Substitute Arc I: Delicate

by **DracoMaleficium**

**Summary**

*It's not that we're scared*

It's just that it's delicate

**Notes**

This is basically what happens when I try to be original and listen to "Cabin Pressure" late at night. I don't know why I thought writing a modern AU Jeeko would be a good idea, but once the concept sneaked its way into my head, it wouldn't let go and before I knew it, I had more pages of fic than I'd written the whole academic year. I suppose the challenges that come with taking the boys out of their canon circumstances and throwing them into a completely different environment were just too tempting not to tackle.

Oh, and I know that I only listed three characters in the tags, but in reality there's A SHITLOAD of them in this fic as supporting cast. I basically tried to squeeze every minor character in here, seeing as it's probably the only modern AU I'll ever write for A:TLA, so why not have some fun with that. Somehow, characters from "Korra" ended up appearing, too. Yeah, I don't know either. *shrug*

Things you need to watch out for: **student/teacher relationships, VERY objectionable professionalism, mentions of violence and abuse, language, sexual and adult themes.** Also the authoress writing about things she knows next to nothing about, like the Navy or martial arts - apologies in advance if I screw things up due to poor research. And for the
occassional wild British English. *I can’t help it okay.*
It may perhaps be considered ironic that when Jee saw Zuko Xi for the first time, it happened in a teashop.

Jee was not a tea man by any definition. If he were to align himself with any beverage in such a way, he would have chosen something less leafy and more… vegetable-or-fruit-based. Preferably served in a bottle or a glass rather than a teacup and containing a reasonable dosage of alcohol, though as to the precise nature of the vegetable-or-fruit-drink in question and the actual quantity of alcohol in it, he wasn't picky.

As if to make the meeting even more unlikely, the day of this momentous occasion was in the middle of an exceptionally hot August, with the sun reigning supreme in the sky and gracing the Earth with its mercilessly intensive gaze. All summer long it had been persisting in this way, chasing children into the air-conditioned sanctuary of their basements and grown men into the even more pleasant sanctuary of pubs.

The aura was not in the least favorable to frequenting bloody teashops, thank you very much.

Looking back, Jee really did believe it was ironic that one of the most important things to happen in his life began in probably the least likely place he would go to, second only to the old town museum, which contained mostly boring rocks but failed to contain air-conditioning.

If Jee believed in such a thing as fate – though he did believe that someone up there was actively trying to screw him over, which to some people is pretty much the same thing – he could have said that it guided his footsteps that day.

Because it was precisely in a teashop that Jee had found himself in on that particular afternoon, his best white shirt already drenched uncomfortably in sweat, the trousers of his lightest suit clinging to his sweaty legs. Accompanying him was Headmaster Pakku, who was, in fact, the one to have guided his footsteps here instead of Fate and who must have been an emissary from some very deep level of hell in disguise, since any other man would not have chosen to have hot tea in this damn weather.

Jee only hoped they served iced tea in this place.

"Ah," Pakku stopped in the doorway and closed his eyes. "Smell it, Lieutenant. The Jasmine Dragon has been a pride of our Asian district for years now. No one makes tea like Iroh. You must try it."

"I'll make it my top priority, sir," mumbled Jee distractedly; he did not add "Right after finding a table near a going fan," which was in fact the priority occupying his mind at the moment as he discreetly scanned the mercifully air-conditioned, ostentatiously Chinese interior.

This one time, luck seemed to be on his side; Headmaster Pakku was obviously entertaining similar thoughts and steered Jee in the direction of just such table, breaking teashop protocol and not waiting for a waiter to accompany them. The table-near-a-fan hunt successfully completed, Jee stretched his long legs discreetly under the table and squirmed in a way he hoped was unnoticeable, trying to find some comfort in his sweat-soaked attire. The older man paid him no heed, too busy craning his neck in search of something or someone.

"Sir?" Jee cleared his throat as politely as he could.

"Oh, no, it's nothing, I was just trying to find that old bugger Iroh… He's probably at the back,
Jee could not help but notice the way Pakku's already grumpy voice dropped even lower and quieter at this last sentence. And just as the words left his mouth, a shadow fell over their table and a voice said:

"Good morning, Headmaster."

Jee looked up.

Some foolish people would say that this was when Destiny happened. Jee though, whenever he thought back to that very first meeting, preferred to think this was when God (or whatever fucker there was up there) decided to screw him double-over. How else could one describe putting this on his path – this which would be the start of a whole other this; which was one of those this-es that left a man scarred and quivering and hugging an empty bottle of booze; which was, in a word, a catastrophe he really should have been smart enough to avoid?

There should have been some warning at least, as Jee mused often in hindsight, especially in those grey hours of three o'clock in the morning in an empty apartment smelling of imminent hangover. Something. A tingling, a creepy sensation of foreboding dread, Spider Senses, a random thunder – anything. He wasn't picky about his omens. And he didn't even believe in omens.

But if anyone deserved a random thunder, it was definitely Zuko. That boy deserved a fucking overture.

But there was no overture, no random thunder, no tingling Spider-Senses and certainly no other indications of imminent Doom other than the stifling, debilitating heat and the impression Zuko himself had made when Jee first set eyes on him.

And, well, as far as first impressions go, this one was pretty strong.

In the end, as he remembered with faint embarrassment, Jee did not manage to stop himself from gaping just a little. It wasn't as if he could help it. The young, black-haired waiter's appearance would catch anyone unawares. Especially with that scowl lurking very visibly on the surface, ready to break out in full at the slightest provocation.

Well. Um.

"Is your uncle at the back?" asked Pakku rather brusquely, sitting back and crossing his arms, not even attempting to smile at the young man.

The young man with the s – the scowl. Yes. A scowl. And not the scar. Not at all with a big, angry red burn scar stretching around his left eye all the way to his ear and occupying nearly half his face.

No. Not at all.

Oh God.

As soon as he realized he was staring, Jee abruptly tore his gaze away from the scar, but the image stayed with him even as he fixed his gaze determinedly on the table.

"Yeah," murmured the boy, handing the two men the teashop cards adorned with elaborate paintbrush paintings of dragons and cherry blossoms. "Do you want me to tell him you're here?"

He had a strange sort of voice – raspy, as if continuously hoarse. But not only that. The words left
his mouth in a comprehensible sentence all right, but they didn't seem quite natural, not entirely linked. Clipped, rather, forced, even gritted out. The very definition of unfriendly if anyone asked Jee, and not at all like a waiter was supposed to speak.

Even though his uncle owned this fragrant joint, if Jee read the implications correctly. Interesting.

"No, thank you, Zuko. I won't bother him while he's back there in his emporium. We'll both have the house special. What is it today?" asked the headmaster – and, as the boy's attention was momentarily focused on him, Jee risked a surreptitious glance.

Unruly black hair falling shaggily all over his face, probably so as to neutralize the scar somewhat. Pale. Tallish. Broad shoulders and chest. Asian features, quite handsome on the unscarred side. Wearing what seemed to be the teashop equivalent of a uniform – red and black traditional Asian robes with golden trimmings – though this one was probably the summer edition, with short sleeves, loose breeches and sandals. It looked so much more comfortable than what Jee was forced to wear and the Lieutenant felt a pang of envy.

Further furtive examination provided a more detailed analysis: back held rigidly straight. Entire posture stiff. Face muscles taut. An angry scowl lingering somewhere in there, as if barely contained and ready to be unleashed. Fingers clutching the order notebook as if holding on for dear life. The boy looked positively ready to spring, but whether at or away from someone, that much was unclear; and glancing at him, Jee realized with a sudden hollow feeling in his stomach that he had seen body language like that before.

In the Navy.

Too intent on his surreptitious staring, the Lieutenant had, rather belatedly, realized that the sudden lull in conversation around him was a little suspicious. Turning his gaze on Pakku, he saw both the headmaster and the teen waiter looking at him expectantly, the former with a mild frown, the latter with something that might have been akin to curiosity had it not been for the scowl, which had by then floated very close to the surface.

"Excuse me," muttered Jee as politely as possible, clearing his throat, "I must have blacked out a little there. It's the heat."

Pakku's frown deepened a fraction as he held Jee's apologetic gaze, but then the older man shrugged and let it drop. "I was just saying, Lieutenant," he started, folding his hands on the table, "that Zuko here is probably going to be among your pupils this semester. He is about to begin his senior year in our high school. As I was saying, Zuko, this is Lieutenant Jee, our new gym teacher who will be filling in for Mr. Bracknell."

Oh. A student. Of course, this made perfect sense.

Having now obtained an official blessing to look the boy openly in the eye – and Jee was very careful not to look in the right eye only – the old sailor was struck by how… well, striking Zuko's gaze was. Not only was the color rather extraordinary – very bright, nearly golden, who on earth really had eyes golden like that? – but the intensity boiling there was positively scorching. And the kid wasn't even scowling anymore. Frowning, maybe, his mouth in a tight line, but without the hostility that Jee was half-expecting to see there, judging by the aggressive body language. No, the kid was just… assessing him, gauging him out, perhaps. Like any kid would with a new teacher. Seemingly nothing out of the ordinary.

But Jee had been the object of many such gazes in the past. He knew how to differentiate between them. And now that he had a little time to study this boy, he did fancy he saw something else in those
eyes as well – something fleeting, flashing there for just an instant, like a spark. Genuine interest.

"Good to meet you, Zuko," he said, holding this arresting gaze with a smile that made its way to his face entirely unbidden. "Thinking of taking the gym this semester?"

"Yeah," admitted the kid with a slight nod. And did not elaborate.

"I hear Zuko is rather skilled in martial arts," intervened the headmaster before the halt in conversation turned into awkwardness. "That seems to be your field of expertise, isn't it, Lieutenant?"

"It is," agreed Jee, still holding eye-contact with Zuko; neither he nor the boy seemed, for some inexplicable reason, able to look away. "Which style?"

"Kung fu, Northern Shaolin," answered the boy, at once this time and with an unexpected flash of eagerness. Jee permitted himself to smile a little wider.

"Me too. I'm expecting to see you in my class then."

"Are you really a soldier?" blurted out Zuko abruptly, apparently completely oblivious to how rude it sounded; he just stood there, ignoring Pakku's severely disapproving frown, clutching his notebook and looking expectantly at Jee, the left side of his face fixed into a permanent glare, the right one displaying growing curiosity – at least, as far as Jee could tell.

Honestly, one could get cross-eyed trying to decipher that face, grotesquely lopsided as it was. With the left eye squinted like that. That burn looked really bad. The poor sod.

"The Navy," Jee allowed for the question without flinching. "Fifteen years of service."

To the boy's credit, he didn't ask "Then what the hell are you doing here teaching gym?", but from the skeptical frown shadowing his face and the clearly disdainful look he cast around the place, it was clear that this was exactly what he had on the tip of his tongue.

"I have to go back to work now," announced Zuko instead after this short pause, turning to Pakku. "Double special blend, then. Right."

And, with a short, tight nod first to the headmaster and then with an even smaller one to Jee, the boy was gone. Jee found himself looking after his retreating back, absently stroking his right sideburn.

Well. That was definitely… curious.

It was only when Zuko silently hovered back to their table and put two steaming cups of tea before them that Jee realized what Pakku had ordered, and that no blessedly cold iced-tea was in store for him.

Keeping up his polite façade after that proved rather challenging indeed, but Jee managed somehow. It was, after all, a business meeting.

The interview was brief and to the point – as everything about the headmaster was. Just a formality, really, with the necessary exchange of remaining vital documents and useful tips as to the inner workings of the school, complete with quite a lot of dry sarcasm. Jee was rather pleasantly impressed. He found himself growing to appreciate Pakku's brisk and cynical manner – the latter especially being a quality which Jee himself did not lack. He could tell working with the man was going to be if not easy, then at least bearable. And the man did not ask too many probing questions, which was another huge point in his favor.
Of course, having a bearable boss was, on the whole, only a small blessing. But given everything that'd happened, Jee was ready to embrace even the tiniest blessings any given higher power was ready to throw his way.

He was that desperate.

"I will be quite frank with you, Lieutenant," Pakku leaned back in his chair, looking at Jee from above wiry arms crossed over his chest. "You will probably not enjoy yourself. No one is going to pretend otherwise. This is not a wealthy area. Though I do pride myself on being a resourceful man and we do manage to pull through passably each year, you will not find any glamour or happy pink feelings of self-fulfillment working here. I daresay it shall be quite the contrary. Now, though I must admit I am rather curious, I did not inquire as to the reasons that have driven you here," the headmaster's dark forehead creased as the intensity of his gaze was turned up a notch, "nor am I going to. It is entirely your own business, as long as it was nothing illegal. I just want it to be clear that it's not going to be anything like the Navy. If anything, it might be harder."

Jee smirked and inclined his head to the headmaster, taking one final sip of the special house blend – which, admittedly, was oddly delicious despite the scorching heat and Jee's habitual dislike of tea.

"And I am not expecting any glamour or happy pink feelings," he replied. "Which makes it a perfect arrangement."

"Indeed," Pakku permitted himself a smirk in response. "If you have no further questions for the time being, I believe it is time we request our bill. I have a couple of other staff appointments to get through today."

"Of course, sir."

Zuko appeared by their table not long after – a silent specter, his eyes firmly fixed on the china he was handling rather than on the customers, he nodded jerkily when Pakku asked for the bill and trod away just as silently as he came, posture stiff and rigid. Once again Jee found himself gazing after him.

"Curious boy, isn't he?" The headmaster was smirking openly now, watching Jee watching Zuko as the boy disappeared in the kitchen. Jee's head snapped back to him immediately.

"Oh, come now, Lieutenant," huffed the older man. "Nothing to get flustered about. That's how everyone reacts to him. He's been living here with Iroh for three years now and the community still hasn't gotten used to him. And vice-versa, I suppose."

"He lives with his uncle?" asked Jee, deciding he could risk questions now that the headmaster opened the subject himself. No harm in a little gossip, after all, was there?

"Yes. Three years now, like I said. Though from the way the boy carries himself, all up at arms against everyone, one could suppose he moved here only yesterday."

"Difficult one, is he?"

"Well," Pakku leaned forward in his chair again and rested his chin on interlaced fingers, "I wouldn't say difficult, exactly. He has not caused any trouble beyond the ordinary, at least in the open. There was some… trouble right after he first arrived, but no bullying or vandalism, nothing of the sort. He does make it exceptionally hard to get through to him, though. Stubborn. Headstrong. Brash. Shouty. With personal boundaries stretching for about a mile. You'll probably see for yourself, Lieutenant. Martial arts is the only thing he's shown any remote interest in so far."
"Aren't I a lucky man, then," muttered Jee, scratching his cheek absently. And then, since his idle curiosity was being indulged anyway, he probed a little further. "And the scar, sir? How did that happen?"

"No idea," answered Pakku, his tone suddenly sharp, any shadows of the previous dry humor gone from his face. "His uncle never told me and I did not see it fit to ask. It has no impact on the boy's performance at school, so if he chooses to keep it to himself, so be it. The same thing goes for why he ended up here, away from his parents. Some educators find it prudent to know every little thing about their students, but I firmly believe that as long as there are no causes for alarm, we have no reasons to pry into their private affairs."

Jee hung his head, recognizing a scolding when he was being given one. "Apologies, sir. I will keep that in mind."

"Good. There are many rumors flying around about Zuko. If I were you, I wouldn't pay them any heed. But speaking of the devil…"

Jee was very careful not to look at the young man too intensively as he hovered by their table to leave the bill. But before the boy left, the Lieutenant found himself calling after him:

"See you in class, then!"

Zuko paused in his step then and slowly turned to look at Jee over his shoulder. Their eyes met and he nodded once, his features softening momentarily into an expression which could almost be mistaken for polite – and then he was off, striding quickly to another table to take the order.

Jee loitered a little, falling behind Pakku as the headmaster left, and then, on a sudden impulse, he left a big tip.

He didn't think of Zuko as a sexual creature then. No. The interest in the boy he found himself developing had been idle, a fleeting fascination, merely something curious to relieve the boredom of solitude, to focus his attention on for a few minutes so that he didn't have the think of anything else. That was all there was to it during that first meeting, with perhaps a tiny spark of potential that went largely unnoticed. Jee entertained idle speculations regarding Zuko for perhaps an hour after he returned to his cramped, messy, newly-rented apartment, and then he got himself busy with the final stage of unpacking and tidying up, doing as much as he could be bothered to do. No thoughts about the boy visited him all through the evening when he watched some television and went for a late walk to further explore his new, unimpressive neighborhood.

And if a fleeting image of an angry burn scar did come to haunt him again that night, it was just before he fell asleep, during this hazy stage between dream and reality when one is drifting in a no-man's-land, ready to be pulled one way or the other.

And Jee had no reason to suspect that, back in his own room up above the teashop, Zuko was thinking of him.
Jee was being honest when he told Headmaster Pakku he was not expecting any glamour. At 38, he suspected his glamour days were already behind him. Which is perhaps a sad conclusion to come to, but Jee was nothing if not a realist and the most recent events in his life did nothing to make him think otherwise. No. It was not glamour nor glory nor glitter he wanted now, nor anything else that started with "g" – what he wanted now was, mostly, to be left alone and perhaps to prove himself useful in some small way that would not involve any further disgrace or humiliation. Because God knew he had had his fair share of that.

Which is why he didn't pause or even falter in his stride as he entered the sports wing of Summerfield's Flowing Creek High School. It was, just as Pakku had warned him, definitely lacking in glamour. In fact, it looked pretty much like every default high school corridor, with sterile, polished floors, walls painted in neutrally cheerful colors and a row of trophies, doubtlessly meant to inspire school pride, locked behind a glass screaming success at every unfortunate passer-by.

His new job. Better get used to it.

"This is the swimming pool," announced Miss Fletcher, deputy headmistress, waving in the direction of an open door and demonstrating her ability to state the obvious. "Over here are the pool locker rooms. The gym proper is through here. The locker rooms of the football team are directly connected to the stadium. Right through here."

Jee followed the short, stout blond lady obediently, nodding along and making all the proper appreciative noises whenever necessary. It was a pretty standard layout, really, nothing out of the ordinary. Easy to find one's way about. Flowing Creek High School was not the biggest as far as high schools went and nowhere near as daunting as some of the schools Jee'd seen in his life, for all its aspiration to appear as one. Of course, Summerfield itself was not as affluent as to sustain exceptionally large schools, so Flowing Creek, probably best described as "average," fitted perfectly into the landscape, which, in Jee's humble opinion, should be photographed and put into a dictionary as the perfect definition of "average."

The last on the list, after an exhaustive tour of all the sports facilities Flowing Creek had to offer, was his office. Or, rather, the office he shared with another gym teacher named Piandao, if the nameplate on the other desk was anything to go by. Another Asian, then. This community sure seemed strong around here…

But perhaps he should not be surprised. The town's Asian district was uncommonly large – and by being so, it was probably the only thing that put Summerfield slightly above the "average" it had slumped to.

"Go on and make yourself comfortable," invited him Miss Fletcher, who was definitely not Asian. "This part of the room is all yours. You'll meet Mr. Piandao once the semester starts. He's a lovely man. I'm sure you'll get along like a house on fire."

"Thank you." Jee sat himself experimentally behind the desk and tried to adjust the revolving chair so that his knees wouldn't bump the surface every time he shifted position.

"Do you have any more questions?"
"None for the moment, no. You explained everything very well."

"I'm glad." Was it him, or did Miss Fletcher actually blush? "I'll be in my office if you need anything, Lieutenant."

After which off she trotted, her high heels clicking rhythmically and probably vibrating in echoes throughout the entire building, deserted for now as it was.

Jee sighed and took a look around.

Right. Right…

And then, without any pointless deliberation – because what good it would do him now that he was here, no good at all, might as well get on with things and deal with it head-on – he started making the little space his own.

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He visited the school several more times before the semester started, both to finish arranging his stuff in the shared office and to familiarize himself with his new haven, its layout as well as its staff. In next to no time he had learned to recognize the faces of most of the teachers, the cleaning personnel and the administrators who happened to be in the building at the same time as he. Taking care to smile, stop by, introduce himself and chat a little, he was on friendly terms with the majority of them by his fourth visit. That was just how he rolled. Practical. No use being standoffish and even more of an alien than he already was. Jee believed in making the most out of every situation, no matter how miserable, and he could certainly use a friendly face or two. It might just relieve the boredom. Besides, he genuinely liked taking an interest in people and could not function very well without someone to joke and to banter with or – when the mood took him – to whine at. That was one of his more valuable skills back in the Navy, where he was directly responsible for dealing with recruits-freshly-turned-sailors and to serve as link between them and the higher officers.

Which worked very well up to a certain point. But there really was no use dwelling on it. What's done is done and all that…

So he strode through corridors, walking himself gradually into this world and taking mental notes of who was a good chat and whom better to steer away from, finding shortcuts, possible sanctuaries, marking where it was better never to venture again, trying to learn as many names and life stories as he could, and generally made himself as much a part of this new microcosm as possible. On the whole, the Flowing Creek veterans were friendly and curious, treating him as a sort of exotic, honorary mascot – "Oh look, Hester, we got ourselves a real soldier!" "Are you going to introduce morning drills, Lieutenant?" "Such a shame you can't wear your uniform to work, that'd impress the little demons for sure…" – and Jee smiled and went along with it, indulging in the harmless flirting or taking up the jokes, earning himself more points. Of course there were exceptions, people looking down on him, intimidated by him or just plain weirdoes, ever present in any academic institution, but those were easy enough to deal with or to simply avoid.

By the time the semester started and the corridors were no longer safe to stroll through on account of being thronged with noisy, spotty teenagers, he was as much a "one of us" and "a decent chap" as he would ever be.
He did manage to meet all of his fellow physical education colleagues before the first bell of the year split their ears. Piandao did prove himself a decent enough guy, sharp and pleasant if a tad too sophisticated for Jee's liking – they would probably get along pretty well and not murder each other after spending a lot of time together sharing one tight space. There was one other Asian coach, a pretty woman called Ming somewhere in her early thirties and endowed with the sort of sharp, sarcastic sense of humor that Jee very much enjoyed. Oddly enough, one of her jobs was coaching the cheerleaders – though as the Lieutenant grew to know her better, he started to think that perhaps it was a conscious choice and that maybe Ming had a masochistic streak to her and simply enjoyed having free food for her inner cynic served her on daily basis. Then there were Mike and Rob, the football and basketball coaches, both big, burly black men, the former having an air of a human-sized teddy bear until he got to the field, the latter wirier, skinnier and drier in general, a man of few words if Jee ever saw one. Martha, a muscular woman with visible traces of Mexican blood, somewhere in her forties and looking like everyone's favorite aunt in a tracksuit, instantly invited him over for dinner to meet her family, whereas Emily, fresh out of college and still a little unsure of her skills as an educator, shied away from Jee's attempts to strike a conversation, though she did smile and wished him a good year. And Judy with the slight squint, and Chris who spoke as loudly as most people shouted, and John, and Alice…

It was important to know people. To not be a stranger. To root himself and carve a nice little niche he could fit in. Even if he had to do it over and over again.

And while he worked on that, September loomed over his head, doing nothing to relieve the August heat – if anything, it strengthened it with the spirit of frantic preparations for what was to come. It was a busy period and Jee was glad for it. The schedules were prepared and distributed, the tasks assigned, the meetings held. The school was made ready for a fresh flood of teenage shenanigans.

And Jee, as he parked his old green Ford on his newly-given spot by the gym entrance on the first official day of classes, felt prepared to deal with whatever life threw at him this time.

After all, it wasn't the first school he would be working at, not the first organization in which he was a new face. It would be fine. As long as he wouldn't repeat past mistakes, it would be fine.

He would make it fine.

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He saw Zuko The Teashop Waiter in fifth period – the martial arts class for boys, obviously – until which point his day had been going as well as could be expected given the circumstances.

After three previous periods, during which he was forced to endure witless freshmen stumbling through an attempt to play volleyball, shout at languid juniors to make them start running and fight off flirty senior girls in their own martial arts class, he could bet he had already gotten himself a nasty nickname or five. None of the students apparently expected having a real class on the first day of school – well, tough luck. They just had to grit their teeth and endure, much like Jee himself had done. It was a good way of drawing himself a mental chart for each class and of identifying the types he had to deal with; those who took his classes for credits only and were terrified to death of everything carrying the faintest whiff of physical exertion were easy enough to pick out. Period one and two were full of those and Jee made a note not to exhort them too brutally – he was not a sadist, after all. Period three, though, not so much, as it was an elective course and apparently filled with senior girls willing to be entertained taught self-defense by a former Navy officer.
To be perfectly honest, Jee wasn’t sure which was worse, though the attention of all those attractive young ladies was rather flattering. And there were at least two or three girls who did show some promise and previous experience, plus they did not bat their eyelashes or giggle at him, so it was not a totally lost cause.

The vacant fourth period was a true relief after the morning ordeal and Jee welcomed it with open arms – though actually he would have welcomed it a lot more had he shared it with Piandao or Ming. Alas, he would have to make do without his colleagues – they both had classes then and he would just have to find away to entertain himself on his own for an hour.

If all his classes were to look like today, he might just use it to sleep.

However, he considered it pretty good going if he only felt the urge to throttle five students per class and did not come close to losing his cool even once, which was a new opening-day record for him. The rank of lieutenant probably helped. News travelled fast, especially in a town like Summerfield with precious little apart from rumors to keep the locals entertained, and most of the time Jee found that the students approached him with varying degrees of respect, the timidly fearful type being predominant. The kids honestly did not know what to expect from him and some of them, he noted, were positively terrified, probably imagining he would introduce army drills and iron discipline complete with saluting. Jee was half-tempted to really bring those in, just to live up to those expectations. Naturally, there were some more cheeky ones who seemed bent on testing him, seeing how much they could get away with, and those were dealt with in a very swift, military manner indeed – Jee hoped they would learn their lesson, but if they didn't, he saw no harm in making them do push-ups and shouting at them to hurry up for the entire hour until the end of term. It was really rather amusing.

With so many distractions around, it was no wonder that he had forgotten all about the moody waiter from the Jasmine Dragon, but when he did spot Zuko – hair just as shaggy as back in the teashop, wearing a loose, sleeveless red shirt and black sweatpants reaching to just below his knees – entering the classroom amidst other boys more or less his age, but keeping a visible distance from them and not joining any bawdy conversations, Jee found himself staring.

Pakku's words from that day floated, unbidden, to the front of his mind as he watched Zuko walk up to a wall and start stretching, resolutely ignoring his chattering classmates. Difficult to get through to him. Personal boundaries stretching for about a mile. Stubborn. Brash. Shouty.

Well. Jee had yet to see Zuko demonstrate the last three qualities, but the first two seemed definitely accurate. What's more, it looked like everyone here was used to this standoffish behavior – none of the boys walked up to Zuko to strike a conversation with him. Quite the opposite, they seemed to keep a conscious distance and did not even glance in his direction.

They did, however, glance at Jee, and more and more openly at that. Two minutes until the start of class. Right then. Time to get the fourth show of the day going.

He strode up to the middle of the dojo – or a wannabe one at least, with proper mats covering the floor, and it really said quite a lot about the area and headmaster Pakku that he chose to invest in having one – then crossed his arms over his chest, schooled his features into the bored, slightly disapproving frown he had perfected from his days in the Navy and waited for all of the boys to acknowledge his existence.

It didn't take long. The chattering gradually quieted and turned into murmurs, to settle at expectant silence as almost two dozen pairs of eyes were fixed on him. As he waited, Jee allowed himself a glance to the right and, very briefly, locked his gaze with Zuko's. The boy was staring at him very intently, his defiant posture mirroring Jee's, his eyebrows – or the one eyebrow he had left –
furrowed into a mild frown that Jee was beginning to suspect was Zuko's default expression. He did not nod, smile or show any other indication that they had met before – and probably for the best, as Jee thought in retrospect. He just stood there, waited and… watched.

Which stirred a rather alarming urge in Jee to give him something to watch. He stifled this traitorous little voice as soon as it dared hiss into his ear, fought the urge to stand up even straighter and stick his chest out, cursed his life and preferences twice over and abruptly cleared his throat, perhaps louder than he had to.

Some of the boys jumped a little at the sound and actually looked like they were about to salute. The majority, though, were eyeing him warily, with different expressions ranging from ostentatiously disinterested to flushed-cheeks-excited.

Jee took all of them in in one, broad sweep of his eyes and started the show.

"I bet you thought I was going to shout Attention," he said, his best Officer voice projecting with no effort at all in the spacious gym-turned-dojo. "And you know what? I just might. It all depends on you lot. We can have it the easy way or the hard way, and by hard I obviously mean hard for you. I may not have been planning on running you to the ground like they do in the good old Navy, but if you really want me to, then there's no problem at all and all the more fun for me. I don't know how Mr. Bracknell did things around here, but make no mistake in thinking that since I'm only filling in for him, I will let you lounge around and laze the hour away. I take my work seriously. Since you signed up for this course under no duress known to me, I'm assuming you're here because that's what you want. If anyone's not happy with that and would rather fill this hour with an elective that will allow the lazing around, then by all means do so. If not, welcome and enjoy."

And here came the pause. Jee made sure to drag it out a little longer than was comfortable to let his point sink in, and used it to look into the eyes of every boy in the room. This was the fun part, seeing how each and every one reacted to his little speech, the one he gave in every class. And it really was fun. The freshmen largely looked like they were about to cower; the juniors predominantly feigned disinterest to exaggerate their cool; the girls listened in rapt concentration, some of them smiling, probably to showcase their eagerness. Those boys seemed to be divided into two types – the ones who really were expecting a relaxing hour with nothing much to do and were in all likelihood already considering signing up for a different class, and those who nodded along, clearly satisfied and nearly smiling.

A quick look at Zuko placed the boy in the second category, though not quite – the boy was not really smiling, but smirking, and not in a pleased sort of way. He looked rather as if he found something grimly amusing about this whole situation, a joke that nobody else saw. He was also still unabashedly staring right at Jee.

Almost as if he was trying to draw his teacher's gaze. Or maybe it was simply Jee's misbehaving imagination turning itself on again, in the least appropriate moment as usual.

"You may have heard about me already," Jee picked up, folding his hands behind his back to better project authority, and took a few steps first to the left, then to the right. "My name is Jee Heng. I used to be lieutenant in our proud country's Navy, where I served for fifteen years. For a while I used to serve as RDC at boot camp. I have been learning various methods of self-defense long before you came screaming and bawling from your mothers' bellies. Kung fu mainly, but some of the other styles as well. This is what we'll be doing here, but since it's a level 2 class, I'm assuming you already know that. Any questions so far? And before you go there, let me tell you straight away that I came to teach here because I wanted to and let's leave the personal investigation at that. Yes? Your name, boy?"
The lad who lifted his hand was rather scrawny and had definitely the slightest build out of all the seniors present; he also had dark, brown skin, a pair of narrow, slightly slanted blue eyes and both sides of his head were shaved, with a mohawk-like ponytail at the center. He was grinning, and very openly so. He seemed to have the sort of face designed for exaggerated facial gymnastics.

"Sokka, sir," he introduced himself, and as soon as he said it Jee thought that he really did have something of an Indian about him to suit the unusual name. Coming to think of it, he looked rather like two of the girls from third period. Family? "I have a question," continued the boy called Sokka in a decidedly hopeful voice. "Are you going to scream and spit at us and call us lazy mother-botherers and make us chant while we run around in circles?"

Some of the boys snickered at that. Jee was very careful not to. He lifted one eyebrow instead, very slowly, which only made the snickering stronger. "Would you like me to?" he asked with his best serious voice, which had a devastating effect on the student morale – some of the boys actually turned around and covered their mouths with their hands. Sokka nodded very eagerly, his eyes huge and glistening, looking for all intents and purposes like it was Christmas.

"Then I am sorry to disappoint you, Sokka," said the lieutenant, and meant it. "You see, that would constitute verbal abuse, which is illegal. They really do come down on that sort of thing here, amazingly, not like in our dear old Navy. Much as I would like to indulge both of us, I fear headmaster Pakku would not be very impressed with me insulting students and spitting at them. Any more questions?"

"What are we supposed to call you?" This one did not raise his hand; he stood there in a defensive position, arms crossed over his chest and hair laden with atrocious amounts of product covering half his face.

Jee opened his mouth to reply, but Sokka beat him to it.

"Can we call you 'lieutenant', Lieutenant? Or 'sir'? Please?"

"Yeah," piped in some other boy who was more than double Sokka's size in muscles – Christ, what were people feeding their kids nowadays, steroids with a sprinkling of veggies? – his black hair carefully greased and arranged, big green eyes shining imploringly. "That'd be totally awesome." A chorus of murmurs in the affirmative confirmed this to be the general opinion of the class.

Jee permitted himself a fraction of a smirk. "Glad to see some of us are enjoying ourselves," he murmured. "Right. You want the Navy, you're gonna get the Navy. Attention! Nobody move while I take attendance!"

As he called out the names on the list, his best Officer voice in full action, he couldn't help the smirk becoming just a tad more visible. Oh yes, he did enjoy this. Hearing the students respond like they imagined soldiers did, sticking their chests out and obviously having fun with the play-pretend, why, it almost brought some of his old sense of authority back. A poor imitation of it for sure, but still.

And this lot were almost adults. Perhaps he could push them just this little bit harder. While they still wanted to and thought it was cool – which would last for about five minutes.

Tops.

When he read out Zuko's name, he looked up at the boy almost unwittingly. The teenage waiter did not move nor change his expression all this time – which meant he was still staring. Jee held his gaze for perhaps a split second longer than was entirely comfortable, feeling his throat suddenly go a little drier.
Which wasn't a reaction he should be having because a teenager chose to gape at him. But Zuko's gaze was different – and not only because of the scar disfiguring his left eye and giving his expression the element of grotesque. This gaze felt like it could burn.

This kid clearly wanted something from him. He was deliberately not looking away. And it was… odd.

But not to be contemplated now. Jee had a class to teach.

All through the warm up he kept catching Zuko in the act of glancing at him, though, and from the looks of it, the boy wasn't even trying to hide it. Jee ignored it as best he could and concentrated on barking out order after order – and Sokka especially clearly found it hilarious – but he did find himself following the lad with his eyes with alarming frequency. If Zuko's silent staring trick was indeed supposed to win him Jee's attention, it was obviously working.

And, as Jee noted with a slight tinge of alarm, it didn't take all that much to pay attention to Zuko.

The sleeveless shirt. That had to be it. It left the boy so… exposed. His arms bare, his shoulders flexing, the skin on his sculpted biceps taut, the muscles of his chest outlined through the material… Exposed. Yeah. Enough so to blatantly showcase the fact that there was very little of a boy about Zuko's body, which was… not a good thing at all.

Jee really had to concentrate.

It wasn't even the kid's body itself. In this class alone there were boys with at least as much muscle – like that enormous green-eyed kid with hair that looked as if a duck was perched on his head. Jee enjoyed the view, but God knew he'd seen enough of gorgeous young bodies not to be affected by them, especially not to the point where it got disturbing.

But he was looking at Zuko in that way now, God help him. And noticing… things. Like the fact that somehow, the teashop boy's figure was just the type Jee liked best. Lean and agile and flexible and packed with firm muscle and shit, he really needed to stop now.

And all of that because the brat just would not stop staring.

It was all right, though, Jee told himself firmly, putting a definite halt to the protracted warm-up and pairing the boys up with each other. Just ignore it and it would go away. Ignore him and maybe he'll stop with the staring. The lieutenant promised himself he wouldn't get into any messes like that again and he was going to stick to it, dammit.

Zuko probably didn't even realize his staring made Jee uncomfortable. However difficult that was to believe when one looked into those disturbingly bright eyes and saw the intent behind the gaze.

"All right, you lazy lily-livers," he said out loud, very deliberately not looking at Zuko. "Show me what you can do. I'm assuming you at least know the basics of self-defense if you chose a level2 course, so let's see it. You'll beat each other up in a nice, civilized, government-approved manner and I'll be strolling among you to see what you're doing wrong. Begin."

It wasn't quite the sorry display Jee had been dreading, at least. More than half of the boys appeared to know what they were doing and quite a few of them displayed some sort of technique. This meant they wouldn't have to start from scratch, which was refreshing. In the end no one ended up with black eyes or broken limbs and, as far as first classes went, that was a pretty decent tally.

The mock duels also meant that Zuko was too preoccupied to continue with his staring, but Jee caught himself looking in his direction anyway, more often than was necessary for mere ability.
assessment. But not because of the boy's looks this time.

Well, not entirely, anyway.

Again, Pakku's words echoed in the lieutenant's mind as he watched Zuko attack, displaying a fury and intensity so condensed, so concentrated, that it really was rather frightening. It certainly frightened Zuko's partner, a tan, thuggish-looking tall fellow named Chan, who looked a little too old to still be in high school – the boy was valiantly trying to hide it and appear manly, but it was clear he wanted to be as far away from Zuko and his viper-quick, skillful strikes and kicks as humanly possible.

