatening to overwhelm him, Jet tried to focus on what was important. He brought his hands to his mouth, cupping them, fake birdsong echoing through the warehouse, calling Smellerbee and Longshot to him.

"No need to call us, we heard." Smellerbee stepped out from behind a nearby crate. "This isn't exactly a vast forest, you know."

Longshot surreptitiously stuffed the silk dress he'd been holding into his bag, trying to hide it from Smellerbee. He motioned towards the door.
"Yes, I know." Jet snapped at him. "I screwed that one up. Can we talk about that later?"

Suddenly the building started to shake. Mortar rained down on them and crates shifted, toppling over, spilling their contents onto the floor. A crate of Ember Brandy broke, filling the room with its fumes.

"Run!" Jet yelled, taking the lead. Longshot grabbed Smellerbee's hand and they started moving, dodging falling roof tiles.

The night outside was darker than it had been when they'd arrived; the empty streets looked forbidding and unfamiliar. The moon had set and the brightness of the city, even at night, outshone the faint stars that had glowed so brightly in the forest, leaving Jet utterly disoriented. He stood in front of the warehouse, trying to remember which way they'd arrived from. He was about to choose a rooftop at random when he heard the faint sound of fighting, steel sliding against steel, echoing through the night.

"Shit." Jet gestured to Smellerbee and Longshot to follow him and broke into a run. "That's gotta be Li."

They rounded the corner to find Li, swords swinging in a well practiced, fluid pattern over his head, fighting off two attacking earthbenders. Bits of rock were flying and Jet peripherally noticed two men with swords groaning in a heap on the ground near several partially loaded handcarts.

Jet quickly assessed the situation. There were eight men, altogether, two of them earthbenders, the rest of them burly street fighters, armed with swords and knives. One of them was giving orders while the others were loading crates onto the handcarts.

Longshot positioned himself behind one of the toppled carts, taking aim, while Smellerbee crouched down, knife at the ready, moving stealthily in the shadows, creeping up on one of the men loitering in the background of the fight.

A column of earth shot up from the ground under Li, meant to trip him, but he gracefully kicked off, landing right in front of the attacking earthbender, ramming the hilt of his dao into the man's chest. He crumpled to the ground, wheezing.

The second earthbender, a short stocky man with a shaved head, stomped his foot and a clump of earth sprang from the ground, forming a crude hand. He stomped his foot again, pushing the earth forward with the palm of his hand. It sped towards Li and would have fastened around his throat if Jet had not lunged forward, his shuang gao hooked together, the hilt barely reaching the earthen fist in time. Specks of earth and pebbles hit Li's shoulder and Li spun around, dao at the ready.

Li inclined his head toward Jet in thanks, his eyes never leaving the approaching earthbender. "I'll finish this one. Go help your men."

"Whatever the Blue Spirit says…" Jet muttered, raising his shuang gao, ready to join the Freedom Fighters.

After the fight, when the Freedom Fighters were tying up the attackers, leaving them in a neat bundle tied to one of the carts for the Bei Fongs to find, Jet caught Li watching him from a little away. Li gave Jet a long, measured glance and then he turned around, sheathed his dao, and walked off into the night.

Jet made sure that Smellerbee and Longshot had the situation firmly in hand before he set off after Li.

"Li, wait up!" Jet yelled after him, starting to run.
Li stopped, half hidden in the shadow of a mansion wall, but he did not turn around.

"What do you want?" His voice was low, resigned.

"Where are you going?" Jet had reached him by now, trying to read the tense set of Li's shoulders.

"What do you care?" Li squared his shoulders, and finally turned to face Jet, looking utterly defensive and defeated at the same time, as if rejection was the only logical consequence. "You told me to leave."

"Li…" Jet took a deep breath, trying not to crumble then and there. The matter of fact sadness in Li's tone hit him like a blow to the gut. "Then why did you stay and fight?"

"They were going to collapse the building," Li looked straight ahead but Jet got the feeling that he was not looking at him. "You… you were still inside."

"Other people would have left," Jet said, more to himself than Li. He ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Take off the mask, Li."

"Why?" Li took a step back, as if expecting Jet to make a grab for it.

"Just do it, please? I want to say this to your face."

Li reluctantly complied, reaching behind his head, pulling at the strings that held the mask up. His mouth was pinched, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Jet exhaled, it was good to see Li's face, even if he was frowning at him. He would never have thought that talking to a mask would be so disconcerting. Being able to read Li's face made this so much easier. "Look, Li. Sometimes my temper gets the better of me and I… well, you know…" He took a step closer to Li, reaching out, putting a hand on Li's shoulder. Li trembled under his touch. "I'm sorry. Please don't leave."

Li looked at Jet's hand then up at his face and gave him a tight nod. It was all the opening Jet needed. His hand slid from Li's shoulder to his neck, pulling him closer until they were flush against each other. "I should have known you would do the honorable thing."

"Jet?" he rasped warningly as Jet ran his thumb along his jaw, but he did not pull away.

"Now that I've found my personal demon," Jet teased, pressing his lips against Li's, "Did you really think I'd let you go so easily?"
Chapter 6

To say that he was confused would be putting it mildly. Out of his depth and more than a little overwhelmed by the recent events, Zuko did not pull away, as he told himself he should have, but instead he let Jet kiss him. The kiss was frantic, desperate and Zuko tried not to read too much into it, tried to keep himself from forgiving Jet too easily.

While Jet, or anyone for that matter, apologizing was unprecedented in his experience, it did not take away the sting of the earlier rejection. Especially since he still did not understand what he had done wrong in the first place, but then, that seemed to be the story of his life.

But Jet's arms around him were safe and warm and the hand on Zuko's good cheek made his knees weak. He leaned into Jet, holding onto him, the kiss the only thing that made sense in an ocean of confusion.

When Jet pulled away, Zuko felt the loss of his warmth, the night air biting with new ferocity. Jet held him at arms length, his stare too intense, and Zuko, feeling way too vulnerable of a sudden, reached for his mask, tying it behind his head. Zuko let out a breath he hadn't been aware he'd been holding, telling himself that he was only wearing it to avoid being recognized.

"We should get going." Jet suggested and Zuko nodded, waiting for Smellerbee and Longshot to catch up. Zuko watched Jet look up at the night sky, turn and take a few steps towards one house. Then he glanced up again, letting out an angry huff of frustration and kicking the wall closest to him.

"Why are there no damn stars in this city?" Jet ran a hand through his hair in aggravation. To Zuko's amusement, the hair rearranged itself in that perfect casual fashion people not Jet had to work hard to accomplish.

"South is this way." Zuko pointed past the warehouse, away from them.

Jet spun around, thinly hidden annoyance on his face. "And you'd know how?"

"The door," Zuko snapped, feeling stupid for having thought their fight was over. "Obviously."

"What. About. The. Door?" Jet's voice was measured and clipped. Seeming to have realized that his temper was getting the better of him, and struggling to keep it under control, Jet took a deep breath.

Zuko shifted his weight, feeling awkward and out of place. He contemplated not answering, since whatever he said seemed to make the snit Jet was in worse. After a few minutes of uncomfortable, expectant silence he ground out, "Traditionally all mansion gates face south-east."

Smellerbee, sharing a longsuffering look with Longshot, put on a fake cheery tone, "Great, let's get going, then. Jet, lead the way."

They climbed up the nearest drain pipe, Jet taking the lead and Zuko, after some debate, let him, hoping he'd not get lost. They ran along walls and jumped the gaps between houses with practiced ease, the adrenaline of the fight still coursing through their veins, making their heartbeats race and their movements quick.

The way back to the Tu Gui seemed somehow longer and as time went on, as their heart rates slowed, so did the excitement of the evening. And with the last part of the rush wearing off, the
events of the evening suddenly appeared in a new terrifying perspective. Zuko found himself wondering what exactly he had gotten himself into.

When they boarded the train, Zuko removed his mask, storing it with the loot from the warehouse. He'd taken a stupidly big risk there, and he wasn't sure what had possessed him when he'd firebent the office safe. But there he'd been, in the warehouse office, with all four guards dead on the floor, knives in their hearts, and in the spur of the moment he'd decided that they should at least get something out of this whole mess. That he didn't want to disappoint Jet, who seemed to put so much faith in him and the raid.

The events of the night had shaken him more than he was willing to show. Not the dead guards, those were not important enough to be worth worrying about, but Jet discovering his identity as the Blue Spirit. It was something he had not counted on and it brought back memories he was trying very hard to bury.

The train started to move and the lights of the city rolled by, on and off, as the Tu Gui gained momentum. Feeling Jet's tense presence inches from him, Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling tension spreading, creeping up on him like the silence that descended on their compartment, smothering and thick enough to cut. Zuko hunched in on himself, sitting on the bench across from Smellerbee and Longshot, who had thrown a possessive arm around her shoulder and was glaring daggers at Zuko. Zuko blushed, avoiding their eyes, feeling uncomfortable and judged. He closed his eyes, wishing he could stop thinking for a moment, for his mind to stop endlessly replaying the events of the night, spinning them, distorted, into ever new versions of what he had done wrong.

Zuko wasn't sure how he should feel about Smellerbee's reaction to his secret identity. He felt like a fraud, at least, for accepting praise for something he'd not meant to do. But what could he do? Tell them the truth and have them reject him like Li's family in that godforsaken desert town, or worse? Zuko tried to tell himself that keeping quiet was the wise thing to do, that it would help no one if he confessed. It didn't make him feel any better.

Not being able to look either Longshot or Smellerbee in the eye without feeling utterly worthless, he turned his head and watched the dark city fly by. His face an eerie reflection in the window, the scar a dark blotch, bleeding into the blackness of the night, his pale skin forming a mask of its own. Zuko ran his hand over his bag, feeling the wooden outline of the Blue Spirit mask through the cloth, the shape familiar and comforting under his fingers.

When he'd first donned the Blue Spirit mask he'd been banished for only a couple of months, his scar barely healed, still hoping to find the Avatar, still hoping he'd be home soon. It had all started the day Zuko had first met Zhao.

Zuko felt the weight of Jet's arm settling on his shoulder, Jet's fingers digging into Zuko's upper arm, pulling him closer possessively. Zuko considered shaking him off, but the warm weight was too much like comfort.

Zuko shifted in his seat, leaning into Jet's embrace, his hand still tracing the outline of his mask, remembering that fateful day.

He'd made port at Zhao's command post to re-provision. They were literally running on their last dou of rice, and his crew was grumbling over reduced the rations and the lack of fresh meat and vegetables. Zuko knew it was his fault, having been reluctant to leave the Eastern Air Temple,
feeling that if they just stayed a day longer, just searched a bit harder they would find the vital clue that would lead them to the Avatar and he would succeed where his grandfather and father had failed.

Zuko tightened his grip on the mask at the memory. Nothing that day had gone as planned. Zhao had been condescending, even right from the start, making him wait while he went through the paperwork, taking more than his time to examine Zuko's demands. Zuko remembered spending hours, calculating his budget to the last grain of rice, only to have Zhao turn around and refuse half of it, shortening his overall provisions by more than a third. Of course Zuko had lost his temper, demanding an explanation and Zhao had just looked at him, giving him the kind of indulgent, condescending look one gave a spoiled child.

"Provisions are scarce, my Prince. With the war effort turning towards the rekindled siege of Ba Sing Se…" Zhao had shuffled through Zuko's carefully outlined papers, skimming them one final time before setting them aside. Zuko had tried ordering Zhao to give him what provisions he needed but Zhao had inclined his head, his tone mocking.

"The Fire Lord has declared that our remaining supplies are reserved for more important matters. I deeply regret that this is the best we can offer." Zhao then smiled at him, the nasty curve of his smile and his tone of voice belying his words. "But I am sure, if you let your father know about your troubles, this will be solved in no time." He got up and put a patronizing hand on Zuko's shoulder. "You understand that I cannot go against the Fire Lord's orders, Prince Zuko. Would you like to dispatch a messenger hawk to the palace?"

Too flustered to speak, stomach churning with unsuppressed hatred, Zuko had stood there, powerless and humiliated, until he'd gathered enough presence of mind to snatch his papers from Zhao's desk and storm out of his office.

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Zuko felt his anger rising at the memory of this humiliation, the palm of his hand growing hotter, wanting to summon the angry flame that burned under the surface. Remembering where he was, Zuko took a deep breath, willing himself not to firebend, to stay calm. It was hard.

Zuko had considered complaining, but who to? Zhao had followed the letter of the law just enough to satisfy protocol, and while Zuko had been humiliated, his mission belittled and branded a fool's errand, Zhao had not technically done anything wrong.

Zuko had been forced to watch as each and every one of his requests had been denied with thinly veiled disdain, and he'd sworn he'd get even.

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Later that same day, Zuko had left his ship in disguise and gone to town, if one could call that hole of a port a town, attempting to purchase what he had been denied. The wind had been fierce, tearing at Zuko's coat, forcing him to hold tightly onto his hood to keep his identity hidden.

The merchant stalls and windswept wooden houses that lined the harbor offered many goods from all nations, but the prices were steep and no one was willing to give a discount to a lone Fire Nation traveler.
Zuko clutched the meager contents of his purse, the coins growing hot with the force of his anger. He'd counted his money carefully, recalculating the cost many ways, but however he did, he always came up short. Zuko contemplated asking Uncle for help, but he discard the thought as quickly as occurred to him, neither his pride nor his honor could allow him to rely on Uncle's charity. The salty sea air tore at his robes as resentment and anger churned in his stomach. He would not even be able to afford even half the provisions his crew needed. Provisions Zhao had cheated him out of.

The grain merchant was a middle-aged man, thin and weedy with shifty eyes, proffering his wares in dusty sacks on the back of a mule drawn cart. Zuko ran his fingers through the second rate rice, inspecting it for vermin, and then he dusted the wool-ash off his hands. He made his bid for the seven dou of rice he could afford. They haggled back and forth, desperation overcoming Zuko's pride and he was about to reach an agreement with the grain merchant when the steady crowd that was doing business in the market dispersed, making room for Zhao and his men. Zuko barely had time to dodge into the nearest shop, watching through the half-closed door as Zhao entered the cobbler's shop a few houses down, his men waiting outside.

Not wanting Zhao to know what desperate measures he had pushed Zuko to, Zuko resigned himself to waiting him out.

When his eyes adjusted to the dimness of the store, he took a look around the store he had entered in a hurry. Stacked on shelves and haphazardly thrown into boxes was an astonishing amount of useless kitsch and gaudy trinkets from all four nations. Bejeweled Fire Nation puppets sat next to leopard-seal skin drums on dusty display shelves. Fine Kyoshi fans were hidden behind fake Air Nomad gliders, and cut glass charms dangling from a metal display-rack near the door. Zuko pretended to browse the wares while the shopkeeper watched him out of the corner of her eye, half paying attention to him, half to the game of pai sho solitaire she was playing on the counter.

Zuko absentmindedly picked up an Earth Kingdom doll, just like the one Uncle had once given… He threw it down in disgust, toppling over a stack of scrolls. He blushed, embarrassed, and turned his back to the woman, letting her deal with the scrolls rolling all over the floor. Zuko peered through the shutters only to see Zhao's men still waiting outside the cobbler's. Fresh anger at Zhao rose and Zuko balled his fists, wishing there was some way to get even, to humiliate Zhao the way Zuko had been humiliated.

On the wall, between the shuttered windows, hanging from haphazardly hammered-in hooks, dangled a set of Earth Kingdom theatre masks, their gaudily painted faces staring into nothing. Zuko took one of its hook, holding it up to his face, his fingernails digging into the soft wood. Zuko turned towards the shopkeeper.

"How much?"

Maybe there was a way to make Zhao pay after all.

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The train rumpled over a switch, pulling Zuko out of his thoughts and into the present. Jet was uncharacteristically silent, pointedly staring at Smellerbee, his arm still heavy and possessive around Zuko's shoulders. Longshot was matching his glare, filling the silence with loud unspoken jealousy. What would they do if they knew? Zuko's stomach clenched in dread.

Feeling the sudden need for fresh air and solitude, Zuko jumped up, throwing off Jet's arm. Before any of them could comment on his behavior, Zuko had opened and closed the sliding door to their
compartment, quickly stepping out into the hallway. Just wanting to get away, wanting to stop thinking. It had been easy during their raid. He knew how to quietly break into places and get away without detection. This he didn't know how to handle.

Zuko stopped a few carriages down and pulled one of the big windows open, glad to feel the night air against his skin, moving through his hair. It was almost like being back on his ship, back when the world had made some semblance of sense. When he'd had a purpose. When he'd had hope.

Zuko hung his head. For a brief second he'd deluded himself into thinking that he might have a purpose again, a new mission, here in Ba Sing Se. He'd been stupid to think that they'd want his help. He'd thought that he'd found people who'd understand him, where he wouldn't have to pretend. That he could belong. Looking back at the events of the evening he realized how stupid he'd been. He'd endangered not only himself but Uncle. What if they had been caught by the Bei Fongs, or worse the authorities? He'd been right, everything he wanted always blew up in his face. He should have learned that by now.

That first night he'd donned the Blue Spirit mask he'd been terrified of getting caught. The timing was perfect. Zhao would be out inspecting his fleet for the next couple of days, his office and quarters deserted. Looking back at it, at his utter inexperience, he realized how lucky he'd been to make it through that night without further humiliation. The reason he'd made it through at all was his single-minded determination and the slow burning fire of revenge.

He'd excused himself to bed early, claiming an upset stomach. Then he'd lain there in the dark, waiting for the crew to settle down, for Uncle to either go to bed or join Jee in a pai sho game in the common area.

When he'd been certain that he would get off the ship undisturbed, he'd rolled up a spare blanket to resemble a sleeping body and dressed in dark clothes. He tiptoed down the empty corridors, trying to make as little sound as possible. Who would've thought his clandestine games of sneaking around the palace with Azula would come in handy one day?

Getting off his ship had proven more of a challenge than he'd suspected it would. Even though most of the crew was sleeping in their bunks or had gone off to port, the crewmember on duty did have sharp ears. Zuko adjusted the fit of his mask, it restricted his vision in weird unexpected ways, making him clumsier than he liked.

Zuko ended up climbing down the anchor chain, avoiding the suspicious eyes of Fen Shao, who'd rushed over at the chinking sound of metal against metal as Zuko had grabbed hold of the chain and started to descend. Zuko had been holding his breath, afraid even the faint sound of his breathing would give him away as Fen Shao leaned over the railing, peering out into the dark harbor and nearly caught Zuko hiding in the shadows. Zuko'd nearly given up then. His heart racing, his hands were cold and clammy around the metal chain. But he could not, would not let Zhao win.

Reaching Zhao's quarters had been oddly anticlimactic, the guard on duty nowhere in sight, the latch on the door easily lifted with his knife. Balancing a squat flame on the palm of his hand Zuko took stock of Zhao's rooms. He'd been in the sitting room before, had sat on one the uncomfortable high chairs next to Zhao, suffering his perfunctory hospitality. Zuko looked around. There had to be a door. The blades of the ornamental weapons Zhao seemed so fond off gleamed in the light of Zuko's conjured flame. Then he noticed it. There was a smaller door, cleverly concealed in the wooden paneling, next to the giant tapestry that depicted the Four Nations.
Zuko pushed at it and it swung outwards, opening without much resistance. The light on his hand flickered, casting the room in a contrast of stark shadows and vague dancing outlines. Zuko pushed up his mask to the top of his head to get a clearer view of the room, careful not to let the rough wood scrape over his still healing scar.

A large four poster bed with deep red curtains dominated the room, standing on matching lush carpets. Zuko looked at it yearningly, remembering his rooms back at the palace, homesickness welling up with tidal force. It had been months since he’d slept in a real bed, months since he’d been home. His cabin on the ship cold and forbidding, a simple pallet on the hard iron floor all the furnishings he’d been allotted as part of his punishment. The sparseness of his room on the ship, the lack of even the smallest amenities, were a constant reminder of what his life had become. He would bear his punishment with what honor he had left, but that Zhao had these luxuries when he had nothing …

The flame dancing on the palm of his hand flared and he had to suppress the urge to set fire to Zhao’s silk drapes, leave nothing but a pile of ashes. See how Zhao would like a few nights on the cold floor. Yet as satisfying as that thought was, that was not what he was here for.

A beautiful antique wardrobe stood on the other side of a vanity table. Zuko pulled the copper pin out of the flame-shaped latch, pulling the black lacquered doors open. Unsurprisingly Zhao owned several sets of dress robes, folded neatly and wrapped in silk-paper on the top wooden shelving, next to boxes of fine parade gloves. The more everyday wear was stored on the shelves and drawers beneath. By the looks of it, Zhao had recently been promoted, the pips on his uniforms new and shiny. Zuko took pleasure in removing them. He weighed the handful of golden rank insignia in his hand, closing his fingers over them, his smile grim as he pocketed them. Zhao really deserved a demotion.

One of the drawers contained a hidden strongbox, securely bolted to the wardrobe itself, the padlock heavy and well made. Zuko pulled at it in frustration. Had he come all this way for nothing? Then, temper flaring, he threw caution overboard and poured his anger into red hot flame and the lock melted between his fingers, the shards falling onto the stone floor, crackling as they cooled.

Zuko flipped the lid open, and whistled under his breath. Who’d have thought the Fire Navy paid that well. On top of a couple of bundles of official looking documents sat several bags money. Zuko reached for the string, opening one. It contained Earth Kingdom coins. Zuko took one out, inspecting it, frowning. How did a Fire Nation officer get his hands on Earth Kingdom currency?

Another bag held Fire Nation money, enough to supply his men and ship for months. The weight of the coins felt good in Zuko's hand, as if, with the help of these coins, he could tip the scales and finally make headway in his quest.

Zuko took off his sling bag, storing the coins securely before closing the strongbox and the wardrobe, trying his best to make it look undisturbed. Then he picked up the shards of the lock he'd broken. No need to advertise the involvement of a firebender.

He was about to leave, already having secured his mask again, when he noticed Zhao's silk slippers, neatly next to each other, peeking out from under his bed. Zuko decided a bit of an egalitarian approach was in order. He smiled grimly and took the left slipper. For good measure, he packed every single left parade glove Zhao owned into his bag.

There was a grove of old trees near the village Zuko had to pass to get back to his ship undetected. Squirrel-pigeons chittered in the night, broadcasting his presence to the wildlife around. The canopy of ancient trees filtered out what little light there was, casting the world in eerie pitch-black darkness and making the lights of the village seem all the more blinding. Zuko looked around, trying to find a
place to dispose of the gloves and the silk slipper, finally deciding on a thicket overgrown with flowering jasmine. Zuko shoved them into the thick foliage and then dusting his hands off the wet forest soil. He couldn't risk getting caught, even if only by Uncle.

Then there was the question of what to do with the money. The weight of the Earth Kingdom coins seductive in his hand, its combined sum worth many months of supplies; Zuko contemplated keeping them. But in the end, trying not to think about what amenities it could buy, he sighed and decided to leave it behind, not knowing how to explain possessing it if questioned.

Zuko propped the bag up against a tree trunk, within easy sight of the road. That way at least someone, someone not Zhao, would get something good out of that bastard's money.

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Zuko let out a rather undignified squeak when someone, Jet, he noticed quickly enough, put his arms around Zuko's waist, pulling him close. Jet's head came to rest on Zuko's shoulder.

"What are you brooding about?"

"Nothing!" Zuko said, his tone defensive even to his own ears. "I'm not brooding."

Jet snorted and kissed the soft spot behind his ear, making his knees go weak.

"I guess this is my fault. I should have said this earlier, Li." Jet tightened his grip on around Zuko's chest and Zuko felt his stomach tighten in unpleasant anticipation, bracing himself for the rejection that was sure to come. Jet's breath was hot against his skin, tickling the short hair at Zuko's nape, as he went on. "You know, you're a damn good fighter. I'm glad you were with us today."

Zuko tried to pull away, startled. That was not what he'd expected. Quite the contrary. Zuko swallowed hard, his voice small. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course I do, why wouldn't I?" Jet's reply was instant, surprised; as if that was the last thing he'd expected Zuko to say.

Zuko turned around in Jet's embrace, searching his eyes, finding, not lies or deception but honest puzzlement. There was something in the way that Jet had said it, that broke through Zuko's defenses, making him feel vulnerable. He tried to stomp on that part of himself that wished for Jet to be honest, to actually mean it, but Jet was close, his hand gentle on Zuko's cheek and Zuko gave in. He grabbed the front of Jet's shirt, his hands like claws on the coarse material, and pulled Jet into a hard, possessive kiss.

Jet let out a gasp but then pushed back against Zuko, returning his kiss with teeth, tongue and a thigh pushed between Zuko's legs. The ledge of the window dug into Zuko's back but what did that matter?

Jet pushed him away after a few moments and Zuko gave him a puzzled look.

"What?"

"Li, as much as I'm enjoying this…" Jet grinned, his lips red from their kiss. He ran a teasing thumb across Zuko's lips, smoothing his frown away. "We're nearly there. We need to get off the train."

He pulled at Zuko's hand, lacing their fingers together and didn't let go.
Smellerbee and Longshot had left without them and Zuko was glad for it. On the way back, through the crowded streets, Jet casually threw an arm across Zuko's shoulders, maneuvering them through the crowd with ease. Jet's friendly chatter and warm affection lulled Zuko and he felt some of the tension melt from him. And when Jet stopped at a small stall, buying a large stick of candied hawthorns, he offered one of the red, sticky fruits to Zuko., Zuko took it, enjoying the tangy flavor and feeling somewhat content for the first time in days.

"Can I come in?" Ignoring Zuko's complaints, Jet had followed Zuko up to the apartment that Zuko shared with Uncle. He was casually leaning against the dirty gray wall of the hallway, giving Zuko a seductive grin. Trying not to show how much it affected him, Zuko willed himself not to blush.

"No." Zuko fumbled with the lock, his fingers clumsy. He was uncomfortably aware of Jet's presence, Jet's gaze on him, Jet's smile offering what Zuko did not know how to ask for, did not know if he even should.

"Are you sure? This sure brings back memories." Jet pushed himself off the wall, stepping close, crowding Zuko against the door. "You're not going to pull a knife on me again, are you?"

"No," was all Zuko managed to grind out. He could still smell the night air on Jet's clothes and he fought the urge to lean back against him. Zuko opened the door instead.

He stepped into the dark familiar room and onto a single sheet of paper, gray in the dim light coming in from the street that someone, presumably Uncle, had left on the floor. It lay smack in the center of the doorway, right where Zuko was sure to find it. He picked it up, smoothing it out, brushing off the dusty footprint.

"What does it say?" Jet craned his neck, trying to get a glimpse of it over Zuko's shoulder. Zuko held it so Jet could see.

Nephew,

Don't wait up for me;

I'm enjoying the lovely company of a lady friend.

-Uncle

Jet guffawed. "At least someone's getting some…"

"Oh spirits, why?" Zuko blushed to the root of his hair, and closed his eyes in mortification. Then he crumpled the paper in his fist, turning around to snap at Jet. "That's not funny!"

"Talking about getting some…" Jet surreptitiously closed and latched the door behind them, turning to face Zuko who was still mortified, staring down at the paper in his hand. Jet took it from Zuko's hand, throwing the paper ball carelessly behind him and reached out for Zuko's hand, entwining their fingers. "Now there's an idea."

"What?" Zuko hated how small his voice sounded. He scrambled for his higher brain functions as Jet wound an arm around his waist, pulling him flush against his chest. "No! Uncle could come home…"
"He won't."

Zuko started to wonder how Jet could put so much certainty in his voice but Jet already was working one of the buttons at Zuko's throat out of its eyelet, kissing the tender skin there. Zuko shivered. Trying to remember why he was protesting this, he gasped at the sensation, tilting his head back for better access.

The sounds of the city filtered in through closed shutters and Jet's clever fingers made short work out of Zuko's outer jacket, pushing it off Zuko's shoulders. The cold night air seeped through his thinner undergarments, Zuko's arms still caught in the sleeves of his jacket. He struggled to free himself but Jet caught his hands, stopping him.

Zuko was about to protest that this was a bad idea, that they should stop, but just before he could voice his concerns Jet let go of his wrists and cradled his head with both hands, then everything else stopped mattering. Jet's lips were soft, the tip of his tongue touched Zuko's and the whole world was drowning in need.

He was faintly aware that Jet was pushing him backwards, towards the bed, but he only really noticed when the back of his legs hit the wooden frame. The world spun as he fell backwards onto the mattress.

The sheets were cold underneath him, the coarse fabric warming quickly. Zuko fought again to free his arms from his jacket, wanting to pull Jet on top of him, wanting to feel those hands on him again. Most of all he wanted to stop thinking. He watched Jet, now a dark outline against the darkness of the room, the only light the thin sliver coming in through the closed window and from under the door.

There was the clink of armor hitting the wooden floor and then the mattress dipped and Jet landed beside him. Zuko finally managed to untangle his arms from his jacket and reached for him, his heart suddenly beating faster. He pulled Jet close, burying his fingers in his hair and kissing him, grinding against him in mindless want.

Half on top of him, Jet gathered Zuko into his arms and kissed back as good as he got and Zuko let himself fall, let Jet catch him. He allowed Jet make him forget, if only for the moment.

When Jet's fingers first touched his skin, cold fingertips burning a path up his chest, worming their way in from under the many layers of his clothing, Zuko gasped, arching into the sensation. His vest and shirt were yanked over his head, catching on his chin, and he had to squirm to free it.

Jet sat up for a moment, getting rid of his own shirt, putting on more of show than strictly necessary. Not that Zuko minded, running his eyes down Jet's smooth chest. Then he pulled him down for a kiss before Jet could say something stupid, call him by the wrong name and ruin the moment.

The sensation of skin on was almost too much, frightening in its intensity. Zuko buried his face in Jet's shoulder, reveling in the feel of his skin, feeling Jet's muscles move under his fingers. Then Jet's hands slid across Zuko's back and down to the curve of his ass, sliding below the waistband, grasping, pulling him against Jet, bringing their erections together in one sensual slide.

Their kiss grew frantic and Jet reached between them, searching for the fastening to Zuko's trousers. Growing impatient he hooked his thumbs into the waistband, pulling them down to Zuko's knees, the cold air sending a shiver down Zuko's spine. Jet's hot hand closed around his erection, and Zuko bucked up into it, delirious with pleasure, wanting nothing more than to hold onto this sensation, to ride it to the end and beyond.
But Jet would have none of that. Just before Zuko could close his eyes and let ecstasy overwhelm him, Jet let go, pulling Zuko into another kiss, running his thumb over the swollen curve of Zuko's lips. Zuko captured it with is teeth, sucking it in, running his tongue along its length, enjoying how it made Jet moan.

Zuko propped himself up on one elbow, using the leverage to turn their positions around, pushing Jet down into the mattress.

Jet moved one arm behind his head, looking up at Zuko, unashamed, with a confidence Zuko wished he had. Zuko ran his eyes over the expanse of smooth skin, finally, tentatively reaching out to touch it, running his fingertips along the expanse of Jet's ribs. Jet moaned and reached out, capturing Zuko's hand and entwining their fingers, pulling him down onto him, guiding their joined hands towards the desperate hardness in his own trousers.

Zuko, trying to hide that he did not really know what he was doing, let Jet take the lead, their hands closing over Jet's cock, rubbing its hardness through the fabric of Jet's trousers.

"Spirits, Li!" Jet gasped and Zuko pulled his hand back involuntarily. Realizing the potential for disaster even through his pleasure-hazy mind, Zuko tried to hide his blunder by reaching for the drawstring that fastened Jet's trousers, pulling at it, undoing the knot. He was filled with the sudden desire to make Jet moan, to erase the sound of that name from the air with moans for Zuko. Jet fumbled to help him, oblivious.

He pulled Zuko close again, joining their hands and cocks into one slick sliding tidal wave of sensation. Zuko moaned, throwing his head back, drowning in Jet, in the onslaught of ecstasy, the novel feeling of wanting and being wanted in return.

Later, tangled together in the darkness, Jet had pulled the blanket over them both, Zuko breathed in the warm scent of Jet's skin. Jet's breathing had evened out a while ago and Zuko lay there, eyes heavy, about to fall asleep. He stirred groggily when Jet slid an arm over his chest, but settled into the embrace, feeling more content than he remembered in years.
Jet woke at the break of dawn to the sound of the waking city, turned over and snuggled closer to Li's warm body, not wanting to get up yet. Gray crept into the room, through the shutters and cracks in the walls, tiny fingers of light reaching out, crawling over his senses 'till he could do nothing but open his eyes. He watched the shadows form and grow longer with the rising sun. Li's uncle had not returned, Jet noted to his amusement. The bed at the opposite wall, a little more than an arm length from where they were sleeping, was empty, the sheets undisturbed.

Li snored softly, his brow wrinkled, as if even in sleep something worried him. Jet watched him turn on his side, the pillow hiding Li's scar, making his face appear whole, as if a different person was suddenly lying next to him. Jet reached out and gently ran his thumb over the Li's cheek, the elegant sweep of his brow and jaw and mused that without that scar Li'd be far too pretty for his own good. Not that he'd wish that kind of burn on anyone.

There was the stomping of bull-pigs and the shoji rattled gently in its frame as a heavy cart drove by, disturbing a roost of squirrel-pigeons. Jet stifled a yawn. Li shivered and stirred, pulling the blanket over them both, up to his chin, trying to shut out the morning air. It was almost summer, Jet noted with amusement, yet Li acted as if they'd just had several cu of snow.

None of the things Jet had learned about Li, and some of them rather surprising, added up to the person next to him. Jet yawned again, stretching. Who'd have thought I'd one day wake up next to my own personal folk hero? I'd always thought that'd be my part.

He had never met a person so easy to read, so utterly amazingly bad at lying and yet, despite that, Li had evidently managed to keep the Blue Spirit a secret for years. Who were you, before? Everything about Li begged that question, and the more Jet learned about him, the stranger that picture seemed to get.

Li's eyes began to move and flutter open, sleep-heavy amber trying to focus on Jet through thick black lashes.

"Good morning, sunshine." Jet grinned down at him.

Li's eyes went wide and he sat up with a horrified expression on his face, pulling the blanket with him. "You have to leave!" He looked around, panic-stricken. "Uncle could be home any moment!"

"Relax! Everything's fine, Li." Jet gripped him by the shoulders, pushing him gently back onto the bed. "If he's not come back 'till now, he won't for at least an hour. It's barely dawn." He slid on top of Li, enjoying the moan that got him. "Not even the bathhouses are open yet."

Li opened his mouth to speak, but Jet, anticipating the protest, leaned down and kissed him. Li went rigid, palms flat on Jet's chest, intending to push him off, but Jet's hands slid down Li's back, pulling...
him closer and Li's protest turned into a moan. Li arched into the kiss and then buried his hands in Jet's hair instead; kissing him back with the single-minded determination that Li seemed to put into every aspect of his life.

When Jet opened his eyes again the sun had risen a full finger's width above the horizon, filling the sky with brilliant reds and pinks. Li was sitting at the edge of the bed, rubbing his eyes with the palm of his hand. Before he could say anything Jet got up and reached for his trousers.

"I know, I know." He said grinning, jumping on one leg trying to fit his other into the right side. "You uncle will be home any moment."

Pulling his shirt over his head and tucking it into his trousers he looked around, trying to find his armor. It had somehow ended up under the dresser. Jet checked his hair in the mirror and ran a hand through parts of it. He turned his head back and forth, looking at his profile, then he ran his other hand through his hair to fluff the parts that he'd slept on. Jet grinned toothily at his own reflection. Much better. He crouched down to retrieve one of his shoes. When he stood back up Li had already dressed and was holding the other shoe out for him.

"It was under Uncle's bed." Li blushed as their fingers touched when Jet took it from his hands. Jet pulled him into a quick kiss.

"Why do you have to go to work, again?"

"Because one of us has to make an honest living." Then Li's eyes went wide and he spun around, searching the room with his eyes. He let out a sigh of relief, reached for his bag and removed his cloth-wrapped mask from it before tossing the bag and its contents at Jet. "You need to take this. Uncle can't find it."

"Sure." Jet took the bag from him, slinging it over his shoulder. "Do you want me to keep the mask, too?"

"No." Li pulled his bed away from the wall, picking up a loose floorboard, gently hiding the mask underneath. Jet helped him push the bed back in place.

"Will I see you tonight?" Jet took a step towards Li, reaching for him, intending to pull him close one more time. Li evaded him and crossed his arms in front of himself.

"What have you planned?" Li frowned, suspicion clear in his stance and voice.

"That would be telling." Jet raised an eyebrow at him, leaning casually against the sliding door, smiling disarmingly. "Don't you trust me?"

"You should leave." Li's frown deepened and he stepped out of reach, through the wooden door into the main living area. "Last night was too close a call. I can't endanger Uncle this way."

"What are you talking about?" Jet pushed himself off the wall, realizing what Li had meant, amused at his assumption and distress. "Don't be stupid, that's not what I meant."

"Oh." Li stopped, his back to Jet, his hand on the door handle. His voice soft, resigned. "I … I'm sorry."

"It's alright." Jet stepped up behind him, putting his arms around Li's waist, resting his chin on his shoulder. "I know you care about your uncle, Li."

Li turned in his embrace and pressed his lips to Jet's. The kiss took Jet by surprise since Li didn't tend
to initiate, well anything, but who was he to complain?

"As much fun as this is..." Jet pushed Li against the door for another kiss. "Didn't you say your uncle would be home soon?"

Li nodded, his eyes still fixed on Jet's lips. Jet kissed him again, his fingers toying with a button on Li's robes. "I'll pick you up after the teahouse closes."

ooooo

Jet whistled on his way down to the courtyard. The sun was warm on his skin and he stopped to pick a straw from one of the flowerbeds that some previous inhabitant had placed next to their door, but were now cracked and overgrown with weeds. He chewed on it, enjoying the familiar feel. A door opened and Jet took a step back into the doorway behind him. Uncle Mushi stepped out from behind an old lady -Mrs Chen Jet's memory supplied after a bit of probing- wearing a flowery dressing gown, hair in messy braids, fusssed over him and Jet watched him steal a quick kiss. Jet's grin widened. That lucky old dog.

Jet watched as Mrs Chen gently patted Mushi on the cheek and told him to wait as she went back inside. She returned seconds later with a wooden tray overflowing with a pot of steaming zhou, sweet sesame-stuffed cakes, a fruit platter and a bowl of perfectly marbled, peeled tea-eggs. Jet's stomach growled.

In the apartment, Mrs Chen's lapdog started to yip and she closed the door, cooing at her pet. Mushi smiled at the closed door, shifted the weight of the tray to a more comfortable position and turned towards the stairs.

"Mushi, good to see you again!" Jet stepped out from the doorway he'd been hiding in. Mushi stopped, his head snapping around, the tray wobbly in his hands.

"Here, let me help you with that." Jet reached for it, taking it smoothly from Mushi's hands before the older man could lose his grip. It would be a shame to let all that food go to waste.

"That's kind of you." Uncle fixed him with a suspicious glare that melted into a smile of recognition. "Oh, you're my nephew's friend from the ferry. Jet, isn't it?"

"Sure is." Jet blew a bothersome strand of hair out of his eye, returning Uncle's smile. "Man, that smells good."

"Why don't you join us for breakfast?" Mushi raised an amused eyebrow at him. "I'm sure Li would love to see you again."

"That's very kind of you."

"Don't thank me, thank Xiao-Dan." Uncle smiled to himself at the mention of her name. "She's a most extraordinary cook."

"Yes, she is." Jet said conversationally. "She was kind enough to share her lunch with me a few days ago."

Jet raised an eyebrow when Mushi knocked on the apartment door before entering. What an odd thing to do at your own door.
"Jet?" Li opened the door a bit, peering out. "Uncle, is that you?"

"Good morning, nephew. I met your friend downstairs." Mushi craned his neck, trying to look into the room over Li's shoulder. "Is it okay if we come in?" Mushi then winked at Li who stepped back to let his uncle in, frowning at Jet and his tray.

"Uncle, you're not making any sense." Li sounded resigned, rolling his eyes in a gesture of practiced defeat. "Why wouldn't it be okay?"

Jet agreed but said nothing. No sense in getting on Mushi's bad side right from the beginning, even if he was acting a bit odd. He toed off his shoes and stepped into the apartment.

"Where shall I put this?" Jet shifted the weight of the platter. "It's kinda getting heavy." Mushi had disappeared into the bedroom, closing the shoji doors behind him. Li gestured at the low wooden table and Jet knelt, sliding the tray onto it.

"What are you doing here?" Li whispered, walking past Jet to get three cushions from the shelf.

"Your uncle invited me up for breakfast." Jet gave him a winning smile before stealing a kiss. Li pushed him off, glowering at him.

"How very kind of him," Li muttered under his breath, putting the cushions down on the floor and, not looking at Jet. He walked over to the stove, taking bowls and spoons from the drying rack.

"The food smells delicious, Mushi," Jet crowed loud enough to be heard through the closed doors. He toed one cushion over next to Li's and sat down, locking eyes with him, a mischievous smile on his lips. "Remind me to thank Mrs Chen."

Li stopped dead in his tracks, blinked and, when sudden comprehension dawned, slammed the bowls onto the table. Jet snickered at Li's frown but did manage to catch the spoon Li tossed at him before it hit his head.

Mushi seemed oddly disappointed when he walked back into the living area. He'd changed into his neat work uniform and his hair shone where he'd applied a wet comb.

"How about some hot jasmine tea?" His voice ringing with fake cheer Mushi busied himself at the stove, setting the water to boil, whistling softly under his breath as he worked. "Nothing fits a lovely morning like steaming pot of jasmine tea."

Li snorted, obviously amused and sat down on the cushion next to Jet. "Zhou?"

"Yes, please." Jet held out his bowl to Li, stomach growling at the sight and smell of the thick white porridge filling it. He poked his spoon at the generous amount of dried fruit among the rice. "Are those dates? Awesome!"

Mushi grabbed the pot of boiling water with his apron, pouring a little into the tea pot to warm and rinse it. A tiny plume of steam rose as he upended the water into the bucket next to the stove. He measured a healthy amount of long dark-green leaves and dumped them into the pot, adding just enough water to cover them, starting to sing softly under his breath.

"Lovely bonsai trees, are they yours?" Jet gave Mushi his most winning smile and gestured at the pruning shears on the window sill next to him.

Mushi made a shushing gesture with his hand and continued to finish the third verse of something that sounded like a song about a little soldier boy. Mushi then, to Jet's surprise - he'd already reached
for his cup - poured out the tea from the pot, only to fill it with freshly boiling water.

"Tea, like life, needs to have its bitterness washed away before we can enjoy its sweetness." He swirled the leaves in the pot, causing them to gently settle at the bottom before he poured Jet the first cup.

"Don't you agree, nephew?" Mushi continued with a wink and a nudge.

Jet caught Li rolling his eyes at his uncle and snickered into his tea. He took a sip and his eyes went wide, breathing in the aroma.

"I don't know much about tea, Mushi." He took another sip, savoring it. "But this is amazing!"

"It takes years of practice and devotion to master the art of preparing tea." Mushi looked proud of himself and then winked at Jet, tapping his nose. "That and you have to know the right song for timing."

"You must teach it to me some day." Jet's voice showed just the right amount of eager interest as he went on, "You sure have a lovely home. Li's lucky to have an uncle like you."

Mushi's eyes twinkled with amusement, his voice full of playful innocence. "I just want to make sure our home looks nice, in case my nephew brings home a lady friend."

"Uncle!" Li blushed an amazing shade of red, ducking his head low over his porridge.

Jet stirred his zhou, trying to hide is scowl. Lady friend? Sorry to disappoint, old man.

Jet put his bowl down on the table, picking up his chopsticks. He pasted a cheerful smile on his face and reached for a wedge of the tasty-looking tea-eggs. He popped it into his mouth, chewing with delight. Then picked up another slice and put it in Li's bowl, leaning close, his left arm sneaking around Li's shoulders.

"You have to try this, it's delicious," he said, his mouth nearly touching Li's ear.

Li, face burning with embarrassment, turned towards him and gave him a questioning look, but did not throw off his arm or inch away. He licked his lips, obviously affected by Jet's closeness, before turning back to his food, avoiding his uncle's eyes. "Uhm, thanks."

Uncle watched them for a moment, his smile never faltering, only the brief narrowing of his eyes giving away that he'd connected the dots. He reached for the teapot and refilled first Jet's cup then his own, catching Jet's eyes.

"It is good to see that my nephew is making friends." He held Jet's gaze for a moment then smiled and reached for a sweet-sesame pastry.

ooooo

Popping the last bit of a sweet-sesame cake into his mouth - Uncle had been kind enough to wrap the leftovers up for him - Jet made his way over to the dormitory where he stayed with the other Freedom Fighters. The morning was still cool, but the sunny blue sky promised a hot day.

He walked past a pretty girl setting up a fruit stand, stacking oranges from a crate into a neat little pyramid on the side of her stall. Freshly cut honey-melon slices on sticks were covered with a clean
wet towel to keep them fresh, their sweet smell heavy in the air nevertheless. Jet wiped his hands on
his trousers, brushing off flaky crust crumbs. Jet watched as the stand wobbled and one of the
oranges from the pyramid started rolling, bouncing off the table in an arch, about to hit the ground.
His hand shot out, catching it before he knew what he was doing. He polished it on his shirt and
offered it to her with a flourished bow, giving her a bright, winning smile.

"Here you go, babe."

The girl snatched the orange from his hand, flipping her braids back in a gesture of annoyance. Her
ground out 'thanks' was emphasized by her frown.

The door of the ironware shop behind her opened and a young man in his twenties, wearing a
blacksmith's leather apron, stuck his head out, carrying a screw-jar with boiled water, steam still
coming off of it. He walked over to the fruit stand and handed it to the girl.

He seemed to assess the situation: Jet's faltering smile and his mismatched armor, her frown. He put a
hand on her shoulder.

"Everything alright, Xiao-Jin?"

She turned and shook her head. "Everything's fine, Da-Ge. He was just leaving." She smiled up at
her brother and he nodded and ruffled her hair. Jet watched him walk back to the shop entrance
where he remained, leaning against the doorframe, right under the big wooden sign that said Jin
Family, Quality Ironware. He gave Jet an unfriendly glare, crossing his arms in front of his muscular
chest.

What was it with city people? Jet inclined his head at them in a way of good bye before moving on.
He was of no mind to let their unwarranted hostility ruin his day, but the nagging feeling of the
rejection lingered. It was not often that he got into a situation that he could not charm himself out of.
It felt like a tiny weight had settled on his shoulder, sliding down on the scales, tipping the luck of the
day away from him.

It got worse from there.

Smellerbee and Longshot were sitting on a bunch of empty crates outside the squat brick building
that served as a dorm to many of the refugees. Longshot, his hat covering his face, sat with his back
against the sunny wall while Smellerbee had her nose in the morning edition of the Sing Bao.
Longshot had his arm around her, his fingers gently caressing her bare upper arm. Every now and
then she looked up to ask Longshot's opinion on something she'd read to him.

Jet dropped the bundle with the breakfast Mushi had given him next to them. "Morning."

"Morning, Jet." Longshot lifted his hat in greeting while Smellerbee put the piece of charcoal she'd
been using down, cleaning her fingers off the black stains on her trouser before she unfolded the
fabric. "Oh, great. Sesame cakes. Yum." She handed one to Longshot, taking another for herself,
looking hungrily at the remaining pastries. "Have you eaten?"

"Go ahead." Jet casually leaned against the crates they were sitting on. "Sure did, Mushi invited me
for breakfast."

"Did he now?" Smellerbee blushed and reached again for the newspaper she'd been reading. "Jet, I
know you are our leader and all, but I've been thinking…"

Stuffing the rest of her cake into her mouth she snapped the newspaper open, folding it in half before
she handed it to Jet. "I'm really sick of living in a dorm."
Longshot nodded in agreement, his arm tightening around Smellerbee's shoulder.

"After last night..." She trailed off, gesturing with her head towards Jet's black sling bag. "We should be able to afford and an apartment? Just the three of us?"

Jet took the paper from her, cocking his head at the tiny script. The page she'd folded it to was a long list of apartments for rent. He tried the words in his mouth, his lips forming them silently as he followed them with his finger on the paper.

"Two bedrooms?" he teased her gently.

"Yes." She glared at him. "Unless you and Li want to sleep next to the stove."

ooooo

Jet scratched the top of his head. "I don't even know where half these streets are."

"There are a couple in locations that I recognize," Smellerbee pointed out. "I circled them."

"They want what?" Jet's eyes went wide. "A full year's rent in advance?"

Even with the money they'd managed to acquire yesterday, that was a lot.

"Yeah, and a lot of them won't rent to refugees, either." Smellerbee pointed her finger at an ad in the third column; she sounded bitter. "It's not right, Jet. Not right at all."

"No, it's not." Jet's hand tightened on the paper, crushing it. "After all the Fire Nation did to us, these are our own people. How can they do this?"

There was so much wrong with this city; it was about time someone set it right.

ooooo

After a bit of debating, they found a secluded corner and counted their cash. It looked like a lot less now, in neat little stacks on the ground, than it had in the purse Li had handed him last night. Smellerbee watched as Jet did the calculating in the margins of the Sing Bao, next to a governmental decree about ostrich horses. And then the re-calculating when Longshot pointed his finger at an error in their estimate. With every counting, the number of possible apartments shrank, leaving them with a rather pathetic list.

Jet's first choice was in a hutong, just off the main street, above a soap-maker's shop, only a short walk from a certain teashop. Smellerbee had rolled her eyes at that, but kept quiet.

When they set off it was almost noon, the sun burning down from above them, heating the narrow spaces between houses without mercy or shade. Nevertheless, the streets were filled with a stream of sweaty people, the air dusty with their hurrying footsteps.

They walked past long rows of two story brick houses, shops at ground level with living quarters above. Canvas roofs, adjusted nearly vertical at this time of day, tried in vain to keep the sun off the wares and the heat out of the stores. Even though he tried to hide it, his head spun with the abundance of goods for sale. He'd been to the small town near the Freedom Fighters' camp more than once, but even with the Fire Nation army's supply trains there had been few shops and none so
overflowing with choice as these. It was almost as if there was no war in Ba Sing Se, as if all the pain and suffering did not affect this city, as if it was all a bad dream left behind when they boarded the ferry. This is why we came here, Jet told himself. This is what we wanted.

After wandering around for a bit, neither Jet nor Smellerbee were willing to admit that they were lost. Longshot finally lost it and pointed towards a group of old men playing pai sho on a makeshift table. Jet sighed, took the Sing Bao from Smellerbee and swallowed his pride, asking them for directions. Why did this city have to be such a maze? It made him yearn for the wide open spaces of his forest and a time when things were simpler.

ooooo

Third road to the east, just as the old man had said, Jet spotted the soap-maker's shop at the end of the alley. The round molds that served as the shop's advertisement dangled in strings from a wooden cross like a chime, rattling gently in the wind. Both the sweet smell of the pulped honey locust used to make soap and the pounding of heavy machinery filled the air.

They walked into a small courtyard where a shirtless boy was sitting cross legged on the tiled floor, sorting honey locust seed pods from a wooden hand cart into three piles. He was half humming, half singing under his breath. Jet stopped and watched him for a moment, remembering those trees all too well from the forest: their dark green, feathered leaves and long brown seed pods, but all the more their vicious thorns. The younger kids dared each other to climb them in late summer, drawn by the sweet pulp in the nearly ripe pods.

A portly woman was poking her head out from what looked to be the shop entrance, checking on the boy's progress. She picked one of the pods up, inspecting it, comparing its hue and size against the others and then smacked the boy upside the head, re-sorting the pod into the lower quality pile.

Jet cleared his throat and made a step towards her, a bit out of his depth as to how this renting business would work.

"Good morning." He held out the paper to her. "We're here about the apartment."

"Oh." She gave him a once over and smiled. "Come along then, the apartment is this way. My name is Ying Mei."

Jet smiled in return. "I'm Jet and that's Smellerbee and Longshot."

"Nice to meet you." Smellerbee smiled awkwardly and Longshot inclined his head in greeting.

Mrs Ying chuckled and tilted her head. "Will you be sharing, if you don't mind me asking?"

Jet nodded gravely. "If that's not a problem?"

"Of course not, dear." She turned to the boy, who had stopped in his sorting, avidly listening to their conversation. She wagged her finger at him, her voice suddenly stern, "Li, those pods won't sort themselves."

The boy ducked his head, uttering a petulant, "Yes, mom."

They followed her to a wooden staircase at the end of the courtyard, past a central well and up two flights of stairs to the attic above the shop's store room. Mrs Ying reached under her apron for her key ring, unlocking the weathered, flame-shaped padlock that secured the door.
Jet frowned at the obvious Fire Nation origin but kept his mouth shut. At least it didn't look new.

"No need to take off your shoes." Ying Mei pushed the door open and beckoning them to enter. "I forgot to sweep this morning."

Jet stepped into a big room with slanted walls. In an alcove to their left was a stove and cabinets holding kitchen wares. The polished dark wooden floor was covered in a thin layer of dust. Two high-backed chairs with an ornamental table between them stood against the opposite wall.

"My parents used to live up here." Mrs Ying was leaning against the door frame, a dreamy look on her face. She sounded nostalgic. "But my mother is too old for the stairs."

"This is really nice." Smellerbee had wandered over to the two rooms in the back, opening the door on the left. It slid open with hardly any noise. She sat on the bed, taking in her surroundings. "What do you think? Jet, Longshot?"

Longshot walked into the room, sitting down on the bed next to her. He nodded in agreement, his hand reaching for hers, a faint smile on his face.

"I take it you want the apartment?" Mrs Ying raised an eyebrow at Jet, looking expectant.

"Looks like a good match to me." He looked around. "Is there anything else we need to know?"

Ying Mei gestured towards the door. "Why don't we discuss this in my office?"

Her office was one floor down. They followed her through the store room full of crates and barrels, past the big gate-like window and its wooden cargo hoist, to a smaller room in the back.

"Take a seat." She scratched her head and smiled, gesturing at the chairs in front of her work desk. "Now, where do I have those forms?"

The office spoke of quiet wealth. A polished wooden office desk, carved high backed chairs with plump cushions. Shelves with ledgers and other, more official looking documents, lined one wall. On the other, in a row behind the desk, hung several beautifully painted portraits. One showed a much younger Mrs Ying and what Jet presumed to be her husband. But it was the one on the far end that caught Jet's attention. His eyes narrowed to slits.

Mrs Ying knelt in front of a wooden chest, pulling out scrolls, unrolling them and stuffing them back with a shake of her head, oblivious. "I'm sure I've got them here somewhere. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Who's that on the scrolls?" Jet's voice was clipped, the cheery warmth gone out of it. He felt Longshot's hand land heavily on his shoulder, blocking easy access to his swords. The weight of his hand on Jet's shoulder was an anchor in a rising tide of anger.

"Which one?" Mrs Ying stood up, brushing the dust from her robes. "That's my husband and me, at our wedding."

"No, the other one," Jet ground out, gesturing to the one further to the left, depicting another couple at their wedding. The bride wore beautiful, if old fashioned, Earth Kingdom robes, her hair ornamented with beautifully carved jade combs. The happy couple was sitting in matching high backed chairs. The bride was sitting to the left, her husband to the right, wearing the red and gold of a Fire Nation gentleman.

"That's my parents." She opened a drawer, taking out another stack of documents, shuffling through
"I am terribly sorry, I'm not usually this disorganized."

Jet's hand balled into a fist. "Your father is from the Fire Nation?"

Longshot's hand tightened painfully on his shoulder. Jet tried to shake it off.

"Yes. He was a trader, that's how he and Mom met. They founded this business." Mrs Ying looked up from her papers and gave him a concerned look. "Are you alright? You look a bit pale."

"I need to get out of here." Jet ground his teeth together, his hands balled to fists in his pockets.

Smellerbee swore under her breath and kicked Jet's ankle. "I think he needs a bit of fresh air."

"Oh dear." She stood up and opened the window. "Is this better?"

"How about we take a walk and leave you to find the papers?" Smellerbee sighed.

Mrs Ying nodded. "I should have everything ready in about twenty minutes."

Smellerbee punched Jet in the arm before he could reply to Mrs Ying, giving her a diplomatic smile. "That'll be fine."

Longshot had taken hold of Jet's other shoulder, pushing him towards the door.

ode

They walked in tense silence for a few minutes, Jet seething. "We're not renting from traitors!"

"What is wrong with you?" Smellerbee pushed him against the brick wall. "I liked that apartment."

Jet pushed back hard, his anger finding the outlet he'd been looking for. Smellerbee stumbled a few feet back, smacking into Longshot.

"What is wrong with me?" Jet was yelling now, face red with anger. "You're the one who wants to rent from Fire Nation scum."

"She's not Fire Nation." She drew herself up to her full height, looking Jet squarely in the eyes. "I'm damn tired of the dorms. That apartment is nice! She was nice!"

"Looked pretty Fire Nation to me," Jet snarled. "Can't trust that lot."

"What, just because her dad was Fire Nation?" Smellerbee snapped back. "That's rich coming from you. Ever taken a close look at Li?"

"That's different," Jet ground out. "He's a refugee, like us."

"Yeah, real different," Smellerbee mocked, her voice scathing. "She's not putting out for you."

Jet made a guttural sound in his throat, reaching for his shang gao. "Say that again."

"Oh yeah." She reached for her own knives.

Before they could advance on each other Longshot took a step forward, positioning himself between them, looking first at Smellerbee, then at Jet.
"You're right, Longshot. I shouldn't have said that." Smellerbee hung her head in shame.

"I… You know what happened." Jet balled his fist and let out a long breath of air. "The Fire Nation… I can't let them do this to me anymore. I've changed." He sheathed his swords, suddenly looking tired. "Let's just get a different place, okay?"

Smellerbee nodded reluctantly, taking out their by now slightly crumpled copy of the Sing Bao. "I guess."

oooooooo

When they reached the next address there was a crowd blocking the entrance. Two women were yelling while several people struggled to restrain them. They were cursing each other and their respective ancestors. They were kicking and struggling against the restraining hands and had, by the disheveled state of their clothes and hair, more than one go at each.

People had formed a circle around them and their families. A man in patched robes seemed to be taking bets and a teenage boy with a ratty face was selling grayish sausages on a stick. One of the women broke loose and flung herself in a flying leap at the other, grabbing a fistful of hair, pulling.

"What's going on?" Jet asked one of the spectators, an old lady with a bag of roasted sunflower seeds that she continued to crack open with her teeth, spitting the shells onto the ground in front of her.

"That one." She pointed to one of the women with her cane. "The one with her hair in a bun claims she got here first." She popped another sunflower seed into her mouth, the soggy shell soon joining the others on the ground. "Other one says she's a lying hog-monkey." She grinned widely at Jet, obviously approving of the sentiment.

"Got here first for what?" Smellerbee interjected, looking confused, unable to tear her eyes of the two now trading punches on the dusty ground. The crowd cheered.

The old woman held the bag of seeds out to her, smacking her cane against the leg of a boy blocking her view. "The apartment, of course."

Smellerbee glared at the fighting women and grumbled under her breath that they should have taken the other apartment when they'd had the chance.

Jet shrugged, ignoring her complaint. "I'm hungry. Who's up for lunch?"

oooooooo

The best rice noodles in all of Ba Sing Se!

That was at least what the sign proclaimed. It hung crooked and weather-worn over a battered door. Peering inside through the beaded curtains, looking at the tiny restaurant with its low, wobbly tables and stools, Jet rather doubted that, but it was there and his stomach was growling. He raised an eyebrow inquiringly at Smellerbee and Longshot, who nodded agreement. The beaded curtain rattled as Jet parted it, stepping inside. They chose a table near the back, squeezing in on the low bench, Jet's legs bumping the rough edge of the table. After the disaster at the soap-shop, he contemplated what to do next. He was their leader after all, it was his job to have a plan. Or at least to appear to.
The waitress, a short, round-faced woman in her twenties with pretty ribbons braided into her hair, bounced over to them, took their order and bounced away with an air of cheer that brought a smile on Jet's face. She returned shortly after to bring them chopsticks and bowls and he winked at her, making her blush and giggle.

"Jet? What are you doing?" Smellerbee hissed and gave him an incredulous look.

"What do you mean?" He looked at her in confusion.

"I thought…?" She blushed, making a vague gesture with her hand. "… you and Li?"

"Yes." Jet folded his arms in front of his chest, starting to feel defensive for no particular reason. "What about it?"

"Then why are you making cow eyes at her?" There was hurt in Smellerbee's eyes, as if he'd betrayed her for some reason. Jet groaned. The Blue Spirit, right. She'd managed keep her voice low, but with the tables as close as they were, heads turned and chairs scraped in the hope of free entertainment.

"Don't be ridiculous, I was just being friendly." Jet gave her a winning grin. "Longshot, a little help here?"

What Longshot did was give him a look that said very clearly that he had no intention on getting on Smellerbee's bad side and that Jet was alone on this one. Jet rolled his eyes but relented.

"Fine. All serious now. See!" He gave her a mock stern look. "No more smiling at anyone, Bee."

"You are not cute." Smellerbee pouted. "Or funny."

"Careful, hot!" The waitress came towards them, swinging a steaming earthenware pot between metal handles. The pot landed with the thud of earthenware on wood in the middle of their table.

"Yum, food." Jet rubbed his hands, glad for the distraction. Reaching into the communal pot with his chopsticks, he pulled the long white noodles up and out, watching them slither over the edge and into his bowl.

"Hand me the vinegar, will you?" Smellerbee held out her hand to Jet, who passed her the bottle and watched her add an unhealthy amount into her broth. "What? I like them this way."

Longshot reached into the pot, stirring the contents with his chopsticks 'till he managed to find a sparrow-quail egg. He held it up, catching Smellerbee's eyes.

She smiled, shoving her bowl closer to him. "Thanks, I love those."

Jet poked at his noodles, watching the two of them, wondering what Li was doing, suddenly not hungry any more.

ooooo

They were more lucky, in a manner of speaking, when they got to the next address. They were greeted by the building manager, a thin, weasely man called Gou in worn reed slippers. According to him, the apartment was indeed still available. Mr Gou twirled his thin ratty mustache as he pointed out that he'd expect advance payment plus a deposit. The sum seemed a bit steep but Smellerbee
glared at him and Jet nodded. Gou showed them up the three flights of stairs to the apartment. They stopped in front of a red wooden door and he reached for the key ring on his belt.

When he put the key in the lock, there was scurrying inside and the door was opened by an old man with panic-wide eyes.

Gou's face turned red. "I told you to be out of here by noon."

"I'm sorry." The man trembled and held onto the doorframe as if letting go would mean the end of it all. "We will pay you, I promise."

"Hah. I've heard that one before," Gou snarled, pulling at the man's arm. "Get out of here before I call the guards."

To Jet's horror, the man dropped to his knees, kowtowing to them, begging the landlord not to evict them, saying that they had nowhere to go. Somewhere, a baby started to cry. Mr Gou tried to pull the old man up by his arm, yelling at him for having missed rent twice.

"We're no charity," Gou growled, once again trying to pull the old man up, finally giving up and stepping back, disgust on his face.

"Please, sir, please. We'll have the money by tomorrow." The old man continued to bang his head against the wooden floor, his hands splayed out in front of him.

"Stop your yammering. That's what you said yesterday, Lao Hui, and the day before." Gou, who had apparently given up on manhandling his tardy tenant, spat on the floor, his voice annoyed. "Now get out of my way, I have people who actually can pay their rent with more than just empty promises."

"Please, we have nowhere to go." Lao Hui made a grab for Gou's leg, looking up at him. "Please."

"Let go off me, you crazy old man." Gou was about to kick Lao Hui when Jet put a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you." His voice was low, threatening. Longshot had stepped up next to him and Smellerbee already had her knife out.

"I really wouldn't," she agreed.

Gou spat onto the floor, mumbling something about dirty refugees to himself, looking at them in defiance. "Do you want the place, or not?"

"No." Jet took one look at Smellerbee and Longshot. "We're leaving."

They frog-marched the offended-looking Gou back down the stairs, none of them willing to turn an old man and his wife out of their home. Jet made a mental note that someone might need a nighttime visit to his vault and possibly to be taught a lesson or two.

They stood in the shade outside the building in defeated silence. Jet pulled out their copy of the Sing Bao and, using the wall for support, he crossed out the ad.

Longshot put a hand on Smellerbee's shoulder, catching her eye, raising a questioning eyebrow.

"Longshot's got a headache. What do you think, Jet? Let's call it a day."

"Sure." Jet sighed and shoved the paper back into his pocket, watching them lean into each other. "I
It was still early in the afternoon when Jet opened the door and stepped into Pao's teahouse. At this time of the day, even though word of Mushi's brewing prowess was spreading like wildfire, there were hardly any customers. Two old women were playing pai sho by the window, gossiping about a neighbor's son. Jet walked past a middle aged man who was nursing a half empty cup of tea, today's paper flat on the table in front of him. Jet craned his neck. Ah, Earth Rumble results.

Li was sitting behind the counter on a tall stool, trailing his finger through a fish bowl, watching, with a pensive frown on his face, as the goldfish followed his fingertip in search of food.

Jet sauntered up to the counter. "Jasmine, please!"

Li looked up at him, wiping his hand on his apron. His frown eased, not quite melting into a smile, only to deepen as if the mere thought of smiling was offensive.

"What are you doing here?"

Jet grinned, reached out and brushed an errant strand of hair behind Li's ear. "Just wanted to see you."

"Oh." Li blinked and blushed. "Pao's out."

"How convenient." Jet squeezed past the counter and into Li's personal space. "I'm sure he wouldn't approve of this."

He crowded Li behind the questionable cover of a potted plant and kissed him, their bodies grinding together with the same intense volatile passion that seemed surround their encounters. Jet's hands slid down Li's side, searching for the edge of his tunic, sliding in, under, seeking flesh. Li gasped and their kiss became a desperate plea of teeth, lips and tongue.

The door chimed and Li pulled away frantically, he slapped Jet's wandering hands away, trying to straighten his apron. "Is that Pao?"

Jet turned and shook his head. "No."

It was a teenaged girl with long braids. She sat down at an empty table near the door. Jet narrowed his eyes; he'd seen that girl before. Then his memory kicked in and his frown deepened. Miss Oranges.

"I have to work." Li pushed him out of the way, grabbed a menu and walked over to her, offering it to her, waiting quietly to take her order. She smiled up at Li, twisting an errant lock of her hair around her finger, asking him something Jet could not hear. Jet glared at her from behind the spiderplant, folding his arms across his chest.

Really, could she be more obvious?

Li paused, closed his eyes as if trying to remember and then started recounting something using his fingers as aid.

Jet was about to go loom helpfully when Li nodded at her politely and turned away. He took a few
steps and paused, turning again, as if it had occurred to him only as an afterthought, to check on the other customers.

The man with the newspaper got up, throwing his paper onto the table in disgust. Digging in his pocket for change, he threw that onto the table too, his fist closing around his list. Li's eyes followed the man as he left the teahouse, the man muttering something about cheating bastards under his breath. Li rolled his eyes, collected the money and righted the bench.

"Uncle, one cup of lavender." Li yelled at the closed door. Jet watched Li walk over to the counter, fetching a wet rag to wipe the table. There was something about the way Li walked that always made Jet pause. And now he had the memory of last night, of Li's body pressed to his just moments ago, the feel of his skin under his hands, to add to the attraction.

"One lavender, coming right up!" The swing doors to the kitchen opened and Mushi placed a tray with a lidded porcelain cup of tea on the counter. Li took the tray, ignoring Jet's leer and carried it over to the girl.

Jet remembered watching Li serve tea on his first day of work just after arriving from the ferry. He'd watched through the open window of the teahouse, as Li was trying to make do with determination where he had no skill, or experience. Li had to come from money. Probably been pretty pampered, Jet mused. If you knew what to look for, all the pieces slid into place. It showed in the way he talked, stood and even, no, especially the way he had served tea. Li'd gotten better quickly, but it had been obvious to anyone with eyes that he had never done this before. Merchants, Jet figured with a grin. And taking Mushi's expertise into the equation, probably dealing in tea.

Li seemed to have finally noticed Jet's staring, since his eyes went wide and he blushed a fierce, adorable red.

Jet snatched a menu from the counter and helped himself to a table, snapping his fingers, a huge grin on his face. "Waiter!"

Li stalked over to him, snatched the menu out of his hands, a storm cloud on his face. "What do you want?"

"I'll have you know, my friend works here," Jet proclaimed belligerently, wiggling his eyebrows at Li. "You better be nice to me, or I'll tell him."

"What?" Li looked at him in confusion. Then comprehension washed over his face and he rolled his eyes at Jet and walked away. "Cut it out, I have to work."

Deciding that this was just too much fun, Jet snapped his fingers again. "Waiter!"

"What kinds of green tea do you serve?" He looked at Li with big innocent eyes, making a grab for the menu, flipping it open. He made a point of studying it intensely, then pointed to a random tea. "What's this one like?"

"Delicious." Li snatched the menu from him again. "Is that all?"

Not waiting for an answer, he turned on his heels, marching towards the kitchen. The menu hit the counter with a thud.

Jet folded his arms behind his head. Leaning back against the wall he stretched his legs out in front of him. Miss Oranges was watching them curiously over the rim of her teacup.

"Waiter!" He enjoyed the angry twirl of Li's robes as he spun around.
"What?"

"I've changed my mind. I'd rather have a cup of jasmine." Jet grinned at him.

Li nodded tightly, his left eye twitching dangerously and turned back to the kitchen. He returned a few minutes later with a steaming cup of tea that he slammed onto Jet's table. Then went to collect the empty cups the other customers had left behind.

Jet sipped his tea, it was really very good. Then he snapped his fingers again.

"Would you mind bringing me today's paper?"

"What is wrong with you?" Li snarled, grabbing the front of Jet's shirt, pulling him up by it. The furry on his face made Jet chuckle.

"Okay, okay. No paper. I get it." He held up his hands in mock surrender, still shaking from barely suppressed giggles. Li let go off him, fists balled at his side.

"Got any snacks?" Pushing his luck Jet went on, teasingly.

Li grabbed his arm and twisted it behind Jet's back, manhandling him towards the door. "Enough!"

Outside, Li marched him around the corner and smacked him against the wall of the teahouse. His breath hot on Jet's face, his eyes narrowed in anger. "Why are you doing this?"

"Relax Li. It was just a joke."

"I don't like those kinds of jokes." Li pushed him against the wall again for emphasis making an angry sound in the back of his throat. "I thought - "

He turned around, back towards the street, before Jet could see his face. The set of his shoulders tense.

"Li?" Jet cringed. He hadn't meant for this to hurt Li. Rile, yes …. He reached out, reaching for Li's shoulder, pulling him around.

Li glared at him and shook his hand off. "Just leave me alone."

Jet watched him stalk back into the teashop, then kicked the wall. Damn, that hadn't gone the way he'd planned. What was it with today? He sat down on the teahouse doorstep, the heat of the sun-warmed stone soaking through his clothes, trying to think, trying to decide what to do next.

He wasn't quiet sure how long he'd sat there when the door opened and Miss Oranges stepped out. She stopped, hand at the door, then turned and waved. "Bye Li!"

She hovered for a moment, looking down at him, trying to make up her mind.

"You know what?" Her voice was as annoyed and disapproving as he remembered it. "For someone who claims to be his friend, you're kinda an ass."

Jet didn't budge, making her step around him. He picked up a pebble, weighed it in his hand and threw it hard at the opposite wall. "Yeah. I know."
Stupid. The rag hit the basin with a thud, a splash and an angry sound from Zuko. Why was he always so stupid?

What was it that Jet wanted from him?

Zuko perched on his stool behind the counter, apron bunched up between his legs, feet on the highest rung. What the hell had that been about?

He glowered at the empty teashop. Now Jet would probably never talk to him again.

Who needed Jet anyway?

The kitchen backdoor opened with a creak and he heard Pao talking to Uncle about restocking their supplies. Zuko knew he should go and check, but he just couldn't bring himself to move. Instead he watched the fish circle in their bowl; endlessly, pointlessly.

He put his finger into the water, watching the fish draw close, nipping at it in search for food. Zuko heated the water just a bit, watching the fish crowd close to his finger as they enjoyed the warmth, and he suddenly felt colder than ever.

Last night had been… too good to be true, that is what it had been. Running along rooftops, pulling a heist as the Blue Spirit again had felt good. After weeks of pretending to be someone he was not, having to keep his head down and having to pretend to be a commoner to fit in, he'd at least partially been himself again. Zuko pulled his hand out of the water, steam rising off his fist. He'd thought they'd accepted him. He'd felt like he could be part of their group. Smellerbee had even called him a hero. Zuko still wasn't sure how he felt about that, but what did it matter now? Stupid, stupid, stupid. Who'd want him around anyway? Banishment, a death warrant and that family in the town on the plains had proven that no one wanted him. Why should Jet be any different?

"Li, go and help your uncle unload the cart," Pao's voice demanded from the kitchen.

Zuko covered his face with his hands. Wasn't it bad enough that he was stuck here, in this meaningless job serving tea to commoners? In the desert he'd had nothing left but his name. He'd been hungry, dirty and desperate. He was fed now, had clean clothes and a roof over his head. But he'd paid for it with his name, his rightful place in the world. And Zuko hated it. He was sick watching his every word, sick of pretending to be Earth Kingdom and especially sick of having to lie about who he was.

"Yes, Pao," Zuko muttered petulantly, pushing himself off the stool and past Pao, glowering at him on the way. "I'll get right on it."

Zuko opened the door to the back alley; an ostrich-horse cart was parked right in front of it. The driver, a short burly man with big bushy eyebrows, was holding its reins, talking softly to the beast. He tied his ostrich-horse to a ring in the wall and gave Zuko a once over, pulling a copy of the Sing Bao out from under the driver's seat. "What are you staring at, boy? Get cracking. I don't have all day."
Zuko balled his fists, glaring at the man's back, reminding himself repeatedly why killing him then and there was a bad idea.

"Ah, Nephew." The cart wobbled and Uncle more fell than climbed down the back. He'd lifted a large bundle of cloth-wrapped pressed-tea cakes off the back of the cart, staggering under the weight.

"Uncle …" Zuko huffed, rolled his eyes and took the stack of pressed oolong from him. "What are you doing?"

"Thank you, Nephew. Unloading the cart, of course. Pao even got aged oolong!" Uncle pointed to one of the wrapped bundles. Zuko gave him a blank stare and Uncle sighed.

"Just put them near the shelves. I'll sort them." Uncle brushed his hands on his apron, his smile turning into a frown. "Are you feeling alright, my nephew?"

"I'm fine." Zuko tried to smile, the corners of his mouth leaden. He turned away before Uncle could ask him further questions.

The tea cakes were heavy and his grip slipping. Zuko leaned backwards, supporting their weight against his body as he kicked the door open with a little too much force. It slammed against the wall and rebounded, hitting him square in the shoulder. Zuko swore under his breath, nearly losing his grip on the tea. He threw the tea down in the middle of the room, rubbing his smarting shoulder. Koh's balls, that'd hurt.

Zuko spent the better part of an hour unloading box after bag after crate.

"What do we need all this tea for?" Zuko grumbled, wiped the sweat of his forehead with his sleeve and hefted another box off the cart. He put it next to the increasing pile in the middle of the kitchen.

Uncle just gave him a dirty look and shook his head. He went back to restocking the shelves, not deigning to acknowledge Zuko's whining with an answer. By the time he'd unloaded the sacks and crates and helped Uncle restock the higher shelves, Zuko's back hurt and popped when he stretched.

The clicking of the beads on an abacus greeted Zuko as he walked back into the main room of the teahouse. Pao was standing at the counter, head bent over a ledger, adding today's purchase into his books. He looked up from his calculations, frowned and gestured towards the door with his brush, ink dripping on the wooden countertop.

"Your friend is loitering outside. Tell him to go away, it's bad for business," Pao snapped and cursed under his breath, looking for something to clean the ink off the wood.

Zuko groaned and muttered, "He's not my friend."

He walked through the empty teahouse, looking for an excuse to delay the inevitable, but found none. Zuko stopped at the door. His hand on the handle he took a deep breath and peered out through the window shutters. Jet was sitting on the front step, head resting on his hands, elbows propped up against his knees. Zuko closed his eyes, squared his shoulders and exhaled. The hinges creaked as he pushed the door open. Jet turned his head and looked up at him, their eyes met and Zuko had to force himself not to look away.

"Pao wants you to leave," Zuko ground out, glowering down at Jet. Trying not to remember those lips on his; how it had felt to hold Jet, to have him hold him back.

"Do you?" Jet gave him a thin, watery smile, sounding all tired and sad, and Zuko balled his fist, his nails cutting into his palm, the pain an anchor. He was not willing to give in that easily.
"Yes," Zuko snapped and turned, trying to hide his nervousness, the onslaught of emotions. He was about walk back into the teahouse when Jet got up.

"Do you really mean that?" There was something in Jet's voice that made Zuko halt, the door barely open.

People passed them by, and Zuko felt their presence burn on his skin. Their voices like knives, their ears and eyes eavesdropping on a scene he'd rather not remember, not have anyone remember at all.

"Give me a reason why I shouldn't." His hand stilled on the door handle, gripping it hard to hide his trembling. Zuko slowly turned and looked straight at Jet, not willing to back down.

"Fair enough." Jet ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Look, Li. I'm sorry."

"Why should I believe you?" Zuko folded his arms across his chest, scowling. "You said that before, too."

"I did, didn't I?" Jet said with a small self-conscious chuckle. "I know I behaved like a jerk in there. I'm sorry that I didn't stop when you told me to. I didn't mean to hurt you, honest. And I won't do it again." Jet cocked his head at him. "Promise."

Zuko felt the full force of Jet's smile, all charm and sunlight and sincerity. He hated himself for how much he wanted Jet to look at him like that, for how it made his stomach fill with butterflies. He gave Jet a small, tense nod. "Is that all?" He really wasn't sure where this was going and the uneasy feeling in his stomach only intensified when Jet stepped closer.

"Well..." Jet gave Zuko a sheepish grin, his voice low, intimate. "I like you, Li." Jet reached out and took hold of Zuko's hand, lacing their fingers. "Let me make it up to you." Zuko suppressed a gasp, the memory of those fingers on his skin still too fresh, too potent. Jet pulled him closer and Zuko let him. "How about dinner tonight; all of us? I'd like to see you again. What do you say?"

And Zuko nodded. He looked at Jet, suddenly self conscious. "I have to get back to work."

Jet's fingers curled around the back of his neck, gentle but inevitable and pulled him in for a kiss. Jet's thumb gently traced the sensitive edge of his scar. It was nothing more than a quick peck, but it left Zuko lightheaded and breathless when Jet pulled back.

"I'll pick you up after work."

Zuko stood and watched as Jet disappeared down the road. He ran a hand through his hair. The day seemed suddenly brighter. The sun was still high in the pale spring sky and Zuko stretched, enjoying the afternoon heat. A group of boys came running past, kicking and chasing a ball down the street. It bounced off the opposite wall and rolled to a stop in front of Zuko's feet. He looked at it, aimed and kicked it back towards the oldest boy. The boy waved and grinned at him and Zuko, to his own surprise, found himself smiling back.

"Good afternoon, Mr Shan, Mr Hui." The two old men nodded in greeting and pushed past Zuko into the teahouse and he stepped out of the way, holding the door open for them. Zuko followed them inside, ignoring Pao's glare, and with a spring in his step walked over to the counter and grabbed two menus.

Pao raised an eyebrow at him, shook his head, a bemused smile on his face, but went back to his bookkeeping without further comment.
Zuko stood in front of the storage shelves, scratching the side of his head. "Uncle, which one is the Dragon Well? Mr Hui wants to see it before ordering."

"Second stack from the left." Uncle reached up and pulled a white cardboard box with big red letters from the shelf. "The one that says Dragon Well on the side."

"Is everything alright, Nephew?" He felt Uncle's hand on his arm, squeezing it gently.

"Yes, why wouldn't it be?" Zuko gave Uncle a puzzled look and took the tea. "Thank you, Uncle."

Mr Hui inspected the tea carefully, holding the box up to the light, waving a hand over it to inhale the faint odor of cut grass, checking the seal. Then he nodded and handed it back to Zuko.

"How much per liang?" he asked Zuko.

Zuko quoted the price and watched Mr Hui stroke his beard in contemplation. "What do you think?" He looked at his friend, who nodded. "Make that two liang, Li."

"Shall I open a card for you, or do you want to take it home?" Zuko took the tea back from him, listening to them argue who should pay, trying to hide his annoyance at their antics. He shot a longing glance over to the hourglass, willing the sand to run faster. Maybe if he asked Pao nicely he'd let him go early…

"Open a card in my name, will you?" Mr Shan addressed a glassy-eyed Zuko, who shook his head to clear it of the stupor he'd fallen into.

"Nonsense. Make the card in my name. I come here often enough," Mr Hui interrupted his friend. "And bring us a pai sho set while you're at it."

"Sure," Zuko muttered, suppressing the whatever that was creeping up. He started to walk away before he remembered to ask, pointing to the box of tea he was holding. "Do you want Uncle to brew you a cup of this?"

"Of course we do." Mr Shang let out a loud bellowing laugh that grated on Zuko's nerves. "He's got quite a talent, your Uncle, doesn't he?" Mr Shan gave Zuko a warm smile.

"I'll tell Pao you want a card," Zuko mumbled, gave him a curt nod and left for the kitchen before they could come up with more things for him to do.

"Pao, they want a two liang card." He stopped by the counter where Pao was tidying away his books.

"Good, good." Pao reached down to where they kept the box with the seals, cards and ink, pulling it out, putting it onto the counter. He flipped the lid open. "Two liang of the Dragon Well, right? On Mr Shan's or Mr Hui's name?"

"Damned if I know," Zuko muttered and shrugged, casting another quick glance at the hour glass on
the wall, wondering what difference it made. They always showed up together anyway. At Pao's
glare he added, "Mr Hui, I think."

Pao pulled out an empty card, and stopped, his hand hovering in mid air. Zuko watched the color
drain from Pao's face. The card fell from his fingers and he scooped it up with a shaking hand. "Li,
go tell your uncle to make the aged Da Hong. Quickly. And stay out of sight. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Pao." Zuko felt himself being shoved towards the kitchen. Zuko took a few involuntary steps,
resisting the urge to turn around and shove Pao back. "What was that for?" he snapped, and stopping
at the kitchen door.

Pao was frantically trying to smooth the creases out of his robes with shaking hands, ignoring Zuko's
question. There seemed to be a little commotion outside, and through the shutters of the shop Zuko
could see a green palanquin parked right in front of the teahouse. Curious as to what was going on
he stretched his neck, trying to see what was really going on.

The front door opened and Pao hissed at him, stepping out from behind the counter. "Leave now!"
The sheer panic in Pao's voice made Zuko obey. The last thing he saw before the kitchen door
closed behind him was Pao kowtowing on the floor, his hands splayed out in front of him and the
wisp of green silk on wood.

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"Nephew, you look worried." Uncle was sitting on his chair by the stove, his feet propped up on a
spare stool. He was reading one of the magazines from the stack the customers had left behind.
"What's going on?"

"Pao's got important visitors." Zuko put his ear against the door. "He's afraid of them."

"Who are they?" Uncle asked and Zuko made a shushing sound with his hand.

"I don't know. Be quiet, Uncle, I want to hear what they are talking about." He pressed his ear
against the wood, straining to hear the muffled voices through the closed door. "I think he owes them
money."

"Nephew, I'm not sure this is a good idea." Uncle got up from his chair. "What did they order?"

"They are too quiet." Zuko let out a frustrated huff and stepped away from the door, giving it a
contemplative look. "Pao said to make the aged Da Hong. Isn't that the expensive stuff?"

"He calls aged Da Hong stuff." Uncle threw his hands up in mock horror. "My own nephew…" He
walked over to a locked cabinet, pulling a big cast-iron key from a ring attached to his belt.

"Nephew, I think it is time we had a talk." Uncle knelt and unlocked the strongbox, pulling out a
paper-wrapped tea cake. "About how the most divine oolong is not stuff!"

"Sure it's not…” Zuko muttered and rolled his eyes, ogling the brick-like tea Uncle was holding up.
He vaguely remembered drinking oolong back when… a long time ago. He was pretty sure it had
been oolong, anyhow.

"Come on then, Nephew." Uncle got up, holding the tea cake out to Zuko. "Give me a hand."
The small, flat wheel of pressed tea was oddly heavy in his hand. "What do I do with that?"

"Go cut it in half and roast it." Uncle gave him a curious look, but didn't take the tea cake back from Zuko. Zuko was about to complain about it, but the happy expectant look on Uncle's face stopped him. Oh well, what could it hurt?

He nodded.

Uncle's eyes narrowed suspiciously but then the clapped Zuko on the back, grinning brightly. "I'll get the cups ready." He gently pushed Zuko over to the cutting board, arranging the good celadon on a tray. Zuko dutifully cut the tea, picking it up in his hand, inspecting the dark crumbling leaves, closing his fingers over them.

"Uncle, I cut it, what now?" Zuko frowned and held out the tea to Uncle.

"It needs to be gently toasted." Uncle rubbed the bridge of his nose and held out his hand. "Over the fire, Nephew! Give it here."

Zuko blushed and opened his hand again, handing Uncle the tea. It was only slightly warm.

Watching Uncle make tea with sure voice and steady hands was soothing and Zuko let himself be lulled by the familiarity of it.

Pao entered the room in a flurry of robes and sweat on his forehead. He took the foaming mugs of oolong, that Uncle was offering him on a tray, spilling small amounts of it with his shaking hands onto the tray.

He was out of the room again, before either of them could get so much as a word in edgewise. What he left behind was a tension that would not leave, that loomed and grew with each second.

Uncle sat back down on his chair, pretending to read his magazine while Zuko resumed his place at the door, trying to overhear whatever was going on outside.

He let out a huff of frustration. "They're not making any sense."

Uncle looked up from the article he'd been pretending to read. "What are they talking about?"

"Fish." Zuko fumed, annoyed at being locked into the kitchen, annoyed at not knowing what was going on, and most of all, annoyed at being reduced to passivity.

When Zuko was finally allowed back into the main room, the visitors long gone, he noticed not one, but two new fish swimming in endless circles in the bowl. Their puffy, wrinkly faces and they way they circled around each other rather reminded them of his aunts. He decided to name them Li and Lo. Zuko snickered; Mr Fish seemed to like Lo, judging by the way he was keeping close to her. What a fitting comparison. Goldfish and concubines, what was really the difference?

The day dragged after that and he kept catching himself sneaking furtive glances at the hourglass, willing the sand to run faster. It was a little better during the main business hours when the work kept him busy and his thoughts off the way Jet had kissed him, of Jet's hands on his …

Zuko cursed as a cup slid from his fingers and dropped into the basin of hot water. It hit the sink with a crunching sound that meant he'd broken at least one more. He scooped the bubbles away with to inspect the damage and fish the shards out of the water. He threw them into the trash. Luckily Pao had retired shortly after the visitors left, asking Uncle to brew him a soothing tea for his headache, so he wasn't here to yell at him for it. Not even a worried comment from Uncle.
"Uncle?" Zuko craned his neck, trying to see what Uncle was doing, since there was no answer. The back door was propped open with a log of wood, had been for a while, letting in the earthy smell of the night breeze and a faint whisper of hushed voices. He wiped the suds off on his apron and walked over to the partly open door, pulling it open. And then closed it, taking a hurried step back.

"Spirits, why?" Zuko closed his eyes, trying to banish the memory of Uncle and Mrs Chen standing close, too close. And he didn't really want to know what else they'd been doing. Zuko went back to washing his cups, wishing there was a way to scrub away memories.

He was halfway through drying the cups and putting them away when Uncle came back inside, a happy grin on his face, carrying a basket.

"Mrs Chen brought us dinner!" Uncle proclaimed as he set the basket down on the work-counter, pulling out lacquer containers and putting them onto the tabletop. He opened one and inhaled deeply. "Look, it's roast duck! My favorite!"

"I won't stay for dinner, Uncle," Zuko muttered and turned back to his cups, taking them off the drying rack and stacking them to be put away.

"Are you meeting your boyfriend?" The barely suppressed amusement in Uncle's voice made Zuko blush a bright, embarrassed red.

"He's not…" Zuko started to say and stalled. What exactly was Jet to him? He'd not precisely joined their group, and didn't know them well enough to even consider calling them friends. But last night - Zuko willed down a blush - and today had been … unprecedented. He pondered it for a moment and then settled for: "I'm having dinner with Jet."

"Nephew, it is good that you are making friends." Uncle's hand was heavy on his arm, his smile fading into a watery worried one. "Matters of the heart can be difficult; like a good cup of tea, they should never be rushed."

Zuko's eyes widened and then narrowed. Please not another turtle-duck talk. "What are you saying, Uncle?"

"Just be careful." Uncle let out a soft sigh. "You're still young …"

"I don't need your advice, Uncle," He shook Uncle's hand off and took a step back, ignoring the hurt in Uncle's eyes. "I'm not a child."

They finished putting away the cups in stony silence, avoiding each other's eyes. The second they were done, Zuko pulled his apron off, bunching it up and throwing it at Uncle. "I'm going out."

Uncle caught the apron awkwardly and the motherly way he was shaking it out and folding it made Zuko's blood boil with annoyance. Zuko slammed the door shut on his way out.

After the relative brightness of the teahouse kitchens the nighttime alley was a dark shapeless blur. Zuko closed his eyes, counting to five under his breath, trying to regain some semblance of night vision. There was the small sound of a rock falling and feet scurrying away on roof tiles. Zuko reached for swords that were not there and opened his eyes, peering out into the night till it swam into dark, shadowy focus. The roof was empty. Part of the shadow at the end of the alley detached itself from the wall and walked towards Zuko, turning into the familiar shape of Jet chewing a straw.

"Don't be too hard on the old guy. He means well."

Zuko was about to snap at Jet for lurking like that and that he didn't know what he was talking about,
but before he could do so, he found himself pulled into a rather persuasive kiss.


"How long exactly have you been out there?" Zuko narrowed his eyes, glowering at Jet.

"Dunno. Needed time to think." Jet laced their fingers together, running his thumb across Zuko's palm in sensual circles. Zuko gasped and tried to pull his hand free, and Jet let go, only to sneak his arm around Zuko's shoulders, pulling Zuko towards him and the street. "Let's go get dinner. The others are waiting."

Jet's hand was a reassuring weight on his shoulder, warm and real in a world that was fraught with strange new rules that he didn't quite understand. Zuko let himself be pulled close. It made him feel a little less out of place, a little less like a stranger always struggling to keep up with rules he did not know or comprehend. Zuko didn't like feeling out of place, even if that feeling had become so normal, so every day, that he had a hard time remembering what it was like to belong.

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Even with the shops closed and locked up, Ba Sing Se at night was anything but quiet. The closer Jet and Zuko came to the main road the more crowded the streets became. The night market was in full swing, peddlers were hawking their wares on makeshift tables or, in many cases, on blankets on the ground. There was the steady hum of conversation as families, lovers, and friends tried to stay close to each other while the steady flow of people pushed them, dragging them on.

Jet maneuvered the street with ease, never bumping into others, always gracefully finding a way through the crowd. Zuko fought to stay close to him, wondering what his secret was. They passed a performing group of acrobats and musicians, their songs and antics drawing gales of laughter from the onlookers. They stayed and watched for a while, Jet clapping and throwing coins in appreciation. To Zuko it felt more like a dream, the bright colors, the overpowering sensations cresting, washing over him. He, for once, was happy to let someone else take the lead, to be dragged along, feeling slightly out of it.

The square was awash with light and the smell of cooking food. Green lanterns hung from the rafters of the many restaurants and bars, advertising the wares sold within. Smellerbee and Longshot had staked out a table in one of the ubiquitous hot pot restaurants and were waving at them frantically when they saw them come close.

Zuko sat down next to Longshot and took a look around. Someone, at some point in time, had taken pride in decorating the place. The sliding doors that were opened and pushed to the side during the business hours were beautifully carved. There were dusty outlines on the peeling plaster where scrolls must once have decorated the walls. The hardwood counter had weathered better, still possessing a dull shine. Two knee-high porcelain bowls, containing miniature koi ponds with dozens of tiny red fish circling around a single lotus flower, flanked the entrance. The tables, though, were low and the stools wobbly. The food - vegetables in baskets along the walls, and sliced meat displayed on trays - looked quite fresh, and the place was reassuringly crammed with customers.

Steam was rising from the many pots simmering over low fires, filling the place with the aroma of cooking food and the many spices floating in the broth.

Smellerbee sat opposite him, nervously fiddling with her bowl and chopsticks, avoiding his eyes. He was all too happy to let Jet do all the talking. A waitress came by and lit a small fire in the clay tray,
sunk in the middle of their table, then placed an earthenware pot of broth over it.

"Hope you like spicy food." Smellerbee blushed and glared at Jet. "Sorry we ordered without you, but you guys were late."

Zuko watched the thin, pale swirls of reddish chili-oil spread out on top of the slowly heating broth, closing in on the star anise and cassia bark.

"You did order spicy, right?" Zuko looked at Smellerbee for confirmation. She nodded, giving him a strange look. Zuko turned towards the waitress. "Excuse me, Miss!" He pointed at the pot she had just brought. "There must have been a mistake. This is not ours. My friend ordered spicy."

"Look, you ordered spicy, didn't you?" The waitress made a huffy sound and gave him a look. Zuko nodded. "Looks plenty spicy to me, honey." She rolled her eyes and walked off.

They call that spicy? He nearly said it out loud before he remembered that he was supposed to be from the Earth Kingdom. Instead he sighed and glared at her retreating back. There was no more than a tablespoon in there altogether. It made him miss fireflakes.

"I like spicy, too." Jet leered at him and pulled him closer, licking the side of Zuko neck. "Mmh, tasty."

"Stop it." Zuko blushed and pushed him away. Wondering, not for the first time, what he'd gotten himself into and if there was any way this would end well. "You promised."

"Sorry." He gave Zuko a rueful smile, the belligerence draining from his voice. "I did. I'll behave."

Longshot raised a questioning eyebrow at Jet, asking, not so subtly, what that had been about.

"Don't know about you, but I'm starving." Jet put on an innocent expression and patted his stomach. "Li, come and help me pick out the food."

He reached for Zuko's arm, pulling him up and away from the table. Zuko pulled his arm free, looking annoyed.

"Don't they have waiters for this here?" Zuko crossed his arms in front of his chest, wondering what kind of restaurant this was where you had to get your own food.

"Longshot, why don't you go and help?" Smellerbee put her hand on Longshot's arm, meeting his eyes, and then turned to stare at Jet. "Seriously, what is wrong with you? Give the guy a break. He worked all day."

"Fine, fine. Not my day, alright," Jet snapped and then gave Zuko a sheepish smile. "Anything you don't eat?"

Zuko looked at his shoes, not sure if he should correct her misinterpretation of his words or not. "No, just pick whatever."

Jet reached out and lifted Zuko chin with his finger. "You're not angry, are you?"

Zuko shook his head. "No."

Longshot got up and gently pushed Jet towards the food display.

Smellerbee picked up one of her chopsticks and twirled it over her thumb. After a minute of uncomfortable silence she sighed and put it back down.
"Listen, Li..." She gave him a shy smile that suddenly made her look very young. "I have something to tell you. Yesterday..."

"What about yesterday?" Zuko interrupted, staring blankly at her, wondering what she could possibly be talking about. His eyes went wide and then narrowed. Was this about Jet and him?

Smellerbee ran a nervous hand through her hair, and blushed. "It's about what happened last night. It's just..." She looked away from him, pushing at her chopsticks until they lay perfectly aligned next to each other. "The Blue Spirit has been my hero, well... since you first showed up in our village."

She made a nervous little sound, and went on, "And well, when I found out it was you..."

"Oh." Sudden understanding hit him and Zuko hung his head, drawing in on himself. Why did always have to disappoint people who saw something good in him? His voice was small, brittle, barely above a whisper, "I never asked to be a hero..."

"What?" Smellerbee lowered her voice after the initial surprised squeak. "But the Blue Spirit, I mean you, did all those things, didn't you?"

"I didn't do any of that for you, or your village." Zuko stared intently at the table, the grain of the cheap wood suddenly of huge interest. "I'm not really a hero."

"But you still did them." She waited until he finally looked at her again and caught his eye. "That is what counts."

"Then what is your problem?" Zuko snapped. Girls really were crazy.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and matched his glare. "Look, all I wanted to say is that I am sorry for being a jerk last night."

"Oh." Zuko blinked at her not quite comprehending, fumbling for something to say. "Thanks, I guess?"

They watched the broth heat up and starting to boil. He caught her looking at him once and again, but she averted her eyes every time he noticed. Then, after a few moments of awkward silence Smellerbee burst out, "There's something I've always wanted to know."

"Okay."

"What is it with you and Zhao's left shoes?"

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"... and then you should have seen his face..." Smellerbee grinned, smiling fondly at Zuko. "Man, did you really do all that by yourself?"

Zuko nodded uncomfortably. She made it out like is petty little vendetta against Zhao was somehow important, somehow noble. The way she was telling the stories about what the Blue Spirit had done, that wasn't him, but he didn't know how to stop her without destroying his cover, so he let her talk.

"Hope you like sweet potato." Jet put a basket of cut vegetables and several plates brimming with sliced meat onto their table. "Care to share what's so funny?"

"Remember when Zhao got promoted?" Smellerbee gestured frantically at Zuko, expecting support.
He shrugged as she went on, "It was the funnies thing ever."

"Was it?" Jet sat down next to Zuko, putting his arm around his shoulder. "What happened?"

"I was just telling Li how hilarious it was when he took all of Zhao's pips and…" She giggle-snorated. "You should have been there, Jet. Seriously. Zhao had to attend the parade in his honor in sergeant stripes and a borrowed jacket that didn't fit right!"

"Ah, good old Zhao." Jet snickered and reached for his chopsticks, picking up tiny, squishy-raw meatballs and depositing them into the boiling broth with a splash. "His supply lines always contained the fanciest stuff. Bet he's still prancing around that little port of his, begging for a promotion."

"He's dead." Zuko closed his eyes, trying to shut out the memory of that night.

"Did you kill him?" Smellerbee gave him a sidelong glance that made it clear she more than approved of that idea. She picked up a plate and pushed sliced mushrooms into the hot pot, poking at them with a chopstick.

"No!" Zuko wrapped his arms around himself, trying to stave off the memories of the cold water and how his rashness that had turned his victory into failure. "The Avatar did."

"When was that? Where you there?" She leaned closer, interested.

"He died at the siege of the North." Zuko's voice was thin, his mind wrapped up in that gruesome event. The Avatar's wrath, the tidal wave. Thousands of people – his crew – drowning in the icy waters of the Northern Sea.

"I heard about that." Jet leaned back, looking smug. "The Fire Nation took one great hit there. Could change the war."

"I don't want to talk about the war." Zuko balled his fists under the table. "Isn't that why we are here?"

"What war?" A waiter carrying a wicker basket with four bottles in it stopped at their table and handed each one of them one. "Sorry, the beer's a bit warm."

"What war?" Jet shot the man an incredulous glare, leaning onto the table towards him. "THE war. Against the FIRE NATION?"

Heads turned to look at them. Some looked around nervously, others had their heads together, clearly talking about what Jet had just said.

The waiter pulled a thin knife from his apron, pulling the corks with a practiced motion.

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se," he said in a loud, clear voice. He gave Jet an annoyed look and hissed, his voice barely above a whisper, "Are you stupid, or something? Keep your damn voice down. We don't want trouble with the Dai Li."

Smellerbee paid for the beer and turned her head around looking at the other patrons. "There's Dai Li here?"

Longshot gave her a glare that said of course there are, haven't you noticed? He gestured across the brightly lit square towards a dark alleyway. The carved doors were pushed back against the wall, all folded up, leaving the restaurant open to the cool night air. Zuko squinted, trying to make out shapes in the darkness.
"They're on the roof." Jet's breath tickled his ear and a whole other kind of shiver ran down his spine.

"What are we going to do about them?" Zuko whispered back. He didn't like the idea of the secret police being onto him. There'd be no saying what they would do to him, if they ever found out who he really was.

"Nothing." Jet shrugged, but his eyes narrowed. "For the moment."

The broth was a bit bland, but the food, after Zuko had surreptitiously added several spoonfuls of chili-paste to his bowl of sesame-butter, was rather good. The beer helped, too. He found, after the initial bitterness, that he rather liked the taste. Zuko fished a mushroom slice out of the communal pot, shaking off the bit of cassia bark that was sticking to it and deposited it into his condiment bowl, slathering it with the spicy sauce.

"Hey, Li." Jet grinned at him and pointed to a group of people across the square. "What's that over there?" Then he reached over with his chopsticks and stole the mushroom slice out of Zuko's bowl, popping it into his mouth.

"What? I don't see anything. What were they doing?" Zuko gave him a confused look and then frowned as Jet closed his eyes and opened his mouth, inhaling deeply. "You didn't just steal my mushroom, did you?"

Zuko's frown turned into a nasty little smile as Jet's face turned red. Jet coughed and reached for the beer. Zuko was faster.

"Too spicy?" Zuko held the beer at arm's length, just out of Jet's reach. "I should let you suffer."

He watched Jet fan his mouth with his hand, tears forming in his eyes, running down the side of his face.

Smellerbee and Longshot moved their drinks out of reach and Longshot put on an expression that said clearly that Jet had that one coming. Smellerbee snickered.

"Didn't you say you liked spicy food?" Smellerbee grinned, taking a gleeful sip of her own beer. "Beer sure tastes good." Jet tried to glare at her between coughing and fanning.

"Please," Jet gasped out in between coughing and fanning, making a desperate grab for the beer. "On't o eet 'gain."

Zuko put on a smug, superior leer, amused at Jet's distress. "Does it burn?"

Jet nodded.

"Good." Zuko smirked at him, but did return the beer to Jet, who drank it down in quick desperate gulps.

"Koh's balls, man! How much chili did you put in there?" Jet wiped the tears from his eyes and the foam from his mouth with the heel of his hand. "Half the jar?"

"Not that much, you wimp." Zuko shrugged, taking the last drags from his own bottle. He looked
amused. "Couple of spoonfuls."

"You're crazy, you know that, right?" Jet ogled his empty bottle. "I'll go get another round in penance, how about that?"

"Sounds fair to me," Smellerbee chimed in. She reached for the purse on her belt, handing him a couple of coins. "Get some fried lychee-nuts while you're at it."

"Yes, ma'am!" Jet mock saluted at her, stepping close to Zuko.

"How about a kiss to make it better?" Before Zuko lean out of reach Jet had pulled him close and when Zuko opened his mouth to protest, kissed him, nipping at Zuko's lower lip, the tip of his tongue sending shivers down Zuko's spine. Jet let him go almost instantly, only his hand lingering on the side of Zuko's neck, Jet's fingers burning on his skin.

"Much better now." He grinned and walked towards the counter, whistling an obnoxious little tune. Zuko halfheartedly glared at his back, half hating, half enjoying the way Jet made him feel.

He watched Jet saunter over to the counter, leaning against it with the casual grace of someone being aware of being watched. Sudden, intense jealousy rising up, Zuko scanned the room. There were people watching Jet. A couple of girls, no older than he himself, were pointing and giggling behind their hands, pointing first at Jet then at him. Zuko blushed and glared at them until they looked away. What was taking Jet so long?

"What's that face for?" Smellerbee gave up trying to catch a fishball with her chopsticks and reached for one of the porcelain spoons. She scooped out the fishball, made a little 'ha' sound and drained the water at the side of the pot, dumping the white ball into her condiment bowl. "Li?"

Zuko's head snapped around and he had to bite back an angry reply. "Nothing!"

"Big, fat nothing, I'd say." Smellerbee licked her spoon, giving Zuko an amused look. "Come on, spill."

Longshot unsuccessfully tried to hide his amusement behind his beer.

"See that big table over there?" Zuko jerked his head toward the other side off the room.

A group of ten men and women were sitting around a table littered with empty plates and bottles. Two of the men were knocking back shots and playing a drinking game that involved banging chopsticks first on the table, then against each other. One of them, a rather pretty woman in her thirties, had her left arm in a sling. Her green sleeveless shirt showed off an amazing amount of colorful tattoos. She was looking over at Jet, a contemplative expression on her face. She reminded Zuko of June.

She turned away, putting her unhurt arm around the burly man sitting next to her, whispering something into his ear. He smiled and laughed, making a kissy gesture at her. She punched him in the leg, pointing in Jet's direction.

Zuko' eye started to twitch, his fingernails digging into his knee. "See!"

The man's smile faded from his face but he patted her shoulder and refilled her glass with a pale golden liquid from a jar. Then he turned and reached for the glass of another man, obviously a bender, judging by his lack of shoes, with a huge purple bruise on his cheek.

"And?" Smellerbee leaned into Longshot, who started caressing her hair.
"She's looking at him!" Zuko ground out, folding his arms across his chest. "They're up to something."

"You know, technically I'm looking at him too." She gestured towards Jet, who was carrying four full bottles of beer. She cocked her head at Jet, swinging her empty bottle between thumb and forefinger in a 'hurry up' gesture.

"You're not taking this seriously," Zuko growled. He made an angry sound low in his throat and kicked an empty beer bottle. It hit the opposite wall, barely missing the waiter cleaning a nearby table. The waiter gave him a dirty look and started picking up the bigger pieces, yelling at the girl behind the counter to get him the shovel and broom.

"Not particularly." At Zuko's furious expression she sobered up, her tone less belligerent but with a sudden edge to it that did nothing to soothe Zuko's worries. "Look, Li. Don't worry. Jet's not that sort of guy."

"I'm not what sort of guy?" Jet handed Smellerbee her beer.

"Did you get the lychee-nuts?" She passed the bottle on to Longshot, snatching another from Jet.

"Ordered them." Jet handed the spare change back to Smellerbee, sat down next to Zuko and took a long draft from his beer.

Zuko grabbed a bottle from Jet, downing a good measure of it. He gestured with his beer to the table at the other end of the room, spilling some. "They're up to something."

"I noticed," Jet whispered and inched closer to Zuko, taking the bottle from Zuko, his lips touching Zuko's ear, his hand caressing the soft skin at his nape. "So what?"

"What is wrong with you?" Zuko frowned at him and pushed his hand away with more force than strictly necessary, reaching for his beer.

"She's not looking at me that way." Jet slid a hand around Zuko's waist, pulling his tense from close.

"Sure she's not, Jet." Smellerbee snorted, pulling at her armor, adjusting her position against Longshot into a more comfortable one.

"No, she isn't. I happen to know when a lady looks at me that way." Jet leered at her, then his expression turned sober. "Look at her arm. Look at all of them. They've got ostrich-horse tattoos."

"Shit." Zuko's frown deepened. The drinking game had stopped and one of the men had gotten up and was now talking to his friends with tension in his stance. He had an ostrich-horse tattoo. Zuko took in the fresh bandages and bruises and cursed under his breath in sudden comprehension. "Last night. At the warehouse."

Jet nodded. "They're with the Ma Longs."

Longshot put his beer down and raised an eyebrow in a clear 'let's get out of here' expression. Jet nodded again.

Zuko inched his hand towards his knife. It was not much, but there was nothing he could do about it at this second. They'd taken them last night; they'd take them again today. He watched three of them surreptitiously get up. Their bender seemed too drunk to walk steadily, leaning on the table for support. That one would take care of itself, Zuko noted with satisfaction. Maybe, just maybe they could make it out with anyone getting hurt too badly.
"We need weapons, they're coming." Zuko scanned the room, his eyes fixing on a middle aged man in guard uniform sitting slumped over on his stool. "I can take the swords off 'at drunk."

His last word echoed in the sudden eerie silence. The room which had a second ago been full of chatter, laughter and drunken song, had gone quiet but for a woman coughing deliberately.

"Waiter! A table for five, if you would be so good."

There was a fake cheerfulness to her voice that set Zuko's teeth on edge. It reminded him of Azula at her most dangerous. All five of them wore bright never-ending smiles that didn't reach their eyes.

"It is our honor to serve the Joo Dees!"

To Zuko's astonishment it was not the waiter who'd brought their pot, or even the one who'd warned them about the Dai Li. It was the older well-dressed woman he'd seen behind the counter, dealing with the bills, who bowed deeply to the group, her ornate sleeves touching the ground.

"Who're the Joo Dees?" Zuko whispered, leaning onto Jet who was also giving them a quizzical stare, scratching his chin. Was it just him or were the lights brighter than before?

"I don't know." Jet looked at the brightly smiling women in their matching outfits and headdresses. He switched his toothpick to the other side of his mouth. "But they're giving me the creeps."

They cleaned and reset the table with a precision and speed that Zuko thought would not be amiss for a royal dinner. Who were these women that they commanded such respect? Or was it fear?

"Still think we should get out of here." Smellerbee waved at the waiter who was carrying a basin with plates and tableware that looked better quality than any of the ones in use. He gave her a tight nod and hurried on.

The Ma Longs were watching them outright now, apparently also waiting for their bill. Zuko figured it was only a matter of chance who got out of there first. Dear Agni, it better be us, if they ambush in one of the alleys…

"Smellerbee, give me some money." Jet held out his hand to her. "I'll handle this."

"How?" She gave him a worried look, but reached into her purse and pulled out a handful of coins. "Is this enough? This better be good."

Jet quickly counted the coins and nodded. "Just be ready to leave as soon as I get back."

They watched Jet talk to the girl at the counter, all charm and smile and persuasion. The girl blushed and giggled and batted her eyelashes at Jet and it took all of Zuko's willpower not to break something again. She pulled out a menu and was reading it out to Jet who seemed to take a vast interest in the subject. They poured over it for a while, then Jet handed her money. Quite a bit of money, if Zuko was any judge.

Zuko reached for his beer again and found the bottle empty. He shrugged and took Jet's. Evening out the mushroom score, that's what it was.

"Had fun?" Zuko snapped when Jet sat back down at their table, his body tense.

"Loads!"

They gave him questioning looks and he put on a smug grin. "Wait for it!"
The girl had disappeared in the back room and returned now with several bottles of the better liquor that she started opening and pouring into small glasses on trays. She waved at one of the waiters and they exchanged a few words, then she handed him a tray. Zuko watched him go around the room, handing people glasses, stopping to chat here and there.

"What's all that about, Jet?" Zuko looked at Jet and then the room and back at Jet, frowning.

"I'm a genius, that's what it's about." Jet smirked, picked up a toothpick and started to chew on it in straw fashion.

When the waiter came to their table and offered the tray to them, Zuko took a cup and looked at it and then, pointedly, at Jet. "We didn't order this."

"It's with compliments from the Ma Long's. The good stuff, too. Don't drink it yet, there's going to be a speech. Something about a wedding, I think."

Smellerbee made a face and Longshot elbowed her. She coughed and reached for a cup. "That's nice of them."

"You sure you want that?" The waiter gave Smellerbee a once over. "It's rather strong. Not really for kids, you know."

Zuko was impressed at the speed with which Longshot put a restraining hand on Smellerbee's shoulder. She struggled against it before giving up, still glaring daggers at the man. "I'm not a kid. I'm fifteen!"

She snatched a glass from the tray, downing it in one go, slamming the empty glass onto the table. She shuddered, made a face and grabbed another full one. "I'm not a kid!"

"We know, Bee." Jet caught her eye and gave her a longsuffering nod. "Ignore him, what does he know?"

She kicked the table, making their glasses wobble and said to no one in particular: "I'm so damn sick of it."

Longshot's hand slid from her shoulder, pulling her close and she leaned back, resting her head against his collarbone. "I know, you're right."

Zuko took his glass and smelled it, then put the pungent drink back onto the table, pushing it away from him. He glared at Jet. "This is your cunning plan?"

"Sure is." Jet grinned. "And it gets better!"

The girl Jet had talked to earlier stepped up to the Ma Long's table, effectively blocking their view. She held out a tray with a full bottle on it, waiting for the older woman who had welcomed the Joo Dees to come over and tap a chopstick against the bottle. The sound echoed clearly in the unusually silent room and then there was the scraping of wood on wood as people stood up and moved closer, looking expectantly at the Ma Longs.

Jet coughed and Zuko got up too, feeling a bit out of it he steadied himself on the table, then opened the top button of his tunic. It was getting kind of hot in here. He eyed the foul smelling drink and looked at the cheering people in disgust. One free drink and they'd cheer anyone, anything. Could it really be that easy?

"We are honored to welcome such generous guests in our humble establishment." The woman held
out the bottle to one of the Ma Longs, encouraging him to take it. He looked at his friends, obviously uncomfortable with having been singled out, but took it after some hesitation.

"I am sure everyone present appreciates your generous gesture and will share the joy this day brings you!" The owner, at least that was how Zuko thought of her, raised her glass and gestured at the man to stand up. "But it is not for me to present the joyful news of this day…"

Thunderous clapping echoed through the room as a puzzled looking Ma Long member was pulled to his feet. The Joo Dees stood with cheerful, doll-like grace, watching his every movement.

"Now!" Jet hissed and pulled at Zuko's sleeve. And they ran.

Zuko stumbled to a halt. He was not sure how many corners they'd turned, only that they were somewhere near the Tu Gui station again. He was utterly out of breath, his heart pumping painfully in his chest, and his head was spinning from the beer. But he was sure that they'd made it. For now at least. He rested his palms against the brick wall, panting.

Jet slumped down next to Zuko, rested his head against the wall and started to laugh. "That was fun."

Smellerbee punched Jet in the arm. "That was stupid."

"What?" Jet spread out his arms in a belligerent gesture, folding them behind his head, sliding down the wall into, legs spread out in front of him. He caught Zuko's eye and grinned up at him like a lunatic. "Got us out, didn't it?"

Zuko looked down Jet, at Jet's contagious grin and collapsed in a fit of giggles next to him. He was starting to understand why Azula kept Ty Lee around.

"I give up." Smellerbee threw her hands up in the air. "You both are insane."

Which set them off into a new fit of belligerent laughter. Zuko leaned against Jet, who shifted to accommodate him and put an arm around Zuko's shoulders. Insanity didn't see so bad right now.

Walking home took longer than it should have, or then, it didn't. The city was still busy, the night markets in full swing. Zuko leaned against Jet, Jet's presence warm and heavy at his side. He felt like he was floating again, moving from the shadows to lamp-lit brightness with an ease, a lightheartedness that should worry him, would have worried him on any other day. He stumbled and swayed a bit, but that was okay, too, because Jet caught him, steadied him and he did the same for Jet.

They walked through the still busy street, stopping here and there to watch the street performers, to watch Jet watch the street performers to be more precise. Zuko didn't seem to be able to focus on anything but Jet next to him. Further down the street, past the stalls with the candied fruit on sticks, past the makeshift tables full of cheap, gaudy jewelry, they passed a woman Zuko had seen at the teahouse. She gave him a friendly nod and walked past them as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Zuko stared after her and pulled Jet tighter against himself. Was this what it was like for
normal people?

It was almost a bit unsettling to walk among the people of this city as if he belonged, was just one of the masses. *Because you are not.*

Zuko stomped on that tiny nagging voice with all his might, yelling back at it that he could be, if he wanted to be.

They continued to stumble down the busy street, close for comfort and warmth. Jet was talking about something, telling a story. His words washed over Zuko, half listening, half trying not to drown in the sudden onslaught of emotion, not wanting to be lulled but unable to fight it.

Desperate for something to ground him Zuko stopped and looked around for Jet's friends. Smellerbee and Longshot were lagging a bit behind and seemed in no hurry either. They caught up with them at a street corner.

"I'm going to walk Li home. Why don't you too go on ahead?"

Smellerbee snorted, absentmindedly playing with the strap to Longshot's quiver. Jet gave her a pointed glare, daring her to contradict him.

Longshot pulled Smellerbee closer, gently untangling her fingers from the leather strap and nodded, his eyebrow raised in a *fine by me.*

"Have fun." Smellerbee leered at Jet and then aimed to punched Zuko affectionately in the arm. She missed, steadied herself against Longshot and tried again with better aim. "Was nice meeting you again, Li."

"You too," Zuko mumbled and rubbed his arm, watching them turn a corner and walk away from him into the night.

"So…" Jet gave him a sheepish grin, lacing their fingers, running his thumb over the palm of Zuko's hand, making him gasp at the sensation. "Any chance your uncle isn't home tonight?"

"Huh?" Zuko wondered briefly if he and Uncle could work out something like a schedule and then stopped dead, blushing a fierce, mortified shade of red. "I don't think so."

"Let's check if the light's still on." Jet pulled him down the street towards the apartment building.

They stood in the dark, in front of the side gate, looking up at the rows of windows, bright against the night.

Jet spat his toothpick onto the street. "Looks like your Uncle decided to stay in." There was more than a hint of disappointment in his voice.

Zuko nodded, still looking up into the night, sharing his mood. Last night had been… he wouldn't have minded a repeat at all.

"Well, the least I can do." Jet took a hold of Zuko's shoulders, a sly grin on his face. "Is kiss you good night."

Zuko found himself pressed into the shadow of the overhanging roof, Jet's lips on his, Jet's hands sliding under the fabric of his tunic, seeking skin. Cold night air hit his over-sensitized skin, and he shuddered, gasping into the kiss. He knew he should care that they were in a public place, that anyone could see and someone probably was, but Jet's leg slid between his and Zuko gasped,
clawing at Jet's back, trying to get him closer.

Jet reached behind his own back, catching one of Zuko's hands, gently guiding it between them, intertwining their fingers, wrapping them around their combined hardness, only the fold of their clothes and the shadows concealing them from view.