*Martial arts is the only thing he's shown any remote interest in so far.*

Another masterful observation on the part of headmaster Pakku. Watching the little demon fight, one would think that it was the only time he really came alive. It was as if he had those massive reserves of anger – or even fury – boiling and brewing underneath, just waiting to be given an outlet, and then they not so much guided his body as completely took it over. And he was good at it, too good for a measly high school course, even a level 2 one.

Jee recognized the feeling behind those jabs. He had experienced a similar urge himself way too often. But not usually to this extent and not all the time – whereas Zuko looked as if this was how he went about fighting every day. Now Jee remembered the look of fleeting horror and distaste on Chan's face when the kid ended up paired with Zuko – so the other boys knew how their friend was. It was a normal thing.

This spelled Looming Trouble in capital letters if he ever saw it.

Jee was looking their way when he called an end to the day's class, so he did not miss the way Chan shoved roughly past Zuko and flashed him a look of pure hate, mouthing something which was probably very far from pleasant. Zuko glared at him, fists tightening, and Chan scurried off in double hurry, joining his friends at the already-congested entrance to the gym. Jee thought he heard the words "freak" and "angry jerk," but he couldn't be sure.

A glance back at Zuko told him this was not the end of the day's excitement.

The boy was standing very still, not moving towards the entrance at all, fists still clenched and **staring** at Jee again.

The older man sighed. "Yes?" he asked, hands resting on his hips as he faced Zuko fully. "You want something, kid?"

"Why did you do it?"

Zuko's voice was low and soft, raspy, cracking a little with unuse. It was upon hearing it, for the first time since the teashop, that Jee realized Zuko hadn't said a single word for the entire class.

The question earned the kid a raised eyebrow from Jee. "I'm paid to do it," he replied in deadpan. "That's what people call a job."

"I mean the tip," clarified the boy, coming a little closer and – Jee was rather pleased to notice – losing the defensive stance a fraction. His fingers unclenched and his arms hung comparatively loosely by his sides as the boy plowed on in this same soft voice: "You left fifteen bucks on the table. It sure as hell wasn't Pakku, he never tips me this much. Not even the stupid girls who giggle at me when I serve them. Why did you do it?"
Ah. That one. Jee had rather forgotten about it. And he sure did not expect Zuko to call him up on that. Honestly, what kid would?

The boy chose to interpret the brief silence in his own way, shuffling from foot to foot, looking at Jee quite challengingly. "Because if you didn't mean to leave that much, I'll give it back. I have the money here. I didn't spend it. Do you want it back?"

"What? No!" Now this was ridiculous. Was that all the staring was about? "Keep it. I don't know why I tipped you so much, maybe I was just feeling generous. It's called an impulse, kid. People have those sometimes. Anyway, it's your money. Go buy yourself a DVD or something."

And with that, Jee made to turn away and head for the office, when Zuko's voice, no longer soft, but suddenly clipped and strangely tight, stopped him.

"I don't want your pity."

The older man looked around to face Zuko again, incredulous. The defensive stance was back on, the scowl reigning supreme on the boy's face. The scar only made it all the more predatory, even nasty.

This really was ridiculous.

"What pity?" asked Jee slowly, examining the boy. "Who said anything about it?"

"Because of my face. You saw it and felt bad for me, so you left me the money. I don't want any of that. If that's the case then you can shove it."

Oh for heaven's sake.

"First off," Jee started firmly after rolling his eyes, "I am your teacher. You don't get to speak to me like that just as you don't get to call headmaster Pakku by his name. I'll let it slide for now because you're all worked up and didn't control yourself, but this is the first and the last time this happens. Is that clear?"

In response Zuko folded his hands across his chest and stuck his chin up. There was challenge written all over his face. Too bad this was a game Jee was not willing to play.

"Secondly, you're making no sense," he continued, matching Zuko glare for glare. "This idea is ridiculous. No pity was involved at any time. I gave you the twenty bucks because I felt like it and I liked my tea. That's all there was to it. Now, since we had it all cleared up, run along to the showers or you'll be late for your next class, whatever that is."

Zuko held his gaze for protracted seconds, searching, searing, scorching. Jee never looked away. If the brat thought he could out-stare him, he was in for a nasty surprise.

The glaring contest lasted for about a minute until Zuko decided the battle probably wasn't worth it, at which point he huffed and walked past Jee to the locker rooms, his stride barely short of a stomp. When he was just by the entrance to the gym, Jee felt another impulse – spite? sudden rush of benevolence? and if the latter, he probably should really stop and analyze where all those benevolent impulses directed at Zuko came from – and acted upon it without much thinking. He called out:

"Oh, and Zuko!"

The boy stopped in mid-stomp, but didn't look around.
"That was some pretty impressive work out there. Nice moves."

Zuko stood in the doorway for a few seconds – but ultimately, he left without looking back.

Shutting the door with a dramatic bang was the only thing lacking in this situation, really. Marvelous.

His last class for the day – a basic level martial arts elective with a mix of students from all years – was a relaxing breeze-through compared to all that.

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Ming walked with him to the parking lot and complained at length about her cheerleaders. Apparently none of them as much as sniffed a pom-pom during the summer holidays and the try-outs were going to be such a pain and the championships were going to be extra hard and life basically sucked giant-ass balls this year. She said it all while laughing all the time, so Jee did not take it seriously. Ming had so much genuine warmth in her that it was hard to take seriously any negative thing she said, no matter how grumbly she made it sound.

It was good having someone like that around. And she had a nice voice.

"Good job out there by the way, soldier boy," she exclaimed, browsing through her purse in search of car keys. "Nice work with the kids."

Jee chuckled, opening his own car – which looked a little modest compared to Ming's gaudy red Mercedes, not that Jee would ever admit it. "How do you know how I did? I don't recall having you in any of my classes."

"I spied on you," admitted the woman easily, beaming. "Emily and I both, actually. I daresay she was really inspired."

"Well, good to know someone was. See you tomorrow, then?"

"Actually," Ming paused in the middle of opening her driver's door, "I do have one more thing to talk to you about. Do you have a moment?"

"Sure," slightly bemused, but also pleased, Jee leaned back on his Ford and waited.

"Charlie Bracknell was a real enthusiast of the martial arts too," started the woman. "A great educator at that. It's really too bad about his knee. Anyway, he used to run this club after class, here in the school, for the more advanced kids. They loved it. He had quite a turn-up each year. I was thinking it would be great if someone could take it up. I would, but I only know the basics and I already run a couple of other things here after class, so, you know…"

Jee nodded, thinking. "Have you spoken to anyone else about it? Piandao?"

"Yeah. And he's willing to work on that, but he's busy too. If you'd be game, then the two of you could work out a schedule between you or something… But do you even want to?"

That was a good question. Did he want to?

But then, why the hell not? If he'd get paid extra for it…
"I'll think about it," he promised Ming with a smile.

"Great," the other educator flashed him a brilliant grin. "Let me know so we can go and talk to Pakku about it. I'm sure he'll approve. See you, then."

"Yeah. Bye."

Despite all its apparent drawbacks, the chief one being Spending More Time Among Teenagers, it had seemed like a decent idea at the time. Which is precisely why the alarm bells should have gone off in Jee's head the very moment he thought that. He knew enough about seemingly good ideas – namely, he knew that more often than not, "seeming" was the only thing they were.

But the alarm bells did not go off, or at least not loudly enough to mute the other voice in his head which said: extra cash. Besides, he didn't have anything better to do with his evenings anyway, at least for now. Why not give it a try? Once or twice a week was not that much of a sacrifice. And it would be an advanced class, for people who really wanted to be there. Committed people he could shout at to his heart's content without fearing a law suit for verbal abuse.

 shouldn't really be that bad, should it?

Of course not.

Which only goes to show that Jee really ought to be preserved for posterity as a living testament to the truth of Murphy's Laws.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Ming's plan is set in motion, Piandao gets some lines, Jee is forced to endure tea again and everyone's favorite Uncle makes an appearance.
Chapter 2: Of Uncles and Swordmasters

Ming was right. Pakku did approve. Such profound was Pakku's approval, in fact, that he deemed it appropriate to begin the sign-ups immediately so that the club could phoenix its way out of the ashes as quickly as possible.

Which, in Headmaster language, apparently meant this week.

"What was the turn-up last year?" asked Jee, sticking the sign-up sheet on the notice board by Pakku's office on Tuesday of the second week of school.

Piandao, who held the pins and handed them to Jee, considered the question with slightly creased eyebrows. "About twenty people, maybe less," he said. "The meetings were twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays. Would this work for you?"

"Yeah," Jee murmured as the two men made their way back to the gym area. "I'm still settling in. Nothing better to do with my evenings. You?"

"Mondays suit me better," admitted Piandao. "I run a weapons course in the martial arts school downtown on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Thursdays are mine, then," Jee nodded. "You people are so busy around here. Everyone seems to be working extra after classes."

Piandao smiled at this. "Surely not everyone, Lieutenant," he amended in his typical, elevated voice that Jee could only call inspired. "It is true that some of us are more committed to our work than it is necessary, but I myself have always seen it simply as an extension of my vocation. Teaching swordsmanship brings me equally as much joy as swordsmanship itself, if not more. There is nothing quite like seeing a student take wing thanks to your teachings and influence. I'm sure you'll agree."

Ha. There was no way Jee could respond to that with a straight face.

So he simply nodded, saving the comments which immediately sprang to his mind to himself, and busied himself with looking at the passing students. This was precisely why it was difficult to talk to Piandao sometimes. The way the man talked about things, it was downright impossible to add anything that wouldn't sound snarky or sarcastic. And somehow, that didn't work with him. He had a sense of humor, yes, but being sarcastic on him when the man was so genuine and earnest about the things important to him, in this simple, disarming way, seemed unfair and wrong. And, oddly enough, Jee liked him, even with this elevated, inspired air surrounding the other man – partly because of this earnestness and simplicity of his readily shared beliefs and partly, perhaps, because he put Jee's own life and beliefs in sharp contrast, which in turn automatically commanded respect. Jee was not averse to those obviously better than him – in his own opinion, it didn't take all that much.

There were some people like Piandao in the Navy – now probably more of them, it being an era of well-intentioned volunteers. Honorable. Honest. Keen. Full of faith and with this inner goodness shining forth on the world like a fucking sun. Even in Jee's own division back in basic there were boys like that, wet behind the ears idealists who didn't know any better until they had their asses served to them by the RDCs. Jee could only look on them with pity. Not many of them survived boot camp, but those that did often climbed the hierarchy ladder pretty quickly. Keenness, after all,
was easy to manage.

Which is probably why Jee's own career was decidedly less than stellar.

Not that something like that would ever happen to Piandao. For all his talk, the guy was tough as nails. Jee did not know him that well yet, but it was easy to see. The lieutenant peeked in on one of Piandao's classes once during his own free fourth period and was really quite impressed.

"We will have to work out a plan of some sort," continued the swordsman – and yes, it was fitting to think of Piandao this way. The way the man carried himself, it was easier to picture him in a traditional Chinese getup than in a tux. It didn't help that he was sporting a real topknot. "Unless you want to make the two meetings disconnected from one another?"

Jee gave this due consideration as they made their way through increasingly crowded school corridors, nodding to a familiar face of a student here and there.

"There should be some continuity, if only for the kids," decided the lieutenant. "We need some time to think this through. Let me know when you have a moment."

"How about Friday after class?" suggested Piandao. "We should have a decent estimation of how many students are interested by then. This ought to make things easier."

Jee agreed.

They were nearly in the sports wing when Zuko passed them. Head bowed low, hair cascading in chaotic wisps all over his face, backpack hanging loosely from one arm, he kept staring at the floor and offered the teachers an almost imperceptible nod. He did flash a quick, surreptitious look at Jee from under the curtain of his hair, so lightning-quick it would have been missed if not anticipated, and then he was gone, shuffling to whatever class he had in first period, never stopping to speak to anyone and glaring resolutely at the floor.

Jee knew this was the case without even looking over his shoulder after the boy. This had become a routine.

It has to be said that the disturbing staring stopped after their first confrontation over the unfortunate tip. During the two days that followed, Zuko seemed to adopt an entirely contrasting approach – he determinedly acted as though Jee was just a faceless, disembodied voice of authority. He obeyed like a slave of a plantation might have obeyed during his first years of captivity; grudgingly, in absolute silence, with every muscle in his body singing of tension, not once looking Jee in the eyes. A less observant – and wiser – man would have dismissed him then and focused on the more responsive students, allowing Zuko to sulk in peace. As long as the brat didn't outright rebel or cause trouble, who cared? But one of Jee's curses was that he was observant, so he did not miss the way those golden eyes did glance to him from time to time, sneakily and fleetingly, like a wild forest animal, if Zuko thought no one was looking. Those glances were too quick to decipher, but they were undoubtedly there and left the lieutenant rather baffled.

By the end of the week the sulking lost some of its intensity. Zuko started looking Jee openly in the eye again and stopped radiating the impression that he was one misjudged word away from beating someone up – or at least he was radiating this noticeably less when addressing his teacher if not his classmates, with whom he remained on obviously hostile terms. Still, he would keep stealing those inconspicuous glances at his teacher when he thought himself safe and undetected.

Jee knew. Mostly because he himself did his own fair share of inconspicuous glancing.
It’s not like it was his fault here, really. No one in his right mind could blame him. Zuko’s odd behavior attracted attention just as much as his fine, young body did, if not more so. Anyone would at least be intrigued. There was something very strange about this boy, very unique, which, repelling though it was, made him a natural object of study.

Curious if the kid behaved this way in all of his classes. No wonder the people of Summerfield found it hard to take to him – Zuko made it impossible.

He didn’t want to fit in.

Maybe this is where his attention towards Jee came from: they were both outsiders. Perhaps Zuko was looking to him as someone to potentially connect with over this. Perhaps he was checking how Jee got on and whether or not they could find a common ground. Maybe he wanted to start a two-people Summerfield Sucks Club. But that was only a wild guess, with no way to check its plausibility.

"There goes one of our potential students," observed Piandao with a surprisingly fond smile, gazing after Zuko as the boy passed them. Jee, having been brought back to earth from his reverie, looked at him, puzzled. "Zuko Xi attended Mr. Bracknell’s classes most religiously," clarified his companion. "Charlie praised his skill quite often… nearly as often as he complained about the boy’s attitude. I have seen him in action myself a few times. Most impressive. Of course, I had the opportunity to teach him some swordplay myself…"

"You teach him the sword?" cut in Jee before he could stop himself. Piandao didn't seem to mind; his smile continued to be warm, but now gained a tinge of sadness as he watched the sulky object of their conversation turn a corner and disappear.

"Yes, used to," he replied. "Dao blades. He has a great facility for them. Unfortunately, though, we only had a few classes together before he stopped coming. Told me it was due to financial reasons, but personally I find this hard to believe. I pride myself on being great friends with his uncle and I know full well how much Iroh loves his nephew. He would never refuse the boy anything which made him happy. There must have been something else, something Iroh thought fit not to divulge."

Jee's brow furrowed at that. "But he still learned martial arts?"

"Oh yes. As I said, most religiously. I suspect this is the only true passion the poor boy has. You must have observed this, Lieutenant."

"Yes. I have," murmured Jee, frowning at the floor.

This seemed like a good moment to inquire a little further; but before he made up his mind and phrased the question he wanted to ask, they reached their shared office and Piandao left to prepare himself for the first class of the day. The moment was gone.

Oh well. There were bound to be other opportunities. And maybe then he could ask about the uncle, too – the man seemed to be quite the celebrity around here.

When during fourth period Jee sauntered over to check the sign-up sheet, he almost whistled in admiration for Piandao’s prophetic streak; it looked like he would have more opportunities to study Zuko up-close. His name was the first on the list.

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The teashop again. Really, what was it with the people of Summerfield and this bloody teashop? Surely the town had other places to socialize in. It had a population of over 160,000, for God’s sake, and no teashop could ever hold that many. There was the bowling alley, for example. Or the pubs. A wide variety of them, actually. Yes. A pub would have been a much more welcome venue under any circumstances, especially as the weather didn’t seem to be getting any cooler.

Honestly, since when did Michigan have weather like that? They definitely had a shortage of it back in the days of Jee’s basic, when the RDCs shouted them up in the middle of the night for Snow Watches to freeze their balls of while pitifully trying to rid the Great Lakes of the fucking white fluff. Even during Jee’s own brief time as a RDC it wasn’t this hot, ever.

On this note, it still felt strange to be this close to Great Lakes again. Sure, they were in different states and separated by the entire width of Lake Michigan and it would probably be more than eight hours to drive there, but this was still the closest he’d been to RTC since his resignation. Not that Jee missed the thrice-accursed boot camp, but ever since he had arrived in Summerfield, he had those… urges attacking him from time to time: the urge to gear up, get in the car and drive the distance to the base, just to see what it looked like now, how things had changed.

From the outside, of course. They probably wouldn’t let him in now.

"Have you been here before, Lieutenant?" asked Piandao as a pretty young waitress with her long hair braided and her considerable boobs nicely outlined through her Asian uniform guided them to a table by the window.

Jee stifled the urge to stop the man from calling him that. He had tried to several times already and it still hadn’t sunk in. People probably just liked addressing him as "lieutenant", he figured. However one looked at it, it sounded… proud.

He also stifled a snarky remark about teashops and headmaster Pakku, settling instead for a short, if telling, "Once. With the headmaster."

"Ah yes," Piandao smiled. "He is of course another friend of Iroh's, whom I do hope to introduce to you today."

"Well, can't say I'm not intrigued," smiled Jee. This, in fact, was true. He was intrigued by the Mystery Uncle. Apart from the fact that everyone in the area seemed to be friends with him, anyone who could live with Zuko and the brat’s relentless sulking and still love him was a remarkable person and probably a superhero.

Speaking of the brat…

A quick scan of the teashop, however, declared it to be Zuko-less. Jee wasn't entirely sure how he felt about this.

At least there wouldn't be any more tip-related shenanigans.

Piandao took it upon himself to order, as a seasoned Jasmine Dragon patron paving the way for the unenlightened. He came up with a blend Jee hadn't even known existed, but before the pretty waitress could hurry away, he added:

"Could you please ask Iroh if he could spare a moment for a friend? My name is Piandao."

"Of course, sir!" chirped the girl and trotted away in her kimono, or whatever it was the staff here
"So," Piandao turned to Jee, "Shall we begin while we wait?"

"The sooner we start, the sooner we finish" was Jee's professional opinion as he rummaged in his bag for something to take notes.

"A most practical approach, Lieutenant. Let us perhaps first look at the notes from Mr. Bracknell…"

They were halfway through those when the waitress brought their order and a quiet message that "Mr. Iroh will come over as soon as he's finished brewing." Which, as it happened, turned out to be precisely when an acceptable and work-able plan for the after-classes seemed finally to have started emerging from the two teachers' discussion. Jee felt a presence approaching before he even saw the bulky figure of the owner making his way towards their table, and he paused in his note-taking to glance up at the newcomer.

"Piandao, my friend!" exclaimed the old man, clasping hands with Jee's smiling colleague. "I was wondering when you'd come and visit. About time! I was in dire need of someone to consult the date for our first game of the season with!"

"I trust you fully on this matter," Piandao rose from his seat to great his friend. "I'm sure we will all be able to attend whichever date you set."

The other man laughed – a full, rich, vibrating laugh coming straight from his ample belly, and patted Piandao on the shoulder in a way which spoke volumes about easy camaraderie. And Jee watched him, intently studying the short, round old man with a face wrinkled like an apple left in the sun for too long and facial hair which could put even the great Rear Admiral "Sideburns" Zhao to shame, and with an air around him which spoke of crackling fires and surprise candy and long bedtime stories and proverbs and wisdom and warmth and everybody's favorite Grandpa. And he thought: Oh.

"Iroh, this is Lieutenant Jee," said Piandao in the meantime, effectively turning the uncle's attention to Jee. The owner positively beamed and the lieutenant thought fleetingly that this was probably the warmest, most sincere smile he had ever seen.

"Oh, of course!" the man reached out to clasp Jee's hand in a vigorous shake. "Zuko's new gym teacher! My nephew told me all about you! He is really impressed by you, Lieutenant."

… What?

"Is that so," murmured Jee cautiously, quite taken aback by this revelation. "Enthusiastic about the class, was he?"

"Most enthusiastic," assured him the uncle, still shaking Jee's hand as though there could never be a greater privilege. "In his own way, of course. I'm sure you know what I mean, Lieutenant."

Jee settled on nodding, trying to wrap his head around how anything about "Zuko's own way" could ever be interpreted as enthusiastic. Whatever did the brat say about him to give his uncle such an impression?

Unless it was just a common nicety, a white lie, something to say. Probably. This man, Iroh, looked like a type to pour out effortless niceties as easily as most Navy officers poured out effortless swearing.

So Jee decided to settle for a simple "Thank you, sir" and tried to cover the surprise which must have
shown on his face with a firm handshake. He was rewarded with an even larger grin and a fussy
"Oh, but where are my manners, please excuse an old man, Lieutenant! Call me Iroh."

"A pleasure," mumbled Jee, finding himself suddenly a bit overwhelmed.

Well, whatdya know, there was something in common between the uncle and the nephew after all: both had the indisputable ability to impose themselves on any given situation and make it so that everything became a background to them. Though admittedly this old man here did this in a different way than Zuko altogether.

This feeling, instead of diminishing, only grew when the owner of the Jasmine Dragon absolutely insisted that they take their tea in a private little parlor at the back, where they could have some privacy. To his growing alarm, Jee found he had very little to say on the matter and was soon being practically maneuvered in the direction of the kitchen, Iroh leading the way and carrying their teas on a tray. And all this time, he would not stop talking.

"I trust you were well-received at the school, Lieutenant," he prattled on good-naturedly, showing them through the busy kitchen positively bustling with activity and smelling so strongly of tea Jee almost felt his eyes water. "I find the staff there to be very engaging. Of course Headmaster Pakku himself is a member of our little Pai Sho community, as are some of the other teachers... You don't play yourself, by any chance, do you, Lieutenant?"

"What…? Oh, no, no I don't," murmured Jee, trying not to show his puzzlement and biting his tongue before he babbled "What the fuck is Pai Sho?".

Zuko was not in the kitchen either. Which Jee noticed purely incidentally, of course, while they were passing through. It was not as if he was looking for the brat. Heaven forbid.

They ended up doing a little tour of the backstage area of the teashop – which must have been purely for Jee's benefit, as Piandao acted perfectly at home – during which Iroh boasted good-naturedly of his little empire. Jee tried to follow the conversation and make some sort of contribution, but most of the time he simply nodded along and made appreciative noises. There was really very little he could add, his previous experiences with tea being limited mostly to the cheap Lipton bags from Walmart. Admitting this here would probably win him a Glare and a future ban.

It didn't help that every time they entered a new area, Jee automatically found himself scanning it for the shaggy mop of black hair and the angry red of the facial burn. It was an instinct, really, and he could not turn it off now anymore than he could stop breathing.

But the teashop tour was concluded without any apparition by Zuko whatsoever, and when the three men finally sat down in Iroh's private parlor with fresh, steaming cups of fragrant this-or-other, Jee resolved to commit himself more to the conversation. Clearly being a friend of Iroh's held a lot of weight around here and he could use this sort of association – just in case.

Besides, the old man might just let slip something about his nephew. Like the hallowed secret of coping with his bratty ways.

In fact, the more Jee looked at the old teashop owner, the stronger he felt that Iroh's face seemed somewhat familiar. He couldn't quite place it anymore than he could hold water in his hands, but the nagging sensation was there and getting more audible with every passing minute he spent in the other man's company.

Strange.
But just when Jee was beginning to really try and investigate this feeling, Iroh steered the conversation in the direction of the Navy; and that was when things got really interesting, albeit a little weird. Very few civilians, if any, seemed to really know what they were talking about when approaching this subject, but after only a few minutes of conversation Jee was dead sure Iroh did know. He referred to all the higher officers by their names, asked after this or that old friend in the military, inquired after the recent changes in training techniques – hell, he even talked the slang! Now Jee was really, really curious. There was no way Iroh could be so well-acquainted with this topic if he hadn't had some connections.

It was quite irritating, therefore, that, after Jee asked him about it, Iroh simply waved dismissively as though swatting away a fly. "Old times," he said, taking a sip of his tea. "From when I was quite a different man. I don't want to bore you with an old man's sob story."

"But I'm sure it wouldn't be boring at all, in fa -"

It seemed, however, that fate did not want Jee to finish that sentence, as in that precise moment the sliding, paper door to the parlor slid to the side, revealing a casually clad Zuko.

"Uncle, I'll be going out to ride my bike for a while, I - Oh."

The young man's eyes rested first on his uncle and only then on his guests – and he seemed temporarily struck dumb at the sight of two of his teachers chatting over tea with Iroh.

And, looking at him, Jee wondered whether the sudden tightening in his chest upon seeing the boy was a very bad sign or merely a pretty bad one.

"Ah, Zuko!" exclaimed Iroh jovially. "We had a very pleasant surprise this afternoon, you see! I finally got to meet the new teacher you've been telling me about."

It was pretty hilarious, really, the fleeting flash of panic in Zuko's eyes as they unwittingly snapped to Jee. The boy did not seem at all impressed with his uncle at the moment – nor with Jee, it would appear. Ah yes, there was the frown. Hello there, took you long enough…

"Uncle," hissed the boy, locking his gaze with the floor. But then he recovered remarkably quickly and turned to Piandao, putting his hands together in a traditional gesture of respect. Then, he bowed.

"Master Piandao," he murmured and, oddly enough, it did sound respectful, even if somewhat strained. Now this was unusual. However, that was where the boy's reserves of respect seemed to end. When Zuko turned his bow slightly towards Jee, he didn't say anything, but looked the lieutenant in the eyes in a way that bore no traces of politeness at all, but had plenty of challenge and cockiness to make up for it.

*Go on, say something,* the kid seemed to be saying. *Make fun of me if you dare. I can take it.*

Jee barely stopped himself from shaking his head. Smiling slightly at the brat seemed to have an even better effect in throwing him further off-balance.

"Good to see you, Zuko," said Piandao good-naturedly. "I was wondering whether I'd see you in my class this year."

At this, the boy looked at the floor again and muttered something which sounded vaguely like "Perhaps." He also gave a little shrug to go with it. Embarrassment was as clearly painted in his entire posture as though he had the word written in lipstick on his forehead.

Jee found he was very much enjoying himself. It really was quite hilarious how the kid's body
language gave everything away. Seeing him this uncomfortable was perversely gratifying.

"Anyway, I'll be going now," muttered the boy, still looking to all intents and purposes like the world held no better wonders than his worn-out Nikes. "I'll be back for supper."

And with that last remark, which could only be directed at Iroh, the sliding door slid shut again, rather more forcefully than was necessary. Angry footsteps could be heard outside for quite some time, complete with a door banging somewhere in the distance.

The three men sat in silence for perhaps three minutes until Iroh gave a little laugh and shook his head with a smile that was disturbingly fond. Jee tried to comprehend how anyone could smile with such fondness after Zuko for about a split of second before his mind firmly shut down.

Sadly, though, the topic of the Navy seemed to have been entirely dropped after Zuko's interruption. Jee resigned himself to sipping his – admittedly delicious – cup of steaming tea while the two men chatted about their little Pai Sho club, and let his mind wander.

Once at home, very late into the night, he found himself in front of his old laptop, a bottle of Budweiser in one hand, staring blankly at the screen.

His fingers seemed to type "Iroh Xi" out of their own accord.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jee goes full Sherlock Holmes, certain questions are not asked and Zuko is shirtless.
The bike wasn't fast enough. Not nearly fast enough.

Zuko's legs did as much as they could, pedaling him through the lamp-lit streets of Summerfield, maneuvering him in a crafty spiral between cars and pedestrians, the noises of the city drowned in the roaring of the guitars in his earphones.

Too bad the music was not loud enough to drown his thoughts as well.

What was he doing there, having fucking tea -?

Zuko never liked puzzles. Azula made sure of that. He'd get frustrated with them way too quickly and then all thoughts of solving them were long gone, thrown out the window. That Jee guy… He was a puzzle. And one Zuko felt the wild, irresistible need to crack, despite the fact that he really was getting frustrated.

What was that guy's deal? First he leaves the fifteen bucks on the table – which were still resting in Zuko's wallet – and then he acts as though it was nothing, as though he left this much for waiters as a regular thing, as though it was just a stupid whim, as though he wasn't interested.

The bike bumped on the uneven pavement by the old, disused factory, and Zuko really longed for the roar of an engine between his thighs, for the speed of his racing motor-bike. He wanted to just take off, let the wind blow this all away from his head. Perhaps it would blow the picture of Jee away, too.

But then, if he really wasn't interested, why did he keep… well, sending all those signals to the contrary? Zuko was not good at reading people, pretty shit at it really, but this… This just wouldn't leave him alone. Just like those fucking impulses he had during class, the impulses to look at the man, and to flex his muscles more than was necessary, and to soak up every glance in his direction that he spied, and to force the man to look at him, to pay attention to him…

The fifteen bucks. Those fifteen bucks just wouldn't let him drop the whole thing. And there were times when he caught Jee looking his way, when he thought - when it felt like - the way the man looked at him, it seemed -

Zuko gritted his teeth when his bike came to a screeching halt in an empty alley, littered with trash and stinking of piss. Carelessly leaning the bike against a wall, the young man promptly started climbing the drainpipe, using bricks and window sills for leverage until he was perched on the rooftop, the evening wind hitting his face, the music still aggressively pounding in his ears. He sat on the edge of the roof, letting his legs kick and swing, and breathed.

Shit, he was fucked up. He shouldn't be even beginning to think this way about a fucking teacher.

But the problem was… The problem…
Yeah. What was the problem here, exactly?

Zuko groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes.

Where would he even begin?

The problem was that he hated it here. He absolutely loathed this fucking town and everyone in it, except for his uncle. And maybe – just maybe – Jee felt this way too.

Which still didn't solve anything, but maybe it was something of a starting point.

_A starting point for what, though?_ Asked a traitorous voice in Zuko's head which sounded suspiciously like Azula, forcing the boy to groan again into his hand. _You're not seriously considering... this, are you? Because that is really the new low._

He didn't know. He didn't know anything anymore.
"So," started Jee uncertainly, shuffling the notes on his desk and glancing up at Piandao, who was busy scribbling something on his schedule chart. "Was your weekend all right?"

"Very relaxing, thank you," answered Piadano lightly, not looking up from his work. "Yours?"

"...It was ok." And that was it when it came to conversation starters. He couldn't bloody well comment on the weather now, could he? Better get right to the point...

But he couldn't very well go ahead with a cheery "So that friend of yours, Iroh... Isn't he by any chance a brother of one of the most influential men in the country? Because I sorta spied on him online". As far as conversational gambits went, this was one was somewhat lacking in subtlety. He was still testing his waters with Piandao, seeing how much of a friendship they could strike between them – if any – and the initial awkwardness had not entirely disappeared. It would probably come out exceedingly weird if he admitted he had looked up Iroh online, not to mention bringing up the whole new set of questions that had posed.

It's just that... Shit, he was getting involved now. And in something that was way, way beyond him.

Really, he felt like kicking himself. He should have made the connection earlier. Xi. That was pretty much the singularly most important surname on the business stage these days. Fire Industries sponsored a shitload of expensive international investments – military provisions included. Hell, Jee would bet his own head some of the shotguns he'd played with in his Navy days were manufactured in one of the Fire factories. That neat, simple logo of a flame was recognizable everywhere.

It's just that one did not expect to be served tea by one of those Xi's. It was like being waited on by Madonna. Things like that simply didn't happen. So naturally most of those who did make the connection probably assumed it was just a coincidence – plenty of people with the same name, isn't there, and in such a huge Asian district, too... And Jee did look at the surname more closely for a moment, but discarded the feeling of déjà vu almost immediately.

Ha. That was probably exactly what the old bugger Iroh wanted.

Iroh Xi. Of course he seemed familiar, he was a fucking retired major general. Jee had never seen him in person, but he'd seen enough pictures and heard the name often enough for it to leave an impression. During his – perhaps too extensive – browsing over the weekend Jee dug up enough information on the man to string together some sort of plausible narrative.

Stinking rich. Sponsoring God-knew-how-many projects and investments. Successful to a fault. Had a reputation for the best mess hall parties in the army. A sure heir to old Azulon Xi, previous owner of Fire Industries. Right up until he was not, apparently because he objected Iraq and Afghanistan quite vocally and eventually resigned after his son, also a soldier, had been shot on the front. After that – vanished. Azulon dead, company taken over by younger brother, Ozai – almost immediately, when one looked at the dates.

And that was when shit got really disturbing.

Some of that information had been relatively easy to find – there were a few articles about Iroh's mounting career, with pictures added. Lu Ten, Iroh's deceased son, was present in some of them. But
after the lad's death and Iroh's resignation the trail went pretty much cold – and even some of that information Jee was only able to unearth because, being a military man himself, he knew where to look. At that point, a disbelieving part of Jee still pointlessly insisted Zuko must have been a nephew from a different branch of the family – maybe there was a sister?

But there was no sister, at least none that the records spoke of. Instead, Jee found an article in The Times about Azulon's death and Ozai Xi's takeover of the company, complete with pictures. There was Ozai himself, tall, handsome, imposing, in a suit which probably cost more than Jee's annual salary, on a press conference, smirking slightly, perfectly groomed, with the characteristic flame looming elegantly in the background. And on either side of him were… his children.

It had taken at least three minutes of intense gazing and zooming in for Jee to truly recognize Zuko. The kid must have been no older than 10. He stood rigidly straight on his father's left side – left, not right? – and looked decidedly out of his depth, surrounded by camera flashes and shouting journalists. After gazing in some more, Jee decided there was something strangely forlorn about his expression, but could not put his finger on what it was precisely. But what was perhaps most striking about the photograph was that Zuko's fresh, young face was entirely unblemished. The younger girl standing to Ozai's right, though – Azula Xi, said the caption under the photo – looked as though she was born on a stage, her pose as confident as that of her father's, her smirk the picture of self-assurance.

A perfect little family. Rich, successful, influential, with prospects half the world was envious of. One thing missing, though – where was the mother?

There was no word about her. Nothing. As though she had never existed. And Jee should really have left the research alone after that, but the next page seemed to have clicked itself, which led to the next one, and then the next, and in the end he did manage to dig up a short little snippet in some tabloid about a divorce, dating from about the same period in which Azulon Xi passed away. There was no picture of the lady herself, only a shot of Ozai from the same press conference and a short, dismissive statement that Ursa Xi retired to the countryside and wished not to be disturbed by journalists. There was nothing else anywhere, not a mention of her, not a single picture, even the divorce trial never got any coverage. She didn't even have a Facebook page. It was as if the woman had been spirited away.

There was very little mention of Iroh, too, after the whole resignation shebang. The only thing Jee managed to come up with were a few articles in Michigan local newspapers about the success of the Jasmine Dragon, which had apparently been quite the sensation, but not big enough to stir national curiosity. Some of those articles briefly mentioned Iroh's past career and background, noting how funny it was to have a former army officer run a teashop, but they were all pretty dated.

At this point it was nearing four o'clock in the morning, so Jee shut his laptop down and crawled into bed for some hours of precious sleep – but he didn't feel sleepy for a long, long time, his head reeling with speculation. And even though upon going to bed he decided firmly the entire mess positively reeked of confidential, murky upper-level shit and had absolutely nothing to do with him, he still popped his laptop open on Saturday evening and searched for some more.

Idle curiosity, he told himself. No big deal. Just curious. And it wouldn't leave him alone now until he found everything he could, like an itch that continuously needed to be scratched. He was doing it solely for the purpose of being able to sleep again without his thoughts constantly straying.

And maybe, just maybe, he would find more pictures of Zuko without the scar.

Ultimately, he did. Ozai's name was now more or less a constant in specialized press and it was with next to no trouble that Jee found a couple of shots of him with both his children in the background: a
grand opening of this-or-that, a newly-coined partnership, a particularly spectacular takeover, a business party. There was more of the girl than there was of Zuko, though, and the most recent articles featured her exclusively as the only companion at her father's side. She was apparently doing very well on her own now, representing her father on press conferences and showing herself very much capable of taking over when the time came. The newest picture of Zuko Jee could find was from when the boy was 13 – young, tall and handsome, with a very serious face, obviously going out of his skin to imitate his father, with a pretty black-haired Asian girl even younger than him on his arm, during some kind of official ball or other.

There was nothing about any accidents that may have caused the scar. Or about the heir to Fire Industries moving to some dump in Southern Michigan.

Finally, in an online archive of some tabloid, Jee found an article which was strangely disturbing. "HEIR OF BUSINESS MAGNATE ACTS UP!," screamed the headline. Attached to the article was the same picture of young Zuko and the pretty Asian girl during a party, captioned: "Zuko Xi in the company of Mai Weng, daughter of Senator Lei Weng." The article itself claimed that the teenage heir to Fire Industries was showing himself less than worthy of the title, acting up in his posh private school, causing scandals, failing classes and falling in with some bad company.