Footsteps echoed down the alley, neither far nor close. Zuko froze, pulling away slightly, but Jet laid a finger over Zuko's mouth, his thumb caressing Zuko's face. Then he made a gentle shushing sound and kissed the words away.

Zuko strained his ears, but there was no outcry or any other sign of detection or acknowledgement, all that remained was the sound of his own heartbeat and Jet's breathing.

Jet's hand started to move, coaxing Zuko's along, their entwined rhythm drowning all reason, and all that mattered were Jet's hands on him, Jet's lips kissing him into oblivion. And in the dark alley, in the shadows of a doorway, Zuko's world exploded into pleasure.

He had no idea how long they stood, wrapped in each other, Zuko leaning against the wall, Jet's head resting on his shoulder.

"Li?" Jet took a small step back, catching Zuko's eyes.

Zuko looked away, wanted to say something, anything, feeling all of a sudden way too fragile. "I have to go."

He haphazardly straightened his clothes, not able to meet Jet's eyes again, and pushed the gate open, stepping through, closing it behind him. He stood in the dark, listening, waiting for Jet's footsteps to disappear in to the night. After a few minutes they did.

Chapter End Notes

One 'liang' (两) equals 50g. It is a measurement used when buying tea or spices.
The dormitory door opened with a groan and Jet tiptoed into the room, head buzzing pleasantly from the beer and Li's kiss. People shifted in their beds, covering their faces, turning away from the sudden light. He closed the door with the exaggerated care of the tipsy.

The room smelled of stale air, unwashed socks, spilled bai jiu and last night's dinner. Jet closed his eyes, trying to get them to acclimate to the dark while not breathing in too deeply. It made him miss the crystal clear air in the forest. His hand balled into a fist. Just another thing the Fire Nation had taken from him.

He picked his way through the maze of shoes and clothes on the floor, careful not to step onto anything. It wasn't a big maze, but neither was it a big room. Not that the people who rented a bed here tended to have much to begin with, but with eight people to a room, clutter accumulated, even with what meager possessions they had.

Smellerbee was right; they really needed to get out of here. Maybe tomorrow he could check back with Mr Gou and see if the old man had paid his rent or not. Any place was better than here.

He reached his bed at the other side of the room without incident, giving a quick nod to the sleepily blinking Mr Fen in the lower bunk who, even though he snored like a gopher-bear, woke at the drop of a pin.

Toeing off his shoes, Jet pulled his shirt over his head, hanging it on his nail next to the window. Then he gracefully pulled himself up to the upper bed. He looked over to where Longshot was sleeping, face turned to the wall. Smellerbee was snoring softly, asleep in her own bed; the Blue Spirit wanted poster was still pinned to the wall by her head, Jet noted, with amusement. A pygmy puma yowled in the night.

Li was the Blue Spirit - that was still something that amazed Jet, and if he admitted it, puzzled him, too. That someone who seemed so out of his depth at all times could have such a competent alter ego, was oddly endearing. He'd been right about Li from the start, when all he'd known about Li was that scar on his face, that he'd suffered at the hands of the Fire Nation. He had known him now for about a week and tonight was the first time Jet had seem Li smile a real smile. The memory made Jet feel more than a little protective toward Li. Yet something didn't add up. There was Li's lack of faith in his own abilities, but it clashed with the unthinking way Li seemed to assume command. Jet scratched his chin, feeling the beginning of stubble. It made Jet wonder about Li's past. Li's uncle seemed to be a decent guy, but something weighed Li down, and Jet strongly suspected that it had to do with the rest of his family.
Jet yawned and stretched. Whatever it was, Jet decided it was better not to push him. For now.

It was as he had said on the ferry to Ba Sing Se. With Li at his side, they'd help people, they'd have each others' backs. It felt good to have that certainty again. That purpose he'd thought he'd lost.

Thin slivers of light wormed their way through the slotted wooden shutters, and Jet crossed his arms behind his head, watching the sleeping city through a broken slat, the moonlit rooftops and dark streets; smiling to himself at the memory of Li in his arms, letting his mind wander and the pleasant memory carry him off to sleep.

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Jet woke to Longshot shaking him gently. He yawned and sat up, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, stretching.

"Morning." Jet jumped off the bed and clapped Longshot on the shoulder. He slipped on his shoes and reached for his shirt, yawned again and ran a hand through his hair. "Watch my stuff, will ya?"

And with that he grabbed his towel and opened the door, shuffling down the hall to the communal bathroom.

Patting his face dry, Jet reached out and rubbed the fog off the mirror with the ball of his hand. He took a minute to fix his hair before he gave himself a self-satisfied once over, smoothing down his shirt. This would be a good day. He had a feeling about that.

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Smellerbee and Longshot were waiting for him in the hallway. Longshot held out Jet's armor and shuang gou. Jet clapped him on the shoulder and took his weapons off Longshot with a nod and a smile.

They ate breakfast outside the hostel, the morning sun pleasantly warm. Jet leaned against the wall, using it for support, his bowl of zhou hot in his hands. With a steady throng of people pushing past, there was no place to sit and so they crowded against the wall, staying close to the stall they'd bought their breakfast from so they wouldn't be accused of stealing the bowls and spoons.

"I've got an idea." Smellerbee licked her spoon clean, pointing it at Jet. "I saw this office yesterday."

"What about it?" Jet raised an eyebrow at her and handed his bowl to Longshot. He fished a toothpick out of his pocket and started chewing on it. "Would you?"

Longshot nodded and took the bowl, waiting for Smellerbee to finish her zhou so that he could return the bowls to the stand's owner and collect their deposit.

"I saw this sign yesterday and I think they rent apartments." She grinned at them. "Not just one, but lots."


She glowed under his praise and Jet let her lead the way. They followed her through the busy streets to a hutong about halfway between Pao's teahouse and Li's home. Smellerbee stopped in front of a
"This is it." She fidgeted, unsure what to do next.

"Something, something Jade Gardens." Jet looked at her expectantly.

"Imperial harmony," Smellerbee prompted.

Jet gave the office-front a critical once over and nodded to himself. It looked, well there was no other word for it: classy. The wooden door and shutters were delicately carved and lacquered a deep, almost black, green. Golden highlights emphasized the scene of carved badgermoles erecting the great walls of Ba Sing Se. It looked like a good Earth Kingdom company.

"Are you sure they've got apartments for rent?" Jet asked and Smellerbee nodded, pointing at the signs left and right of the door.

"At least they say they do."

"Okay then, this is it." Jet pushed the door open and stepped inside.

A bright green sparrowkeet perched in a gilded cage next to the door. It pranced a bit on its stick, tilting its head and then jumped at the bars, looking at them with mean beady little eyes.

Welcome, welcome!

Jet involuntarily took a step back and glared at the screeching bird that was swinging upside down from the bars of its cage. He carefully stepped past the cage and took a look around, whistling under his breath in approval. The room itself spoke of their proud Earth Kingdom heritage and the same wealth the office front had suggested. There was a small waiting area, a couple of high-backed chairs interspaced with oversized porcelain vases, and matching scrolls decorated the walls. He recognized one of the scenes, a man and a woman in flowing robes standing on top of a great mountain, as the founding of Omashu.

An immaculately dressed woman, with small jade charms dangling from her headpiece, obviously some sort of receptionist, sat behind a wooden office desk sipping rose-petal tea from a lidded cup. Today's copy of the Sing Bao was open in front of her featuring a picture of the Earth King and his pet bear. The title said something about a party. She put her cup down, looking up at them, her smile seamlessly gliding into a dismissive frown.

"We're not hiring." She flicked through her newspaper, obviously expecting them to leave.

"We're looking for an apartment." Jet gave her a winning smile, moving his toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other. "What have you got available?"

She looked up again, directly at Jet this time, giving him a not quite disapproving once over, her painted lips drawn into a tight line.

"Our apartments start at three-hundred silver a month." Her tone made it clear that she thought they couldn't afford even the air they were breathing, never mind an upper end apartment. Jet narrowed his eyes, biting down on his toothpick. This was not what he'd expected.

Smellerbee did some quick calculating in her head, using her fingers for help. She matched the receptionist's stare. "How many months in advance?"

"Three, plus deposit." The newspaper snapped open again, making a point.
Jet held his hand out for the purse and Smellerbee handed it to him. He sauntered over to her desk, letting it drop onto the table with the rich clang of heavy coins.

"I'm sure that won't be a problem."

He polished his fingernails on the front of his shirt.

Smellerbee looked at Jet, wordlessly asking his permission. He gave her a tight nod and she grinned up at him. She pulled herself up to her full height, facing the other woman. "How do we apply?"

"Please take a seat, I'm sure this won't take long." She gestured dismissively toward the two chairs in front of her desk, taking her time to fold her paper. Jet shared a look with Longshot who shrugged and sat down next to one of the vases, stretching his legs out in front of him, leaving the chairs by the office desk for Smellerbee and Jet.

In the back of the room, half hidden behind a folding screen painted with some kind of weird looking bird a chair scraped. Jet could make out several men, some of them in what appeared to be a private guard uniform. One of them, a scarred older man, peeked over the screen, fixing Jet with a calculating stare. He beckoned another guard close with his hand, pointing at Jet's swords. Jet met his eyes and the man held his gaze for a moment before he looked nodded grimly to himself and sat down in front of the receptionist's desk.

"You'll have to fill these out." The woman gave them a cold smile and pulled a stack of forms out from one of her desk drawers, her voice a condescending singsong. "Please write legibly."

She put it on the table, pushing it over towards Smellerbee with one well manicured finger, then scooted her chair back. Jet watched her scrunch up her nose as she reached for her teacup and breathed in the rose aroma deeply. He narrowed his eyes at her. He'd washed up just an hour ago. He was starting to like this place less and less.

Smellerbee took the forms and started to read, her brow wrinkled in concentration. The ink stick lay, black and about the length of a thumb, on a delicately carved ink stone, jade-handle brushes dangling from a decorative rack above it. She reached for it and dipped it into a porcelain water-bowl to wet it. Holding it between her thumb and index finger she ran it in gentle circles around the ink stone, the ink grinding against the rough surface of the stone, mixing with water to form a lustrous dark ink.

The receptionist observed her over the rim of her tea cup the same way, Jet thought angrily, The Duke would watch a particularly interesting beetle. Smellerbee put the ink stick down, her hand shaking slightly as reached for one of the brushes and started to write.

Jet watched her as she carefully filled out the forms, her tongue peeking out from between her lips as she concentrated on her writing.

"Jet?" Smellerbee looked up, gently tapping the brush against her lips. "How do you spell your name?"

"Ehm. Jet... as in Jet."

There was a barely suppressed snicker from the receptionist. Jet glowered at her. What kind of question was that, anyway?

"That's not helping." Smellerbee frowned at the paper, the ink and the world in general.

Jet blinked at her in a moment of confusion and then rising frustration. "Give it here, I'll write it myself." He held his hand out for the brush and frowned. He could spell his own name, thank you so
very much. "Where?"

Smellerbee pointed to an underlined space on the document. Jet dipped the tip of the brush into the fresh ink and wrote his name, just like his mother had taught him so many years ago.

The receptionist had gone back to her sipping her tea, the cup and lid held elegantly in her soft, pale hands. Her expression was torn between amusement and annoyance.

"Excuse me? Am I reading this right?" Smellerbee snatched the paper from Jet, pushing it back towards the other side of the table, her finger on a word about halfway down the page. "Earthquake insurance? Why do we need earthquake insurance?" She added, slightly nervous, "Are there earthquakes in Ba Sing Se?"

"There aren't if you pay the fee." The receptionist rolled her eyes at Smellerbee and took another infuriating sip of her tea.

Behind them Longshot had crossed his arms in front of his chest, his hat pulled over his eyes. He was snoring softly. Jet felt the urge to kick his chair.

When Jet handed the brush back to Smellerbee, he noticed the same guard he'd seen a few minutes ago was back. And he was not alone. Another man had joined him, shorter than the first, only his eyes visible over the divider. The shorter man whispered something and the scarred guard nodded and stepped out from behind the screen. Bring it on then, Jet thought, if nothing else, breaking some of that fancy furniture would make him feel better.

"Miss Cu, could you join us for a moment?" The guard looked at them with nervous, shifty eyes.

"I'm with customers, Tong," The receptionist snapped, not taking her eyes of Jet, Smellerbee and Longshot. Jet suspected she was afraid they'd steal the brushes.

"It's important." Tong stretched the last word with impatient annoyance.

She set her cup down with rather more force than necessary and gave Jet a falsely cheery smile. "If you'd excuse me for a moment."

Not waiting for an answer she strode off in a swirl of expensive silk, nearly knocking over the decorative screen as she passed.

There was a hushed argument between the guard and her and Jet strained his hearing trying to catch bits and pieces of it. Next to him Smellerbee cursed.

"Do you think they'll let me start over again?" She frowned at her uneven writing.

"I doubt it, Bee." Jet's eyes never left the outlines of the people behind the screen. "We may have to get out of here, anyway. Something doesn't smell right."

Miss Cu returned moments later with a bright, plastered-on smile that did nothing to make Jet feel more comfortable. She took one look at the form Smellerbee had been filling out, her face forming into a blank, polite mask as she picked it up.

"I see you are finished." Miss Cu nodded at Smellerbee, folding the paper without reading it. "Good, good."

"But I …" Smellerbee interrupted, holding up the brush in her fist to underline her statement. "I wasn't done."
"Oh, never mind the pesky paperwork." The receptionist got up and took a ring of keys from a hook on the wall. "Why don't I show you the apartment? I'm sure you are curious to see it."

"Why're you so nice to us, all of a sudden?" Smellerbee looked at her with suspicion; suspicion that Jet shared.

"I'd kind of like to know that, too." Jet's hand inched towards his shuang-gou.

"I had not realized..." She bowed, trying to hide the plethora of emotions that washed over her face. "My deepest apologizes."

"And what exactly are you apologizing for?" Jet was fighting the annoyance in his voice, the grip on his temper slipping. This was not him, he was supposed to be good with people.

A bit of her former tetchiness returned. "Look, I'm just following orders. My colleagues just informed me that the boss wants me make an exception for you. Something about returning a favor. I didn't ask. Do you want the apartment or not?"

"Who's your boss?" Smellerbee crossed her arms in front of her chest, looking challenging up at Miss Cu.

"The Imperial Harmony Jade Garden Corporation." Miss Cu, arms akimbo, matched Smellerbee's stare. "Obviously."

"If you would excuse us for a moment." Jet gave her a perfunctory smile before he grabbed Smellerbee by the arm, pulling her towards Longshot.

"What did you do that for?" Smellerbee squeaked. "I wanted to ask her about that exception."

Longshot pushed up his hat, meeting Jet's eyes, indicating that he'd heard. They huddled around his chair, trying to keep their voices low.

"What's going on?" Smellerbee jerked her head towards the receptionist and then continued in a lower voice. "What do we do now, Jet?"

Jet took another look around the office, at Miss Cu, who was watching them over her teacup, the guards surreptitiously trying to listen in on what was going on from behind the painted screen with the flying boar, the small shrine with a plate of lychee-nuts in front of the official royal portrait. The flying boar. Of course. Jet smacked himself on the forehead and let out victorious hah. How could he have been that stupid?

"Jet?" Smellerbee put a gentle hand on his arm. "You alright?"

Longshot's raised eyebrow mimicked her concern.

"Never been better." Jet straightened his shoulders, hooking his thumbs into his belt and grinned. "Remember what you used to say?"

Before they could answer Jet continued smugly, "If we follow my plans it all works out in the end."

"Yes, but …" Smellerbee looked at Longshot for help, who shrugged. "I don't understand, Jet."

"The warehouse we raided…" Jet coughed and went on snickering. "I mean defended. It belongs to the Bei Fongs." He gestured towards the paper screen with the stylized flying boar. "And so does this company." He let out a short, amused snort. "They think we did it to help them."
"Oh." Smellerbee's eyes went wide, and she blinked a couple of times, her expression changing from worried to sly. "How nice of them to offer us an apartment for our troubles."

"Exactly." Jet grinned. "But we're keeping Miss Cu waiting."

"We are ready when you are." Smellerbee gave the receptionist a nod.

Miss Cu put down her cup and got up in a rustle of skirts. They followed her out of the office and down the street, past the opening stalls and shops, to the gates of a seven story apartment block with curved roofs and a private courtyard with a well. Jet courteously pulled the main gate open for them, entering a housing complex pretty similar to the one Li and his Uncle lived in.

The apartment Miss Cu led them to was on the fifth floor and they waited in the open hallway as she unlocked the door. A few doors down someone opened their shutters, peeking out.

"This is it." Miss Cu pushed the door open and stale air greeted them, a thin layer of dust covered all the surfaces inside. Slivers of light fell through closed shutters illuminating a rather spacious interior.

"I'm sorry, this apartment has been empty since ... for a while." Miss Cu looked around ill at ease, avoiding their eyes. "I hope you don't mind the dust."

Smellerbee did not seem to notice or mind and took hold of Longshot's hand, pulling him inside, a happy grin on her face. She pointed towards one of the bedrooms, and he squeezed her hand, smiling down at her. Jet looked away and shuddered. He really hoped those walls were thicker than they looked.

Oddly enough Miss Cu did not enter the apartment but instead held the door open for them, hovering at the doorstep.

"After you." Jet gave her a mock bow, watching her squirm.

She shifted nervously. "Do go ahead. I'll just be in the way."

Suspicious of her motives, Jet took the key off her to keep her from potentially locking them in.

He stepped over the traditional high door threshold into the apartment itself. The main living area connected to two bedrooms with the mattresses rolled up into neat bundles on the beds. The kitchen walls were tiled in an intricate pattern of light and dark greens and had the luxury of a drainage pipe and a big earthenware cistern to store water. The stove connected to a kang, a raised brick dais with an embroidered mattress that could be heated in winter. A low wooden table stood in the center of it.

Jet thought that he'd rather enjoy showing Li the apartment later on. Especially the bedroom that he'd have all to himself.

Smellerbee was pulling open closets and cabinets, finding them empty. Jet leaned against the carved wooden frame of the kang, keeping an eye on the door and Miss Cu. He nodded at Longshot who walked over to the window and pushed the shutters open, letting in fresh air and the ever present noise of Ba Sing Se.

Light suddenly filled the room, making them blink in the sudden brightness. The gust of air unsettled some of the dust. Jet sneezed. Smellerbee walked around a bit, inspecting corners and opening even more cabinets, while Jet watched, trying to find out what made Miss Cu so ill at ease. He played with the key in his hand.

It really didn't make sense. The hardwood floor was a bit stained and worn but other than these
minor signs of neglect the apartment was the nicest they'd seen so far. How could a place like this stay empty long enough to gather dust, never mind signs of decay? He wondered what the regular price was and at how few would likely be able to afford the rent. I bet they don't usually rent to dirty refugees either. Jet's face twisted up in disgust and anger at the earlier slight. This was not how it was supposed to be. These were his own people, not the Fire Nation. This had to change and that would be his job. He'd help. He'd fix things.

"If you are done looking around." Miss Cu was impatiently tapping her nails against the doorframe. "I'd suggest we go back to the office to sign the lease. That is, unless you don't want the apartment." Her tone made it clear that she thought this rather unlikely.

"Of course we want it." Smellerbee glared at Jet, daring him to contradict her.

"With that settled…" Miss Cu gave her a perfunctory smile and turned to Jet, holding her hand out. "Could I have my keys back, so that I can lock up?"

ooooo

When they exited the building Miss Cu took the lead, and they followed her back to the office. At a street corner an old man was playing the pipa, his eyes unfocussed, lost in his own music. He knelt on the dirty road, his hat in front of him. It was a nice little tune and Jet tossed him a small coin.

There were people waiting when they got back. A palanquin was parked outside, the bearers squatting in the shade. Miss Cu cursed quietly under her breath and Jet shot her a curious glance.

Inside an older woman, sitting poised and straight backed on one of the visitor's chairs was chatting to a nervous looking guard, her hands resting on an ivory handle cane. Next to her stood two of her own body guards, a stylized hermit crab on their uniform identifying their house.

Miss Cu bowed low, the jade beads on her headpiece jingling. "Lady Pang, what an honor. What brings you to our lowly office?"

The guard, Tong was his name if Jet remembered correctly, took this opportunity to bow even lower and leave, relief obvious on his sweaty face.

"Nothing that can't wait." Lady Pang gave her a stern nod. "I see that you have customers to attend to." She met Jet's eyes and he was suddenly very aware that this was no pampered society lady. He held her gaze for a moment - giving in too soon would not do - then inclined his head at her. How do you fit in … he wondered.

"Of course." Miss Cu bowed again, looking slightly confused but ushered Jet, Smellerbee and Longshot towards her desk.

Her hand shook slightly as she filled the lease out for them, explaining the conditions as she went along. She seemed focused on Smellerbee, seeking eye contact with her, waiting for her to nod before moving on. Jet frowned, this would not do. He was still the leader of the Freedom Fighters.

"So this is per month, right?" Jet pulled the document closer to him and pointed to a number on the lease. Longshot raised a questioning eyebrow at him. Jet ignored him.

"Yes, as I just said, it is." Miss Cu gave him an irritated look and reached out, pushing the paper back towards Smellerbee.
"And we pay three months in advance?" Jet tried again.

"Yes." The receptionist pinched the bridge of her nose. "Is there anything else you'd like me to explain, sir?"

"Don't worry, Jet. I've got this covered." Smellerbee looked at him with big, serious eyes and Jet sighed.

"No, no. It's all good. I trust that you can handle this, Bee," he ground out, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms in front of his chest, pretending not to feel Lady Pang's eyes boring into his back.

ooooo

Li was sitting in the shade under the sycamore tree in the courtyard, his head resting against the trunk. He was reading a book, clearly absorbed in it. Jet smirked and tiptoed up to him, sitting down on the ground next to Li.

"Hiya, handsome." He snatched the book out of Li's hands.

"Don't call me that." Li snapped and blushed.

Jet laughed at Li's frown and kissed him.

"What's reading?" Jet held the book out of reach, dead set to find out what this book was. Judging by the color of Li's face, it had to be rather good. "The Stone Record?"

"Story of a Stone. Give that back!" Li made a grab for his book, but Jet was faster.

Li scowled at him.

Jet ignored Li's protest and leaned in for another kiss, noticing in satisfaction that Li's determined scowl was slipping, his eyes half lidded, his face flushed.

"Sounds boring." Jet flipped through the pages, pretending to read while watching Li's reaction out of the corner of his eye.

"Damn it, Jet! Give it back! It's not yours." He held out his hand for it, looking annoyed.

Jet held the book out of reach. "Make me."

Li ignored the ground and forced another kiss, noticing in satisfaction that Li's determined scowl was slipping, his eyes half lidded, his face flushed.

"Sounds boring." Jet flipped through the pages, pretending to read while watching Li's reaction out of the corner of his eye.

"Damn it, Jet! Give it back! It's not yours." He held out his hand for it, looking annoyed.

Jet held the book out of reach. "Make me."

Li made an adorable huffy growling sound in his throat and Jet found himself quickly and effectively pinned to the ground, an angry Li glaring down on him. Li plucked the book from Jet's hand, tossing it onto the ground nearby.

"What ya going to do now?" Jet leered and moved his legs, upsetting Li's balance. He crashed down onto him, still holding fast onto Jet's hands. Jet wiggled a little, rubbing up against Li. Li gasped, and loosened his grip, his eyes wide. Gotcha! Jet freed his hands and grabbed Li's ass, pulling him all the way down on him. Li gave him a last token glare and then kissed him with an intensity that startled Jet, taking his breath away.

Feeling Li's warm weight settle next to him, Li's amber eyes lidded with lust, Jet reached up and caressed his unscarred cheek. On second thought this may have been one of his better ideas.
"What are you doing here?" Li rested his head on Jet's shoulder and Jet started carding his fingers through Li's hair.

"What if I just wanted to see you?"

"Really?" Li lifted his head, searching out Jet's eyes, his voice small and surprised.

"What kind of question is that?" Jet blinked at him, baffled at the sincerity in Li's voice, as if Li actually doubted him.

Li's eyes dropped and Jet reached out, lifting his chin with his index finger. "Of course I do, silly."

Li snorted, resting his head back in the crook of Jet's arm, his fingers idly running over Jet's chest. "Right."

"We got an apartment." Jet's hand wormed its way into Li's sleeve and up his arm. Jet enjoyed the way Li gasped at the contact of skin on skin. "I thought you might want to see it."

"I've got to work soon." There was no real protest in Li's voice.

"Come on, it isn't far." Jet ran his hand up Li's back, his fingers caressing the nape of his neck. "And Pao doesn't open for at least another hour."

Li seemed to think that over and then nodded, as if it were an important decision.

ooooo

They walked next to each other down the shadeless midday streets, Jet leading the way, their hands brushing occasionally. Jet smiled to himself. This day might yet turn out as good as he'd thought.

The old man with the pipa was still sitting at the same corner Jet where had seen him earlier, but his song had ceased. People loitered, walking just that little bit slower as to not miss the best Ba Sing Se had to offer in street entertainment: the potential of a fight.

"Dance." A swarthy man in guard uniform was towering over the beggar, holding up a shiny gold coin. Jet noticed the hunger in the old man's eyes as he watched the coin being flung into the air and caught again.

"I like to see people work for their supper! Don't you, Han?" The guard was shouting in the jolly drunk way that meant that he was about to find his entertainment in bullying someone smaller and defenseless. "Dance! I said dance, old man."

His friends laughed.

Jet felt Li tense. Li had stopped walking, his face a terrifying snarl, angrier than Jet had ever seen him. He followed Li's gaze to the guard's back.

"Li?" He tried to put a hand on Li's shoulder but Li shrugged him off with force and let out an angry growl, body tense, hands balled into fists at his side. Jet involuntarily took a step back and in the blink of one moment Li seemed to make up his mind, the tension transformed and shifted.

"Nothing funnier than an old fart dancing for his supper!" The man tossed the coin into the air. It sparkled.
The guard let out a loud bellowing laugh and Li stepped up behind him. With one fluid movement, Li grabbed the bigger man by the shoulder, spinning him around. The ball of Li's hand hit the man's chin, Li's fingers wrapping around his face, pushing him backwards. Li shifted stance, dropping into a smooth crouch and kicked the man's legs out from under him.

The guard's back hit the dust with a dull thud, Li in a graceful crouch on top of him, his foot on the man's chest. The coin was still high in the air.

Jet let out an appreciative whistle, watching the coin spin and fall.

Li got up and held out his hand, catching the gold coin. He looked at it for a second, turning it over in his hand, before dropping it into the beggar's hat. "Go get yourself a good supper, old man."

Jet had to admit that he was more than a bit impressed. Maybe Smellerbee had a spare wanted poster. He was starting to see the appeal.

Wiping his hands on his tunic Li looked around for the fallen man's friends, locking eyes with the biggest of them. "Anyone got a problem with this?"

He shook his head and people were backing away, and there was the occasional snicker and hushed comment.

"Not bad, Li, not bad at all." Li'd be one challenge to take on in a fight, that was for sure. He'd definitely be an interesting sparring partner. Jet put an arm around Li's shoulder and grinned. "Glad you are on our side and not the Fire Nation's."

Li stiffened and mumbled something like 'you have no idea'.

Jet jerked his head towards where two of the guard's friends where helping him up to have him promptly vomit on their shoes in thanks. "Mind telling me what that was about?"

Li's hands balled into fists again. "Bad memories."

ooooo

Jet led the way to their new apartment, and Li followed. They had just climbed the stairs to the fourth floor when one of the neighbors stepped out of his apartment, blocking their way. He was smoking a foul smelling copper pipe that he pointed at Jet.

"You lot moving in upstairs?" He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Saw you this morning."

"Did you, now?" Jet gave him a bright smile and elbowed Li to stop him from glowering at the man. "My name's Jet and this is Li."

"I'm Liu Lian." The man stuck his pipe back into his mouth, taking a deep drag. "Any of you benders?"

"Why?" Jet gave him a puzzled look. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"Depends. Got any trained fighters?" He took another drag from his pipe, exhaling noxious smoke towards them.

"Well, we've done our fair share of fighting, haven't we?" Jet playfully punched Li in the shoulder. Li grunted, rubbed his arm, and glared at Jet.
"Any of you family?" He poked his pipe at Li, giving him a once over. "How much do you weigh? You look a tad skinny. One-twenty?"

"What?" Li took a step forward, his expression challenging. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing, I'm sure." Jet suppressed a laugh; Li was a bit on the skinny side. He put a restraining hand on Li's arm, shaking his head slightly. "Mr Liu is just trying to get to know his new neighbors. Aren't you?"

Mr Liu watched them through narrowed eyes. "Gonna give you a week, give or take." He snorted derisively stepping back into his apartment without a backwards glance.

The door slammed shut leaving Jet and Li to look at each other in confusion.

'What was that old gasbag on about?' Li made a threatening motion towards the closed door. "I'm not one-twenty!"

"One-twenty five?" Jet suggested, dodging Li's punch. He shrugged and then conceded at Li's glare: "But you are right, I don't like it either. We should keep an eye out."

They walked up the last flight of stairs and stopping in front of the entrance door.

"Five-thirteen B? How fitting." Li glowered at the apartment number and shrugged. "Did you get a discount?"

"In a manner of speaking." Jet gave him a sly grin. "Superstitious, are we?"

"I failed my destiny." Li pushed the door open. "I don't think an unlucky apartment number will make a difference."

Destiny? What kind of person had a destiny to begin with, never mind a failed one? Jet followed him inside, closing the door behind them, puzzled by Li's throw away comment.

They were greeted by the smell of cooking and the rather domestic scene of Longshot stirring something in a big cast iron pot in the kitchen. He turned around and smiled at them in greeting. Jet looked around the apartment and noted with approval that the layer of dust that had coated, well everything, was more or less gone and the spring breeze had carried away the stale air.

Li had stopped a few steps into the room and stood awkwardly, looking from Longshot to Smellerbee. He raised a hand in greeting. "Ehm, hi!"

"Hi, Li!" Smellerbee was sitting on the edge of the kang in front of the living room table, surrounded by several crumpled up sheets of cheap paper. There was a frown on her face.

"Jet, I'm not sure I can do this." She looked at her uneven handwriting, and sighed. "No one's going to believe that this is real."

Li leaned against the kang's frame, looking over her shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"Filling out work permits." She sighed. "Or at least trying to."

"Keep it up, Bee." Jet shot Smellerbee a reassuring smile. "I know you can do this."

She gave him a skeptical nod, but pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and dipped her brush into the ink. "I guess…"
"You got the wrong *shi* there." Li pointed to the second word in the sentence she was practicing.

"Thanks." Smellerbee let out an annoyed sigh and crossed out the offending character, scribbling a different one above it. "This one, right?"

Li nodded. Jet took his arm, whispering into Li's ear. "Let me give you the grand tour."

He gently manhandled Li over to the larger bedroom. "Welcome to Jet's Room of Delights!"

Jet bowed with a flourish, letting Li precede him into the room, then kicked the door shut with his foot.

Li gave him a confused look that was starting to slide into a frown. He looked around the room's sparsely furnished interior.

"It's … uh, nice," he offered.

"I promised you a real bed, didn't I?" Jet put a finger against Li's chest, backed him backed against the bed, pushing him down on the mattress. He flopped down next to him with a grin. "And I keep my promises."

Any protest Li had died in a moan when Jet kissed the thin sliver of skin right above Li's collar.

Li gasped when Jet sucked in a tiny bit of skin, biting it gently. "Do you have to do that?" Strong hands clamped around Jet's head, pulling him up to face a flushed Li. "Everyone will see!"

Jet gently ran his thumb over the tiny purple spot. "It looks good on you."

"You're impossible," Li huffed but let Jet kiss him and undo the top button of his uniform.

"What's with all the layers?" Jet teased, worming his fingers between the Li's tunic and shirt. "Not that I mind unwrapping, but …"

"It's cold." Li sounded defensive. "I'm cold."

"Warmer where you come from?" Jet reached for the second button but Li grasped his wrist, pulling his hand away.

"Yes, a lot." Li didn't meet his eyes. "I have to go to work soon."

"Well, then we'd better not waste any time then." Jet propped himself up on his elbows, sliding on top of Li. "How's this?"

"Your armor is digging into my shoulder," Li complained but arched up, pressing his lips to Jet's.

Jet snuck a hand down between them, shifting a bit so there was room to maneuver. Li's eyes scrunched shut, his lips parted and he let out a tiny whimpering gasp. Jet's hand slid lower, over his erection, lingering, fingers pressing down just hard enough to promise but not deliver. Yet.

Li's eyes popped wide open and Jet kissed away his moan.

"Jet, what about the others?" Li gasped, arching into his hand, his action belying his words. "They can hear!"

Jet's lips brushed the outer shell of Li's good ear, his voice pitched low, "Then you'd better be quiet."
Jet leaned against the door and watched Li smooth down his outer tunic, thinking it would look better off Li than on. He longingly glanced over at the bed and wished that they’d had more time to make proper use of it, but well, that would have to wait.

Holding the door open, he reached for Li's hand, lacing their fingers together. Li looked down at their joined hands and blushed. Jet squeezed encouragingly.

"I bet Longshot has lunch ready." He pulled Li into the living area and towards the kitchen.

"What's for lunch?" Li asked.

"Let me have a look." Jet lifted one of the lids, fanning the steam away to get a better look. "Rice. Aw man." Longshot glared at him, snatched the lid away from Jet, placing it back onto the pot. He raised the wooden ladle menacingly.

"Okay, okay." Jet grinned. "Another ten minutes, or so?"

Longshot nodded and pointed the wooden spatula towards the living room, making a shooing gesture.

"Smellerbee, you done yet?" Jet leaned over the kang, trying to make out her process. "We need the table in a bit."

"Look!" She beamed and held up a finished work permit for them to inspect. "I did it!"

"I knew you could do it, Bee." Jet took a cursory look at the document, handing it to Li.

"Your name is Ying?"

"Of course not." Smellerbee rolled her eyes at him. "Had to buy a passport off some guy. That's the name it has on it."

Li gave her a quick nod and then narrowed his eyes. "Do you have another one?"

"Another what?" Smellerbee had picked up her brush again, ready to start on the next permit.

"Form. It's just… This will fool no one." Li frowned, shook his hand free of his oversized sleeve and pointed to where she'd filled in the dates. "You used normal numbers."

"What about them?" She drew the words out with a sigh, the enthusiasm slowly draining off her face. "I messed up, didn't I?"

"You can't use those on official documents." Li held his hand out for the brush. "Here, let me show you."

She handed him the brush and Li gracefully knelt down next to the table, pulling the paper close. "Like this."

He quickly wrote down a row of complicated looking characters, holding his sleeve back with his left hand. Jet squinted at them over Li's shoulder. "Those are numbers?"

"Yes." Li handed the brush back to Smellerbee. "You try it."
She dipped it into the black ink, peering at what Li had just written and starting to copy them. Even to Jet's eye, her numbers looked wobbly and childish and he felt vaguely bad for noticing.

"You got the stroke order wrong," Li admonished. "They don't look right if you mess it up. Remember: Left to right, top to bottom."

"I know!" She threw her brush down in frustration, covering the table nearby in fine ink speckles. "Fine, you know what, you do it!"

And Jet agreed. Let Li show would he could do, his superior attitude starting to grate on Jet. Li gave her a sideways glance but picked up the brush and pulled the paper closer. "Do you just want me to copy the other one?"

"Don't you want to try on scratch paper …" She watched him dip the brush into the ink she'd made and write her name with quick, precise strokes. It took him less than five minutes to fill out the entire document, even though he had to stop and ask Smellerbee for information a couple of times.

"Where did you learn to write like that?" Smellerbee's voice dripped with awe, making Jet grind his teeth. He hadn't thought it possible for her to worship Li more than she already did. Apparently he had been wrong.

"Yeah, where did you?" Jet chimed in, crossing his arms in front of his chest, trying not to sound as annoyed as he was.

Li shrugged. "I had a tutor."

Not school, not his mom, but a tutor? That implied serious money. Jet's frown deepened. He'd never known anyone who'd had a tutor. Most of the freedom fighters hadn't even gone to school, and those who had gone, like Smellerbee, didn't have more than a few years under their belts. Enough to get them by in the world, but definitely not long enough to learn how write in fancy squiggles.

"Can you do the ones for Jet and Longshot, too?"

"Sure." Li nodded at Smellerbee and dabbed the ink-stick into the water to make more ink. She huddled close, feeding him the necessary information and sidelong admiring glances.

When Li pushed the finished document away and reached for an empty form, Jet's left eye started to twitch. He snatched the completed work permit up, turning it this way and that. Jet glared in envy at the graceful, fluid characters, so different from his own crude ones. They looked like the curly, decorative calligraphy he'd seen on the scrolls at the Imperial Harmony Jade Garden Corporation early today. He tried to shrug it off, tried to take a deep breath. Yet the fact that he could not do this stung -, it too had been taken from him when the Fire Nation had killed his parents, and Jet had to fight hard not to resent Li for it.

He forced a laugh. "You know, with all those delicate loops and curls, your handwriting looks kinda girly."

"Yeah?" Li finished the last line on Longshot's work permit, swirling the brush in the cup of water to clean it, his expression challenging. "Let's see yours, then."

"Forgive me for not being a pampered little rich kid and not having had a fancy tutor. " Jet got up and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "They're hard to come by when you live in the forest because the Fire Nation murdered your parents!" The last words were screamed, his hands rising in an exasperated gesture only to ball to fists at his side.
"Jet?" Smellerbee squeaked, her voice incredulous, her eyes wide with shock. She put a soothing hand on Li's arm, who shook it off, springing to his feet.

"You know nothing about my parents," Li hissed, his hand inching towards his scar. As soon as he noticed what he was doing he dropped it, his fingers clenching and unclenching at his side. Li's eyes flared, his mouth pinched into a scowl. "Or me."

"You're right. I don't." Jet took one look at Li's frown and Smellerbee's concerned expression and deflated. "I need air."

He slammed the door on his way out.

oooooo

Jet punched the wall in the hallway. Hard. He suppressed a yelp as the wall proved harder than his hand. Shaking it in pain, he stomped down the stairs.

He had every right to be angry. He'd been on his own since he was eight years old. Jet wrapped his arms around himself as the memories crept up on him. Memories of the lifeless bodies of his parents on the floor, of running, running as fast as his skinny legs could take him down the dirt track into the forest. He had stood, on a grass covered hill and watched the Fire Nation soldiers assemble and retreat. Helpless rage burned in him, consumed him, but all he had done, could do was stand there and feel the warmth of the fire on his skin. So he watched their village, his home, burn; smelled the fire, the roar of the flames silencing the forest 'till finally, hot and helpless, the tears had come.

Jet jammed his hands into his pockets, blinking the wetness out of his eyes. He blindly walked down the alleys, taking turns wherever there were fewer people. The last thing he wanted to deal with now was other people. He kicked a pebble, watching it bounce down the paved road.

He watched these fat, lazy city people, with their secure pampered lives, and bile rose in his throat. He'd struggled and won against odds bigger than they could imagine, risked his life to guarantee their freedom, only to have it rubbed in his face that along the way he hadn't picked up a stupid, unimportant skill like reading. How was that his fault, when the Fire Nation had taken his home and his parents from him? And now this city, this Earth Kingdom city, was treating him like dirt for something that was the Fire Nation's fault. He'd suffered in a war these people denied even existed. He balled his fists. They're buying their security, their pampered lives with the refugees suffering. He'd end that, he thought, he'd right the scales. Sometimes there needed to be a flood before there could be a new, clean beginning. To wash away the dirt so that decent people could make an honest living again.

He hadn't paid attention to where he was going and suddenly the great wall loomed in front of him, higher than any tree in the forest. He shaded his eyes, looking up, craning his neck to even make out the edge. This was not protection, it was a prison, a golden cage for fat, lazy song birds. A group of Dai Li agents walked by in the distance and Jet stepped into the shadows of a nearby hutong. No need to attract their attention.

He followed the narrow alley through a row of crammed courtyards, past a woman washing clothes in a basin, a toddler strapped to her back. She looked up at him with tired, suspicious eyes, rubbing the sweat of her forehead with the back of her hand.

The hutong connected to another street full of noise and life. He turned a corner to find himself — how fitting, Jet thought with a scowl — in the printers' section of town.
Under the shade of a canopy a young earthbender, presumably the apprentice, was cutting a big block of granite into slabs, piling them on top of each other on a wooden crate. A little off to the side, a middle aged man inspected the drawings a customer had handed him. He reached for one of the granite blocks, placing it on the table in front of him. Jet watched the stone rise under the man's hands, the masters' fingers dancing delicately over the gray surface. Thin lines connected to form a finely crafted picture. The master then presented it to the customer, who nodded in approval. And with one slap of the master's hand the edged words slid through the stone, only to reappear mirror-imaged and ready to print on the other side.

People pushed past him and he let himself be dragged along when suddenly two familiar voices made him turn to scan the crowd.

"I don't know Aang," a girl said in a contemplating voice that brought back the memory of his forest and, more urgently the cold clasp of thick, unyielding ice against his body, and the shame of what he'd almost done. The people he'd almost killed. Tried to use her to kill.

Jet caught the glimpse of a blue robe and a long braid and his stomach dropped. What was she doing here? For a second hearing her voice alone had the power to transported him back to when he was frozen to that tree in the forest, Smellerbee desperately chipping away at the ice that held him captive, knowing that any minute Fire Nation troops would appear in the clearing to take him away to be executed for what he'd done to that village. The memory of fear and shame was enough to drown his anger, making him look around frantically for a place to hide.

"We've only been here for ten days. It seems a bit rude, going over their head like that." Katara was walking next to the Avatar. Aang was carrying a scroll of some sort, his expression stern.

"I am sick of waiting, Katara." He turned to look at her, his voice changing from anger to misery. "Appa is so close… This may be our only chance."

"I understand, but Aang …"

Jet dodged into the store on his right, desperately hoping that this was not where she was headed and groaned. Of course. It had to be a book store.

The clerk in the back looked up briefly from his pai sho game and Jet chose a book from the nearest shelf, pretending to be browsing. The store was gloomy, ornate window shutters keeping out most of the noon glare. Jet watched Katara and the Avatar walk past the store and let out a breath he had not been aware he'd been holding when they turned the corner. That had been close.

Him using her had not exactly been one of his finest moments and the shame of what he had almost done, what he'd almost made her do, washed over him fresh and hot and potent. He looked down at the book in his hand, staring at the title, not recognizing even half of the words. He turned it over in his hand. It was a thin thing, nothing more than a couple of dozen pages held together by string and glue. What a stupid thing to get angry about. He shook his head, trying to clear it. He was doing it again, making the same mistakes, letting his anger overrule his common sense. This was supposed to be his new beginning, his second chance. He wasn't sure there'd be a third one. Li'd been right about one thing on the ferry: he couldn't do this alone.

Jet put the book down, annoyed at himself for letting something stupid like that get to him. So Li could read - big deal. He'd never gotten mad at Smellerbee for that before, had he?

He walked down the street a bit, making sure to go in the opposite direction he'd seen Katara and the Avatar walk off in. He left the printers' district and its smell of drying ink behind and came to a row of open warehouses with crates holding pickens. A rooster-picken stopped rooting in the dirt, raised
its head and crowed. Jet turned away from the less than pleasant smell of the slaughterhouses to find himself in front of a lacquered city gate.

Two enormous tree trunks, polished and painted a sparkling, glaringly white, held up a winged top piece with a carved center. Three blue swirls over wavy lines. The design looked vaguely familiar to Jet and he stopped, wracking his memory as to where he’d seen it before.

A cart passed him by and he felt a sudden drop in temperature. He shivered and turned as it rumbled past and a few droplets of cold water hit him in the face. The sun shone onto the straw packed ice, making it glisten as it melted in the heat. Ice. Katara's necklace. Jet took a step back and looked around. Among the familiar green that Ba Sing Se citizens seemed to favor, there was the occasional blue tunic and he even saw a man with a haircut similar to the one Katara’s brother had. He hadn’t known that Ba Sing Se had Water Tribe people living, that there were not only a handful of them among the refugees, but a whole Water Tribe section of town.

Not wanting to chance meeting Katara again he turned and started walking back to their apartment, and having only a vague idea where he was he looked up, shielding his eyes against the sun, searching for the familiar structure of the Tu-Gui to guide him home.

Walking back to their apartment, Jet followed the overhead rails of the Tu-Gui, hearing more than seeing the trains speed by and for the first time he actually realized how big this city was. There had to be millions of people living between its magnificent walls. Refugees from all corners of the Earth Kingdom flocked to the lower ring and apparently not just the Earth Kingdom alone. He took another look at the carved gate. It did not look new, in fact near the base the paint was cracked and peeling, revealing several layers, as if it had been painted at least half a dozen times. He looked at the houses and the people on the street. These were no refugees, not people who had escaped the Fire Nation with only what little they could carry. Quite the contrary. There were two story stone houses painted in Water Tribe white and blue, restaurants and merchants selling goods not from the ground, but from rows of tidy storefronts. This was a prosperous little part of the town. Jet ground his teeth at the thoughts that came unbidden. If there was a whole section of town full of Water Tribe people, Water Tribe people who lived here, had kept part of their culture and, judging by the ice he’d seen on that cart, benders. Did that mean …

Jet swallowed, balling his fists, his thoughts drawn back to the soap merchant's office and her openly displayed Fire Nation heritage. Fire Nation people living here, in the Earth Kingdom's greatest city? Protected by the same walls that kept them safe? Did that mean there was a Fire Nation part of town, too? Maybe even firebenders?

He took a deep breath to steady himself and then another one for good measure. Just because the Earth King considered them his citizens, and they were not involved in the war, that did not mean Jet had to like it. He made a mental note to find out where this Fire Nation nest was, and for the time being avoid it.

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When he got back to the apartment, someone had stuck a flyer to their door with cheap glue. Jet pulled it off, looking at the crude picture of two earthbenders throwing gigantic rocks at each other. Bright red letters proclaimed: Ultimate Earthrumble III.

Smellerbee and Longshot were wrapped up in each other on the kang, dozing in the afternoon heat. Jet tried to close to door with care.
"Hey, you're back." Smellerbee yawned and cracked open a sleep heavy eye. "Li left. Had to get to work."

"Figured." Jet gave her a tight nod. He looked around the apartment and sighed. "It would be nice to have dinner here tonight. All of us I mean."

"Yeah, Longshot's going to do some shopping in a bit." She teasingly poked him in the side and he groaned and batted her hand away. She gave him a sly look. "You're better at bargaining."

Longshot gave her a look that clearly called bullshit on her statement. He disentangled himself from Smellerbee, and got to pour himself a cup of water.

"Do you want some lunch?" Not waiting for a reply from either of them she hollered after her boyfriend. "Longshot, since you're up, can you get Jet some lunch?" Smellerbee snatched his pillow and stuffed it behind her back, sinking back onto the kang with a satisfied sigh. She turned to Jet. "Oh, and we might have a job."

"Really? That was fast." Jet sat down beside her on the mattress, looking pointedly at her feet till she pulled them closer to herself, giving him more space.

"That guard, Tong, from the Jade Garden Corporation. He came by while you were gone. They need extra guards at the Earthrumble." She looked a bit guilty. "Well, and I said yes."

Longshot handed Jet a bowl of egg fried rice with a few slices of meat on top. It was even still warm.

"Thanks." Jet nodded at Longshot and dug in. He hadn't even realized how hungry he was.

Jet's mood significantly improved once they went around to their old dormitory and Jet started talking to people. As always in the afternoon, a small crowd had formed outside the hostel, people fleeing from the crowded, hot inside to the streets. Some sat on small stools, other crouched in the dirt around the entrance, out of the way of the carts and traffic. Jet recognized most of them on sight. He'd made a point of learning their names, where they are from and those little tidbits of information that would bring a smile to someone's face if mentioned at the right moment. His memory had served him well in the past, and besides, what kind of sorry leader couldn't be bothered to take an interest in those around him?

He greeted Mr Fen and his wife, and they chatted about Mr Fen's new job which he'd finally managed at one of the ostrich-horse stables. Jet congratulated them and clapped Mr Fen on the back, wishing them well. Mrs Liu, a round faced friendly woman from near Omashu, had not been so lucky. Her granddaughter, Xiao Li, lost her job as a waitress when her work permit had not been renewed. Jet listened to her longwinded, frustrated tale about the injustice that was Ba Sing Se's local administration and promised to help. All the while Smellerbee was at his side. Jet could trust her to write it all down, to keep track of his promises.

Jet liked talking to people, liked listening to their sorrows and liked the way a kind word could ease a frown and bring back a smile. This was what he'd come here for. And for the first time in a long time he actually felt like he was doing something, and not just anything, but the right thing. These people had suffered enough. They did not want hand outs or charity; all they wanted was the chance to make a new life. He just wished that there was more he could do, that they could help more people, but the number of permits was limited. With every promise, every pride stiffened plea for help, the
number of permits dwindled. They would have to find a way to get more soon.

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"You know what we should do?" They stood outside the dormitory, the sun low in the sky. The earlier crowd having dispersed, the street was starting to fill with a different kind of crowd. Smellerbee was packing up her ink and brush. "Have dinner tonight!"

"We weren't going to?" Jet teased her, having a pretty good idea what she was at. "Damn, I'm kinda hungry."

"Funny. I meant a nice dinner at our place, you know you and Longshot." She gave him a sly look. "… and Li."

"You're not coming?" Jet tried to suppress a grin. "I thought you liked Li?"

"You know what I mean." Smellerbee socked him in the arm. "Go and apologize, Jet."

Jet rubbed the spot where she'd punched him. "Yeah, I know, Bee."

"Good. That was a stupid fight." She'd finished packing up her things and gave him a happy smile. "See you at the apartment."

ooooo

Not quite ready to face Li, Jet strolled down the street to the market. He walked past the pots and pans at the iron mongers over to the food section, where stacks of vegetables and spices, dried seaweed, and piles of mushrooms were on display. He stepped around a cart full of cabbages, the merchant animatedly arguing with a customer over the price. A pungent smell, like a picken cage long overdue cleaning after a three weeks heat wave, washed over him and he covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve, looking for the offending source. He found it in a stall that sold spiky gray-green fruit. Some of it had been cracked open revealing pale-yellow fruit flesh. Driven by morbid curiosity Jet stepped closer, breathing shallowly. Spirits, how could anyone eat something that foul?

An old woman with a face like a winter-wizened apple was lazily fanning at the ripe fruit with a wooden fan, keeping the flies away. She sat on one of the crates the fruit came in. Jet tilted his head to get a better look at the writing on the crate and snorted, torn between amusement and disgust. Figures, Jet thought. Something that putrid could only be Fire Nation.

The smell seemed to cling to him, and linger even after a few dozen feet. Jet kept walking. The market gave way to store fronts, and single stalls. He browsed through a collection of ready-made tunics, holding one up against his chest, trying it for size, amused at how many shades of green there were, when his eyes fell on a display across the street. Dozens of glass jars, the lids wrapped in green fabric to make them seal tight, were arranged in neat rows by the entrance. The smallest of them reached to Jet's knee, the biggest was about the size of a wheelbarrow. The setting sun illuminated the amber liquid inside, giving the things floating in it a golden glow. Jet had never seen such a huge variety of flavored bai-jiu. He only ever had the home-brewed variety, distilled from whatever grains could be spared and then aged to majority in earthenware jars, spiced with the berries, mushrooms and the occasional lizard from the forest.

Digging for cash in his pockets Jet entered the shop, squinting up at the dangling sign. It read, Jet
was fairly sure, Drong's Delicatessen.

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His purchases neatly tied up and stored in a string bag, courtesy of the store, Jet set out for the teahouse. Li would be getting off work in a few hours.

The streets changed with the time of day. Dusk was rising and the regular shops were closing up, making room for the street merchants. The setting sun was casting the sky in a rather unpatriotic mix of red and gold. With the setting sun and dinner time getting closer, the carts that had been selling fruits and vegetables during the day were pushed off and different ones appeared, full of sweets, trinkets and other more questionable merchandise. Jet's stomach growled. The night-market was not yet in full swing, vendors only setting up, the coals on their barbecues still black, barely dusted with gray.

A girl, Jet recognized her as the one who'd made cow eyes at Li, was pushing a cart, calling out for people to buy the last of her fruit on a stick. The freshly cut melons looked sweet and Jet would have been tempted to buy one, but for the fact that he did not like her, did not like the way she hung around the teahouse, and even more importantly did not like the way she looked at Li. He walked past her stall, giving her melons a once over. She shot him a dirty look and Jet smiled back with more teeth than necessary.

Hidden in the shade of one of the bigger houses, a few feet away from where she was selling her fruit was another stand, smaller, with less selection but also less of her.

A skinny girl with a friendly smile was standing behind a pile of what look to be some sort of peaches. If Jet were honest with himself he'd admit to not really liking peaches that much, that in fact he'd much rather buy one of the fragrant honey-melons from the other girl, but there were times when a peach was the better option.

He picked up one of the smooth, red and gold flecked fruits.

"This is some kind of peach, right?"

"Those are nectarines." She smiled at him. "Do you want some?"

Out of the corner of his eye Jet could see a group of Joo Dees crossing the street, their hands demurely hidden in their flowing sleeves. He stepped out of sight behind the fruit stand, pretending to inspect the wares. The crush of people opened and closed around them, as if they walked in an invisible bubble, a pack of lion-sharks passing through a school of sardines. He shuddered. There was something wrong with the way they smiled, their expression never wavering, as if they were wearing masks.

The girl said something to him and he blinked, looking back at her and the nectarines she was holding out for him.

"Four nectarines." She paused and then repeated, "Four nectarines for Ba Sing Se."

"Four what?" Jet repeated a bit sheepishly since he hadn't paid attention. A bit puzzled, too since that sentence really didn't make much sense. "Four nectarines for Ba Sing Se?"

"Yes, for only one copper piece." The girl held up one of the fruit, locking eyes with him. "Four nectarines for Ba Sing Se."
Jet's stomach growled and that made his decision for him.

"Sure." He shrugged and handed over the coin.

She wrapped the fruit in cut up squares of old Sing Bao to keep them fresh and then folded another piece of paper into a conical bag.

Only later, when he was sitting on the roof opposite the teahouse did Jet notice that she'd given him an extra nectarine.

ooooo

Jet had staked out his usual spot on the roof and was watching Li work. Watching him come and go from the main room, bring trays full of steaming cups and taking away the empty ones after wiping down the tables was kind of soothing. Jet's stomach growled again and he reached into the paper bag, pulling out one of the nectarines. He unwrapped it, dropping the paper behind him, letting the wind carry it off. He took a bite of the nectarine, wondering what that girl had been on about and if maybe she'd been in the sun too long. Four nectarines for Ba Sing Se? What did that even mean?

Li was kneeling in front of a customer, fussing over what looked to Jet like fancy tea foam in a cup. And even though he wasn't smiling, Jet grinned, some things probably would never change, Li was the picture of grace as he poured and offered the tea to one of the two old ladies, holding his sleeve back with his left hand in poised gesture.

There was a minimalist elegance to his movements that made Jet wonder if Pao or his Uncle had taken him aside at one point and taught him how to do this, or, more likely, if this was just another fancy thing Li had learned back when he'd been rich.

The sky was getting dark and Ba Sing Se exploded in a sea of green lanterns. Jet watched Li unhook the teahouse lanterns with a long bamboo stick, light them and hang up again, their greenish-golden light illuminating the street below. When Li was done he wiped his hands on his apron and stepped closer to the house Jet was hiding on. Jet pulled back a bit, trying hide in the shadow of the chimney.

"Spirits, Jet. You know we can see you, right?" Li glared up at him, his arms crossed in front of his chest. He let out an exasperated huff. "Just come inside! You're making Pao nervous. He thinks you're going to rob the place."

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Notes: If you squint 四油(桃) 'si you tao' i.e. 'four nectarines' sound a lot like 自由 'zi you' i.e. freedom.
Li ushered him into the teahouse kitchen and before Jet could complain – not that he wanted to – he found himself sitting in a corner, nursing a cup of Mushi’s amazing jasmine tea.

He half pretended to listen to Mushi’s chatter about the right preparation for oolong while chewing on his straw and surreptitiously watching Li coming and going from the room.

The kitchen was hot and humid, several small fires were burning in the stove, soot blackened kettles sitting on them, spouts steaming. Jet reached for the window, cracking it open to let in the cool night air. Mushi was readying a group order and Jet thought that for a man of his girth, Mushi was actually quite quick on his feet. It was almost like watching someone do a combat routine, the way he moved between the stove, the tea cabinet and the work-counter.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, the teahouse closed and Mushi and Pao sat down in the main room to talk over the day's business. Li grabbed the broom and started the evening clean up. Jet was leaning against the door, watching Li sweep the restaurant, wondering, not for the first time this evening, how he should apologize. He ran through the scenarios in his head, trying to decide how to phrase it. *I'm sorry, I was a jerk earlier.* That could be a start, only… Li didn't seem angry at him. No pouting, no more than usual for Li, anyway and no shouting or accusations. Not even a cold shoulder. He was acting pretty much as if nothing had happened at all.

By the time Li had extinguished all but one lantern in the main room and had bolted the front door Jet had come to the conclusion that maybe this was how Li wanted it, that maybe Li understood.

He watched Li pour the remaining hot water from the kettles into a basin to wash the cups and pots. Steam rose from the basin and Jet worried for a second that Li would scald his hands on the hot water, but it must have been cooler than he suspected, since Li never so much as twitched. Li rubbed a rag over a bar of soap and started cleaning the small earthenware cups, stacking them on a clean towel to dry. Jet stored his straw behind his ear and grabbed the second towel from the hook next to the sink. Maybe there was a better way to say sorry than saying it out loud.

Jet stepped up next to him and took the cup Li'd just finished washing and dropped it, shaking his hand in pain. The cup bounced off the counter and rolled to halt a few feet away.

"Ow, those are really hot." Jet bent to pick up the miraculously unbroken cup.

"Did you just break that?" Li, hands dripping sudsy water, turned toward him and scowled. "Just leave them be, they'll dry by themselves."

"No. And no need to thank me," Jet muttered and picked up another cup, making sure to only touch it with his towel. For the second time he wondered how Li could stand the water. Must be practice.

"Why are you doing this?" Li looked pointedly at the cup in Jet's hands.

"Hey, I thought you could use a hand." Jet gently nudged him with his hip, winking at him. "Besides, the sooner you get done, the sooner we're out of here." Jet moved closer to Li, pressed against him from behind and kissed the tender spot behind his ear, whispering for only Li to hear, "And I can think of a few things more interesting than washing dishes…"

Jet stepped back and watched the spectacle that was unfolding on Li's face. Li blinked once, twice and then his eyes went wide and he blushed to the root of his hair. Jet put down the dry cup and let out an amused chuckle. Some things were just too easy.
When they got back to the apartment, Smellerbee was just setting out four sets of chopsticks and plates on the table. Jet blinked. Matching plates.

"Heya, guys! Longshot, they're here." Smellerbee smiled at them. "Good to see you two."

Jet looked around the apartment, whistling softly under his breath. Someone had been decorating.

"Nice scrolls. So, Longshot's been going all out on the shopping, huh?" he gently teased Smellerbee, She seemed oblivious to it and beamed at him.

"Yeah, he got sheets and blankets, too. And a three legged toad." She pointed to the gilded figurine of a toad perching on a pile of Earth Kingdom money. She had placed it on the window sill, where it overlooked the living room. Its green crystal eyes glowed menacingly and golden coins protruded from its squat mouth. "It's for luck!"

"Those eyes glow in the dark! That's awesome, man!" Jet elbowed Li, who was standing wide-eyed at his side. "Don't you agree?"

"Amazing," Li muttered. "Did you really pay for that?"

"Yeah, Bee, did you?" Jet chuckled, shifting his straw from one side of his mouth to the other. "Or did you get a five-finger discount?"

"Paid." Smellerbee stuck her tongue out at him. "I thought we're going straight now. No more stealing."

Li snorted and she glowered up at him, pointing her finger at his chest, her voice full of hurt dignity. "Oh, you're a fine one to talk, Mr Blue Spirit."

Jet looked at her extended finger - she had to stretch up quite a bit to reach Li's chest - and then at Li who was squinting down at Smellerbee, a look of exasperation on his face. Jet caught his eye and they both dissolved into laughter.

"You two are impossible!" Smellerbee huffed. "Fine, no more stealing in …" she paused and her frown started to wobble, turning into a grin. "Broad daylight?"

"Wouldn't want to attract unwanted attention, now do we?" Jet sidled up to Li and slid his hand over Li's ass, squeezing, enjoying the way Li gasped and then turned to glare at him.

Longshot appeared from the kitchen carrying a tray with several serving plates brimming with food. It smelled delicious and Jet's stomach rumbled.

"I'm gonna go help Longshot get the grub." Smellerbee gestured for them to sit at the low table.

"You made egg-fried pork?" Jet grabbed himself a pillow and threw it down on the kang.

"Awesome! Li, you have to try this, I swear Longshot's egg-fried pork is the best there is!"

Longshot blushed and gave Jet a happy little smile.

Jet set down cross-legged, looking at Li who was standing awkwardly near the kang, obviously not sure on what to do. His hands were clenching and unclenching into the fabric of his tunic, a tiny
adorable scowl on his face. Not being able to resist the temptation, Jet grinned and pulled a struggling Li onto his lap. "Hiya!"

"Do you have to do this?" Li glowered down at Jet, but didn't move.

"Yep." Jet decided to push his luck and tried to pull Li down for a kiss. "It's part of my charm."

Li growled under his breath, his hands on Jet's shoulders, keeping Jet at arm-length. Jet snuck his hand under Li's long tunic, running it over his thigh.

"Cut it out," Li snapped, batting his hand away. "There's grass in your face."

Li plucked the straw from Jet's mouth and tossed it onto the kang. Then he grabbed a rather surprised Jet by the front of his shirt, pulled him close and kissed him.

Smellerbee coughed and gave them an amused look. "Food's ready."

Li scrambled off his lap, blushing a furious, deep, adorable red. Smellerbee tossed him a pillow.

The food did look and smell good. Jet could hear his stomach rumbling as they waited for Longshot to come and join them. Then he suddenly got up, tapping the side of his nose.

"I nearly forgot." He went over to the door where he'd dropped his bag. "I got us a treat in celebration of the day." Jet grinned and pulled the bottle of bai-jiu he'd bought earlier, putting it on the table. Li picked it up and inspected it.

"Jet…" Li held the bottle up against the light. "… there's stuff floating in it."

"Yep, I got the expensive bai-jiu."

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"I'm not drunk!" Smellerbee proclaimed in the exuberant way of the truly and utterly smashed. Longshot rolled his eyes at her and picked her up, carrying her over to their room. She was fast asleep and snoring slightly by the time he closed the door behind them.

Wouldn't want to be her tomorrow, Jet thought. He had only had a glass or two, but even he could feel its warmth coursing through his veins. Li'd not really touched the bai-jiu, proclaiming it vile after a tiny sip and a lot of coughing. Jet had laughed at that, teasing Li that 'if it was too strong, then he was too weak'.

Li was standing at the window, looking out over the dark city, his arms wrapped around himself. Jet stepped up behind him, sliding his arms around Li's middle, his fingers coming to rest on Li's stomach. Jet brushed his lips against the nape of Li's back and Li drew in a sharp breath.

"It's getting late, I should go." Li didn't move.

"Or you could stay." Jet tightened his grip around Li's waist, pulling Li tighter against his body, making his intention clear.

There was a moment of silence, when Li didn't answer but didn't pull away. Jet was breathing shallowly, trying to keep the effect of having Li so close to him under control. He wanted Li, wanted him so badly he could almost taste it. After a minute or so, when Li still hadn't moved, or given any sign of what he intended to do, Jet was starting to worry that he'd pushed it too fast, that Li would
blush and panic and run from him again, but Li didn't.

"Yes." Li's voice was barely above a whisper, but in the silence of the apartment it was enough.

Jet smiled against Li's skin, kissing the side of his neck. This was what he'd been waiting for, wanted, ever since he first spotted Li leaning against the railing on the ferry.

Li let out a startled little sound and pulled away, turning around to glower at Jet. "That tickles."

"How horrible," Jet gently mocked and pulled Li into a proper kiss.

They ended up against the door to Jet's room, Li's hands tugging at Jet's shirt, Jet's knee between Li's legs. Jet fumbled for the handle, gave up and just dug his fingernails into the frame to make the door slide back.

They stumbled into the room, Li first, nearly falling. Li's legs hit the bed and he tumbled backwards onto it, Jet landing on top of him. Li made an undignified grunting sound and Jet rolled off him, onto clean, crisp sheets. Jet made a mental note to thank Longshot tomorrow.

Li's body was hot and solid under him, reminding him that this was not one of the many wet dreams he'd had about exactly this happening, but finally real. It was almost too good to be true. He tugged at Li's belt, pushing the tunic off Li's shoulders and huffed in frustration at discovering not one, but two more layers of clothing between him and Li's skin. A tiny voice in the back of his mind wondered if Li dressed like this on purpose to annoy him.

Soon their clothing was scattered across the floor and Li's fingers were digging into the bare skin of his back. Jet arched into the touch, capturing Li's mouth in a hot, searing kiss. A kiss that turned into another and another and then a nip at Li's jaw, his collarbone and then all the way down Li's body. Jet enjoyed the trail of gasps and moans each lick, each gentle nip and soothing kiss drew from Li.

Jet sat back on his heels, looking down at Li spread out on his bed. Li's face was flushed, his breathing uneven. Hands holding on tightly to fistfuls of blanket, Li shivered, looking up at him through lust hazy eyes. Jet smiled, reaching for Li's hand, entwining their fingers. Jet held his gaze for as long as Li would let him. There was vulnerability in Li's eyes, and, for a brief moment, a sort of soft wonder, as if he could not believe this was happening, either. Then Li took a deep breath, screwed his eyes shut and turned his head away, burying the undamaged side of his face in the pillow.

Later, when they lay tangled in each other, and Li had fallen asleep, snoring softly, Jet ran a tender hand over Li's face, his fingers ghosting over the raised scar tissue on Li's face. Li stirred and Jet pulled his hand back, wrapping his arms instead around Li's waist, pressing a tender kiss to Li's shoulder, not intending to let him go anytime soon now that he finally had him.

The sun had barely started to rise above the horizon, only a thin sliver of gold rising up from the gray of twilight, when someone touched Jet's shoulder. Jet opened one sleep-encrusted eye, peering up at a fully dressed Li.
"Mmph."

"I have to go."

"What? It's barely dawn." Jet sat up, rubbing his eyes. He reached out and tried to pull Li back down onto the bed.

"Jet, I need to get going."

"Why? I'd rather you stay."

"Some of us have a job." Li batted his hands away. "You might want to try that too, one day."

Jet threw a pillow at him. Li easily dodged it, sliding the door open.

"Am I going to see you later?"

Li looked at him from the open door, his scowl giving way to a tiny smile. He nodded. "I'll bring lunch."

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Jet woke up a few hours later, his stomach growling. He got up and stretched. Still yawning, he slid the door open and was greeted with a rather noxious smell coming from the kitchen.

"That better not be breakfast." Jet pinched his nose shut 'til he reached the window, then pushed the shutters wide open. "Better! What is that smell?"

"Do you have to make so much noise?" Smellerbee was laying on the kang, propped up by pillows, with a bucket next to her on the floor and a wet towel over her face.

"Are we feeling a bit under the weather?" Jet did nothing to keep the amusement out of his voice. Considering the way she'd chucked back the bai-jiu last night, he was actually kind of impressed that she was conscious.

"Fuck you, Jet," Smellerbee muttered, her voice muffled by the towel. She inched away from the patch of sunlight the open shutters left in.

Jet snickered and went into the kitchen, helping himself to a bowl of the zhou Longshot must have made earlier.

"Morning, Longshot." Jet leaned against the counter, peeling an egg and cutting it onto of his porridge. He stirred and started spooning his breakfast into his mouth with relish.

Longshot, who was stirring a dark brown liquid in a pot, nodded at him in acknowledgment. A paper bag, contents spilling out onto the workspace next to him, bore the crest of 'Old Li's Apothecary'. That explained the smell.

Jet watched Longshot pour the infusion into a small porcelain cup and carry it over to Smellerbee. Jet took his bowl and followed him. This was going to be good.

Smellerbee had not moved, her face still covered with the damp towel. She stirred slightly and let Longshot help her sit up all the way. He pressed the cup with the medicine into her hand, motioning her to drink. Smellerbee took one sniff and gagged.
"What is that crap? That smells rank!" Smellerbee complained. "I'm not going to drink that!"

"That's not what you said last night." Jet snickered.

"I hate you! Lots!" Smellerbee grumbled and then glared at Longshot but took the cup. "Both of you."

She took a sip and gagged, spitting into her hand and examining the contents. "ANTLERS! Why are there antlers in my willow-bark tea?"

"Drink up, Bee. Those antlers will do ya good. " Jet snickered then continued more to himself than anyone else," Besides I'm not sure how long I can handle you being hungover."

oooooooo

Just as he had promised, Li showed up at around noon, carrying two earthenware pots with the seal of a nearby restaurant on their side.

"I brought lunch!" The sleeves of his oversized tunic covered his hands and he stood there, Jet thought, like a little boy in his dad's clothes, all uncertain defiance. It was oddly adorable.

"Oh, good." Smellerbee hastened to grab the pots of Li, putting them on the table. "I'm starving."

"Look who's feeling better now." Jet teased her, before pulling Li into an embrace. "Missed you!"

oooooooo

They ate the noodles Li had brought and afterwards Smellerbee sheepishly asked Li to help her fill out some of the work-permits she'd taken the names and data for yesterday.

Jet grabbed a pillow and folded his arms behind his head. Watching their heads bent over the paperwork, Li's graceful movements as he wrote down the information Smellerbee gave him, was oddly soothing and Jet felt his eyes drift shut.

He woke when a pillow hit him square in the face. Smellerbee was glaring down at him. "We're done, O Mighty Lazy One."

"I'm carrying the responsibility." Jet smirked up at her. "That's hard work, I'll have you know."

"Don't you mean hardly?" Li had crossed his arms in front of his chest, sniggering down at Jet's mock-outraged expression.

"I'll show you about hardly…" Jet made a grab for Li's arm, pulling him onto the kang next to him. Li let out a rather undignified squeak, but let himself be pulled and Jet could swear there was an actual smile forming on his lips. It made Jet want to kiss him, so he did.

Smellerbee muttered something that sounded a lot like: 'I really don't need to see that' and marched into the kitchen to help Longshot clean up.

They heard her fill a basin with water from the cistern to wash the dishes, loudly complaining about the icy-cold water.
Jet reached over to the window sill, grabbing one of the nectarines from the fruit bowl. He unwrapped the fruit and bit into it. "Want one?"

Li nodded, not moving from his place among the pillows.

"So, tonight…” Jet picked up another nectarine and tossed it at Li. "What would you say to a bit of rooftop fun?"

"What do you have in mind?” Li caught the fruit gracefully from mid-air and peeled the paper off. He dropped it onto the kang next to him. He rubbed the nectarine against his shirt to clean it before taking a bite.

"I want to get a better impression of the city. There have to be more warehouses like the one we visited." Jet propped himself up on his elbow, looking straight at Li. "You in?"

Jet watched Li lick the sticky juice of his fingers, his tongue shockingly pink against pale skin. Jet blinked, licking his lips in mimicry, wondering how much time exactly they had before Li had to go back to work. The idea of pulling Li into his room and licking the nectarine juice off Li's fingers himself was growing more appealing by the second.

"Just scouting?" There was odd undertone to Li's voice, a mixture of excitement and hesitation and Jet remembered what Li had promised his uncle. That, and Li was pretty easy to read most of the time, and Jet could see that he wanted this, missed running along rooftops in the middle of the night, missed not being cooped up in a teahouse serving tea to old ladies all day.

"Just scouting. Nothing else.” Jet nodded, figuring that it would be easy enough to persuade Li once they were up on the rooftops, if the opportunity to a raid presented itself.

Li suddenly sat up straight and picked up one of the paper wrappings they had dropped, smoothing it out with unsteady hands. "Where did you get this?"

"What? From one of the fruit stands near the teahouse. Why?" Jet sat up and leaned closer, trying to get a look. "What's with it?"

"It's some kind of underground newspaper.” Li's eyes were speeding over the paper.

"Really?" Ba Sing Se had an underground? The thought of that excited Jet. It was good to know that not everyone was cowed by the Dai Li. "What does it say?"

Li made a 'later' gesture at Jet with his hand, continuing to read, a multitude of emotions washing over his face. When he finally looked up his mouth was pinched and his eyes wild. Li stood up, putting the paper flat on the table. He ran a hand through his hair, pulling at it.

"The Fire Nation breached the outer wall with some sort of drill, but was thrown back not by the army but a single earthbender." Li's face had lost what little color it had, his eyes narrowing, moving rapidly as he continued to read. He was leaning heavily on the table. "The Fire Army … No…”

"Is that for real?” Smellerbee quipped and wiped her hands on her tunic. "I thought there was no war in Ba Sing Se?"

"There isn't." Jet said with satisfaction. He wondered what part of this had upset Li the way it did. Was that how he had gotten his scar? An encounter with the army? He tried to put jovial cheer into his voice, trying to comfort Li, rubbing a soothing hand over Li's back. "We kicked them back out, didn't we?"
"True." Smellerbee nodded and sat down on the kang, drawing her feet up under her, cocking her head at Li. "What else does it say?"

Li put his hand palm down on top of the paper, pulling his fingers together, scrunching up the paper in his hand, he closed his eyes, his voice shaking. "They claim…" He started and stopped, taking a deep breath to steady himself. "They claim that the attack was lead by the Fire Nation's crown princess." He spat the last words with a venom that made Jet wonder if Li had some personal grievance with her.

"The Fire Nation has a crown princess? I always thought they had a crown prince." Smellerbee scratched her head.

"So did I." Li threw the paper to the ground and stalked over to the window.

Smellerbee picked it up. "What kind of newspaper is this anyway? Doesn't look like the Sing Bao to me."

"Something underground." Jet answered her, looking at Li's slumped back. He wondered if it would do any good to hug him, or if that would make him stalk off, leave. "I've heard about her."

"Have you, now?" Li snapped and turned to glare at him. "What exactly did you hear?"

"Not that much, to be honest." Jet gave Li a reassuring smile. Maybe if he shared some information? Was that what it was? Li being uncertain because he didn't know what was going on or who he was dealing with? "The forest we used to live in, well we'd intercept Fire Nation messenger hawks from time to time and from what I've heard she made quite a name for herself. Supposed to be some kind of firebending genius."

Li let out an angry huff, his face settling into a scowl, his voice low, talking more to himself then any of them. He suddenly looked scared. "What is she doing here?"

"Sieging the city?" Jet shrugged, getting up. "Hey, don't worry, didn't that paper say we kicked her butt? They've been laying siege to Ba Sing Se for decades. Kinda like a big camping trip for them. We're safe here."

Li nodded tightly and muttered something that sounded a bit like: 'if it were that easy'.

Jet went on, taking a step towards Li. "But I gotta say, if we had someone like her leading us…” he took another bite of his nectarine. "And not an idiot who throws parties for bears, then we'd be the ones winning this war." He emphasized his words by pointing the half eaten fruit at Li.

"You sound like you approve." Li had turned away from him, staring out of the window, his knuckles white, fingers tense on the wooden frame.

"What? No. Me approving of anything Fire Nation? Of a firebender?" Jet threw the nectarine pit out of the window and hugged Li from behind, trying to give the comfort Li seemed to need. It wasn't right that he was this scared, even within the safety of Ba Sing Se's walls.

"Don't worry, we're safe here," Jet repeated and Li let out a shuddering, unsteady breath, haphazardly trying to free himself from Jet's embrace. Jet held him tight, not letting him get away. He rested his head on Li's shoulder and Li leaned back into him.

They stood like that for a moment, Jet pressing his lips against Li's neck, his voice soothing.

"It's going to be alright. We're going to be alright. I promise. We're going to get them back for this
one day. For everything they've done to us. You don't have to be afraid of their firebenders. They're not invincible, you know. I've killed plenty of them."

Li stiffened in his arms when he mentioned the firebenders and Jet cursed inwardly, his hands running slow circles over Li's chest.

"You do really hate them that much, don't you?" Li's voice was barely above a whisper; he sounded broken and defeated.

"Yeah. I do. I've seen what they do." For a moment Jet could smell the smoke again, saw the fire and he vowed that this would not happen to this city if he had a say. "What they do to good people." He ran his finger over the edge of Li's scar and Li flinched away from the contact. Jet continued, his voice tight, "I don't think there's anyone out there who hates firebenders more than I do."

"Then…" Jet felt the muscles in Li's back shift and stiffen. He was silent for a moment, drawing in on himself. His voice broke and he started again, barely above a whisper. "Then you'd better let go off me."

"Li, we're not blind. We know you have Fire Nation blood." Jet let out a small laugh, wondering if that was what all of this was about. "It's okay, Li. It's not your fault that your father didn't take no for an answer."

"That my father…?" Li sounded confused, as if he had to make sense of what Jet had just said, as if the implication was somehow foreign to him. Then Li turned around with force, his hands pushing at Jet's chest and Jet was stumbling backwards.

"What is wrong with you? That's sick!" Li's hands were balled at his side, his face a mask of fury. "My father would never do that!"

"You… Your father…" Jet looked at Li, really looked at him, taking in his defensive stance, the way his feet had unconsciously slipped into a fighting stance. A stance he'd seen many times when fighting Fire Nation soldiers. "You're Fire Nation?"

And then Li nodded. Jet's horror must have been obvious on his face since Li's face shuttered, his voice defeated, barely audible. "So much for: 'It's okay, Li'."

There was a moment of deafening, uncomprehending silence, when all Jet could hear was the blood pounding in his ears, before he took a step back, his mind reeling. He shook his head, refusing to take Li's words the only way they could be taken, desperately grasping for an explanation that did not bring his world tumbling down. That didn't feel like a kick in the gut.

Longshot got up, his steps echoing in the silence as he walked over to Smellerbee. Jet looked from Li to Smellerbee to Longshot and back to Li.

"What do you mean?" He heard Smellerbee ask after a while, her voice hoarse and a little bit shrill, answering her own question. "You're a firebender."

And then Li defiantly said the word Jet's mind screamed could not be true. "Yes."

"No!" He could barely hear his own words, blood pounding in his ears, not sure he'd even spoken at all.

Smellerbee said that she should have figured, that she knew, but that made no sense to Jet. Why would she say such a thing, in such a calm voice? Why would she betray their cause? The thought made him angry and his eyes darted across the room, looking for his swords. They had to be
somewhere, and finally he spotted them leaning against his bed. The bed he'd just shared with …

Li had taken a few steps towards the door when Jet lost his temper, when the words came back with force.

"Why would you help us, if you're one of them?" Jet was trying not to scream, crowding in on Li, trapping him between kang and kitchen. "I don't believe you."

"Why wouldn't I?" Li ground out. "Why would I lie about this?"

"Then prove it!" Jet spat, the rein on his anger slipping.

"I'm not a liar." Li raised his hand palm up, the ghost of a flame forming above it.

"Spirits, Li! Did you have to do that?" Smellerbee grabbed Li's arm, pulling it back down, giving him a glare that clearly said that he was not helping. "This was going so well. Let me handle this."

"It's true..." Jet looked at Li, at Li's hand. He could still see the afterimage of the flame that had flickered in Li's palm just a second ago, and he started to laugh manically, hysterically. "You really are a firebender..."

Jet had to say the words out loud, to comprehend them. His head swam and he had to steady himself on the table, not trusting his legs to support him. He heard Smellerbee say that Li should just leave, but he wasn't really listening. The truth seemed bright red in front of his eyes, blinding him. Li was a firebender. Li. Was. A. Firebender. Darkness crept up on the edge of his vision.

Jet stopped laughing, suddenly dead-sober. "Then prove to me that you're Fire Nation scum!" His lip curled, his voice low, dangerous. "Burn this place, kill us all. Isn't that what you people do?"

Smellerbee took a step closer, reaching for Jet. He looked at her hand on his arm, felt the cold seeping through his sleeve, creeping up, just like…

"Jet? This is Li..." Her small hands still damp from washing the dishes, her voice pleading. "Li's on our side, Jet." She carefully positioned herself between him and Li. "He's the Blue Spirit, remember? He's one of us, one of the good guys."

"Let go of me!" Jet scrambled back, pulling his arm away from her as quickly as he could, but it was too late, the cold was already spreading, freezing him into place and there was nothing he could do about it.

"I know, don't you think I know that?" It sounded more like a sob, a plea, than a question. He looked at Li in his oversized, second hand clothes and swallowed, futilely trying fight the tidal wave of memories that loomed at the edge of his vision. It was almost a relief when it swept over him. It churned, bubbled, a malevolent whirlpool of raw emotion that tore at him with nails and teeth.

His swords, he had to get his swords. He frantically looked around the apartment, finally seeing the familiar hilts peek out from under his bed. The bed they'd-

Jet swallowed back the bile and balled his hands to fists. He had to get his swords and then he'd get Li for what he'd done, for how he'd betrayed them. He sprinted into his room, pulling his Shang Gou out from under the bed.

There was the soft click of his door closing and when Jet pushed against it from the inside he felt Longshot holding it close.
"Open that damned door," Jet yelled, pushing hard against it. The door gave slightly, it was not as if Longshot weighed all that much.

"Only if you promise not to do something stupid." Smellerbee demanded.

"Open. The. Door." Jet ignored her, putting his full strength into his next shove. Longshot stumbled halfway across the room and Jet glared at Smellerbee, pointing his sword at her, angry at their betrayal. Li was Fire Nation, how could they do that to him?

"Where is he?" Jet hollered at his Freedom Fighters, searching the room frantically. "WHERE is he?"

"Jet…" Smellerbee tried again. "Li left." She grabbed his arm again. "Come, we need to talk."

"You let him leave?" Jet's voice was incredulous; he yanked his arm from her. "What if he's a spy? How do we know that he won't turn us in? You can't trust a firebender!"

"Jet, this is stupid," Smellerbee ground out. It was clear she was having trouble keeping her voice under control.

"If you're not gonna help, then get out of my way!" Jet pushed her and she stumbled. He ignored her pained cry as she hit the floor and made for his weapons. Swords in hands, Jet stepped toward the door. Longshot was helping a cursing Smellerbee up and Jet raised his swords in warning, pushing past them.

"Jet! Come back!" Smellerbee hollered but Jet was already out the door and halfway down the corridor. Not that he would have listened to her anyway. If they were fine with firebender in their midst…well he'd deal with that later, but he wasn't and there'd be a reckoning.

He hastened down the stairs, jumping several steps at a time only to come to a skidding halt at the main gate, panting. Jet's head turned left and right, his eyes darting from face to face, searching the sea of green clothes and dark hair. Li could not be that far ahead, but where had the bastard gone to?

Jet set off towards the teahouse, deeming it his best bet. Li had a lot to answer for, and Jet wanted answers, now better than later. No one snuck past his defenses, deceived him and betrayed him, without paying for it. Had that been Li's plan all along? Integrate himself into the Freedom Fighters and then destroy them? It all made sense now. The way he'd gotten Smellerbee on his side, pretending to be her hero. How he had managed to pit his own Freedom Fighters against him. Jet tightened the grip on his swords. He'd make Li pay for it. Dearly. He sped around a corner, slipping on the loose sand and smacked into something someone's back. Both he and the man he'd run into stumbled. Jet managed to catch his footing, arms flailing.

"Move, asshole." He shoved the man out of his way, ready to run off again when a woman, an earthbender judging by her lack of shoes, stepped into his way.

"Did you just shove my brother?" Her left foot slid back and Jet could feel the earth ripple under his feet.

"I said, get out of my way!" Jet crossed his shuang gou in front of him, trying to push past her. Rock closed around his ankle, locking him in place. Jet cursed, his swords ready in front of him. He'd never fought an earthbender before. This was all Li's fault. "Let me go!"

"And where do you think you are going?" There was an infuriating smug undertone to the bender's voice.
Jet crouched down and started hacking at the rock with the hilt of his sword, freeing his foot. "Get out of my way. The firebender is getting away!"

"Firebender?" The woman's voice was amused. "Really?"

"I think someone owes Ling an apology," another man chimed in.

People were gathering around them, in good Ba Sing Se fashion of never passing up the opportunity for free entertainment. Jet thought he could make out the shape of Longshot's hat in the crowd. The traitor.


"Or what?" She deliberated reached out with her hand, pulling the earth out from underneath Jet's feet. He fell to the ground, rolled and hooked his swords and whipped them in a slashing arc at her shoulder. She cursed and stepped back. The blade of Jet's second sword collided with a pillar of rock, sliced halfway through it and stuck. He propped his foot against the stone, pulling at the stuck sword. It took his full strength to retrieve it from the rock.

"Don't you understand? You're letting the firebender get away!" Jet was yelling now, between heaving breaths, gesturing in the direction Li had gone, yelling. "HIM! Li!"

Heads turned, and the crowd parted, revealing a cabbage stand.

"Him?" The earthbender laughed, pointing at the exasperated looking cabbage merchant. "Seriously?"

"Not him, you moron! He's getting away!" Jet swung his swords wildly, his vision red hot with anger. If he could only get away, could only get Li, they'd believe him then. They'd have to!

There was the wet sound of swords cutting through flesh Jet noted with satisfaction. That should teach them to stay out of his way. Li was getting away and he'd be damned if he let that happen.

A cart rumbled into the square and stopped a few feet away. The crowd lapsed into a sudden silence. Out of the corner of his eye Jet saw several dark clad men come toward him and he raised his swords, ready for whatever they could throw at him. He never got to do so much as swing his shuang gou. Jet felt the earthen hand close around his wrists, drawing them behind his back. The stone fingers twisted and squeezed and he dropped his swords, gasping in pain. He struggled for his balance, legs kicking. A second earthen hand, balled to a fist, hit him in the chin and his head jerked painfully to the side, the momentum of the impact pushing him over. He fell.

Time seemed to slow down, stretched and thickened until it resembled the flow of treacle. He felt suspended in mid-air, his head jerked back, the pain spreading. Someone was screaming his name. There were faces looking down on him. He thought he'd made out Longshot and Smellerbee in the crowd. Then time sped up, and he hit the ground and everything went dark.

He woke up chained to a chair, an eerie light flashing in front of his eyes. A soothing voice told him that he was safe now.

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se."

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se."

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se."
Notes:

Bai-jiu is a Chinese hard liquor of 80 to 120 proof. It has absolutely no resemblance to sake or soju. Wikipedia has a rather apt description of what it tastes like.

If you squint 四油(桃) 'si you (tao)' i.e. 'four nectarines' sound a lot like 自由 'zi you' i.e. freedom.
Zuko sat on the roof of Pao’s teahouse staring down at the roof-tiles, his stomach tight with anger. The street below was nearly deserted; most people had already returned to work after their lunch break. He kept an eye out, nevertheless, more for Jet than for the Dai Li. Zuko was not really worried about Jet turning him in. Jet was not really a ‘going to the authorities’ kind of guy, but judging from his reaction, he might be out for a fight. Zuko snorted. Not that Jet was going to be much of a challenge. He’d seen him fight. More enthusiasm than skill. He’d have Jet begging on his knees in a matter of seconds. And Jet would have it coming. How dare he say that about Zuko’s father? And about his mom! Anger and humiliation at someone even thinking that about his mother made Zuko seethe in impotent fury. Right now, what he really wanted was to punch Jet. Punch Jet until he couldn’t hear those vicious words anymore, until there was a reason for the hatred in Jet’s eyes. But he couldn’t. He’d promised Uncle to lay low, not to attract the attention of the authorities. Zuko scowled down at the roof. He wrapped his arms around himself and took a deep breath. He should have lied.

But that was just it. His fingers tightened, digging painfully into his arms. It was wrong. He shouldn’t have to lie, he told himself, not about this. Resentment boiled inside of him and he felt his body temperature rising. Was there nothing of his that he could keep? He’d resigned himself to the wrong name, to having failed his destiny and losing his throne, all for a chance at a normal life. That wasn’t going to happen, was it?

Zuko ground his teeth, trying to stomp on the memory of last night, of Jet touching him, of the brief moment of happiness this morning. He should never have let Jet get that close. He was not one of them. Never would be. And why would anyone want to be, anyway? His fingers were growing hot, flame was starting to coil around them, his bending getting harder to control by the minute. Zuko felt the angry heat his body was radiating and knew he should try to keep his bending under control, lest it give him away, but all he could think was that he was not cold anymore.

What now? Zuko let out a pained breath and covered his face in his hands, pressing his palms against his eyes. It would be easy to give in to the familiar pressure of despair, looming at the edge of his anger. Zuko let out a shaky breath to steady himself. He wouldn’t cry.

Pao’s shop was still closed and he wasn’t quite certain why he’d even bothered showing up for work. He watched a group of Dai Li agents pass the teahouse without so much as looking up and let out a breath he’d not been aware he’d been holding. He knew he needed to tell Uncle that he’d screwed up, that his rashness and his temper had cost them again, that their secret had been compromised. What had he been thinking, giving away their secret like that? Especially with Azula waiting outside the city. What did she want? Zuko let out a mirthless laugh. If she thought she could track the Avatar through him, she was hilariously wrong.

Azula being so close was a bit disconcerting. Remembering their last encounter, Zuko shuddered. What would happen if she somehow managed to get into the city, capture it even, capture them? Would she just send him and Uncle back in chains to the Fire Nation? The thought of going home was … he was tired of running, tired of trying to fit in; tired of only being accepted when he was pretending to be someone he was not. Why fight the inevitable? There was moss growing in the cracks between the tiles and Zuko picked at it, pulling out clumps of wet earth. He watched it crumble under the heat radiating from his palm.

He’d get up soon and confess what he’d done to Uncle. Soon, he told himself, but somehow Zuko couldn’t bring himself to move.
The wooden beams creaked and Zuko wearily watched as Smellerbee swung herself up onto the roof. He pulled out another clump of moss, pointedly ignoring her. He kind of wished she would go away, but knew he'd probably have no such luck.

She stood for a few seconds on the sun-drenched roof, looking lost, the wind tearing at her clothes and hair, before she sat down, a couple of feet away from him. Zuko held out his palm and the wind picked up the moss. He didn't say anything. If she wanted to talk to him, that was her choice.

After a minute or two Smellerbee cleared her throat, her voice hoarse, as if she had been crying. "Jet got arrested."

"Good." Bitterness welled up in Zuko; why should Jet get away if he couldn't? "What are you here for?" he snapped at Smellerbee, scowling. "If you want the bounty, you'll have to turn me in to the Fire Nation."

"What?" She snapped and drew herself up a little, hands balled to fists. "Why would I do that?"

Zuko huffed and thrust his hand out towards her face. He lit the wad of dried moss between his fingers, feeling his chi flow free for the first time in weeks, lips curving up into the semblance of a smile. "I'm sure you haven't even thought about it." The flames reflected briefly in her eyes and he saw her recoil and then visibly brace herself, looking more petulant than brave.

"Fuck you! What did you do that for?" she ground out, her eyes wide, still focused on his hand, as if the flame had hypnotized her like a rabbaroo facing a panther-python.

"Isn't that all we do?" Zuko sneered, mimicking Jet's voice.

"I didn't say that." She glowered at him, her hand inching toward her knives. "Are you done being a jerk?"

"No." He inspected the soot blacking the tips of his fingers, flicking a bit of dried moss away. "You haven't answered my question. Why are you even here? Do you want to watch them arrest me?"

It was as if that small movement broke the spell and Smellerbee turned her head away from him, looking out over the roofs. One of the city guards was making his rounds, sauntering down the nearly empty street, stopping here and there to talk to the local merchants. Smellerbee smacked the dry moss out of his hand, matching his scowl.

"Just keep on lighting shit and that pleasure will be all mine." She snapped and after moment went on, her voice less harsh, more thoughtful, "No one seemed to believe Jet about you being a firebender. They laughed at him ..." She wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on her knees. "What do you think is going to happen to Jet?"

"And I am supposed to know, how?" Her presence was starting to irritate him. He really did not get why she was here, what she could possibly want from him. The memory of Jet's words churned like acid in his stomach and he just wished she'd leave him be. He was going to get arrested soon anyway. Dragged back to the Fire Nation and publicly executed. He dusted his hand off on his pants. If he was lucky.

"You're the Blue Spirit." She turned to look at him. Looking him squarely in the eyes. "Aren't you."

"Yes." Zuko let out a dry humorless laugh, remembering what Zhao finding out about his secret had cost him. He ran an agitated hand through his hair. With a cruel edge to his voice, he asked, "What did he do, exactly? Kill someone?"
"No! He didn't." She cringed, closing her eyes for a moment as if lost in a memory of her own and went on, "He was coming after you; he said he wanted answers. And then started a fight with an earthbender."

"That's all?" Zuko did nothing to hide his surprise. He'd expected much worse.

"Isn't that enough?" She closed her eyes and Zuko could see a tear running down her cheek. "They're not going to … you know, execute him, are they?"

"Does he have any history with the Earth Kingdom guards?"

Smellerbee shook her head. "Not as far as I know."

"I doubt it, then." He vividly remembered that time when crewman Shi had gotten himself arrested in a port town. They'd locked him up and Zuko had to go negotiate with that smug hog-monkey of a mayor for Shi's release. In the end they'd let Shi go after Zuko had paid the outrageous fine, and … Shi was dead. All of them were dead. Zuko's stomach clenched and the rubbed his hands over his face, digging his palms into hollows of his eyes. He thought back on his days on his ship, hopping from port town to port town in search of any trace of the Avatar. It seemed like such a long time ago, another life even. His voice was broken, unsteady as he answered her, "Look, I don't know how this city works either. Why don't you ask Pao?"

"Li?"

Zuko startled at the concern in her voice. Something touched his arm and he stiffened, the muscles in his back like rock, as he felt her hand on his shoulder. "Don't touch me!"

"Are you alright?" Her hand hovered awkwardly by his shoulder before she pulled it back when he flinched away from her touch.

"Why do you care?" Zuko clenched his jaw and pulled out another clump of moss, feeling his chi warm his whole body as he watched the spongy green clump turn brown and dry up between his fingers. Spirits, he'd hated being cold.

"Of course, I care. You're one of us. One of the Freedom Fighters." After a moment of tense silence she added, "Aren't you?"

"What?" Her words snapped him fully back into the present and he let out a gasp of surprise. "Why would you want me to be one?" Zuko tried to stomp on that tiny speck of hope that was oozing through his despair. "You heard what Jet said."

"I defended you, you jerk." She shook her head in annoyance. "I don't think what he said is true. And you are the Blue Spirit." She looked at him then, as if searching for something. "You help people, don't you?"

"They don't want my help. No one ever does once they know who I am." Zuko shook his head. He all too bitterly remembered that farm out on the plains. The loathing and fear in the eyes of the woman who'd moments ago begged him to help her son. "They don't even want me around once they know."

Even Zhao had preferred to die rather than accept his help.

"I do." Desperation edged into her voice. "You're still the Blue Spirit." She tried again, picking at the skin on thumbnail. "You still did all those things."
"I didn't do them for you," Zuko ground out. There was no point in denying it; he was past the point of lying anyway. How had his childish vendetta with Zhao ended up so twisted? She really thought he'd done all those things to help her village. "I did them to get even with Zhao."

"But you still did them."

"I can't change who I am." Why wouldn't she go away? With all due right she should hate him, be terrified of him. "I won't."

"Oh, for fucks sake, I'm not asking that…" She stared down at her gloves, her words sliding into silence. After a while she sighed and went on, "Look, can we talk about that tonight? At the apartment?"

Zuko was about to ask her what there even was left to talk about when a pebble hit the roof about an inch from his foot. It bounced off the tiles in series of patters and Zuko heard a familiar voice call him.

"Nephew!"

Zuko looked down to the road below. Uncle Iroh was standing in the middle of the street, arms akimbo.

Zuko let out an exasperated sigh and hollered back,"What?"

"Pao wants you off the roof, he thinks people will think you're going to burgle the teahouse."

"Yes, Uncle." Zuko rolled his eyes and watched Uncle go back inside.

"Burgle the teahouse? Seriously?" Smellerbee coughed and muttered, "What for?"


Smellerbee snorted.

They stared out over the rooftops in silence. Another group of Dai Li walked past the teahouse, not even sparing it a second glance. Maybe Smellerbee was right and whoever had arrested Jet had only locked him up for fighting, but the queasy uncertainty remained. Some of the turmoil inside him was dying down, and even though Jet's reaction had left him with a bitter aftertaste, this time he wasn't as alone and friendless as he'd been in that town on the plains. The thought unsettled him more than he cared to admit.

"I have to work." Zuko got up, smoothing down his apron.

"Will you come by after work?" Smellerbee cocked her head at him, giving him a small, hopeful smile.

Zuko nodded. If he didn't get arrested first.

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Letting go of the side of the roof, he jumped the last bit, landing in a graceful crouch on the packed dirt of the alley. He dusted his hands off on his robe and took one last glance around the empty street before entering the teahouse. How long would it be before he could be certain the Dai Li would not come and arrest them? Hours? Days?
The door swung open with ease as Zuko pushed it, and Zuko shivered and blinked, trying to shake the disorientation, as he stepped in from the sun-baked street into the gloomy interior of the teahouse. Pao was bent over his ledgers at one of the tables and gave him a nod in greeting, then gestured absentmindedly at the shutters. "Some light would be nice, Li."

Zuko let out a perfunctory huff and started removing the wooden bars that locked the windows from the inside during off hours. He propped the shutters up against the wooden frame, letting in sunlight and air.

Uncle was apparently in a good mood since the words to *Four Seasons* echoed in bits and pieces in from the kitchen and Zuko sighed, hating himself for disappointing Uncle. Again.

Pao was muttering to himself, still bent over his ledger. He grumbled at Zuko to get on with it, customers could come in any minute, and not to forget to feed the fish. Zuko ground his teeth, refusing to admit that he was grateful for the excuse. He'd talk to Uncle once he'd done his chores.

Right, the fish. Zuko walked over to the counter and dug around in the box with the spare supplies for the fish food. He gently tapped the glass and, watching the goldfish come to the surface, he sprinkled the pellets onto the water. Li and Lo greedily snapped up the food, but there was no Mr. Fish. Zuko tilted his head, tapped at the glass again as he searched the fishbowl and cursed when he found him. Mr. Fish, well, what was left of him anyway, had sunk to the bottom, dead-white eyes staring up at Zuko from among the decorative stones. The day was getting better and better. He'd liked Mr. Fish.

Dragging in half a bucket of water from the rainwater barrel, Zuko hefted it onto the stool by the counter. He carefully caught the remaining fish with a cup and deposited them in the fresh water, then picked up the glass bowl to dump the water out in the kitchen drain and clean the decorations when Pao looked up from his ledgers.

"What do you think you're doing?" Pao put down his brush, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Didn't I tell you to…"

"Mr. Fish died." Zuko turned back to Pao, holding out the fishbowl the half eaten fish as evidence.

"Who's Mr. Fish?" Pao blinked at him for a second then he got up in a hurry, the color draining from his face. He steadied himself on table. "The fish died?"

"Yes." Zuko gave Pao an odd look. "I just said that."

"The FISH died?" Pao ran over to Zuko, snatching the fishbowl from his hands, staring into it in horror. The hasty motion made the water slosh out of the bowl, drenching the front of Pao's tunic. He didn't seem to even notice.

"They're going to kill me!" Pao let out a panicked shriek and thrust the bowl back at Zuko, who was beginning to think that the old gasbag had finally lost it.

"They'll think I'm trying to weasel my way out of paying." Pao tore at his hair, eyes wild. "Why, spirits, WHY?"

"Who's going to kill you? What money?" Zuko slid the bowl back onto the countertop, wiping his hands on his apron, wondering what it was with people today. He gave Pao's teacup a suspicious look. "What kind of tea is that?"

"What? No!" Pao gave Zuko an exasperated look. "I'm talking about the Earthquake Insurance. Spirits, sometimes I wonder about you refugees." He held out his left hand, giving his fingers a
dismayed look and wiggled them at a scowling Zuko. "Which finger would you choose? Pinky? Ring finger?" He clasped his hands over his mouth, silencing a shriek, eyes wide. "Oh spirits, what if they take both?"

Shoving Zuko out of the way he started to frantically count the remaining fish before grabbing a handful of coins from the till and darting out of the teahouse.

Zuko followed Pao to the window and watched him run down the road with more speed than Zuko would have thought someone his age capable of. Pao skidded around a corner and Zuko shook his head, frowning. He gathered up Pao's books and shoved them under the counter, remembering Pao's secret talk with the lady who'd given him the fish, Zuko wondered just how much money Pao owed her, and who exactly she was. And what by Koh the stupid fish had to do with it all.

ooooo

Uncle was setting out teapots, whistling under his breath. Zuko's throat tightened and he swallowed nervously. He busied himself with cleaning the fish bowl, and between sidelong glances at Uncle, tried to decide how to best break the bad news. His thoughts started to run in circles around the events of this day and he found himself incapable of focusing of anything but Jet's angry words and the memory of waking up with his head resting on Jet's shoulder, now turned bitter. Zuko wiped his hands on his apron and sighed.

"Uncle, I …"

"Ah, Nephew!" Uncle looked up from his work, smiling at him. He started to dig in his pockets for something. "Just the relative I wanted to see."

"Exactly how many relatives of yours are there in Ba Sing Se?" Zuko muttered low under his breath.

"Why, you of course. My favorite nephew." Uncle smiled at him, pulled out a half-copper coin and tossed it at Zuko. "Be a good nephew and run down to that stall at the street corner and get me a nice cup of iced juice."

Zuko caught the coin awkwardly. "What do you want fruit juice for, Uncle?"

"Why, Nephew, for drinking, of course." Uncle shook his head, giving Zuko an amused smile.

"What about tea?"

"What about it?" Uncle looked at him, an annoying twinkle in his eyes.

"But you always drink tea!" Zuko huffed, emphasizing his annoyance with an exasperated movement of his hands.

"There is a time for tea, Nephew and there is a time for juice. Orange would be nice." Uncle scratched his beard. "Or watermelon."

"Are you even listening to yourself, Uncle?" Zuko was quickly running out of patience, his voice rising and more than a tad shrill. "First Jet, then Pao with his stupid fish and now you don't want tea!" Zuko flailed and then pinched himself in the arm. "Am I trapped in some kind of nightmare?"

"Nephew." Uncle gave Zuko a sidelong look and then gently led him to the table by the range. "What happened? You were in a much better mood this morning."
"What do you mean happened? Azula is sieging the city, we are about to get arrested by the Dai Li and you don't want tea!" Zuko covered his face in his hands in a dramatic gesture, "Have you all lost your mind?"

Uncle pulled out a stool and pushed Zuko onto it. "Nephew, is there something you want to tell me?" He pressed a cup of tea into Zuko hands.

"We have to leave the city." Zuko's voice was small, papery. He pushed the cup away from him and turned, unable to look Uncle in the eye. He suddenly felt sick to his stomach.

"What happened, Prince Zuko?" Uncle's hand was heavy on his shoulder, adding to the burden Zuko was carrying, not easing it.

"I made a mistake," Zuko bit out. "I should not have trusted him."

Uncle remained silent, waiting for Zuko to go on. His hand still hot and heavy on Zuko's back.

"Jet knows I'm a firebender," Zuko said into the oppressive silence, cringing at his voice, thinking it too loud even though it barely rose above a whisper.

"He did not take it well?" Uncle's voice was grave as he pulled a stool close and sat down next to Zuko.

Zuko shook his head.

The tea was pushed back into his hands and Zuko clung to it, wrapping his fingers around it. Tea scented steam rose as Zuko let it drain some of the turmoil heat out of him. He stared at the bubbling liquid and the words came.

When Zuko was done Uncle sat for a while, saying nothing, just stroking his beard. Zuko waited until he could stand it no more.

"What do we do now, Uncle?" He hated how whiny his voice sounded.

"Nothing."

Uncle actually smiled at him and Zuko's expression slid into a scowl.

"What? You can't be serious."

"Nephew," Uncle sighed, patting his hand. "Sometimes the wisest action is to do nothing. If we even so much as pack a bag we are damning ourselves. So we shall do nothing."

"What about Pao? What if the guards come asking about us?" Zuko couldn't help but throw a nervous glance at the door.

"Leave Pao to me." Uncle reached into his sleeve and pulled out a single pai sho tile.

"What are you going to do?" Zuko glared at him. "Beat him at pai sho?"

Uncle gave him an indulgent little smile and ran the tile over the knuckles of his hand. "Something like that…"

"And Azula?" He could accept that Uncle had ways to handle Pao, considering that his geezer pai sho club had arranged for them to be here in the first place. But Azula was another matter.
"The walls of Ba Sing Se are strong, Prince Zuko. So far she has not managed to breach them."
Uncle gave him a small smile. "For now we are safe here."

"I will not underestimate her again." Zuko scowled, the image of lighting hitting Uncle flashing before his eyes. His grasp on the teacup tightened, the last of the liquid within evaporating into steam at the memory.

"Our anonymity grants us cover, even if she does enter the city," Uncle added softly and Zuko gave him a tiny nod, hanging his head in shame. "Here we are Li and his uncle Mushi. And if she does comes looking for us, no one knows who we really are."

"The more people know us as Li and Mushi, the better. It is important that you remember that, Nephew." Uncle waited until Zuko met his eyes and gave him a sad little smile. "Even if your heart tells you otherwise."

Zuko sat on his stool behind the counter, his chores long done, boredom creeping in on his anxiety. He'd angled himself away from the reach through window, so that he'd be invisible from the kitchen, and was idly pushing at the stack of menus, aligning them in a perfect right angle to the corner of the table. He'd tried watching Li and Lo, usually finding them calming, but for once found that their endless circles made him even tenser. Zuko wished there'd be more customers, so that he could bury himself in busy-work, something, anything, to take his mind off the horrible mess this day had become.

The back door opened and Zuko turned, watching as Pao entered the shop followed by two delivery men carrying a large container between two bamboo rods. Zuko heard Pao give Uncle orders to brew him a calming infusion and then holler his name. Zuko rolled his eyes, expression slipping into an even deeper frown as he jumped down from his stool and pushed open the kitchen door. Agni knew what all that was about. Well, he'd find out soon enough, wouldn't he?

He wasn't quite sure what he'd expected, but a giant vase full of fish was not it. Zuko cocked his head at the cheap porcelain container. It was a bit eerie watching dozens of exact copies of Li and Lo swim in its depth.

Pao peered nervously over Zuko's shoulder into the teahouse. "Have there been any visitors… for me?"

"No." Zuko stuck his finger into the vase, watching as the circling fish drew closer and started to gently nibble at the tip of his index-finger.

"Stop playing with them and make yourself useful," he snapped and thrust the cup at Zuko. "There need to be five fish in there at all times, do you understand me, boy?"

Gasbag, Zuko thought and scowled at him, but took the cup. Five fish, huh. He rolled up his sleeve and plunged his arm into the cold water, catching one of the fish with the cup. A nice fat one, belly protruding with unladen eggs. Shouldn't be long before there were dozens of tiny fish. Zuko snickered under his breath. Pao's flailing would be worth it.
He'd promised, hadn't he? Zuko raised his hand and forced himself to knock at the apartment door. Floorboards creaked and a few moments later Smellerbee's voice, muffled by the wood of the door, demanded to know who was there.

"It's me," Zuko answered, and after a brief silence added, "Li."

The door swung open and he stepped over the raised sill into the apartment. Jet's apartment. Zuko closed his eyes, forcing down the maelstrom of emotions threatening to overwhelm him.

When he opened them again Smellerbee had closed the door and was giving him this odd look, kind of like he'd seen Ty Lee look at Azula at times, like she was actually glad he was there. It was more than a bit disconcerting.

"Have you eaten?" Smellerbee pointed at the table were several barely touched dishes were set out, long gone cold. She gave him an apologetic smile. "Longshot can heat it up for you. There's plenty."

Zuko shook his head. It seemed like none of them had been able to muster much of an appetite.

Smellerbee got back onto the kang and Longshot let out a huff and scooted over a bit, putting his arm possessively around her, glaring at Zuko. The three legged toad's eyes glowed menacingly and Zuko hunched over, sitting on the edge of the kang, idly picking at a loose threat dangling from his pillow.

"You wanted to talk to me," Zuko blurted out, suddenly wanting to get this over with, the question of 'Why had they asked him to come?' burning in the forefront of his mind.

"We got a job." There was an edge of fake cheerfulness to her voice that was not really surprising given the events of the day. "As guards for the Bei Fongs."

"Good for you," Zuko muttered and tried not to look around the apartment. Last night's memories were too fresh and he hated himself for wanting that time back. Someone had closed the door to Jet's room and Zuko was grateful for it.

"Thanks." Smellerbee ran a nervous hand through her hair. "And I talked to the office lady, Miss Cu." She suddenly was avoiding Zuko's eyes, staring at the hideous prancing horse scroll on the wall. "I told her about what happened to Jet." Her voice apologetic, "Well some of it, anyway." She picked at a bit of skin on her thumb. "Not the firebending part, obviously. She said she'd have Guard Tong check with the city guards for us. Let us know where he is."

"You want me to help you bust him out." Zuko scowled and then set his jaw petulantly. He had guessed that they wanted him for something, needed his help, most likely. He should have figured that it was about Jet. A small part of him wanted to say 'yes' even after all that had happened, but he stomped on it hard. There was no way Zuko would risk their cover to bust Jet's sorry ass out of prison.

"What?" Smellerbee gave him an astonished look. "That's a stupid idea." She pulled her legs up under her, resettling against Longshot in a more comfortable position.

"Then why am I even here?" Zuko stood up and folded his arms across his chest, staring straight at them. "What do you want from me?"

"Jet's … probably gone for a while." She finally looked up at him, locking eyes. "Someone has to be in charge."

"In charge of what?" Zuko's eyes went wide, incredulous. Was she seriously asking him to step in while Jet was gone?
"The Freedom Fighters."

"You are joking, right?" He snorted. "There's only you and Longshot."

"And you." She gave him a sly look. "We need you Li. Jet would have wanted that."

"Right." Zuko's tone called well deserved bullshit on her statement and her sad attempt to manipulate him into saying yes. If Jet wanted anything to do with Zuko at the moment it was more likely running him out of the city than putting him in charge. "I don't think so."

"Oh, come on, why can't you be in charge?" She put on a more cheerful voice, trying to cajole him into agreeing, but her voice was clearly crumbling around the edges. "I'm sure you would be good at it."

"No. And stop asking." Zuko folded his arms in front of his chest. "I promised my uncle." And I can't let him down again, he added quietly to himself.

"Jet got arrested and you're not even sticking around until he gets back?" She glared at him, her arms akimbo. Longshot put a hand on her shoulder and she spun around, snarling at him, "Don't you say it! Considering all that has happened, you think Li should just leave? What is wrong with you?"

"Are you saying I owe you for not turning me in?" Zuko snapped, taking a step toward her.

"What?" She turned to glare at Zuko, not backing down. "That's not how I meant it."

"That's what you said," Zuko snarled glowering down at her.

Longshot made an annoyed huffing sound, threw his hands in the air, turned and walked over to the window, scowling out into the night.

"Oh, fuck it, that's not how I meant it." She huffed and ran her hand over her face. "I'm upset, alright! This is all a bit much." She sat down heavily on the kang. "You know what we've done for the last couple of years? Fight the Fire Nation, that's what! The Blue Spirit …you being one of them…" She kicked the wall, and winced in pain when it turned out to be harder than her toe. "This has been one hell of a day."

"I didn't ask for any of this," Zuko growled, wishing he had his swords. "This was a mistake."

"Was it?" She clenched her jaw, her nails digging into the palm of her hand. Her voice unsteady with emotion. "Why are you here? In Ba Sing Se I mean. You said you became the Blue Spirit because of Zhao. What happened? You are one of them, why not just go to a different part of the Fire Nation?"

"I'm not a spy, if that's what you mean." Zuko tried to not feel the sting of her intentional use of them. "Why do you care anyway?"

"I care," she ground out, "Because I really do not want to have been wrong about you."

Zuko blinked; that was not the answer he'd been expecting by far. He rubbed his hand over his face, trying to find the right words. "I was careless. Zhao figured out who I was. My …" Zuko took a deep breath. "The Fire Lord declared me a traitor."

"Are you telling me you got declared a traitor for stealing Zhao's slippers?" Her voice was incredulous.

"Of course not!" Zuko snapped, his injured pride getting the better of him. How dare she? "You
wanna know the truth?" Zuko tried to reign in anger, voice rising. "Zhao had captured the Avatar. I
broke him out of Zhao's prison. There. Is that good enough for you?"

"You freed the Avatar?" Her eyes went wide as saucers.

"Yes." Zuko's voice dripped with contempt as he went on, "Aren't you glad I did?"

"I guess…" She looked away from him. "We met the Avatar once. It's why we're here, too."

"You know the Avatar?" Zuko's heartbeat sped up. Could be true? Could it be this easy after all? He
tried to steady his voice, trying not to sound too excited, not to give too much away. "Are you
friends with him?"

"Not exactly." Smellerbee drew out the word in a way that made Zuko raise an inquisitive eyebrow.

"What do you mean?" Zuko's voice was papery thin, deflated, his hope sinking. Of course, he
thought bitterly, nothing was ever easy for him. "Do you know where he is?"

"No idea. We didn't exactly part on the best terms." She blushed and Longshot inspected his
fingernails with exaggerated care. "But he's the reason we're here now," she mumbled, her voice
making it clear how uncomfortable with the subject she was. "Why we want to start a new life. Why
we changed." She briefly locked eyes with Zuko before she went on, "I guess your Uncle was right,
we all need second chances."

Zuko mulled her words over, trying to decide whether to press for more details or to let it rest. It was
not as if he wanted her to keep on asking questions either. In the end, he nodded. His silence for
theirs. That was a trade he understood.

Uncomfortable, awkward silence fell and Zuko, avoiding their eyes much as they were avoiding his,
looked out into the night city. The lantern below cast it in the eerie green light that he'd still not
gotten used to.

"I should leave." Zuko took a step toward the door.

"Please don't." And when Zuko stopped and turned back to her, her face brightened a little. "We're
good, right? Still friends?"

Friends? He blinked. He wasn't even sure what that word meant. How could they be friends?
Especially with all the lies between them, the careful half truths and omitted topics. Was this what
friends did? Lie to each other for the sake of company? Uncle's soft words about fitting in rang in his
ears and he thought 'why not'. They knew one of his bigger secrets and still seemed to want him
around. He gave her an uneasy shrug, thinking about what he could offer her in return.

"I guess I can still help you with the documents," he offered. "If you want me to…"

"Would you?" She beamed at him. "That would be awesome."

Longshot fixed her with a stare and she pursed her lips at him. Then he rubbed his hand over his face
and nodded.

Zuko's stomach growled.

"Let's have dinner." Smellerbee batted her eyelashes at Longshot, gently kissing him on the cheek.
He sighed and reached for the half full plates of food, taking them to the kitchen to heat them up.
And Zuko let himself be pulled back to the kang.

ooooo

That night, long after Uncle had gone to bed, Zuko lay awake for a long time, watching the shadows of the moon wander across the room. He'd never thought he'd wish back for the bleak hours of endless boredom that had reigned on his ship before that fateful light in the sky, but now everything was changing too fast, too often. And, he thought grimly, never for the better.

He woke in the middle of the night, the moon had already set, leaving the room dark and silent. A warm weight pressed against his back and he turned, sneaking his arms around, burying his face in … Zuko snatched up the pillow and threw it to the floor with force. Why was he always so stupid?

Wide awake, heart beating, he lay in the dark listening to the rhythm of Uncle's soft snoring, trying to find some comfort in the familiar sound. The sky turned gray with dawn before he finally sank into a deep, dreamless slumber that left him sluggish and heavy headed when he woke.

Uncle pressed a bowl of hot zhou into his hands, giving him a mildly worried look. Zuko ate it mechanically, too tired to taste much of the food.

It must have rained some time during the night, but what puddles had formed on the road were quickly evaporating, filling the narrow streets with a clingy, sticky humidity that soaked through Zuko's clothes, making the thin cotton of his tunic stick unpleasantly to his skin.

ooooo

Uncle's reputation seemed to making the round, this morning shift being one of the busier ones Zuko had experienced. Which, at least, seemed to put Pao into a good mood as he went about whistling out of tune and making Zuko wonder why exactly he wasn't allowed to kill the man.

Just when they were closing down for the morning, Zuko was wiping down tables and Pao busily clicking away on his abacus, there were raised voices outside the teahouse door.

Pao got up and peered out of the window, curious as to what was going on outside. Then he let out a muffled shriek and backed away from the shutters, bumping into a table.

"I'm not here!" Pao flailed and hastily grabbed his books and fled the room, stopping at the kitchen door for a quick: "And you haven't seen me all day!"

Zuko threw his rag onto the table, wiping his hands on his apron. Walking over the window to see what Pao's latest freak-out was about, Zuko was starting to suspect that Uncle was feeding Pao the special tea. Or if he wasn't, maybe he should.

Before he could look outside, though, the door swung open and a girl in guard uniform walked in. Zuko swore under his breath. This was not good.

The guard looked around the teahouse and when she noticed Zuko broke into a wide grin. "Li! How are you?"

Zuko blinked, taking a closer look. "Smellerbee? Is that you?" He hadn't recognized her without her headband and make-up.
"Grand, isn't it?" She pulled off her helmet, putting it on the table next to her. Her hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail, making her look even younger than usual. "What do you think?"

She twirled, showing off her new uniform.