"Teenage rebellion? Azula Xi (12), Zuko's sister, seems to think so. 'My poor brother is simply confused and straining under the responsibility,' she told us outside the Xi estate in California. 'I dearly hope this is just a passing phase.' She refused to comment further, though a reliable anonymous source tells us the Xi boy was frequently seen with a street gang. He is currently hospitalized in a private ward, having sustained a mysterious injury, most probably obtained in a recent street scuffle. Is that a way for a future industry magnate to behave? Or is Zuko Xi actively trying to flee this responsibility? Ozai Xi refused to comment, but he recently issued a statement that the boy is going to be moving under the care of his uncle, retired major general, currently residing in Michigan. Does the leader of Fire Industries hope his brother will instill some good old army discipline into the boy before it's too late?"

A variation of this short article could be found in several other tabloids, none of them commenting on what happened to the boy after he was released from hospital – and none of them describing exactly what kind of "suspicious behavior" the boy indulged in, only giving very broad, general statements which could mean anything. No picture of Zuko with the scar ever made it into the press. Apparently this was not a very popular topic, easily buried in the archives and forgotten. The Xi's were not film or music celebrities, after all, and though popular after a fashion, they were not what was commonly considered "hot gossip." Maybe that was why the scarce articles were so fuzzy when it came to specifics.

Or maybe the entire story was just made up.

The thing was, though, Jee had no reason to suspect it was. He could frown at the article all he wanted – and he did frown a considerable bit, tugging at his sideburns and taking deep gulps of coffee – but he couldn't deny that the general image they painted of Zuko somehow fit. The kid did emit this kind of Bad Boy impression at school. This scar had to come from somewhere. It was surprisingly easy to imagine him running around with a street gang, being all rebellious to spite daddy and maybe get some attention this way. This whole thing had the aura of a typical Rich Boy scenario: "daddy is too busy to spend time with me and doesn't love me, so I'm gonna make him notice me." The mother's mysterious absence only made this more likely.

Let's face it. If Zuko was anything, he was definitely a rebel.

But Pakku did say the boy didn't cause any serious trouble since coming here, and he certainly did
not wreak any considerable havoc in Jee's classes – well, not the kind that would disturb the students as well as him, anyway. Though, on the other hand, the students were afraid of him. That much was clear by now. And if Zuko had any friends, he was very good at keeping them secret. Did anyone at the school know? Did they type Zuko's name and find those articles? Did any of the kids suspect they listened to music on equipment manufactured by Zuko's dad?

Three years the boy had been living here. Three years, banished from his comfy home with five swimming pools and visiting celebs and high living, confined to this little dump on the other end of the country, working as a tea server.

No wonder he looked like he wanted to punch the crap out of the world at any given moment.

It still didn't explain the weird interest the kid seemed to have developed in Jee, but the man found he was glad for this additional information on Zuko's background – even if it felt disturbingly like prying. Perhaps it would make some things easier to understand. Or at least to put up with.

In the end, after he felt he had exhausted all available sources, Jee had bookmarked his findings and tried to devote his Sunday to put the whole thing entirely out of his mind. He had already invested much more interest in Zuko than was healthy or professional, and every thought he spared on the boy only made it worse. He went out for a walk, caught a movie at the theater – one of those action blockbusters with lots of noise and shooting and explosions that conveniently allowed one to turn off his thinking for two hours – and phoned some of his old friends. He even played his guitar for a bit in the evening, a few classic rock ballads, something which he had not done since he arrived in Summerfield. He had a life of his own, dammit, and he was not going to waste all his free time on a family he had – gladly – nothing to do with.

But he could not stop his thoughts from flying back to the topic the moment he switched the lights off, nor could he keep them quite contained now, in his office in Flowing Creek on Monday morning, sitting across from Piandao and wondering how best to broach the subject without seeming like a creep.

That he was actually beginning to turn into, gods help him.

"I have to say I really am looking forward to the afternoon," said Piandao amiably, having finished with his scribbling and shuffling the papers. "Will you come and watch, Lieutenant?"

Jee rubbed his eyes tiredly. This clearly wasn't going to work. Not a good time to ask and prod, this – it would probably end in one big fest of awkward. There was no safe way to ask what he wanted to ask. Besides, even if Piandao was friends with Iroh that didn't mean he knew anything substantial.

"Yeah," said the lieutenant tiredly. "I'll watch. That'll be good."

However, not asking the questions did not make them go away. Having a class with Zuko in fifth period did not help matters at all. What with the kid's habitual sneaky ogling – though it was way too far-fetched to call it ogling, wasn't it? wishful thinking, Jee, wishful thinking – and the dug up material still fresh in Jee's head, it was quite a miracle that he managed to soldier his way through the class without a single awkward mishap or comment.

Especially since halfway through the class Zuko apparently decided that it was too hot in the air-conditioned gym and started exercising without his shirt on. Jee did not miss the long look the brat shot him as he removed the sleeveless shirt – couldn't miss it, busy staring straight at him as he was.

Well. Well.
… This really wasn't good.

Jee somehow managed to avoid gaping at Zuko for the rest of the class, choosing the smarter self-preservation technique and resolutely refusing to acknowledge the shirtless laid out on a silver platter before him – but he could not keep looking away when, after the class was finished, the kid decided to loiter again and wait until all his classmates were out of the gym.

Great. Just what Jee needed. The kid was going to accuse him of stalking now. Teenage tantrum coming in three… two…

"Please tell me you haven't joined my uncle's stupid tea club," said the boy instead, quite surprisingly, toying with the shirt in his hands but, infuriatingly, not putting it back on.

Jee felt momentarily conflicted over whether or not to order him to. It seemed like the biggest clash of interests since – well, since forever.

But he had to look at the kid now, didn't he? It would look super-suspicious if he hadn't.

"No, I didn't join," he replied as neutrally as he could, keeping his eyes locked firmly on the boy's face and very decidedly not looking down. "I landed in the back parlor only because of Mr. Piandao. Strategy games are not really my thing. And neither is tea, actually."

Wait. Was it a trick of the light, of did the corners of Zuko's mouth actually go up? By a miniscule fraction and only for a split of second, but still.

"Thought so," said the boy, shrugging, his voice probably the softest and most neutral Jee had ever heard it be. "Pai Sho is probably the most boring thing in the world. Uncle has this club… Some of the teachers are in it. And Headmaster Pakku. We close the teashop early and they have those tournaments. Embarrassing as hell."

He wasn't looking Jee in the eye as he said it, the tension in his body was laughably noticeable and the fiddling of his hands on his shirt was getting more and more frantic, but still – what the actual fuck? Was Zuko Xi standing there shirtless and trying to make polite conversation or did Jee obtain a mystery concussion overnight and was imagining things? Because that was quite a jump from that Friday afternoon at the teashop and definitely not what Jee was expecting and…

And the brat just absent-mindedly scratched his abdomen.

Oh bugger. Jee's eyes did go lower after all.

That was a really nice abdomen. And Jee had no business whatsoever staring at it, so he stopped.

… In theory. Shit.

And Zuko… suddenly Zuko wasn't saying anything.

But he very slowly lowered the left hand, which was still clutching the shirt, and softly scratched his stomach again, inevitably further drawing Jee's attention. Which – which must have been purely accidental. Yes. Of course. There was no way in hell the kid did this deliberately, because this would mean that he was flirting, which he was obviously not.

The son of Ozai Xi of Fire Industries, standing there being blatantly shirtless and lightly touching himself. Really, could shit get any more surreal?

Not to mention that the situation was now rapidly moving from surreal to -
Jee was a grown, experienced man. Of course he knew about sexual tension. And he knew that what was right in this moment developing in the empty gym between him and this seventeen-year-old, angry boy, carried a scent of sexual tension so strong it could be bottled up and sold for quite a hefty sum apiece on Amazon.

But knowing this did not provide him with the willpower to tear his eyes away and put a firm end to all this. No, his eyes clearly decided they were declaring independence and, as their first act of defiance, chose to disobey the orders of Jee's brain and to hungrily follow every slight twitch of Zuko's pale fingers as they nervously skirted across well-defined, glistening abs. The movements were subtle enough that they could easily be interpreted as simple, subconscious nervous reactions, but they also lingered, and this - Christ.

Zuko Xi was an attractive boy. A very attractive boy. Even with that horrific scar on his face. Because his body was already so well-developed that many grown men could be jealous of it, and his hair partially curtained the scar anyway, and he was letting Jee stare, just standing there and not saying anything and -

And, yeah. All this time, the kid was being silent. Which, when Jee realized it finally, the silence having grown more and more pronounced, was probably what prompted the man to tear his eyes from the admittedly mesmerizing view and focus his eyes again on Zuko's face.

Just in time to see the slightly dazed look in the boy's healthy eye, his half-parted mouth and a faint suggestion of a blush.

A fucking blush.

"So, uh," resumed Zuko awkwardly, seemingly startled into looking away and running a nervous hair through his messy hair. "Just wanted to say don't let them recruit you. Would be suicide. Lieutenant."

Okay, so he was trying to diffuse the somewhat heated – sizzling, actually – situation. Which in itself was very strange, but Jee appreciated.

"Will look out for those wily tea people then," he replied, attempting to smile. "Thanks for the warning. Coming to the club meeting today?"

"Yeah."

"Good. See you then."

Zuko nodded, not looking Jee in the eyes, and made himself scarce astonishingly quickly, leaving behind an imprint in the man's mind of his sweaty, perfectly sculpted chest and of the look on his face as Jee stared at it.

Left alone in the gym, Jee stood in place for a while, frowning and trying to get his messy thoughts back on track. Then, he walked up to a wall and hit his forehead against it, hard.

This had to stop. Even though Jee wasn't sure what this was and it hasn't even properly started yet. Because Jee knew himself, he knew the signs, and this was going in so many wrong directions all at once that he had to nip it very much in the bud.

He would start off by getting it once and for all into his thick skull that Zuko Xi was not flirting with him. He was not making any advances, not inviting anything, not deliberately creating a space for
them to interact. And even if he were – which Jee decided firmly to not allow himself to think – it would lead nowhere. That’s right. Jee was not going to get himself into a messy relationship with an underage student and that was that.

He carried on through the entire sixth period with this resolution embedding itself firmly in his mind, all thoughts of Zuko very decidedly banished. When it was time to take a small break and sit in on Piandao’s opening meeting of their little club, this decision was still very much the loudest voice in Jee’s mind.

He would not look at Zuko if he didn’t have to. He would not actively encourage this situation to develop. He would not be this kind of person.

And Zuko was not flirting with him.

Chapter End Notes

Next: The martial arts club is officially in session, Sokka has Ideas and Jee continues to battle his libido.
Chapter 4: The Dancing Dragon Club

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Piandao’s welcoming speech was, on the whole, as one would expect it to be. The man greeted everyone in his typical elevated tone, introduced both himself and Jee – and then launched himself into a mini-monologue about the symbolism and principals of martial arts, about how important they were to history and culture, how vital in finding balance and happiness and other such spiritual crap. Listening to him from his place on a bench by the wall, Jee fleetingly thought the guy sounded very much like the stock enlightened guru from every Hollywood martial arts flick.

Hell, give the guy inversions and he would sound like Yoda.

Some of the kids clearly thought so, too, judging from the not-so-sneaky grins they sent each other while their teacher was busy being oratory.

And yet – not being ridiculous about it. No. As irritating as Jee usually found this kind of speeches – because at the end of the day, it all came down to beating the other guy up before they could beat up you and Jee had always failed to see it as something particularly spiritual – even he had to admit that Piandao was actually interesting, his words fuelled by that compelling, puzzling, simple belief, iron conviction ringing in his every word. Jee could be snarky about it all he wanted, but it didn't change the fact that Piandao was – inspirational. Damn.

And while he was unleashing his inspiration on the classroom, Jee amused himself by trying to put a name to every face. There was Sokka and Bolin – those boys were really hard to forget, even after day one. Standing by them were three girls from Jee’s third period: Korra, Katara and Suki, all three of whom the lieutenant was genuinely glad to see. Jee's watchful eye did not miss the way Sokka was trying to inconspicuously inch closer and closer to Suki, nor the way Bolin nudged Korra with his elbow and grinned, mouthing something to which the girl replied with a smirk. Katara, ever the diligent one, shot the two of them a mildly disapproving glare and quickly focused her attention back on Piandao, apparently oblivious to the clumsy attempts of a young, bald kid, probably a freshman, with an arrow tattooed on his head and similar ones on his arms and legs, who was trying to 'accidentally' brush their hands together.

Ah. The exchange student Ming was so excited about during lunch a few days ago. Jee saw him a couple of times in the corridor – it was hard to miss the kid, sticking out from the crowd as he was. Sent from some Asian monastery or other to learn the ways of the world, apparently. From the rather dopey looks he was sneaking at Katara, the boy was a very attentive learner indeed.

Jee smiled to himself, watching them. It was so good to know he would never be this age again.

He recognized a couple more kids from his other classes, but there were also a few faces he could not place – most of them white kids, a few African Americans too. Chiefly seniors and juniors with the occasional younger-looking teens, all of them looking suitably fit and more or less eager, so far as one could tell.

And then there was Zuko. Whom Jee was very deliberately not looking at.

In the meanwhile, Piandao managed to wrap up his speech with an inspired reflection on the harmony of all living things. He did not even finish asking if there were any questions when Sokka's hand shot up.
"Sifu Piandao, I think we should get ourselves a group name," announced the boy without waiting to be asked to speak, his face breaking into a giant grin.

"A group name, Sokka?" Piandao did not look impressed. "But you have not had a name before…"

"Yeah, 'cause Sifu Charlie thought names were lame. But we should totally get one now! I'm voting for Super-Awesome Badasses!"

There was much snickering at that, which Jee shared. "Why not throw Mega in there as well, to dispel all doubt," he suggested with a smirk, earning himself a look of pure idolization from Sokka and further chuckles from the group.

"Yeah, that about covers it," said Korra, punching Sokka lightly on his skinny arm.

"Oooh! Oooh!" The bald exchange kid seemed very agitated by this idea; he actually stood on his toes, inches away from jumping up and down. "Can we be Kung Fu Pandas? I loved that movie!"

"Or Karate Kids! Eh?" suggested Bolin, looking hopefully at the group. "'Cause, you know. We're kids. Learning karate."

"I still like Super-Mega-Awesome Badasses better," said Sokka stubbornly. "And it was my idea to give us a name in the first place, so I get to choose."

"Oh for goodness's sake," Katara rolled her eyes. "You don't get to choose anything, Sokka, because there will be no silly names! We don't need to look stupid in front of the entire school! How do you expect to get more members when you advertise for a club called Super-Mega-Awesome-Badasses?"

"I should think people would flock to join," replied Suki with a smile, winking at Sokka. "Not everyone gets to be a Super-Mega-Awesome-Badass-Kung Fu-Karate-Kid-Panda."

"This is getting ridiculous," Katara huffed at the whole laughing group and looked imploringly first at Piandao, then at Jee. "Sifu Piandao, Sifu Jee, please tell them it's ridiculous and that there won't be any stupid names!"

_Sifu Jee_, eh? That was probably the first time anyone called him that. It sounded… nice.

"Sorry, Katara," said Jee nevertheless, smiling at the girl. "Looks like you got outvoted. Though you lot better think of something shorter. The SMABFKKPK Club is rather a mouthful."

"This is so stupid." This statement did not come from Katara. Uttered softly, in a very derisive, hoarse whisper, it floated in Jee's direction from where Zuko stood, slightly apart from the majority, fists clenched at his sides and glaring at the chattering, laughing crowd.

"Well, what do you think we should name ourselves then, Mr. Sunshine?" asked Korra, smirking challengingly at Zuko.

"Oh, leave him alone," interjected Suki, smiling at Zuko indulgently as though he were an exceptionally grumpy mascot. "He'd probably have us be The Doom Squad or something like that."

"Hey!" Sokka caught on to the suggestion. "The Badass Ninja Doom Squad! It's perfect!"

"Not as perfect as the Karate Kids," challenged him Bolin, puffing up like a typical male preparing himself to defend his territory.

Katara facepalmed and sighed like a martyr. Zuko snorted and crossed his arms over his chest.
Around them, the scene turned into a massive session of bickering.

And Piandao just stood there, amiably indulgent, overlooking the humorous argument over a stupid group name with a slightly bemused expression, like a father might watch his child play in a sandbox with other five-year-olds. After a minute of this Jee hauled himself up from the bench and strolled over.

"Aren't you going to put a stop to this?" he asked, watching the students.

"Why should I?" Piandao shrugged. "They are obviously enjoying themselves. And Sokka's idea of a name seems popular, they might as well choose one now."

"Right." Jee frowned. And then he shook his head and clapped his hands, loudly.

"Oi!" he shouted. "I give you lot twenty seconds to come up with one name. The first and the loudest suggestion goes. And no badasses. We need to keep this school-friendly. No pandas, either, I hate those stupid hairy buggers. Go!"

A dozen mouths opened to shout at the same time, but it was a petite-looking black girl with a shock of curls tied back in a ponytail who beat them all and screamed at the top of her lungs:

"The Dancing Dragon!"

A mini-pandemonium broke out, but Jee decided not to let himself be swayed. Sure, they were an after-class club and naturally discipline would be slacker than in actual class, but this did not mean he could allow himself a slip in his foreboding drill sergeant reputation. This lot apparently needed someone to hold the reins.

"The Dancing Dragon it is!" he announced with finality, raising his voice and clapping once so as to be heard over the hubbub. "I said whoever is first and loudest. Sorry, kids."

"But that's lame! And girly!" protested Sokka, the picture of indignation.

"Right, because 'girly' is such a disaster," Katara rolled her eyes again.

"I actually like it," piped in the exchange student with a very wide smile. "It's dynamic. And dangerous. Good job, Lucy!"

The Dancing Dragon author beamed at him.

"Thanks, Aang."

Bolin and a couple other students, including Korra, looked like they were about to go on protesting, but at this time Piandao put his hands together and – well, Jee, standing next to him facing the students, wasn't entirely sure just what the man did, but the effect was instant. The entire group settled into disgruntled, sullen silence almost immediately, all fixing their gazes on the swordsmaster with something bordering on reverence.

Jee raised an eyebrow. What the hell? Piandao didn't even say anything, he just… stood there. And looked at them. And somehow, just by standing and looking at them, he managed to make his own silence more prominent and audible than any shouting petty officer could.

Okay, that was pretty impressive. And also a little annoying.

"You all heard Lieutenant Jee," said Piandao softly once he was sure he had everyone's undivided
attention. "From here on out we shall be known as the Dancing Dragon Club. Congratulations, Lucy. I, for one, believe a more perfect name could not be asked for. A martial artist should be like the dragon – swift, dangerous, deadly, but with movements as graceful and mesmerizing as a dancer's. A dancing dragon is a creature of power and grace, something we should all aspire to. Now, assume your horse stance. We will begin with breathing exercises."

They did begin with breathing exercises – and finished with them, having done little else throughout the entire hour and a half of their allotted time. Jee sat there on his bench and watched teenagers breathe, squatting and assuming different poses, while Piandao walked around them and talked in that hypnotizing, soothing voice of his. It was a wonder nobody fell asleep.

But neither did they protest nor show any blatant signs of impatience – well, maybe except for the exchange kid, Aang, who did have some considerable problems staying focused and would squirm doubly as much as the others. Most of the kids were pretty concentrated, eyes closed, body tense, senses on the alert. Despite the entire club name debacle, they clearly took all this seriously and respected Piandao.

Well then. This only meant Jee would have to earn their respect just as effectively now, wouldn't he…

He was still firmly held by his resolution to behave, so he only permitted himself to look at Zuko when it was a natural consequence of looking at everyone else – but when he did, he was unfailingly struck by the sheer tenacity reflected on the boy's face. You could carve in fucking stone with the power of this kid's determination. He looked as if every word dropping from Piandao's lips was a pearl to be caught and cherished and he was dead set on not doing anything wrong – even if it was breathing, something which he had been doing since he was born. If Jee admitted before himself that he looked more closely – which he wouldn't – he would concede that there was an underlying current of growing impatience somewhere in that expression and in the way the boy's muscles contracted… but that way lay disaster. If Jee permitted himself to study Zuko's muscles, his thoughts would be plunged right back onto that downward spiral of doom. So he stubbornly avoided this train of thought as soon as he came in view of it, focusing on other students with a determination which had gotten him through 15 years of naval service and was only sharpened because of them.

And very, very firmly not reacting to the lingering, slightly expectant look Zuko gave him at the end of class, before he slowly disappeared into the locker rooms after the rest of his classmates.

***

On Wednesday after class it turned out that not only did they have a club name – they were also about to have a logo. At least according to Sokka, who saw it fit to accost Jee at the end of their regular fifth period class, a beaming Bolin in tow, brandishing a rolled-up sheet of paper like a proud architect might present the plans for something that could be called Millennium Tower or Golden Memorial Bridge.

Jee was less than amused when he saw them approach. Both of them were wearing grins which, he had already learned, did not bode well. Zuko lingered in the back again and hovered by the door, watching the spectacle with a dark, sullen expression which Jee really did not want to try and decipher.

"We wanted to show you this, sir!" announced Bolin as Sokka unrolled the poster lovingly and
spread before Jee what - well, what must have been a painting, because it sure as hell couldn't be handwriting and that left only one alternative.

There were... colors. Quite a lot of colors. So many colors that it looked like someone high on something very illegal indeed decided it would be a good idea to make a paper color soup. And among those enthusiastic blotches, there were some lines which could be interpreted as a sort of creature if the viewer was feeling benevolent, but the actual nature of the intended image was more than puzzling. And above this display of merry artistic chaos were words calligraphed in what the author presumably imagined to be Asian font, proclaiming "The Dancing Dragon Club."

Right.

Jee looked from the picture back at the boys – they were both grinning and watching him expectantly, all eagerness and youthful zeal. Damn. How to handle this diplomatically...

"That's... very interesting," he said at length, taking care to keep his expression as neutral as possible and silently thanking the higher powers for his military experience, which enabled it.

"We did it during lunch hour!" announced Sokka excitedly. "It's a dancing dragon, sir! Those are the wings, sir!"

"Wings. Right. Very... colorful."

"This could be our logo!"

"It'll be perfect after a bit of photoshopping," piped in Bolin.

Yes, if by a bit of photoshopping you mean redoing the whole thing, thought Jee, though out loud he said:

"I think you should wait and show it to the rest of the group on Thursday before doing anything more about it. After my class. But I appreciate your... effort."

"We should have a logo," announced Bolin as Sokka saluted and returned the cardboard masterpiece of modern art back into its rolled-up state. "All the other clubs do."

"Right. Like I said, wait for Thursday and see what the others say. I'll see you both tomorrow."

"Yes, sir!" shouted both Bolin and Sokka in unison, and managed to keep their faces straight for about a split of second before they collapsed into a fit of giggles. Clearly this feat of synchronic responding had been previously rehearsed.

Jee graced them with a smile before shooing them out of the gym with a mock-stern "Bugger off now."

Zuko was no longer there by the door when the two boys left. He must have disappeared soundlessly sometime in the middle of this exchange. Jee heaved a small sigh of relief. This meant another day would go by without him breaching his resolve.

And he had to admit he was doing rather a good job of the whole mess. Both on Tuesday and during today's class he did not look at the boy any more than was strictly necessary, but he also made a conscious effort not to avoid him altogether, which would be taking it to the extreme and sending an inappropriate message all on its own. He couldn't give Zuko fuel to think he was reacting to him in any way out of the ordinary. As far as Jee could tell, he largely succeeded in treating the kid like he treated any other student, though maybe with a bit more reserve and proper, professional distance.
Which was very much needed here. Yes. Distance was good.

He also managed not to think too much about the stuff he read on the Internet over the weekend, though some part him did keep a look-out for any tip-off signs which would shed some light on how much the other students knew of Zuko's situation. So far, there weren't any. From the three weeks Jee spent in Flowing Creek, it seemed that nobody particularly cared about Zuko's parentage – or about anything at all concerning the boy. They kept a huge distance from him and clearly this was how he wanted it.

If only he had wanted the same from Jee, the world would have been a much simpler place.

But no. He took to staring again. Jee could feel it. The more determined he was not to acknowledge what had undeniably passed between them on Monday, the more intense Zuko's renewed attempts to draw his attention got. And today there was also some glaring involved. Zuko was even more violent than usual and it was only by some miracle that Jee didn't have to break up a fight between him and Ruon-Jon, who was unfortunate enough to be paired with him for a pin-down contest.

It was getting increasingly hard for Jee to convince himself that it was not an attempt to get his attention, but this was what he had decided to stick to. It was safer this way.

Besides, even if it was a ploy to get Jee's attention, it didn't matter. Jee could deal with it. He was in control here and Zuko would just have to suck it up.

Not that including the words "suck" and "Zuko" in the same sentence was the wisest course of action here…

Still, looking on the bright side, it definitely wasn't the lethally boring exile Jee had been expecting before arriving in Summerfield. He'd been having plenty of excitement.

Though in all honesty Jee wasn't sure which of the two he preferred.

***

By the time the Thursday club meeting began, Jee was more than ready to call it a day and drive the hell home. All day long the unmistakable signs of an impending migraine plagued him and prevented him from thinking with his usual clarity. The students only made it worse. The unrelenting miasma of heat outside, spiced with storm-heralding humidity, apparently turned them all to unresponsive mush. Even inside the Flowing Creek building the air seemed strangely electrified, as though the coming storm wanted to penetrate the classrooms. As a result, Jee had to do more shouting than usual and resort to the more tradition-blessed Navy disciplining methods, which, by and large, meant running the lazy buggers to the ground until they cried. And not even that managed to lift his spirits. Clearly, it was just One of Those Days and the twice-accursed Zuko situation did not help Jee's mood in the slightest. The little bastard even managed to make things worse in fifth period when he got himself into a near-fight with Chan – Jee actually had to physically restrain them both from punching the living daylights out of each other over a stupid you-shoved-me thing.

And, blast it all to hell, his first reaction was to grab not Chan, but Zuko. Of course. Yes, the brat was the more violent of the two and more in need of restraining, but still, Jee felt like a bloody idiot when he quickly moved to stand between two snarling boys, planting a firm palm on each chest and trying hard to erase the feel of Zuko's firm, solid muscles from his flesh memory. Which was really
hard to do while he still felt them, the heat of Zuko's chest nearly scorching his hand. And when he stood there, ordering them to shut the bloody hell up and leave it while Chan took obvious pains not to turn tail and run for it and Zuko tried to lunge at him, the predominant thought on Jee's mind was:

*I seriously need to get laid.*

Needless to say, after all this he really wasn't in the mood to look at any more teenagers, but thankfully, the club meeting started out smoothly enough. Sokka and Bolin miraculously managed to contain their logo-related enthusiasm and waited until the end of the class with sharing their creation, like Jee asked them to; the lieutenant found himself remembering most of the names of the students he didn't normally teach; and, maybe because of his military aura or maybe because of the merciless drill he put them through during the warm-up, the kids followed his instructions willingly enough and without too much fuss.

Or maybe they just sensed his crappy mood and didn't want to risk it.

Still, Jee saw no reason to go easy on them. One of their aims in setting up the club was to improve the students' physical fitness and endurance and this was exactly what he intended to do – if he was going to suffer through another hour and a half, well, so would they. Push-ups, crunches, reverse curls, stretching, running, squatting, sequences of murderous exercises across the floor and more, all done to the accompaniment of Jee shouting at them to hurry up, had most of the students exhausted by the end of the warm-up.

Good. They had better get used to it. Piandao might preach at them and make them breathe on Mondays, but this was Jee's class and he was going to make things his way.

Next came the basics – it was good to have the kids brush up on them, no matter how advanced some of them were. Jee demonstrated a few simple punches, which they did repeatedly in long sequences to get their bodies adjusted to the movements. Kicks followed. By the time Jee paired them up to practice those basic moves together – one person attacking a kicking shield held by the other – they had less than a half hour left.

Jee let his students choose who they wanted to be paired up with, just to test the general group dynamics, and was pleased to notice that most of the girls did not shy away from forming pairs with boys. Thankfully, they had an even number of students, so the lieutenant did not have to practice with one of them himself – knowing his rotten luck, he would have gotten Zuko. As it was, the kid was eventually approached by Korra, who confronted him with a cocky "Ready for me, broody boy?"

Zuko's only response was a glare and a general stiffening of his entire figure – which, in his body language, probably meant challenge accepted. Jee decided to keep a closer eye on the pair – just in case. He really didn't want to prevent another fight. Neither Korra nor Zuko were known for their mild, controlled tempers and both were obviously itching for a challenge.

Oddly enough, even with this simple exercise, they got it. Zuko gruffly offered to hold the kicking shield first while Korra kicked and punched at it, and one would think there was no way for them to make it into a contest, but clearly Jee underestimated the power of teenage bravado. Zuko locked his legs and tensed up in such a way so as not to budge, even for an inch, as Korra's punches landed – hard, shit, the girl was *strong* – on the shield. And the harder he froze in place, the stronger Korra's attacks got, as if she wanted to force him backwards. A vicious circle was clearly in the making.

Jee shook his head with a sigh and took a quick look around the gym to assess how the rest of the class were coping, deciding it best to leave the two kids to it for now while there was no imminent risk of collateral damage. He honestly didn't have the strength to tell them to cool off, but at least the
general situation seemed manageable enough. Sokka was currently whining under the assault of Suki's heated attack, Katara was holding the shield for Aang who took obvious pains not to kick and punch too hard even despite the girl's encouragement – Jee would have to do something about that – Bolin practiced with Jack, a boy who could compete with him in size, Haru was helping Lucie with her stance. Some of the pairs were goofing off, but not disturbingly so. Nobody seemed to require his immediate attention, so Jee strolled over to Aang and demonstrated how he should have been hitting the shield.

"Don't be afraid to hit hard, kid," he said, aiming a punch at the shield which Katara withheld with a small smile. "See? She's not a delicate flower. She's tough. You won't hurt her. Now give it a go for real."

Instead of following Jee's instructions right away, though, Aang hesitantly scratched the back of his head. "Um. That's not really my style, sifu Jee," he confessed with a sheepish, apologetic smile. "I'm used to Ba Gua. We don't really, uh, punch and kick like that…"

Right. No shouting, Jee, this kid doesn't look like he takes well to being shouted at…

"Versatility is good whatever your preferred style is," he said, trying to sound patient. "You may find yourself in a nasty spot one day and you're gonna wish you practiced some punching then. You'll get a chance to show off your skill, but today it's punching time. Now hit that shield and imagine it's your least favorite person's face. That always works for me."

Aang sighed and shuffled in place, looking unsure and mumbling under his breath: "But that's hate and negative energy. It's not how I'm supposed to feel…"

Jee decided that in this situation, the Eyebrow Raise of Doom and his best drill sergeant face were appropriate.

"What was that?" he asked loudly, activating both; oh, yes, that felt good.

Aang sprang to attention, his eyes wide and panicked.

"Nothing, sifu Jee, sir! I'm going to punch the shield now, sir!"

"Good! Show me!"

"It's all right, Aang," added Katara in an encouraging tone from behind the shield. "I'm ready."

This time it was better. The kid actually put some muscle into it. Jee nodded in satisfaction and sent Aang a fraction of a smile before moving on, glancing briefly in the direction of his most combative pair.

They had switched in the meantime – Korra held the shield now and Zuko kicked at it, viciously hard and fast. The smacks of his feet colliding with the shield echoed loudly in the gym. Admirably, Korra held fast under the assault, her feet locked, her teeth clenched, her face fixed in a determined frown. She was making it into a strength contest much like Zuko had before.

Well. If they felt so inclined, Jee wouldn't interfere. It kept Zuko busy and his energy directed… elsewhere that was not Jee. As long as the shield was the only one receiving all the abuse of raging teenage hormones…

They finished a little early, officially to give Sokka and Bolin time to present their creation. Jee predicted it would turn into a prolonged discussion and was proven right almost immediately, when the unrolling of the poster provoked a fair amount of incredulity accompanied closely by hilarity. He
sat back, rolling his shoulders and massaging them, and impatiently watched the spectacle unfold.

"You have got to be joking…"

"What does that even look like?"

"You call that a dragon? My cousin could do a better dragon than that. And she's 4 months old!"

"Well, you draw one if you're such an expert!"

"I think it looks… cute."

"Yeah. Like a toddler's scrawl."

"I worked very hard on this, I'll have you know!"

"You mean 'we' worked hard on this, right?"

"Well, yeah. Sorta."

"You know, Bolin, this really isn't something you should be proud of."

"Hey!"

"I think we could make it into a snake if we added a tongue…"

"And what's with the rainbow? Are we a gay club now?"

"That's not a rainbow, that's dragon fire!"

"Oh yeah? Since when is dragon fire rainbowy?"

"Seriously, whatever you guys have been smoking, you should lay it off."

"Cut the guys some slack. That's just Sokka's gay subconscious making itself known."

"For the last time, you idiots, THAT IS NOT A RAINBOW!"

"Maybe if I worked on it a little, we could use it…"

"As a deterrent, you mean."

"Hey!"

Zuko, predictably, did not take part in the discussion. While the rest of the group huddled in a noisy, chattering semi-circle around the poster duo, he sent a long, lingering look at Jee – at which point Jee abruptly transferred his gaze to the group, rather more ostentatiously than was necessary – then abruptly made his way to the locker rooms, wiping his forehead as he went and breathing heavily from exertion. Jee watched him go out of the corner of his eye until the boy disappeared from view.

Okay, so things could be going better. But with any luck, Jee had gotten his message across. They were going to tread the path of the moral and godly from now on, no matter how often Zuko decided to take his shirt off…

Jee massaged his own forehead and temple, swallowing a groan. Yeah, there was a definitely a nasty headache already developed there, dangerously close to a full-blown migraine. He would have to stuff himself with some powerful painkillers once he got home. And go straight to bed.
Fucking teenagers with their fucking perfect bodies and fucking provocative staring…

At least the poster issue seemed to have been temporarily dealt with. Aang offered to work on it, as apparently he was in an art class, and a few people volunteered to help. With that concluded, the only thing left to do was end this session with a formal bow to signal that they could all damn well go home now.

When upon getting into his car Jee remembered he still had the grocery shopping to do, he very nearly slammed his hands on the honk.

It was late in the evening when he finally parked by his apartment building and climbed the creaky stairs up to the third floor, laden with bags of shopping. His dinner was an improvised, quick affair of frozen, ready-made lasagna washed down with some ice-cold beer straight from the fridge, which sometimes helped Jee with his headaches. He was too relieved to be back home to care about quality nutrition.

Not that this cramped, cluttered little two-room space deserved to be called home. But it was quiet, private and blessedly teenager-free, and Jee could roam around it with nothing on but his boxerbriefs, so it was good enough for his standards. At this point, he just wanted to be left alone.

The thunder which rippled across the sky did not surprise him in the least as Jee threw himself on his old, squeaking bed in the dark, not bothering to turn the light on. The air smelled of storm so strongly everyone expected it to break out any moment, and even back when the lieutenant had been busy shopping the wind had already started to howl through the streets. It was only a matter of time. As long as it didn't rain, he could keep his windows open to let in the wind and the colder, blissfully fresh air…

Jee closed his eyes when the next thunder rumbled alarmingly close and ear-splittingly loud. He stretched on the bed, tension painfully obvious in his shoulder and neck muscles – and, well, bloody everywhere. Maybe it was a good time for a cigarette. He wasn't a heavy smoker, but he did enjoy one every once in a while, particularly when he felt more stressed out than usual.

Sitting up, he leaned over to his bedside drawers and rummaged in them for the packet he kept there in case the urge struck him. But even with the cigarette in his mouth and the stormy, charged air pouring in from the open windows, it still wasn't enough to help him unwind or magic the pulsing pain in his head away.

It was so hot. It had no right to be, what with October right around the corner, and yet… The storm should clear the air a little, but the humidity was maddening. The air was positively oily with it. Jee lay there nearly naked on top of his bedspread and still drops of sweat trickled down his neck, down his legs, from his armpits…

The problem was, he knew what he really needed. And, as the storm rolled closer and closer, he was increasingly willing to just crack and do it.

Maybe this really was it. This one moment of abandon. To clear his thoughts and rid himself of this blasted, pent-up tension. Maybe then it would be easier to move on and keep his promises to himself.

And, well, why the bloody hell not? The walls may be paper-thin, but in this weather, nobody would hear him. Not the young married couple with a 1-year-old toddler who lived next door from him, not the middle-aged single businesswoman in the flat below and certainly not the widowed Mrs. Chow, his old and deaf-ish landlady, dwelling above. They were all busy with their own lives – even now, Jee could hear the crying of the 1-year-old through the wall and their parents trying to soothe and distract him with noisy cartoons. Nobody was going to care about what a lonely ex-sailor did on his
Another thunder rolled, this one finally unleashing a torrent of long-awaited rain on Summerfield. Jee swore under his breath, got up, closed the windows, turned on the fan and lay back down on the bed, extinguishing his cigarette.

And then, he closed his eyes, took one deep breath to say a temporary farewell to his resolve and slid his right hand under the waistband of his underwear.

What the hell. There was no harm in fantasizing if he wasn't going to act on it…

And yet, initially he still refused to think of Zuko, clinging to what pitiful shreds of morality he had left. The rain banged and rattled furiously against the glass, the thunderstorm crashed and rolled over his head, and he lay there in darkness, stroking his already half-hard cock almost languidly – because why hurry, he had all night, there was no urgency whatsoever – searching his memory for particularly arousing memories of his past exploits.

Like that one time, when he fucked Steven Hawkins up against the door of the engine room, both of them biting onto the other's skin to keep quiet…

Or Miguel Duncan back in basic, his young, tawny skin glistening in the showers when they rushed through it to make it before the lights-out…

Or when Steven sucked him off for the first time while they were both on guard duty…

Or that one guy in Iran, barely over twenty, so skillful with his tongue, so eager to please…

Zuko's skin coated with sweat as Jee grabbed him from behind to stop him from lunging at Chan…

The grasp on his cock became firmer as he let out a soft groan into the static darkness.

Fuck, it was useless. He could fight a losing battle against his own mind all he wanted, but deep down, he knew what was really boiling beneath the surface. And he was rapidly losing his stamina and the will to fight. No one could see his thoughts except himself. Might as well give in.

His hand sped up as his mind filled with images of Zuko, shirtless and gleaming with sweat and looking at Jee like he sometimes did in class – only more so, with more obvious lasciviousness and need. Feeling only a little guilty, Jee summoned the memory of how his palm felt pressed up against Zuko's chest and imagined what it would feel like to run it over the rest of the boy. And suddenly, the floodgates opened. The dam exploded. More pictures, all originating from Jee's suddenly overactive imagination, burst forth, so quickly they nearly blurred into one another.

Zuko standing alone under the school showers, the water trickling down his spine, along the smooth, enticing curve of his buttocks and between them, and he was looking over his shoulder at Jee, smirking at him in invitation.

Zuko on his knees in the locker rooms, gloriously naked and eagerly sucking on Jee's cock, a glazed look in his eyes as he locked them with the lieutenant's.

Jee sucking on him, in the back parlor of the Jasmine Dragon, Zuko with most of his tea server's uniform still on, writhing and pulling at Jee's hair and breathlessly gasping his name.

Zuko riding him in the middle of their empty gym, wild, wanting and reckless.

Jee fucking him, fucking him hard, from the behind, lying on top of him, sideways, on this bed, on
the floor, in the school's restroom cubicles, on the bunks of some of the ships he'd served on, and Zuko looking at him, constantly looking at him, his striking golden eyes wild and bright and glazed with sex, wanting, lusting, demanding…

He came into his hand with a hitched breath, his eyes snapping open, still seeing Zuko's white, naked body in a dizzying whirl of highly inappropriate images, the boy's eyes boring into his mind, the thunder a shattering rumble in his ears.

He lay there afterwards, in his dark, dark bedroom, God only knows how long, just breathing heavily and listening to the storm.

It was so much easier than thinking.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Zuko gets even more aggressive, Ming is flirty and Jee shows exactly how much he ISN’T a good role model.
"Ok, hang on," asked Jee carrying his lunch tray with a cheeseburger and fries and following Ming to an empty table in the teacher's lounge. "What the hell is this Music Night?"

Ming chuckled good-naturedly and set her own tray of highly unhealthy junk food down on the table. "You need to go at least once," she said, sitting down and inviting Jee with a gesture to do the same. "Your reputation as a Flowing Creek teacher depends on it. You could say it's sort of an unofficial rite of passage."

Jee frowned. "And you're inviting me to the next one?"

"In two weeks' time, yeah. It'll be the opening of the season. I'm sure one of Mr. Iroh's tea buddies will invite you to this sooner or later. It's kind of a big thing."

Jee stifled a sigh and rubbed his temple. The universe obviously hated him.

"The Jasmine Dragon is famous for it," offered Ming, her mouth full of fries with copious amounts of ketchup. "Iroh does this thing once a month. It's mostly for the school bands, a friendly space they can perform in and get their names out there, but there's also an open mike later in the evening with karaoke and so on. It's lots of fun."

"And the teachers go under no duress?" Jee had to make sure – maybe there was a loophole somewhere he could use to wriggle out of it...

"Well, Pakku does select a number of chaperones to help out and make sure the kids behave. He makes a lottery. But you should come anyway, even if you don't get picked. Like I said, it's lots of fun. I'd love to see you up on stage, soldier boy."

She winked at Jee, taking a generous gulp of her milkshake. The man found it in him to smile and briefly debated whether or not to tell her that he played the guitar and was generally considered quite a good singer, but ultimately decided against it.

She would probably find out soon enough. He couldn't think of anything to say that would save him from this. Maybe he'd come with some excuse later, but for now, his mind was too busy panicking, so he cleared his throat and asked the most ordinary question he could think of:

"Will there be alcohol?"

"Later in the evening after the students are done, yes. Iroh is pretty liberal on this point. Don't worry, even he won't make any of us drink tea all the time."

Good. So there was a tiny silver lining to this thing after all.

"Well?" Ming playfully poked his hand with her fork. "Are you game?"

Jee took a sip of his coke and sent her another smile, silently congratulating himself on this feat of facial maneuvering when all he wanted to do was scowl – or better yet, run away and hide in some broom closet until the world forgot about him. "It's not like I have much of a choice, do I?"
"No you don't," said the woman cheerfully, blissfully oblivious to her companion's inner turmoil. "And you know what? I'm even going to pick you up in my car and drive you back so you can drink. Aren't I awesome?"

"You're sure it won't be to make certain I'll come and to drag me out by force if I refuse?"

"Damn, you blew my cover."

"What's this about blowing covers?" asked a slim, attractive woman of about forty, dressed in a smart burgundy suit and hovering at their table with her own tray. Jee's memory supplied the necessary data almost at once: Jane Pool, divorced, two daughters, American History teacher, likes cats and gardening. She took the vacant seat between Jee and Ming, smiling at the two of them.

"Jee's just said he knows about my big lesbian crush on Sarah Lankin from administration," explained Ming immediately.

"Yeah, I was just telling Ming here to act on her feelings."

Jane nodded with the expression of a sage. "A good lay will do her good. Do it, Ming, for all our sakes."

Sarah Lankin, a bitter old lady responsible for schedules, was commonly known among the staff as Sarah Chainsaw, and not for her love of carpentry.

"But in the meantime, she's abducting me for my very first Music Night over at the Jasmine Dragon," clarified Jee, munching on his cheeseburger.

"Wanted to do it before all the other teachers got to it and stole my date," Ming winked at him again.

Jane whistled. "You sly little thing," she said, taking a bite of her coleslaw. "You've just earned yourself hate mail from all the female staff."

Ming shrugged, unperturbed by the vision of her mailbox filled with jealous feminine vitriol. "Finders keepers. They'll just have to deal with it."

Jee wasn't sure how to respond to it, and not only because it was vaguely awkward to hear such blatant testaments to his own popularity with the ladies of Flowing Creek High School. He had suspected for a while now that Ming might have taken a shining to him. All things considered, this outing could be a good opportunity to explain to her that his appetites were, ah, of the less conventional sort.

And even less conventional now than they had been before, it seemed…

Not that he was consciously keeping his homosexuality a secret. But the less people around here knew about his private life, the safer he was. It was better this way.

Which is why he did not deny the "date" status of their Music Night evening that day during lunch and even played along, adding a little harmless flirtation to keep the conversation going. Creating such safety nets never hurt, however much Jee might have disliked similar masquerades. Besides, he really enjoyed Ming's company and it was definitely better to go with her than with other people who might potentially want to drag him to this event, so all in all, there were some good sides to all this.

However, neither of them outweighed the one massive, glaringly bad side, which was spending the evening in Zuko's Uncle's teashop, where it was all but certain Zuko would be as well. If Jee hadn't known any better, he might have suspected there was someone out there who was actively trying to
push them together.

Not that Zuko needed any more encouragement – at least on some days, when Jee's "Zuko's NOT flirting with me" mantra begged for serious reevaluation and gradually lost its potency. On those occasions, the flirting, though admittedly awkward and rather clumsy, was so obvious in the way Zuko looked at Jee, moved or tried to attract his attention, that convincing himself that what he saw was not, in fact, what he knew he was seeing, got nigh impossible.

There was one particularly trying situation during their normal fifth period classes, about a week ago, when Zuko got himself into a real fight, with Tahno this time. Jee didn't know what was going on since he was busy correcting Sokka's stance, and only when the insults turned into a messy argument with fisticuffs involved did he realize what had happened. It took both him and Bolin to fully restrain the boys, with Zuko being exceptionally violent and practically seething with fury – Jee had to hold him forcefully until he calmed down. As a result, the brat somehow managed to brush against him in all the wrong areas at once. Jee sent both offenders to Pakku's office as quickly as he could and remained distracted for the rest of the lesson, and it was this memory, accompanied by the usual half-conscious sense of guilt and embellished with a fantasy of how differently it might have ended, that he wanked to that night.

Not to mention it was torture just meeting Zuko, both in everyday classes and in his Dancing Dragon sessions, because every time he looked at the brat, images from his own fantasies would start speeding through his mind like it were some fucking Formula 1 racetrack. This inevitably led to... undesirable effects. It was a good thing Jee had had plenty of experience in controlling his erections, because otherwise he would have gotten himself kicked out pronto and maybe even locked up for his trouble.

And then there were other days, during which Zuko seemed to avoid Jee as much as Jee wanted to avoid him. It felt, then, as though the boy was trying to pretend that the flirty days never happened and that he never sent Jee any signals that could be interpreted as provocative. Jee learned to distinguish between these moods based on the levels of snappiness and standoffishness Zuko exhibited: he was at his most irritable and violent when he was trying to play the good boy. The Tahno fight happened on one of those days, actually, even though this eventually led to the inappropriate rubbing.

It was a Thursday. Zuko did not come to the club meeting that afternoon.

Initially, Jee tried to interpret this confusing behavior, make some sense of it. He gave up after the second week. One could as well try to see through a crazed lion in a cage – Zuko seemed just as unpredictable. Maybe there was a deeper, desperate signal hidden somewhere in there, but Jee had better things to do than try to decode it. For now, he decided that ignoring the boy was the best course of action he could take. He would deal with things as they came at him.

Of course, making the decision was much easier than sticking to it, but no one could blame him for not trying.

He would deal with this teashop gig the same way. He would go to this Music Night thing and – and enjoy himself, that's what he'd do. Yes. Maybe he'd even go up on stage. And if Zuko was there, maybe then he'd see that Jee just didn't care. And then, hopefully, he'd give up and start behaving like a normal student. Or at least as normal as it was possible for someone like Zuko to be.

And if things got heated again, well then, Jee would just have to confront him openly and put his cards on the table. Look, kid, you're hot, but I'm not all that eager to go to jail and it's not gonna happen, so just drop it and find yourself a nice boyfriend or girlfriend your age. Or something along those lines, minus the "you're hot." That's not the kind of thing one said when one was getting rid of...
a horny teen. It could just encourage the brat.

Actually, maybe that was precisely the sort of conversation both of them needed. And coming to think of it, maybe Jee should heed his own advice and find himself someone of his age. He didn't really want to look for a relationship, not after everything he'd been through, but maybe a solid one-night stand or three would help him get over his own stupid fantasies. After all, it'd been a while…

It was with these thoughts circling his mind that he excused himself from the teacher's lounge and made his way to the sport's wing, wanting to catch up with his paperwork. He still had a couple of assessment tests left to brainstorm and the first batch of report cards would have to be sent soon. Yes, that was the thing to do. Work. Get busy. Stop thinking about all this and focus on the job at hand. This method had enabled him to survive all these years and there was no reason why it should fail now. Jee turned a corner that would lead him through the science wing and across the bustling student cafeteria –

- to be greeted with a shout and the sound of a body slamming heavily against a locker.

Jee was in full sprint before he even knew what was happening, pushing past disoriented students to get to the source of the commotion. Judging from the sounds, a fight was already in full swing. Jee took one more turn, sprinted past the chemistry labs towards the closed emergency staircase…

And there he was. Zuko. Of course. Surrounded by Tahno, Chan, Ruon-Jon and a couple of thugs Jee didn't recognize, some of them wearing the Flowing Creek football team jackets. They had Xi cornered against the lockers and it looked like they were trying to land a hit on him, but it was one of the football players who had a nasty bruise blossoming on his cheek and was whimpering in pain, trying to stop blood from gushing out of his nose. Zuko stood in readiness, his knees bent and planted firmly on the ground, his left hand in a fist close to his body, his right one put forward, ready to block any punches coming his way. He looked unscathed, but furious as all hell, baring his teeth and all but snarling, his eyes reduced to tiny slits blazing with rage.

There were some terrified students cowering a good distance from the group and looking on with morbid fascination, but only a handful – most of them had the common sense to get the fuck out of there. No educators apart from Jee within eyesight. A quiet, deserted little spot… ideal for beating someone up. Theoretically.

Too bad for them Jee had taken the time to explore all the convenient little nooks and corners of the school to move about quicker. Tough luck, punks, it's your unlucky day…

"You little shit!" yelled Chan just as Jee arrived on the scene, drawing his hand back as if about to deliver a punch. "You're gonna pay for that!"

"Like I did last time?" asked Zuko in a low, dangerous whisper, tensing up. Chan roared and flung himself at him.

Jee only had a moment to react. He shouted an authoritative "HEY!" and jumped to stop the scuffle just as Zuko ducked under Chan's fist and kneed him right in the balls. The lieutenant pushed past the rest of the boys to form a living shield between them and Zuko, just in time – they looked about ready to tear the Xi brat apart.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" roared Jee, holding fast and preventing a furious Zuko from getting past him to lunge at his attackers. "Do you want to get expelled? Fine, be my guest, but at least have the decency to take your stupid brawls outside!"

"He started it!" accused Ruon-Jon, patting a bent-over and mewling Chan on the back. "You saw
"What he did!"

"Yeah, and I saw your pal there attacking him first. Sure looked like starting it to me."

"Well, he got poor Silas before you got here, sir," Tahno flipped his hair back theatrically and indicated the thug with the nosebleed with an imperial flick of his hand. "It was beastly, sir. I'm so appalled I'm still in shock and will probably have to be sent home to recover."

"Nice try, Tahno. " murmured Jee, feeling Zuko's attempts to reach past him increase, "but the only place you're gonna be sent to is Headmaster Pakku's office. Same goes for you lot."

"I'll make sure they get there," offered Jeong-Jeong from the drama department, who had arrived on the scene in the meantime and loomed ominously over the boys, the wild mane of his white hair making him look like an imperious lion. He then indicated Zuko, who, Jee could guess, was still snarling and decidedly failing to ooze the typical "innocent victim" vibe. "What about this one?"

Jee's mind, or the part of it responsible for all the stupid, self-destructive on-the-spot decisions, which had apparently chosen this moment to activate itself, considered this only for a split of second before taking over Jee's mouth and making him blurt: "I'll take care of him."

Jeong-Jeong eyed him curiously – and even to Jee, who had probably seen more piercing glares in his life than all the kids of Flowing Creek combined, this gaze seemed impressively intimidating – before he nodded with a curt "Very well" and gave Chan and Tahno's group a slight shove to get them moving.

Jee waited for them to pass, then turned around and grabbed Zuko by his arm. The decision was made, it was time to face the fruits of his stupid blunder.

"Come with me," he ordered.

He led the way to the sport's wing, not checking if Zuko followed, and then, after a moment's deliberation, his feet took him out of the building by one of the emergency exits. He took a deep breath and leaned against the wall, facing the football field. They needed to get away from the crowds first and foremost and this was as good a spot as any. Now that the heat had finally subsided and moved to make way for true fall, it was actually bearable to venture outside and the day was nice if a little cloudy, with some wind blowing in the colder, November air. It was still warm enough not to need jackets.

And yeah, maybe he shouldn't deal with Zuko on his own like that, especially with that thing they had-and-hadn't going, but he really didn't want to send the brat to Pakku again in such a short time for a fight Jee was fairly certain Zuko did not initiate… and, well, perhaps this was a good opportunity for them to have a serious word or two, just like he'd decided before he stumbled across that fight.

Maybe it was a sign. Or something.

Jee waited for Zuko to join him by the wall and did not say anything for a while, waiting for the boy to calm his murderous instincts a bit and start making sense. Finally satisfied with the sound of Zuko's breathing returning more or less to normal, he asked, looking straight ahead at the empty field:

"So what was it about this time?"

"That's not any of your business," snapped Zuko, kicking a convenient stone as though it had Chan's face painted on it.
"See, that's where you're wrong, kid," Jee shrugged, still not looking at him – if he had, he might have gotten flashbacks of his fantasies involving Zuko again and this was definitely NOT the time and place. "Personally I don't give a fuck, but as your teacher, I need to know what's going on. You can explain either to me or to Headmaster Pakku. Call me a big softie, but I didn't want you to get in trouble with him again so soon. Your choice, though."

For a while, Zuko didn't respond. Maybe he was too angry, maybe he was choking on his own rebellious spirit or maybe he was stumped by Jee swearing so easily in front of him. But Jee, for obscure reasons he really didn't want to dwell on, wanted them to talk on a equal-to-equal basis here and hopefully Zuko would get that from his politically-incorrect attitude.

It seemed that he did.

"I don't think anyone would call you a big softie," he whispered, his voice hoarse as usual. Jee smirked to himself. "No, I guess not."

"They started it," Zuko's voice grew loud and indignant again, and then the boy added, probably emboldened by Jee's anti-didactic attitude: "Those fucking bastards."

Jee did look at him then, a short, fleeting glance, the smirk still in place, but he didn't say anything to admonish the boy, weird though it was to hear him swear so openly. The air was clearer between them now than it had been for weeks and he wanted to encourage this development. It could give him a potentially good opening to broach the subject of their... whatever the hell it was.

"They pushed me against the lockers when they passed me. Tried to steal my iPod and smash it against the wall. So I stopped them."

"And gave Mr. Silas a nice broken nose as a souvenir," Jee commented, careful to keep his voice neutral, non-judging. "Why would they do that in the first place?"

Zuko shrugged and leaned back against the wall, following his teacher's example. "They've hated me from day one," he admitted matter-of-factly. "I guess they're afraid I'd try and steal their rightful title of top bad guys of the school. As if I gave a fuck about this stupid place."

Jee looked at him properly then, a longer, searching look. Zuko had his head bowed, but he stood with his scarred profile to Jee and though the hair hid his infamous scar partially from view, it still peeked at Jee, red and angry and foreboding.

Yeah, I can see why they would think that, he thought. It was easy to imagine the rest. Zuko's temper could be described by many adjectives, but "mild" and "forgiving" were not among them. With those guys around for over three years, it was a wonder the school was still standing.

Not to mention this situation felt quite ironically familiar. It was odd to see himself in Zuko, but there it was. Jee remembered being in a similar position all too well. He knew how that felt. Knew how it was to want to grab the world by its throat and squeeze until there was nothing, absolutely nothing left...

"I could always hold my own against them," added Zuko in a low whisper, still gazing at the grass beneath his Nike sneakers. "And it just pisses them off even more."

Ah, yes. This, too, was familiar. High school may not have been the worst period of Jee's life, but only because he had the Navy to compare it to. It was its own special brand of hell, really, and if you were unfortunate enough to be unpopular one…
Maybe that was Zuko's problem: that he didn't have anyone to talk to about it. It was a wild guess, but seemed plausible enough. There was the uncle, of course, and he seemed like the kind of guy every child ran to with the tiniest thing, but then again, Zuko was so painfully different from the old man that perhaps he didn't feel very close to him, not close enough to really open up. There were thousands of kids like that: lost and angry, thinking they had no one to turn to and that they had to deal with life's shit on their own.

Jee knew. He used to be one of them.

"You have a knack for making enemies," he commented softly. He didn't add Just like me, but it was on the tip of his tongue.

Zuko shrugged. "Yeah, well. I don't care. I can take any of them. I didn't need your help."

Jee graced this adolescent remark with a frown. Not that he didn't expect this kind of attitude; he knew it was coming and a part of him half wanted to start reminiscing at the boy, to show him that they were not so very different and that Jee could partly see where he was coming from. But coddling was the last thing Zuko needed now and besides, it would perhaps push their boundaries another few inches, which Jee really could not allow. The lieutenant may have been sympathetic to the kid's situation, but he was also the educator here and needed to set the boy straight, casual atmosphere or not.

"All eight of them at once?" he asked, at which Zuko shrugged again. "That's impressive. But, you know, in your situation it would be wiser not to attract incidents like the one I interrupted. I know they started it this time, but I'm not sure that was the case with Tahno last week. I know from Headmaster Pakku that you didn't cause trouble before, so I can't help but wonder…” Jee took a deep breath and went for it. "Is there anything you need to talk to me about?"

It was fascinating, Zuko's body language. Jee didn't know if he'd ever met anyone more easy to read than Zuko and more puzzling at the same time. The boy tensed up so visibly he must have grown an inch with his head still bowed – Jee could see a vein pulsing in his neck.

Ah-ha. I got you, kiddo. Your move now.

As it turned out, however, Zuko refused to take the bait.

"Why would there be anything I'd want to tell you?" asked the boy quietly, the sudden tightness in his voice impossible to miss.

Jee sighed. Well, he gave Zuko an opening there. It wasn't his fault the brat didn't want to make a use of it.

"I don't know. You tell me." And then, after a moment of internal battle, he reached into the zipped pocket of his tracksuit and pulled out his packet of cigarettes and a lighter. "You want a smoke?"

Zuko looked at him as though Jee suggested that he eat his own foot. Or propositioned him outwardly. And he had good reason to.

Just look at that scarred eye. Couldn't open it any wider if he tried, even when he's shocked. Christ, what on Earth happened to you, kid? And why didn't your rich, powerful Daddy raise all hell in repercussion? What did you do to piss him off this much?

"Are you serious?" asked Zuko incredulously, still looking at Jee as if the man had sprung two extra heads in the meantime. "You're offering me cigarettes?"
"I find them quite calming, myself," replied Jee, taking care to appear as nonchalant as possible. "There are no cameras out here. Nobody'd know. I figured you could use one."

Zuko tore his eyes away from him. "I don't smoke," he murmured sullenly, but Jee was fairly sure he did not imagine the slight shadow of a smile about to fight his way onto Zuko's lips before the kid rapidly looked away.

Good. That was the goal. Gain his trust, treat him like an adult and maybe he'll open up bit by bit…

"You really are something else," whispered Zuko. "You could get fired for that."

"It wouldn't be the worst thing to happen to me, kid, believe me."

"Well, yeah," Zuko's shoulders slumped somewhat as his voice grew softer. "I can imagine. Nobody in their right mind would choose to live here if they had a say in it. Especially not after the army… or the Navy."

Jee took another long look at him, lighting his own cigarette, and then gazed back to the football field. And just how much do you know about the army, eh? he thought. Did Daddy take you for his social calls to the barracks? Did you have tea with the high officers while they pinched your cheeks and fussed over how much you've grown? Did you tell them you want to be a soldier when you grow up?

"It's not all bad," he said instead, letting out a comforting puff of smoke. "Could be worse. Could be some dump with nothing but houses and grocery stores for miles and miles."

Then they were silent for a while, both of them, Jee smoking and Zuko just standing there, leaning against the wall, gazing off into space. It felt… strangely comfortable, actually, for a given value of comfortable. There was a bit of tension there, but nothing like the kind Jee sometimes felt in class, and for once, Zuko was not frowning or shouting at anyone. The cigarette achieved its aim – it put the boy as much at ease as possible. It implied trust, ensured him that Jee didn't want to treat him as just another student when they were in private and relied on him not to blab to someone from the staff. It created a special something, a secret to share between them, a space that was just their own.

And okay, maybe it was the wrong message to send and quite contrary to what Jee wanted to establish between them, but it seemed crucial in creating the right sort of mood to tell Zuko to stop with his… weird interest. Yes. This was the perfect opportunity. They were alone here, no one would walk in on them, no security cameras would record their conversation and Zuko, for once, seemed responsive.

He should do it now. Tell the kid to stop and give up. Right now, while the silence lasted.

Jee took a deeper breath and opened his mouth to say something to this effect, simultaneously gearing himself up for an angry outburst, but Zuko beat him to it.

"You really hate it here, don't you," he whispered, a stronger gust of wind almost intercepting his words and scattering them across the football field. "This exile. Just like me."

This… was not the direction Jee had planned for this conversation to go. Exile?

"Doesn't matter if I do or don't," said the older man eventually. "I'm here. I've got a job to do. Nobody cared how I felt about things. That's just how it works."

"Should I do the same, then?" Zuko looked up to him then, suddenly challenging, anger once again bubbling to the surface. "Give up, assimilate? Stop fighting?"
"And just who or what are you fighting, kid? And why?"

Zuko didn't seem to like those questions at all. Suddenly, he was up at arms again, his walls rising immediately, his body becoming a tower ready to be defended from a siege. He straightened up, detached himself from the wall, stood facing Jee with his chin raised in defiance.

"You don't know anything," he gritted out.

*I know more than you'd want me to.*

"You're right, I don't. Nor do I care," Jee lied, matching Zuko glare for glare.

"Then why did you drag me out here? What do you want from me?"

*I want to kiss you,* flashed through Jee's mind like a lightning, fast, blinding and destructive. *I want to pull your pants down and take you right here and now, up against this wall. And I know you want me to.* Zuko was all up in his personal space now, anger incarnate, his nostrils flaring, his amazing eyes so very bright… and his face heating up, perhaps not only from the building tantrum.

*Do you fantasize about me, boy? What visions do you touch yourself to?* – Those were precisely the kind of questions that should not cross Jee's mind at the moment, but they still did.

Maybe Zuko saw something of Jee's thoughts reflected in his eyes; he tensed up all over again, but didn't back down. His healthy cheek was beginning to turn a rather fetching shade of red. His lips, the older man noticed, were slightly parted.

It would be so laughably easy to lean in now and close them with Jee's own. So very easy. It wouldn't even take a second. And there was the possibility that he'd read the signs all wrong and that Zuko would push him away, but Jee was betting that he wouldn't and then it could get really interesting…

Damn it. Damn it all to hell. He was messing everything up here. He allowed himself to slip and Zuko saw that, he must have seen this sudden flare of desire, he was so close…

"I only wanted to talk to you," said Jee heavily, closing his eyes for a second and sighing deeply. He took the cigarette from his mouth and snuffed it on the ground with his shoe to play for time and calm his racing thoughts, Zuko still standing way too close for comfort. "Like I said, I didn't want you to get in trouble again. Try not to get into any more fights this month, is all I'm saying. I'm not going to be there to save your butt every time, Xi."

Zuko was gazing at him, his angry scowl smoothening gradually into something less wild and threatening. He was confused, Jee realized with a sudden jolt. He didn't know what to make of this situation. He felt the sudden change in the air, detected the oily taste of growing desire, and now it had shifted all over again and he didn't know why or how or what was going on…

"I told you," he said, still frowning, but didn't take a step back. He was either very brave or incredibly stupid, or, quite possibly, both. "I don't need you to save my butt. I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. I just don't want you to get expelled."

"And why do you care?"

"You're my student. That's my job."
And then Zuko's expression changed again. The scar made it nearly impossible to read, but there was no question that the mood around them underwent another transformation. The difference was subtle, but it was there, charging the air around them with a strange kind of electricity Jee was all too familiar with.

As if to emphasize this, Zuko took a step even closer. He was nearly face to face with Jee now. Would have been, had he been taller. Jee could feel the warmth of his breath on his chin.

Which meant he could also see the scar up close, in more detail than he'd ever seen it before, and let it suffice to say the view was not appealing. Jee's eyes escaped from its stark, repelling ugliness to Zuko's healthy eye almost immediately and as soon as they did, the man felt a pang of remorse. So he prayed that the kid wouldn't spot this moment of weakness and forced himself to meet him eye-to-eye, though what he probably should have done was back away a step. Or ten.

"And you're sure that's it, Lieutenant?" asked Zuko in a whisper that was low and disturbingly soft and – Christ Almighty, it sounded sensual. "There's nothing more?"

Now, some part of Jee's brain screamed at him. Here's your opening. Take it. Tell him to back off. He's all but rubbing against you. That's the most provocative he'll get. He's your student, for God's sake. You're the authority figure here. Tell him to stop this, end it now.

And there was the other part of him, which screamed even louder: Kiss him. Kiss him now. He's begging for it. Taste him, see if his skin is really as soft as it looks.

And Jee subconsciously leaned in, ready to do one or the other…

…and, in the end, did neither.

"No," he said quietly and took a belated step back, feeling suddenly heavy, pathetic and very, very old. "There's nothing more."

"Oh." Zuko eyed him for a moment more before stepping back himself, looking oddly deflated. Anger, lust, whatever it was that drove him just a moment before, was gone now and only confusion remained. When Jee looked back at him after a moment, he saw questions there, and puzzlement, and he didn't have the strength to give the boy any answers.

"You should go," he said, leaning back against the wall. "You'll miss your classes."

Zuko left soundlessly a moment later – Jee didn't even notice him go, too busy staring at the ground under his feet.

God, he was so pathetic.

That was during lunch break before his free fourth period. Zuko's class was next. And it was hell, pretending that nothing happened, even if Zuko's attackers never made it to class; because he still had to look at Zuko and saw those questions there, and then he had to look away every single time, feeling like a wretched coward.

At least it was Wednesday. Which meant no Dancing Dragon meeting. He could just go home after the next class and…

But he did not end up staying home that evening. With the night already spilled in black ink outside, he drove up to a club he found on the Internet, in the shadier part of Summerfield, and sat at the bar, looking from one face to another, searching for someone to warm his bed for the night, his veins screaming in restlessness. He even allowed himself to be chatted up and then led to the restrooms by
a handsome, muscular blonde about thirty years old. They made out in a smelly, dirty cubicle to the
beat of monotonous, primal music thrumming above their heads from the dance floor and to the
sounds of other people fucking in the cubicles next to theirs – but Jee left before it got serious, feeling
even more frustrated than before.

This was not what he needed. It didn't give him any relief. It only made him feel more hollow.

At least it wasn't Zuko he dreamt of that night, but Steven – Steven, who had practically shared Jee's
bunk for nearly four years and whose last words to him had been to lighten up, it was all going to be
fine, before the message came that some Afghan bastards blew him up in the desert. And it was only
just before Jee woke up with a gasp that Steven's plain, sun-burnt face changed and blurred into a
smoother, paler one, with a pair of golden eyes boring right into Jee and slender, strong, ghostly
fingers trailing down his cheek.

Chapter End Notes

Next: We go to Music Night, Jee is unappreciative of poetry and Zuko is compared to a
cat.

Also, check out this hilarious picture Nele did as an alternative version of this chapter -
what if Zuko did accept the cigarette?
Chapter 6: Music Night

When they pulled up in Ming’s car on across the street from the Jasmine Dragon, the teashop looked positively festive. A string of lanterns shone bright yellow above the entrance and the whole place glowed like a colorful beacon in the dark, putting the buildings surrounding it to shame. Music could already be heard pouring out into the street as the two of them got out of the car.

"Iroh Xi sure knows how to throw a party," murmured Jee as he offered Ming his arm and led her to the teashop.

"Oh yeah, he's famous for it. Not only in the Asian district."

No, Jee thought. The Army would have quite a lot to say about Iroh's parties, too.

A blackboard stood by the entrance bearing a chalk invitation to the monthly Music Night, with the names of bands performing this evening listed below. There were three, with one of them currently entertaining everyone in the teashop.

The décor had been suitably changed for the occasion, as Jee noted when he led Ming inside. There were more lanterns, for starters, and lit candles on every table. Colorful garlands hung from the ceiling together with jasmine flowers and dragons made of origami. About half the tables had been cleared away to make space at the back for a makeshift wooden stage cluttered with electronic equipment, cables and musical instruments, leaving precious little room for the performers. They didn't seem to mind; caught in the middle of a lively rock ballad, all they apparently cared about was their music.

Jee gazed at their faces and tried to remember the names, but the only people he recognized were the drummer, whom he had in second period, and the singer, Molly Zei, from Jee's third period. The music was good, had a pleasant hard edge to it and Molly had a surprisingly strong voice for such a sweet, frail-looking girl – she looked right at home on that stage.

"I love that song," confessed Ming, guiding her companion to a table by the door – one of the few which still remained vacant. The party had been going on for only an hour and already the Jasmine Dragon was packed with joyous music-and-tea lovers, not all of them Asian.

"Never heard it," Jee took a seat and allowed himself a quick study of the staff.

He spotted Zuko lounging against the wall next to the kitchen doors, arms crossed over his chest, a rag hanging from his hand. Jee looked at him until Zuko met his gaze, then smiled and nodded in silent greeting.

There. This should take care of any potential awkwardness – at least in theory.

"No?" Ming looked hilariously appalled. "You're kidding! They play it over and over on the radio.
It's quite a good cover, too. I think I like this version even better."

"It's decent," Jee conceded. "Would never peg Molly for a stage animal."

"Who knows what dark secrets lurk under innocent exteriors. Look at her go. She's amazing."

Jee nodded and scanned the teashop for other familiar faces. A large burst of youthful laughter from the opposite side of the shop caught his attention – seated by two joint tables there were Aang, Katara, Sokka, Haru, a kid in a wheelchair Jee didn't know and Suki, together with a group of girls Jee remembered seeing in the corridors. Some of them were in his third period, too. He was surprised to see they all wore similar fancy outfits, identical to Suki's, in various shades of green, and a few of them were applying make-up which, at this stage, looked more like traditional warrior face-paint or something Kiss fans could wear.

Intrigued, he nudged Ming and indicated the noisy, colorful bunch. "Do you know anything about this?"

"Oh!" Ming's eyes lit up in excitement. "The Kyoshi Warriors! Suki started them. They all come from Kyoshi Street here in Summerfield. They're a sort of gang, but not of the troublemaking kind. Suki teaches them everything she knows about self-defense and they follow her like a pack of fangirls. Apparently, some of them are good musicians and dancers, too. They've been performing at Iroh's for some time now. You're in for a treat, Jee. They're really good."

"And the crazy face-paint?"

"Their stage signature. Goes with their music really well. They use props, too. You'll see."

Some of the kids at Suki's table spotted them in the meantime; Aang grinned and waved, Katara inclined her head politely and smiled, Haru did the same and Sokka actually saluted. Jee nodded at them in acknowledgement and continued his teashop survey, curious what other familiar faces he might spot.

A few teachers, some students here and there, quite a lot of strangers…

Ah, and of course, the Pai Sho club all gathered in the corner. There was no mistaking Iroh's robust, heartfelt laughter. Him, Pakku, Piandao, Jeong-Jeong, even Bumi the physics teacher, better known among the Flowing Creek personnel as The Nutter (and for a good reason; Jee had the misfortune of talking to him a couple of times and always left feeling short of a few brain cells) – they were all there, engaged in a game. Not the Pai Sho thing this time, but cards. Jee briefly debated whether or not to stroll over and say hello, but decided against it for the time being. The old buggers would no doubt spot him soon enough and Jee suspected that their entire gang unleashing their venerable company on him all at once would be rather more than he could handle without a drink in his hand – and then there was the question of Iroh himself. Jee didn't feel all that eager to talk to him face to face again. Knowing his rotten mouth, he might just slip and address the man as "sir" or blurt out something to the effect of *Did you know your nephew probably has a daddy kink?*

No. It was better to avoid the old bugger for as long as he could.

"Here, take a look at the card," suggested Ming, pushing said item towards Jee. "I already know what I want."

"I was rather banking on you ordering for both of us," Jee admitted, taking the card and giving it a skeptical once-over. "That's what people did whenever they dragged me in here."

"Not a tea enthusiast?"
"Not by a long stretch. But… that's not their usual card, is it? There are only two types of tea here and some cocktails…"

Ming smiled. "That's because Iroh prepares a special blend for each Music Night," she explained. "The first cup's always on the house. I think it's his way of experimenting. Sometimes his Music Night creations make it to the main menu, sometimes they don't. He always gets incredibly excited about the whole thing."

"You don't say." Jee sighed. "I'll take whatever you're having. Can't really tell one fruit tea from another. Usually I just grab the first thing from the shelf."

"Don't worry," Ming patted his hand comfortably. "It won't be long now before they serve alcohol. You'll feel better then."

Jee smirked skeptically. "That a promise?"

Ming beamed at him.

This could be a good moment to introduce the subject of his true preferences, Jee thought fleetingly. He had to do it soon, while the evening was still young and before she got more emboldened. It wasn't fair to lead her on like that any longer. He could casually ask about her relationships and then squeeze somewhere in there, subtly, that she looked really lovely tonight – which she did – but she wasn't exactly his type, sorry…

"Are you ready to order?"