"It's ah…" It looked like a standard issue guard uniform to Zuko, but somehow he realized that that would be the wrong thing to say right now. "Nice?" he tried.

"Yes, isn't it?" She ran her hand over the green cotton of her tunic, smiling as she gently traced the embroidered flying boar. "I don't think I've ever owned something this nice. And the armor fits properly, too!"

Zuko swallowed. He'd never given much thought, until recently, to where things like clothes came from. They just were. Like food, they just appeared. He remembered the first time he'd been truly hungry, a day after Azula had tried to capture them. When he'd found out that he was now considered a traitor to his country. That he was stuck like this.

"Why are you here?" he ground out, before turning around and going back to wiping tables.

Smellerbee stepped around the table and waited until he was looking at her. "You know how you're really good with the dual swords…"

"What about it?" Zuko wrung out the rag over basin, staring into the murky water.

"Well, all the guards here use them, right?" She blushed and inspected her fingernails. "Jet showed me how to use his hook swords, but I tend to stick to daggers." She gave him an embarrassed little smile. "They're going to test us tomorrow and I'm a bit rusty."

"You want to practice?" Zuko gave her a small nod, he could respect that, and he had to admit he was getting a bit rusty himself. Working in a teahouse did nothing for his combat skills. "Meet me at the empty warehouse in an hour."

"Would you?" She beamed at him. "Thanks, Li!"

"What about Longshot?" Zuko looked at her squarely. "Can he use swords?"

"No, he can't. Jet tried to teach him once…." Smellerbee growled low under her breath. "Didn't you hear us fight outside? He says he doesn't want lessons. He's being an ass."

"You mean, he doesn't want lessons with you there," Zuko stated. "Doesn't want to admit that he can't do it."

Zuko was all too familiar with the grating feeling of watching Azula excel at something he had spent weeks practicing, and still could not do.

"Yeah, something like that," she muttered and then brightened, punching him affectionately in the arm. "You're the best, Li! I'll see you in an hour, then?"

Zuko picked up the basin and nodded. "Sure."

oooooo

The inside of the warehouse was stuffy in the noon heat and the unpleasant smell of animal droppings lingered in the air. Squirrel-pigeons cooed in the rafters and rose in a cloud of feathers and
indignant shrieks when Zuko took off his tunic and shirt, shaking them out with a snap, before throwing them onto one of the empty crates where they'd left their belongings.

Longshot had let out a derisive snort and settled beside their bags, face shaded by his hat, long legs stretched out in front of him to give them room to spar.

Zuko wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand. Smellerbee had not lied; she did have her basics down. However, she wouldn't be much of a challenge in a real fight and even though her stance was solid, which Zuko noted with approval, her center of balance was off and she lacked practice.

Ever since they'd started sparring Longshot had just sat there, back against the crates, glowering at the pair of them. Zuko half expected to hear the whoosh of a pullstring and an arrow to hit him in the back. Zuko shook off the urge to turn around and yell at Longshot, to ask him what the fuck his problem was.

Smellerbee parried his attack with her left sword, swinging at him with the right one.

"You're doing it again," Zuko gently pointed out. "You need to use both swords in unison, not one to block and one to attack."

Smellerbee huffed a little in annoyance, more at herself than at him, but then she nodded and shifted her center the way he had shown her. The dual swords were not the best weapon for her and definitely not her weapon of choice either, too long and heavy for her frame. She was doing better than he had been, when he'd first started teaching himself how to use the dual swords. Not that anything ever came easy to him.

They sparred for a while, attacking back and forth, her movements smoothing out, her handling of the weapons becoming more confident with practice.

Longshot's presence was a storm cloud in the background, his eyes never leaving them.

Sweaty and exhausted, they collapsed against the crates. Smellerbee punched him affectionately in the arm.

"Thanks, Li. That helped a lot."

"You're welcome."

Zuko rubbed the spot where she'd hit him, still not quite comfortable with her way of showing affection. He distinctly remembered Azula shoving him, but for what affection there was in her punches, they always had a vicious edge to them.

Longshot handed Smellerbee one of the water skins, ignoring Zuko's outstretched hand.

"Longshot, give him the damn water." Smellerbee elbowed him and Longshot let out a grunt, glaring at Zuko as if it was his fault before throwing the water skin in his general direction. Zuko caught it, too thirsty to do much more than glare back.

"Anyone else starving?" Smellerbee pulled herself to her feet, looking down at them. "I could eat a whole hog-monkey."
Zuko rubbed his stomach and nodded. "Yeah, me too."

"Jiaozi fine with you guys?" Smellerbee leaned down and pecked Longshot on the cheek before getting up. And when they both nodded, she gave them a big grin. "I'll be right back. Don't kill each other while I'm gone."

They waited in silence. Zuko upended the rest of his water skin over his head, the cool water feeling good against his hot skin. He'd missed his swords more than he'd thought and teaching Smellerbee had been surprisingly fun.

Longshot had taken off his quiver, and pulled out one of the arrows, picking at the cresting. He pointedly ignored Zuko's presence and Zuko knew the frown of injured pride when he saw it. He'd looked its twin in the mirror once too often.

Zuko watched the dusty sunbeams coming in through the gaps in the roof. Had it really been only a few days since they'd all stood here in the middle of the night, on their way to raid one of the Bei Fong's warehouses?

The memory of that night and all that had followed was starting to turn the silence into lead. He had to do something, say something to drown out the voices his memory conjured.

"Is that a yu-yan bow?" Zuko asked, nodding towards Longshot's bow, remembering all too well their deadly aim. Freeing the Avatar out from under Zhao's command had been one of his more desperate moves. He sighed. It had been a while since any of his moves had been anything but desperate.

Longshot gave him a tight, barely noticeable nod, wetting his thumb and forefinger, smoothing out the ruffled fletching of the arrow.

"I've met the yu-yan archers. They are... quite formidable," Zuko tried again, face slipping into a scowl of frustration.

Longshot shook his head and remaining sullenly silent and Zuko started to wonder what, short of a knife to his throat, or maybe Smellerbee's, would make that man participate in any kind of conversation.

The arrow slid into the quiver with the slick sliding sound of smooth wood against oiled leather. Longshot picked up another arrow, inspecting the tip and smoothing out the fletching, before putting it back into his quiver.

Zuko folded his arms behind his head, looking to the rafters, watching the squirrel-pidgins bob and coo. The silence stretched and when Longshot did speak, his soft voice was enough to startle Zuko upright.

"It was my mother's."

"Did she train you?"

Longshot grunted in a way that Zuko interpreted as a 'yes'.

Zuko leaned back against the crate. "You any good?"
Longshot let out a snort and stood up, pushing his hat back. He pointed to a beam on the opposite end of the warehouse. Zuko squinted, barely able to make out some kind of movement. Longshot nocked his bow, aimed and shot. The arrow sped through the dusty air and hit the beam with a dull thud. Longshot sat back down, crossing his arms in front of his chest, looking smug.

"Yes."

"Congratulations, you hit the beam." Zuko rolled his eyes but got up and walked over to the where the arrow was protruding from the wood nevertheless. A fly was squirming and buzzing besides it, its wings pinned to the wood by the metal tip of the arrow. Zuko whistled under his breath. Not bad, not bad at all. He didn't have any experience with long distance weapons, but he could respect this kind of skill. He pulled the arrow from the wood, offering it back to Longshot.

"Nice shot." Zuko gave Longshot a calculating stare. If he didn't want to learn from him, fine, that was Longshot's problem, but Zuko'd be stupid if he gave up the chance to have a yu-yan archer teach him. He held out his hand to Longshot. "Can you show me how?"

Longshot locked eyes with him and after a few moments nodded, but he did not take Zuko's hand when he got up.

A bruised wrist and cut index finger later- he really should have known better than to steady the arrow between his fingers and let the fletching cut him- Zuko was slowly getting the hang of it. The thing that took most getting used to, though, was the stance. Firebending demanded a more square stance, not the open one Longshot kept insisting he use.

Longshot had drawn a crude target on one of the walls with a piece of charcoal that Zuko managed to hit without hurting himself in the process at his fifth try.

By the time Smellerbee came back with two steaming bamboo baskets full of jiaozi, they'd switched to dual swords and Longshot seemed to have lost some of his rigidness toward Zuko.

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They sat around the makeshift table of an overturned bucket and a wooden board. Smellerbee had handed them each a pair of chopsticks and Zuko picked a steaming dumpling out of the bamboo basket, dunking it into the little bowl with minced garlic and soy-sauce. He thought it could do with more than a little chili-oil and possibly some vinegar, but the pork and cabbage jiaozi weren't bad at all.

They ate in silence for a while and Zuko let Longshot take the last dumpling. Smellerbee gave him a sidelong glance. "Can I ask you a question?"

Zuko's stomach knotted with dread. "What is it?"

"You know, I've been thinking, about you using the dual blades." She gave him a nervous little smile. "I mean… why don't you just bend? Most benders I've met can't fight worth shit without it."

"Who says I'm any good at bending?" And it was true, wasn't it? He couldn't even recall the number of times he'd suffered embarrassment and humiliation due to his inadequate bending skills.

"So what? You're damn good with the swords?" She put her chopsticks down beside her bowl, giving him a sympathetic look that he instantly resented. "That's something, right?"
"I guess." Zuko glowered down at the last bit of cucumber on his plate. He remembered Azula's mocking words about him and the women's arts, about how he threw knives nearly as good as the girls in her class. That no matter how good he was with the swords, it would not matter or, more likely, it would add to his disgrace, to his utter failure at learning proper firebending like his father wanted him to. There were some things Smellerbee could not understand. That no non-bender could.

"We should do something tomorrow." She then looked at Longshot who shrugged.

Zuko furrowed his brow. "I guess I can come by at lunch and fill out a couple of those work permits."

"Sure…" She frowned at him, looking a bit hurt.

"What?" Zuko frowned back, starting to wonder if they even spoke the same language. "I thought you wanted me to help you?"

"I do." She sighed.

"Then why are you mad at me?" This was starting to be as bad as trying to figure out what his sister was up to.

"I just thought it would be nice if we did stuff together…" She looked away from him to Longshot. "Don't you agree?"

Longshot started collecting the dishes, ignoring her question.

"You two are impossible!" Smellerbee huffed, then her face brightened up. She dug in her pockets and pulled out what looked to be an entrance ticket to some kind of show. "Look what I found!" A sly grin on her face. "Tong gave us some free tickets for Earth Rumble Seven." She held the ticket out to him. "It'll be fun, I promise."

Zuko was about to snap that he hated fun, and what fun was idiots throwing rocks at each other's heads anyway, but bit his tongue. He took the tickets and nodded. "Thanks."

oooooo

The next few days passed without much happening. His work at the teahouse dragged, he'd reached that point of familiarity with his chores, the point where it became a routine that made days seem endless and work tedious, with only his sparring sessions at lunch break brightening the day.

Even though both, Smellerbee and Longshot, had been accepted into the Bei Fong guards, they continued their sparring sessions during his lunch break, or sometimes after the teahouse closed. One evening Smellerbee came running into the teahouse, skidding to a halt in front of Zuko, hugging him for all that he worth.

"Mrs. Cu found Jet!"

"Great," Zuko mumbled, gently pushing her off him. He couldn't help wondering where it would leave him, if Jet returned. If he would still be welcome. "Where is he?"

Zuko listened to her telling him about how Tong had located Jet in the Good Citizen Penitentiary, but that they weren't allowed to see him, which worried her.
Even thinking about Jet's return made Zuko's stomach clench and any kind of sympathy taste like ashes in his mouth. So he told her, in papery thin words, not to worry, that everything would be fine, desperately wishing she'd change the topic or go away.

The kitchen door opened and Mrs. Chen, who always came by just before closing time to visit Uncle then drag him off to the spirits knew what fun activity, came to stand beside him, and after taking one look at his face, patted him gently on the arm.

"You know, I wouldn't worry too much. Last time I got arrested they'd just let me sleep it off," Mrs Chen said in a conversational tone.

"You got arrested?" Zuko's voice rose an octave, giving Uncle an exasperated look. "What for?"

"Having too much fun, apparently." Mrs Chen grinned. "I really wouldn't worry that much. Even when I hit that hussy from apartment 314 with a bottle they only kept me for a week and a half."

"I'm sure things were different when you were young, Xiao Dan." Uncle grinned, winking at Zuko.

"Oh, you charmer." She put a caressing hand on Uncle's cheek. "That was last year."

"You hit her with a bottle?" Smellerbee sounded rather impressed and Zuko shook his head.

"She had it coming." Mrs. Chen crossed her arms in front of her chest, looking rather smug.

"Shouldn't have said that about my son."

ooooo

More days passed and Zuko started to recognize the teahouse regulars. Every couple of days Mrs. Ying, who ran a soap shop, came by with a group of friends, ordering endless cups of gun-powder oolong. They spend all afternoon playing some kind of card game, gambling on what looked like colored wooden chips, but that Zuko suspected represented quite a bit of money.

Shan and Hui still argued over who should pick up the bill and Zuko learned to drown out their arguments and charge each of the old gasbags alternately.

And then there was that girl. He vaguely recognized her as the one who worked the fruit stand near their apartment. She came by every afternoon and asked him weirdly pointless questions that Zuko suspected were not pointless at all, but aimed to gather information, if only he could figure out to what purpose. But what was even more disconcerting was the way she watched him go about his job. Her gaze followed him where ever he went, putting him on edge, making him wonder what she knew, if she suspected something. He would have to talk to Uncle about her.

Today was especially bad. He'd just brought her a second cup of lavender tea- the first one had ended up spilled all over him - when he heard the menu hit the floor with a dull thud. It made Zuko's left eye twitch.

"Here you are." Zuko gritted his teeth and picked up the menu, handing it back to her.

There was something wrong with her. First she's spilled tea on him, drenching his apron and outer robe – Uncle had hung them next to the ovens to dry - and now she'd dropped her menu for the third time. How anyone could be this clumsy was beyond him.

"Thanks Li." She smiled at him and he gave her a curt nod, muttering 'you're welcome'. He was
about to return to his stool behind the counter when she called his name again.

"Li?"

"Yes?" Zuko turned and stared at her. Did she have something in her eye?

She held the menu out beseechingly. "Can you help me read this?" She patted the bench beside her.

Zuko groaned but sat down next to her and took the menu from her hands. Could no one in this stupid city read properly?

She scooted closer and he could feel her breath tickle his neck as he read the different kinds of tea and their properties out to her. Her hand slid onto his leg and he stopped, turning to face her only to be staring directly at her … oh!

Zuko blushed. So that was what this was about.

This hadn't gone too badly. Well, she was still here, wasn't she? Even after the juggling disaster. Not that he was really sure why he was here. Well, he kinda did. Thanks Uncle! He couldn't shake the faint suspicion that Jin and Uncle had planned this all along. But it hadn't been so bad so far, never mind that he couldn't figure out why she kept offering him those strange looking cookies. Yet when she had gripped his hand and dragged him across what seemed like half the city to see her favorite fountain he'd oddly enough enjoyed it.

But now the fountain was dark and there was a sad look on her face and for some reason he wanted her to smile again.

"Close your eyes." He knew this was a bad idea, an incredibly bad idea, if he were honest, but she'd seemed so excited and seeing her this disappointed was just not right. "And don't peek!"

The way she smiled at him when he said it made his final decision for him. He took a few steps forward, toward the fountain and concentrated. Zuko's foot slid sideways, into bending position, his hands shooting out, fingers aiming at the lanterns, flame leaping from them in precise movements. He had barely lit more than half of the lanterns when something smacked him in the back of the head, interrupting his bending. It bounced off and hit the cobbles with a dull thud; steel and sparkrock rolling to a halt in front of his feet.

"Don't you need those?" An amused voice echoed across the empty square and a familiar figure stepped out from a dark doorway, coming toward them.

"Jet?" Zuko's stomach clenched in dread. How much had he seen? What was he going to do? "What do you want?"

"It's beautiful!" Jin had opened her eyes again, looking at the half lit fountain and then at Jet coming towards them. "How did you … Li? What is going on?" She put her hand lightly on Zuko's arm, giving him a puzzled look. "What is he doing here?"

Jet entered the lit area, a wide, unfriendly grin on his face. "Yeah, what exactly are you doing, Li?"

Zuko took a protective step in front of Jin. "What do you want, Jet?"
"Just making sure you don't do anything stupid." Jet moved his straw from one side of his mouth to the other. "Wouldn't want anyone to think you're a firebender now, Li, wouldn't we?"

"Li? A firebender?" Jin snorted, picking up the sparkrock and steel from the ground, offering it on her open palm for Jet to see. "You know, I might do cactus every now and then, but that is the stupidest thing I've heard in a while." She narrowed her eyes at Jet. "Why are you ruining our date?"

"Oh, a date is what this is." Jet stepped close to Zuko, locking eyes with him. "And here I thought it was bad manners to date other people when one had a boyfriend."

"You're the one who went crazy!" Zuko growled, hand itching for swords that were not there. "After what you said, do you think you can just show up like nothing happened?"

"Well, I changed my mind." He reached out and put an arm around Zuko's shoulder, leaning in, pulling Zuko close, his voice pitched low, confidentially. "Had a lot of time to think. Prison does that to a man."

"What is wrong with you?" Zuko growled low under his breath. Was that a threat? Was Jet still thinking about turning him in? All his pent up anger at Jet surfaced, boiling over, and he grabbed the front of Jet's shirt. He spun him around, smacking him into one of the tall lanterns. The metal pole shook under the impact, and Zuko stepped in close, pinning Jet to it. Not that Jet made any move to fight back, or escape. "Why are you stalking me?"

"I missed you." Jet leaned in closer, his thigh sliding between Zuko's legs, his lips nearly brushing Zuko's. Zuko hated how Jet's presence was affecting him, how he was drawn to him, how his breath was suddenly catching in his throat and his heart beating faster. It would be so easy to give in, to close his eyes and …

Jet's lips brushed his ear. "Unless you like eating tofu now."

"You bastard." The crunching sound of his fist connecting with Jet's jaw was oddly satisfying, as was Jet's surprised gasp of pain. Zuko took a step back and noted a thin trickle of blood running down Jet's nose.

He slid into fighting stance waiting for Jet to retaliate, but Jet just stood there, looking up at the lantern an eerie smile on his face.

Zuko reached for Jin's hand, waiting until Jet was looking at him again, and then intertwined his fingers with Jin's.

"We're leaving."

Jin gave him a rather puzzled look but followed him away from the square, back toward the busier part of town with its shops and well lit streets.

When Zuko looked back, right before they'd turn a corner, Jet was gone, the half lit square abandoned.

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Notes:

'eating tofu' is a Mandarin euphemism for 'groping boobs'.
Rumor/Urban legend has it that the Triads give goldfish to keep track of protection money.
Regain the Avatar's trust, make them your allies.

The light flashed before his eyes and disappeared into darkness, leaving the flickering afterimage of Katara's face.

Rekindle old feelings.

There was the light again, the flame the color of Li's eyes. Jet nodded. He could do that. He could do anything his friends asked of him.

"Are you even listening to me?" Smellerbee snapped her fingers in front of his nose.

Jet gently took Smellerbee by her shoulders. "Really, Bee, there is nothing to worry about. I'm fine."

And he was fine. Never been better, actually. So it really did not make any sense at all for her to be yelling at him.

"Then why won't you tell us where you've been?" Smellerbee stomped her foot and let out a grunt of frustration.

"I've been here all day."

"No, you haven't!" She rubbed the palm of her hand over her face, then turned and looked at Longshot and Jet wondered why he too looked so concerned. There really was no reason. It was safe here.

"You were gone for hours!" she went on.

"I went for a walk." Jet remembered feeling a bit stuffy, cooped up in the apartment. The fresh air and stretching his legs had done him a world of good, and Ba Sing Se was beautiful in late spring. They were really lucky to be here.

"You were gone for SIX HOURS!" Smellerbee yelled and then visibly calmed herself. "You just got out of prison, Jet. We worry."

"I must have lost track of time." Had it really been six hours? It hadn't seemed that long. He gave her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry I worried you." A memory formed in his mind. "I met a friend."

"Oh. Why didn't you say so?" Smellerbee's frown eased momentarily before deepening. "Who? And what happened to your nose?"

Li folded his arms in front of his chest, taking in Jet and the flowers; he rolled his eyes. Jet's lips twitched into a half-apologetic smile and he shifted the bouquet of fire lilies to a more comfortable position in the crook of his arm.
"Jin's not here," Li growled. "If you want to apologize."

Jet tilted his head at him - why would he want to do that? "Do you like them?"

He held the flowers out to Li, who eyed them suspiciously, giving Jet an annoyed glare that Jet was sure he didn't deserve.

"They're flowers…" Li started to scowl, but took the lilies. "You could give them to her yourself when she comes by in the afternoon."

"What? No, they're for you!"

"What?" Li looked in exasperation at the flowers he was holding. "What did you get me flowers for?"

"To say I'm sorry." Jet gave him a confused smile - was there something wrong with the flowers? "You're not allergic, are you?"

"Allergic?" Li threw the bouquet at him, his face an adorable shade of red, flowers scattering all over the teahouse floor. "I'm NOT a girl!"

Jet hung his head as he watched Li stomp off. He'd liked the flowers; they'd reminded him of Li's eyes and his friends had said that's what he should do to apologize: Give flowers. It hadn't even occurred to him that Li would see it this way.

Pao and Mushi were standing in the kitchen door, snickering. An old lady, that Jet vaguely remembered living in the same building as Li, walked over to him and patted him gently on the shoulder. "He'll come around."

Jet nodded. Of course Li would come around. Her comment puzzled him. Why wouldn't he? She started picking up the scattered lilies, muttering something that sounded a lot like 'waste not, want not'.

Jet walked out of the teahouse and down the street past an abandoned fruit stand. He kicked a nectarine in his path, the overripe fruit splattering soft yellow pulp across the cobbles. An old friend came and walked with him for a bit. He said something that Jet didn't quite understand, but what did that matter? The sun was warm on his face and he shaded his eyes with his hand, looking up at the clear blue sky. One of his friends was perching on a nearby rooftop. Jet gave him a nod, then started walking down the street, a spring in his step. He had somewhere to be.

The sun was setting and Jet was sitting on the steps outside the teahouse, waiting for Li. It was kinda late and Jet, for a brief second, wondered what he'd done all day, but pushed that thought aside. It was not important, a reassuring voice told him. Li would be off work soon and he wanted to meet him, not just because his friends had insisted he apologize. He watched the sky turn dark and the street light with the green glow of crystal lamps. Ba Sing Se really was a wonderful city.

"What do you want?" Li loomed over him, glaring down.

"Hi, Li." Jet looked up at Li, half expecting there to be a group of people frowning down on him. It was good to see Li, even if Li was scowling at him. "I was waiting for you."

"Why?" Li closed his eyes and rubbed his hand over his face. "Please don't tell me you've gotten me more stupid flowers."
"No." Jet got up, feeling a bit hurt. He'd liked those flowers; he'd even bought them. Jet brushed the dust of his trousers. "Let's go have dinner. I'm starving."

"I already ate." Li's lower lips protruded and Jet licked his own lips, wanting to kiss that pout away.

"Hey." Jet got up and took Li's hand, running his thumb over the inside of Li's palm before Li could pull his hand away with a gasp. He watched the blush creep up on Li's face, taking in Li's slightly parted lips and sharply inhaled breath. Another unbidden memory flashed before his eyes. There was this forest again and a girl. Jet shivered, he suddenly felt cold, as if ice was creeping up on him. His friends said he was to apologize to her, but that made no sense right now, she wasn't here. Li was here and Jet wanted Li, not some girl he could barely remember. And so he locked eyes with him, voice sincere, "Li, I've changed."

"Have you?" Li shook his head, taking a step back. "In a week?"

"Yes. I'm here to …" Jet stopped again, about to say 'help you find Appa', but that didn't make any sense either. He sighed, looking to the ground. "I let my anger get out of control." Where had that come from? He shook his head to clear it of the unwanted thoughts and stepped into Li's personal space. "I am here now, aren't I?"

"You are," Li said neutrally, lips pressed flat as he considered Jet. "Doesn't mean I'm not still mad at you."

Jet briefly wondered what Li was mad about, but shrugged when he felt the memory slip through his fingers like smoke. Whatever it was, it seemed to matter to Li, and his friends had insisted he apologize so Jet continued. "I've put all that behind me." He paused, why had he nearly called Li 'Katara'? What a strange thing to do. Jet searched Li's eyes for any clue that he'd miscalculated, said the wrong thing, and then, when Li's frown lessened ever so slightly, he tried again, "I'm really sorry. Let me make it up to you."

Li didn't seem quite convinced, but Jet wouldn't be Jet if he didn't know how to tip the scales in his favor. He leaned in just a bit closer and tugged an errant strand of Li's hair behind Li's ear. Jet held onto it for longer than he should have, wanting to slide his hand into it, wanting to feel it tangle between his fingers and then brush his lips against Li's and... Not now, later, he told himself, later for sure. "Come, I've something to show you. It's a surprise!"

"Where are we going?" Li hadn't moved away and Jet took that as victory. He watched Li lick his lips and swallow hard.

"That would be telling," Jet whispered before stepping away.

They walked down the busy street and Li stopped at a stall to buy two roast meat wraps. He passed one to Jet.

"I thought you'd already eaten" Jet took another bite of the wrap, enjoying the spicy combination of sliced cucumber, onion and crisp roast pork.

Li flushed and glowered at him. "I changed my mind."

Jet led the way and they walked down the busy night market, first shoulder to shoulder, then Jet let his fingers brush Li's hand, once, twice, and then Jet captured it, intertwining their fingers.

The warehouse stood dark and empty, the street deserted.

"Come on!" Jet said, gently pulling at Li's hand.
"This is what you wanted to show me?" Li pulled his hand free, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "I've been here before, you know..."

Jet looked up into Li's eyes. They really were a most extraordinary color. Golden, like the tip of a candle flame. He remembered seeing eyes like that... in a forest, but that didn't make any sense. He was in Ba Sing Se now, everyone is safe here. Jet pushed those thoughts aside; he had better things to right now, with Li being this close. He reached out and slid his hand over Li's shoulder, fingers tangling in the feathery soft hair at the nape of Li's neck. His thumb came to rest against the tender skin on Li's throat. He ran his thumb up and down the hollow, feeling Li's pulse flutter, involuntarily tightening his grip. How easy it would be to just tighten his grip a tiny bit more, hold on a little bit longer and...

"Jet?" Li's voice was hoarse, his pupils dilated.

"Shush." Jet stepped closer, his other arm sneaking around Li's waist, his thumb pressing gently against the side of Li's jaw, making him tilt his head just the right way for Jet to brush his lips against Li's.

"Yes?"

Li didn't so much as answer but smash their lips together, his fingers digging desperately into Jet's upper arms.

"Nngh." Jet's eyes watered in pain and he pushed Li back, holding him at arms length. "That hurt!"

"What?" Li huffed and then glowered at him.

"My nose." Jet whined, blinking the tears from his eyes.

"Oh." Li bit his lip before going on, "I'm not going to apologize for that."

"Didn't ask you to, did I?" Jet snapped before grabbing Li's hand, pulling him toward the door.

"Come on."

"Why?"

"I did bring you here to show you something, didn't I?" He pulled a little at Li, who wouldn't budge.

"Right." Li let out a snort that Jet really wanted to comment on, but his friends had said he needed to make amends and so Jet just pushed the door a little bit harder than was truly necessary.

The inside of the warehouse lay dark, and a lot of the crates that he remembered littering the place had been moved, showing the true size of the building. Jet's eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, light only coming in through cracks in the roof and walls. Their steps echoed eerily in the darkness. Li pulled his hand free, looking around in the dim light.

"Why are we here?" Li fell back a step or two, his posture rigid, his eyes searching the shadows. There was an odd undertone to Li's voice that spoke of unease, as if Li didn't really trust him. But that was ridiculous, why wouldn't Li trust him? Maybe he was afraid of the dark, even though that was ridiculous. There was no reason to be afraid. Ba Sing Se was safe and he'd seen Li fight. Between the two of them they could take anyone.

"This way." Jet pointed to the ladder leading up to the cargo hoist, already climbing the first few rungs before looking back and giving Li a reassuring smile. "It's going to be good, I promise."
He waited until Li had climbed onto the platform and was standing next to him before opening the wooden cargo door open. Light and noise spilled into the room and the brightly lit nighttime city opened up in front of them as the door swung inwards.

Jet tugged at Li's hand, then stuck out his foot, making Li stumble so that he ended up flush against Jet's chest; it worked just as well with Li as he remembered with the girl in the forest.

"Why, hallo there." Jet reached out with his free hand to gently run a finger down the side of Li's face, just beneath the scar, watching mesmerized how Li blushed and how his Adam's Apple moved when he swallowed. You liked that, Jet thought when Li sighed into the touch. Jet leaned in further, whispering, his voice low, as if sharing a secret in a crowd. "Isn't she amazing?"

"Who?" Li blinked, confusion slipping into a frown.

"The city," Jet mouthed into Li's hair, just above his good ear.

Outside a group of street performers passed by, their music echoing cheerfully down the quarter. Jet brushed his lips against Li's, making sure that this time his bruised nose did not ruin the mood. "Kinda romantic, isn't it?"

Li started to nod then growled. "Fuck you!" Li shoved hard at Jet's chest making them stumble backwards. Jet, having no intention of letting Li go, held on tight and together they crashed onto a pile of empty sacks. Li landed with a thud on top of Jet and Jet wrapped his legs around him, reversing their position with one swift move to pin Li underneath him.

"What was that about?" Jet asked, catching his breath from the fall.

Li struggled against him until Jet gave up and rolled over, pulling Li on top of him. "I'm not a girl!" Li snapped and Jet snickered. He'd forgotten how adorable Li in a snit was. His fingers wormed between them, slid down Li's chest, past his stomach and closed over Li's cock, squeezing gently. "I hadn't noticed."

"Good," Li gasped, trying to keep from arching into Jet's touch. He closed his eyes for a second then glared down at Jet. Jet squeezed again, for good measure, watching Li's expression waver between pissed off and turned on.

Li was breathing hard, his eyes focused on Jet's mouth, and since Jet saw no reason to make Li wait for it, especially not now when he could feel Li's cock hardening under his caress, so Jet reached up and kissed him.

Li's lips were slightly chapped, as if he'd been biting them, but they were warm and pliant under his when Jet pressed his lips against them. Li kissed with the same awkward intensity he seemed to approach everything in his life. Not that it wasn't a good kiss. And Jet did know about kissing, was rather brilliant at it, even if he said so himself. Yet somehow the half scared, half desperate way Li returned his kiss tasted sweeter than any kiss he could remember.

He could get lost in this, Jet thought and started working on the buttons of Li's robes.

Li returned the favor, tugging at the belts that held up Jet's armor until they were undone and slid to the floor beside them with a dull thud. Jet's tunic was next and then Li's hand slid under his shirt and –

"Yes!"
Jet moaned, struggling to get his shirt over his head, out of the way. Who needed a shirt anyway? Not Li, either. Jet pushed Li's tunic over his shoulders, trapping Li's arms in the sleeves. Using his advantage, Jet flipped them over, and pinned the long tunic to the ground with his knees. Feeling victorious, he then started to work on getting Li's wide-sleeved shirt out of the way. He pulled it free from Li's trousers, sliding his hand under it, only to groan in frustration when his fingers did not meet skin, but another soft undershirt.

"Do you have to wear that many layers?" Jet whined and tugged at Li's shirt again, trying to untie the fastenings. Li glowered up at him and Jet frowned in frustration at the knot he'd someone managed to tighten, contemplating how mad Li'd get if he'd just cut it open.

"Let my arms go, Jet." He let out an angry huff and strained against the constricting fabric and Jet shifted slightly, releasing his hold on Li's tunic and Li struggled free, slapping Jet's hands away from the knot.

"That's a sailor's knot, you idiot." Li pulled at it and it opened easily and Li shrugged his tunic off before letting Jet pull his shirt over his head and discard it in a pile next to them.

Why would Li use something that complicated? Jet wondered for the fraction of a second but then he decided that Li's bare chest demanded his attention more urgently than musings about Li's past.

"Stay!" He gave Li a gentle push for emphasis and leaned down to stop any complaints with a quick kiss, moving on to suck at that tender spot right below Li's left ear, where the scar ended and his normal skin began. Jet sat back on his heels, admiring the tiny purple bruise that was forming on Li's neck. He ran his hands over the smooth skin of Li's chest, reveling on how Li's muscles twitched under his touch, and wondering why Li covered this under so many layers. A waste, really. He leaned down again, only to plant wet, hot kisses and gentle bites down Li's stomach and then, after he dragged Li's pants out of the way, with rather enthusiastic help from Li, closed his mouth around Li's cock and started to suck. Li's hands took hold of his head, sliding into his hair, holding him close. Not that Jet had any plan on going anywhere, he rather enjoyed the feel of Li's cock in his mouth and the breathy, suppressed moans Li made were all kinds of hot.

Li tensed, arching off their makeshift bed, as he came, leaving Jet to plant his hand firmly on Li's hips to steady them, and swallow. Jet licked his lips when he flopped down next to Li and pressed his lips to Li's. Li tensed for the fraction of a second then kissed him back with raw passion.

"Your turn." Li wriggled out from under Jet's arm and knelt down over Jet's legs, and Jet, being the helpful guy he was, pushed down his trousers, freeing his erection from the by now rather maddening confinement. Li blinked and stared. He swallowed hard and then seemed to take a deep breath and lean down. Jet's hand caught him at the shoulder.

"You've never done this before?" It was more a statement than a question.

"I want to," Li gave him a petulant look, setting his jaw stubbornly. "It's only fair."

Jet rolled his eyes at him and pulled Li back down next him on their makeshift bed of clothes and empty sacks.

"Here, let me show you." He took Li's and hand and sucked Li's index finger into his mouth, running his tongue up and down the slender digit, tracing the tender skin on the underside of the knuckles. Li's eyes went hazy and he let out a soft 'oh', and Jet noted, to his amusement nodded, that Li was growing hard again. Well, he'd have to wait, now was Jet's turn. Fair was fair after all.

"Like this?" Li reluctantly pulled his finger back, reaching for Jet's hand. Hot, wet suction engulfed
Jet's middle finger, making him almost come then and there. He should have known that there was nothing Li did halfway.

"Yeah," he admitted, out of breath, "like that."

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Jet woke when Li stirred at his side. He must have fallen asleep, even though he didn't remember doing so. Li was looking down at him, a goofy expression on his face, that Jet suspected mirrored his.

"Hey." Jet reached out and interlaced their fingers.

"I have to go, Uncle will worry." Li squeezed Jet's hand slightly before pulling free.

"Okay." Jet yawned, suppressing a snicker. "Do you want me to walk you home?"

Li glared at him.

"Right, right, not a girl." Jet grinned and leaned back, folding his arms behind his head. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Li. "Picking you up tomorrow after work?"

Li gave him a nod and finished dressing. He'd see Li again tomorrow, after he met his friends.

The night breeze was pleasant and Jet's eyes were falling close. He watched Li climb down the ladder and disappear out of sight. He fell asleep to the gentle buzzing of the city, thinking that life was good.

Morning came with damp fog and the twitter of squirrel-pigeons.

ooooo

His friends had stopped by not long ago, had given him a flyer with a picture of the Avatar's bison on it. They'd sighed when he'd squinted at the printed words and asked what it said. One of his friends had been kind enough to read it for Jet, though.

They'd told him to wait here, that the Avatar would come soon, and so he waited, watching two women hang up their laundry. He winked at them and they giggled, waving back at him from across the river. And then he saw her, just as his friends had said, gluing poster to the pillar near the river. He stepped out of the shady hutong he'd been waiting in, rolled up flyer in ready in his hand.

"Katara!" He called out to her, watching her turn around, eyes wide. It was good to see old friends. He gave her charming smile. "I think I can help you."

Her hands moved faster than he could dodge, gathering the water from the river in a one huge growing wave, channeling it toward him.

"Katara, I changed!"

The water enveloped him and he was thrust back several dozen yards, hitting the wall at the back of the dead end with a thud.
"Tell it to some other girl, Jet." She glared at him, a sphere of water churning menacingly between her hands, turning into frozen daggers speeding toward him.

He pulled his swords without thinking, dual blades deflecting the icy projectiles.

"I don't want to fight you." He held up his weapons for a demonstrative second, and then dropped them to the ground. "I'm here to help."

Jet reached for the flyer he'd stuffed into his belt, barely noticing the icicles, before they pinned him against the wall.

Jet sighed under his breath. What was wrong with that girl? He'd thrown down his weapons, done exactly as his friends had told him to, yet here he was, pinned to the wall with vicious looking frozen daggers. Maybe he should have gotten her flowers.

Looking past Katara's glower, some distance away, he could make out the Avatar, Katara's idiot brother and some girl running towards them. They came to a panting stop just behind her.

"Katara, what is it?"

Katara, her eyes never leaving Jet, anger in her voice, stood up straighter. "Jet's back."
The Walls of Ba Sing Se Chapter 14

Outside in the street, strings of firecrackers exploded, loud and echoing. The noise startled Zuko from his cleaning. He leaned his broom against the wall, wiped his hands on his apron and walked over to the window to peer out, wondering who was chasing away that many ghosts.

People had gathered about half a block down where green lanterns had been attached to an arched trellis and the street was littered with yellow and green paper from the firecrackers. A door was decorated with the double luck symbol of a wedding in process and Zuko could make out a few familiar faces in the crowd. Mrs Ying and her husband were bowing to the newlyweds, accepting shiny wrapped wedding candy from the bride. Pao was standing off the side, drinking baijiu out of a tiny cup with a man who Zuko thought to be the groom's father. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves and Zuko frowned.

He'd been to a wedding once, a long time ago. Zuko wasn't even sure if Azula had been born then. He remembered toddling along next to his mother, holding on tightly to her hand as they paid their respects. He'd been overwhelmed by the celebration and the sheer number of unfamiliar people and had fallen asleep at the table with his head on his mother's lap, his father's hand in his hair.

A group of Joo Dees arrived, the crowd parting for them, and Zuko took an involuntary step back from the window, further into the shadows. There was something about the way they never stopped smiling that put him on edge. Someone was ruling this city with an iron fist and Zuko, not for the first time, wondered how exactly they were organized and who was in charge. The Joo Dees bowed to the newlyweds and their parents, presenting them with an official looking, green and gold wrapped scroll. The couple took it graciously, but even from afar Zuko could see the bride relax visibly when the Joo Dees turned and walked away without further incident.

The bride was a short, slender girl who Zuko was sure he'd seen around, but who now looked all grown up with her hair no longer in braids, but done up women's style. He briefly wondered what Mai would have looked like on their wedding day, if the occasion would have made her smile or, more likely, frown harder. Mai. He hadn't thought of her in weeks, not since he'd tracked Azula's tank. Did she, too, now hate him? Think him a traitor?

Zuko turned and walked away from the window, the cheerfulness of the scene suddenly grating. There would be no wedding now. He ground his teeth, setting his jaw defiantly. Traitors with bounties on their head did not get to keep their fiancées. His fingers reached up to touch his scar. At least now she'd never have to see how deeply he'd dishonored himself.

He stopped mid step, stomach churning with unnamed emotions. And then there was Jet…

Not willing to deal with any of that he picked up his broom and started sweeping again, and in the absence of customers, kept his hands and mind busy with the menial tasks that accumulated on any given day. He was going through the pai-sho sets when the door opened, ringing the bell above it.

"Morning." Smellerbee, wearing guard uniform, poked her head in. She pursed her lips at his expression. "You're in an awfully good mood today."

Zuko straightened up from his seat behind the counter.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Jet here?" Smellerbee asked, leaning against the doorframe.
"No."

"Did you guys fight, or something?"

"No."

"Pao's not in, is he?" she asked and Zuko shook his head.

"No."

"Talkative today, aren't we?" She rolled her eyes at him. "Come on, let's sit outside. It's stuffy in here."

Zuko sighed loudly but followed her, bunching up his apron as he sat down next to her on the doorstep. The street was empty now, the wind blowing pieces of firecracker shells down the alley.

Smellerbee turned to look at him and grinned. She gestured in the general direction of her neck.

"I take it you two made up."

Zuko's hand shot out, searching with the tips of his fingers for the telltale bruise. He found it and blushed furiously, ears burning. Damn it, Jet! So that's what the approving clap on the shoulder from Uncle and the saucy wink from Mrs Chen this morning had been about.

"Yeah." He picked at a loose thread dangling from the hem of his apron, avoiding her eyes. "Last night."

"Hey, when he shows up later, can you tell him that we're on dock duty today and won't be back 'til this afternoon?"

"Sure."

"And keep an eye on him, if you can." Smellerbee looked at him with big worried eyes. "He's been acting odd since …"

"I guess…" Zuko shrugged.

"Are you up for dinner tonight?" She nudged him with her elbow. "It's been a while since all of us did something together and I just got a nice bonus and you look like you could do with a bit of cheering up."

Zuko was about to snap that he hated cheering up when he remembered that Uncle had said he'd invited Mrs Chen over for dinner tonight. He suppressed a shudder at the utter mortification of them trying to surreptitiously play footsie under the table.

Smellerbee clapped a hand over her mouth and started giggling.

What's so funny?" Zuko hated how his voice squeaked indignantly.

"I didn't know you guys did that."

"Did what?"

She looked around for eavesdroppers, and then leaned closer. "You glow like an oven when you blush."
"I do not!"

"Do too." She licked her finger and pressed it to his hand. It made a sizzling sound.

Zuko slapped her hand away, scowling at the ground.

"What did you get a bonus for?"

"Caught that guy who's wanted in Omashu right off the ferry." She sounded rather proud of herself as she explained, "The Bei Fongs want us to keep an eye out for fugitives that are worth money." Her grin turned sly, "You know, pick them out right when they get off the ferry before they can hide in the city. This bastard was trying to dodge his gambling bets. I am kinda surprised he made it as far as Ba Sing Se…"

Zuko's blood drained from his face. This was not good, not good at all.

"Don't worry." Smellerbee smiled and nudged him with her elbow. "I got you covered."

I very much doubt that, Zuko thought bitterly. Not when you see the other wanted poster.

"Hey, I gotta run. Tong's probably already waiting for me at the Tu Gui." Smellerbee got up and brushed the dust off her uniform. "See ya tonight."

Zuko watched her hasten down the street, a bad feeling in his stomach.

Zuko was reading the Sing Bao in the shade under the sycamore tree near the apartments when Jin walked into the courtyard and sat down next to him.

"Hi Li."

She offered him a bag of baked goods, the Da Ma bakery's label prominent on the front, and when he shook his head, reached into the bag for a cookie herself. Still chewing, she took one look at his neck and sighed.

"Serves me right, trying to pick you up on the rebound, doesn't it?"

"Jin … I…" Zuko scowled at his ankles, not knowing what to say. He hadn't meant to hurt her; it, Jet, had just … happened.

"No, it's okay. I'll get over it." She popped another cookie into her mouth, giving Zuko a sidelong glance, an odd undertone in her voice as she continued. "It's a pity he's such an ass, I wouldn't say no to …" She sighed and proffered the bag again. "Nevermind. Take one, they're very relaxing."

Partially because it was polite, partially to make her stop asking, Zuko reached into the bag and took a cookie. A sickly sweet smell clung to them and after a small, unpleasant mouthful, Zuko carefully put the remaining half down next to him on the grass.

They didn't speak for a while and he leaned back against the trunk, enjoying the mild breeze. It was oddly calming, sitting under the tree, with Jin close by, the leaves of the sycamore a particularly pretty green. He picked one up from the ground, fascinated by its fine veins.

"Look!" Jin snuggled closer, her head coming to rest against his shoulder. She pointed up to the sixth
floor and giggled. "Mrs Lin is feeding the squirrel-pigeons."

"What's so funny about that?" Zuko was suddenly very aware of her body against his. "She likes squirrel-pigeons."

"No, silly." Jin giggled again. "She hates Mrs Wang. Watch!"

And soon enough a window on the fourth floor opened and a middle aged woman started hanging up laundry. A squirrel-pigeon cooed and something white landed with a soft splatter on the window sill next to Mrs Wang.

"Oh." Zuko snickered, watching Mrs Lin put out more rice. "That's clever."

Mrs Wang's head disappeared from the window and there was the slamming of a door and angry footsteps stomping upstairs. They looked at each other and dissolved into hysterical giggles.

"Li?" Jin had stopped laughing and turned her head, looking at him with wide dreamy eyes. Zuko blinked, wondering if he should stop her, if he even wanted to. Their kiss was soft, gentle and when Jin pulled back and, again, rested her head against his shoulder she took his hand, fitting their palms against each other before pulling it to her lips and kissing it, too. Then she let go of it, and got up, a sad smile on her face. "Don't be a stranger."

"Where are you going?"

She looked back over her shoulder at him and giggled.

"To get noodles. I'm starving."

Zuko picked up his discarded newspaper, trying to find where he'd left off, but found that he had a hard time concentrating. His eyes fell shut, the newspaper still in his lap.

The high-pitched bark of Mrs Chen lapdog startled Zuko awake, and for one second he thought that Jin must have come back. He frowned at Mrs Chen and her yipping pest exiting the building and yes, of course, he sighed, coming towards him.

"Atta boy, Li, atta boy!" There were dimples on Mrs Chen's round, grinning face that made her look years younger. "Just don't let them catch you." She sat down and picked up the bag of cookies and nudged him with her surprisingly boney elbow. "Or are you kids sharing?" She gave him an indecent wink.

"Sharing what?" It took him a second before the full meaning of what she'd said dawned on him and when it did his eyes popped open wide and he jumped to his feet, mortified. "What? No!"

"Pity." Mrs Chen opened the Da Ma bakery bag and inhaled deeply, a sly smile forming on her lips. "You'll be wanting these?"

Zuko picked up his newspaper and scowled at her. "Keep them."

Now what was it that Jin had said about noodles? He was suddenly really hungry.

oooooo

By the time he was due back at work the pleasantly relaxed feeling had transformed into a throbbing headache. And when that pompous ass Quon had shown up offering Uncle his own tea shop in the
Upper Ring, and Pao was about to throw a wobbly over Uncle leaving, Zuko had had it. He'd tossed his tray onto the nearest table and slammed the door on his way out, furious at how little say he had over his own life.

He kicked the decorative pot outside the teahouse, then leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms in front of him in impotent anger. Uncle'd been the one to insist he make friends and now he expected Zuko to leave whatever pitiful excuse of a life they'd built behind and move to the Upper Ring. What was even worse was that it seemed all but decided without anyone even once asking Zuko what he wanted.

And then a piece of paper fluttered down from the sky and changed everything. The Avatar was in Ba Sing Se.

ooooo

Zuko stood at the shore of Lake Lao Gai, wishing he could take his mask off, to not just feel the second-hand heat of the day, but to feel the sun and the wind themselves on his skin. So far everything had gone smoothly and in Zuko's experience this was unprecedented and reason to worry. He tried to stomp hard on the tiny bit inside him that still hoped that for once Agni might grant him victory, that maybe he'd done enough penance to succeed this time.

The information he'd coerced out of the Dai Li agent last night had proven to be correct, the entrance was easy to find and exactly where described. Surveying the area once more, reassuring himself that he was not being watched, Zuko knelt and levered the manhole cover open with the hilt of his sword and started his descent down into the damp, echoing tunnels. He'd find the Avatar's bison and then the Avatar himself. He'd finally regain his honor and his destiny. With every rung of the ladder, the words repeated themselves in his mind, filling him with determination.

After a seemingly endless climb he finally reached the bottom of the shaft. He took one last glance back up at the far away sun, nearly at its noon peak now, straightened his back and started walking. With some luck he'd be flying back to the surface.

The tunnels under Lake Lao Gai twisted and turned and with every turn, every step deeper into the maze, Zuko started to hate the dingy green light emanating from the crystals that lined the walls even more. Being this far under the lake put him on edge, the damp walls a constant reminder of the tons of water and earth over his head, of how far out of the reach of the sun was.

He took a deep breath and told himself to focus on the task at hand. He counted the doors and tunnels carefully, quietly slipping past several open doors, pausing only momentarily to take in the unsettling scene of a group of Joo Dees in training. He hoped that, even if the information the Dai Li agent had given him proved to be false, or his luck ran out some other way, that he'd at least be able to fight his way back to the surface.

And then there it was. Zuko stopped, counting the number of doors again to be certain and then nodded to himself. This had to be it. Behind this door was the key to his destiny and this time he was not going to mess it up. This time he'd succeed. He'd finally be able to go home.

He took a deep breath and pressed his palm to the stone. To his surprise the door slid open easily, and Zuko sighed with relief. He'd been worried about that and he'd been ready to blast the door open with fire, if necessary. That it slid open at the mere touch of his hand made Zuko wonder just how many non-benders came down here. He snorted. Right, as if the Dai Li would clean up bison shit.
And there it was. Zuko briefly closed his eyes, leaning heavily against the doorframe, wondering if it was too early to thank Agni. He'd done it. He found the Avatar's bison. He was so close to his destiny, he could almost taste it.

Inside the cell, Appa opened his eyes and got up, pulling angrily at his chains.

"Expecting someone else?"

Zuko stepped into the cell, sword out. He'd have to do something about those chains.

The Avatar's bison backed away as far as his chains would let him, lowering his horned head threateningly and Zuko resisted the urge to reach out and pet it. It truly was a magnificent beast.

"You're mine now," he said, for a brief moment wondering if he could actually keep it afterwards.

There was a muffled rumbling sound and the floor under Zuko's feet started to tremble with the distant but unmistakable power of earthbending. His body tensed. Something was happening and he'd have to hurry. Behind him the door slid open. He spun around, swords at the ready. Had he been discovered?

"Uncle?"

Zuko lowered his swords, blinking at the sight of Uncle Iroh in the doorway. And then he heard it. Faint, but unmistakable.

"Long Feng is escaping!"

He would recognize that voice anywhere. Zuko sheathed his swords. The Avatar was here.

"So, the Blue Spirit..." Uncle began but Zuko didn't listen.

"I don't have time for this." He shouldered past Iroh and was out the door before Uncle could finish his sentence. Let Uncle deal with the sky-bison, he had an Avatar to capture.

Zuko sprinted down the corridor, catching a glimpse of the Avatar's orange robes disappear around a corner. Zuko skidded to a halt, pushed himself off the wall, and chased after him again. He saw the Avatar enter a cavernous room full of drainage pipes, only to have the wall close up right in front of him when he got there. He banged his fists against the stone in frustration. Not again. Not after he'd come this close.

Maybe he could get in there through the pipes. Maybe not all was lost after all. Looking around frantically he noticed a door to an adjacent room. To his great relief it opened under his touch and he could hear Jet threatening someone. Jet? No, that couldn't be right. Why would Jet be here, under Lake Lao Gai? But it was definitely Jet's voice that echoed through the drainage pipes. Jet was here? Spirits, this could not be good.

Zuko pushed the thoughts aside. He didn't have the time to think about what Jet's presence meant, couldn't let it distract him. The Avatar was more important. He hoisted himself up into one of the bigger pipes, grimacing as the cold water soaked through his clothes. Zuko braced himself and started crawling on all fours through the pipe that separated him from regaining his honor.

The room opened up in front of him and Zuko stopped, crouching at the end of the pipe. He reached for his chi, willing his hands and clothes dry while taking in the scene, assessing the situation. A high ranking Dai Li agent, judging by the honors on his queue, was standing off to the side where the door would have been. The Avatar and Jet were facing the man, arguing with him. How they'd
ended up on the same side, only Koh knew. And then the strangest thing happened. At the command of the Dai Li agent Jet drew his shang gou and attacked the Avatar. Zuko's Avatar.

The Avatar's eyes went wide, but Zuko had to admire his reflexes. A blast of wind made Jet slide backwards. His shang gou scraped over the stone floor, slowing his backwards stumble and he came to a panting halt, immediately advancing on the Avatar again.

"Jet's it's me -" The Avatar dodged Jet's attack again, spinning off to the side, looking oddly dismayed at the idea of having to fight Jet. Hadn't Smellerbee said the Freedom Fighters and the Avatar hadn't parted on good terms?

Zuko tried to swallow back the feeling of unease that tried to surface. Had Jet been on the Dai Li's side all along? Had he been spying on him, too?

"You don't have to do this!" The Avatar pleaded.

The Dai Li agent replied in mock sympathy, "I'm afraid he doesn't have a choice." He stopped, eyes narrowing at Zuko. "What are you doing here?"

Zuko ignored him; the man was no threat yet and Jet was attacking his Avatar again. Zuko jumped down from out of the pipe, and landed in an elegant crouch next to Jet, pulling his swords out to block Jet's attack in one fluid motion. Sharpened steel met, swords sliding against each other with a high pitched screeching whine, and then Zuko flexed his arms and pushed, forcing Jet to stumble backwards in surprise.

Jet came to a panting halt, shoulders drooping, eyes unfocussed but then he seemed to pull himself together and attacked again, swinging his swords almost comically, trying to get past Zuko to the Avatar. Zuko growled under his breath. Not going to happen. He matched Jet's stride, forcing him sideways.

"Jet?" Zuko all but shouted, trying to get Jet's attention, distract him from the Avatar, but to no avail. It was as if Jet did not even recognize him. What had that man meant when he'd said Jet had no choice? There was something very obviously wrong with Jet: His movements were sluggish, his attacks were basic and not at all like his usual graceful moves. Zuko could not shake the feeling that this was not Jet, that someone with only rudimentary understanding of sword fighting was controlling Jet's movements. It was starting to worry him.

"I don't want to fight you!" Zuko parried Jet's clumsy attack, only blocking, diverting, not yet retaliating. Jet, for one tiny fraction of a second, seemed to focus on him, and then his eyes went blank again.

"That's good, I guess…" The Avatar chimed in, then his voice rose an octave, "You know each other?"

"The Avatar is mine!" Zuko growled at no one in particular.

"Okay, not so good anymore…” The Avatar surreptitiously tried to move to the exit, but Zuko cut him off.

"Do your duty, Jet!" The Dai Li agent demanded.

Zuko frowned. What exactly had the Dai Li done to Jet? If he had had any doubt that something was wrong here, Jet was taking direct orders from the Dai Li. Spirits, Jet taking orders from anyone dispersed any doubt he'd had.
"They can't make you do this. You're a freedom fighter," the Avatar begged. "Look into your heart."

Jet seemed to be caught in some inner struggle, and then he looked at Zuko before his eyes glazed back over.

"Do it, do it now!" the man urged.

Zuko cursed under his breath when Jet raised his shang gou again, but then something changed. Jet closed his eyes, his face twisting under the power of strong emotions and then he turned, face still ashen, but eyes no longer vacant.

He turned, and to Zuko's surprise threw one of his shang gou hilt first at the agent. The man easily sidestepped it, sliding into a bending stance. Jet's sword hit the wall with a thud, burying the bladed hilt several inches into the soft rock.

The Dai Li agent's foot slid backwards, his hand bending the stone in front of him. Zuko; still focused on Jet's sluggish movements, felt more than saw the man move as the rock formed a pillar under his bending and sped in a cloud of dust toward them, robbing them of sight.

And Jet just stood there. A dim outline in the dust, a prone unmoving target. Recognizing the danger for what it was Zuko's heart started beating faster, adrenalin speeding his movements, he stepped in front of Jet, swords out, slashing at the empty air, trying to stop the earthen wall before it could reach Jet. His swords connected with stone and Jet went down. Something inside Zuko crumbled. Once again he hadn't been fast enough.

The dust settled.

Jet, like Uncle back when Azula had nearly killed him in that desert town, collapsed without so much as a gasp. A surprised expression on his face, Jet fell over backwards, clutching at his chest.

And then there was the Dai Li agent, voice gratingly smug, taunting Jet, telling him how foolish he had been, already treating his death as a foregone conclusion. While Zuko knelt next to Jet, trying to keep from screaming, his vision gone black at the edges. Not again. Zuko turned towards the Dai Li agent. Fire roared from his hands, aimless, pointless, a token gesture flaring after the man already escaping on a rising pillar towards the ceiling and gone through one of the upper pipes before it could even so much as singe his robes.

The fire died down and Zuko, Avatar and Dai Li forgotten, cradled Jet's head, running his fingers through his hair, desperately trying to hold onto the one thing that mattered. Jet was still breathing, still breathing. Jet, who infuriated him, who'd done any number of stupid, aggravating things, yet who had somehow managed to worm himself into Zuko's life, was now lying here, in a damp cell under Lake Lao Gai and ... Zuko's fingernails dug into his palm. This was all his fault. Every single time he'd come close to capturing the Avatar it had ended in disaster and someone else had paid for it. Maybe Uncle was right, maybe he should just accept his defeat. Face tight, having made his decision, he turned to face the Avatar. "Leave!"

"But what about..."

"LEAVE!" Zuko roared and then went on more quietly, his voice monotone, defeated, "Your bison is in a cell down the corridor to the right. Leave, before I change my mind."

The Avatar didn't need to be told twice.
Note: Ever wondered why Jin was so Zen?

The Da Ma bakery: Da Ma 大马 means 'big horse'; Da Ma 大麻 on the other hand 'marijuana'.
There was blue sky above him when Jet opened his eyes. Sky? How had he gotten outside? His vision was a bit blurry and he blinked, trying to focus. No, not sky, someone wearing blue. Jet groaned in pain as a gentle hand held up his head.

"Katara?" he whispered. His chest hurt.

"Shush," a woman's voice - older, deeper - urged gently. A cup was pressed insistently against his lips. "Drink."

And he did. It tasted strange, sickly-sweet and salty at the same time. It dragged him down, wrapped him into a thick layer of cloying mist that made his eyelids heavy, and pulled him into fitful sleep with nightmares he didn't remember later.

When he woke again it was noon and he was covered in sweat. The thin blanket felt too hot and he kicked at it, turning his face away from the sun. Someone wiped his brow with a cool rag and Jet sighed, peering out from under leaden eyelids.

Longshot's somber face turned into a wide grin.

"Smellerbee!"

"What? Is something wrong with Jet?" Jet heard her get up and shuffle over and moments later she was fussing over him, relief so plain on her face that he was starting to wonder just how injured he was. She looked like she'd been crying.

"Hey." He gave her a reassuring smile, or at least tried to. He didn't remember smiling taking this much effort.

"You're awake!" Smellerbee looked like she really, really wanted to hug him, but her eyes flicked over the bandages on his chest and she sighed, taking his hand instead. "We were so worried."

Jet took in the unfamiliar room. He was lying on a pallet against one of the walls, a sliding door a little in front of him at his feet. A low table with a bucket of water next to it stood in the middle of the room. The table was overflowing with stacks of bandages and jars of medicine. Scrolls with flowing calligraphy decorated the walls and Jet wondered briefly what they said, since they had no pictures to hint at the meaning. There were two windows behind him, thrown open wide, the sun streaming in through the open shutters and he could hear the gently shifting leaves of a tree. This was not their apartment in the Lower Ring, or even a hospital. Not that he'd ever been to one, but he was sure they didn't put patients in luxurious bedrooms. And then Jet noticed the quiet. No carts rumbled by, no street merchant calling out. A number of questions flooded his mind: Where am I? Where's the Avatar, and how did I get here?