Jee nearly jumped out of his seat. How on Earth did Zuko get to their table so quietly? Honestly, sometimes Jee was ready to swear the brat was a fucking secret ninja-in-training.

"Hi there, Zuko," greeted him Ming easily, leaning back in her chair. "Good to see you. What's this new chocolate extravaganza?"

Zuko shrugged, shooting Jee a furtive glance and something which could, in proper lighting and by someone in a benevolent frame of mind, be considered a shadow of smile. "Uncle's going on and on about it," he said disinterestedly. "Made me try it. It's okay, I guess."

"Honestly, kid," Ming laughed and shook her head. "How can you work and live in a teashop and sound so bored about it?"

"Honestly, kid," Ming laughed and shook her head. "How can you work and live in a teashop and sound so bored about it?"

"You would sound bored, too, if you lived here, miss," replied the boy softly, his face settling into a full frown.

"I guess you and Jee here would have a lot to talk about."

It was almost comical, the way they both shot identical looks at each other in the very same moment, and then looked away just as quickly. Good thing no one was likely to have a reason to study their mannerisms more closely – otherwise they would have just given them some serious incriminating evidence.

Acting like a culprit even despite his continuous refusal to commit the crime. Good going, Jee, real good going.

"We'll both have the chocolate thing, then," decided Ming in the meanwhile, seemingly oblivious to the awkward moment she'd sparked. "I'm curious. Aren't you, Heng?"

And it was then, as Jee realized in hindsight, that the situation shifted from awkward-but-bearable to shit suddenly hitting the fan. Zuko gave him a longer look, longer and searching, his eyes narrowing and darkening as he inspected both Jee and Ming.

… Oh.

Well, damn. There was no question of how this would look to the kid. And now Ming went and called Jee by his first name, something nearly no one apart from his mother did. Not even his lovers.

The brat would draw all the wrong conclusions, of course he would – indeed, was clearly doing so already. Jee fancied he could look past the layers of hair and skin and flesh right into his brain and see the cogs and wheels turning, the thoughts rapidly acquiring a scarlet hue; could imagine the sudden tightness in Zuko's chest so well as though it were his own.

Jealousy was a nasty, nasty feeling. And it sneered right at Jee from the Xi boy's eyes.

The lieutenant felt like swearing. This had the potential to turn into something really, really bad, not to mention it could undo whatever progress they had managed to achieve in their relations. Which, granted, was not exactly stellar, but still, there was no denying the atmosphere between them had shifted after their lunch break talk – Zuko's staring got less obtrusive, he no longer reacted to everything by blowing up in anger and seemed, in fact, more... not subdued, exactly – that would have been about as possible as Zhao distributing non-poisonous candy – but contemplative, maybe? When Jee did catch him looking his way, it was no longer the disturbing heat he'd grown familiar with, but honest-to-God curiosity, though sometimes mingled with something darker.

And that was understandable. He must have confused the hell out of the kid that afternoon.

The point was, Jee really wanted to get somewhere with him, and not necessarily the bedroom anymore. He wanted to help, especially now that he'd gotten a glimpse of a true person behind the ball of anger and had an inkling as to what could be done. Especially since he'd begun to suspect that, for all his outward bravado, Zuko must have struggled with his own feelings and felt confused by them – that would explain the erratic, unpredictable behavior. Jee understood, or at least he thought he did. The boy was seventeen. He had every right to feel disoriented and conflicted over his own urges, even more so if he had not had a boyfriend before – and frankly, Jee couldn't see that happening. The sexuality conflict was another area that, with a bit of empathy and goodwill, Jee could perhaps aid him in, or at least soothe the transition somewhat until the boy grew into his skin; he remembered being confused like that himself all too well.

It would be a painstakingly slow process, but they had already taken the first step. Which could go to waste now, incinerated with this one, violent spark of jealousy. It would be all to easy for Zuko to extend it into betrayal.

And yes, Jee had initially wanted to drive him away at all costs, even if it meant hurting his feelings in the process, but now…

"Anyone joining you?" asked Zuko quietly, glancing first to Jee and then down at the floor, thus confirming all of Jee's suspicions. Fuck.

"I don't think so, no," Ming sent the boy a winning smile.

Zuko's jaw visibly tightened as he bowed his head even lower.

"Right," he whispered and stalked off without a second glance at either of them.
And for one, horrible second Jee was gripped by a sudden, suicidal, inexplicable need to go run after him.

_Idiot. Idiot, idiot, idiot…_

A soft sigh from Ming made him turn – she was also looking after Zuko's retreating back, her expression sad.

"Don't you sometimes wish you knew what makes that boy tick?" she whispered, supporting her chin on her palm.

"Yes. Frequently." And if that wasn't the understatement of the year, Jee'd eat his own sideburns.

"Oh right, he's in your classes. I never had him as a student, but I'm a frequent visitor here and a bit of a friend of Iroh's and it just seems…"

She never did finish the thought, but shook her head, looking wistful.

Okay, Jee had to be careful there and not jump on the topic too eagerly. His best bet was to change it, however much he wanted to gossip about Zuko with someone who'd been there to watch the kid through all his years in Summerfield. Better not display overt interest.

"He's a tough one," he conceded, shrugging to boost the nonchalance factor and swinging one arm over the chair, "but I've met many people like that before. Well, maybe not exactly like him, but I know how to deal with them. You should have seen some of the guys in Navy boot camp, they make Zuko look like a meek nerd."

Ming smiled a very crooked smile at that. "I'm sure you were one of them, you big troublemaker."

"Oh, you have no idea," Jee returned the smirk.

"So how did you end up there in the first place?"

Jee shrugged again, looking down at the table. "Seemed like a good career choice at the time," he murmured. "I was young and stupid, I wanted to get out of home like crazy and my mom couldn't afford to send me to college. The Navy was a better choice than cleaning the toilets at Wendy's and seemed like a good way to start over, see the world, get somewhere. The pay was good, too, and the benefits, you know: all the perks they give you for your willingness go to get yourself killed. I was never ambitious or fanatical enough to try and join the Marines, the Navy was more than enough."

_It could get me well away from mom and gave her a reason to be proud from a good distance, so everyone was happy._

"It helped set me straight," he continued, glancing up at Ming. "I used to be one hell of a brat."

"Care to tell me more?" His companion smiled in encouragement, her eyes lighting up.

"Maybe some other time," Jee returned the smile. "You gotta let me keep some of that enigmatic aura. Can't spill all the secrets on the first evening, now can I?"

"'Enough about me, let's talk about you', eh?" Ming chuckled, but then her gaze fell on the door to the teashop and she perked up so visibly that Jee's response died on his lips.

"Well, would you look at that," whistled the woman. "Bolin's older bro is back in town!"

"Who?"
Ming pointed to Suki's table, which now gained four more occupants in the shape of Korra, Bolin and a couple Jee didn't know, visibly older than the rest of the kids: a tall, lean boy sporting a red scarf and an elegant girl with stunning hair and even lovelier face.

"That's Mako," explained Ming. "He's in college now. I used to teach him. Good at MMA. And this must be the Sato girl, Hiroshi Sato's daughter. Rumor has it her daddy paid for Mako's tuition and is going to pay for Bolin's, too, just because his daughter is dating one of them... Mako got a sport's scholarship anyway, but I guess those guys can use all the help they can get."

Ming then launched herself into a lengthy tale about the circumstances of Bolin and his brother, then started talking about Aang and a few of her other students, displaying the easy, conversationalist style Jee enjoyed about her so much. His companion was witty, funny and had no qualms whatsoever about mixing factual information with the most outrageous gossip; Jee learned more about his own students than he would have discovered on his own during the whole academic year. About some of the teachers, too, and perhaps more than he really wanted to know. Like that bit about Mrs. "Aunt" Wu, the widowed student counselor, flirting shamelessly with Iroh at every given opportunity.

"I'm surprised she's not around," commented Ming, craning her neck to look around the teashop. "She usually comes to these things regularly. You should see poor Zuko's face when them two love birds are at it. It's hilarious. And it's not only old Aunt Wu, actually, though she is his favorite. Iroh is just a big flirt in general. It's all rather sweet."

And during all this, she never once gave Jee the opening he needed to steer the conversation in the direction of his homosexuality. He didn't want to spring it at her out of the blue, so he decided to resign himself to the situation and be patient. A right moment would come.

Zuko came over sometime into the conversation, gave them their tea and left without a word, like a mute slave in some sultan's court, without one look at Ming or Jee. The lieutenant tried not to glance after him this time. With Ming distracting him, it was much easier.

In the meantime, Molly and her band were replaced on the stage by Suki's Kyohoshi Fighters or whatever it was they called themselves. The girls, all wearing the ridiculously strong, theatrical make-up and identical outfits, ascended the podium to a thunder of applause and enthusiastic cheering, the loudest coming from Aang's table. Iroh came up on stage with them to thank the previous band and present Suki's, but from the crowd's reaction, he hardly needed to – Jee seemed to be among the very few who had not heard them play yet.

"Go, Suki!" shouted Sokka, nearly standing on the table and obviously taking great pains to be heard above the noise; his girlfriend laughed and blew him a kiss, to which the crowd reacted even more loudly.

"They're playing traditional Asian folk and sometimes add a bit of a modern touch to it," explained Ming. "Wonder if they're gonna do the fan dance... Oh yes, they are!"

Jee looked to where she pointed, the sweet, lukewarm taste of the last drop of his chocolate tea dropping down his throat. Iroh and a few of the staff, a silent and grumpy Zuko included, were clearing a small space in front of the podium, pushing the front-most tables back a bit. Not only did the tables' occupants not mind – they were eagerly cooperating. Clearly whatever was about to take place was very popular.

Jee's eye was then drawn to the instruments the girls were tuning. He was hardly an expert on his own culture, but they looked like traditional folk instruments.
"How did they manage to get their hands on that?" he asked skeptically. "Looks like expensive stuff."

"Iroh funded it. He's a great supporter of the arts. Took Suki's band and a couple others under his wing after they first performed here."

Jee frowned.

"Ming," he asked slowly, careful about how to phrase his next question, "don't you ever wonder how the owner of a teashop could afford all this?"

The woman shrugged. "It's a very successful teashop. And I guess he's got some cash stacked on the side. Maybe he gets a good pension. Never wondered about it, actually. Everyone's happier now that Iroh's in town. He's really done a great deal to liven up the community here."

"Obviously," Jee murmured, glancing over to Iroh, who was now busy chatting with a middle-aged couple by one of the tables. "And you're not even curious?"

"Of course I am, just a bit. But as long as he's doing so much good, I see no reason to probe. Now cheer up and enjoy the show, you grumpy bugger."

With a resigned sigh, Jee did as he was told, tearing his eyes away from Iroh and focusing on the stage. A few of the girls were on the podium and starting a wistful, melancholy tune with drums, flutes and pipas while the others stood in a formation below and began to move in a slow, precise, complicated routine, each wielding two golden fans. Suki led the dancing group, graceful, focused and strangely unearthly under the face-paint.

It was… objectively beautiful, Jee had to admit. The music had a certain hypnotizing quality to it – slow and modest, it conveyed the melody with only a few, sparse sounds, and the girls with the fans moved to the beats but also to the ones that were not played, reacting to the intervals between sounds as though those, too, were drum beats. It looked less like a dance and more like a mix between that and a fight – their movements had strength behind them, and a concentration that made Jee think of true martial arts masters while they practiced their art. The subdued, color-tinted light played with shadows across their painted faces, giving the whole spectacle an otherworldly atmosphere.

It was… well, it was poetry. Poetry of sound and movement. And though Jee appreciated the art, he had never been much of a poetry lover to begin with – a highly practical man, he was of the opinion that it made life unnecessarily complicated. People wasting their life trying to find the perfect rhyme to describe a hyacinth tended to irritate him. Whenever he was confronted with such kind of poetry, a part of his brain kept insisting that instead of scribbling such nonsense, the author could have gotten off his distinguished butt and done some really useful work for a change. In Jee's uneducated opinion, poetry should be about people; about the filth as well as the glamour; something that could speak to everyone, even those who had never seen a college lecture room. Simple verses, powerful exactly because they were straightforward, and melodies one could whistle in the shower and that stuck with a man for years and years, was what he understood, what he connected to, in music as in all arts, the martial ones included. The performance of Suki's friends, while undeniably beautiful and oddly mesmerizing at first, felt rather too much like the other, more elevated type of poetry for Jee to really get into it. After the second dance, very similar to the first one, his attention started to drift.

And that was when he spotted Zuko again. The boy was leaning against the wall behind the podium, in its shadow, his expression silently thunderous and also strangely desolate. He was holding something, a bottle of some kind, and taking sip after sip from it, staring straight at Jee's table.

Caught red-handed, the boy looked flustered and embarrassed for a second before he apparently
decided to abscond to the kitchen – he straightened up and made his way to the back door, supporting himself against the wall with one hand.

Jee felt himself frown. Was it just him, or was the kid's walk a little… wobbly?

What the fuck was in that bottle?

"Enjoying yourselves?" a pleasant, familiar voice tore Jee out of his gloomy reverie; he looked up into the beaming face of Iroh Xi. It was rather like looking at a smiling old apple with an overabundance of facial hair.

"Yes, thank you, Iroh," replied Ming. "This new tea is delicious."

"I'm overjoyed you like it, dear. Apologies for not having greeted you right away. I would have, but you two looked like you'd appreciate some privacy, if you know what I mean," Iroh winked at both of them more lecherously than should have been possible for a man his age.

Ming laughed, clearly pleased with the assumption. "That's quite all right, we managed to entertain ourselves somehow," she said light-heartedly, sending Jee a warm, affectionate smile.

"So I saw. You're a very lucky man, Lieutenant!" the older man clapped Jee soundly on the back. "Ming is a wonderful girl."

Jee tried on a smile, making an effort so it wouldn't appear strained. "She must be a very good actress, then. She's just pretending to be nice to get free tea."

"Yeah, I'm a pretty mean hag to most men," Ming shrugged, winking at Iroh. "But I do love your tea, so you're the exception."

"My dear, you make me wish I was twenty years younger," the teashop owner laughed his deep, disarming laugh, patting himself on his belly.

"Oh, I don't know, Iroh," Ming raised her empty cup to him with a smirk. "I hear your ladyfriends are not complaining."

The retired major general was just about to answer with something lewd – it was painfully obvious in his sly-old-fox expression – when a deafening crash from the kitchen interrupted him.

"Oh dear," said the man, his expression suddenly gravely concerned as everyone whipped their heads in the direction of the noise. "I'd better check what's happened… please excuse me."

Jee swallowed, fighting the sudden tightness in his throat. For a heartbeat he had to struggle with the urge to get up and see what was going on – if Zuko was okay. And instantly, he hated himself for it.

In the meanwhile, the Kyoshi girls did one more dance and then Suki got up on stage, discarding her fans and pulling up a small drum from behind a speaker.

"All right, guys," she said into the microphone, "how about some real fun?"

And, among many whoops and cheers and whistling from the audience, she started a fast, thrumming beat which the girls onstage picked up almost immediately. One of the other dancers also got up on stage, replaced Suki by the microphone and started singing in Japanese. Her friends sang in harmony with her from time to time and it wasn't long before Aang pulled Katara to the open space by the podium to dance. Other couples joined them in time, the music being perfect for dancing. Before he even realized it, Jee's foot picked up the rhythm.
Now this – this he understood.

Iroh returned from the kitchen after a while and sat back down with his Pai Sho friends, but he no longer oozed his typical benevolent cheer. Jee, who eyed him closely, noticed it immediately, even though Iroh was taking great pains to appear his normal, jovial self.

Something was wrong.

What happened next only ensured Jee in this sentiment – it wasn't Zuko who appeared by their table, but the braid-sporting girl with big boobs Jee had seen here before.

"Would you like anything else to drink?" she asked with a winning smile, brandishing a notebook. "Mr. Xi says it's time to serve the cocktails."

Ming declined, explaining she was the driver, but Jee ignored the card entirely and asked, trying to appear disinterested and probably failing quite epically:

"Where's Zuko?"

For the shortest of seconds, the girl looked decidedly uneasy before she schooled her face into her former, friendly expression. Immediately, all of Jee's instincts went on the alert.

And was it his imagination, or did she just send him a very assessing look?

"He's, um, he's not feeling so great," she explained a little nervously. "He took a break."

"It's nothing serious, though, is it?" asked Ming before Jee could say anything.

The waitress chuckled even more nervously. "Oh no, ma'am," she assured, though to Jee's suspicious eye she didn't seem so assured herself. "He'll be fine. He only needs a little rest. It's my pleasure to serve you for the rest of the evening. My name is Jin."

"Good to meet you, Jin," said Ming pleasantly. "Do you go to Flowing Creek? I think I've seen you around the school..."

Jee stopped listening. His eyes flew to the doors to the kitchen, drawn to them as though by an invisible magnet. Suddenly, he knew he wouldn't be able to spend the rest of the night in peace until he found out for himself exactly what the hell was going on.

*I'm so hopeless*, he thought, absent-mindedly tugging at a sideburn. *And I don't think I even care anymore.*

And the fact was, he was a bit of a snooper; he had reconciled himself to this part of his personality long ago. More often than not, it had gotten him in trouble, but right now, curiosity was stronger than common sense.

He waited a bit after Ming ordered something non-alcoholic for herself and Jin wandered away before he stood up with a short "Restroom. Be right back."

If he remembered correctly from Iroh's tour all those weeks ago, the restrooms were the first door to the right in the corridor behind the kitchen doors. Which made it a perfect spot for spying. He could wander slightly further and eavesdrop a little and if anyone caught him, he would just pretend he'd gotten lost. There shouldn't be that much staff at the back now – most of them, from what Jee saw, where in the main area, taking orders or simply enjoying the music.
Flawless plan. Now if only he knew what to look for…

Luck, however, clearly decided to be on his side after a fashion – Jee didn't walk further down the corridor than the main kitchen area before he heard Zuko's voice, loud, indignant and cracking a little, from behind closed sliding doors to his left:

"I'm NOT gay!"

Jee stopped in his tracks immediately and froze in place. Then, very carefully and silently, he pressed himself against the door and listened. Which he maybe shouldn't do, but obviously this conversation was interesting and, if the last few weeks were anything to go by, concerned Jee personally.

"Of course you are, sweetie," replied a girl's voice that sounded like Jin. "You'd have slept with me ages ago if you weren't."

"But I had a… I dated…"

"Yes, yes, you had a girlfriend. When you were thirteen. I know. And yes, she's very pretty, but that doesn't count."

"Yes it does."

"Jet's disagree."

"Jet's an idiot."

"Can't argue with you on this one, dear," Jin's voice gained a little playfulness, or at least it sounded like that from behind the door. "You're the one who's an expert on Jet. Which is precisely my point."

"Get out!"

"Not until you come down from those boxes. Nice and slow, Zuko, I don't want any of your acrobatics. Not in your state."

"I'm not in any state!"

"Sure you're not." Now Jin sounded like a saintly schoolteacher whose student put his head in the toilet again. "Now come down and show me exactly how sober you are."

So Jee's suspicions were right: Zuko was drunk. And judging from the exchange in there, he could also guess pretty well as to the reason…

"Get out!" repeated Zuko, his voice sounding odd – more raw, more… desperate.

"You know, I can't say I blame you," said Jin lightly, obviously trying to appease the angry beast. "He's pretty hot for an older guy."

… Fuck.

"Wha – what?" Zuko was obviously confused and getting defensive all at once.

"I liked his muttonchops," continued Jin. "One doesn't see them very often. And his chest and arms look really, really strong. I can totally see the appeal."

*Deny it,* pleaded Jee silently in his head. *Deny it. Say something, dammit! You cannot be that obvious!*
Instead, Jee heard a sudden clutter, a frightened squeal and a furious, roaring "GET OUT, NOW!"

Jee only had a split of second to jump as far away from the sliding door as he could before it opened with a bang and a panicked Jin all but fell through. Jee watched as the girl smoothened her apron and looked disapprovingly at the room she had just vacated, muttering an irate:

"Honestly! Like a baby!"

Jee decided to take this as his cue to announce his presence in the corridor and gain himself a plausible alibi at the same time.

So he cleared his throat and asked, as politely as he could:

"Is there a problem? Can I help?"

"Oh!" Jin jumped at the sound of his voice and immediately whipped around to face him; Jee watched patiently as her pretty big eyes narrowed suddenly in suspicion and a frown marred her lovely features. "I didn't know you were back here, sir," she said slowly.

"I was just looking for the restroom," confessed Jee with an apologetic shrug, radiating innocence as best he could.

"See, girl, I'm just a guest who got lost, not at all a dirty old eavesdropper who's hot for teenage ninja waiters… "Mr. Xi said it was through here. I only just got here."

Jin scrutinized him for a few seconds longer, which was a tad surprising. She didn't look like the kind of girl who would learn this early to distrust by default. Obviously she was smarter than she let on.

But then her expression changed – she glanced once more at the door to the room where Zuko was, then back to Jee, then back to the door. She was clearly mulling something over; her fingers started fiddling with her apron and she bit her lower lip.

"Actually, sir… " she started in a whisper. "I think there might be something you could do to help. It's Zuko, sir. When I said he's unwell… well, that was a bit of an understatement. Can I… can I trust you not to go to the police?"

"Of course." So she was worried about Zuko breaking the law, getting drunk at his age. That, too, was smart, though admittedly she should have gotten some adult whom she knew she could trust, not someone who was virtually a stranger.

"He's in the storage room," said the girl, motioning for Jee to come closer. "He's sitting on top of some boxes. Goodness knows how he managed to climb up there. Someone needs to take him down before he falls and hurts himself. Maybe you could convince him, sir." She paused again, looking him up and down, and suddenly Jee was painfully aware of what must have been going on in her mind. "You know, as his teacher."

"I'll… try," offered the man, perhaps a little more sternly than he should. "Not sure it'll work out, though. Do you, uh, know Zuko well?"

"Better than most," Jin shrugged. "I'm probably the closest thing to a friend he has here. That's not to say I'm a real friend. Just trying to be one. As much as he'd let me."

Jee nodded.

"And that crash we heard from the kitchen?" he asked quietly, approaching Jin.
She looked embarrassed.

"He's… he's drunk a little bit, sir. Got a little clumsy. It wasn't a big deal. Nothing too expensive. And no one's hurt. Mr. Iroh sent him to bed, but… well, Zuko decided the storage room would suit him better for some reason. I think he just likes high places. I find him on the roof sometimes."

Well, Zuko the Cat. Who would have thought.

"Let's see what we can do, ok?" He smiled at Jin, who obviously needed some reassurance. She nodded, opening the sliding door for him.

Jee walked in just in time to feel the full weight of warm, drunk teenager fall right on top of him.

Chapter End Notes

The lovely and utterly adorable sketches of Zuko the Cat are courtesy of Anankhe and much kudos goes to her :D

Next: There is a lot of descriptions, people make very bad life choices and Zuko pukes.
Chapter 7: Not Ready

Chapter Notes

Caution: absurdly long chapter.

It's also the last one I have pre-written and published in other places, so from now on, there are going to be regular periods of waiting for new updates. Which is my sly way of saying "Some feedback right about now would be awesome, thanks" ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Ouch*, thought Jee. And out loud he said:

"Umpff."

Christ, the kid was heavy…

*What the fuck's just happened?*

"Oh dear," he heard Jin's concerned voice somewhere above him. "Uh, are you okay? Zuko? Mr. Lieutenant, sir?"

*Let's see. I'm currently lying on some floor with a drunk Zuko on top of me. Everything's just tickety-boo.*

"I'm fine," he managed to grunt out, trying to shift his weight and move Zuko off him. The floor felt painfully hard against his stiff back. "Hey, kid! Zuko! You read me?"

"Should I run for help?" asked Jin; in the meantime, Zuko groaned, moved his temporarily sluggish limbs to prop himself up and looked down, straight into Jee's eyes.

And then his own, golden ones comically widened. Even the injured eye opened as far as it would go. Clearly it had not been his intention to test his questionable aerodynamic abilities with Jee conveniently around to cushion his fall; now he was no doubt trying to figure out how the holy fuck he'd gotten himself on top of his teacher, and the very same one who... Well.

Jee met his frightened, glassy gaze rather patiently given the circumstances. Someone should give him a medal or something.

"Hi," he deadpanned, if only to see what the kid would do.

In response, Zuko just stared at him some more, his expression rapidly travelling through different stages of fear, confusion, shock and embarrassment, to finally arrive at a curious mixture of all of the above. The healthy side of his face was nearly completely bright red.

Jee sighed and tried once more to assess the situation. It wasn't a desirable one, to put it mildly. Or, depending on how one looked at it, it was *too* desirable to be healthy for either of them at this point. In short, here they were, on the floor together, one on top of the other, with their legs all tangled up and Zuko supporting himself on Jee's chest. One didn't really need a whole lot of imagination to start thinking very inappropriate thoughts right about now.
"Uh," Zuko managed to announce and immediately Jee's nostrils were assaulted with the very distinctive smell of wine. That seemed to be it, as far as the boy was concerned.

"Feeling eloquent, are we?" murmured Jee, shifting himself a little, which only resulted in Zuko's sharp hipbone rubbing against his crotch.

Jee shut his eyes and tried to list in alphabetical order all the reasons for why sporting a boner in this situation was a gianormous no-no. Luckily, the wine on Zuko's breath made for a rather successful sobriety agent.

"I think this is the moment when you try to get off me," he prompted instead, doing his best to ignore the little, traitorous voice in his head which whispered *Or get off with me*.

"Uh," repeated Zuko, once again demonstrating his awe-inspiring conversational skills. "Right. Sorry."

He blushed even more and fixed his embarrassed, slightly unfocused gaze on Jee's collarbone rather than his face. As he attempted to prop himself higher up and roll off his teacher to the side, his hands slid across Jee's chest in a definitely more lingering way than the situation merited.

His hand was *warm*. And so was the rest of his body.

Damn. Jee half-wanted to reach out and keep him in place now.

Easy now, it really wouldn't do to take advantage of utterly sloshed, confused boys dropping on him out of the sky…

"You're drunk," he accused Zuko once the boy was safely off him and trying to stand up.

The boy shot him a death glare and mumbled an incensed "Am not." So apparently he remembered that he was supposed to be mad at Jee.

Wonderful.

Jee moved to rise from the ground too, wincing a little when his back voiced a painful protest at such violent treatment, then stood next to a decidedly wobbly Zuko and crossed his arms to radiate fierce didactic disapproval – only to uncross them again to catch the swaying boy before he toppled over.

Zuko tried to push him away, but his aim was a little off and he only succeeded in sloppily pushing at Jee's right cheek.

"Jin," asked Jee levelly, struggling to hold the little rebel in place, "just how much did he manage to drink?"

"Um." The girl indicated an empty wine bottle peeking out from a paper bag lying on the ground in a corner by the door. "Only this. But he drank it all himself, and in quite a short time as far as I know."

Great. Simply fan-fucking-tastic.

"Where did you even get that from, eh? Stole it from your precious uncle's cabinet, no doubt," Jee addressed Zuko sternly just for the sake of it, though it was clear at this point he could just as successfully be scolding the pile of boxes – the brat was too absorbed in trying to demonstrate that he could walk straight on his own just fine, thank you very much, and swaying rather dangerously in the process.
Fuck. A thousand fucks with some shit thrown in. And it was all his fault, wasn't it…

Jee sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. There it was, this thrice-accursed sense of responsibility. Try as he might, he couldn't deny what he suspected about Zuko, which really did make it partly his fault if it were true. And now, as was usually the case, he was possessed by the need to make it right somehow.

Taking the little demon to bed, away from further harm, would be a good start. And he would absolutely refuse to think about this situation in any different light until he was safely out of this place, locked away in his own apartment, preferably following Zuko's example and drinking himself into a stupor.

"Could you get Iroh?" he asked Jin, who stood in the doorway biting her nails. "Or if you know the way to this little felon's room, could you show me and tell Iroh what happened?"

"Of course," the girl replied, pulling herself together. "Zuko's bedroom is upstairs, second floor, third door to the right. You'll find the staircase if you turn left at the end of this corridor. It's usually open. I'll tell Mr. Xi and he'll join you as soon as he can."

"Thank you, Jin."

"I don't need your help!" Zuko protested rather hotly as Jee unceremoniously proceeded to throw the boy's arm around his own neck to stabilize him. "I can get there on my own!"

"Says the brat who thought he was a bird," muttered Jee, trying to push his protesting burden towards the door.

"I didn't," claimed the kid, dragging himself after Jee most reluctantly and still trying ineffectively to break free. "Had no idea you'd be there! Would've landed just fine if you hadn't burst in."

"Why won't you tell this story to someone who cares," the lieutenant suggested, stopping just past the door, with Jin still standing there looking on with concern. "Zuko. Hey. Listen to me, you little… kid. You can let me help you upstairs and tuck you in like a good boy, or I can just carry you over my arm like a potato sack and then tuck you in anyway, only much rougher to make sure you stay put. Don't for a second think I won't."

Zuko looked up to glare at him. A staring contest Jee had already learned to expect from him ensued, made so much shorter and easier by the fact that Zuko seemed to have trouble with his focus, before the boy finally saw the futility of further struggle and deflated with an angry huff, which probably meant grudging submission.

"See?" Jee smiled in encouragement. "That wasn't so hard. I promise I won't tell anyone. Now, on we go."

A stifled giggle from behind him made Jee turn around and look at Jin; she was standing in her previous spot, watching them no longer with concern, but with obvious amusement, covering her mouth with both hands. She smiled widely at Jee and gave him a thumbs-up before turning around and trotting down the corridor, seemingly in no hurry whatsoever.

Jee frowned after her. Her little gesture of appreciation didn't seem to imply anything other than "Good job handling him," but then again, he already knew that she'd somehow learned about Zuko's weird little… thing for him. And now that Jee was aware of that, the looks she gave him back at their table suddenly became a whole lot clearer.

This was… potentially dangerous. Jee needed to get Zuko to bed as soon as possible and then
scramble the hell away, so as not to give the girl even more food for thought. She didn't seem to disapprove, but there was no telling what was really going on in her head. If she had any reason to suspect Jee might take advantage of Zuko in his drunken state…

Not good. Not good at all.

Shit, he shouldn't have sent her away. They should have escorted Zuko to bed together so that he wouldn't be left alone with the boy. Suddenly, Jee wanted to shout after Jin and ask her to come back, but it was too late – she'd already disappeared.

Stupid, stupid, stupid…

Nothing to be done about it now, though. He'd think of a way to redeem it later, once he'd dealt with the more immediately pressing problems – like the heavy, stiff weight of a reluctant Zuko leaning on him. The boy might have stopped struggling physically, but it was clear he was less than happy with his current predicament, which he probably viewed as a serious blow to his dignity; his body was tense all over, his muscles hard and unresponsive.

There was also the fact that he was mad as all hell at Jee at the moment.

Right.

Jee adjusted his arm to steady him better and started walking towards the staircase Jin had mentioned, steering Zuko so that they would find something resembling a rhythm. He knew how to do this – it wasn't the first time he escorted a drunk person and now he had the added bonus of being sober himself, which had not always been the case. Plus, for all his lovingly carved muscles, Zuko was still a great deal lighter than most of the people Jee'd walk-of-shamed in his time, though he seemed bent on annulling this little advantage by being as passively uncooperative as it was humanly possible. With one arm strategically wound around the boy and resting on his waist, Jee firmly led him onward, ignoring the awkward silence Zuko seemed hell-bent on making worse.

Miraculously, they managed to reach the staircase without too much fuss. Jee half-expected Iroh to catch up with them at this point, which, indeed, would have been a blessing; but he only heard random series of footsteps on the kitchen corridor and Suki's music, muffled now by distance. Either Jin, for reasons fathomable only to her, took her sweet time informing the owner of his nephew's situation, or Iroh decided Zuko was in capable enough hands and trusted Jee to take care of his precious little demon until he could come and relieve him.

And since when was Jee anyone's idea of a good babysitter?

He should probably text Ming. She was bound to wonder what on Earth was taking him so long. No time for this now, though, he had to brave the stairs to the second floor with Zuko all but hanging on him. Trying to multitask now could very well get them both killed.

Concentrate. That was the key. Ming would understand.

"What were you doing back there, anyway?" the boy asked suddenly, his voice a little slurred though still distinctly snappish.

"Looking for the gents'," replied Jee quickly. "Right leg up. Left now. Good."

"That wasn't the gents'," explained Zuko after a pause filled with struggling limbs. "That was the storage room. With tea and stuff."

"By stuff, would you happen to mean flying teenagers? Didn't know teashop storage rooms
contained those," murmured Jee, readjusting his slipping grip on the boy.

*If I knew, I'd come for tea more often.*

Zuko snorted. "I told you," he insisted. "I would've landed just fine. It was your fault for barging in like that."

"And the drinking? Was that my fault, too?" asked the lieutenant, taking care to sound harshly disapproving and make it clear the question was rhetorical. "You broke the law, you know."

Zuko tried to shrug, then seemed to remember it wouldn't be very effective with one of his arms slung around Jee's neck. "Wouldn't be the first time," he mumbled sullenly.

Jee rolled his eyes. Great, there came the showing-off part. Look at me, I'm all grown up, drinking my uncle's wine without permission… Yeah. Real mature.

And then Jee wondered if maybe, just maybe, even subconsciously, it had been for his own benefit. *Look at me, I'm old enough to get drunk so I'm old enough to fuck…*

Sodding teenager logic.

"Enjoying yourself?" asked Zuko unexpectedly somewhere in the middle of the first flight of stairs; his body was getting slightly more malleable, but his voice sounded even more hoarse and hostile. "I don't mean now," he corrected himself quickly. "Back there. With miss Ming."

Jee nearly swore out loud. If he needed any more proof that his suspicions re: Zuko drinking were accurate, here it was. He had to tread carefully here, and not because of the staircase.

"She's a very nice woman," he replied slowly. "But don't go spreading any rumors about us at school. They… wouldn't be true."

That seemed to get the brat's attention. His head rose as he looked at Jee, who felt the intent gaze on him even though he was busy watching the stairs as he slowly maneuvered them both up.

"You mean this isn't a date?" Zuko's voice now rang with honest confusion.

Jee sighed. "No," he confessed heavily. "At least not on my part."

"Why? It looked like you two –"

"Ok, stop right there. You shouldn't be this interested in your teachers' sex life. That's called being noisy and you know what they say about curiosity."

"I'm not a cat, though."

"Could have fooled me."

This earned him another snort, but afterwards it seemed that Zuko got a bit lighter, more cooperative. The silence, too, seemed less oppressive and sullen. Which only further dampened Jee's mood.

He should have lied and confirmed he was into Ming. That was the sensible thing to do. Sure, it would have hurt Zuko, but it would've been for his own good in the long run. He would've gotten over it. But Jee was just too fucking soft, wasn't he, he didn't want to knowingly twist the knife in Zuko's jealous back just to drive him away and now he had to deal with the mess he'd helped create, as usual.
The point was… he really didn't want Zuko to think he was on a date. Which was the most idiotic thing of all.

Or maybe it wasn't – maybe the cake for the most idiotic thing was taken by the fact that his hand tightened its grip on Zuko's waist unnecessarily, feeling the kid's body warmth seep through the uniform right into Jee. As if on instinct, Zuko responded to this more tender touch by inching closer to his teacher and leaning his head slightly on the older man's arm. He didn't seem conscious of this, or maybe the alcohol lowered his inhibitions so considerably that he didn't care anymore. Jee entertained the idea of shifting them again so that they would regain some semblance of distance, but in the end thought better of it. If Zuko had the excuse of drunkenness, well then, there was no harm in hogging this very, very nice warmth just a little, was there…? It wasn't as if they were molesting each other.

And if Zuko stumbled upon one of the stairs a little too clumsily so that Jee had to catch and conveniently hold him even closer, well then, there was no need to overanalyze it.

The thing was, Jee wasn't used to this. To denying himself – as far as sex went, at least, because God knew he got used to denying himself other comforts long, long ago. No, when it came to fucking, he'd always been more or less honest about it with himself as well as with other people, especially once he'd gained some experience. He knew how to play this game, he'd been in a couple of more or less stable relationships, had had his share of frantic one-night-stands in strange places or awkward tumbles in his bunk in the dark, and he'd never seen any reason to stifle his urges, even in the Navy, where getting caught could mean pretty disastrous consequences. But this – this was new. This was unchartered territory and he had to keep actively convincing his stupid, demanding body it should stay that way. Even though parts of him rebelled against this resolution with all of their might and screamed at him to just look at Zuko, to see how painfully eager and willing this boy was, how easy it would be…

The result was that what at first had only been awkward, uncomfortable and devoid of even the faintest traces of sexual potential, was now steadily blending into a whole different situation altogether; instead of focusing on the road ahead and on taking the next step so they wouldn't fall on their butts, Jee was now focusing on every inch of Zuko's body where it was pressed into his.