He tried to sit up but intense, breath-stopping, white hot pain made him gasp and his head fell back onto the pillow, tears running down his face as he tried to breathe as shallowly as possible. Smellerbee and Longshot hovered nearby, wiping his brow and chiding him for even trying. After a few minutes, when the pain had receded enough for him to phrase a coherent sentence, he managed to rasp out, "What happened?"

"You're hurt. The Dai Li …" Smellerbee started and trailed off when Jet closed his eyes. He nodded, his fingers ghosting over his bandages. He remembered. They'd brainwashed him, those utter bastards. Made him fight the Avatar for them and then that fucking earthbender had gotten him good.
"Are you hungry?" Smellerbee asked and Jet nodded. He wasn't even sure what day it was, nor could he remember when he'd last eaten.

Longshot got up and a few moments later came back with a second pillow. Smellerbee helped him prop Jet up into a sitting position. It fucking hurt.

"Sorry, it's only zhou." Smellerbee held out bowl and spoon with a small apologetic smile. "But the healer said that's all you can have at the moment. Do you think you can manage, or do you need help?"

Longshot hovered at his side, offering him a cup with water that Jet drank down greedily, coughing painfully as a result.

"Zhou's fine," he managed to say after a while. As much as his pride made him hate to admit it, he was not sure if he had the strength to eat by himself, but spirits be damned if he wouldn't try. He smiled at her, holding out his hand for the spoon. "You'd better hold the bowl. I don't want to end up covered in food."

She nodded and scooted closer, sitting on her crossed ankles.

Jet dipped his spoon into the rice-porridge, carefully guiding it the few inches to his mouth. He hated how much effort it took, how his hand trembled. Swallowing hurt, too. He let his hand fall to his side, waiting for the pain to recede before trying again. Someone groaned and Longshot got up. Jet followed Longshot with his eyes, curious what was going on. And then his fingers clenched around the spoon, knuckles white with exertion. How could he have forgotten about Li? Li - no, the fucking Fire Nation firebender - was sleeping on a bed a few feet from him and Longshot was wiping his brow as if he cared. What the fuck was going on here? His thoughts must have been clear on his face since Smellerbee sighed and moved ever so slightly in between them.

"Li's hurt, too," she muttered, putting the bowl down on the floor beside her, she rubbed her hand over her face. "He saved your life under Lake Lao Gai."

Li was hurt? Jet's eyes narrowed. When had that happened? What by Koh had happened?

"Where are the others?" He scanned the room for any sign of Katara, her brother, or ... "Where's the Avatar?"

"Fucked if I know," Smellerbee cursed, her expression fierce. "They're all gone. Don't know why you bothered helping him. He certainly didn't return the favor."

"What do you mean?" He covered his face with his hands, rubbing his palms over his eyes. His memories were such a mess, but he was certain he remembered the Avatar being there with them before ... "How did we get out of there?"

"We're in Mushi's new apartment. Li and Longshot carried you." She offered him the zhou again. "You should eat something."

Her voice was clipped and there was something she wasn't telling him. Jet frowned, annoyed at her mothering and not willing to let go of the topic.

"What about the Avatar? Katara?"

Smellerbee turned her head away, shaking it slightly. Her hands balled to fists.

"Just tell me, Bee." This was getting ridiculous, how bad could it be? Were they dead?
"They left you there to die, Jet." She stopped, taking a deep breath, her voice hoarse with suppressed emotion when she continued, "One second Longshot and I were fighting alongside them and then the Avatar came running back and yelled that he'd found Appa, and then the bastards ran after his stupid pet. Barely stopped to tell us where you were." Smellerbee wiped a tear from her face with the back of her hand, smudging her make-up. "I – We found you and … the way Li was holding you, I thought you were dead. Don't you ever die on us, do you hear me!"

She punched him in his uninjured shoulder, then got up and stalked over to the window. He could hear her suppressed sniffling, even with her back to him.

Jet looked from her to Longshot, who nodded. What the hell? Why would they do that? He'd been on their side- this time. And that wasn't quite how he remembered it, either. Sure, Li had stepped in, defending first the Avatar and then him from that Dai Li agent, but something didn't add up. Why had Li told, no ordered, the Avatar to leave? Also, why had the Avatar listened to him? Jet watched Li toss and turn in what looked to be a fever dream. Had Li thought Jet was dead already?

The screen-door slid open. A tall woman in blue robes toed off her shoes and stepped into the room.

"Healer Kepu." Smellerbee's face lit up and she rushed to greet her.

"How are our champion Earthball players?" the healer inquired with a smile, then nodded at Jet. "I see one of them is up. How wonderful."

She knelt next to Li's bed, putting her bag down on the ground and started to rummage through its contents. She pulled a folded paper from a leather pouch with a stylized white flower on it. It reminded Jet of a pai-sho tile. Tutting to herself under her breath she unfolded it, careful not to disturb the power of finely ground herbs inside, and then gestured at Longshot. "Is there clean water in that bucket?"

Longshot nodded and carried it over to her. She bent some of the water out of it, a perfect sphere the size of an orange hovering over her left hand while she mixed the herbs into with her right. The water took on a greenish tinge. When it started to glow the healer bent over Li, covering the sides of Li's head much the same as Katara had done for Jet, when-

Jet turned his head away, not liking the reminder. He shot Smellerbee a questioning glance and whispered, "Earthball?"

She glared back at him, her voice as low as his and very annoyed. "You'd rather we'd told her the truth?"

"Fair enough," Jet muttered, not meeting her eyes. That certainly would have been a bad idea.

The screen door slid open again and Mushi entered the room, carrying a tray loaded with enough food to feed all of them and then some. Longshot and Smellerbee hastened to clear space on the table for him to set the tray down. Mushi scanned the room and when he noticed Jet awake and sitting up, his eyes fixed on him for a few seconds before turning to the healer.

"How's my nephew?" Mushi hovered by Healer Kepu, an anxious expression on his face.

"As good as expected." She held out her hand and he helped her up. "I have done all I can for him." She smoothed the wrinkles from her robes then, taking in Mushi's downcast expression, put a hand on his arm. "He's going to be fine. He just needs to sleep it off."

"Thank you." Mushi covered her hand with his, looking up at her. "For everything you have done, Kepu. We – my nephew… your help means a lot. Sometimes it seems the only thing the past will
bring is grief. It is good to be reminded that there is still hope."

"There's always hope." She smiled at Mushi again and then turned to Jet. "Now, let's see about your ribs. How are you feeling?"

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Jet leaned back against his pillow, utterly exhausted. If he had to admit one thing, Healer Kepu was thorough. She'd poked and prodded him, healed his ribs with glowing water and then fed him foul tasting tea that was making his thoughts heavy and his eyes droopy.

She'd assured him that he was going to be fine, and would be out and about in a couple of days if he did as she'd ordered and stayed in bed. Jet had harrumphed at that but Smellerbee and Longshot had glared at him and with his ribs hurting the way they did, the healer was most likely right.

It was starting to take effort to keep his eyes open and as he turned his head slightly, trying to find a more comfortable position, he wished he hadn't. Li was sleeping fitfully on the other side of the room, Mushi at his side, and Jet wondered, for one brief second, if Li was going to be alright.

Fuck no, Jet chided himself, he wasn't going to worry about a firebender. A damn Fire Nation firebender, at that. He didn't worry about firebenders, he killed them. Li was just lucky Jet was out of commission at the moment, or he'd take care of Li himself. Jet's hands balled to fists. It was all Li's fault, anyway. If not for Li, he wouldn't have gotten arrested by the Dai Li in the first place. It wasn't fair, Jet complained to himself. Why did Li have to be a firebender?

He watched Longshot talk quietly to Mushi, watched the old man pat Longshot avuncularly on the arm and Jet's frown deepened. Since when did they get along? How could they do this to him, betray him like that? Those two were Fire Nation. Had Smellerbee and Longshot forgotten their forest and all that had happened already? How had his life turned upside down without him noticing?

ooooo

He woke to the sound of Li screaming. His eyes still heavy from whatever medicine that tea had contained, Jet thought that he shouldn't turn, shouldn't care, but he couldn't help himself, he had to know what was going on.

Li was sitting up ramrod straight on his bed, his breathing heavy, his eyes wild. Li's blanket had fallen from his upper body and Jet admired the way Li's muscles moved as Li got up, how he rolled to his feet with the graceful movements of a true fighter. Jet's eyes came to rest on one small, flat rosy nipple and he licked his lips, remembering how Li's skin felt and tasted, remembering the helpless-needy sounds Li made when Jet licked that one spot right below his ear, before Jet also remembered that he should hate Li and everything he was. Jet closed his eyes, ignoring the pain in his chest and the need between his legs, as he turned his back to Li. He wasn't going to get turned on by a firebender. After a while he fell asleep again.

The next time he woke he was alone, and grateful for it. The sun was low in the sky and the breeze carried the faint smell of lilac in bloom. It was almost peaceful. Jet looked around the room. Li's bed was neatly made and Li himself was gone, which suited Jet just fine. Jet ran his fingers over his bandages, trying to assess just how much damage that fucking Dai Li agent had done to his ribs. He hissed when his fingers pressed down on his ribs, coming to the conclusion that he must have broken
several of them. The healer seemed to know what she was doing, though. The pain in his chest that earlier had made breathing hard had faded to a faint hum of discomfort and Jet decided to try and sit up. The sooner he could leave the better.

It was a mistake; a very, very painful one at that. The second he tried lifting his upper body off the pallet white hot pain swept over him, making him fall back, only to envelope him in even more pain when his back hit the mattress.

Jet screamed.

Hurried footsteps came running down the hall, the door slid open with a thud and Li entered, eyes wild, body rigid, ready to slide into battle stance at the drop of a pin. Jet closed his eyes, half expecting flames to fill the room. He'd seen that stance before many, many times.

"What happened?" Li looked around the room, searching it for Dai Li agents lurking in the shadows. He relaxed visibly when he found nothing amiss.

"Oh, you're awake!" Li exclaimed, looking happy at the fact. He smiled and toed off his shoes at the door.

"Yes," Jet ground out. Obviously.

"Hey." Li knelt beside him, reaching out to gently squeeze his hand. And for one thoughtless, comfort-seeking second Jet almost squeezed back.

"Don't touch me," Jet hissed and flinched away from Li's touch, doubling over in pain at the too quick movement.

"Does it hurt?" Li looked at him with worry in his eyes and Jet turned his head away. It had to be a trick. Why would a firebender worry about him?

"Yes," Jet rasped, and it did hurt, just not the way Li was assumed it did. He hated the part of him that wanted Li to touch him, wanted to hear the reassuring words and feel the reassuring touches Li was offering. Firebender, Li's a firebender, Jet kept repeating to himself. It would be so easy to give in. How could he take comfort from a firebender's hands? Those gentle touches were an illusion. He knew what those hands could do, how the hands that gently wiped his brow and smoothed back his hair, could create fire out of thin air, could burn houses and scar flesh.

"What happened?" Li fussled with Jet's blanket, his gaze too intense.

"Tried to sit up." It was only half a lie.

"Oh." Li took the familiar cup from the table, holding it out to Jet. "You should take your medicine."

Jet reached for it, his hand shaking. What could Li possibly want from him? Why did Li care? He'd cared enough, if Smellerbee was to be believed, to have saved his life. Maybe what had happened between them hadn't all been a lie? No, that didn't make sense, the only emotions Jet had seen firebenders capable of was rage and hate, not this, so Jet refused to name it - whatever it was.

"Here." Li took the cup from him, holding it to Jet's lips. "Drink this."

"I am not a baby, I can drink by myself." Jet reached for the cup again, spilling some of the contents, but somehow managing to drink most of it before Li took the cup from him again, putting it back onto the table.
Li nodded, as if he understood something that he could not possibly understand. "I'll get you another pillow." He got up and returned with the pillow from his own bed.

Jet looked at his own shaking hand in disgust and then at Li. Li, the firebender, was kneeling next to him, was offering his own pillow for Jet's comfort, was looking at him with eager-worried puppy eyes and Jet had to fight to not give in and betray everything he'd ever believed in. It didn't make sense. So much didn't, right now. Jet swore he would puzzle out why, but for the time being Li seemed to want to please and Jet was starting to think that he liked the idea. It didn't matter that he didn't like accepting help from a firebender, but he needed Li, and it was a twisted form of revenge, that was sure, to have a firebender at his beck and call, willingly so on top of that. Jet smiled, it had a certain kind of other appeal, too. Surely an opportunity to get back at the Fire Nation would present itself in time, and Li might just be the key to it. He'd wait for now, till he was better and then, Jet felt his eyes getting heavy with the medicine, then he'd think of something. If nothing else he could just tip off the Dai Li and get Li and his uncle arrested. But for now he'd wait and lull Li into a false sense of security.

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He woke in the middle of the night to the afterimage of a lantern flashing before his eyes and a scream stuck in his throat. Eyes wild, Jet lay frozen, searching the darkness for the Dai Li agent that had been there moments ago in his nightmare. Slowly the curtains that fluttered in the night breeze became just that, curtains, and the threatening shadows turned into the leaves of the tree moving with the wind before the full moon. And slowly his breathing quieted and his eyes drifted shut.

There is no war in Ba Sing Se!

The voice echoed in his head and Jet tried to move, to pull away, to run, but the Dai Li agents were stronger than him, dragging him back to that horrible room with the flashing light and he felt the cold, hard stone clamp down over his wrists, felt its pressure close around his forehead and panic rose in Jet. Not again. And Jet screamed.

"Jet." A dark figure was shaking him gently and Jet pushed him away, struggling against his blanket and the hands on his shoulder.

"Jet! Wake up."

He blinked, trying to shake the remnants of the dream. It was not real, he was safe. He was not under Lake Lao Gai. He took a deep breath, focusing on what was there. Li was kneeling next to him on the floor, hair sticking out in all directions, looking sleepily at him, fingers playing with the edge of Jet's blanket. Part of Jet wanted to reach out and pull Li down, into his arms, wanted to bury his hands in Li's hair and kiss him until the nightmare was forgotten, until nothing but the taste and feel of Li's body beneath his remained. And then Li turned his head and smiled sleepily at him.

"You had a nightmare."

Jet smiled back, about to reach out and then the light of the moon fell on Li's scar and Jet closed his eyes. He nodded, suddenly having a hard time breathing and kicking himself for even thinking of taking comfort from a firebender. A nightmare, indeed.

"You shouldn't go back to sleep just yet."

He felt Li's hand on his shoulder and forced himself not to flinch. He opened his eyes.
"I know."

Li squeezed his good shoulder in sympathy. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No!" The idea of talking about what had happened, of what the Dai Li had done to him, made him wrap his arms around himself, trying to keep the panic at bay. "I can't …"

Li started to awkwardly rub Jet's arm in what, from anyone else, would have been soothing circles.

"I used to have nightmares back when …" Li's voice trailed off and Jet noticed Li's hand inching toward his scar before dropping back into his lap. Li shrugged, a self-conscious little smile on his lips. "Uncle used to talk to me after. It helped."

"What did you talk about?"

"What I would do when …" Li sighed, the smile gone, replaced with a more familiar frown. "You sure you want to hear this?"

"Yeah, go on." Anything to keep the nightmare at bay. And who knew, maybe he'd learn something useful. Jet lifted the edge of his blanket and Li slid in next to him, settling by his side, resting his head on Jet's good shoulder, careful of Jet's injuries. Jet hated himself for how natural they fit together and how good it felt to hold Li again. This would have to stop once he was better, but for now, he needed Li. With his ribs still mending and the Dai Li out to capture him, he could not risk antagonizing Li, could not risk getting thrown out. So he let Li snuggle close, let himself take the comfort that was on offer.

"I was banished from the Fire Nation a few weeks before my fourteenth birthday." Li let his voice trail off. "I lost an Agni Kai."

"What's an …" Jet raised his head to ask.

"It's a kind of ritual duel." Li's voice broke, and Jet let him find his own pace, didn't push for words not ready to come. After a while Li went on, his voice hoarse with suppressed emotion. "I refused to fight, I –" His hands fisted restlessly in the blanket. "I begged, I … I lost my honor."

"They kicked you out of the country for that?" Jet wanted to understand, really did, but with his thoughts still wrapped in the remnants of his own nightmare, and his brain sluggish from sleep, it took him a moment to grasp more than the surface meaning of a lost battle. Shit. "They did that to you, didn't they?" He reached up and gently touched the scared side of Li's face. "For losing a fight?"

Li jerked away from his touch. "It's not that simple."

"Sure it isn't," Jet muttered, feeling some of the puzzle pieces that made up Li fall into place. What the hell was wrong with that country?

"What do you miss most about the forest?" Li reached for his hand, twinning their fingers together and Jet decided not to push, to accept the obvious change of topic for what it was.

"The trees and the quiet." The memory of his little village in the tree-tops was bittersweet, but it had been good while it lasted, before the arrival of the Avatar had turned it all to ashes. "And the grass. There was this lake we used to go swimming in during summer …"

"There is park nearby," Li suggested, desperately grasping for common ground. "We could go when you're better."
"I'd like that." Jet yawned. He found himself indeed liking the idea. His eyes drifted shut again and this time Li didn't stop him.

He woke again, when night was turning to dawn, in the gray early hours of morning, from the fading images of a pleasant dream, feeling more content than he could remember feeling for a long time. His head was resting on Li's chest, their legs entwined. Li had stayed, had cared enough to not let him face the nightmares alone, and for some reason this made Jet smile. He snuck an arm across Li's waist and snuggle closer, letting that warm sticky feeling lull him back to sleep, the steady drum of Li's heartbeat drowning out the faint nagging voice that insisted that this was wrong, that Li was Fire Nation.

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That morning Healer Kepu had finally declared him healthy enough to eat real food instead of the endless broth and zhou he'd had to suffer these past days on top of his injuries. At lunch, Li had carried up a whole tray full of mouthwatering dishes, which made him suspect that Mrs Chen was visiting. Jet popped the last fried jiaozi into his mouth with a sigh of contentment; damn, he'd missed real food. He put down his chopsticks on top of his bowl and handed it back to Li. Li smiled at him when he took it and as Jet watched Li tidy the table, he decided to ask the question that had been bothering for a while.

"Why did you come after me?" Jet leaned back against the mountain of pillows supporting his back. It was one of the questions that he'd been trying to find an answer to when he was lying alone in the apartment, Li and Mushi gone off to work. What exactly had they been doing under Lake Lao Gai?

"What?" Li's hands stilled, his back straightening visibly and Jet noticed Li's eyes go wide with shock. Li really was an open book when he was upset, and for some reason, the question did upset him. Interesting.

"I mean under Lake Lao Gai." Jet probed, watching Li cringe at the mention of the place. Now that at least made sense, that place was creepy. But he kept on wondering: Was there more to it? "I want to know why you were following me."

"I didn't come after you." Li's voice was low, barely audible, admitting a truth he didn't seem too proud of. "Not at first."

"Then why were you there?" Jet was truly curious now. He'd understood if Li'd been following him, had somehow tracked him to the Dai Li headquarters. That's what he would have done in Li's place.

"Why were you?" Li flared, and Jet was staring a rather familiar pout.

"I was with the Avatar." Jet gestured at his bandaged ribs. "And not exactly by choice, if you remember..."

"Oh. Right." Li turned away, pretending to study one of the scrolls on the wall. "I was after the Avatar, after what was left of my honor..." Li's voice trailed off and Jet narrowed his eyes at him. It made some kind of sense - you couldn't be around Li and not notice that he took anything concerning honor very seriously – but, hadn't he said he'd lost his honor in a duel? Jet's memory was a bit hazy on that whole talk, but he was pretty sure that's what Li had said to him after the nightmare. How did the Avatar fit into that?

"I saw you protect him from the Dai Li, well me -" Jet nodded. Katara had been going on about the
Avatar being 'last hope for peace' more than once, could it be that simple? "Why'd you do it? I mean help him in the first place. I know you've helped him before, too. You told us that, but … " Jet ran a hand through his hair. "What I mean is, what's he got to do with your honor, you being Fire Nation and all…"

"He's gone." Li slammed the last lunch-bowl back onto the tray with more force than necessary, clearly unhappy, before turning to the door. "I don't want to talk about it."

Jet ground his teeth, willing his ribs to heal faster. There'd be a day when Li couldn't just walk away from a conversation like that. He'd get his answer then. No matter how easily you could read Li's emotions, especially when he was upset, getting information out of him when he didn't want to tell was another matter altogether. Jet would have to ask Bee about this later, she seems to be buddy buddy with Li lately.

He glared at the door, running his fingers over his bandages. He needed a plan. He'd been forgetting about that. Li and his uncle were Fire Nation, which meant they had to be up to something. You couldn't trust Fire Nation, they were always up to something. Jet just had to wait and find out and then he'd send them in to the Dai Li

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It wasn't until days later, Li's head was resting on Jet's good shoulder, the scarred side of his face hidden, that Jet remembered again. Jet trailed his fingers lazily up and down Li's arm, worming his way up and into the wide sleeve of Li's tunic. Li sighed and Jet noted the trail of goose bumps his fingers were leaving, showing just how much Li seemed to enjoy his touch. Li's arm tightened around his waist and he felt him bury his face deeper into Jet's chest with a content sigh. Jet pressed a kiss to Li's hair and leaned back against his pillow, letting his own eyes drift shut. The wooden shudders, thrown wide open, rattled slightly and the breeze carried with it the pleasant scent of lilacs, taking away the remnants of the stuffy noon heat and Jet let it lull him to sleep.

"I have to go soon." Li looked up at Jet through sleep-heavy eyes and something in Jet froze. Firebender eyes. How could he have forgotten, even for one moment, what Li was?

Jet turned away, and yawned. He rubbed his hand over his face, pressing the ball of his palm against his eyes to keep from screaming. How could he have been this careless? Let the enemy lull him into this false sense of comfort?

He made a noncommittal sound and when he opened his eyes again Li had gotten up and was brushing the wrinkles from his robes.

"Uncle is expecting me at the teahouse." Li gave him a small awkward smile that eased the frownlines from his face, made him look his actual age and Jet found himself smiling back before he could help it. "Do you need anything before I go?"

"Yeah." Jet propped himself up on one elbow, careful not to upset his healing ribs. Li's hair was sticking up at an odd angle where he'd rested his head against Jet's chest and Jet refused the urge to reach out and ruffle it, refused to be charmed either.

"The tea's gone cold." Jet held the cup demonstratively out to Li. "Could you?" He moved his hand in a vague imitation of bending. "You know, heat it?"

Li took the cup, giving him a sidelong glance. "You sure?"
"Yeah." Jet nodded. Never been more sure.

He watched Li wrinkle his brow in concentration, his gaze fixed on the cup. Nothing happened. Li let out a huffy, angry sound, his grip on the cup tightening, his frown deepening.

"You done yet?" Jet gave him a puzzled look. He was used to firebending being, well, more fiery. "Aren't you supposed to move your hands or something?"

"No!" Li's other hand balled to a fist. "I can do this."

He remembered Smellerbee saying that Li wasn't that good a bender, but this? Jet was almost starting to feel sorry for him. Not that he would ever feel sorry for a firebender, but –

The tea was starting to steam.

"Here." Li held the cup out to Jet, a sheepish grin on his face. "Careful, it's hot."

"Thanks." Jet muttered, taking it. So much for that. Jet felt the heat of the tea seep through the porcelain of the cup and settle painfully into the palm of his hand, refusing to let go, needing the pain as a reminder. He would not forget again.

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"I wish it was easier to get into the Upper Ring." Smellerbee scooted her cushion closer to the pai sho set, contemplating her next move. Her black bison was in check, Jet noted, already plotting how he could use that to his advantage.

He reached for the bowl with the roasted sunflower seeds she'd brought and cursed under his breath in irritation, then freed the sleeve of his new robe from the edge of the table where it had snagged. Smellerbee had insisted that he wear it, and he had to admit she was right. His clothes and armor stood out, especially here in the Upper Ring. He ran a hand through his hair. She'd also suggested that he'd shave his forehead Ba Sing Se style to fit in better, but that was not going to happen, Jet grimaced, unless the situation became dire. He was going to wear green, stay in the shadows and lay low. For now.

"I miss you guys." Smellerbee sighed and Jet found himself agreeing.

It was odd not having them around, but he couldn't risk going back to the Lower Ring right now, couldn't risk the Dai Li finding him, not after he'd managed to break their brainwashing and attacked one of their senior agents. The Dai Li surely had a reward out for him just for that. Jet pushed his wide, green sleeve up to his elbow. What was it with Ba Sing Se fashion? Besides everything being shades of green. That he could deal with. Jet glared at the offending sleeve. How anyone could fight, or for that matter eat, without those damn oversized sleeves getting into everything was beyond him.

Smellerbee blocked Jet's white junk from crossing the river into her fortress. Her eyes lingered on the board and Jet wondered what tile she was looking at, or now that he paid attention, was trying to not look at.

He raised an eyebrow at her move, then it clicked. Oh, that's what she was planning. Clever, Bee, but not clever enough.

"I'll be up and about soon, Bee." Jet smiled at her, trying to decide if he should play his bison against her own or against her white jade. "It's only been a few days, anyway."
"Yeah, but with Li living here now..." She sighed, biting at her thumbnail. "It just won't be the same."

"I'll think of something." Jet picked up a random pai sho piece, running it over the back of his knuckles, contemplating what she'd just told him. It was true, Li moving to the Upper Ring changed things. And while he could sneak in, he'd rather not, not when the Dai Li was already on his case. But relying on Li to come to the Lower Ring, he didn't like that either. That would put Li in charge and Jet was the one who wanted to keep an eye on him, not the other way around.

"We've asked to be transferred to the Upper Ring, but there are no openings." She glared at his white lotus piece as if it was the source of all of her distress. "Everyone wants to work here."

"Yeah," Jet grumbled, letting his gaze wander out the window and over the perfectly groomed trees. He tried to stay away from the window and in the shadows if he had to be anywhere near it. As unlikely as the Dai Li finding him here, he'd rather not take the chance until he was completely healed. Somewhere in the courtyard Longshot and Li were practicing archery. If he listened carefully he could even make out the thud the arrow made when it hit the straw target. Jet had to admit it was nice here. "Li sure made it …"

"I'm sure we can find a way for you two to see each other." Smellerbee put down the game piece, nodding at herself in satisfaction. She cocked her head at Jet, giving him an encouraging smile. "Hey, why don't you ask Mushi for a job?"

It wasn't a bad idea, per se, and he'd get to see Li more, but … "I'm not sure I'd make a good waiter…"

"Who said anything about actually working in the teahouse?" Smellerbee rolled her eyes at him. "Just get Mushi to sign off on the permit. Done."

"Pai and sho." Jet's black lotus piece ended the game, and he tried not to look to smug at his winning gambit and her pout. "You know, that's not a bad idea. I might just do that."

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It was good to be among people again. Jet had never been one for brooding or being by himself, and the hours alone in the apartment had been suffocating him. He leaned back against the mountain of cushions supporting his back and watched the patrons of the teahouse. He also got the feeling that Li wanted him here. He'd only had to complain about how being alone all day up there in the apartment was driving him insane and that he really missed Li before Mushi had given in and had consulted Healer Kepu. Once she'd okayed the idea, Li had helped him down to the teahouse and there he sat now, propped up in a corner with an endless supply of Mushi's amazing tea and a tray of snacks.

He was playing a lazy game of pai-sho with Li, waiting for Li to make his next move whenever he was not busy serving tea and stealing kisses whenever the opportunity presented itself. Li was a much more challenging pai-sho opponent than Smellerbee and even if Jet would never admit it, the small breaks he got in between moves only halted his slow but inevitable defeat.

Jet took off his hat, scratching his head. He'd never worn a hat for any length of time before and he hated the itchy, sweaty feeling that it left him with. And what it did to his hair. They'd tried pulling his hair up into a topknot, but failed miserably, and so he had to settle for a Pao-style hat instead, which Li had snickered at. Jet felt vaguely ridiculous, but decided to suffer it for the sake of the disguise. The Dai Li was most certainly still after him.
"We're closing for lunch soon." Li put down his tray, gave the board a quick glance and picked up his black jade to block Jet's white bison. "Do you think you can walk back up to the apartment?"

Jet nodded, staring at the board where Li had put his tile. Li made an annoying satisfied sound under his breath and picked up his tray up again before turning to Jet, smirking. "Pai!"

"You can't do that!" Jet pointed at the pai-sho tile Li had just played. Three of Li's black tiles cornered his bison.

"Can't do what? Win?" Li narrowed his eyes at him.

"No. You can't put your jade there, that's against the rules. You can't box me in like that!" Jet crossed his arms in front of his chest. What was it with Li, he obviously knew the rules. Five-year olds knew the rules, for Koh's sake.

"Are you saying I'm cheating?" Li's frown slid into a glare, his knuckles white with tension where they held the tray.

"No." Jet matched his glare. "Are you?"

No wonder Li'd been winning. Of course the Fire Nation cheated, wasn't that just to be expected? Bastards.

"I don't cheat." Li turned to walk away. "You're just a sore loser."

"Says the cheater!"

"Take that back!" Li spun around and slammed the tray down onto the table, upsetting some of the tiles.

"Who's cheating?"

A cloud of scented tobacco smoke enveloped them, and Mrs Chen stepped close and reached across the table for one of the sesame cakes.

Jet harrumphed and gestured at the board. Let her tell Li.

Mrs Chen studied the board for a bit and then announced, to Jet's slack jawed surprise: "You're in pai."

"Hah!" Li didn't even try to hide his gloating, and Jet really, really wanted to punch that smug expression off his face.

"But you can't do that!" Jet gestured at the offending tile, trying to rein in his temper, annoyed that she was siding with Li. "He's cornering the bison. You can't corner the bison! That's cheating!"

"Nah." Mrs Chen patted Jet on the arm. "That's not cheating, that's Western Rules. I know cheating when I see it."

Jet gave her a charming smile, not one bit convinced that Li had not been cheating. "How would you know about something as – " He shot Li a glare, "dishonorable as cheating?"

Mrs Chen grinned. "Mushi cheats."

"Uncle would never… Oh, you mean at pai-sho." Li looked shiftily to the side. "Yeah, he does that." Then he turned back to glare at Jet. "But I don't!"
"Sure, you don't," Jet muttered under his breath. He raised a questioning eyebrow at Mrs Chen. "If he cheats, then why do you still play with him?"

"Not everyone's a sore loser," Li chimed in, nettling Jet.

"Who says he wins?" Mrs Chen chuckled, chewing thoughtfully on the mouthpiece of her pipe. "But you said he cheats!" Jet exclaimed, now truly puzzled.

"He cheats, alright." Mrs Chen sucked in another lungful of scented smoke, letting it out in small puffs. She grinned. "But so do I."

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One good thing about the Upper Ring, Jet thought, was that rich people were apparently lazy and business in the teahouse never really picked up until the afternoon, leaving them with a nice long lunch hour. Today Mushi had surprised them with a packed lunch and ushered them out of the teahouse, all too innocently proclaiming what a nice day it was. Part of Jet wanted to know what the old coot was up to, but then, Mrs Chen was visiting he could smell her foul pipe wafting in from the back door. Jet shuddered, maybe he didn't want to know after all.

There was one thing Mushi had been right about: the park was beautiful. Leaves rustled gently in the breeze and Jet sat down. He leaned back against the tree trunk, resting his head against it, enjoying the earthy scent of wet earth and fallen leaves. He ran his fingers through the short, manicured blades and smiled. It was not quite his forest, but it was close enough.

Summer was upon them, and even with the gentle breeze and the shade Jet was starting to feel hot. What he really wanted was to take of his stupid hat. He scrunched up his eyes and looked around, scanning their surroundings carefully. But for an old lady knitting in the shade at the other side of the pond, the park was deserted. He grinned and took off his cap, running his hands through his hair, trying to coax it into a semblance of his old style. Li snorted at his fussing and Jet shot him a glare.

A flock of turtleducks landed on the nearby pond in a flutter of wings and splashes of water.

"I didn't know they could fly."

Li handed him their lunch basket and sat down next to Jet.

"Who can't fly?" Jet put the basket down on the grass and reached out with one arm, pulling Li closer, snug against his good side.

"Turtleducks." Li stretched out his legs in front of him, settling into a more comfortable position, eyes far away, voice soft and thick with bittersweet emotion. "My mother and I used to feed them when I was little. I never knew they could fly."

Jet turned his head at the odd undertone in Li's voice. Most refugees came to Ba Sing Se with enough sad stories about loved ones to fill several lifetimes, and from what Jet had been able to gather from Li's stories, Li was no exception. Li being here in Ba Sing Se with no other family except for Mushi made that painfully obvious. Li rarely talked about his family at all, so Jet didn't feel like letting the opportunity pass to learn more about Li's past and the way he'd talked about his mom made Jet curious. "What happened to her?"

"I don't know." Li's voice turned cold and flat; he swallowed hard, his fingers reaching up to touch
his scar, and Jet was almost sorry that he'd asked at all. "She … from what I remember, I think she died to protect me."

Jet squeezed his shoulder. He understood, more than understood, actually. His own parents had done just that, died protecting him from Fire Nation soldiers. Right. Not the same at all. How stupid of him to forget. His tone took on a vicious edge. "Was that what the duel was about? How you got that scar?"

"No. She left when I was ten." Li stiffened under his touch, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, taking several deep breaths in the silence before continuing, his voice emotionless, clipped, "This -" He gestured at his face, "was my own fault. I disrespected a General."

"You were in the army?" Jet's voice rose an octave, his fingers digging into Li's shoulder in surprise. No. Jet shook his head, trying to rid himself of the horrifying image. His mind already clothing Li in Fire Nation armor, the stiff shoulder pads and skull helmet of his nightmares. He felt sick to his stomach. Anything but that.

"I wasn't in the army. I was thirteen." Li sat up. He pulled away from Jet and picked up a pebble, weighing it in his hand. He pitched it at the pond, making it skip a couple of times before it sank. "I spoke out of turn."

Jet tried to hide his relief, glad that Li could not see his expression. He wasn't sure what he'd have done if Li had been a soldier. Kill him, most likely. Or at least tried to. Instead he focused on what Li'd just said, at the glaring, horrifying scar proving Li's claim. They burned off half his face for speaking out of turn? Not that he didn't think those bastards capable of almost anything, but he had to admit that the harshness of the punishment surprised even him.

"Do you ever… you know," Jet fidgeted, not sure if Li would want to talk about this, if Jet himself would even want to hear the answer. "Have you ever thought about going home?"

"Yes."

Jet swallowed hard. Of course Li wanted to go home, who didn't, it just - Jet tried to name the horrible feeling in his stomach at the thought of Li leaving, of Li not really wanting to be here.

"What's stopping you?"

"The warrant on my head," Li snapped but did not struggle when Jet pulled him back into an embrace. "And no, I don't want to talk about it."

"It's okay, we don't have to," Jet whispered against Li's skin. Li let out a harsh, shuddering breath before he nodded and Jet went on, "I'm just glad you're here with me now."

They sat for a moment in silence then Li reached over for the basket, and more for something to do than anything, started serving out their lunch. A turtleduck hen with her three chicks waddled out from a nearby thicket and Jet broke off a piece of his steamed bread, throwing it to them. They gobbled it up and came closer, the chicks hiding behind their mother, and Jet broke off another piece, holding it out between two outstretched fingers.

The turtleduck hen inched closer, her conflict between wanting the food and her reluctance to be close to people obvious. She reached for the bread Jet was offering and he pulled it out of reach, amused at her indignant quacks. He lowered his hand again, teasing her once more. She made a sudden leap for the food and Jet yelped.

"Damn thing bit me." He growled. "That's what I'm getting for being nice."
"You had that coming." Li snickered at Jet sucking his index-finger.

"Not. Funny." Jet punched him in the leg, glaring both at Li and the hissing bird.

"Just let her have the bread." Li snatched the bread from Jet, breaking off small pieces.

"That was my lunch!" Jet protested as Li tore up the bread, strewing the pieces onto the ground for the birds to eat.

"Tough."

Jet harrumphed and folded his arms behind his head, watching Li feed the turtleducks. His index finger still smarted from where that stupid bird had bitten him, but even through his pout he had to admit that Li playing with the chicks looked pretty damn adorable.

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"Why'd you do it?"

Jet looked at the official stamp on his work permit. It was big and square and had the name of Mushi's teahouse written in neat characters. Jet was pretty sure the old man, while friendly to his face, didn't really approve of him. He'd be a fool not to notice the speculating glances the old man gave him whenever he thought Jet wasn't watching. Not that Jet cared, but he was, if not leery of the man's motives, then, at least, curious why he'd do him such a big favor. Another big favor, considering the healer. What was it he wanted in return?

"You are important to my nephew," Mushi's voice was calm, infuriatingly so. He took a sip of his tea, letting the steam from his cup rise ominously between them. "He has never had an easy time making friends."

Jet's eyes narrowed. Was the old coot seriously buying friends for Li? Kinda insulting, if you thought about it. Not to him, of course, but to Li.

"And yet I don't see you doing this for either Smellerbee or Longshot."

Jet turned his permit over and back again, carefully keeping it out of the man's reach, before locking eyes with Mushi.

"You were there for my nephew when he had to make a very important decision. You helped him make the right one." Mushi matched his stare. "I will not soon forget that."

Jet suppressed a flinch at the steel in Mushi's eyes. Gone was the jolly old man who merrily hummed yellow songs when brewing tea in his kitchen. Interesting, Jet mused, there seemed to be hidden strength to the old man, a fleeting glance of who he must have been in his younger days.

"What decision?"

"My nephew was once an angry young man, too." Mushi reached for Jet's teacup, refilling it, ignoring that was still half full. He smiled at Jet in the avuncular way that annoyed the stuffing out of Jet. "I can see much of him in you."

Jet tightened his grip on his tea. What did they have in common besides being men and maybe an affinity for sword-fighting? What the hell was 'I can see much of him in you' even supposed to
mean? Jet looked once more at his work-permit and then back to Mushi. There were plenty of secrets here and he'd find out, oh, he would find out about every single one of them. That Mushi was instrumental in Jet being able to keep up his surveillance of them made it all the more sweet. He smiled at Mushi, but his smile had a little too many teeth in it to be genuine.

"I do appreciate it."

"You are welcome, dear boy." Mushi put his teacup down and got up, taking off his apron. "But I must hurry." He brushed the wrinkles from his robes, winking at Jet. "It does not do to keep a lady waiting."

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Jet threw the pai sho tile in his hand back onto his game of solitaire. His messed up, boring, stupid, stupid, stupid game of solitaire. He'd lost count on how many rounds he'd played, but he was certain about one thing: He'd scream if he'd play another. There had to be something more interesting to do around here. He looked over at Li reading on the kang and grinned. Or someone. Now there was an idea.

Jet sauntered over to where Li was sitting by the window and flopped down on the embroidered cushions next to him. "What are you reading?"

"A book." Li held it up, showing him the title and Jet made a grab for it, snatching it from him. He flipped through the pages, looking for pictures, ignoring Li's frown and outstretched hand.

"Something about politics?" At least that's what he thought the title meant and Li nodded.

"It's about government structure." Li ran a hand through his hair. "I want to know how this city works."

"I'll give it back for a price." Jet leered at Li, pointing at his cheek.

"I was done with it anyway." Li gave him a sideways expression that Jet assumed was supposed to be feigned innocence.

"Were you now?" Jet grinned, and Li pounced. Jet found himself pushed back onto the pillows, pinned down and not minding at all, with Li panting above him. With his arms pinned to the kang, keeping him from using them in any kind of constructive way, Jet craned his neck and brushed his lips against Li's, raising a questioning eyebrow at him. It still amused Jet that someone who could blush such vivid colors could kiss with such ferocious passion. Not that he was complaining.

"Shut up."

Li let go of Jet's hands, his fingers instead searching for the fastenings to Jet's robes, fumbling with the buttons. Jet took that opportunity to wrench his sleeves free from under them, so that he could take proper hold of Li's ass.

The front door opened and Mushi's voice echoed through the hallway. "We're back!"

Li's hands stalled, his eyes comically wide as he scrambled away from Jet, trying to put as much distance between them as quickly as he could.

"Careful, my ribs," Jet gasped when Li accidentally brushed against them.
"Sorry." Li gave him a sheepish look. "It's only …" He gestured at the door.

"Yeah, I get it." Jet rolled his eyes at him. Mushi really had the worst timing. Jet patted the pillow beside him and Li scooted closer, letting Jet put an arm around him.

"Nephew? Are you home?" Mushi poked his head into the room, carrying some kind of musical instrument.

Jet managed to squeeze in a 'hello Mushi', before Li jumped off the kang, his voice incredulous. "You got a tsungi horn?"

"Yes!" Mushi sounded extraordinarily proud of himself. He winked at Jet. "My nephew used to be a quiet talented tsungi horn player."

Jet snickered. "Is that so?"

"When I was EIGHT!" Li turned to glare at a snickering Jet.

"I'll help Xiao Dan with lunch." Mushi grinned, putting the instrument down on the kang. "Why don't you practice a bit, I'm sure it will come back to you in no time."

"Didn't know you had musical talent." Jet leered at him, after the door closed behind Mushi. "Your uncle said you're really good at blowing the 'tsungi horn'? Wanna practice?"

"Not funny!" Li socked him in the arm.

"Not even a little bit?" Jet teased, but after taking in Li's pout, amended, "So, about that book?" he teased. "Planning a coup?"

"No." Li picked up the book, turning it over in his hand. "But someone should."

Jet pulled him closer, brushing his lips against Li's cheek. "How so?"

"Their government is a coup waiting to happen." Li resettled into a more comfortable position at Jet's side, resting his head on Jet's shoulder. "I mean, the amount of power the Grand Secretariat has… They've practically handed the country over to the Dai Li."

"What are we going to do about it?" Jet shuddered. That was not a pleasant thought.

"Join the Dai Li?" Li shrugged.

"Hah, bloody hah."

They both got up when Mushi called them to lunch, and Jet tried to put Li's comment off as a joke, but a bit of unease remained. His eyes fell on the stack of newspapers next to the kang and he gave Li a sidelong look. Why was he so interested in Ba Sing Se politics all of a sudden?
"Oh spirits, why?" Li slouched at the window, his hands resting on the green wooden frame. He turned toward Jet, a comically horrified expression on his face.

"Do I want to know?" Jet teased, sitting up form the pillows he'd been lounging on. He scooted to the edge of Li's bed and pushed himself off without, he noticed with pride, so much as a twitch from his ribs.

"How bad can it be?"

"Bad!" Li frowned, his lower lip wobbling ever so slightly.

"Is it now?"

It was fucking adorable. Jet felt a twinge of embarrassed self-consciousness at the sappy, mushy feeling that had settled in the pit of his stomach and focused on the matter at hand. He'd known Li long enough to know that any excuse would do for Li to sulk and that the best way to stop Li's pout in its track was, well, Jet licked his lips and stepped purposefully up behind Li, trapping him strategically. He was going to get a kiss out of this, at least.

"They're going fan-dancing." Li pointed to the two retreating figures and shuddered, voicing Mushi's evening plans with an air of mortification that Jet thought it surely didn't deserve, "Like comm-"

"Like what?" Jet's hands slid from Li's shoulders down to circle Li's waist. He looked out over Li's shoulder onto the courtyard, catching a glance of Mushi and Mrs Chen leaving, arms linked. It was kinda sweet in a 'no details, please' way.

"Like comm– like ..." Li started, then stiffened and stopped, as if unsure how to complete the sentence. He raised his hands only to drop them again, his voice underlining the drama in the gesture. "Like complete idiots."

Jet snickered. Li turned an amazing shade of red any time Mushi and Mrs Chen so much as smiled at each other. Then it clicked and Jet's grin widened even further. Li's uncle was out of the house and would likely not come back any time soon.

"Talking about idiots ..."

Jet leaned closer, pressing a kiss to Li's neck. He froze at the heat radiating off Li's skin. His breath
caught in his throat, as he was suddenly, painfully reminded of what Li was by the physical heat of Li's blush. What was wrong with him? How could he forget, even for one moment? He wanted to run, to push Li away, hating himself for letting himself getting lulled again, but even more for still wanting Li, despite it all. Jet bit down on the inside of his lip, swallowing down the emotions that were threatening to overwhelm him into one tiny whimper. He forced himself not to recoil, not to run. It would ruin his plan. Yes, he had to focus on the plan. Jet closed his eyes briefly, to steady his resolve, and then whispered into Li's good ear, kissing the spot just below it that he knew made Li gasp in pleasure before he could react to Jet's teasing.

"Let's finish this," Jet said roughly.

"I didn't start … oh, that." Li seemed to consider his suggestion for a second, in that too serious, calculating way of his. "What about your ribs?"

The worry in Li's voice, the way he actually seemed to care, felt like a kick to Jet's stomach. It was most definitely false. There was no way … Of course it was false, had to be, Jet thought, and that was a comforting thought. Firebenders didn't care, he'd seen enough evidence of that in his life and that steadied Jet's resolve to go through with his plan, made it easier to ignore what both Li and Mushi had done for him. He would find out whatever secrets they had and then he'd hand them over to the Dai Li. Let the Dai Li do their job. But first he'd got to get Li to trust him. Jet ran his hands over Li's chest, toying with the intricate knot button, slipping it free from its loop and his fingers inside Li's clothes. Jet felt victorious when Li let out a tiny gasp.

Li's muscles felt slick and tense, he could feel them twitching even under the thick layer of Li's clothes. Li's nipples were hard pebbles between his thumb and forefinger, and Jet teased them with his fingers, pinching them, making Li's breath hitch. It was exhilarating. The heady feeling of control of having Li, a firebender, under his power thrilled and disgusted him, and that disgust thrilled him even more.

Jet's cock, never really having lost interest, was throbbingly hard again, and Jet pulled Li flush against his chest, rubbing his erection against Li's ass, hoping that his voice would not betray him, "What do you think?"

He must have been convincing because Li pushed back against Jet, oblivious to Jet's qualms. Li's jaw was moving in a telltale fashion and Jet just knew that Li was biting his lip, trying to keep from moaning out loud. That would not do.

He grasped Li's shoulders in both hands, turning Li around. Li's hands went around Jet's waist and his eyes were half closed, heavy lidded with lust. Jet kissed him, wishing that Li's eyes were any other color, trying not to forget the part where Li was Fire Nation and that Jet should hate him, no matter how good the kisses were or how hard they made him.

Jet forced himself to not let go, to not sink into the moment and let lust sweep over him, to not forget that he had a plan, that this was part of it. It would be too easy to get lost in what Li seemed to be offering so freely. Jet slid one of his hands down, cupping Li's erection, his middle finger teasing the hard curve through Li's clothes and Li ground back against Jet's touch in a rather satisfying way. Li wanted him, and maybe trusted him. That had been his goal, hadn't it? Then why did kissing Li make Jet's stomach knot, did make him feel ashamed at what he was doing, of what he was feeling for Li?

Jet stomped onto that thought with force. This was part of his plan, if he got something out of in return, what was there to complain about? Couldn't blame his body now, could he? It wasn't as if Li was hard to look at.
"Have you ever?" Jet ran his fingers over the curve of Li's ass, under his tunic and along the seam of Li's trousers, pressing down between his cheeks through the fabric. Li gasped and blushed in a telltale way, then reluctantly shook his head.

Good, Jet thought with satisfaction. He liked the idea of Li never having been fucked before, of him being the first to have this firebender. It gave him a heady sense of power. There was no way Li would ever forget this, him.

With a firm grip, his thumb caressing the good side of Li's face, Jet took hold of Li's chin and turned his head until their eyes met. Keeping eye contact, he leaned up slightly to kiss him again, his other hand still caressing the inner curve of Li's leg. Li's fingers dug into Jet's upper arm and Jet felt them burn through the fabric, swore that Li's touch was hotter than usual. Halfway through the kiss, Jet noticed, to his irritation, that Li was taller than him now. When had that happened?

Breaking the kiss, Jet ran his hand down Li's arm, teasing the sensitive skin of Li's palm with his nails before twining their fingers. "Come!"

He pulled Li away from the window and toward the bed, grabbing the jar of bruise ointment with his free hand. He'd found during one of his long, lonely afternoons convalescing that it doubled rather well as a lubricant.

They stumbled across the room, bumping into the low table and Li tugged at their joined hands, urging Jet closer, his free hand pulling at Jet's tunic, seeking skin.

Remembering how Li had pinned him to the kang earlier, how Li seemed to think he was in charge, well, of everything, Jet's eyes narrowed. There was no way he was going to let a damn firebender top him. Jet dropped the jar onto the bed and pushed Li against the wall, not to hurt, but hard enough to make it clear who was in charge of this encounter.

"Jet?" There were questions in Li's eyes, questions Jet didn't want to answer, so Jet stepped close and kissed Li before Li could do something stupid, like protest, or try to take charge again.

"Shhh." Jet kissed him passionately. Li's apparent eagerness to get Jet out of his clothes and his fingers onto bare skin thrilled him. Jet ran his thumb along the line of Li's scar, watching him shudder under the caress and whispered, "I'm going to make this good for you, Li. So good. Take off your clothes."

And Jet stood back, watching, mesmerized, as Li undressed, layer upon layer, to reveal a nicely muscled chest.

Jet's mouth went dry as he looked Li's body over. That he hid that under so many clothes really was a waste. He licked his lips as his eyes dropped lower, finding Li already hard.

"What about you?" Li's voice, slightly hoarse on a normal day, had taken on an even darker, breathy timbre that went straight to Jet's cock.

Jet fumbled with the belt of his hanfu, wanting to feel Li's skin slide against his. He got out the rest of his clothes as quickly as he could and pulled Li to him. The sudden sensation of skin against skin made them both gasp and Li claimed his mouth in a hot, sliding, passionate kiss that took Jet's thoughts away. He pulled away, breathing hard. He had to regain control, take the initiative.

"Wet them," Jet ordered, whispering into Li's good ear, pressing his index and middle-finger against Li's lips. Li breath hitched and he nodded. His pink, hot tongue snuck out, tentatively touching Jet's fingers before sucked them in to the knuckle. Jet moaned at the hot, wet suction and Li's clever...
tongue worming itself between the fingers, teasing the sensitive membrane of flesh between them, almost too much for Jet. He worried his lip, his head thrown back, his knees weak. All he wanted was for Li to touch him, to join their hands and cocks, and to let go. He leaned into Li, his breathing ragged and he had to focus on all the Fire Nation had done to him, his family, to not come right then and there.

Jet's fingers made a wet plopping sound when he pulled them out of Li's mouth and claimed Li's lips with his own, their kiss open-mouthed and desperate. Spirits, why did he have to want Li as much as he did?

He was harder than he ever remembered being and from the way Li was grabbing his ass and grinding against him, Li was as close to coming as he was. Li's hot, hard cock was sliding against his own and damn, it had been too long since he'd been fucked and Li's fingers were digging in just right, just where he –

"No." He pushed Li away, held him at arm-length. He wanted – he was going to fuck Li.

"No?" Li looked at him with wide, lust-darkened eyes, but there was something else in them: uncertainty. Jet kissed him again, more gently, not liking Li being unsure, hating that Li'd even think that was a possibility.

"Hey, that's not what I meant." Jet pulled Li closer, running his fingers down Li's arm, teasing the inside of Li's palm before lacing their fingers. He pulled Li's hand up to kiss it, too. "It's just … we got all evening."

Li nodded and some of tension drained from him, but Jet could still feel his eyes boring into him, and he had to avoid meeting them, afraid to give himself away, or worse: give in. Jet sat down on the bed, making sure to wince when Li's free hand slid over his ribs. Never one to give up an advantage, he felt it would not do to let Li forget that he needed special consideration. Not if he wanted things to go his way. He laced their fingers and pushed Li down to kneel in front of him.

"Suck me," Jet whispered, his free hand pushing down at Li's shoulder, before it slid up along Li's neck and into his hair, cradling Li's jaw. "Like you sucked my fingers."

To his surprise Li scrambled backwards to his feet the second his knees touched the floor, his eyes wide and fearful, staring at Jet's outstretched hand. Jet looked at Li, at the scar on his face and back to his own hand. The dots connected. Fuck. He lowered his hand, cursing himself inwardly.

"I– I didn't…"

"Just shut up." Li glared at him, panting hard, daring him to continue, his hands balled to fists. "And don't do that again. My … it's …" His lips were pinched into a tight, angry line, his eyes, narrowed and dangerous. He was breathing hard and his feet had unconsciously slid into a fighting stance. "Just don't."

No. Fire bending position. Jet balled his fists, ready to duck the plume of fire that didn't come.

"Fine," Jet ground out and dug his nails into the frame of the bed, feeling foolish for having felt empathy toward a firebender. Should have known better, he thought bitterly, but one thing was damned sure: he'd not give a firebender the satisfaction of seeing his unease. Instead he smiled.

A tiny part of Jet wanted to make Li kneel, reveled in the idea of making him relive all that the Fire Nation was capable of. But then the anger seemed to drain from Li and his features relaxed, and Jet felt him looking at him. He flinched under Li's intense gaze and before Jet could even so much as
open his mouth, Li grasped his shoulders and pushed him back onto the bed.

"Ouch." Jet winced, for real this time. He scooted back, making room for Li, before he lifted himself up on his elbows, only to be pushed back down on the bed, Li leaning over him.

"Don't be such a baby."

There was no sting in Li's voice, but Jet would have protested anyway, had there not been Li's hot mouth on his cock. Jet's fingers dug into the sheets and he arched his back. Spirits, it felt so good, so unbelievably good, and that it was Li doing this to him, Li's hot tongue, soft lips and clever fingers trying to please him with the intensity, the focus that seemed to be the core of Li's being, made it even better.

Jet slid his fingers into Li's hair, caressed the unscarred side of his face, cradled is skull and gasped his name when Li's tongue pressed down just where Jet wanted it most, fingers tightening in Li's hair when his cock brushed against the back of Li's throat. His hands buried deep in Li's hair, holding him, guiding him, Jet thrust up with a moan, once, twice, and then one final, glorious time.

He held Li steady when release washed over him, his hand gentle but firm when Li tried to pull away, forcing Li to swallow his come, his pleasure amplified by the tantalizing feeling of being in control.

When Jet could think again he loosened his grip, about to apologize for being this rough, when the words caught in his throat. Li didn't seem upset, he just licked his lips, and rested his head on Jet's stomach, breath tickling and hot against Jet's skin. Jet could not pull his eyes away, guilt and annoyance ruining the pleasant afterglow. He'd never done anything like this to a lover, and even though Li was Fire Nation, part of Jet felt sick and disgusted at himself, but what puzzled Jet even more was that Li hadn't protested or tried to pull away. It would have made everything easier. It irked Jet that Li didn't seem to mind. It seemed like he was completely okay with the rough treatment, with Jet fucking his mouth, spirits, he might have even enjoyed it. Then Li turned, looking up at Jet with a tender, infectious smile on his face that reached his eyes. And then it hit Jet and his guilt turned to ash in his mouth. Of course Li'd enjoy it. Li was Fire Nation. Clearly they liked it rough.

Jet's hands had dropped from Li's hair and Li looked down on him, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, his chest heaving. He locked eyes with Jet and licked his lips predatorily before climbing fully onto the bed, claiming Jet with a hungry, passionate kiss. Jet tasted his own come on Li's lips, the salty-bitterness turning into a exhilarating triumph. As if, with this kiss, he was one step closer to victory.

Li grabbed his hand, joining their fingers, guiding them to his erection. A few quick strokes later he moaned his release into Jet's shoulder, collapsing half on top of Jet with a sigh, wrapping his arm around Jet's waist.

Dusk was rapidly falling and the setting sun was bathing the room in brilliant shades of orange and red and growing shadows.

Li's fingers ghosted over Jet's skin, half teasing, half caressing, as Li soaked up the bone-melting feeling of the afterglow.

It was nice. Jet knew he should hate Li touching him like this, should hate himself for letting him, for enjoying it as much as he did, but right now he could not muster the energy. Telling himself the more natural he acted, the more convincing it would be, Jet caressed Li's shoulder. His fingers drew tiny gasps and shivers from Li, but when he ran them through Li's hair Li winced and pulled away to glare at him.
"That's going to bruise." Li reached up, exploring the bruises with his own fingers.

"Sorry." Jet felt a new wave of shame at Li's words, pressing a kiss to the top of Li's head, so that he could avoid meeting his eyes. "All better?"

"Just watch it next time." Li snorted and snuggled in closer. "The stupid hickies are bad enough."

"Ready?" Jet reached for the lube, holding it out demonstratively to Li.

"I said yes, didn't I?" Li had set his jaw in the way that Jet had learned meant that any further discussion would involve the word honor and would end in Li sulking. He'd rather fuck, Jet decided, and nodded.

"How…" Li looked at the jar in his hands and then back at Jet. "I mean, I've seen … but…"

"Relax." Jet took the lube back from him. "Let me take care of you."


Li was lying face down on the bed, his head cushioned on folded arms, Jet straddling his legs. Jet dipped his index-finger into the jar, the ointment warming quickly, stickyly viscous between his fingers. He rubbed a tiny bit of it on Li's sphincter, pressing down with a tentalizing hint of pressure. "Do you like that?"

Li groaned and arched into the touch, but Jet would have none of it. He withdrew his finger, just long enough to, once again, remind Li of who was in charge and then, when Li whined prettily, Jet thrust his finger into Li's ass, sliding it in to the second knuckle.

Li's fingers dug into the sheets, his forehead pressing down, and the way he lay there, naked and panting, with Jet's fingers deep inside him, the erotic perfection of it all, made Jet worry his lip between his teeth. He bit down until he felt the coppery taste of blood flood his mouth, needing the pain just to keep from coming from the sight alone.

"Jet?" Li turned his head a little, trying to catch his eye, the small movement shaking Jet out of his stupor.

"I promised, didn't I?" He slowly withdrew his finger, reveling in the small hissing sound Li made, only to thrust it back in again. In and down, and by the sharply indrawn breath and subsequent moan, hitting right where he'd wanted them to. Jet pressed a sticky kiss to Li's shoulder, the tip of his index finger emphasizing his words against Li's prostate. "… and I keep my promises.

Li's hand snuck under himself, wrapped around his own erection and would have given himself sweet release just then had not Jet smacked it away, growling low into Li's ear: "That's for me to take care of."

He intertwined their fingers, trapping Li's hand beneath his own. His free hand searched for the jar of ointment and when he finally found it, scooped out a generous amount. The cold made him hiss as he coated his cock, the discomfort a not unwelcome delay. It wouldn't do to have a firebender think he didn't have the stamina…

He positioned his cock and pushed in, just slightly, just the tip, enjoying the frustrated whine Li let out. So this was it, could it have been that easy all along? Jet smiled grimly to himself. All the Fire
Nation apparently needed was a good, hard fuck.

Li groaned and Jet pressed in just a tiny bit more.

"You want it, don't you?" His voice husky and low. "Tell me that you want me to fuck you!"

"What are you waiting for?" Li growled low in his throat. "By Agni, fuck me already."

And Jet did. Taking a deep breath he pushed in slow and hard and deep, wrapping his free hand around Li's waist, holding him exactly where he wanted him, aiming so that his cock just barely grazed Li's prostate, giving him a taste of the pleasure to come.

"No touching." Jet scolded as Li's hand once again wrapped around his own cock. He pulled Li backwards, onto his lap, his cock deep in Li's ass, Li's thighs spread wide.

He was going to make Li feel this, make him come on his cock alone. Li pushed back against the wall, driving himself onto Jet's cock with determined thrusts, his head bent backwards, resting on Jet's shoulder. It would take but the tilt of his head and Jet could…

Li's tongue was hot in his mouth, his panting breaths searing and the biggest turn on he'd ever felt in his life. There were teeth and tongue in this kiss and a passion Jet thought could only be born of hatred. It was not fair, why did it have to feel so good? He thrust harder, with cock and tongue and then suddenly, finally, his fingers digging deep into Li's flesh, he came with vision-blurring intensity.

He was barely aware of Li frantically matching his last strokes, their bodies arching, flesh slapping against sweaty flesh before Li, too, came, and they collapsed onto the bed in a heap of tangled limbs.

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"You know, I glad we met on the ferry," Li said after a while. He yawned, before snuggling closer to Jet. "Things would have been so different."

"Yeah, they would have been." Jet stared at the ceiling, wondering just how different the events would have played out for better or worse.

He woke in the middle of the night, sweating. Li's arms were wrapped around his waist, Li spooning him from behind, still fast asleep.

Jet tried to untangle himself, but Li moved with him, shifting, as if he couldn't, wouldn't be parted from Jet.

Jet turned onto his side and watched the shadows lengthen, unable to fall asleep again. It figured, Jet thought bitterly. Not even now, in the middle of the night, was he allowed to forget just exactly what Li was.

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When Jet entered the teahouse kitchen through the back door, Smellerbee was sitting at the staff table in the corner by the latticed window, chatting amicably with Mrs Chen. They were hunched over...
some kind of paper, which Smellerbee was writing on.

"Not so close to the heel, you'll get the ink all over your fingers. Hold it up higher," Mrs Chen advised, holding out her hand for the brush. "Here, let me show you."

Mrs Chen gathered her flowing sleeve in her left hand, pushing it against her right arm. "Like this."

She adjusted the brush so that her fingers wrapped around the middle of the handle. She dipped the bristles delicately into the small pool of black ink in the ink-stone and traced a character on the cheap paper.

"What's this for, Bee?" Jet picked up one of the sheets of paper, studying it. A grid of quarter-inch wide squares covered paper so thin he could nearly see through it. "Where are Longshot and Li? Off sparring?"

"Jet!" Smellerbee turned around and threw herself at him. "Didn't see you come in." She took a step back, her hands still on his upper arms, her expression approving. "Nah, Longshot's on dock duty. Making some extra cash." She let him go, giving him a sly look. "You and Li … made up, huh?" She leaned in conspiratorially, her voice pitched so that only he could hear her. "So, is it true …" Smellerbee winked at him, her smile turning into a leer. "What they say about firebenders?"

"Bee!" Jet gasped in what was only half mock-outrage. The whole damn situation was too raw, too complicated. He snapped, a bit more harshly than he meant to, "Well, why don't you ask Mrs Chen?"

Smellerbee stuck her tongue out at him, punching him in the arm for good measure. "Maybe I will!"

Jet coughed and Mrs Chen, at hearing her name, perked up.

"Ask me what?"

"If they are any of your tasty pork jiaozi left." Jet rubbed the sore spot and gave Mrs Chen a big, friendly smile, greeting her with a nod and a smile. "They truly are the best in all of Ba Sing Se."

"Flattery will get you anywhere." Mrs Chen grinned. "I kept a plate especially for you."

She walked over to the stove, where a plate wrapped in a clean towel set next to the big kettles full of hot water that were kept boiling at all times.

"Are you writing more permits?" Jet asked Smellerbee, gesturing at the ink and brush with the scroll he was still holding.

"Shhh." Smellerbee nodded her head toward where Mrs Chen was and then went on in a bright cheerful tone. "No, Mrs Chen is teaching me calligraphy." Smellerbee dug in the pile of paper, fishing out one that had writing on it. She held it up for Jet to inspect. "Isn't this cool!?"

Jet found himself pushed into an empty chair, a plate of deliciously smelling jiaozi in front of him. He picked up his chopsticks, pointing them at the paper Smellerbee was holding.

"That's writing?"

Jet squinted at the squiggles on the paper and didn't get it. Thin lines curved and wound to form something that to Jet looked like nothing so much as if someone had dunked a boiled noodle in ink and dropped it on paper. He popped another jiaozi in his mouth, chewing with vigor. He'd not been lying, Mrs Chen's dumplings were damn delicious.
"Grass script," Mrs Chen supplied helpfully, picked up a handful of roasted sunflower seeds and cheerfully started cracking them open with her teeth, spitting the hulls back into her hand. "Very sophisticated."

"I got this at the news stand." Smellerbee nodded. "Looks nearly as pretty as Li's, doesn't it?"

"Everyone needs a hobby." Jet gave her a thumbs up, inwardly rolled his eyes at her, biting back just exactly what he thought of Li's handwriting, grass script, and sophistication, for that matter. "What does it say? Can you read that?"

"Nah, not really. Mrs Chen says it's a famous poem." Smellerbee had the grace to look slightly embarrassed at admitting that, before puffing up her chest with pride. "I've been practicing, though, been getting a lot better!"

Jet was about to ask her what the point of writing like that was when no one could read it, when Li stormed into the room, cutting him short.

"Can you believe the nerve of that pompous gasbag!" Li slammed the door on his way in, gesturing at it as if it personally had offended him. "Waltzing in here as if he owns the place."

"Who? Mushi?" Mrs Chen offered him some of her seeds and Li took a couple automatically, stared at them as if they had meaning. He closed his hand around them, and Jet could have sworn he saw a thin streak of smoke rising from Li's fist.

"No, not Uncle." Li looked confused for a moment then shook his head and stomped over to a chair and sat down in a huff. "Quon."

"Well, technically..." Jet teased and Li shot him a dirty look.

"Quon!?" Smellerbee gasped, her eyes wide with shock. "Shit. That's not good."

"What?" Jet looked at her, confused by her strong reaction. "Why?"

Smellerbee lowered her voice to a whisper, "I think he's Dai Li."

"Are you sure?" Li jumped up from his chair, feet sliding unconsciously into a defensive bending stance.

Jet cursed under his breath. It was blatantly obvious that Li was one of them. How had he failed to notice it before? He'd fought hundreds of Fire Nation soldiers and dozens of firebenders. It was kinda ironic that a firebender would spring to his defense and Jet would have thought that kind of protectiveness adorable from anyone else, well, if he needed protection that was. The Dai Li had caught him by surprise back then. No way he'd let that happen now.

"Kinda." Smellerbee shrugged. "Well, he seemed a bit fishy, the way he just showed up and poached Mushi. So I went and asked Tong, who said he was definitely not one of the Bei Fongs, and he'd never heard of anyone named Quon in the Pangs' either. And when he did some asking around, it turned out that no one had ever heard of him."

"They only do their job, you know." Mrs Chen spat out another sunflower seed husk. She'd sidled over to the door, cracked it open just the tiniest sliver and was pressing her ear to it, the dangling charms on her liangbatou tinkling against the wood. "Now shush, I can't hear a thing."

Smellerbee's eyes went wide, and she hastily covered: "Yes, the Dai Li protects us. We're safe here."
There was no conviction in her words and Jet agreed. Can't trust the locals. Not one bit. Jet pushed his half eaten plate away, suddenly not hungry. He remembered all too well how no one had so much as lifted a finger when the Dai Li had grabbed him and ... He shuddered. Not a memory he liked to dwell on.

Smellerbee said something to Li that Jet didn't quiet catch and they seemed to agree on whatever it was, which annoyed Jet to no end. How had Li ended up in charge again?

"Let's ... go to the park." Li pulled off his apron, leaving it behind in a messy heap on the chair. He grabbed Jet's hand, and Jet would have protested if not for the fact that he really didn't want to deal with the Dai Li right now, not yet anyway. Not when his plan was so close to completion.

So, he let Li pull him off the chair and toward the back door.

Li turned back to Mrs Chen.

"Tell Uncle we're at the park. Feeding turtleducks. At the park."

Jet had to smile, charmed beside himself. Li really was the worst liar.

It seemed to have worked on Mrs Chen, though, since she still had her ear firmly on the door, clearly more interested in eavesdropping. She waved her hand at them in a hush gesture, but nodded.

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That night, they got back late, with Li scouting ahead to make sure there were no Dai Li agents waiting ready arrest him. Jet lay awake in bed. Li was snoring softly at his side and Jet could not stop wondering why the Dai Li wanted Mushi to have a teahouse in the Upper Ring. Was this part of some twisted, nefarious plan to have another go at the Avatar's life? Was he even still in the city?

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The train entered the tunnel that separated the Middle from the Lower Ring the tunnel momentarily drowned everything in darkness, Jet felt the hair on the back of his neck rising. So this was it then. They were nearly there. He ground his teeth, wondering what was wrong with him. It had not even been three weeks since he'd lived here. This was ridiculous.

Li put his arm around Jet's shoulders, and Jet wondered how obvious his nervousness was, but the warm weight felt too much like comfort and even if though it pained to admit, it felt good. Jet snuck his arm around Li's waist and squeezed. Sure, they had a list of errands to run for Mushi and Mrs Chen had invited Mushi and Li to meet her son later on, but there was plenty of time and this was supposed to be a fun afternoon. They'd promised Smellerbee and Longshot to meet up later, and Jet, having gracefully backed out of the family dinner, was looking forward to spending an evening with them. He'd barely seen them since ...
hanfu, and even though he'd never admit it to anyone who'd ask, he decided that he preferred the peace and quiet of the Upper Ring.

The crowd thinned out the further they got away from the station and the street vendors selling snacks and drinks to the passengers by the entrance. Jet sighed when Li stopped at a newsstand and started browsing their selection for what seemed forever. After a while Jet picked up an Earth Rumble magazine himself, just to fit in. He didn't really care that much about the sport, but the magazine in question had plenty of pictures.

The cover showed the amazingly realistic drawing of a girl, who looked vaguely familiar, victoriously holding up an Earth Champion belt. Jet suppressed a shudder, she really was eerily familiar.

He must have stared a bit too obviously at the picture, since the newsstand owner, a thin middle-aged man with big side-burns took this as an opportunity to strike up a conversation.

"Isn't it awesome?" He enthusiastically gestured to a blurb on the cover. "And The Boulder is coming to town next week. That's going to be one hell of a re-match!"

"Really?" Jet nodded politely, trying to remember which one the Blind Bandit was. The Duke would have know, Jet thought sadly, remembering the kid's exuberant enthusiasm for the Earth Rumble.

"Yeah, tickets are half sold out already!" The man leaned closer, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. "Wanna know a secret? What a little bird who works for the Earth Rumble told me?" He tapped the side of his nose. "The Boulder's totally going to win this one. My man says that whole kerfuffle was staged. Kinda obvious if you asked me." The man let out a bellowing laugh. "Come on, first the Blind Bandit defeats The Boulder! I mean seriously, The Boulder! And then, as if a little girl outbending a pro is not enough, some kid comes out of nowhere and kicks her ass. Could that be more staged?"

"Sounds staged to me, alright." Jet nodded again and then his eyes went wide. The blind earthbender travelling with the Avatar. Of course. He'd met her that day … and then it all connected in Jet's mind and he had to take a couple of slow, careful breaths.

"Bastards," Jet cursed under his breath.

Good to see she'd made it out from under Lake Laogai, he thought bitterly. The more he thought about that day, the angrier it made him. So much for comrades in arms. Spirits, one moment he'd fought alongside the Avatar and then, the next minute, when he went down defending that bastard, they'd all betrayed him. Left him for dead at the mercy of a firebender.

"Hey, you buying that?"

The man snatched the magazine out of Jet's hands, smoothing out the pages that Jet just now realized he'd been holding a bit too tight.

He mumbled an apology he didn't really feel, wondering when they could finally get out of here.

"You didn't have money riding on that, did you?"

The man gave him a sympathetic look then turned when Li snorted out a self-satisfied "hah."

"Can you believe that?" Li nudged him with his elbow, and shoved a newspaper in his face. He pointed at a headline and started to chuckle.
Jet glared at him, unwilling to acknowledge that he didn't know even half of the words in that sentence.

"What?"

"Bureaucracy, am I right?" The newsstand owner asked, grinning as he turned his attention to Li. "I'd hate to be the poor schmuck who has to sort that out."

"Yeah." Li started laughing nastily, eyes still fast on the article. "I'd hate to be on the Zoning Board right now."

"What board? What's so funny?" Jet asked. He was getting seriously annoyed now. Was anything printed to be his personal hell? Also, was it too much to ask to share the damn joke?

"The Avatar rezoned the zoo without permission." The man slapped his thigh, face red with his uncontained amusement. Jet shook his head minutely. Still didn't make any damn sense. As if it explained everything, the man added, "Moved it to the Agrarian Ring. Just think of all the property law violations!"

"Hilarious," Jet snapped, grinding his teeth. Zoning? Go on, he thought, don't bother sharing your stupid inside joke with me, I'm sure it isn't funny to begin with. He was starting to hate city people.

Li picked up the Earth Rumble magazine Jet had been leafing through earlier.

"Do you want this?"

Jet shook his head, hating being placated. Li shrugged and thrust the stack periodicals he intended to buy at him, digging in his coin-purse for change.

Jet shuffled through Li’s purchases of densely printed papers, wondering what topics could be discussed at such length and without even one picture. One of the magazines was thicker and shorter than the other ones and Jet pulled it out, flipping it open and stared. Then he started to laugh, holding up the magazine in question.

"You got a fashion mag?" Jet grinned, flipping through the pages of must-have summer jade-hairpins, make-up tips and celebrity gossip, marveling at the quality of the prints, the lines so fine, the pictures almost looked real. He pointed to a particularly pretty girl, modeling a qipao. "That one'd look good on you, you've got the legs for it!"

"What?" Li snatched the papers back, face flaming. He stuffed them into his bag and stalked off down the road. "That's not for me, that's for Mrs Chen."

"Sure it is," Jet teased, hurrying to catch up to a sulking Li.

Li had stopped at the side of the narrow road, shading his eyes against the sun as he looked up at some store sign. It read 'Happy Music Store', at least Jet was ninety percent certain it did. Jet put his hand on Li's shoulder to get his attention.

"More shopping? I thought we were done?" Jet tried to not sound whiny even though he really didn't want to go into another dusty shop and look at endless stacks of whatever they sold there. The winding crowded streets in the Lower Ring, with their noise, smells and most of all, lurking Dai Li
agents were getting to him. He really wanted to be done with this stupid running errands business and have a nice bowl of noodles somewhere, preferably with a door that closed. "Smellerbee and Longshot are waiting for us."

"Uncle asked me to get him some sheet music." Li turned, shifted his bag, and after taking in Jet's expression, Li rolled his eyes at him. "How about I meet you guys there?"

"Sure thing." Jet squeezed Li's shoulder again, feeling much happier at the prospect. He leaned in closer, whispering, as if telling an important secret meant only for Li. He let his lips briefly touch Li's skin. "Don't be too long."

Li blushed, but nodded, a goofy smile on his face. "I won't be."

"Jet, wait!" Jet had taken only a few steps when he felt Li's hand on his shoulder. He turned around only to have the heavy shopping bag shoved at him.

"See you at the guardhouse." And before Jet could protest, a smirking Li wound his way through the crowd and disappeared into the music shop.

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It was still early when Jet got to the Bei Fong guardhouse and none of the guards on dock duty had returned yet. Tong, going through a stack of wanted posters and obviously not in a good mood, told him to shove it and stay out of the way while he did the paperwork. He let Jet put his bag behind the desk, though, and promised to keep an eye on it.

Jet massaged his shoulder. He'd be damned if he'd be the one to carry that bag on the way back.

Not feeling like wandering around much, since the crowds were getting to him and there were too many Dai Li agents around for his liking, Jet decided to find a quiet spot in the shade, where he could keep an eye on the street without people paying much attention to him. And he knew just the spot. A little down the road was a small hutong with an old sycamore tree growing next to a fountain. The ancient roots protruded twisted and gnarly from the paved ground, providing shade and cover, while at the same time an excellent view of the street.

He pushed his way through the throng of people, pretending to be interested in what the faring merchants had to offer on their rickety make-shift stalls and blankets on the ground. Seeing spirit money for sale, he felt a twinge of remorse at who'd now take care of his parents' graves. There was no one left. After Katara's brother had foiled his plan to destroy the Fire Nation colony, the Freedom Fighters had disbanded and everyone had left the forest. It was now truly a place of the dead and forgotten. Jet balled his fist, he had been damned close to joining the dead himself, if not for Li. How ironically fitting, that he'd owe his life to a firebender.

Jet counted the weeks he'd been away from his forest, his home, on his fingers. Had it really been months? It seemed too long and too short a time at once.

He haggled a bit over a roll of spirit money and a thin box of incense, more out of pride than because he really needed to be thrifty. His hands closed around the soft paper, and he had to swallow back the sadness that was threatening to well up. He took a deep breath. Even if he was far from his parents' grave, if a grave you could call it, he was going to do right by them. He'd definitely do right by them come Yu Lan Festival next month.
Except for a woman hanging laundry with a long bamboo stick onto the high lines strung between the alleys, the courtyard was deserted. He sat for a while on a root that served as a bench in the shade. Jet fished a toothpick out of his pocket and started to chew on it, the familiar weight between his lips soothing. The sycamore not only provided decent cover but also quick access to the rooftops if need be. Li would have to come past here on his way to the guardhouse, which made it even more convenient. It was a good, old tree, Jet decided, patting the trunk affectionately. And if he closed his eyes, just for a second, he could pretend that he was back home, that the noise of the city was the wind in the trees.

Not daring to think too deeply about where his future might take him, he folded his arms behind his head, leaned back against the trunk, for now satisfied with watching people come and go.

There was shouting in the distance. Jet sat up straighter, vaguely wondering what was going on and if a bit of good old street entertainment – most likely a drunken brawl – was worth getting up for when a group of children ran past him, down the street towards the ruckus. There was excitement in their voices as they hurried past, and then Jet heard it: "Hurry, Kai. We're gonna miss it. Someone's fighting a firebender!"

A firebender? Jet bit down on his toothpick, splintering it. He cursed and spit it out. Jet shook his head trying to ignore the uneasy feeling that was settling in the pit of his stomach. Li wasn't that stupid. Jet got up, nevertheless, and grabbed a boy by the arm, spinning him to a halt.

"What's going on?"

"Let go of me, asshole!"

The kid wrenched his arm free, and pushing Jet back with a well aimed earthbending move. He made a face at him as Jet stumbled backwards and earth-skated after his friends. Jet reached for his swords, not to hurt, just to trip, but his hands came back empty. Right. No swords. He was not liking this one bit.

An ostrich-horse cart rumbled past on the uneven street, the Dai Li agent steering urged the animal on with sharp clicks of his tongue. Jet took a step back, the blood draining from his face at the sight of the all too familiar, steal reinforced jail-wagon and he had to steady himself on the nearby tree as the memories washed over him, drowned him.

Cold rock closed around his wrists and ankles, he was being dragged backwards, thrown into an ostrich-horse cart and then… Jet shuddered, digging his nails into his palm hard enough to draw blood. No, it wasn't real, it was just a bad memory. He would not make that mistake again. Yelling and screaming about the war in a city ruled by the Dai Li had been stupid, and he wouldn't have made that mistake if not for Li telling him … but what if …

Li was down that street. If anything, Li'd be fine, wouldn't he? They'd arrest the other guy, right? That's what they'd done to him, but …

A man's scream echoed through the narrow streets and the feeling of unease that had settled in Jet's stomach grew to full-blown panic.

Jet shoved his spirit money into his pocket and started running off after the children. He had to be wrong. How he wished he was wrong.

When he arrived at the square it was rather anticlimactic. The crowd was already dispersing, the excitement over. Jet caught his breath, supporting himself on a nearby wall. In the distance he caught a fleeting glance of the Dai Li dragging someone away, someone covered in blood Jet noted in
horror, into the back of an ostrich-horse carriage. Someone laughed, the same nasty sound he'd heard that day when …

The doors closed on him, his arms twisted behind his back, and then the cart moved as the agents climbed on, swaying under their weight and then… Jet hit his fist against the wall. It was not real, damn it.

Instinct made him press himself into the shadows as they drove past. It would not do for the Dai Li to notice him. He was pretty sure they still had a warrant out on his head. Jet turned towards a grandma eating walnuts. She wrapped her fingers around two walnuts cradled in her palm, pressing down with her other hand, cracking them open with expert skill. She picked at the bits of shell and nuts in her hand, discarding bits of shell before choosing a piece to eat.

"What happened?" Jet wiped his sweaty hands on his tunic in a nervous gesture.

"Some refugee went crazy." She gestured with her cane. "You missed one hell of a fight, kiddo." She offered him a piece of walnut.

"No, thanks." Jet shook his head. His stomach churning with unnamed emotion. He looked around the eerily familiar square. Was that where he'd fought that earthbender? Jet pinched the bridge of his nose. That day was all such a blur. "And then?"

"Stabbed some rich kid she thought was a firebender. Nasty scar, too. Screamed he'd burned down her home." The old woman shook her head slightly as she went on. Her fingers closed around two fresh walnuts. The cracking sound like fingernails on chalkboard to Jet's temper. "Can't trust that lot. Refugees, nothing but trouble..."

"What about the guy she stabbed?" Jet refrained from shaking her. What was it with the people in this town, how could they just watch, enjoy the show when…

"Dead." She pointed to a dark puddle in the sand, and a stack of discarded newspaper. She spat out another sunflower-seed shell. "Pity."

No. It couldn't be. It wasn't Li. It was some other poor fool. Not Li. Not. Li.

"What about the scar?" Jet hated how frantic his voice sounded, how pleading. He covered the left side of his face with his hand. "Did it look like that?"

"Half the face gone." She nodded. "Pretty nasty scar, that was. Such a shame, was rather pretty." She took in the Upper Ring quality of his robes and hat. "Someone you know?"

Jet leaned heavily against the wall, feeling as if the ground had just been pulled out from under him. Everything went dark around the edges and Jet felt his vision blur. Jet briefly covered his face in his hands, trying to clear it, trying to think. Li was still at the music store, yes, that was it. He only heard the beginning of her rant about crime rates, dirty refugees and how this neighborhood had gone down before he was halfway down the street and running toward the music shop.

He skidded to a halt in front of the store, pulling the doors open with force. The street was bright, too bright, making it hard to make out anything in the semi-gloom of the shop and Jet looked around in panic.

"Li?" Jet yelled, blinking furiously to get his vision back. A young clerk was hunched behind his desk, looking up at Jet in annoyance.

"What?"
"The guy, with the scar," Jet panted out. "Is he still here?"

Please be here, Jet pleaded with whatever spirit was listening.

"Do you see him?" The clerk shrugged, gesturing one-handedly at the interior of the tiny cramped store, demonstratively flicking over a page of his magazine with his other hand.

Jet balled his fist, trying to reign in his fear and anger. "When. Did. He leave?"

"I don't know, a couple of minutes ago." The clerk seemed unimpressed. "You buying anything?"

"Thanks for nothing." Jet slammed the door on his way out, trying hard not to panic. Li was at the guardhouse, he repeated under his breath, had to be at the guardhouse. Jet must just have missed him on the street. Anything else was too horrible to even contemplate.

Jet shoved his way through the crowds, pushing at people. Jet cursed. Everyone seemed to be conspiring to slow him down, to be in the way, making him desperately wish he had his swords.

When Jet got there, out of breath and dizzy with worry, Tong was sitting outside on a small three-legged stool, smoking a foul smelling pipe.

"Li here?" Jet panted, leaning forward, hands pressed against his thighs, gasping for breath, his just recently mended ribs hurting like mad.

Please let Li be here.

"No." Tong was chewing at the end of his pipe, watching him with bored interest. "Dock duty isn't back yet, either."

"Shit." Jet sat down hard on the floor, not caring about the dirt. He covered his face in his hands, trying to swallow back the panic of everything falling to pieces around him. Li couldn't be dead, just couldn't be. Jet needed him to be alive. Jet pressed the palms of his hands against his stinging eyes. This was not happening.

"You alright, kid?" Tong sounded mildly concerned.

"No," Jet ground out.

Tong shrugged and went back to blowing rings of smoke into the air.

What now? Jet balled his hands to fists, his fingernails cutting into his flesh. What would he tell Smellerbee and Longshot? What about Mushi? Jet swallowed down a sob. Spirits, what would he tell Mushi? It was all his fault. He should have been with Li. It would never have happened if he'd just... And he'd not even been there. Li had died alone, fighting some crazy stranger while Ba Sing Se cheered them on. Jet's balled fist hit the ground. He had to get out of this city. Nothing good had come of coming here and without Li there really was nothing left for him. Smellerbee and Longshot had made a life, had jobs and a future, but what about him? He had nothing, accomplished nothing and no reason to stay.

Jet rested his forehead on his knees, trying to decide what to do next, but for once in his life he had no idea what to do. Maybe he would leave the city, join the army, maybe ...

"Weren't you waiting for Li?" Tong's foot nudged him gently in the leg and he pointed his pipe at someone down the street. "Isn't that him over there?"
"Where?" Jet's head shot up, looking in the direction Tong was pointing. Li. Jet pinched himself, just to make sure. It was Li, Tong was right.

Jet closed his eyes, the dreadful, heavy feeling in his stomach replaced by one of giddy relief. Li was walking toward them, eating a slice of melon, as if he didn't have a care in the world. Jet got up from the floor, brushing the dirt off his robes, thanking the spirits all the while he was rushing over to Li. Li was alive.

"Man, am I glad to see you!" Jet dragged him into an exuberant hug, burying his face in Li's shoulder, ignoring the undignified stinging feeling in his eyes. Li was alive, it hadn't been Li. He was starting to feel a little bit self-conscious about his overreaction, so he let go of Li, but kept his arm firmly around Li's waist. Li didn't seem to mind, even seemed to lean into the contact.

Li looked at him with his golden, Fire Nation eyes, and then it dawned to Jet, that, yes, Li was a firebender, and Fire Nation on top of that, and Jet hated the Fire Nation and all it stood for, but that was okay. Li wasn't like them. How could he ever even considered handing Li over to the Dai Li? Li'd saved Jet's life and that was more than he could say for the Avatar. But most importantly, Li was his goddamn firebender and that was what counted and Jet was okay with that. There had to be an exception to every rule, and Li was his.

"Jet?" Li awkwardly turned toward him, his hand a comforting weight on Jet's shoulder, a hint of concern in his voice. "Everything alright?"

Jet smiled and nodded. "It is now."

Chapter End Notes

A big Thank You to Cadesama and moonyazu9 for the beta :D
"Jet!" Smellerbee raised her voice slightly to be heard from across the room.

Zuko pushed the right corner of his newspaper down with his index finger, his eyes darting from an annoyed looking Smellerbee back to where Jet was taking a nap next to him on the kang. Jet grunted and turned over on to his side, and Zuko shifted to accommodate Jet's legs in their new position.

"You said you'd help!" Smellerbee's words were muffled by the nails wedged between her lips. She was standing on an overturned bucket, tapping her foot impatiently.

She spit the nails into her free hand. "JET!"

"I'm up, I'm up!" Jet blinked and stretched. He let out a jaw-cracking yawn, not bothering to cover his mouth. The yawn seemed to go on forever. Zuko picked up a sunflower seed from the bowl on the low table, held it between his thumb and forefinger, contemplated it for a second, and then aimed. From the way Jet spluttered and coughed, he'd been successful.

"Hey!" Jet spit the soggy seed in Zuko's general direction and glared at him, smacking him on the leg. "What was that for?"

"What do you mean? I thought you were asking for food." Zuko flicked another seed at him. "Like a baby bird."

"What?" Jet blinked at him, shaking off the last remnants of sleep. "Oh, I get it. Ha, ha." He raised an eyebrow at Zuko, a too suddenly angelic expression on his face. "But now that you mention it, I do feel a hungry …" He grabbed a handful of roasted peanuts from the bowl next to him, stretched, pretending very badly that he intended to eat them and not throw them at Zuko.

Zuko snorted. That would be the day, when he fell for something that obvious. He hooked his hand under Jet's knee, pulling him forward the second Jet threw the peanuts. Jet's oh so clever revenge was cut short by an undignified squeak, the peanuts raining down behind the kang, onto the floor.

"Ass." Jet propped himself up on his elbows and tried to kick Zuko in the side. He geared himself up to launch himself at Zuko when Smellerbee stomped her foot.

"Oy!" Smellerbee huffed and threw a nail at them. It hit the wall above the kang, bounced off and landed on a pillow next to Jet. "Is. This. Straight?"

Her hand flat against the wall, she dramatically slid her side of a gigantic Earth Rumble Seven poster up and down. Longshot was holding up the other side, a longsuffering expression on his face, his raised eyebrow and pointed stare making it clear that he was not the one cleaning up the peanuts, and that he just wanted this over with.

Jet humphed and put down the Hurt'n'Dirt magazine he'd rolled up to smack Zuko with. He tilted his head back in thought. "A little more on the left, Bee."

"Like this?" Smellerbee reached up on her tiptoes and adjusted her side of the poster a tiny bit.

"Yep." Jet grinned at her. "Much better. That's one cool poster. Do those glow?" Jet pointed at the big characters spelling out 'Earth Rumble Seven'.

"They do!" Smellerbee squeaked, smoothing down the poster. "Isn't that awesome!? Just wait until it
gets dark."

*Of course they glow.* Zuko hid his snicker behind his newspaper, pretending to be absorbed in the article he had been reading.

Jet whistled low under his breath, clearly impressed. "Where'd you get it from?"

"Got it from Tong." Smellerbee gestured toward Longshot for the hammer. "We're doing security, remember." She placed the nail. "Last chance. Li, what do you think? Does it look alright?"

Zuko sighed and looked up from his newspaper. "It's even."

He had to bite back that he could fix that poster permanently with a little well placed fire.

Not that the place needed more illumination. Zuko shuddered inwardly. Smellerbee seemed to have made it her mission to cover the whole place in green-glowing crystal knick-knacks.

"Man, do you remember when we first got here?" Jet reminisced.

What Zuko was thinking must have shown on his face and Jet seemed to have a knack for knowing exactly what Zuko was thinking. Jet shrugged sheepishly, putting his arm around Zuko's shoulders. "So much has changed. Looks like a home now, doesn't it?"

"Weird how that happens." Zuko nodded and found that he meant it. He leaned into the contact, oddly grateful for the gesture. He hadn't had a place he'd call home in years. His cabin on the ship had been a place to sleep, to meditate, but not home. Now, when he thought about home, the Palace Caldera was not the first thing that came to mind anymore. This should have surprised him, worried him, but lying here with Jet on the kang, he felt for the first time in years like he wanted to stay.

The apartment had changed quite a bit since he'd last been here, if nothing else, it was definitely brighter.

That hideous three-legged toad was still perching on the window sill, but now it was not alone. A few potted herbs had joined it, as well as a brightly glowing crystal tree, the leaves shaped like miniature coins. Zuko kept his head carefully turned away from it, afraid that if he caught any more prosperity he'd need glasses. Or a seeing-eye dog-monkey.

In the small space between the two doors to the bedrooms, stood a cheap replica of a famous Earth Kingdom Shui-Ping Dynasty vase. Zuko watched Longshot walk past it, his fingers brushing the eight shoots of lucky bamboo inside.

A string of small green crystals carved to look like flowers was draped around the kang, over the kitchen door and wound its way all the way to the entrance where – Zuko cringed – the Blue Spirit wanted poster that used to hang over Smellerbee's bed had been re-homed to.

Zuko shifted, his head resting on Jet's shoulder. He watched Longshot carry a tray of steaming teacups in from the kitchen. He handed one to Smellerbee, shoved the tray onto the low table and took a cup himself before gesturing to them to help themselves.

"Nice, isn't it?" Jet pulled him closer, his hand sliding down Zuko's arm, coming to rest around his waist.

"Yeah, something like that," he mumbled, not wanting to explain.

Jet pulled them both back onto the kang, Zuko's head on his shoulder, their legs entwined. "Comfy?"
Zuko nodded, shifting slightly to his side, his left arm draped across Jet's stomach, his face resting on Jet's chest.

Jet fished the magazine he'd been leafing through before out from among the pillows.

"Did you see that?" Jet folded over the cover of the newest issues of Hurt'n'Dirt and pointed at a color print of The Boulder flexing his impressive muscles. "That's one cool badger-mole tattoo! I kinda want one."

"Want what, Jet?" Smellerbee rolled up the stack of wanted posters she'd been memorizing and shoved them at Longshot. "Give me yours when you're done." Longshot nodded and she turned to look at Jet. She studied the centerfold Jet was holding up for her to see, her expression growing more and more amused by the second. She tilted her head at him. "Nice tattoo. Where do you want to get it?"

"On my back." Jet rolled his eyes at her. "Duh."

"Which half?" Zuko snorted and snatched the magazine from Jet, making a show of looking from it to Jet and back, comparing. "I'm not sure there's enough space on your -- " Zuko coughed. "slender back."

"Oh snap," Smellerbee giggled and poked Longshot, who grunted but didn't look up from the wanted posters he was memorizing.

"Excuse me," Jet rolled up his sleeve and glared at Smellerbee in mock indignation, flexing his guns. "Did you just let him call your leader scrawny?"

"Yep," Smellerbee deadpanned not moving from her nest of pillows on the floor. "But I'm sure they've got some great 'bulk up fast' tips."

"It has a recipe for a nourishing picken-egg shake on page 23," Zuko needled, meeting Jet's glare with a superior smirk. "I'm sure you can get Uncle to make it for you."

"Don't you mean we?" Smellerbee half turned toward him from where she was lying on the floor, and poked Zuko in the leg. "You finished with the international section?"

"The international section? You sure?" And when she nodded, Zuko rolled his eyes, nonetheless flipping through the Sing Bao until he found the pages Smellerbee wanted. He held them just out of reach, teasing. "I think Jet's nearly done with his fashion mag."

"Hey!" Jet swatted at Zuko with his copy of Hurt'n'Dirt. "This is manly entertainment I'll have you know!"

Zuko dropped his paper onto the kang and made a grab for the magazine. He should have known it was too easy. The second he got hold of it Jet gave the magazine a good tug and Zuko found himself tumbling sideward and halfway onto Jet.

"Why, hello there." Jet tucked a strand of Zuko's hair behind his ear, grinning up at him.

"Let me up," Zuko groused, more out of habit then an actual desire to get up. Jet was a solid, reassuring warmth beneath him, and his hands were starting to move in interesting ways, worming their way under Zuko's layers.

"You're crushing the paper," Smellerbee complained. "I want to read that."
"Yeah, don't do that, Jet." Zuko shifted his weight so that he was fully on top of Jet. "It's not nice."

"Sorry, Bee. Can't move." Jet let out a theatrical gasp. He gave her big, fake, helpless puppy eyes, before poking Zuko viciously in the side. "Li's too heavy."

Zuko squeaked and coughed which forced him to partially roll off Jet. He rubbed his side, scowling. Oh, we're fighting dirty now? With a practiced move he, launched himself at Jet, grabbed Jet's hands and swung back on top of him, holding him fast in a military restraining grip.

"I'll show you heavy, you ass," Zuko panted, eyes narrowed, glaring down at him, their faces but inches apart. "You lose!"

"Don't. And you like my scrawny ass!" There was a breathy undertone to Jet's voice, and Zuko narrowed his eyes at him, waiting for the counter attack that was sure to come. It didn't, or at least not in the form that Zuko had expected. When Jet arched up to kiss him, Zuko wasn't sure if he minded this part of playing dirty, or if Jet was even the one who'd started that kiss. But it definitely did not mean Jet had won.

Smellerbee cleared her throat, sounding a bit embarrassed. "Get a room."

"I have a room." Jet gave her a winning smile. "It's right over there."

"Funny," Smellerbee muttered. "Now give me that damn newspaper."

Zuko sighed theatrically, rolled off Jet and smoothed the pages out before handing them to her.

"What do you want with the international section, anyway?"

"Yeah, Bee, there's no pictures in it." Jet held up his Earth Rumble mag for inspection. "See, pictures. Far superior."

He had procured a toothpick from somewhere and propped it between his lips. "No, seriously, I'm nearly done with the Earth Rumble mag, if you change your mind."

"I want to read the Sing Bao. You know, that is what people do with a newspaper." Smellerbee blew a raspberry at them before she lay back down, adjusting the pillow under her head.

Zuko held his breath for the explosion that didn't come. Instead, Jet looked at him, a strange little content smile on his face and chewed thoughtfully on his toothpick.

"You've been practicing your characters with Mrs Chen, haven't you?" Jet pointed the toothpick at Smellerbee, who ignored him. "You think she'd help me, too?"

Zuko blinked. That was unexpected. The last time the topic of reading or writing had come up Jet had stormed out and not been seen for the rest of the day.

"I'm sure she would." Smellerbee turned her head and smiled up at Jet. "Want me to ask her?"

Jet nodded and Smellerbee punched her pillow into a comfortable shape before turning her attention back to the Sing Bao. "Now shush, I'm dying to know what's up with the Queen of Omashu."

Zuko snorted at the wrong title, wondering if that was some kind of weirdly clever political commentary. If you believed military intelligence, the old gasbag that used to rule Omashu was a complete lunatic. It made Zuko thank Agni that Uncle had never insisted on visiting that particular old friend. But Omashu had been conquered, and -- Zuko took a deep breath, forcing himself not to
think about what was past. It was complete fiction anyway. With the Dai Li controlling every printed word, the Sing Bao's international column tended to be an utter farce. Last week they'd congratulated the Prince of the Southern Water Tribe on the birth of his third child. The article had been complete with engravings showing the mother and the proud father with the newborn, in front of a colossal, glittering ice palace. Zuko'd felt a pang of guilt looking at that picture, remembering Katara's pitiful excuse of a village, curious if that was what it had looked like a hundred years ago. Before …

"You alright?" Jet pulled up one of his legs and Zuko shifted to accommodate him. Jet's fingers gently touched his arm and Zuko shivered, wondering how a simple touch could have such an effect on him. “Anything I …"

"It's nothing just ..." Zuko shook his head and Jet nodded. One of the things he liked about Jet was that he understood about ghosts and not talking about the past.

Jet made an affirmative, understanding sound and tugged at Zuko's arm until Zuko's back was settled against his chest. With Jet's reassuring warmth behind him Zuko relaxed and soaked up the heat; he'd been cold for too long. He turned his head to look at Jet and when Jet smiled at him, smiled back.

This was, for the lack of a better word, nice. Zuko looked from Smellerbee, her lips slightly moving as she read, to Longshot memorizing a stack of wanted posters, and then down to where Jet's arm had snuck around his waist. It was strangely pleasant to spend time with them, even doing nothing that he couldn't do by himself.

For as long as he could remember he'd been the one looking in: at Azula and her friends, at his crew. Always watching, but never a part of it, until now. Maybe losing his past, his title and destiny was the price he had to pay. He should have realized it when that family in the desert, who had taken him in without question, only to reject him as soon as they found out who he really was. This time, Zuko thought bitterly, he'd not make that mistake again. Uncle was right. They were Mushi and Li and that was for the best of it. He would pay the price, at least for now.

Pleasantly aware of Jet's presence, Zuko went back to reading the editorial. It was the first in many days that was written by Grand Secretariat Long Feng himself. Zuko recognized his precise prose immediately. Some of the more recent ones had been uncharacteristically rambling, making Zuko wonder if Long Feng had taken the week off or something. Yesterday's editorial had been particularly bad. It claimed to be by his Majesty the Earth King himself. Judging by the flowery, circular style and the archaic spelling, Zuko did not doubt that that was true. Anyone else would have earned themselves a trip to Lake Laogai for that kind of pretentious tripe. There were, Zuko thought, upsides to the Dai Li running this city. If there ever had been a good reason why Qin the Conqueror had wanted to simplify their writing and buried any objecting scholars alive, this editorial was one. Kuei apparently had not been told that no one had used half of those characters for over three-hundred years. The speech had gone on for over a page on how Kuei himself had failed his people and would now, back wielding his birthright power, and with the help of the Avatar himself, right the wrongs of the past. Zuko wondered briefly is any of that was true, to be even marginally trusted, or just a new flavor of the lies and half-truth this city ran on. Not wanting to admit how close to home that hit, he'd balled up the paper and sulked on the roof until Uncle had sent Jet up to coax him down.

Zuko pulled himself away from the memory, trying to once again focus on the article in front of him. Whatever the previous article had been, Long Feng was back and Zuko had to admit he much preferred his editorials.

This one was a clever recounting of how the greatest Avatar of all time, Avatar Kyoshi, had founded
the Dai Li to protect their country against a peasant uprising. Zuko felt a shiver of unease run down his spine at the rather thinly veiled threat. The editorial went about on how, now that the Avatar had returned to the world, the Avatar, the Earth King and the Dai Li, in righteous unison, would ensure every citizens' safety. Today and forever. Long live the Earth King.

Zuko frowned at the lithography of the Earth King and the Avatar. Standing next to the majestic throne, the Avatar was barely taller than the seated Earth King. Flanked by the half-circle of royal Dai Li guards, they both looked dwarfed. The throne and the standing agents made both the Avatar and the Earth King look like children in need of protection.

So, the Avatar was still in Ba Sing Se. Good for him.

"You're doing it again," Jet teased gently.

"Can you hand me my tea?" Zuko reached over Jet and took the cup from Smellerbee. "Doing what?" he asked Jet in return, for a second genuinely confused.

"Scowling." Jet gently squeezed his arm, giving him a small, understanding smile. "Something in the paper?"

"It's nothing." Zuko said and meant it. He put his cup down on the floor and looked from the picture to his and Jet's intertwined legs and back to the Avatar. He sighed. It really hadn't been a choice at all. "Just memories."

"So, what about that Queen of Omashu?" Jet addressed Smellerbee, his tactic of changing the topic obvious, but welcome. "Never heard of her."

"Give me a second, will ya." Smellerbee waved her hand at Jet dismissively. She scanned the pages, her lips moving silently as she read the headlines.

Zuko ignored them, focusing instead on the article detailing the re-zoning incident and the subsequent legal fall-out. Mrs Chen had lent him one of her son's old textbooks and after reading it, he was starting to get the finer details. Ba Sing Se's government and legal structure was fascinatingly, but needlessly, complex and he'd noticed plenty of areas where it could be streamlined, if he were in charge. He'd enjoyed talking to Mrs Chen about it, but even though she'd grown up in the city and could explain the bigger picture to him, she was no legal expert. Maybe he could sign up for a course at Ba Sing Se's university. Why waste his time here with serving tea, when he could learn something useful? The idea was tempting, and Zuko mulled it over in his head, wondering what he would have to do to take the entrance exam. He hadn't realized how much he missed school, missed books and newspapers until he had arrived in Ba Sing Se where there was an abundance of learning and culture and all the things he'd taken for granted as a child. He'd have to talk to Uncle about this idea.

The next article was an interview with General Sung, questioning him on the necessity of tax increases to support the army. As the General metaphorically stuttered his way through the minefield of questions, the interviewer made it more than clear that this was not a mere interview, but a thinly hidden piece of Dai Li propaganda.

This was not the first time Zuko had noticed the conflict between the Dai Li and the Council of Five. The more he read and talked to the patrons at the teahouse, the more he became aware that the façade of government unity was just that. Ba Sing Se's government was not at all united, divided into several warring factions, struggling, grasping for and trying to hold onto as much power as they could.

It should not have surprised him, though. He'd seen with his own eyes just how far the Dai Li was willing to go to gloss over the fact that the Fire Nation army had been sieging the wall for nearly a
century now. That they successfully managed to do so, despite the constant stream of refugees, showed exactly the true power in this city lay.

He flipped a page and was suddenly faced with a recruitment ad for the Earth Kingdom army: "The Earth King wants you to protect our glorious walls!"

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose. How did people wrap their brains around this?

He put down the paper in disgust just in time for Smellerbee finish reading her article.

"Can you believe it? The Queen of Omashu is getting married again! They're throwing her a parade next month," Smellerbee crowed, triumphantly pointing at the passage, declaring the news as if this was a close relative, or, for that matter, real. "Awesome!"

Zuko shared a look of exasperation with Longshot. The misinformation about the outside world the Dai Li fed the populace was another piece in the puzzle of how exactly they stayed in power. That someone who should know better parroted it, though …

"Really?" Jet yawned and folded his arms behind his head. "Why?"

"It's her birthday, d'uh!" Smellerbee proclaimed with grating superiority. "It's going to be really cool!"

Longshot buried his face deeper in his wanted posters and mumbled something about being on indefinite overtime that week.

"You do know that there's no Queen of Omashu, right?" Zuko looked from Smellerbee to Jet and back to Smellerbee. "Right?!"

"What do you mean?" Smellerbee frowned, her voice dripping astonishment. "Of course Omashu has a Queen." She held the paper out to him, pointing at the article. "See?"

"Seriously?!"

There was an amused undertone to her voice that was really starting to annoy Zuko. What was wrong with her? Queen of Omashu? Omashu had a king, well, had had one until this spring when they had got conquered. How could they not know that? didn't they learn that in school? And then it hit Zuko. How could they? They'd grown up in a forest; of course they'd believe anything the paper wrote. By Agni it really wasn't right. And it was the Fire Nation's fault in more than one way. Those regions had been conquered over a decade ago. Why wasn't the governor taking care of his people? Every citizen had a right to at least a basic education.

"Don't be stupid. Omashu has a king," Jet cut in before Zuko could say anything else. "That paper is full of lies."

"I'm not stupid. I know that," Smellerbee snapped. "Spirits, Jet, did a badger-mole take your sense of humor or something?"

"How's deliberately misinforming the people in Ba Sing Se funny?" Jet crossed his arms in front of his chest and Zuko agreed. It really wasn't.

"What is it with you? I mean, Li's the one who has no sense of humor." Smellerbee stuck out her tongue at him. "Cheer up, it was just a joke."

"I have a sense of humor." Zuko frowned. "Anyway, Omashu had a King. There's no more
Omashu. They got conquered this spring."

"That's not true, is it?" Smellerbee's voice was small, hesitant. It made her sound younger than she was. She hesitated slightly, sounding like she really, really didn't want it to be true.

"They renamed it New Ozai." Sometimes Zuko wished he was more like Azula, he'd never been good at lying on the spot. He shrugged self-consciously. "Last I heard."

The sudden silence emphasized the horrible feeling of dread in Zuko's stomach, that he'd said the wrong thing and now there was no way to take those words back. His fingers itched to touch his scar. It really was a talent.

"New Ozai? Good one Li!" Jet laughed, his voice on edge, belying his words. "Take that, Smellerbee! No sense of humor, huh!"

Zuko was about to point out that it hadn't been a joke, wanted to ask them if they hadn't heard the rumors among the refugees, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to speak, afraid that whatever he said would just make it worse.

"Dude, not funny." Smellerbee reached over and socked him in the leg. "You know what the Fire Nation does to people!"

"No shit, Bee." Jet cut in, theatrically drawing circles in the air on the left side of his face. "You think?"

Smellerbee blushed and hid behind her paper.

Everyone went back to reading their magazines and newspapers, and for a long time the only sound Zuko could hear was the shifting of paper and the faint noises of the busy city below. room.

Zuko was halfway through the business section when Smellerbee cleared her throat.

"Li?" She held out her tea to him, not looking up from her newspaper. "It's gone cold."

"I'm not a stove." Zuko muttered but he did take the cup and the peace offering.

"You sure?" Jet put on a mock innocent expression, quickly turning into a leer. "You look plenty hot to me."

"Really?" Smellerbee groaned and threw a pillow at him, breaking the stifling atmosphere.

Zuko gave him the evil eye, trying to hide his relief. He'd never quite understood what the appeal of just being around people was. Back on his ship he'd pretty much convinced himself that all of that was beneath him, that it did not befit his station to befriend the crew, but now… It was pleasant.

Zuko could not help but keep watching Jet out of the corner of his eye. Jet had abandoned his Earth Rumble magazine a while ago and was lying in what looked like a comfortable sprawl on the kang facing the window, his back resting against a heap of pillows and bunched up blankets.

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks." Jet smiled at him and Zuko could not help narrowing his eyes in suspicion. It wasn't that he didn't want Jet to be happy, Jet's sudden change in mood worried him. After they'd broken the Dai Li's brainwashing Jet had been more sullen, given to flares of temper. Ever since Zuko'd met up with him at the guardhouse Jet had been acting strange. This newly found equilibrium and unshakeable good mood worried Zuko. It felt a little bit too much like the way he'd acted when the Dai Li had him under their thrall. Zuko was about to ask Jet if he'd been seeing his
'friends' again when Longshot snickered nastily, distracting him.

Longshot smirked and pointed to one of the wanted posters he was memorizing for work, holding it up for them to see.

"Admiral Tinkle Tinkle*? Am I reading that right?" Smellerbee guffawed and snatched it from him, holding it out for Zuko to inspect. "That's not really his name, is it?"

Zuko blanched. Smellerbee was holding a Fire Nation wanted poster. Jeong Jeong's wanted poster.

"No, it's not," he snapped, feeling like the floor had suddenly dropped out from under him. His own voice sounded distant, mechanical, as he continued, "They do that to mock him."

"Li?" Smellerbee looked at him, concern in her voice. "This wasn't the bastard who…" She gestured vaguely at her face.

"No, never met him," Zuko lied, and shook his head, cold sweat running down his neck. 'Lucky to be born' echoed in his head. "Do you often get Fire Nation wanted posters?"

"Sometimes." She shrugged, oblivious. "Money's money. We even get an extra five percent if we catch anyone wanted in the Fire Nation." She looked at Jet's exasperated expression, before she continued, "What? I mean, present company excluded," She snickered, "why should we harbor their criminals? We got plenty of our own."

"Hey," Jet rubbed Zuko's back soothingly. "Don't worry, as if Smellerbee would turn in the Blue Spirit." He grinned and raised a teasing eyebrow at her, "Not unless they add at least a couple of zeroes to that reward."

Zuko swallowed hard. He wanted to believe that. Wanted to trust Jet with his secrets, but –

"Funny," she pouted, her cheeks flaming. "But seriously Li, we got your back." She smacked Longshot in the thigh. "Don't we?"

Longshot held Zuko's gaze for a moment and then nodded.

"You saved Jet," he said slowly. "We owe you."

Jet leaned in, his lips close to Zuko's good ear. "Hey, don't worry." His breath was hot against Zuko skin and he shivered.

"Li," Jet continued in the same low whisper as before. "We know you're not like them." His hand found Zuko's and squeezed it, reassuringly. "It's not like you're a general, or something."

"Or something," Zuko muttered and had to take several long, shallow breaths, fighting the intense nausea he felt welling up. He hated the secrets and even more, hated that they were necessary.

"I'll have to leave soon." He said, looking at the three of them. "Dinner with Mrs Chen and her son."

"Are you coming back tonight?" Jet asked, his voice hopeful and Zuko wished he could say yes, but he'd promised Uncle.

Zuko shook his head.

"Uncle asked me to open the teahouse tomorrow."
"Hey, listen, we got dock duty tomorrow morning, which means we won't be back until early afternoon, but how about lunch the day after?" Smellerbee suggested. "I'll cook."

"No offense Bee, but..." Jet made a face and Zuko had to agree. Smellerbee managed to burn water. On a good day. "I thought you liked Li."

"Excuse me!" Smellerbee huffed, arms akimbo. "I'll have you know that I cook the best take-out in all of Ba Sing Se!"

"Lunch it is then." Zuko snorted. "Want me to meet you here or at the guardhouse?"

Longshot and Smellerbee exchanged looks, and Longshot nodded. Smellerbee dug in her pocket and pulled out a key that she tossed at Zuko. "It's the spare one. Let yourself in if we're not back yet."

"Thanks." Zuko closed his fingers around the metal key, acknowledging the significance of the gesture with a solemn nod. He awkwardly waved Smellerbee and Longshot good bye.

"I'll walk you down," Jet announced and followed him out the door.

"So, I won't see you until tomorrow afternoon?" He pulled Zuko against himself. "Seems entirely too long for my taste. I'll surely die of boredom, and," he whispered, "lack of sex."

"I'm sure you'll find something to occupy yourself with."

"I might. There's this waiter I've been wanting to ask out." Jet grinned, spun Zuko around and trapped him against the door. "I think he might like me too."

"He might." Zuko couldn't help but grin back at Jet, despite his best effort not to. Jet's lips brushed his, and Zuko grabbed the front of Jet's shirt, moaning into the kiss, returning it with force, still overwhelmed with how much, how desperately he wanted this. "Think we can make it to your room?"

"What about that dinner at Mrs Chen's?" Jet teased, pressing hot, open-mouthed kisses to Zuko's neck. "Won't you be late?"

"Fuck late." Zuko gasped when Jet's hand slid under his tunic and traced his erection through the fabric of his pants.

"I'd rather fuck now." Jet grinned at Zuko's exaggerated groan at the pun.

A skinny, middle-aged woman was leaning on her broom, watching them from the other end of the hallway, but she stepped back inside before Zuko could ask her what her problem was.

Zuko pulled the door open and nearly fell over Smellerbee who was tying her shoes in the entrance way.

"I thought you'd left?" She looked in confusion from Zuko to Jet and back. "Forgot something?"

"We got lost," Jet deadpanned. "My room's that way."

"What are you up to?"

"I'm making dinner." Smellerbee grinned and help up a flyer from Kyoshi Beef Noodle King. "We'll be back in an hour."

"Bring me back their special," Jet demanded. "With extra beef. I'll need the protein."
Zuko cringed and pushed Jet toward the room. "I can't believe you just said that."

Jet grinned. "It's part of my charm."

There was a strange increase of Joo Dees patrolling the street and Jet wondered where the regular Dai Li street agents had gone and what it could possibly mean. Still not completely comfortable in the Lower Ring, even though he was wearing his cap and his fancy Upper Ring robes, Jet kept to the shadows and the more deserted alley ways.

He decided to wait for Smellerbee and Longshot at the guardhouse. The Lower Ring was making him itchy and he'd much rather go back to the Jasmine Dragon. Maybe he could convince Li to knock off early and come to the park with him to feed the turtle-ducks. After the all the dust and noise from the Lower Ring, he could do with some blue sky and green grass.

It was nearly three pm, and Jet's stomach growled. He stopped at a street vendor to get a one of Ba Sing Se's famous roast duck wraps. Here in the Lower Ring, they were mostly cucumber, leek and sauce, with only a few thin slices of duck thrown in, but they were still pretty damn delicious. He ate it while he walked, the sweet dark sauce soaking through the wax-paper wrapper and the napkin, dripping onto his fingers. Too late he considered getting some for Longshot and Smellerbee, but he was already around the block and decided it would just be easier to come back later.

When Jet entered the guardhouse Tong was slicking back his hair with a wet comb, whistling low under his breath. He gave Jet a nod in greeting, and turned back to fixing his queue.

"Not back yet," Tong announced, perfectly aware of who Jet was looking for. He smoothed down his tunic, tossing Jet an indifferent look. "And I'm knocking off early."

Jet grinned. "Got a hot date?"

"What I got is the keys to this place." He stopped in mid-shoo, as if he suddenly remembered something important, went back over to his desk and picked up a roll of paper. "Can you give those to your friends? They just came."

Slightly annoyed that he was not trusted to wait inside, Jet sat down on the bench outside the guardhouse and unrolled one of the bundle of scrolls out of boredom. They were wanted posters. He flicked through them, looking for something new, but he'd seen most of them before. Gambling debts, ostrich-horse theft, the usual fare. The next one he pulled out made him startle. This one was new. He studied the pictures, his eyes wide. Jet swallowed hard, his palms clammy as he smoothed it out on his knee.

It was a Fire Nation wanted poster with the imperial seal red and prominent in the lower half. And it had two people on it. Two people who looked a lot like Mushi and Li. Mushi looked pretty much like himself, but wore a top-knot and had since grown his beard out. Li, on the other hand, was only recognizable by his scar.

Jet's stomach filled with dread, and he took a deep breath. Maybe this was Tong's sick idea of a joke. It had to be.

Jet skimmed the text on the right, picking out the few words he recognized: General, Dragon of the
West, Prince.

Mushi, the Dragon of the West? Fat, affable Mushi with his tea obsession? That was about as laughable as Li being the Fire Prince. If anyone had suggested that to Jet even ten minutes ago he'd laughed himself sick. Now, staring down at the evidence, at the wanted poster, it wasn't funny at all.

Jet rubbed his sweaty palms on his tunic. Li wasn't the son of the Fire Lord. This was ridiculous. He'd not asked the Fire Lord's son to join the Freedom Fighters, had not spent the last couple of weeks desperate to spend his time in the Fire Prince's company, had not fallen in – Jet bit his lip until he tasted the coppery tang of fresh blood; he needed the pain to focus.

He had to be sure. He would not repeat his past mistake. Jet searched the road, the shadowy entrances, for a sign of the Dai Li, and took a deep breath when he could not detect any. Li had told him that they were wanted, that they had to flee the Fire Nation, right? Maybe he was misinterpreting this. He looked again at the words, willing them to make sense. He bunched up the two copies in his fist, looking around for someone to help him read. He had to know what they said. Jet swallowed bitterly. Had to be sure.

One of the kids that did odd messenger jobs for the Bei Fongs was loitering nearby and Jet called her over.

"Hey." He held out the scroll to her. "Can you read?"

The girl took in his Upper Ring clothes, gave him the stinky eye and held out her open palm. "I can for two copper."

Jet itched to just grab her, shake her greedy little ass, but he couldn't afford to make a scene. He dug in his pocket, pulling out some loose change and tossed it at her.

"What. Does. This. Say." He ground out, holding the wanted poster out for her to read.

She pocketed the money and took the poster from him. "By the order of the Fire Lord," She squinted at the crumpled paper. "Arrest the rebellious traitors Iroh and Zuko." She snickered at the way Zuko's name was written, before she continued, "General Iroh, the Dragon of the West and Prince Zuko Crown Prince to the Fire Lord.*"

"Give me that!" Jet felt the blood pounding in his ears, a wave of intense anger and nausea washing over him. "You're lying!" He made a grab for her, but she stepped out of reach and stomped her foot, bending a cobblestone to hover in front of her fist.

"Don't touch me, stinkface!" she yelled at him, punching the rock toward him. She stuck her tongue out at him as he ducked, and ran off down the street.