Judging from the silence on the other end of this deal, Zuko was all too aware of this, too.

However, luckily for Jee's resolve, this didn't seem to be a night made for romance – when they were almost to the top of the staircase, Zuko suddenly pushed away from Jee and promptly threw up all over the wall. Oh yeah, Jee'd almost forgotten about the wine and why he was escorting the kid up in the first place. The lieutenant winced in sympathy and awkwardly patted the heaving, ashen-faced boy on the back, before pulling out a set of tissues from his pants pocket and offering it to him. Zuko wordlessly accepted the gift and wiped his mouth, looking utterly desolate, then allowed himself to be led to his own bedroom without another word, giving off the impression that he was just a few tiny fibers of strong will short from keeling over and only Jee's support stopped him from actually doing so.

"I… I need to change," he mumbled once they staggered into his dark bedroom and Jee started feeling the walls for the light switch.

"Correct. Taking a shower would also be a good life choice, if you can stand there without falling over. Need my help to get the bathroom?" asked the man absent-mindedly; his hand touched the switch and flicked it, thus bathing the bedroom in electric light.

Zuko briefly shut his eyes against the sudden brightness.
"No," he rasped out. "It's just through here." He indicated a door to their left.

A private bathroom adjoining the bedroom? Fancy.

"I'll wait here and make sure you don't drown, then," decided Jee and crossed his arms over his chest to firmly prevent all discussion on the point. "Any suspicious noises and I'm barging in, so kindly don't lock yourself in there. It would seriously hinder my heroic mission."

Zuko didn't seem to have it in him to fight over this – he simply gave Jee a lingering, resigned once-over, then shook his head and disappeared into the private bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

"Thanks for not throwing up on me!" shouted Jee to the door on a sudden instinct, but he wasn't graced with an answer. Instead, he got the unmistakable sounds of more dry-heaving before he heard running water in the shower.

There was nothing for it but wait, then. A shower would do the kid some good and he definitely needed to get out of his vomit-sullied uniform. This could take a while. Jee deliberately left the bedroom door open – closing it could imply something shifty – and took a few steps into the room proper, then looked around, his curiosity suddenly piqued.

He didn't have anything else to do for now, anyway…

If Zuko was the main mastermind behind the décor, it was clear which colors he liked best – the bedroom was oppressively dominated by the deep red of the walls and the lacquered black of the furniture. Fire Industries colors, Jee noted, with a touch of whatever other colors were smuggled here by various wall hangings, books and other typically high-school curiosities. It felt... daunting, a little. Aggressive, pulsing with a strange sort of destructive, fierce energy. Not tasteless, exactly, not ugly, but... oppressive. Jee wondered how anyone could sleep in here, with all that restless redness closing in on him from the walls.

Which probably explained a lot about Zuko – or maybe it was the other way around.

Fleetingly, Jee found himself surprised to see an actual bed in here. Given Iroh's fondness for tradition, he half-expected a sleeping mat. But no, the spacious room seemed rather modern and ordinary, with a long, oaken desk lining the wall to Jee's right, cluttered with books, papers, notebooks and a laptop; a big wardrobe tucked into the corner to the right; shelves hanging on the walls here and there, covered with books; and a nightstand, with a night-lamp and a thick paperback, an illustration of pirates on the cover, that Zuko must have been reading, judging from a bookmark peeking out from it close to the end.

That was not to say there were no Asian elements, though; there were plenty, and for the next couple of minutes Jee amused himself with a highly educational game of "Spot This." A porcelain figure of a dragon on the desk; a strange-looking altar with candles and incense, a sitting mat spread in front of it, by the door to the bathroom; a traditional Chinese watercolor painting of a waterfall, with cranes and cherry blossoms and something in ornamental calligraphy written on it, hung on the door – a surprisingly peaceful element in this pulsing, vivid redness; more distinctly Chinese ornaments on the shelves to keep the books standing, pale figurines of warriors and women in kimonos; a couple of signs which Jee couldn't read painted in black directly on the red walls. All in all, there was no mistaking this room's occupant's descent, but at the same time, though all of this set the tone of the general décor, it didn't overwhelm it or turn the bedroom into a temple, maybe because there was still room on the walls for some ordinary posters of rock bands and movies and a cork board by the desk with Zuko's schedule, some sticky notes and pictures stuck to it.

It made for a highly unusual mix. Basically, the room looked a bit as if the occupant got some old
rubbish down from the attic, then couldn't decide which stuff to throw away and didn't bother packing it away again.

And decided, for some reason, to add a giant logo of Fire Industries; the neatly stylized flame sprayed in black right above Zuko's bed presided over the scene like some creepy sentinel.

Jee frowned at it as he perched on the edge of the bed, flicking the night-lamp's switch on. It gave off a soft, pleasant glow which Jee deemed more comfortable for a soon-to-be-hungover teenager, so he stood back up and turned the big lamp off, leaving the room in a gentle, scarlet half-light. It suited the general color scheme much better than the previous brightness; made the room feel warm rather than aggressive, turned its furious lividity into a gentler vibrancy.

It also made the sprayed black logo so much darker, somehow. Maybe it was the deepened shadows, but in this gentle glow the stylized flame of Fire Industries seemed to loom over Jee's head in a way that could be identified as menacing.

So the lieutenant escaped from it, looking to the opposite end of the room. Which was when his eyes landed on the altar again and noticed something they had failed to catch before: a pair of crossed, sheathed swords rested on wooden supports on the wall right above it.

Ah. Those had to be the dao Piandao talked about. Not only did Zuko train with them, then, he even owned a pair… Those must have cost a fortune. But then again, the kid was actually among the few people who really could afford it, wasn't he? Even disgraced and banished to the province like that. The thought suddenly made Jee oddly uncomfortable.

The shower in the bathroom was still running when Jee's cell phone rang, disturbing the silence with Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*.

Ming. Oh yeah, he was supposed to text her earlier, wasn't he…

"Hi there," he said awkwardly, getting off the bed and sauntering idly towards the desk to gaze at the pictures pinned to the corkboard. "Sorry for the delay. I had to –"

"Jin told me," said the woman on the other end of the line. "I just wanted to make sure if everything's all right."

"I think the situation's under control. He's taking a shower. I'm hanging on in case I hear something that'd indicate the kid's slipped and bashed his head against the tiles."

"Right, we wouldn't want that." There was a small sigh from Ming. "Just… don't take all night, okay? I do recall promising you some drinks."

"I'll be back as soon as I'm relieved of my Zuko-sitting duty. I'm sure you'll be able to entertain yourself without me until then."

There was a chuckle on the other side of the connection. "Be careful, you may regret saying that. Bye."

Jee said goodbye in a murmur and ended the connection almost on instinct, too intent on what was before him.

He knew that girl. Or at least, he'd seen a picture of her when she was younger and hanging on a 13-year-old Zuko's arm at a party. Here, in this photo cut out from some sort of a magazine, she looked about sixteen, sitting at a table on a patio someplace tropical overlooking the sea, hiding in the shade produced by a giant umbrella and looking thoroughly bored. Rather beautiful, too, slim and tall,
effortlessly graceful, her face sharp, regular and elegant. The clothes she wore were dark, smart and fashionable in this discreet, subtle way really rich and classy people dressed, as they saw no need to advertise their all too obvious status. Her long, black hair was done in a simple, efficient braid and falling on her right shoulder, enhancing the look of affluence and practicality. There was a man's hand resting on the table next to her elbow, but it was impossible to tell to whom it belonged as the rest of the picture did not make it onto Zuko's corkboard. Maybe it was the girl's posh daddy – a senator, wasn't he? What was her name again…?

Curious. There seemed to be at least one person from his past Zuko missed enough to look for her pictures in the press, then. But why the press? Why not a facebook photo, why not something more personal? There was a story there, no doubt about it, and Jee wasn't entirely sure if he liked the implications his mind instantly supplied him with.

His gaze tore itself away from the pretty teenage girl and moved on to the next photo, of a dashing young man in uniform, saluting with one hand and embracing a beaming dark-haired Iroh, also in uniform, with the other. The deceased cousin? Looked like it, the family resemblance was there if one looked hard enough.

It was the third photo, however, that drew most of Jee's attention. There was the Xi family relaxing on a beach somewhere that had palms, with young Zuko industriously building a sandcastle with the help of a beautiful, long-haired, soft-faced woman clad in bikini who could only be his mother. Ozai was there, too, sitting up under a beach umbrella and holding Zuko's younger sister in his arms – the little girl was reaching out towards her brother as though she wanted to join in the sandcastle-construction-site fun. The picture must have been taken sneakily, maybe even by Iroh or his son, for the family did not in any way acknowledge the camera pointed at them, which gave the scene a very natural, genuine feel. Zuko's face comically screwed up in rapt concentration, the tip of his tongue peeking out, and the mother's warm, loving expression as she gazed on her son, could not be faked. It was difficult to make out the father's face as it was hidden in the shadow, but Jee could easily enough imagine him smiling indulgently at his family.

How long ago was this picture taken? It looked like something from another world. If Jee had felt poetically inclined, he would have thought it seemed like a memory caught adrift in the sea of chaos, a fleeting moment forcefully wrenched into a frame so it wouldn't escape on the wind… But poetry was the last thing on his mind right now so he merely stared at the peaceful scene, suddenly unable to form a single coherent thought, his throat going strangely tight.

There was no question that this was a memory. Something irretrievably lost. And this awareness only strengthened Jee's already solid curiosity.

What happened? What made it all go bust?

Jee wasn't naïve. Though he had next to nothing to do with those higher up the social ladder, he knew that to most of those corporate bastards, happiness was just another commodity. Moments like the one caught in the photo had to be scarce in the Xi family – everything Jee'd read about what happened later confirmed it. But it was enough to awake a hollow pang in Jee, an old, muted longing he thought he'd long since left behind.

He used to want memories like this one, didn't he, ages, ages ago…

And then he realized Zuko looked at this picture every single day when he woke up, every single night when he went to bed. Ever second he spent in this room, this scene, this memory, had to haunt him with a remainder of what he'd lost. And, the least understandable thing of all, the kid had chosen to inflict this torture on himself, day by day. The pictures, the Fire Industries logo on the wall…
It was as if he was consciously fuelling his own hatred and anger to make them last, to hold onto the past and his frustration with the present, as if they alone gave him the drive to go on – to fight.

"Should I do the same, then? Give up, assimilate? Stop fighting?"

Was this Zuko's battle, then? Was he fighting against accepting his new situation, against giving up? Was he afraid that once he'd allow himself to stop looking back, to start anew, he would... What? Betray something or someone? Lose his old life irrevocably?

Was that really such a bad thing?

It was, as Jee suddenly realized. For someone like Zuko, it was. People like him didn't think of letting go. They fed on their own anger until they choked, but it was this anger that gave them a purpose. Something to aim at, something to fight for. Something to keep them out of the mundane, oily everyday routine of the average.

In a way, Jee understood. He may never have had the genuine warmth and comfort of a loving family, but he had tasted enough of its imitation to partially imagine what went on in Zuko's head. He'd had his own battles to fight, his own fuels to keep the anger alive, before he'd learned to let go and look ahead rather than back. It was a tough lesson, one of the toughest, and Zuko had yet to learn it – if he ever would.

The sudden silence shook Jee out of this gloomy reverie – the shower had stopped. Meaning he had to bolt away from the desk right now, or else Zuko would catch him spying on his privacy and there would be consequences. So, in quick, noiseless strides, Jee once again made his way to the bed and sat on its edge, schooling his expression so that it looked neutral with a tinge of boredom.

Trying hard not to look like a man who'd just intruded on some of the wounds in Zuko's heart.

Just as he predicted, it didn't take the Xi boy long to emerge from the bathroom once the water stopped running – and when he did, his step seemed confident enough, with only tiny traces of swaying. However, Jee took note of it only when his brain was finally done registering the other, more immediately pressing fact that Zuko emerged from the shower shirtless.

His black hair wet and plastered to his skin, the lower half of his body clad in black cotton pajama pants, the upper, gloriously exposed, still adorned with droplets of water dropping on him from the hair and slithering down his fair skin, the kid gazed at Jee for about a split of second before he started to make his way to the bed. The older man stood up, just in case, but it seemed the water had helped at least partially dispel the cloud of alcohol from Zuko's head – he reached the bed without any serious trouble and lay down on top of the covers, looking up at Jee half-expectantly, half-questioningly.

Which probably meant the lieutenant would have to come up with a reason to justify why he was still here and not making his way back downstairs right this very second.

And yeah, why wasn't he?

"Don't you own a set of pajamas?" he asked, quirking an eyebrow, in what was probably a very lame attempt at humor.

Zuko didn't seem amused; his eyes narrowed. "It's warm in here."

Of course it is. Nice try, Casanova.

Even in his state, the little critter could be sly. Jee absolutely refused to believe he didn't fail to wear a
"Feeling any better, kiddo?" asked Jee softly in a valiant try to shift attention away from Zuko's appetizing physique.

Zuko nodded, his eyes narrowing even further. "I'm fine," he saw fit to clarify. "You can go now."

"Not until your uncle comes to relieve me," stated Jee in a flash of inspiration, hesitantly perching back down in his spot on the edge of the bed. "I have to make sure you stay put and not do anything else stupid before the night's end."

"Why? You're not my babysitter."

"Stop acting like a baby who needs one and maybe I'll reconsider."

Only in hindsight did Jee realize that maybe implying that about Zuko had not been the brightest of ideas – the kid would just take it as a challenge. It became blatantly clear when, in a fit of bravery, Zuko reached out and lay his hand on Jee's.

"I am not a baby," he stated rather vehemently.

And though he kept looking into his teacher's eyes intently as he did so, he couldn't mask the nervousness bubbling under the bravado; couldn't hide the gulping movement of his Adam's apple as he swallowed; couldn't stop the shifting flicker of his eyes or the way they glazed slightly over.

Which told Jee all he needed to know.

You don't know what you want, he thought, looking at their joined hands and then back to Zuko's face. You think you do, but you're uncertain. You don't know what the hell you're doing. You're trying to figure it out as you go. I don't know why you're even starting this and I don't think you do, either, but you're chasing something that's way too big for you, and maybe for all the wrong reasons, and you're not sure what I can give you, but you still think you want to try, even though you hesitate.

You're not ready.

It seemed that the shower and the vomiting did not clear Zuko's head entirely after all.

And yet, Jee didn't pull his hand away. Ignoring the alarm bells roaring in his head, he slowly reversed their positions so that both of their hands lay palm-up, Zuko's on top of his. Jee felt the heat of the boy's narrow gaze directed at him as his thumb started to idly explore, to touch, to travel up and down, side to side, on the offered hand, brushing white, surprisingly calloused skin, lightly pressing on passive fingers.

He should stop it. Every sane thought in his brain screamed at him to do just that. Stop it, and then talk to the kid like a normal, responsible adult without fucking touching him.

But Zuko's hand was warm, he wasn't moving it away from Jee – he just lay there, silent and very, very still – and, truth be told, Jee didn't want to stop. It felt good. Experience told him not to stop anything that felt good, as sensations like this were difficult enough to come by. And maybe, hopefully, this simple touch would be enough to temporarily soothe the fire in Zuko's heart, or at least bank it a little. Maybe he could bring the boy some comfort this way. This simple skin-to-skin contact didn't have to be sexual if they didn't consciously make it so, and right now, it was just a
moment of emotions unidentified, suspended on a tightrope between innocence and sin.

Zuko's eyes still fixed on him, Jee moved his second hand to join the first in its gentle exploration of skin, pressing a little firmer here and there in a massage, as if to say: *Relax. Calm down. You're not alone.*

"You do realize that what you did was incredibly moronic," he stated softly, looking into Zuko's eyes. "As your teacher I should lecture the hell out of you."

"I'm not good at listening to lectures," murmured Zuko, meeting his gaze.

Jee permitted himself a half-smile. "And lucky for you, I'm not very good at giving them. But I am forbidding you to behave this stupidly ever again. Someone could have caught and reported you."

Zuko looked puzzled. *This is what you're warning me about?* he asked in a raspy whisper. "Getting caught? You're not gonna talk about how bad alcohol is for me?"

"It is bad," admitted Jee, "but I started pouring it down my throat when I was even younger than you, despite people lecturing me about it, so I imagine you're not going to listen. I don't feel like wasting my breath. It's something you'll have to learn on your own. Next time, if there has to be a next time, try to be more discreet. The sight of your uncle bailing you out isn't worth it."

"You… used to drink as a kid?" asked Zuko even more incredulously.

"That and more," Jee winked at him, silently congratulating himself on a connection not completely broken. There was hope yet.

"Listen," he said more earnestly, his hands still caressing Zuko's. "I know you have… problems. Don't deny it, it's as obvious as your friend Chan's IQ. I just want you to know that, well… you can talk to me. About anything. Believe me when I say I know what it's like to have problems at your age. I'm always ready to help if you need it."

The boy examined him carefully, his body unmoving, his eyebrow slightly furrowed. When he said "I don't need your charity," Jee was ready for it.

"It's not charity," he insisted, squeezing Zuko's hand once. "It's plain old goodwill. Just… think about it."

Slowly, very slowly, Zuko nodded.

"You should try to get some sleep, kid," whispered Jee into the soft, reddish glow, still massaging Zuko's warm, warm palm. "It'd do you good."

"Stop calling me that," the teen's voice was strangely quiet and, suddenly, intense; his eyes never left Jee's. "I'm not a kid anymore."

Yes, you are, thought Jee, answering his gaze with a steady one of his own. Your body may be that of a man, parts of you may feel like they've grown too much already, but there are parts that still have a long, long way to go.

He didn't say it. What came out of his mouth was:

"Getting drunk does not make you an adult. It just makes you an idiot." The words were harsh, but the touch of his hand gentled the message. "Believe me, I would know."
Zuko's eyelids lowered a little. "You're gonna preach at me after all, Lieutenant?"

"No," Jee shook his head and permitted himself a smile at the boy. "Like I said, there are some lessons you need to learn for yourself. Just be careful."

There was a beat of silence as they looked at each other, the scarlet half-light deepening the shadows on Zuko's body, the giant black flame looming over them both.

And then, something in Zuko's expression... changed. Jee wasn't sure what it was, but he realized it had been shifting for a while, subtly, making the kid's eyes even brighter. Zuko swallowed, loudly, and the tendons in his hand tensed under Jee's touch.

"But there are... other lessons," he whispered, his raspy voice barely audible now, his eyes narrowing again. "Aren't there? Lessons you could teach me."

His hand closed on Jee's.

Jee should have prevented what happened next. He should have voiced some protests, however token. But in the end, though he knew perfectly well what was coming and Zuko wasn't even that quick about it, he did nothing as the teenager, his own student, propped himself up into a half-sitting position, leaned in and kissed him.

As far as kisses went, this one was decidedly not glamorous. It was sloppy and awkward, barely a touch of the lips at first, and hesitant, too, because Zuko nearly missed. Even as he automatically opened his own mouth to deepen it, Jee could sense Zuko's nervousness peeking out from underneath the haze of lust and wine-induced determination, tasted self-consciousness on the boy's lips. The smell of wine still lingered there, muted now by the generous taste of toothpaste, and though the lieutenant wanted more than anything now to leave his common sense on the other side of the door and dive right into this moment, into this delicious, willing warmth, it was this remaining whiff of alcohol that jolted him right back to reality.

When he pushed Zuko away, he did it as gently as he could, grasping the boy's shoulders to steady him as he gazed intently into his eyes.

"Zuko," he said in a low voice. "Zuko. Listen to me. We can't do this. Not like this.

"But we just did," whispered the kid huskily, trying to lean in again. Jee held him steady, though it was admittedly hard to argue with this bit of logic, especially when Zuko's bare shoulders felt so nicely warm, smooth and solid under his touch.

"I know. But we shouldn't. You're still drunk, you don't know what you're doing and I'm not going to take advantage of that."

"What do you mean?" asked the kid slowly, his one eyebrow going up in confusion as his temporarily alcohol-addled brain tried to make sense of the world. "That you wouldn't have stopped me if I hadn't drunk anything?" He cocked his head to the side, his wet hair clinging to the scarred half of his face, his forehead furrowing in a frown as he studied Jee. "Well, I'm not drunk anymore. I know what I want. Do you?"

Shit. Now he'd gotten himself into a true lose-lose situation, hadn't he. No matter what Jee said, he was going to screw up. He could be honest, admit that yes, he wanted Zuko very much but he couldn't possibly act on this desire because of a hundred perfectly valid reasons the brat would not acknowledge, thus forever destroying his own authority in Zuko's eyes and giving him an opening for further advances. Or he could lie and deny everything, in which case he would crush the boy's
confidence and potentially drive him into depression. He could still do that and hope Zuko would prove to be stronger than that, but fuck, the kid went and got himself inebriated just because he saw Jee on a presumed date and was potentially having a sexuality crisis. Jee'd been there, done that, dealt with the shit that followed and it wasn't pretty. A part of him, the one that always got him into trouble, still very much wanted to help the kid. Wanted to reach out and guide him through this, to lead him to the other side with as little scars as possible. If he denied this part of himself now and Zuko caught his lie, he would perhaps forever shut the door to civil communication between them and any help would thus be rendered impossible. The kid would feel cheated and wouldn't want anything more to do with an old hypocrite like Jee.

Which, perhaps, could be a desirable outcome in that it would forestall any further situations like that – but that would be the only consequence which could be viewed as positive.

He was wasting precious seconds here. Zuko sat mere inches away from him, the taste of his lips still a warm tingling on Jee's, his pale skin – so much of it – looking disturbingly enticing in the soft, reddish light which painted deeper shadows on the perfect shape of the boy's chest and stomach, and he was looking at Jee, waiting impatiently for an answer. Suddenly, Jee wanted nothing more than for them to stay like that so he could stare at this beautiful picture forever and feel the heat of this young body under his palms as he moved them, just a tiny little bit, to the sides, to slide them down Zuko's muscular shoulders…

He had no excuse. None whatsoever, other than his own pent-up lust and Zuko's willingness, as his hands did slide down smooth, pale skin slowly, inch by inch. The boy shivered under his touch and closed his eyes for a moment, breathing deeply. His body was rigid, but he didn't move an inch away from Jee as the man's hands travelled down his arms, lightly caressing the muscles tensing under his touch.

A quick glance down proved to Jee just how much Zuko didn't mind. Which… didn't help him come to grips with himself at all. Made it worse, in fact, as now he was gripped by the irresistible urge to reach down and close his hand around this tempting bulge growing in Zuko's pajamas, to see what kind of sounds it would elicit from the boy, how his face would change, how the rest of his body would react…

Great. Now he was this close to getting hard himself.

He wanted so many things right now. He wanted to lean in, cup the healthy side of Zuko's face and lead him into another kiss – a real one this time. He wanted to trace a wet pattern on the boy's throat with his mouth. Wanted to kiss those nipples, visibly hardening under his gaze. He wanted to see how the boy's arousal tasted, to push him onto his back and take him, with the distant sounds of Music Night below them floating in from the window. Wanted to touch, to taste, to explore…

It was the football field all over again.

He had to get away from here, now.

"Zuko, this needs to stop," he managed to utter, his hands stilling on the boy's forearms. "I mean it. You have no idea what kind of mess you're getting yourself into."

The boy regarded him in silence for a moment, his eyes visibly bright with desire. "But you want me," he whispered, inching closer to Jee, his voice bearing a tint of accusation. "I've seen it. You want me."

"It doesn't matter what I want," Jee sighed. "We cannot continue. I need to go."
"I'm not afraid," insisted Zuko, his voice rising. "I'm ready. I want this. Teach me."

And the worst part of it was, Jee nearly believed him.

"We'll talk about this some other time, when you're completely sober," he muttered and looked away, giving Zuko's forearms a little squeeze. "You don't know what you're saying."

"I do!" The kid wrenched his arms away from Jee's grip, his expression growing furious in a blink. "How much more obvious do I have to make it?! Stop using me being drunk as an excuse like a fucking coward and finally admit that you want me too!"

There was desperation underlying his words now, and just a visible trace of self-doubt. **Admit it, please, prove me right, I've laid myself bare for you, don't push me away now…**

Fuck.

"I told you, this has nothing to do with what I want, it's about what's right and what's wrong," Jee said coldly, by some miracle managing not to shout. He was fucking everything up here epically. "This? This definitely falls into the wrong category, in case you haven't noticed. And it's illegal. It has to stop, and it will stop now."

Zuko looked away from him as if slapped, hanging his head, biting his lower lip, drawing in on himself.

"Seems I was wrong about you," he muttered, as if to himself. "I thought you were brave."

Which was when, to put it shortly, Jee went insane.

Or, if he were to tell the long story, that was when he gritted out an **Oh, fuck this**, reached out, grabbed the back of Zuko's head, forced him up by the hair and kissed him on the mouth, hard.

**That's it**, he thought, forcing Zuko's mouth to open with little trouble and tilting the kid's head to better angle the kiss. **I've lost it. I'm trying to prove my own courage to a fucking teenager and allowing myself to be baited like a damn eight-year-old.** That wasn't the case, though, and he knew it perfectly well because the ugly truth was that something in him went snap! and he simply used the bait to justify his actions to himself. There was also a different undercurrent to his thoughts, one which ran deeper and which hummed in an angry, provocative whisper:

**So you know what you want, boy? You think you're so grown up? Let's see it, then. Show me.**

His other hand landed on the other side of Zuko's face, just below the scar; his thumb caressed his jawline while he firmly maneuvered the boy's face. Zuko tried to keep up and reciprocate, opening his mouth dutifully and letting Jee's tongue in; the moment it touched his palate, the Xi boy let out a small, desperate whimper and tried to get closer to Jee, his arms snaking around the older man's neck. Jee's right hand travelled down from his face to caress his back and draw him nearer at the same time, so that suddenly he had a lapful of teenager. And all this time, he kept kissing Zuko so hard as if he wanted to bruise, greedily exploring the warm, wet cavern of his mouth, allowing himself, just for this one, wild moment, to open up the dams of frustration and need. To pour in all the pent-up want, to show this selfish, damnable, **delectable** brat just what his flirting did to him, to demonstrate the levels of self-control it took to keep refusing – the courage it took to look away and deny himself. To show Zuko exactly how dangerous the game he initiated was, and how much he was not ready for it.

**See this, kid? Do you see this? This is courage, this is what bravery is really about. You have no idea about any of it. So stop playing with fire or you'll get burned even worse than you already were.**
But education was as far from Zuko's mind as a nunnery was from a nymphomaniac's – his body pressed up so close to Jee's, the lieutenant could feel exactly how excited he was. Jee was basically crushing him, assaulting his mouth with everything he had and still the boy was hard as a rock, his erection pushing insistently into Jee's stomach. The older man's body was responding to it more and more enthusiastically, his hands dancing frantically all over Zuko's naked upper body, delighting in the feel of firm muscles he'd wanted to touch so desperately. Zuko's hands were travelling into Jee's hair, down his cheeks, tracing his sideburns as he tried ineffectively to keep up with the older man, to match him need for need; he was emitting little frantic noises of pleasure and want which went straight to Jee's groin; but there was no question that he was being overwhelmed.

The kiss lingered. And the longer it lasted, the more the situation deteriorated dangerously close to blending into foreplay. Jee was involuntarily slowing down, his intent of crushing Zuko being forgotten in favor of savoring the moment; his hands were sliding lower and lower; their erections rubbed against one another on their own accord, starting a spiral of pleasure and doom all at once… There was no telling where this kiss would have led, even despite Jee's iron resolve not to push it any further than that – but for the sound of heavy footsteps on the staircase, louder and louder, steadily embedding itself into Jee's clouded-yet-sharpened consciousness.

"Iroh."

He pushed Zuko away again, forcefully this time, and held him firmly by the neck, gazing hard into the boy's hazy eyes.

"You are not ready for this," he gritted out determinedly, making sure each word settled itself in Zuko's mind and stuck there. "Now, we will not talk about this again. Ever. Do you understand?"

He didn't wait for a reply, but pushed Zuko back onto the bed and grabbed the covers, pulling it from under the boy in one, swift tug. With practiced, military precision, he covered Zuko with them, ignoring the boy's bewildered "Hey!".

"Pretend you're asleep," Jee ordered, sitting on the revolving chair by the desk, a nice, respectable distance from Zuko. "Or at least try to look like you're about to. You're uncle's coming."

This seemed to finally anchor the boy to reality; quickly, he pulled the covers up to his head and lay on his side facing Jee, squeezing his eyes shut. His breathing hadn't returned to normal yet but he took admirable pains to calm it, just like Jee was trying to do with his own.

The man licked his lips, as though this could erase the taste of Zuko from them and thus destroy incriminating evidence. The telling tent in his pants was a more difficult issue, but thankfully he'd heard the footsteps early enough to still be able to do something about it – he shut his eyes and promptly went through the impressive collection of memories which never failed to cool him down. The rush of adrenaline and the flesh memory of Zuko, still very fresh on his skin, made it tricky, but by the time Iroh's footsteps were heard on the floor of the Xi apartment, the situation was more or less under control.

A quick glance at Zuko assured him the boy was determined to play the part of Sleeping Beauty, though Jee was fairly sure no person ever slept with their faces scrunched up in such a frown without having nightmares, never mind sleeping princesses. But maybe this was his normal sleeping face and Iroh wouldn't find it suspicious? His breathing had returned more or less to normal and the flush of his cheeks was barely visible in the reddish lamplight. Good. They were both more or less presentable.

Therefore, when Iroh emerged from the gloom of the hall outside to peek into the bedroom, he was greeted with a slightly tired smile of the former lieutenant Jee, spinning this way and that on Zuko's
revolving chair.

Jee put his finger to his mouth in the universal "hush" gesture and indicated Zuko with a jerk of his head. The old man took one look at the immobile lump that was his nephew under the bedcovers, smiled with visible relief and motioned for Jee to come over.

"My sincere apologies, Lieutenant," he whispered, closing the door slowly. "I'm afraid I burdened you with my nephew for longer than you expected. Alas, my duties kept me very busy, but I knew Zuko was in capable hands. I hope he wasn't too difficult?"

"Don't worry," Jee made a dismissive gesture and had to bite his tongue to keep himself from adding sir. He was pleased to discover his voice was only a little rawer than usual. "He… uh… Well, I managed to keep the situation under control."

Like fuck I did.

"Most admirable," Iroh patted him on the shoulder, though he was barely tall enough to reach it. "I'm afraid Zuko can be rather… troublesome."

"I think that's a euphemism given the circumstances," Jee permitted himself a resentful glance at the door, which was now completely closed. "Does he – "

"Does he drink regularly?" Iroh finished the question for him, moving to turn the light on in the hall. "No, Lieutenant. Zuko is a good boy, albeit a very troubled one." At this point Jee had to physically stop himself from snorting; whatever Zuko was, he was not a good boy. "There was a brief period when he'd gotten himself into some bad company, but I am happy to say this is no longer the case, even though I have to admit it was good to see him interact with his peers outside of school. Poor children. I sometimes wonder what has become of the boy who showed such a fierce interest in my nephew… But I digress. No, Lieutenant, I haven't seen Zuko in such a state in a long time. Rest assured I will talk to him about it in the morning and make certain that it won't happen again."

"Please be sure to stress how dangerous it was," said Jee for lack of a better idea. "Drinking in public like that could have gotten him arrested… Not to mention it's terribly wrong and irresponsible, naturally."

"Of course." Iroh nodded and folded his arms so that his palms disappeared into the long sleeves of his robes. Jee briefly wondered if the man ever wore casual clothes and immediately pictured him in a fluffy, homemade jumper. "Now, I'm sure you're anxious to rejoin our lovely Ming, Lieutenant, but I wonder if you could spare a moment more? There is something I'd like to show you, as Zuko's coach."

Jee nodded, glancing once more at the door to Zuko's bedroom.

For a second, he wondered if, right in this moment, the boy was masturbating on the other side of it. The fleeting mental image came dangerously close to stirring Jee's barely-stifled desire anew, but thankfully it didn't get a chance to blossom as Iroh promptly marched down the hall, motioning for Jee to follow.

The old teashop owner led his guest into a spacious, elegant sitting room which displayed a mixture of affluent modernity and Asian tradition, done more tastefully and effectively than in Zuko's bedroom. The dominant colors here were white and various shades of brown, with sparse, elegant furniture, a big, flat-screen television and a giant window occupying nearly the entire wall opposite the entrance. The most prominent element of the room, however, was an impressive collection of trophies and medals, displayed proudly in a glass cabinet opposite the television set, by the
comfortable-looking leather sofa.

It was in front of this cabinet that Iroh stopped, waiting for Jee to join him.

"All Zuko's," announced the old man, visibly swelling with pride. "From martial arts tournaments."

Jee whistled in appreciation. He knew the kid was good, but damn, those were some really big trophies in here… And so many of them.

"I tried to convince him to keep them in his bedroom so that he could look at his past successes every day, but he didn't want to hear about it," continued Iroh quietly. "To this day, I don't know why he was so averse to the idea. You will find, Lieutenant, that Zuko is an exceptionally driven boy."

"Yes, I did notice something to this effect," murmured Jee, gazing from one trophy to the other.

Christ, it looked like the kid stood on the podium in the majority of tournaments he'd ever competed in. Sure, there were silver and brown medals as well as golden ones and some of the trophies were for places lower than the top three, but still…

Iroh was right. Jee did appreciate seeing this.

"My nephew is not one to brag about his accomplishments, but I thought you'd like to see it… especially since he is going to compete in the national championships this year."

Jee frowned. "He never mentioned anything."

"I thought so," Iroh nodded sadly. "I'm not asking to give him any special treatment, Lieutenant, but should he happen to request some extra training time before the championship…"

It was only by a miracle of self-control that Jee didn't smash his head against the glass right there and then.

*Having fun up there, you fuckers who decided it would be fun to screw my life up again?*

"I'll do my best to help," he promised aloud, because what else was there to say?

Iroh let him go quite quickly after that, with only the minimum amount of small talk – Jee didn't remember ever running away from anywhere with such profound relief, maybe except for the nightly guard duties at boot camp. He found Ming chatting to Piandao and the rest of the Pai Sho gang at their table, so he strolled over, striving to appear nonchalant. It was alarming how difficult he found it.

Suki's girls were no longer performing – the stage was presently occupied by one of the teachers Jee was less acquainted with, carelessly delivering her own rendition of *I Will Survive*. Which probably meant it was karaoke time.

Whatever. Jee wasn't going to stick around to enjoy it.

"Oh, there you are!" said Ming once she spotted him. "I was getting worried. Everything all right?"

"Yeah, everything's fine," replied the man laconically, nodding at all the men at the Pai Sho table. "Good evening."

"I'm snatching him back to my table, then, gentlemen," announced the cheerleaders' coach, taking Jee by the arm and steering him away from the group. "Sorry."
The Pai Sho players laughed and let them go, with Bumi The Nutter wolf-whistling lewdly after them; Jee was unspeakably glad for Ming's straightforwardness. He really, really wasn't in the mood to interact with more tea enthusiasts. In fact, he feared that if he didn't get the hell out of the Jasmine Dragon soon, he might just start shouting.

"So, do you feel like a drink?" offered Ming once they were seated at their table. "And how's Zuko?"

"Ming…" Jee sighed and looked at his companion imploringly. "I'm sorry, but would you mind if we just paid and left? I… I need to clear my head."

She looked surprised, but didn't question him.

Jee only permitted himself to breathe easily once he took his seat in Ming's car, shutting the door behind him. His companion didn't say anything once she started the engine and pulled out of their parking spot, nor did she question him when he asked:

"Would you mind stopping by the park? I think I need a short walk."

"Sure," she answered. "It's a lovely night."

It was, but Jee noticed it only when she pointed it out. His mind was too full of warm, eager teenage boy whose lips still burned on his own.

"So," said Ming, turning on the radio. "You never told me how Zuko was."

"Not bad, for a drunk kid," Jee shrugged, looking out the window at the night lights of Summerfield flickering past them. "I think he only threw up twice. Managed to avoid doing that on my shirt, too. I'd consider that pretty good going. He was asleep when I left."

"No idea what could have gotten into him?"

"Nope. He's a strange kid."

"Yeah," Mind nodded. "He really is."

She let Damien Rice fill the silence in her car with his slow ballads and lulling vocals and didn't press Jee for more conversation until she parked in the lot by the Summerfield City Park, its gates still open at this time of night. Then, she announced with finality that she was coming with Jee, to which he could only nod.

The park wasn't big, though pleasant enough. Located just at the outskirts of downtown, it reached out naturally to the suburbs and provided a natural border of green between the two. Jee'd strolled through it before, back when he was still exploring the scarce pleasures Summerfield had to offer. By day it was filled with the elderly soaking up the last of the sunshine, sometimes kids and people walking their dogs, with the occasional joggers, skaters and bikers. The lieutenant jogged here himself a couple of times when the weather made it possible. Now, it seemed deserted but for the occasional hobo, sitting on one of the benches and gazing up at the night sky.

"Okay," Ming sighed once they found a spot by the pond with a fountain which was currently out of order. "What's wrong? Spill."

Jee shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. There was no way he could tell anyone what was really wrong, but it was honesty hour anyway and he had one secret he had to share with Ming. Might as well be brutally honest and be done with it, he really didn't feel like playing at tact anymore.
"I'm gay," he confessed, joining his hands together and gazing at them rather than at the woman next to him, wincing as the weariness crept into his voice. "Sorry. Should have told you sooner."

"Yes." Ming's voice felt like ice cubs dropping down his back once she finally decided to use it, which felt like hours. "You should have."

"I'm sorry."

She didn't reply.

They sat there for a while in heavy silence, the air around them growing colder by the minute, the night going on its steady course undisturbed, the city lights in the distance painting a picture of disconnected glowing dots before them. In this silence Jee searched his mind for something to say, but couldn't come up with anything that wouldn't sound dumb, hollow or plain insulting, so he kept his mouth shut, allowing Ming to make up her mind about the whole mess in peace.

The cool air felt good on his face. Might just prevent a headache.

"So why didn't you?" asked the woman eventually, leaning back on the bench and crossing her arms as if to shield herself from further blows. "Tell me, I mean. You knew I was interested."

"I did," Jee agreed. "And I'm sorry, I know this makes me twice the asshole."

"Yes, it does. So? Did you want to use me as a beard? Because I'd be pissed, but I'd understand. People do that, especially in towns like Summerfield."

"No, that wasn't… I mean, partly, yeah. Maybe. But I wanted to tell you tonight, anyway. I didn't want to lead you on. I like your company and thought this might be a good opportunity."

Ming sighed. "Let me guess," she murmured. "You were waiting for the right moment."

"In short, yes."

"I hate it when men do that," hissed the woman, looking up at the sky. "Why can't people simply say things right away? I thought you did. That's partly why I liked you. Well, that and your sideburns."

"I do, most of the time," Jee admitted, smirking at the sideburns part. "With varying results. One doesn't get to be 38 without learning some basic survival skills, though, and not being straightforward on this particular point turned out to be one of them. Sadly."

"You don't have to tell me that," whispered Ming. "One of my best friends is a lesbian. It's just that… well, never mind. Thanks for telling me at all."

"Sorry," repeated Jee, because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

The woman shrugged. "I'll get over it. What I don't understand is, what caused this sudden grumpy mood? Why were you so desperate to get out of there?"

"I guess babysitting drunk teenagers is bad for my mental health."

"It's a good thing you're gay, then. You won't ever have to deal with your own adolescents."

"Yeah," Jee murmured gloomily. "Lucky me."
"You do realize that you owe me a night out?" asked Ming after a new spell of silence, this one somewhat more comfortable. "In a pub of my choosing. With karaoke. I'm not gonna let you off the hook just because subsequent fucking is no longer on the menu."

Jee smiled at her then, genuine gratitude on his face. This woman was nothing short of amazing.

"But just so you know," Ming continued quietly, looking ahead at the city lights, "I'm still mad at you. So you'd do well to stay clear of me next week. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Still. It was good to know he didn't screw up *everything* quite beyond redemption.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Amends are made, a deal is struck and Jee uses the word "adorable."
Interlude II: Zuko

Chapter Notes

No chapter 8 yet. You can expect that in about a week. For now, here is a glimpse into the mind on the other side of this mess; for many reasons I think it is necessary to give Zuko a voice at this point in the story. I hope you'll agree with me on that after reading and that it won't destroy your enjoyment of this fic.

The herbal tea was strong in his nostrils and even stronger on his tongue. Zuko winced after the first sip, hot bitterness bleeding into his throat, but kept drinking, conscious of Uncle's hawk-sharp gaze. He was prepared to drink anything the old man gave him after last night, especially if it was supposed to help him get rid of the nausea in his stomach and the hell in his head.

Or the physical one, anyway. No herbs, however strong, would chase away the memories.

As he sipped the tea in silence, he tried to look anywhere but at Uncle. The disappointment etched there was more than he could handle.

"Will you explain now?" the old man asked softly, sitting across from him at the kitchen table to a plate of scrambled eggs and toast.

Zuko shook his head.

"It was nothing."

"Zuko," there was a subtle warning in Uncle's voice. "You haven't behaved like that in a long time. If there's something troubling you, I want to know. Maybe I can help."

"You can't," murmured Zuko, and only then he realized his slip; idiot! He bit his lip, shut his eyes for a moment and then amended: "You can't help because there's nothing to help with. It was just… I don't know. I really hate Music Night."

He risked a glance up at Uncle then; the old man was watching him with faint traces of amusement.

"It seems I failed to fathom the depths of your hatred," he commented, a comforting echo of his usual cheeriness creeping back into his voice.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," whispered Zuko. "It was stupid."

"Yes, it was."

"I guess I have a lot on my mind, that's all."

"Is this about college?" asked Uncle Iroh, his voice growing concerned again. "Because if it is, you really shouldn't worry. I'm confident they will accept you. You have wonderful grades. Even if you don't get into Harvard or Yale like your Father wanted, I'm sure – "

Zuko gripped his steaming mug more tightly. "Uncle, please," he uttered, lowering his head. "I don't want to talk about it."
He really, really didn't.

"Very well. But if you need me, I'm here."

Zuko could only bring himself to nod.

Once upstairs, in the safe sanctuary of his bedroom, he shut the door behind him and collapsed face-down on the bed, deciding against turning the stereo on. With this damnable hangover the music might just split his head in half and he needed it now to think, however strong the temptation to just curl into a tight ball and sleep through the rest of Sunday.

He needed to decide on what to do once Monday came, first, because he sure as hell couldn't face it unprepared.

It was a good thing the Jasmine Dragon stayed closed on Sundays – nothing disturbed him up here apart from the usual street noises and those, too, were noticeably quieter in the morning. Most of the district seemed to have jumped at their only chance to sleep in and have a quiet day off.

Maybe he should take this chance and try to meditate. He hadn't done it in a while, too distracted with everything else…

But there was no way he could meditate now, with this fucking hangover – though Uncle's nasty herbs were already helping – and with the memories of last night driving him insane.

If only…

If only he could talk to Mai. Even if he wouldn't tell her everything – oh hell no – just… hearing her voice… having her berate him and call him an idiot… would perhaps be enough to lend him some strength to face Jee once the week started. But Mai was on the other side of the country, wasn't she, and probably with Azula or her parents, and there was the time difference to consider anyway and…

But he needed her. Needed the unconditional, rough support that only she could provide.

After a few minutes of internal battle, he caved in and sent a short text to her secret mobile, hoping she'd call him back once she found a convenient moment. They only contacted each other this way if there was an emergency on either side – it was far too risky to keep in touch regularly, with Azula almost constantly breathing down Mai's neck and her parents probably supervising every call she'd ever made and every social network she'd set up a profile on. The last time they talked had been when Zuko broke up with Jet, though "breaking up" was perhaps too strong a term to describe something which had not even been a proper relationship to begin with, and that was summer over a year ago.

He missed her.

But that wasn't the problem at the moment, was it…

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose and ran a hand through his hair in helplessness, fervently wishing for something to kick. Or for a place where he could scream and scream until he screamed out everything.

No. The problem was that he'd made a complete idiot of himself, that he'd humiliated himself beyond any sane belief and stepped right into a situation he had no idea how to navigate through.

But he was so angry, so fucking damn angry. And hurt. And…
And he couldn't, he just couldn't. Something in him just went bust. It was too much. And all he wanted was to just forget, to dumb his senses until he couldn't feel anything, and maybe that was a stupid urge, a loser's urge, and he couldn't afford to be a loser – he fucking wasn't – but to allow himself this one moment of numbness, of indifference, of not caring that only one way could bring him, just this one time…

And then Jee was there, was there with him, so fucking close, and he was sending all kinds of mixed signals again, and he, Zuko didn't even know. He was so confused. But then he wasn't anymore, and it was as though his mind just exploded, and he didn't know why he wanted it, but he did, and it almost felt as if he absolutely needed the confirmation from Jee or he would…

He just fucking plunged right in, didn't he, without thinking it all through at all. Acting on his impulses. Like he always did, and of course it had exploded in his face. Everything always did.

He just didn't want to be pushed away. Not after everything. That would have been…

Fuck, he'd felt so vulnerable and exposed then. If Jee hadn't actually kissed him, if he'd walked out on him…

Gods, he really shouldn't have drunk so much.

He's going to see Jee tomorrow. After… everything.

Shit.

Zuko groaned, then shifted on the bed so that he lay across it, his head hanging off the edge, his legs propped up on the wall, feet crossed. His eyes fell on the photos pinned to his corkboard – upside-down, he gazed at Mai for a while until he got dizzy. Rather hopelessly, because her photo did nothing to help mute the memory of Jee kissing him – that image was still reigning supreme in his head and absolutely forbidding him to think of anything else.

Christ, that was just…

Fuck.

If the man's intention was to drive him away by kissing him like that, he failed epically. Zuko felt unbearably hot just thinking about it and there was almost no doubt left in his mind that he wanted it – all of it. He hesitated before, fought with his own body over this on daily basis and grappled with self-hatred almost every night, questioning those confounded desires and overanalyzing everything till dawn, but now he had the phantom feeling of Jee's lips on his – a memory this time, not just a fantasy – and of his hands holding him, and one thing he knew for sure was that he wanted more.

It was nothing like this with Mai. Or with Jet. The last one especially had been quite the disaster. But at least it had taught Zuko that even now, even after what his father had done to him, he could still be desirable. Could still be considered wanted, attractive, and the confirmation of that in Jee's eyes and touch was –

Addictive. And going straight into his head, even stronger than the wine.

He needed to feel it again. Needed to feel wanted. Jet had taught him that, he'd given Zuko a taste of what it was like, he'd ignited a spark… And now that spark in him was a full-blown fire, wild and reckless and in need of more kindling. Now that he'd tasted the thrill of seduction, he just couldn't let it go, no matter how much his brain wanted to fight it.

It wasn't just that, though. Jee was… different. He was from the outside looking in, a fighter, like
Zuko. And yeah, Jet was a fighter too, but Jet was crazy and didn't know anything, was just as angry and confused as Zuko and they only dragged each other down. Jee, on the other hand, seemed so... battered, so battle-worn, yeah, but not defeated. He was a survivor. He could adjust. He could actually leave things behind him.

This man must have seen and known so much, must have so much to share, experiences to talk about, lessons to offer. Shit, he even admitted to having been a drinker at Zuko's age. Which meant that, perhaps... he understood. Or at least wouldn't judge, wouldn't push him away, just like that.

Besides, though Jee didn't know it, he came from the world Zuko knew. He served in the military. He was a man of the inner circle, had probably been in the thick of things and wore the Navy about him as other people wore perfume. Like Uncle. Like Lu Ten.

(Like Father.)

Jee was an enigma and parts of him were still beyond Zuko's grasp, but... Recently, it felt as if... as if they'd connected, somehow. It must have meant something. Jee seemed to be trying to communicate some kind of message to Zuko - even last night. And, despite himself, Zuko was growing more and more fascinated. Drawn in.

And the feel of Jee's big, strong body engulfing Zuko's was just...

He'd never felt anything like that before.

(Only... he had. There was a dim, misty, years-old memory buried somewhere deep in his mind, covered with cobwebs and all but dead, that now stirred and convulsed as though in rigor mortis, sparking an old, painful longing. A child briefly embraced by his father.)

Zuko shut his eyes against the image, suddenly feeling sick.

(No. It wasn't like that. He wasn't like that.)

And Jee wanted him right back, he all but admitted it. Zuko wouldn't have gambled everything on this one kiss otherwise, even drunk out of his mind.

So where did this leave them?

Zuko changed positions again, leaving his feet up against the wall but shifting so that his head rested on the bed as well, his arms crossed behind it.

Jee said he wanted to help him. This could mean many, many things, however, and Zuko wasn't sure which of those his teacher had on his mind. Only one fact seemed certain – they needed to talk.

And Zuko absolutely loathed talking about his feelings, especially as he felt so confused about them – because what could he possibly say, that he had no idea what was going on with him? – but there seemed to be no hope for it. Everything depended on Monday now, on what Jee'd say.

Zuko already had a pretty good idea as to what it could be: more denial. More self-preserving crap. Very well then, he could play along. He needed the time to sort himself out somehow, especially after last night – because even though he now had a very clear idea of what he wanted, he still couldn't for the life of him grasp why he wanted this particular thing so badly, and however strongly he might hate Jee's reasoning, he had to admit the guy was actually in the right here.

However one put it, what he wanted now wasn't... It wasn't right.
Damn. Everything about it was just so messed up.

*He* was so messed up.

What would Father think if he saw into his thoughts now? What would *Mother* think?

Maybe Jee was right. Maybe it really was better to just let go… Even if he really, really didn't want to.

Play for time. Play it safe for now. See where things would go from there. That seemed to be the best option right now. And Zuko could hate this plan – he despised waiting and standing idly by – but the alternative was literary pushing himself on Jee and he'd *never* do that.

Gods, he had no idea what he was doing.

So yes, maybe some space to breathe, pause and start over was not such a bad thing after all.

And then he might learn what exactly Jee meant by "help."
Chapter 8: Aftermath

Chapter Notes

A small announcement before we start: some of you may have already noticed that "Substitute" now has a companion piece to go with it, "The Locker Room". So far there are two shorts, one of which is relevant to the actual story while the other, mostly, isn't. There shall be more, so check it out if you haven't already.

Now, back to your regularly scheduled fanfiction, in which there is a moment to breathe after the monumental screw-up of the previous chapter and Jee finds himself extolling the joys of teaching.

Warning: contains Optimist!Jee.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Considering everything that had happened over the weekend, Jee expected Monday to be nothing short of a disaster. It took considerable willpower just to drag himself out of bed and force some meager breakfast down his body – a part of him even wanted to just call in sick and give himself a bit more time before facing… Well. What he had to face eventually. But that would be a cowardly thing to do and Jee did not survive over fifteen years of naval service by being a coward. Experience taught him long ago that the best way of dealing with the messes he'd created was to simply face them head-on, because if he didn't, they had the tendency to fester and grow like some nasty weed.

Besides, he was an officer in the damn military services, wasn't he? Or used to be. Anyhow, he sure as hell was not afraid of any teenagers.

So he valiantly soldiered through his first three classes – though they did pass in something of a blur – congratulating his third-period students on a great performance at the Jasmine Dragon and exchanging noncommittal remarks with Piandao in-between. The man clearly wanted to chat about Music Night, but he'd caught on to Jee's peculiar mood rather quickly and mercifully left him alone. The lieutenant spent his lunch break in the shared office, leaving greasy stains everywhere and fine-tuning the physical tests he'd have to subject his students to soon to sweat some grades out of them; and whiled away his vacant fourth period running on the empty track to the point of exhaustion, trying to gear himself up for a confrontation which he knew was impossible to avoid.

And if Zuko didn't want to initiate it this time, Jee would. He had some serious apologizing to do and needed to at least try to right this huge-ass goddamn mess. Leaving it like this was not even an option.

He steered clear of Ming, too, keeping in mind her words back in the park; but she did offer him a half-smile when they passed each other in the corridor, so maybe this meant he was getting back into at least one person's good graces.

Still, even despite a quick smoke after his jog, the nervous tension stayed with Jee when Zuko's class started, and from one glance at the boy – hanging on in the back of the class, head low, avoiding eye-contact – he gathered they both felt equally wretched.

At least Jee had a sort-of-plan how to fix this, something which he spent nearly all of Sunday mulling
over. Iroh showing him the trophies that disastrous night did give him an idea which, to be perfectly honest, might help him get his relationship with the boy sorted out, but it might also fuck things up completely and beyond repair. It was a risk, but one that Jee was prepared to take after everything that had happened.

He needed to do something.

So, with that in mind, he drilled the boys through an extensive warm-up and then led a couple semi-complicated katas, half-concentrating on the task at hand and half-forming a speech he would deliver later, once the rest of the class was dismissed.

And he dearly hoped the rest of the boys wouldn't start getting suspicious. How many times now was he about to have a private conversation with Zuko that the other students could see? They really needed to be more careful in the way they interacted. All it took was a tiny smidgen of suspicion in the wrong head and everything could go BOOM!, just like that…

Thankfully, Zuko seemed to get the message from Jee's meaningful glances; he lingered behind after class so that the lieutenant didn't have to ask him to stay openly. Sokka did glance at the pair of them upon leaving, but there was nothing more dangerous than ordinary curiosity in his eyes before he shrugged and followed his friends to the showers, calling after Bolin.

Which left just the two of them in the big, empty gym, with the memory of Saturday night hanging between them like a big, slimy ghost. For a moment, just as Jee predicted, the situation remained very awkward, with him and Zuko just standing there, a good distance from each other, and looking anywhere but in the other's eyes – and both of them remembering exactly what had passed, reliving every detail of the kiss which had no right to happen but happened anyway. Jee was sure it was on the forefront of Zuko's mind just as vividly as it was on his own.

After all, he'd been reliving that scene on replay practically non-stop since it happened so that every detail was by now as firmly embedded in his mind as though it were a rock. And seeing Zuko in the flesh again, right here before him, did nothing to put the plug on his spinning thoughts.

But he couldn't let the silence stretch into something heavy and unbreakable – and the more time they spent avoiding what had to be said, the harder it would become to actually choke something out, as was always the case with scenarios like this one – so he decided to embrace his role as the responsible adult and cleared his throat as a preamble.

"So," he started, channeling the confidence he did not, in fact, posses at the moment, and winced at the gruffness in his voice. The boy still wouldn't meet his eyes. "Zuko. I know I said we'd never talk about what happened, but I think you'll agree with me that we do need to have this conversation."

The boy lifted his gaze, but only for a split of second.

"Yeah," he murmured, the textbook definition of nervousness. "Look, I…”

It looked to all intents and purposes like a fit of anxiety-fuelled, hesitant babbling was coming his way; Jee decided to put an end to it before the kid had the chance to humiliate himself beyond recovery, at least in his own eyes.

"Sit down," he offered, indicating one of the benches. "We don't have much time before the next class starts."

Zuko did as he was told wordlessly, without looking at Jee.

Right. This was going to be even more difficult than expected. The brat's ways to make every
situation ten times harder were practically uncanny.

Jee sat next to the boy – taking care to maintain a good distance – and cleared his throat again, about to launch himself into the speech, when a movement caught his eye; he glanced down to see Zuko twisting his fingers nervously, maybe even without realizing he was doing it. He'd obviously rather be abandoned on ice in some bit of frozen tundra in Alaska than stay here in this gym. And Jee had absolutely no idea how to put him at ease in a way that wouldn't involve touching.

Whatever evil forces once whispered to him that teaching in high school would somehow be a good idea, he'd never know. He obviously wasn't destined to deal with moody adolescents.

But he had a very moody specimen on his hands right now, and it needed to be dealt with regardless of whether Jee felt ready for it or not.

Better get this over and done with straight away. Head-on, soldier.

"Look, kid, I'm sorry," he began, looking down at Zuko. Maybe if he gazed at him hard and long enough, he'd somehow make the brat look back at him.

The Xi boy tensed and stopped moving, but did not raise his head.

"I never should have allowed things to go this far. It was unprofessional and wrong and I shouldn't have taken advantage of you. I'll understand if you want to report me."

It wasn't much of a gamble – Jee would bet his annual salary that Zuko wouldn't report him to anyone. But he meant it anyway and made sure to have this earnestness reflected in his voice. It was absolutely crucial that Zuko understand his rights and options; that he know he had a way out. That Jee wouldn't put any pressure on him, wouldn't abuse the position of power being a teacher gave him, wouldn't set any conditions. This had been weighing heavily on Jee's conscience ever since that damned night and he had to get this across first and foremost, before moving on to anything else.

Apparently, it was the right thing to say, too: it finally provoked Zuko to look him in the eye.

Or maybe 'stare' was more like it.

"You're kidding, right?" the boy whispered.

Jee shook his head somberly. "No, I'm not. It was wrong and off-limits. You have every right to report me." He schooled his expression so that it betrayed nothing but absolute conviction and honesty, before he pressed on, holding Zuko's gaze: "I want you to know that I will not hold a grudge against you and it won't in any way affect your grades. Whatever you tell the Headmaster, I'll confirm without making a fuss. I'm not pressuring you into anything, kid. The choice is yours."

"No!" Zuko nearly jumped off the bench in agitation; Jee had to marvel yet again at the boy's spontaneous expressiveness. "I'd never… I wouldn't… It wasn't… Shit." He pinched the bridge of his nose, settling down again, and sighed. "It was me," he mumbled so quietly Jee had to strain his ears to decipher the words. "My fault. I… You were right, it was stupid. I didn't… I wasn't trying to…" His head dipped even lower than before, hair falling all over his face. "I don't want you to get fired."

Well. That was… good to know.

Jee let that last sentence hang between them for a while before he cleared his throat again and nudged Zuko with his elbow.
"Does it mean you'll stop flirting with me?"

He didn't exactly mean it to sound playful, but somehow it ended up coming out that way anyway; when Zuko looked up at him again, it was with a very odd expression indeed.

"It means…" started the teenager, once again getting his awkward on; he raked a hand through his hair in frustration, trying to find the right words.

Jee didn't remember ever feeling more glad for not being a teen anymore.

"I'm sorry, okay?" Zuko spat out finally. "I shouldn't have… uh. It wasn't right."

Now it was Jee's turn to stare at the kid as though he had just announced he was going to work as Mickey Mouse in Disney's Magic Kingdom. He may not have known Zuko all that long, but he was fairly certain that him apologizing to anyone over anything was an occasion of positively momentous proportions, worthy of noting down on calendars. That alone gave him quite a decent indication of Zuko's current state of mind.

He really must be feeling embarrassed and guilty about the whole thing – maybe even as guilty as Jee himself. Damn.

It would probably be best not to comment on the apology itself; he might never get another one if he pushed it. Time to move on. The difficult bit was still ahead of them.

"Look here," he said after a pause, sighing heavily. "It's not your fault. I know what it's like to feel confused about your own body. I've been there. It isn't easy. And it's something that no guidance counselor can get you through. You're at the stage when you need to experiment and explore and I get it."

He sighed again, knowing how risky it was what he wanted to say next, but went ahead with it anyway because right now, reassuring Zuko was more important than his own discomfort:

"I had my first boyfriend when I was about your age."

Zuko shouldn't really be surprised by this – Jee had kissed him, after all, and foolishly went ahead and showed just how susceptible he was to his flirtation – but the kid's head snapped to him anyway, as though the lieutenant had just shared a revelation of truly groundbreaking proportions, possibly rivaling the first moon-landing.

"Had crushes on other guys even earlier," Jee went on, making a show of looking down at his hands to spare Zuko the embarrassment of being caught staring. "Not exactly a welcome thing, back where I grew up. Had to deal with all kinds of shit. Felt like punching everyone's face in, day after day. So what I'm trying to say is," he lifted his head then and looked right into Zuko's eyes, "I don't want you to feel like I'm pushing you away. I'm not. I can't have a relationship with you, kid, but I can help you. I can at least listen to whatever you have to say, when you need it. I can answer any questions you may have. I can support you. The question is, will you accept it?"

"And let's be clear on one thing," Jee's voice grew stern as he held Zuko's gaze; this was the important part he needed the kid to pay really close attention to, or the whole endeavor would be for nothing. "There's no subtext to this. I'm not trying to get closer to you just to get into your pants and I will not try to flirt with you if you do decide to accept what I'm offering. I have a proposition for you, but I don't want you to read anything deeper into it. The fact that I… well, that I might find you attractive doesn't mean I'm communicating anything unseemly. Try to keep that in mind, okay?"

Zuko nodded, brow furrowing in concentration. He was trying to puzzle Jee out. Well, good luck
"Your uncle mentioned something about a championship," Jee picked up the speech after a loaded pause which, he hoped, only emphasized how serious he was about the last bit. "I'd like to offer you private lessons to help you prepare. Say, twenty minutes to half an hour every Thursday after DDC. Just training, the two of us. And nothing more."

Yes, he had to make that part absolutely clear. Repeating it five more times probably wouldn't be enough. But Zuko was looking straight at him now, his lopsided gaze hard and intent, and once again Jee fancied he could see the cogs turning in the kid's head as he tried to analyze everything his teacher said and make sense of the situation.

Jee let him take his time. He said his bit, dropped the bombshell and now all he had to do was wait for a reaction and pray that he hadn't just made a huge mistake. A part of him, probably the insane, irrational one that couldn't walk away from a broken, sniveling rookie without at least trying to help, really wanted to connect with the kid and make right what he'd ruined on Saturday. Fighting in private, using a non-verbal language Zuko seemed to speak, away from other teenagers who would set him on edge, seemed like a good way to do it. As long as both of them made an effort to keep things safe and proper, this could really work.

The question was, would Zuko stick to Jee's conditions. The man wasn't sure how much more of the brat's teasing he could take without either breaking every single resolution he'd made on the matter or losing his mind.

Maybe what happened between them on Saturday really did scare Zuko a bit, though, or perhaps Jee's earlier speech actually succeeded in helping him realize the possible repercussions – he seemed much more subdued and apologetic, and when he finally murmured a quiet "Ok" into his hands, it sounded genuine. At least for the moment.

And, for the first time that day, Jee smiled, feeling as though a backpack full of explosives had just been taken off his back. This meant they were more or less done here. There was only one more thing left to clarify before he let the kid go, hopefully with both their minds set moderately at ease:

"Don't think it's favoritism," he said. "It's not. I'm going to extend the same offer to your clubmates. If anyone wants to have extra training time, I'll make myself available to them. So don't go feeling too special."

For a moment, he was afraid this remark might jeopardize his earlier efforts to make Zuko feel special – there really was no telling how the kid would react. Talking to him felt remarkably like reporting to Jee's less mentally stable officers in the Navy, only worse, because the worst the officers could do to him was yell at him and demote him; with Zuko, it seemed that anything could happen.

However, some merciful higher power appeared to have taken pity on both of them and granted Zuko enough insight that the boy actually detected the undercurrent of mock seriousness in Jee's voice – when he turned to look at his teacher again, he wasn't smiling, exactly, but there was something astonishingly warm in his face and a suggestion of a spark in his healthy eye. Relief, too, painted as on a canvas on his visibly relaxing body. Clearly he was just as glad of the direction their talk had taken – and of it being almost over – as Jee was.

What happened next only proved it.

"I think it's too late for that, Lieutenant," Zuko said softly, standing up, and Jee was pleased to hear the nervousness was gone from his voice. His body, too, definitely seemed more relaxed, especially in comparison to how it was just minutes ago. When Zuko spoke next, there was no denying a new,
hesitant playfulness creeping into his manner: "Unless you kiss all your students."

Jee's jaw did not fall open only thanks to the years of practice he'd had in keeping a straight face no matter what.

Here was Zuko. Being playful. And trying to joke.

Those words were dangerous here, where anyone could look into the gym and overhear, but, fuck it, Jee smiled wider anyway. He couldn't possibly help it if he tried. This was such a new, unexpected side of Xi that he'd never seen before – probably very few had, coming to think of it – and it was so damn adorable that Jee suddenly wished they could go through conversations like this one every day if that was to be the outcome.

Maybe someday he could get the kid to give him a genuine smile. Now wouldn't that be a sight.

"Don't get too cocky," Jee admonished him with exaggerated sternness, but his smile stayed on, and the atmosphere around them gained extra few degrees.

"Or what?" Zuko crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his chin up, the very picture of a spoiled brat, but it was so obviously clear he was putting on a show that Jee felt so ridiculously satisfied with himself he could have laughed. "You're going to punish me, Lieutenant?"

"I might."

There! Right there. An almost-smile, flashing across Zuko's face quick as lightning, his expression wobbling under its force and under the strain of trying to hide it. The kid looked away after that, as if afraid that if he kept Jee's gaze any longer, his momentary collapse would actually show.

Yes. Someone really should give Jee a medal.

And maybe they should not be flirting like that minutes after they swore they would not, but it did not feel like flirting somehow – not this time. It felt light, and giddy, and perhaps they both had an excess of energy now that they needed to release, but Jee saw nothing wrong in this situation, safe in the conviction that he had done his duty and drew firm lines on the sand which Zuko agreed not to cross.

Besides, he almost made this boy smile. Nothing that produced such a result could possibly feel wrong.

"Go on, then," he said softly, scratching the back of his neck and feeling a profound sense of relief rushing over him like bliss. "Your education awaits."

Zuko nodded and turned to leave, but seemed to have a sudden thought pop into his mind; he turned to look at Jee again, the previous ease gone once more to be replaced by a return of hesitation.

"You won't back out of it, will you?" he asked, holding Jee's gaze. "The private lessons. Should I really stay on Thursday?"

"Yes. And no excuses. I'll tell your uncle what a lazy piece of work you are if you don't show up. We have plenty of work ahead of us."

This seemed to reassure the Xi boy; he nodded and made a weird little gesture with his hand, opening his mouth, as though he wanted to wave or say something more – but then he apparently thought better of it and promptly strode out of the gym without a backward glance at Jee.
Actually, make that a medal, a statue and a park named after him. Right now Jee felt he could do anything.

It must have shown on his face when he burst into the office quickly to prepare for the next class; Piandao, who had been reading, looked up at him with some curiosity and smiled.

"Ah," he said amiably, "good to see your mood is improving. Pleasant class, I gather?"

"Yeah," Jee smiled back at him, sorting through his mess of grease-stained papers to find the right attendance list for sixth period. "Something like that."

He should really stop by Office Max today and get himself some decent folders, it was about time…

"I'm surprised," replied the other man, setting his book down on the desk. "I expected things to be rather awkward between you and Zuko Xi after you assisted him in his… predicament on Saturday. Did he apologize?"

"News travels fast, eh?" Jee smirked; of course it would. Piandao must have known what happened, or the surface of it at least, he was there and seemed to count among Iroh's closest friends after all. "He did, amazingly. I gave him a pep talk. I think it's done some good."

His colleague nodded in satisfaction. "Such moments make teaching worthwhile, don't they?" he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Making a real difference. Helping. Guiding."

Under any normal circumstances, Jee would have rolled his eyes at this typical bit of Piandao-esque wisdom, but today, there was no trace of sarcasm in his voice as he replied:

"Yes. It can be pretty special."

He had felt it first-hand, after all, hadn't he, and not only today – though it was probably the biggest victory on his list to date. He used to feel this way really strongly back in the good old days, when he served as RDC and witnessed bunch after bunch of recruits graduate boot camp under his watchful eye. Later, after his promotion, he enjoyed instructing the rookies just as much and not only because it was damn well satisfying to run a tight ship and have people obey you without question, not out of fear, but out of respect. There was something to be said for when a green recruit addressed him as "sir" in a way which confirmed that he genuinely accepted Jee's authority, not because it was imposed on him but because he chose to do so. The job of a substitute high school teacher didn't even come close to this feeling of profound pride and accomplishment – if anything, the hapless teenagers irritated him even more by contrast and served as a painful highlight to his disgrace. But then again, in none of the schools he'd worked at before did he come across someone like Zuko. Someone who would really benefit from Jee's help. Someone he could work on. Who needed it.

And who, in strange, surprising ways, would turn out to be so similar to himself.

This didn't mean that all of their problems would magically go away – haha, no. Things ran much deeper than that, especially now that the very vivid memory of Zuko's lips haunted Jee incessantly, unsettling him with a throbbing, insistent kind of longing. But it was a solid beginning, a gateway, a foundation they could perhaps build on; and the very fact that Zuko agreed to take this step with him, to trust him enough to try, filled Jee with the kind of optimism that was probably just as rare as it was short-lived.

He found himself whistling as he made his way back to the gym, the correct list of attendance in hand. There was a new spring to his step that hadn't been there for a long time, and a giddy lightness which would probably disappear soon, making way for Jee's usual cynicism, but which, for now,
filled him with a vague, long-lost sense of purpose.

He had a project now. A goal to work towards. Something to look forward to, instead of just wading through day after day in this gray little copy of a town before the proper teacher came back and he was summoned to another town exactly like this one, to settle in and start over, and over, and over.

And suddenly, just like that, even the gaudy school corridors didn't look quite so crass anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Jee is impressed, Zuko is angry and a certain police chief has a request.
Chapter 9: Of kids and police chiefs

Chapter Notes

I am happy to tell you that the wonderful Anankhe did a beautiful, yummy picture of "How Chapter 7 Should Have Ended"! (Psssst! I agree)

And now for your regularly scheduled fanfiction, a huge chunk of which was brought to you by Squidcats who suggested how to introduce the two awesome ladies who had been missing from this fic. I hope she likes the result.

Make sure you have a nice cuppa and a lot of time before you sit down to read - this one is another monster length-wise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Alright, let's go through this one last time. And no whining."

Jee heard the students flock slowly behind him, some of them groaning, a good deal of them panting, most of them too worn-out to waste their breath on voicing complaints.

He sympathized. He was pretty exhausted himself after a whole day of exercising. But it was a good, pleasant kind of exhaustion that relaxed the mind just as it strained the body and that reminded Jee, time and time again, just why he had chosen this particular career path to begin with. Sure, knowing self-defense was good and handy, especially in a place like Jee's old hometown, but physical exertion in and of itself was probably one of the main reasons for why Jee decided to devote himself to studying martial arts. There was something incredibly rewarding in pushing his physical limits and overcoming them, day by day, only to discover that his body was prepared to do a bit more every time.

Which, up until that point, had been the chief – and sometimes only – advantage of his current occupation as a substitute gym teacher. The job had many faults, hell yes, but it did give him the chance to exercise five days a week for almost six hours, and he could also order a bunch of lazy kids around into the bargain. All things considered, the deal seemed decent enough most of the time when Jee chose to be in a better mood.

He thrust his fist out in a swift punch and heard two dozen juvenile fists follow his example, with much better synch now that they'd practiced the routine for half the period. The other fist followed, and then a roundhouse kick that a few of the kids struggled with – which was alright, they were a level 1 class after all. Jee finished with a series of dynamic kicks, gave the kids some time to follow, then turned around to signal the end of the class.

Watching the group of sweaty, exhausted adolescents file out of the gym shuffling their feet, some of them already gossiping and giggling and arranging to catch each other online, he strolled over to the bench where he'd left his towel and wiped his face and neck.

He was feeling pretty damn pleased with himself. Might even go downtown for a takeaway lunch, he mused – he really couldn't be bothered to cook today – and then drive to the park to consume it there, the weather still being good enough for outdoor relaxation. It was probably wise to take advantage of that before November unleashed its torrent of rain and wind on the state. Fall had been
spoiling them so far with surprisingly little rain and copious amounts of sunshine, turning the forests surrounding Summerfield into a splash of vivid color and making Jee wish he'd taken up residence somewhere out of town – driving an extra half hour to school and back every day, even on dirt roads, seemed like a good trade-off if he were to travel through natural corridors of magnificent red, yellow and orange, reflected spectacularly in the little ponds and lakes Michigan was notorious for. The awe-inspiring countryside in its fleeting, fall-triggered splendor was almost enough to make even a grumpy old cynic like Jee feel good about the world.

The park it would be, then. And maybe its atmosphere would help him get a solid plan together for his first private lesson with Zuko – which, after all, was to take place tomorrow.

Jee was a little surprised to realize he was looking forward to it already. Maybe his newfound optimism from their Monday confrontation was clouding his judgment, but he hadn't had a halfway decent sparring partner in what felt like decades and whatever could be said about Zuko, the boy had some skill. As long as he wasn't in one of his more bratty moods, it could turn into a really interesting and rewarding afternoon.

And maybe even the 'no bratty moods' condition was too much to hope for – it was Zuko, after all – but the kid had been acting relatively normal and not drawing any attention to himself in class both today and yesterday, so maybe not. Maybe they were both equally eager to make amends. Jee would enjoy it while it lasted.

So it was in a pretty good mood that he exited the Flowing Creek High School building that day.

Which lasted right until several seconds later, when he heard a woman's gruff, gravelly voice call out after him just as he was about to unlock his car:

"Lieutenant Jee Heng?"

The tone immediately made him think 'high-ranking officer' even before he turned around to face its owner – it was obvious this voice was accustomed to barking out orders on daily basis and, more importantly, having those orders obeyed. Jee'd heard enough of such voices in his life to create a special mental group for them – hell, he used it himself.

This alone spelled trouble, and when Jee's eyes fell on the woman marching briskly up to him, trouble became a whole fucking huge-ass neon.

Impossible, his mind screamed in a flash of cold, irrational panic. It was absolutely fucking impossible the police were on him so soon. Shit, he hadn't even done anything yet! Nor was he ever going to! They couldn't arrest him, they had nothing on him, no one could prove that the kiss happened unless Zuko actually did report him, but he wouldn't…

… Would he?

All of this passed through his mind in a blinding flash, the shock and guilt disabling his rational thinking for about half a second – but thankfully he got a grip on himself before his face gave away anything potentially incriminating.