Part of Jet wanted to grab his swords and run after her, lay off dealing with the inevitable, but he had no swords and Li was the Fire Prince.

He supported himself with one hand against the guardhouse wall, chest heaving. Li, no, Zuko, was the crown prince of the Fire Nation. He still couldn't quite wrap his brain around that idea. His face twisted up in a mask of pure hatred and disgust and he smacked his palm against the wall. He had been played good. Jet rubbed at his eyes, angrily with the back of his hand. He was going to kill that bastard. Kill them both and burn that teahouse to the ground.

He needed a plan. More importantly, he needed a weapon. Koh's balls, his swords were up in Li' -- No! -- Zuko's room. He couldn't go back there. Jet turned around frantically. The guardhouse! There had to be weapons in there. But Tong had locked the door. Past caring, Jet took a step back and
threw his full weight against it. The wood creaked and splintered and Jet let out a gasp of pain as the
door proved to be harder than his shoulder. Cursing, he kicked at the lock, managing to break it at
the second try. The door swung open and Jet stepped into the empty guardhouse.

The weapons box was in the back. Jet disregarded the rack of jian and went straight for the swords.
To his annoyance they did not have any shuang gou, and he had to forgo his favourite weapon for a
pair of dao, like the guards carried.

The weapons were practice swords, dented, barely worth calling swords. He swung them
experimentally, suppressing the pain from his injured shoulder. They'd have to do. He'd strangle Li
with his bare hands, if it came to that.

He hurried back to the Upper Ring, pushing back on his rage, his hurt until he'd balled it up into a
tiny, white-hot flame.

He forced himself to go with the flow, to not run, even though every fibre in his being screamed at
him to hurry.

The Tu Gui rattled through the wall, temporarily dousing the wagons in darkness. Jet sat, staring
stoically at the floor, trying to make himself small, unnoticeable. He was not going to be stupid again.
He was not going to get caught. No Dai Li would save Li, not this time.

He was already in Middle Ring when it hit him. Had Smellerbee betrayed him? Had she hidden
previous wanted posters? Made sure the Blue Spirit would not get arrested? She'd even admitted to
it. Li'd not only played him, he'd also played her. He probably wasn't even the real Blue Spirit. He'd
used her hero worship to manipulate her into betraying Jet. He laughed bitterly. Trust the Fire Nation
to do nothing by half measure. It was quite an elaborate plan, really. Get close to Jet, so that he could
worm his way into the Freedom Fighters, capture the Avatar and burn Ba Sing Se to the ground. But
then, the Fire Nation was nothing if not devious. But they would not win, not this time. He'd take
them out before they could do anymore damage.

The pain in his shoulder had subsided to a low, humming pain, which flared up again as the jogged
down the serene avenues of the Upper Ring. He was about to pull into the courtyard that led to the
Jasmine Dragon, ready to face Li, when a girl in a blue tunic crashed into him. He cursed in pain as
he slipped on the slick flagstones and landed on his injured shoulder.

"Jet?" Katara picked the scroll she'd been carrying up from the ground, and squatted in front of him.
Her face was red and her eyes wild with emotion. "I thought you were dead."

Note: More translations can be found at atla_annotated on tumblr.

Jeong Jeong's Wanted Poster:

緝拿
琤琤
前烈火國艦長
年六十，白髮。
貌似柔順實長制火術
捕者慎之
Wanted
Cheng Cheng
Former Fire Nation Admiral
Sixty years old. White hair.
Appears harmless (but is a)
Firebending Master.
Approach with caution.
琤琤 - Cheng Cheng - TINKLE TINKLE

This is NOT his real name. Note how the pronunciation does not even match his name. Also remember how Zuko’s wanted poster changes the spelling of his name from 蘇科(resurrect rule/revived law) to 祖寇(ancestor robber). Jeong Jeong’s name was changed, as was Zuko’s, to mock them.

Personal opinion: As funny as Admiral Tinkle Tinkle is, I think Jeong Jeong’s real name is most likely 燦燦 - Jiong Jiong - Fire Fire.

Zuko's and Uncle's Wanted Poster:

承烈火君命緝捕艾洛祖寇
二叛賊.艾洛將軍曾為平西
巨龍. 祖寇*王子曾為火帝
儲君. 二賊違反國令.
拒絕征剿水族蠻子及捉拿
降世神通.格殺勿論.

By orders of the Fire Lord:
Arrest the rebellious traitors Iroh and Zuko.
General Iroh, the Dragon of the West
and Prince Zuko Crown Prince to the Fire Lord.
The (two) traitors disobeyed imperial orders to
eliminate the Water Tribe Savages and to capture the Avatar.
Deathly force permissible.
"Katara?" Jet took a couple of deep breaths before he could trust himself to speak; the pain in his shoulder made it hard to focus. "You have to warn the Avatar."

"Warn him about what?" She crouched down beside him and he grabbed her arm, his hand near her elbow. He pulled her close and Katara had to drop to one knee to keep her balance.

Jet frantically looked around, lowering his voice to barely above a whisper, "I think the Fire Nation is in Ba Sing Se."

Her eyes went impossibly wide and she glanced over her shoulder, to the teahouse, her voice equally low, "I know! I just saw Prince Zuko. We need to warn the Earth King."

So it was true then. There was no Li, had never been a Li, there only was Crown Prince Zuko. The depth of Li's betrayal hit him hard, hurting him more than anything that had happened since his parent's death. He'd told Li yesterday, although not in so many words, that he loved him. Li must have thought it all, him, utterly hilarious. Jet's grip on her arm tightened involuntarily. He'd been made a fool of in more ways than one and, Spirits, he would make Li pay for that.

"Jet, you're hurting me." Katara yanked her arm free and shook it out, glaring at him.

"Sorry," Jet grunted, his thoughts wild. "Why don't you go and warn the Earth King?" Jet picked himself up from the ground, using his swords to push himself upright. His eyes darted toward the teahouse and back to her. "I have some unfinished business to take care of."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Jet." Katara shook her head, her eyes lingering on his swords. Momo landed her shoulder, chittering.

"I'm not going to let you warn him." Jet's face twisted up in anger. She was not going to stop him, not this time. He was right this time. He drew his swords at her, suppressing a wince. "Are you going to freeze me to something again?"

"Don't be stupid," she huffed, but her hand did inch toward her waterskin. "Why would I do that? Prince Zuko's a threat."

Jet tore his eyes away from her hand with effort. He shivered at the memory of ice creeping up his legs, of how trapped in impotent anger he'd felt frozen to that tree and took a step back, into fighting stance.

"Then get out of my way."

Katara reached up to scratch Momo's head, not moving. If anything she seemed slightly amused.

"No offense, Jet." She looked him up and down and Jet could feel her judging him and finding him wanting. It made his skin prickle and he glared down at her. Her eyes lingered dismissively on his swords. "But you don't stand a chance against me. Or him."

"Are you saying that I can't take him?" he challenged her, but she just rolled her eyes at him and kept on petting that stupid lemur. Jet cursed and put his swords down, not wanting her to see how his
right hand trembled under the strain. Besides, he needed his full strength for when he faced Li. "You think I'm weak because I'm not a bender?"

"Yes, I am saying you can't take two firebenders at noon. And I really don't have time for this." She glared up at him, but then her face softened a bit. "Besides, your shoulder looks like it could use a good healing."

"My shoulder is fine," Jet ground out. The last thing he needed now was pity. "And this is personal."

"Personal? Do you think you're the only one who was hurt by the Fire Nation?" Katara flared, the lemur forgotten. She took a step toward him, into his personal space, face red and eyes flashing with anger. "Do you have any idea how dangerous Zuko is?" Her hands fisted into her tunic. "He's chased us for months, always trying to capture Aang."

"Then let me take care of this." Jet suggested, not willing to explain how he knew just how dangerous Li was. That he'd fallen for the mask of endearing insecure sincerity, infuriated him, and he'd not let her know just how stupid he'd been. He'd probably laugh at him, tell him that he'd had it coming after what he did to her, and the hurt over what Li, no Zuko, had done to him was too raw, too potent, to admit any of it. That Li had known exactly which buttons to push, how to get under Jet's skin, had played him, was not a small hit to his pride. He prided himself on reading people and that Li had slipped past his radar was humiliating, to say the least. He should have known it had all been a lie the second he'd found out Li was a firebender.

"I won't let the Fire Nation take Ba Sing Se." He could still smell the smoke, could still feel the heat of the flames in his memory. But he was not eight years old anymore. Now he could save people. "I have to protect this city."

"I know." Her hand was firm and reassuring on his arm, but her expression fierce. "Don't you think I understand that?"

"Yeah, I guess you do." Jet had to give her that. Even though she'd not approved of his plan to drown that village, and yes, that had been a bit rash, she was one of the few people who did understand. There was no love lost between her and the Fire Nation, not after what she'd told him about her mother and from the way she spoke about Li, he'd done quite a bit to deserve her wrath, too.

They locked eyes, and he could see his feelings echoed in her expression. They both knew how much was at stake.

"They're not getting away this time." The air around them took on a frosty note with her anger. "I can promise you that, Jet. You don't have to do this alone. We'll come back right after we've warned the Earth King. You, me, Toph, the Kyoshi Warriors and a couple dozen of the Earth King's guards."

"Together." Jet locked eyes with her, daring her to contradict him. Maybe he'd try doing it her way this time. It was not as if Li suspected anything. He'd taken the wanted poster with him, so there was no one to warn him, no one knew but Katara and him.

"Together." Katara gave him a grim little nod. Frost formed on the scroll she was holding. "We're going to take them down for good."
The fake Kyoshi Warriors had ambushed them the second Katara finished speaking. Before he could so much as lift his swords, he had been pinned to the pillar behind him by viciously sharp and precisely aimed throwing-knives. Another one of them had taken Katara out with frightening speed, and Jet watched her crash to the floor, immobilized, as the girl cart-wheeled away with deceptive ease. The one in charge – Katara had called her Azula –, couldn't be older than Smellerbee. She'd looked at Katara and him in cold distain, but had seemed amused at the idea of Li being in the city. She and the other fake Kyoshi warriors had formed a circle around Katara's unconscious form, had loomed over her, and Jet's ears perked up when their leader referred to Li as Zuzu. He narrowed his eyes at the obvious nickname. They knew each other. Not surprising. He stored that information away, certain that he'd figure out later how it all fit together.

It was when four Dai Li agents stepped out of the shadows that Jet started to really panic. Why did it have to be Dai Li? He really missed the days when all he had to do was dodge fire.

"Let go of me! You traitors!" he demanded, voice shrill with barely suppressed fear, as he kicked and struggled against the dead-hold the Dai Li agents had him in, their hands strong, unyieldingly clamped around his upper arms. They ignored his protests, his curses and taunts as they dragged him along, just like they had the last time.

They passed through long, sunny corridors, but soon descended dusty stairways, which had only one thing in common, they led him further and further underground, away from the sun and the sky and at the mercy of the cursed light of the green crystals. It seemed to go on forever, blend into each other that when they finally did let go of him, when they threw him down a long dark tunnel, it caught him by surprise and he stumbled, fell and landed in a heap at the bottom. He pushed himself up on his hands and looked up at the closing door, watching it wane like the moon, seeing Dai Li agents and rotating lanterns in the afterimage.

There is no war in Ba Sing Se!

Jet sat where he'd landed and wrapped his hands, his arms around his head, covering his ears and his eyes, wishing the words would stop echoing in his head, that it all would stop, that the lamps would not come back. He took a few shallow breaths and let out a sound that might have been a curse or a sob, or both, waiting, dreading for the light to return, for the words to come.

There is no war in Ba Sing Se! There is no war in Ba Sing Se! There is no –

"Jet?" Katara's hand hovered over his shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Her voice pulled him back to the present and he rubbed his hands over his face, fingertips pressing down on his eyes.

"There is war in Ba Sing Se," he declared and then started laughing hysterically, gulping for air between bursts of sobbing, giddy laughter that made clutch his stomach and rock backwards and forwards with each fit. "Katara, there is war in Ba Sing Se!" he repeated, taking gasping breaths between the words, laughing so hard his side hurt. It really was funny when you thought about it.

"Jet?" Katara had crouched down next to him, her hand cupped over the outline of a necklace on her chest. "You're scaring me."

He looked at her, the giddiness leaving him as suddenly as it had possessed him, and he stared at her worried eyes in the harsh, sickly green glow of the crystals, trying to get a grip on it, on the panic, on the memories and focus on how to get out of this fucked up situation.

"I'm alright." Jet ran his hands through his hair, he'd lost his stupid hat sometime during the day – not
that he cared – and took a several deep breaths. "Just give me a minute."

His eyes slowly adjusted to the harsh dimness of their prison. The green-tinted darkness of the cave, the hurt at Li's betrayal and the indignity of having been captured by the Dai Li, again, churned in his stomach, making him more irritable by the minute. He wrapped his arms around his knees, not wanting her to see how weak, how out of control he actually felt. He'd been running on adrenaline since he found that wanted poster and now that the buzz was wearing off, he felt drained.

"We need to find a way out of here," Katara declared in a matter of fact voice that was like nails on a blackboard to his mood.

"Got another great plan, Katara?" Jet lashed out at her, cradling his injured arm close to his body, wanting to hurt something, someone in return.

"How exactly is this my fault?" Katara snapped back, and started pacing back and forth. "How was I supposed to know that Azula was in the palace?"

"Let's go for help, Jet. We can take them down together, Jet." Jet mimicked her voice in an as irritating singsong as he could manage. He kicked at piece of broken off green crystal, making it skip halfway across the cave. "How did that work out for you?"

"Clearly I should have just let you charge in there and have Zuko kill you," Katara said her voice dripping with sarcasm. "You know what, that plan is starting to sound real good."

"Or you could just leave me behind to die, like you did last time!" Jet snapped and before Katara could reply, continued, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I nearly died in a cave like this." He looked down at the dust, hanging his head. Jet knew he was pushing buttons, was purposefully doing so. Hurting her. Twisting the knife felt good, and he wanted her to feel at least a tiny bit of his pain. "It's just –" he sighed, pausing for emphasis. "This place, when the Dai Li brainwashed me –" He shuddered. "And then under Lake Laogai – I was fighting next to the Avatar and then I was down and –" He looked up at her, accusing. "You left me there to die."

"We didn't mean to leave you behind," Katara tried to explain, but she had the dignity to look ashamed.

"Sure, you didn't." Jet snorted, not believing her. They hadn't given a shit about happened to him, once they'd gotten that stupid bison back. Li had – no he hadn't, Jet chided himself. That had all been an act.

"No, really," Katara continued. "You were just … gone. And then Aang found Appa and…" She sighed and took a step toward him, sitting down on the rock next to him. "Look, I –" She put a hand on his shoulder and he winced. "Do you want me to look at that?"

"Yeah." Jet nodded.

He let her peel back his tunic to get a better look at his shoulder. He thought about that day, how helpless he'd felt under the thrall of the Dai Li's brainwashing, how he had been forced to fight first the Avatar then Li. How Li had held him, had – Jet swallowed back a sob. Li hadn't cared at all, not about him. It had all been part of his plan. Jet really had been had good, and what made him furious, seethingly angry, was that part of him still cared.

"Did that hurt?" Katara's hand hovered over his shoulder. "Sorry."
"It's okay."

He ground his teeth and let her think it had, not willing to admit the real reason.

"Looks like a pretty nasty bruise." She poked at it again, more gently this time. "Can you roll your shoulder for me?"

Jet did, wincing in pain.

"It doesn't look dislocated or broken, just bruised." Katara looked at him in sympathy, but shrugged. "There's not much I can do right now." She gestured to the empty waterskin at her belt. "I need water to heal."

"I'll live," Jet muttered and pulled his sleeve back up.

"How did that happen?" Katara nodded her head toward his injured shoulder.

"I broke down a door." Jet didn't meet her eyes, fully aware of how stupid a thing that had been to do. "I needed a weapon." He tried to defend himself, but even to his ears it sounded weak.

"Smart," Katara harrumphed and Jet wished she'd just shut up.

He fixed his eyes on the spot where the door had been, waiting.

The day had been exhausting, but in a good way. Word about Uncle's brewing prowess had made it around fast and the teahouse had been so packed all day that Zuko considered telling Uncle that they needed to hire another waiter if this kept up. Finally the last patrons had cleared out. Zuko looked up from his sweeping and glanced over to where Uncle was righting the chairs. He leaned on his broom for a moment, enjoying the cooler night breeze, and smiled to himself. He could get used to this.

Zuko was halfway done sweeping the big dragon-themed carpet in the entrance when they got interrupted. An imperial messenger handed Uncle an invitation to serve tea to the Earth King.

They'd spent the next couple of hours preparing. Zuko stood at the kitchen counter and unwrapped, then carefully rewrapped their best yixing tea service with soft rags, the right ones this time, while Uncle had set out every bag, canister and tin of tea they had in the teahouse on the table in the back. Uncle excitedly picked up one after the other, trying to reason out which ones they should take.

Later that night, when Zuko had already gone to bed and was falling asleep, he realized that Jet hadn't shown. Zuko dressed hastily, with unease settling deep and unshakeable in his stomach. Please, Agni, let him be safe.

When he snuck out of the house he could still see Uncle's silhouette in the teahouse window, probably repacking those damn pots again.

The Tu Gui was deserted at this time of night, leaving Zuko plenty of space to pace. He looked at the sky, gauging how many hours he had until dawn. He told himself not to worry, that Jet was just staying another day with Longshot and Smellerbee. That he'd get there and they'd be fast asleep, calling him silly for bothering to come all the way from the Upper Ring. They'd have come and told him if Jet had gotten arrested again, wouldn't they?

No one stopped him as he hastened down the empty streets and climbed the stairs to the apartment.
three at a time.

After a couple of minutes of frantic knocking, a disheveled looking Smellerbee finally opened the door, the metal gleam of Longshot's arrowhead visible behind her in the dark.

"Spirits, Li," She ran a hand through her hair, looking annoyed. "It's past midnight. What do you want?"

"Is Jet here?" Zuko tried to look past her, hoping for a glance of Jet in the shadows, making it all right. But there was only darkness.

Smellerbee's eyes went wide and she gesture for him to come inside, carefully locking the door behind him. They stood in the dark, the only light coming from the green crystals that lit the hallway outside.

"He's not with you?" She rubbed at her face, and Zuko could see the horrible realization of what that meant take over, the sleepiness in her features sliding into a worried frown. "Shit. I thought he was with you."

Longshot swore under his breath and reached for the spark-rock with trembling hands.

Their unease settled into outright worry when they compared notes on when they'd last seen Jet. Jet had not been there when they got back from work, had not met them for lunch either, but they'd assumed that he'd just left for the Upper Ring early.

It took Smellerbee and Longshot mere minutes to get dressed and then the three of them split up, hoping to cover more ground that way. They asked around outside, questioning the few night-market stalls that were still open, but no one had seen Jet.

The worst part was going back to the apartment in a tense and unhappy silence, all of them aware there was nothing they could do right now.

Every creak, every stray voice outside made them look to the door, hoping that it was Jet coming home. But every time the door did not open and the footsteps faded down the hallway.

"I'm going to strangle Jet." Smellerbee punched a pillow, looking like she was about to cry. "I swear, if he turns up tomorrow morning, all whole and sound, I'll murder him."

Zuko couldn't agree more. He sat on the kang, where Jet and he had lain together, just yesterday and – Zuko rubbed his temples. He had to stay focused.

Longshot stepped up behind her, putting his arms around her shoulders. She reached for his hand, wrapping herself in his arms, his head resting on hers.

Zuko looked at his lap. Their closeness made him miss Jet even more, made him desperate and anxious about the what was to come.

In the end, they agreed to meet up again tomorrow evening, and, if necessary, go back to the catacombs under Lake Laogai and free Jet by force.

No one dared address the elephant in the room: What if Jet wasn't there either?

Smellerbee hugged him good bye, clinging a little harder than necessary and even Longshot put a friendly hand on his shoulder, and it helped a little that they, at least, were still there.
Zuko sat on the empty Tu Gui, staring out into the darkness, watching the silhouettes of houses fly by. Would they have to leave Ba Sing Se when they broke Jet out? Could he hide Jet in the Upper Ring, or was it just a matter of time before the Dai Li found him there, too? Zuko thought about leaving the city, the teahouse, Smellerbee's and Longshot's apartment, the bathhouses, shops and restaurants. And while he wouldn't think twice about leaving them behind if it came to that, he'd come to like the city and all it had to offer.

Someone had left yesterday's issue of the Sing Bao folded up on one of the seats. The Earth King and the Avatar stared up at him in their show of unity. Zuko frowned at the paper and turned away from it, back to the dark city, contemplating his bargaining chips. If he wanted to stay, to get Jet pardoned, the Avatar would be his best bet. But how? Maybe if he called in that debt from under Lake Laogai? Would that be enough? Zuko grasped his shoulders, digging his fingers into the tense muscles in his neck, thoughts flying. Maybe he could promise to teach the Avatar firebending, he'd need to learn, right? Zuko sighed, would they even believe him? He'd have to try, he didn't have much to lose anyway. Maybe – maybe they'd believe him if he brought Smellerbee and Longshot along, but then he'd have to explain who he really was and he could see that just going over really well. Zuko buried his face in his hands, wanting to scream in frustration. He had to stay focused. None of this would even matter if they didn't free Jet first. He would deal with anything else after.

Back in the Upper Ring, Zuko kicked off his shoes and tiptoed to his room. He pulled his shutters closed before lighting the small candle on his nightstand. It was a few short hours until he had to get up again, and early dawn was already turning the night sky into shades of gray, but with Jet missing he was certain that any sleep he'd get would be mired by nightmares.

Zuko sat on the floor and crossed his legs, facing the candle. He tried to calm his thoughts, even out his breathing. At first the flame spluttered, swaying left and right, threatening to go out, but then Zuko's training kicked in and the flame of the candle rose and fell with the rhythm of his breathing.

Jet wasn't sure how many hours had passed since the Dai Li had captured them and thrown them in here. Judging by the sound of his grumbling stomach it had to be at least early evening and he was starting to wonder if they were going to get fed at all.

Katara had explored the cave earlier, out of curiosity and sheer boredom, he guessed. She'd said it wasn't one cave, but a string of small connected caverns. Not that he cared. He was reluctant to leave that entrance out of his sight. Afraid that if he turned his back for one second, he'd miss his chance to escape.

In the end, Katara had settled for staying with him near the one exit they knew, close to the ramp that led up to the door. They'd gone silent a while ago, Jet stewing in his anger, carefully nursing his fury, while Katara paced, mumbling to herself.

When Jet first heard voices and footsteps outside, he wasn't sure if they were real or in his imagination, but then the ground started to shake faintly and the door slid open and he wondered if they'd come for them at last.

He sprung to his feet, ready to fight, and he could see, out of the corner of his eye, that Katara had done the same, but no one entered the cave. Instead a Dai Li agent placed a tray on the floor.
"Dinner!" the man announced and bent the earth underneath the tray to slide it downward. The door closed behind him even before the tray reached the end of the slope.

Katara lifted the lid. One steamed bun and what looked like a half full canteen.

"Bastards." She picked up at the canteen, gauging the contents. "That's not even enough for healing your shoulder."

"Is it enough to fight?" Jet asked, willing to make the sacrifice of staying thirsty when it meant to get a chance out of here.

"We should drink it." Katara gripped the canteen tightly, her voice at the same time angry and resigned. "What point is there in trying to fight if we're both too weak to do anything?"

As much as it pained him, Jet had to agree.

"We'll wait for the right moment." He glared up at the door. "We're not giving up this easily."

"You should eat something." Katara drank her share and handed him the rest of the water and half of the bread. Her voice was small, tired, "Who knows how long we'll be in here."

Jet took the water, but when she offered him the bread again, he shook his head.

"All yours." Jet's stomach growled again, but he ignored it. He didn't think he could eat so much as a bite.

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He'd slept in fitful bits and pieces, waking up as if fighting his way through waves on the shore only to be dragged down again. Dreaming that he was back at the teahouse, back at Smellerbee's and Longshot's apartment, back in the forest. Never quite able to tell what was real or just a dream. The scraping sound of the earthen door being bent open woke him and he rubbed at his tired eyes, trying to focus.

Two Dai Li agents, their outlines dark against the brightly lit corridor, dragged a struggling person within view.

"You've got company," one of them mocked, before pushing their prisoner down into the cave. He stumbled and rolled gracelessly down the slope into the cave, coming to a stop in a heap of limbs and clothes right in front of Jet.

"Li?" Jet's eyes widened. He hadn't expected to ever see Li again. "You gotta be fucking kidding me."

Li had barely gotten up from the ground when Jet charged. He was going to kill that bastard. Beat him and hurt him like he'd hurt Jet. Jet's fist connected with a satisfying crunching sound and Li stumbled backward, making it worth the pain that shot up Jet's injured arm.

"Jet? What happened?" Li rolled to his feet, but didn't attack. "We were so worried. We looked all over for you last night!"

Not that Jet cared. He took another swing at Li, Li's odd calm making Jet angrier than ever. Was this
all a game to him?

When Jet advanced on him, fury on his face, Li took a step back, dodging him with ease.

"Did the Dai Li do this to you?"

Jet growled low in his throat and tried to grapple Li. He was going to make Li pay.

They collided with the wall, and to Jet's satisfaction Li let out a gasp of pain as his back hit the sharp crystal protruding from the stone.

"Jet, talk to me," Li begged, pushing Jet off, evading Jet's fists. "This is not you."

That Li didn't attack, that there was concern in Li's voice made Jet even more furious. He wished they hadn't taken his swords, even a crappy sword would do. He crouched low, trying to kick Li's legs out from under him.

"I'm going to kill you." Jet hissed, fury twisting his face. "You traitor."

"This is me." Li evaded him easily, ducked another swing, and caught Jet's hand in his own. "I'm on your side, remember? Smellerbee, Longshot, the teahouse? Don't let them do this to you again."

"Zuko? What's Zuko doing here?" Katara demanded to know, and Li's eyes went wide.

Li's guard went down for a split second and Jet crowed inwardly. Gotcha!

He dropped to the floor, taking Li with him. They rolled on the dirt, Jet kicking and struggling, but despite his best efforts, he was the one who ended up face down in the dirt. Li's knee was in his back and Jet's arm was overstretched with Li's hand pushing against his wrist, making it impossible for Jet to move.

"You fucking bastard," Jet ground out, trying to struggle free. "You fucking liar. You're not on my side. You're one of them."

"You're hurting Jet!" Katara yelled in impotent anger. "I knew we should have kept some of that water."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Li snapped at Katara, then in a calmer voice continued, voice a thin, breathless pant from their struggle, "I'm not trying to hurt you, Jet. You need to snap out of it."

"Traitor." Jet's face was squashed sideways into the ground and he was breathing in the dirt. It tasted bitter, ashen just like the fury inside of him. "I trusted you, and you betrayed me." His words were muffled by his awkward position. "I should have known better than to ever trust a firebender." He spat the words, "Prince Zuko."

Hearing his real name, the name he'd left behind when he stepped on the ferry, from Jet of all people, startled Zuko enough to loosen his grip. Jet managed to break free and he scrambled away from Zuko and came to rest with his back against a cluster of crystal, panting hard.

"Jet, let me explain…" Zuko started, not really knowing what to say, how to explain, feeling dread at the price he'd have to pay this time.
"What is there to explain, Prince Zuko?" Jet flared, his back against the wall. He slid down slowly, as if against his will. As if his legs wouldn't support him.

"No, do explain, Zuko," Katara chimed in, positioning herself a bit off to the side, halfway between Jet and him. "I could do with a good laugh."

"Azula tricked us into coming to the Palace to serve tea and then had the Dai Li arrest us. Uncle got away, but …" Zuko started to explain but Katara cut him short.

"Oh, I see how it is," Katara accused. She went on, arms akimbo, "This is all part of the plan, isn't it? Have Azula throw you in here with us, so that you can capture Aang when he comes to help."

"What?" Zuko looked at her in bafflement. He wasn't on Azula's side. Why would she think after what had happened in that deserted village and under Lake Laogai? It didn't make any sense.

"Oh! Very convincing," Katara crowed, pointing at him self-righteously. "You're not even trying to deny it."

"I'm not working with Azula," Zuko tried to explain but neither of them seemed to listen. Zuko felt dread settle in the pit of his stomach. This day was quickly going from bad to worse. "This is crazy," he muttered.

"It's all makes sense now. You're working with the Dai Li." Jet was holding his right arm against his chest, obviously in pain and Zuko cursed under his breath. He hadn't meant to hurt him.

"Let me guess, you promised Longfeng the throne if he hands over Aang to you," Katara continued, still not making sense to Zuko, but Jet seemed to agree with her, nodding along to her words. "The world can burn as long as you get what you want. You really are a horrible person."

"I've never met the Grand Secretariat," Zuko tried to reason, trying rein in his annoyance at the baseless accusations. Jet looked at him with hate in his eyes, agreed with her accusations. It left Zuko feeling backed into a corner, as if they'd already passed judgement and that there was no way for him to change their minds.

"Liar! You're the one who let Longfeng go under Lake Laogai. You were working with him all along!" Jet shouted over him, eyes wild.

"I didn't let him go, I was trying to save your life!" Zuko snapped, quickly losing the battle against his temper. "I didn't know who he was."

"Why would you do that?" Katara looked like she didn't believe him either, but didn't contradict him. "What do you care what happens to Jet?"

"You didn't come for me that day, did you?" Jet looked him straight in the eye, daring him to lie.

"No." Zuko cringed, not even bothering to. It never worked anyway. He was slowly but steadily losing his footing, scrambling uphill in this emotional battle that seemed to be rigged against him. "But I let –"

"That's what I thought," Jet hissed, cutting him off, struggling back upright. "You told me you were after the Avatar, you meant you were trying to capture him, to take him back to the Fire Nation, weren't you? That's why the Dai Li set you up in that nice teahouse in the Upper Ring, wasn't it? You disgust me. All this time I thought you were a decent person –"

"That wasn't a set up, Uncle earned –" Zuko blinked. He guessed it made sense, in a twisted kind of
"Of course he's Dai Li!" Jet's whole body was shaking with emotion. "Did you get a good laugh out of it? Pretending to rescue me from the Dai Li?" he yelled and Zuko wanted to hold him, like he did after Jet's frequent nightmares, but when he reached out with one hand, Jet evaded it. At least didn't back away, if nothing else he stepped closer, into Zuko's personal space, coming to stand only inches from his face.

"Why did you take me in after? Was any of that real?" Jet looked up at Zuko, his voice heavy with emotion.

Zuko swallowed hard. Maybe not all was lost, maybe they could talk this through, maybe –

"Tell me!" Jet grabbed the front of Zuko's tunic, leaning in even closer. "Were you thinking of the Fire Nation when I fucked you?" he whispered and then abruptly pushed Zuko away, making him stumble. Jet turned his back to him, his voice hoarse as he continued. "To think that you, I –"

Zuko could see Katara's eyes go wide at the revelation, cringed at her high-pitched exclamation, "You dated Zuko?"

"I didn't know who he was," Jet explained defensively, his voice a broken whisper. "He tricked me!"

"Jet?" Zuko reached toward Jet, hoping in vain that Jet wouldn't back away. "I know I lied about who I was, but I swear, I didn't lie to you about anything else. I'd never–" I gave up my destiny for you, he wanted to say. "I – You're important to me."

"Shut up! SHUT up! SHUT UP!" Jet rubbed at his eyes with the back of his hand. "Stop lying. You used me!" He advanced on Zuko again, his face twisting up in fury. "You're the Fire Lord's son." He shoved at Zuko, swinging at him and Zuko caught his fist trapping it, pushing him backwards.

"Your father killed my family. I betrayed them and I didn't even know." Jet stumbled to a halt and rubbed at his face again, his arms falling to his side. "You knew!" he accused, voice shaking. "You say you care about me? Why should I believe you? You don't care about anyone but yourself."

"I didn't trick you!" Zuko yelled, his anger getting the better of him. It was almost funny that they thought him capable of everything his father thought he was not. Zuko felt he was fighting a tidal wave of raw emotion, a nightmare that maybe he could wake up from if he tried hard enough.

"I didn't do those things," Zuko started again, already knowing that he'd lost, but he had to try, had to at least one more time. "Jet, you know me. We – I wouldn't …"

"You wouldn't what?" Katara snapped, stepping to Jet's side. Zuko had nearly forgotten that she was there and her sudden, angry intervention startled him.

"Do you really think we'd believe that there's anything you wouldn't do to win?" she went on, "You're a terrible person. Always hunting Aang, trying to capture the world's last hope for peace. But what do you care, you're the Fire Lord's son. Spreading war and hatred is in your blood."

"Is that what she told you?" Zuko demanded, looking straight at Jet, hoping to see anything, even the tiniest bit of the Jet that had been his friend just a few hours ago.

"She didn't have to tell me anything," Jet hissed, reached into his pocket and threw the wanted poster at him. Jet's face was a mask of anger and disgust, his brow knit and his jaw set in an unforgiving line. "This told me all I need to know."
Zuko stared at his death warrant in Jet's hands, feeling as if the ground had been pulled out from under him. His vision blackened around the edges and time seemed to slow down. His lungs refused to fill with air, making him feel light-headed and dizzy. He wanted to ask 'how could you?' Wanted to tell Jet that he was still the same person, ask him if the past weeks meant nothing to him, but all he could do was stand and stare at Jet, the words refusing to come.

"Maybe I can still collect the reward," Jet added nastily and Zuko felt like he'd been punched in the gut. Nothing ever changed, nothing made a difference. Second chances were for other people. No one ever cared about what he'd actually done, all they saw and they wanted to see was the worst of him. Rage, thick and potent, enveloped him and he wanted to scream at the sky, like he'd done back on the mountain top, wanted for lightning to strike him, Jet, something. But most of all he didn't want to believe that Jet had done this.

"You handed Uncle and me in on a death warrant?" Zuko wanted to shout, to hurt Jet like he'd just hurt him, but his voice failed him. Instead, the words came out softly, in a dry whisper.

The warrant in his hand trembled, the paper starting to blacken where he held it. Jet had handed him in on his death warrant. Jet hated him, hated the Fire Nation. Hated him enough to want him dead. Had planned to hand him in for the reward. Why was he always so stupid? It never mattered what he did, how hard he tried to be a good person. It hadn't mattered back on the plains, and it apparently didn't matter now. All everyone ever saw was the son of the Fire Lord. And he didn't even have that anymore.

"All we wanted was a second chance!" Zuko shouted through his rising anger. "I thought you – this could work, that I could make a life here." It flared up inside him and he let it sweep over him, engulf, take away the hurt. At least for now. It filled him with power he'd never felt, pure raw energy that spilled over and out, white and hot and blue-tipped with rage. Flames roared up around him, melting the stones, cracking crystals, charring them with the force of his despair.

"I trusted you. I gave up my destiny for you and you turn me in for a reward?" he yelled, pushing at the flames, letting gust high, fuelled by pure inner turmoil. Turmoil worse than when he'd waited in emotional limbo after Azula had attacked Uncle. Worse then when he'd not known if Uncle would live or die in that dilapidated house in the desert.

"I loved you," Zuko whispered into the roaring flames that swept through the cave and he was vaguely aware of someone shouting his name in panic. As much as part of him wanted to, wanted to live down to their worst expectations, Zuko couldn't bring himself to do it. He closed his fist, extinguishing the flames, wondering for one second if he had hurt them, angry at himself that he still cared.

Jet and Katara were cowering away from him, at the far end of the cave, hiding behind a thick cluster of crystal and rock. The fear and loathing in their faces made Zuko crumble, like so many ashes, he sank to his knees on the floor, covering his face in his hands. "Stay away from me!"

Jet's rejection hurt, hurt worse than back on the plains. Back when he'd not known what it could be like, when the friendship had only been a day old, not– How losing was worse than never having. Now he knew what it felt like to wake up in Jet's arms, knew how good it felt to when Jet smiled at him, made him smile in return, what it was like to have friends, people who cared. Had cared. Zuko rubbed at his stinging eyes, and turned his face away from them, not wanting them to see his tears.

Let them hate him, fear him. It wasn't as if anything he did would change their minds anyway. To them all he'd ever be was the face of the enemy. If only it didn't hurt so much.

He heard them talk to each other from the other end of the cave, and Katara seemed to be furious, but
the echo of the cavern distorted her words, warped them, made them unintelligible. Zuko watched them out of the corner of his eye. She was pacing back and forth in front of Jet, gesturing at Jet in anger that Zuko guessed was directed at him.

After a while he heard someone come closer and he turned, dreading whatever it was they wanted. Katara held up a singed wanted poster. "Is this why you were fighting Azula in the village?"

"What do you care?" Zuko picked up a handful of sand and let it run through his fingers, watching it was better than looking at her.

"I didn't know about this." She thrust the crumpled paper at him. She sighed. "I didn't know about you and Jet either. Listen, Zuko I–"

"So you just wanted to hand me in to the Dai Li." He locked eyes with her, not caring why she was playing nice, why she was even over here. "That makes me feel all better."

"Why shouldn't I?" she challenged him. "You've been following us for months, always trying to capture Aang. Why would it be any different this time?"

"If that's what you think, then why did you come over here?" Zuko picked up a shard of crystal from the ground and weighed it in his hand.

"Why did you come to Ba Sing Se, if you weren't following us?" She sat down next to him, her hand coming to rest on her empty waterskin.

"Why does anyone come to Ba Sing Se?" He tossed a piece of crystal at the wall, watching it shatter and bounce off in many glowing shards. "After Uncle got hurt, we needed somewhere safe. A second chance. Worked out great, thanks to you."

"You really want me to believe that you were running a teahouse? That you wanted to stay here?" She'd folded her arms in front of her, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Zuko pointed at his expensive Earth Kingdom robes. "Does this look like a Fire Nation uniform to you?"

She cocked her head at him, clearly trying to decide if he was telling the truth or not. Zuko turned away from her. What did it matter anyway?

"Look, Aang and the others are going to come and get us out of here," she said after a while, hesitantly, as if she herself could not believe what she was offering.

"Us? Don't you mean 'you'?" Zuko said nastily. "I'm here because of you turned me in. Aren't you proud that you might succeed where Zhao failed?"

She blinked at him, looking confused, but then went on, her voice soft with what had to be fake compassion, "Maybe it doesn't have to be this way."

"Doesn't have to be what way? Are you going to tell me that I can choose my own destiny?" Zuko sneered, staring down at his hands, fisting them in his robes. "I wanted to do that, wanted to start a new life here." He turned to face her again, shouting, "And then he – you turned me in for serving tea!" That he'd even considered joining them last night tasted sour in his mouth. Why did his life turn from bad to worse with every turn? He got up, brushing the dust off his clothes. "You just say that now because you need my help. You know you don't stand a chance against Azula."
He turned to walk away from her when the wall behind Jet suddenly burst outward in a cloud of dust, and Uncle and the Avatar stepped into the cave.

"Katara?" The Avatar ran toward her, and she met him halfway, hugging him. He hugged her back, glaring at Zuko as if this all was his fault. Zuko set his jaw and glared back.

Jet blinked, looking from the Avatar to Iroh and back.

"Ah, Nephew, Jet." Uncle reached over his shoulder and lifted the handle of the bag he was carrying over his head. "Good to see you unharmed." He shoved it at a perplexed looking Jet before Zuko could stop him. "I thought you might want these."

"Uncle, no!" Zuko's eyes widened in horror at Uncle handing his weapons, unaware of how badly Jet had betrayed them. He sprinted across the cave, trying to get to Uncle first, but he wasn't fast enough.

Zuko threw himself at Uncle, trying to get him out of the way, positioning himself between Uncle and Jet.

Jet weighed his swords in his hands, giving him a wide, dangerous smile. "Too late."

"I won't let you harm Uncle." Blue-flamed daggers formed at his fists, ready to defend Iroh.

"Nephew? Jet? What is going on?" Uncle sounded confused. "Why do I need defending?"

"Uncle, what are you doing with the Avatar?" Zuko accused, raising his daggers slightly, threateningly, not letting Jet out of his eyes.

"Saving you, that's what." Aang let go of Katara and turned to face Zuko. He gestured at him and Jet. "What's that all about?"

"Liar!" The flame-daggers at Zuko's fist flashed white-hot. "Uncle, they're the ones who handed us in to Azula."

"Nephew, is that true?" Uncle sounded unsure, as if doubting Zuko's words and Zuko's anger flared. Why was everyone assuming he was the one not telling the truth, that this was his fault?

"Yes, Uncle, it's true," he ground out, spitting the words like gravel.

Zuko didn't take his eyes off Jet but he could feel Uncle turn to address the Avatar, "Why don't you go ahead and help your other friends?" Uncle put a hand on Zuko's shoulder. "Zuko, it's time we talked."

Jet stood, swords at the ready, glaring at Zuko, ready to strike the second Zuko let his guard down. He'd seen Jet like this before, the wild look in his eyes, back on the Tu Gui when Jet had wanted to burn down the city.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the Avatar bow to Uncle, something that Zuko couldn't wrap his mind around, and it seemed, Jet couldn't either.

"Katara! Aang! You can't trust them! Don't go!" Jet yelled after them. "It's a trap!"

Katara turned back to look at Jet, her mouth set in a fierce line, her brow pinched. She looked from Zuko to Jet to Uncle and back to Jet, before shaking her head in annoyance.

"Do whatever you want."
She disappeared down the tunnel without another glance.

"Nephew, I know you feel hurt, right now, but you're not the man you used to be," Uncle tried to placate him. "Since we arrived in Ba Sing Se your decisions have led you down the right path." He fixed Jet with a stare, before continuing, "Don't let anger and hurt feelings cloud your judgment. It's time for you to choose your destiny, to fight at the Avatar's side."

Zuko scowled, feeling betrayed for the second time today. How was he the one who had to make a choice? Uncle knew what Jet and the Avatar's friend had done, why there were in this mess in the first place and now he wanted Zuko to join them?

"Why Uncle?" Zuko had not thought that this day could get any worse, but listening to what Uncle wanted him to do broke something inside him. Uncle had been at his side even before his banishment, that he would turn on him like this, wanted him to join those who saw him as the enemy was unbelievable. How could he ask this?

But before Zuko could answer, tell Uncle no, green crystal sprang from the ground, sped across the floor in a glowing trail and rose to enclose Uncle and Jet.

Zuko spun around, feet sliding into fighting stance, flame daggers still at the ready. "Azula?"

Azula, flanked by two Dai Li agents, looked down at them from a small outcropping of rock and crystal. She waved at her agents and they bent her a smooth passageway down.

"I expected this from Uncle, but you, Prince Zuko?" Azula walked toward Zuko, her voice matter of fact, "Zuko, Prince Zuko, you are a lot of things, but you are not a traitor"

"Like hell he isn't!" Jet cursed and struggled against the crystal holding him. "And who exactly are you?"

"Listen to me, Zuko," Uncle implored. "She's trying to manipulate you."

And you're not? Zuko thought bitterly.

"Oh, I remember, you're that fake Kyoshi Warrior." Jet turned to Zuko. "I knew you two were working together. What's the grand plan? Conquering Ba Sing Se for the Fire Nation? I'll sure to let Smellerbee know what a great hero the Blue Spirit truly is."

"Why don't you also tell her who handed him in on a death warrant for money?" Zuko's fire flared white hot again. "I'm sure she'd like to know that part, too."

"I'm impressed, brother!" Azula looked approvingly at his blue flames, perfect twins to her fire. "It seems like you have finally grown into your power."

Zuko stared at her, feeling the maelstrom of emotions that fed his fire churn inside him, his voice hoarse when he finally spoke, "You always feel like this?"

Her eyes widened minutely, in silent shock of understanding that he knew, before her usual cold self-control took over, but in that split second Zuko felt closer to his sister than he had ever before in his life. Did she always feel like this? Zuko tried to remember when her fire had first turned blue. It hadn't always been blue, he did remember that much.

"That's your sister?" Jet's voice rose more than an octave in shock, then he shook his head, letting out a derisive little laugh. "Of course she is..."
"Do something about that." Azula gestured toward Jet and one of her Dai Li nodded and punched out a rock fist. It sped across the room and clamped around the lower half of Jet's face, gagging him.

"Don't hurt them!" Zuko's flames formed a whip, lashing out at the second earthen hand flying toward Uncle, smacking it out of the air.

Zuko's fire retreated into sharply defined daggers, and he advanced on Azula. "Let them go!"

"Really, Zuzu?" Azula nodded at another Dai Li agent, holding up her hand to Zuko. "If I wanted to hurt them, don't you think I'd have already done that?"

"What do you want?" His eyes flicked from her to Uncle and Jet and back.

"You can still redeem yourself, Zuko," She offered, clasping her hands behind her back. She circled Uncle and Jet, studying them as if they were exhibits in a zoo. She flicked her nail against the glowing crystal, making it chime. "It's not too late."

"Don't listen to her, Prince Zuko." Uncle wriggled in his green-glowing prison, pleading with Zuko. "The redemption she offers is not for you."

"What are you offering?" Zuko asked, thinking at least he could hear her out. How much worse than Uncle's idea of the joining the Avatar could it be?

"I need you, Zuko," Azula's voice was matter of fact. "I plotted every move of this day, this glorious day in Fire Nation history, and the only way to win is together. At the end of this day you will have your honor back, you will have father's love, you will have everything you want."

"Zuko, I'm begging you," Uncle spoke again. "Please don't let your anger cloud your judgement. Bigger things are at stake then your heart."

"Why don't you let him decide, Uncle?" she interrupted, turning toward her brother and for once Zuko thought she was utterly sincere. "I need you Zuko."

Zuko took one final look back at Jet, at the hatred in his eyes, the resentment, then stepped forward, to Azula's side.

To Zuko's surprise there seemed to be genuine fondness in her voice as she smiled at him when he joined her, "Welcome home, brother."

Jet struggled against the crystal trapping him, but to no avail. No matter how he twisted and turned his wrists, he could not seem to wriggle free. The sharp edges dug into his skin, cutting, chafing, but the Dai Li knew what they were doing, the crystal held fast.

Mushi had gone silent, his face twisted with intense sadness and disappointment, when all of a sudden someone addressed them from behind.

"Grand Lotus." A Dai Li agent stepped out of the shadows. He bowed to Mushi, ignoring Jet. "I take it you are unhurt?"

Quon? Jet could only see him from the corner of his eye, but he was pretty sure it was him.

"Quon." Mushi confirmed Jet's suspicion. "How good to see you. Would you mind?" Uncle nodded
Jet swore under his breath. Quon was Dai Li, of course Quon was fucking Dai Li and of course Mushi was fucking working with him. Smellerbee had been right. Quon was nearly unrecognizable without his flashy jewellery and expensive hanfu. But then, Jet fumed, that was the point of a disguise, wasn't it? He felt stupid, though. The way Mushi had gotten his good fortune handed to him, it stank of a set-up. He should have known, no one was that good. He'd seen plenty of people struggling to get by in the Lower Ring. Mushi's sudden windfall should have tipped him off in more than one way. Li really had done a great job distracting him.

"Of course, Grand Lotus." Quon stomped his foot and slid it backward, away from them, and the crystals forming Mushi's prison retreated back into the earth with his movement, leaving Jet to be still trapped in his glowing pillory.

Jet fumed inwardly. He told himself that he shouldn't have been surprised when Quon stopped there and didn't free him, but looked at Mushi for permission. Traitors, the lot of them. And what kind of bullshit title was Grand Lotus anyway? He'd never heard that one before.

Mushi rubbed his wrists before he picked up Jet's swords, throwing them across the cave in opposite directions, before he nodded at Quon. "Free him."

"Why are you helping me?" Jet snarled when the earthen gag was finally removed and he could speak again. He stood there, rubbing life back into his wrists, locking eyes with Mushi. No, the Dragon of the West. As implausible as that seemed it still was the truth and Jet could not afford to forget that behind the affable façade was the man who'd sieged Ba Sing Se for years.

Jet didn't run after his swords. There was no point. He'd never reach them in time to fight an earthbender and a firebender. This day had been more than he could handle and he wanted answers. And spirits, Mushi was going to give them to him.

"Because my nephew, as angry at you as he is now, would never forgive me if I didn't." The Dragon of the West folded his arms in his sleeves, looking deceptively grandfatherly. "Go. They need all the help they can get."

"Now, I understand we don't have much time," General Iroh nodded toward Quon and they took a few steps away from him, making it clear that their conversation was not meant for him. Not that he cared, he had other things to take care of.

Jet gathered his swords and ran towards the sound of fighting. He looked back, one last time before he entered the big cave, to see Mushi and Quon talking animatedly, and shook his head, needing to focus on the present. He'd deal with the craziness of The Dragon of the West helping the Avatar and the mess this day had become later.

The tunnel opened into a large cavern with what seemed to be the ruins of an ancient palace grounds. He ran towards the sound of fighting. A large waterfall feed what had once been ornamental pools. He could see Katara, at the far end, fighting off Dai Li agents with water-tentacles, but there was something wrong about the whole scene. There were dozens, no, hundreds of agents but they were not attacking, just standing in neat little rows, like toy soldiers, waiting, he assumed, for an order from Azula. Or, he thought bitterly, Zuko.

He more shouldered than fought his way through the rows of Dai Li agents, most of them didn't even see him coming, nor seemed to care particularly much. Li, no, Prince Zuko, he corrected himself mentally, was standing in front of the agents near a particularly big cluster of brightly glowing crystals. Jet set his jaw, pushing past the pain in his shoulder. He was going to have his revenge.
When he was but a few feet away from Li, about to raise his swords to attack, the crystal broke open and Jet realized that the glow had not been the natural glow of the crystal but Aang in Avatar state.

He rose, in a column of light, eyes and tattoos ablaze with spiritual energy. Jet stopped dead in his tracks, his arms falling to his side, his swords making a scraping sound as the edges hit the floor. He knew he needed to stay on his guard, that he was surrounded by enemies, but all he could do was look up at the ascending form in awe.

So this was what the Avatar was about? Not just some kid with a title. He'd never known. No, that was wrong. He'd known. Everyone knew about the Avatar and the balance of the elements. He had known, but he hadn't believed. All this time he'd thought that the Avatar was just that, a funny little kid with a title too big for his skinny shoulders, but now, faced with the divine sphere of pure power right in front of him, he realized how wrong he'd been. He'd never been much of a spiritual person, the only memory he had of going to a temple was holding onto his mother's hand while his father made offerings to the spirits. It must have been during one festival or another. The memory was blurred with age, though, having taken on the dream-like quality of anything that had happened before the Fire Nation had destroyed his life.

But right now he felt transported back in time to that one happy moment, felt a tiny fraction of what it must be like to be one with the universe. The small hairs at the back of his neck crackled with static energy as the room filled with the cosmic power the Avatar was gathering and Jet couldn't take his eyes off him. He finally understood what they were fighting for, what Katara had meant when she'd said 'Aang can save the world'.

And then the lightning struck. Sickly blue, he could see it crackle across the room, a split second before it hit the Avatar with a deafening blow and the magic moment turned into a nightmare of afterimages. The Avatar was falling and he heard someone screaming. It took Jet a moment to even comprehend that such a thing was possible, that the Avatar could be defeated so easily. But there she stood; outstretched fingers still smoking, expression smug and superior, not a hair out of place, as if this had not cost her more effort than swatting a fly.

And the Avatar was still falling.

Jet took a step forward, started running, wondering if he could make it in time, when he was swept up in a tidal wave from behind, pushed forward in the torrent of Katara's stream as she sped past, over him, drowning everyone in her way to catch her falling friend.

Jet was swept alongside her, coming to a gasping, tumbling stop a few feet from where she was cradling the lifeless form of the Avatar.

Was this it? He looked at her and then back at their enemies. How could it end like this? And then there was L– Zuko. Prince Zuko was getting to his feet right in front of him, dripping wet and steaming. Blue fire sprang from his hands and Jet positioned himself between him and the Avatar.

Jet squared his shoulders, the metal blades of his shuang gou sliding against each other in a high whining sound as he raised his swords over his head, ready to strike. Let's finish this, you fucking bastard, he thought, let's finish this once and for all.

But before he could strike, before he could at least try to repay that Fire Nation bastard for all he'd done, flames cut him off from the side, made him stumble backwards, towards Katara and the lifeless form of the Avatar.

"Prince Zuko!" Mushi roared from above, jumping down from a small overhang with more speed and grace then Jet would have thought the old dude capable off, and landed between him and Zuko.
"I know you feel betrayed, Nephew," he yelled again, shooting flames in their directions, shielding Katara, the Avatar and Jet from the Zuko's and Azula's return fire. "But I cannot let you do this."

"You have to get out of here," he urged Katara. "I'll hold them off as long as I can."

Katara gathered the waterfall around her, twirling it, twisting it into a churning spiral at her command. It gathered around her, enveloped her and the Avatar and Jet's eyes went wide. She didn't even seem aware that he was there.

Mushi's breath came in panting, laboured gasps and Jet wondered just how much longer he'd be able to fend of two younger, stronger firebenders. And the Dai Li seemed to be closing in, too. Jet cursed under his breath. He had to get out of there, and Katara was his only chance.

"Hey!" he yelled to get Katara's attention, stepping toward her, into the twisting, churning torrent she'd created.

Katara's head snapped in his direction. She blinked, for the first time since she'd caught the Avatar, acknowledging her surroundings.

"This is all your fault," she whispered, her words bitter, her eyes hard.

"So, you're leaving me behind, again?" He matched her glare. Guilt was always a good motivator.

"Just hold onto me," she ordered as the water engulfed him for the second time today.

He waded toward her, searching for a hold and managed to barely grasp her ankle before the water started to rise at her command, pushing him upward, covering his face, stealing his breath. He had to force himself not to let go, to hold his breath and hope they'd be out of there before he ran out of air.

When they finally did reach the surface it was in one of the ornamental fish ponds behind the palace. They had to drag the Avatar to the shore through knee-deep water and tangled water-lilies.

Night was falling when they passed Ba Sing Se's Outer Wall on the back of the Avatar's flying Bison. The Avatar lay unconscious and Katara was fussing over him in a desperate, shaken manner that made Jet turn away. Katara had been right, it was his fault. He went over the long list of should-have, could-have again and again, but they boiled all down to one thing: He should have been the one to deal with Zuko. Should never have gotten Katara or the Avatar involved. And now he couldn't bear to even look at her. The worry on her face too stark a reminder of how catastrophically wrong this day had gone. But even with his back to her, he could see the blue shadows her healing magic cast. Jet covered his face in his hands, his palms pressing down onto his eyes, wishing the afterimages would just stop. But all he could see, over and over again, was the lightning striking and the Avatar falling.

And then the Avatar let out a sigh and a gasp, breaking the eerie silence and Jet briefly closed his eyes, saying his thanks to whatever spirits were listening, that, at least, he would live.

It was a little surreal to be riding on a sky-bison next to the Earth King. He briefly wondered if he should kowtow or something, but decided against it. No one else was and if he was honest, the frightened, pathetic man next to him was nothing like what he'd imagined the Earth King would be
like. Not that he'd ever really thought about what his King would be like, but in all honesty, this was not even close to what he'd have said if asked to make a guess. Shouldn't the Earth King be in control of the situation, take charge? And not be a fussing over his pet bear, and whining about the height and the cold wind, like a spoilt child. If this was what their leaders were like, no wonder the Fire Nation had won. He thought about Li and how effortlessly he had taken charge, how used to command he'd been, and had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep his emotion from spilling over. That's what a leader should be like, someone people followed without even thinking about why, not that sorry excuse of a king huddling next to him. This was why, Jet gave the Earth King a disgusted look, they had lost, never had a chance from the get go. And there was no denying it, the Fire Nation had won. Utterly, completely and irrevocably.

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Zuko straightened his back, arms linked behind his back. He was standing at attention on top of the Middle Ring under a canopy, next to Azula. Mai, Ty Lee and Azula's Dai Li had formed a half-circle behind them.

The Lower Ring stretched below them, the grey rooftops shimmering with heat in the mid-day sun. He could hear the hawkers advertise their wares and the drovers shouting, and cursing, but Zuko kept his eyes fixed onto the horizon. The clear blue sky allowed him see all the way to the Outer Wall, past the Agrarian Ring and beyond, where the Fire Nation army waited for the agreed upon signal.

Below, just a few feet away, lay the familiar streets, unsuspecting of what was but minutes away. There were the rooftops he'd climbed and the places he and –

Zuko's eyes were starting to water with the intense brightness of day, and it would be easy to just lower them slightly, but he refused to look away. The pain was too new, too deep, and it took all of his self-control to just stand here and act like nothing was wrong. Not too long ago he'd lived down there, been part of it. He'd known these people, lived among them – Zuko set his jaw – and then they had rejected him, betrayed him. He owed them nothing.

He was faintly aware of Azula pontificating, declaring this the greatest day in Fire Nation history. She had made it clear to a terrified general that there was to be no looting, no burning, or otherwise damaging the city. That this was her city and her victory and her wrath would fall onto anyone spoiling her moment. Zuko'd almost felt sorry for the man kowtowing in front of her as she lectured him on how she wanted her Pearl of the Earth Kingdom to set a shining example of her victory. She hadn't failed to point out, more than once, that she had succeeded with cunning where Uncle and dozens of generals and a hundred years of force, had failed. Part of Zuko was grateful for it, not sure if he could handle seeing the city burn, no matter how much Jet had hurt him.

Mai cleared her throat, gesturing with her chin towards an impatient Azula.

Zuko hastily took his place next to his sister and together they slid into a bending stance, raised their arms in unison and punched a plume of bright blue fire into Ba Sing Se's sky, symbolizing their victory.

Something small fell out of his pocket and rolled to a halt a few feet from him in front of one of the Dai Li agents. The man picked it up and handed it back to him, bowing respectfully as he did so.

It was the small brass key Smellerbee had given him. Zuko's fingers closed around the unbidden reminder of what had, a few days ago, been a gesture of friendship – one now turned sour. Part of him wanted to turn back time and just be Li and have friends and lay on that kang with Jet, and have
who he really was not matter. But it did matter, he thought bitterly, had mattered more to them than friendship or love.

His first instinct had been to throw the key out, toss it back into the Lower Ring, a useless reminder of the past, through it away like Jet had done to him. He pocketed it instead.

The earth rumbled faintly as Ba Sing Se's wall fell. Too faintly Zuko thought. He felt like it should have been grander, bigger, should somehow reflect the immensity of what was happening to him, the city, the world in general. The Avatar was dead, the Fire Nation had won. But nothing seemed to measure up to scale. The noise, where one would expect roaring thunder, was but a faint hum in the background, barely audible above the everyday hustle and bustle of the Lower Ring. Zuko trained his eyes on the horizon again, watching the dust roll in like a sandstorm on the plains.

The Great Walls of Ba Sing Se had fallen.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: All/any dialog you recognize was borrowed from the "Crossroads of Destiny".

And before I get hunted down and burned at the stake for not getting them back together: There will be a sequel called "All Roads Lead to Caldera".

A special thanks goes to Cadesama. I could not have done this without you!

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