Easy now. It was impossible that this fierce-looking, gray-haired woman clad in police uniform, seeming more or less his age and with a couple of formidable-looking scars on her cheek, was here because of Zuko. And even if she was and the kid did report him – or even if he simply let something slip to his uncle and then the old man notified the authorities – he would deal with it like a man. He could deal with it. There was absolutely no reason to panic, and no reason at all for behaving like a culprit.
So Jee stood up straight, raising his head high, and schooled his features into a neutral expression of mild interest that used to be his default face for dealing with his superiors back in the Navy, relying on long years of experience in feigning innocence and dealing with idiotic commanders he’d much rather punch in the face than report to.

"Yes," he replied, his voice calm – maybe a bit too calm to sound natural, damn it – and rested his elbow on the roof of his old car, looking straight into the police officer's eyes. "How can I help you, officer?"

She stopped a couple of steps’ distance from him, arms on her hips, her assured posture and the hard, set lines on her face screaming authority. Jee was impressed. Many of the officers he'd served under couldn't be this intimidating just by standing still, not without trying very hard, whereas this woman looked as if she hadn't been doing anything else since the day she came into this world. She seemed the kind of person who, to all intents and purposes, wasn't born the normal way but sprang directly from a rock.

"Lin Bei Fong, Chief of Police," she introduced herself after a beat, offering Jee her hand.

The lieutenant took it and shook heartily, not bothering to be gentle, which seemed to earn her silent approval – the lines on her face smoothened somewhat, even if only for a flash of second. Then she was back into intimidation mode.

"Let me get straight to the point, Lieutenant," she offered, her manner no-bullshit all over. "I respect your time enough not to waste it on pointless small talk."

"I appreciate that, Chief." Jee couldn't help the hint of a smirk from creeping onto his face. About to be arrested or not, he couldn't help but instantly respect this woman. It was instinct.

"As I understand it, you run a martial arts club here Thursdays after class," said Chief Bei Fong, her eyes on him hard and scrutinizing, giving nothing away but what Jee guessed to be habitual annoyance.

"Good to see the town's intelligence department operates flawlessly," he replied with a smile.

The Chief shot him a glare.

"It does. You'd be surprised, Lieutenant."

Jee had enough common sense to recognize the not-so-thinly-veiled threat and shut up. He still had no idea what this iron lady wanted from him in the first place and it was perhaps a good idea not to antagonize Summerfield's authorities so soon after their first introductions. Especially not with his track record.

"Anyway," picked up the chief after a meaningful pause, apparently satisfied her words had had the desired effect, "what I want to know is, is it for the students of Flowing Creek exclusively or would you be willing to accept an outsider?"

Oh?

Bit by bit, relief crept back into Jee, calming his racing thoughts somewhat and relaxing the tension in his muscles. So it wasn't about Zuko after all, nor about anything else he might have done. Good. Good. It seemed he was safe again…

But on the other hand, one never knew for sure when dealing with the law enforcement. There may be a trap in this yet.
"We haven't had any students outside the school apply," he replied cautiously. "I would have to take this up with Headmaster Pakku. Is there a problem, Chief?"

"No. At ease, Lieutenant." Though the way the Chief said it seemed to imply an unspoken yet. Or maybe that was simply her default way of communicating with everyone; Jee had known a couple of policemen in his time and all of them seemed to believe they were constantly on duty, even sitting in a pub among their pals. The way they saw it, everyone was guilty of something. He could bet his left hand this Bei Fong woman was of the same breed. Which was why her next admission came as a bit of a surprise:

"I am here in… private capacity."

Jee arched an eyebrow at her, waiting and trying not to let his guard down entirely just yet.

Chief Bei Fong waited for another beat, her brow creased in a frown, before she continued:

"I would be much obliged if you could admit an extra student to your Thursday classes," she announced, and though the words were polite enough, her tone made it sound as if she were issuing an order. "My niece. She is a homeschooled freshman."

Jee frowned. Right, it really did not seem like he was in any trouble, but then again, the request was pretty bizarre.

"Like I said," he started, "I would have to talk to the headmaster first, but I'm sure there should be no problem if –"

"She's blind."

That shut Jee up again.

"And for this reason," the woman continued, gazing sternly at Jee, "her parents are not exactly happy with her taking martial arts lessons, even though she is exceptionally gifted. Which is why I would appreciate it greatly if you did not, in fact, consult the headmaster about it."

"Wait. Do you expect me to tutor her… in secret?"

"In a word, yes."

If Jee were to frown any deeper, he would have gotten prominent lines etched into his forehead for the rest of his life. Chief Bei Fong must have predicted his growing reluctance, though, and prepared accordingly.

"You would have my gratitude." The way she said it – slowly, in a low voice – implied that he could very much need it, though, again, that was how she probably sounded all the time. "Oh come now, Lieutenant," she huffed with growing exasperation as Jee let the silence between them stretch, too confused to speak. "I looked through your records. Don't pull that face on me, I wouldn't leave my niece under the care of a man I didn't thoroughly examine first. I know that doing things by the book is not exactly your forte. The thing with Toph's parents is, they're paranoid. They want to keep her locked up, probably for the rest of her life, and they don't understand a damned thing about the girl. As luck would have it, the family is living close to Summerfield for the moment which makes it possible for me to smuggle her out every once in a while. It's impossible to do so on Mondays, which is why I came to you, not your colleague. I observed your classes today and I think you will do."

"I will do," repeated Jee hollowly and wondered briefly whether he should take offense.
The Chief looked him over once, critically, and nodded, a dry smirk gracing her features.

"Yes. You like adventures, Lieutenant. And while I don't normally condone any bending of rules, I am prepared to go to significant lengths to make sure poor Toph has her share or normal living. I know you can be persuaded to turn a blind eye to help a little girl. And believe me when I say Toph will be a great asset to your classes."

Jee considered his options.

On the one hand, he could get in really serious trouble with a clearly obsessive – and potentially influential – family, and God knew he already had enough on his plate with the offspring of one set of bigshots. On the other, though, he would have the Chief herself on his side if anything happened… Or would he?

"Can I trust you to take the blame if her parents want to file a suit against me for kidnapping?"

It was now Chief Bei Fong's turn to demonstrate she had also perfected the difficult and highly impressive art of raising a single eyebrow.

"Can it be that you're afraid, Lieutenant?"

Jee replied with a dry smirk.

"No, Chief. I am merely being cautious. I'm sure you can see why, since you bothered to peruse my records so diligently."

"If my brother ever catches wind of this," stated the woman firmly, "I will admit to being the one with the initiative and you being nothing but the instrument. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, if you can give me that in writing."

She seemed to approve; her smirk widened a fraction.

"You shall receive it tomorrow. Do I take it we have an agreement?"

Jee smiled. The Chief of police in Summerfield would owe him a favor. As far as backdoor deals went, this one wasn't bad at all.

"Bring the little lady tomorrow, Chief," he replied. "Let's give her space to make up her own mind whether or not she even wants to continue."

"Sounds reasonable. Thank you for your time, Lieutenant."

"The pleasure is all mine."

The Chief, however, did not stick around long enough to receive the end of this sentence – her business taken care of, she promptly marched off in the direction of a blue police Dodge, her manner brisk and sharply to-the-point down to the decisive hit of her low-heeled boots against the pavement; probably on to a very important mission she put in potential jeopardy just to talk to Jee.

The lieutenant watched her go and wondered, frowning, whether he'd just made his already pretty bad situation infinitely worse.

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True to her word, the Chief did drive her niece over – perfectly in time with the final minutes of sixth period. Jee didn't even make it out of the gym before she blocked his way stepping through the open doorway, hands folded across her chest, expression sour as ever, uniform sharp and immaculate.

Jee wondered if she'd timed it precisely so as to deprive him of his already too-short break.

He forced a polite smile onto his face in greeting and only then noticed the smaller, almost petite figure sliding into view next to the police Chief. The niece, presumably.

The blind niece he was supposed to secretly teach how to fight.

As before, Lin Bei Fong did not waste any time but proceeded straight to the introductions, putting a hand on the little girl's shoulder.

"My niece, Toph Bei Fong," she announced; Jee did not miss the way her eyes narrowed at him in scrutiny. She was probably gauging out his reaction to the girl. One final test.

Jee took a good look at her ward, still smiling – it didn't matter that the girl couldn't see it, as her unfocused, milky gaze indicated. She could probably hear it in his voice and besides, her aunt was watching Jee like a hawk, eager to jump at the slightest slip-up.

"Hello, miss," he said amiably. "I am Lieutenant Jee Heng, though your excellent aunt has probably told you that already. Ready to kick some butts?"

Which was when he received his first shock of the day: the grin which spread over Toph's features at his words looked positively feral. Jee felt himself stare. It was an expression one would sooner expect to see on the Cheshire Cat than on a sweet, young face such as hers.

"Like hell I am," she replied, her voice undeniably enthusiastic and strangely foreboding at the same time.

Jee gave her another once-over, more piercing this time. Seemed there was more to this little one than met the eye.

"Good," he nodded. "There will be no slacking off here. If you're not a sweaty mess ten minutes into the warm-up it means you're not trying hard enough. That is…” Jee had to cut off here, suddenly feeling awkward; crap, how would she even follow the warm-up if she couldn't see what he was demonstrating? How would she repeat any of the exercises, for that matter?

Toph, however, seemed to have mysteriously caught on to his sudden discomfort.

"Just shout out the instructions," she said dismissively. "I know what's what. Unless what you do here is something artsy and innovative, but Auntie Lin tells me it isn't."

"No, it isn't," Jee agreed gratefully. That had been a close one. He really should have given this whole thing more thought before he came to work today, but Zuko's first private training session had been on the forefront of his mind all of last evening.

He decided to intercept Katara before the start of the DDC meeting and ask her to look after Toph during class. The girl had already proven herself to be among the more responsible members of the group and she was subtle to boot – Jee hoped he could rely on her to pay attention to what this tiny, cheeky one was doing and gently correct anything that needed correcting.

"And is your charming aunt going to stay here and watch the lesson?" he asked, glancing up at the Chief.
She wasn't amused. "Don't you try to sweet-talk me, mister," she grumbled. "I'm working. Toph can look after herself just fine. But if something happens to her during your shift, you'd better leave the country altogether because I'll come after your sorry Navy ass like a fucking pissed-off Valkiria, only without the singing. Oh, and here," she rummaged in the inner pocket of her uniform jacket, "is the protection shield you requested."

She handed him a written statement, which Jee treated to a quick once-over. Everything seemed to be in order, the terms spelled out exactly as they agreed yesterday. Bei Fong even bothered to stamp it with the seal of her office.

Yep. It should do.

"Satisfied?" asked the woman dryly, one of her eyebrows going up.

"Completely," Jee smiled at her, if only out of a sudden, schoolboyish need to tease. "Thank you, Chief."

"Yeah, yeah," she waved at him dismissively. "I'm off. Toph, try not to kill anyone while I'm gone. Would be messy to cover it up."

"Sure thing, Auntie," the little girl smirked at her aunt, who smirked at her in return and gave her hair a ruffle before she marched off, giving Jee one last glance of warning over her shoulder.

The lieutenant inclined his head after her, folding the document and shoving it into the zipper pocket of his tracksuit. He would treat it with the respect it deserved later, when he was back in his own apartment and had access to proper folders.

"Is this about my parents?" inquired Toph, crossing her arms over her small chest. "What she gave you just now?"

"Yes." There seemed to be no reason to hide things from her – for a child her age, she looked exceptionally intelligent.

She nodded as though she'd been expecting this. "Smart of you to think of that," she said matter-of-factly. "If my folks ever find out I've been here, they'll go nuts."

"Overprotective, are they?"

Toph snorted. "You have no idea. They think a blind, helpless little girl cannot handle this big, scary world." Suddenly, she looked up at the general area where she probably guessed Jee to be. "I hope you don't think so, too," she threatened. "I can kick ass just as well as anyone else. Better."

"I believe you," Jee replied calmly – and, strangely enough, found that he meant it. Already, after only a few minutes of talking to her, he could see the inner strength and defiance in the kid – it was practically oozing out of her lithe form, much like it was oozing from her aunt. That was when Jee first wondered, not for the last time, how anyone who knew her better could ever think of her as helpless. It was now laughably easy to deduce she and Lin Bei Fong were closely related.

In short, Jee was impressed. And the feeling only grew when he led Toph in the direction of the girls' locker room so she could change – unprompted, the girl used the short time to brief him on all the techniques she was good at, casually displaying knowledge so detailed and thorough that it was obvious she had been at it for a long time.

"The tutors Aunt Lin smuggled in for me had to do a lot of physical leading at first," she was saying, her tone flippant and easy, "but I caught on quickly. I learned to rely on my other senses more. Did
you know it's pretty easy to predict the moves of a seeing opponent after only one round? They make little telltale noises all the time. And the air changes in a particular way. They just don't notice."

"No, I did not know that."

"That's because you see the normal way. Don't worry about me, old man. I can keep up just fine. Only don't tell the others. It's always fun to watch people catch on."

Jee believed all this with no trouble by now.

He left her by the girls’ locker room to make her introductions on her own – him entering a room full of changing teenage girls wouldn't be considered appropriate – and returned to the gym, stopping by the office to get his notes. As luck would have it, Katara passed him on her way to change, so he stopped her quickly and briefed her on the situation. Just as expected, the girl immediately jumped at the opportunity to help, earning herself a prominent place on Jee's short Uncommonly Decent People I've Met list. Now he could only hope the girls would get along.

He made Toph's introductions to the entire group brief, avoiding a fuss, and started off with the warm-up immediately, cutting short all possible gossip on the topic; but not without noting how Zuko's eyes widened in surprise at hearing his new clubmate's name. He would have to file this away for further analysis.

That day they practiced dodging and blocking, which always made for an amusing class. Jee chose Korra to be his demonstration partner for the first set of moves and wasn't surprised when, after the demonstrative round, the girl made her way directly to Zuko. The two of them paired off together for exercises almost regularly and it looked like this had been going on for a while. Sometimes they acted very hostile about it, especially when Zuko was in one of his more intense moods which never failed to bring out Korra's teasing, mocking side; but underneath it all, Jee suspected that they simply appreciated the skill of the other and regarded them as a worthy opponent. Not that they were the only ones in the club representing a higher level – no, most of the kids who had signed up were sufficiently advanced and could hold their own against either Korra or Zuko – but Jee supposed that the reason they were so fond of sparring with each other were their similar temperaments and attitudes to fighting. While being undeniably better-adjusted and socially adept, Korra sometimes displayed levels of larger-than-life intensity and fiery determination worthy of Zuko's and these came out especially in the sparring ring. For all her mocking of the Xi boy – which, Jee was increasingly convinced, only served as bait so that he would unleash his torrent of fury on her when they fought – she obviously appreciated and enjoyed the challenge he represented and, as far as Jee could tell, the feeling was mutual.

The only problem was, both of them had alarmingly short fuses and there had been days when, driven by adrenaline and equally strong competitive spirit, the two of them took things further than Jee instructed, spontaneously erupting into full-blown duels. Those never failed to delight at least half of the club members, who would then take to cheering until Jee broke it up.

The last time it happened, the lieutenant was half-tempted to let them beat each other up until one emerged the obvious winner. But then the other would want a rematch, so it really wouldn't have been productive in the long run, no matter how much he may have been curious to see the final outcome. Besides, considering how evenly matched the two of them were, both in skill and in their stubborn refusal to give in, it could take forever.

Today, however, Zuko seemed much more cooperative than usual – in fact, if Jee was any judge, the kid gave off tiny signs that he was actually excited. He replied to Korra's usual baiting with a few sarcastic remarks of his own and once they started practicing, he seemed so energetic and unusually light on his feet as though he were not fighting, but playing.
Jee tried not to read too much into it, but he couldn't help a smile and the warm glow of pride in his chest. The shadow of the optimism he'd felt on Monday returned, leaving him with a pleasant tingle of anticipation. To know that Zuko was looking forward to their private sparring as much as Jee was made all the difference.

But there was still the rest of the class to teach before that, and one new lady in particular who may require his assistance. Tearing his eyes away from a smirking Zuko easily dodging Korra's roundhouse kick, he sought out Toph.

Who, as it turned out, was currently busy wiping the floor with Bolin.

"Get up, Bo!" Sokka cheered his friend on, leering with obvious amusement. "Can't let a little girl kick your butt this easy." For which Katara, standing next to him, smacked him over the head.

"Watch out or you're gonna be next, Loudmouth." Toph rested her hands on her hips. "Ready for another go, Big Guy? Come on, I'll go easy on you this time."

Bolin, his face all red from mortification, got on his feet again and dusted himself off, clearly trying to save face by acting nonchalant about the whole thing. "Of course, it was me who went easy on you," he clarified with a strained smile.

The expression on Toph's face was positively terrifying. "Of course," she mouthed. "Get over here then and show me what you can really do. Or are you afraid to hit a little blind girl?"

Jee decided it was time to bring his voice of authority to the table before anyone got hurt – and he had a sneaky feeling it wouldn't be Toph.

"Only dodging and blocking, remember," he reminded them sternly; the reprimand in his voice seemed to help Bolin cool off a little. "And you," Jee turned to Sokka, Katara, Aang and Suki, who had been standing idly by and watching the unusual scene, "get back to work."

"Sure thing, sir," replied Bolin, the lightness in his voice obviously fake. "Ok, Toph, try to block me now and then I'll try to block you…"

He shifted on his feet, then delivered a swift, strong punch to the right – which Toph, smirking, easily ducked under. Then, dizzyingly fast, she promptly got in Bolin's personal space and hit him square in the sternum, sending him down to the floor again.

Snickering and chuckling broke out all around them. Jee was sorely tempted to join in, but he had to make do with a smirk and swept his gaze over the group, bringing them back to order. Toph crossed her hands over her chest again, grinning like a tiny, deadly shark.

"What was that you said about going easy on me?" she gloated as Bolin tried to regain what was left of his dignity. "Come on, Big Boy, you can say it."

Bolin sighed, getting to his feet again. "Okay, okay," he admitted. "You're awesome."

"And?" prompted Toph unabashedly.

"And badass."

"Awesome and badass. Don't you ever forget that."

Jee decided it was his cue to step in.
"I see it's time for a partner swap," he ordered. "Aang! I know it's heartbreaking to let Katara practice with someone else for a while, but try to get over it for five minutes and come here to see if you can deal with Toph here."

"Beware," muttered Bolin ominously on his way to Katara. "She's a deeeeeemon."

The tattooed exchange students laughed at that, beamed at Jee with a chirpy "Yes, sir!" and jumped over to Toph. "Hi! I'm Aang. Great to have you here," he exclaimed with a disarming smile which, unfortunately, was lost on his new friend.


Predictably, she let Aang attack first and dodged, but when she tried to land a hit on the bald kid in exchange, he swiveled gracefully to the side. Toph frowned at that and tried to deliver a punch again, after waiting and listening intently first, but Aang ducked under her fist this time as well, smiling slightly.

Jee nodded in satisfaction. This was exactly what he hoped for. He had noticed earlier that Aang's favorite method of fighting was keeping out of the way or even getting behind his opponent so that it was impossible to land a hit on him – almost like a dancer, he used the lightness of his feet and his incredible reflexes to always be inches away from where his opponent wanted him to be. This trend, and especially the getting-behind thing, tended to infuriate some of the more offense-oriented club members and push them into angry, uncontrolled attacks, which was when Aang used a couple of quick jabs to take them out, mostly using their own force against them. It was an impressive technique to be sure, and undeniably effective, though Jee took care never to pit the monk against Zuko for fear that the smaller guy might not make it out of the scuffle alive. But it was precisely why the lieutenant thought Aang would do well against Toph, who obviously depended on her opponent's underestimating her and charging mindlessly.

It would be good practice for both of them. Jee stood by and watched the two kids for another while, observing with satisfaction how, already, they were trying to adjust to each other and learning from the other's technique – Toph obviously exasperated and baiting Aang to behave more aggressively, to no avail – before he moved on to other pairs. These two would be alright.

By the time the class ended, Toph Bei Fong was already an obvious favorite of the group and rightfully earned herself a brand new circle of ardent admirers. Jee smiled when he saw Katara, Aang, Sokka and Suki approach her and invite her to go out to dinner with them. He found himself hoping that the girl would be able to steal some more time away from home to join them – she was probably the most impressive person he'd met in a while and definitely deserved all the praise and goodwill that surrounded her.

"Before I let you lot scram," Jee said loudly, once again catching the group's attention, "I have a small announcement." He sought out Zuko in the crowd of students, sent him a confidential little smile and once again addressed the entire club: "It has been brought to my attention that some of you might compete in the national martial arts championships. I already know of one student who will be competing and I offered him some time for private training sessions. This offer is open to any of you. If you're interested, come up to me now or e-mail me or let me know some other way and I'm sure we'll be able to arrange something. Now off you go."

A few of the faces looked thoughtful, he noticed, but in the end, no one did stay behind to ask for private training with him – which, if Jee were to be honest with himself, brought him a bit of relief. He might still get a few requests later on as the kids made up their mind, though, and he would have no choice but to make good on his word, but such was the cost of sticking to impartiality. He meant
what he said to Zuko about no favoritism and was adamant to stick to it – he couldn't let it show that he favored the brat in any way. And not only as a means for precaution.

He absolutely fucking hated favoritism and did not want to become that kind of teacher. If Zuko got private time with him, it was only fair to offer the same opportunity to others and that was that.

And speaking of Zuko…

The kid stayed behind, of course, and was currently busy taking huge gulps out of a water bottle he had brought with him into the gym. Korra lingered behind to give him a questioning look – he shrugged and muttered something non-committal, to which she smirked and shook her head.

"If you manage to spend five minutes alone with this guy without killing him, sir, you have my deepest respect," she called out to Jee before running up to a waiting Bolin.

Zuko glared after her, but did not comment.

Toph was already gone, probably changing in the locker room, but a familiar, uniformed figure waiting by the open doors, leaning on the frame and gazing at Jee expectantly, told him that his adventure with the Bei Fong ladies was quite not over yet.

"Take a moment to rest," he told Zuko, passing him on his way to the police Chief. "I'll be with you in a sec."

"Your niece," he started before the woman even had a chance to open her mouth, "is incredible."

This pleased her, as far as Jee was able to tell – for a split of second, she did not seem disapproving of the entire world around her. "So she is," she admitted with just the tiniest detectable trace of fondness. "I take it you have no objections to her continuing with your classes."

"None at all. As long as that's what she wants."

"We'll learn that in a minute, Lieutenant."

She was right. In no time at all Toph was with them, changed from a tank-top and leggings into her daily green hoodie and jeans, making her way over with the help of Katara. Her older companion smiled politely at the Chief and took a few respectful steps backwards, waiting for the rest of her group and obviously trying not to appear like an eavesdropper.

"Well?" Lin asked the girl, arching an expectant eyebrow which Toph couldn't see but seemed to have sensed anyway.

She grinned. "Next week. Can we make it?"

Jee was busy smiling at her, so he didn't entirely catch the expression of appreciation and gratitude which Toph's aunt flashed him – he only spotted a shadow of it as the woman's gaze returned to her ward.

"We'll see," she conceded, which seemed to be some sort of code, because Toph's smile only grew.

"Oh, and one more thing," said the girl. "Those guys," she indicated with her thumb the general direction where Katara was waiting, "are now my fans or something. They want to hang out and bask in my glory. Think I can go?"

She tried to act nonchalant and indifferent about it, but it was clear from the inflection of the last
word and the way she seemed to tense all over waiting for a reply how much she really wanted to go. Jee glanced to the Chief – she was frowning, her eyebrow creased, her expression conflicted.

"You know we can't risk your parents finding out you haven't been with me the entire time," she said slowly; and it was heartbreaking, it really was, the way Toph hung her head and seemed to have shrank a few inches.

Lin saw it, too, and sighed deeply, scrunching her eyes shut and massaging her temple with one hand. Jee thought he caught her murmured "Fuck," but couldn't be sure, it was so soft. "Fine," she said finally, as if against her better judgment. "But don't take too long. And let me know when you're done so I can pick you up, or have those guys drive you over to the station. Got it?"

Toph's happy grin could have outshone the sun.

"Glad to have you join," said Jee, making his presence known. "Make sure to keep up with the good work next week."

"Sure thing, sir Old Man." Which was when Toph punched him in the arm. Surprisingly hard, too, though it was probably the shock of her doing it at all that made Jee sway a little. "It was fun," she stated. Then, she turned around and called out to Katara's group: "Okay guys, whatever, I guess I can come with you if you want me so badly!"

In no time at all, she was whisked away by the cheerful group in the direction of the parking lot; their laughter could still be heard a long time after they left the gym area.

Lin watched them go with a fondness that was probably as alien on her face as rage on Aang's, but she went immediately back to her Rough Police Chief mode as soon as she sensed Jee's amused eyes watching her.

"Thanks," she muttered, almost grudgingly, but did send him a flicker of a smirk before she turned around and marched out of the sports wing to her car.

Jee inclined his head after her respectfully. He understood. No other words were necessary here. Right. Right…

Feeling almost absurdly satisfied and – not chirpy, dammit, never in his life had he been chirpy and he was going to stick to this record – Jee turned briskly on his heel and marched back into the gym.

His evening was not over yet.

Zuko was waiting for him. Jee wasn't really surprised to see him sitting on the floor and stretching; normal kids would have used the short break to rest, but Zuko had long since established he did not count among this group. Jee smiled briefly at the sight before he approached him and took a swig out of his own water bottle.

The gym had no windows save for a few narrow ones high up by the ceiling, but even without the view of the darkness outside, the evening seeped into the spacious hall and tinted the whole scene with an informal, relaxed atmosphere all camaral, evening sessions carried, with traces of physical exhaustion floating in the air and a silence which seemed cozy and familiar. Jee and Zuko were the only two people in this makeshift dojo now and had it to themselves for basically however long they wanted – the lieutenant checked to make sure no clubs met here on Thursdays after theirs.

Somewhere in the distance, in other parts of the sports wing, the basketball training was in mid-session, the sounds of balls hitting the ground, shouts and whistles faint and muffled; splashing and more whistling from the swimming pool indicated the students there were well into their own
training; the occasional chanting in the rehearsal room nearby told Jee that Ming was whipping her own girls into shape. Somehow, all those noises surrounding them only contributed to the feeling of isolation in the dojo; and once again, much like he had on the football field, Jee felt that, in a strange way, this space had suddenly transformed into their own, private sphere.

It was a pleasant feeling and strangely comfortable, which Jee was grateful for. He could only hope Zuko would feel it, too.

"Ready?" He asked the boy once he was done drinking; Zuko smirked at him from the floor and gave his legs one final stretch before swiftly getting to his feet.

"Right." Jee turned his head this way and that to relax his neck muscles. "You stand over there. We'll have a few rounds of sparring. I want you to pretend this is a tournament. All the normal rules apply." He picked up his water bottle, his bag, his tracksuit jacket and his car keys, then used them to mark a square on the mats. "That's our ring," he explained. "I gather you've been in enough tournaments to know when a round ends?"

Jee had not competed in one his entire life, but he'd trained with people who had and he'd been in enough mock fights and seen enough tournaments to learn the usual rules.

"Yeah," Zuko nodded, running a hand through his hair. Jee briefly debated whether or not to suggest that he invest in a headband to keep it out of his eyes.

"Okay," he said instead, easily sliding into a fighting stance. "Bring it, kid."

Zuko's eyes narrowed dangerously as he rasped out: "I'm not a kid."

Then, he charged.

Jee had observed him enough to predict the possible lines of attack Xi was likely to take, but he was still slightly startled at the speed and swiftness of Zuko's assault – the lieutenant sort of expected them to circle each other a bit first, to test the waters. But it seemed Zuko did not believe in half-measures; he launched himself straight into the offensive, delivering a precise, swift kick which Jee blocked with his fist not a moment too soon. This did not discourage the kid, who pressed on with a sequence of jabs and kicks, obviously trying to keep Jee in the defensive. The lieutenant decided to indulge him – he kept blocking, keeping Zuko from landing a decisive hit, budging just enough not to cross his makeshift ring markers, and let the boy wear himself out as he observed.

Most of the characteristic elements of Zuko's style he had already learned were in ample evidence: good speed, solid technique, admirable reflexes, impressive strength, extraordinary drive and flat-out uncommon endurance. Those things usually allowed the kid to outdo most of his peers. But against an old, seasoned fighter like Jee, other elements came to the surface – like the way Zuko tended to bet everything on the first few minutes, throwing all that he had into them without bothering to pace himself to last longer. Or a certain sloppiness creeping into his attacks the longer he fought. Or the way he seemed to sacrifice control for the sake of pressing on no matter what, thus losing focus and letting himself get carried away too easily. Or the way he did not think ahead and try to feel his opponent, relying on instinct and the heat of the moment rather than on strategy.

Which was, indeed, typical Zuko and really, Jee should have predicted all those things based on the kid's impulsive personality alone. But at least he now had a very firm idea of what they should work on.

Satisfied with his observations, Jee decided it was now his priority to lay them out for Zuko too. He focused on the kid's heated attacks, which had by now gotten rather chaotic, found a crack in his
offence and struck out, cool and precise, hitting the boy's stomach.

Zuko groaned and doubled over, stumbling backwards; when he looked up at Jee again, his eyes shone with shock and some very familiar, building fury. The lieutenant nodded at him, getting into a stance again.

"The first round goes to me," he said a bit unnecessarily, but not without a sprinkling of grim satisfaction. "Again."

The kid didn't need to be told twice – drawing on reserves of strength that came from Jee had no idea where, in he launched himself again, repeating his previous strategy, only with double the fury. Jee didn't let him play this time and cut the heated assault short with a precise kick to the kid's right shin, just as Zuko was raising his leg into a kick of his own.

"How did you do that?" sputtered Zuko breathlessly once he recovered.

Jee smirked at him.

"I used my brain," he explained laconically. "Draw your own conclusions. Again."

Zuko sneered at him, baring his sharp white teeth, and this time he waited a beat before jumping into the offense, his breathing heavy, the sweat breaking out on his face and neck and trickling down his torso, his sleeveless shirt wet and clinging to his body. Jee permitted himself a short moment to appreciate the view before he disciplined his mind to focus back on the action; but he couldn't be bothered to muster a whiff of guilt about it this time, maybe because it was firmly established that he would not act on it and, for once, Zuko was not trying to encourage him.

He was too busy working himself up into a rage.

It lasted longer this time – Jee missed the kid twice, and the third time he tried to knock Zuko out, Xi threw himself to the ground in a duck and, spinning on his hands, did a grand sweep with his legs break-dance style, apparently trying to make the older man lose his balance. It was a really impressive move and Jee found himself temporarily distracted, but then he saw an opening as Zuko jumped to his feet again and he took it, sending the boy back to the ground and out of the "ring".

Three times seemed enough of a demonstration. Before Zuko could attack him again, Jee put up a hand in the universal halt gesture and reached out to help his student up as a peace offering.

He shouldn't have been surprised when Zuko refused to take it and got to his feet on his own, quite violently at that – really, this civil rapport between them was too good to last and obviously Xi's ego had just been quite severely wounded. But Jee could not deny the spark of irritation he felt at the boy's reaction, even as he motioned for the bench and sat down without glancing to see if Zuko followed.

"I want to go again!"

"No," Jee ignored the angry outburst and the furious panting, calmly taking a seat to show how much he was not intimidated. "That's enough. I already know what I wanted to know."

"I want a rematch! I can beat you this time!"

"Maybe later. For now, you sit. And listen."

For a second, the Xi brat looked as though he wanted to bite Jee's head off.
It was okay, the man told himself. Zuko's pride and ego had taken a serious blow, which was a huge deal when one was seventeen. If he needed to shout and kick something for a bit, he could. And then they would go back to the teaching part of the evening, something they were here for in the first place.

"Have a drink," Jee offered his student the water bottle.

Instead of accepting it, Zuko folded his legs stiffly under him and sat across from Jee cross-legged, head bowed, eyes hidden by his hair. His entire posture almost shook with how pissed he was.

Jee stifled a sigh. Patience, patience. Let the brat stew for a moment in peace if he felt so inclined. There was obviously a lot of ire to gulp down over there.

He took a deep gulp himself, ignoring the simmering centre of silence across from him, and waited. It took Zuko a minute or so to get over himself and calm down enough to speak without snarling, but even when he did, he didn't raise his head to look at Jee:

"Alright, what did I do wrong?"

Jee toyed with the bottle, throwing it from one hand to the other. "Well," he started softly, "what do you think you did wrong?"

Zuko looked at him then alright, though "glared" was much more adequate a term to describe it.

"You're supposed to be teaching me, not the other way around," he snapped.

"Let's start with something else then," Jee resumed amiably, ignoring the outburst. "Why did I win? Think about it."

Zuko's only response was to turn the glare up a couple notches.

Jee shrugged to show much he was not impressed by that and continued: "Did you learn anything about my technique?"

"Yeah, that you wait a lot," scoffed the brat disdainfully.

Jee smiled at him. Now they were getting somewhere.

"Exactly. And why do you think that is?"

"Because you're an old man and don't have the energy anymore?"

"Oh hardy har har, watch me double over and die from laughing so hard," Jee deadpanned in response, rising an eyebrow. "Try to use your brain this time. It's not that difficult."

Zuko glared at him some more, probably out of pure brattish defiance, but then – lo, success! – his brow furrowed in actual thought. Jee was pleased to see this development and smiled in encouragement, waiting.

"This is going to be about thinking ahead, isn't it," sighed the kid eventually, hunching forward in a very resigned manner.

So he'd had this kind of talk before and it obviously didn't stick. Which didn't bode well for Jee, but at least the brat had some inkling as to what the problem was.

"Yes," Jee nodded. "Which is something you don't do. You charge right ahead without thinking.
You don't pace yourself. You don't use strategies. And, most importantly, you don't observe.”

Zuko looked at him in sullen silence, his lips forming into a pout, his eyes stormy and defiant. The sight was so hilarious that, for a moment, it was all Jee could do not to laugh.

Yep. The pout was pretty damn adorable and smothered Jee's own irritation quite effectively. "Your technique is good," the man continued, feeling a new rush of goodwill towards the stormy cloud of wounded self-esteem that was Zuko. "You've got some very impressive moves and pretty good instincts. And you're very fast. Not to mention your endurance and drive. I know all of it has been enough to get you far in the competitions. Your uncle showed me the trophies."

"I figured he would," mumbled Zuko, lowering his eyes. "I heard you two talking outside my door."

Which immediately brought Jee's mind spiraling back to that night, to Zuko's bedroom, to the reddish half-light, to the smell of wine, to the warmth of the boy's body, to the taste of his frantic lips. He swallowed, feeling a flood of warmth pooling in his stomach, and took another swig from the bottle just to distract himself from the memories so they wouldn't creep into the moment and hang between them again like some invisible miasma – but from the hard lines of Zuko's tense body, he could venture a pretty good guess as to where the brat's mind was at the moment, too.

No matter. They would get over it eventually and move on. These things took time. As long as neither of them did anything to acknowledge slips like this one, it would be fine.

It was a relief to see that, for the time being, Zuko seemed to agree with him.

"I was very impressed by your collection," said Jee softly, trying to dispel the cloud of their shared memory for good. "But I hope you'll agree with me that it is no reason to stop trying to improve. You are a senior. My guess is, some very important scholarships hinge on this year's contest, am I right?"

Zuko looked up into his eyes again at that – and once more Jee found himself momentarily distracted, not by any hints of seductiveness in the boy's face this time, but by its sudden, grave seriousness. When Xi nodded, his lips forming a thin, hard line, the muscles on his face taut with tension, his eyes bright and unrelenting, he did not look like a teenager anymore – in this one moment, he looked like a samurai readying himself for battle.

"Care to share your plans with me?" Jee asked, his tone even softer; something in the intensity in Zuko's eyes tugged at him.

That gaze commanded respect. Jee had never seen a teenager look so grown up before.

And then his thoughts flew back to the photos pinned to a corkboard, to the giant flame sprayed in black above Zuko's bed. Suddenly, he was dead sure that the championships had a lot to do with the happy family building sandcastles on a beach.

"No," replied the boy curtly, the same intensity still gracing his features with a sombreness that was disturbingly beyond his age. "But I want to learn from you."

Jee nodded, still strongly impressed by the inexplicable gravity of the moment, the meaning of which he couldn't quite grasp yet but which lay heavily between them nevertheless, almost as thickly as the memory of their kiss.

The lieutenant got to his feet again then, despite this heaviness, and walked over to Zuko decisively, not quite breaking the spell, but readjusting it so it would no longer overwhelm them. "We'll do a couple more rounds," he said, his tone loud and decisive once again; it didn't chase away the weight of the air, but it did change the atmosphere a bit, giving it a vibrant sort of energy that came with a
solid purpose. "This time, we'll go slowly and I'll be giving you feedback in the meantime. We have a lot of work ahead of us. Deal?"

Zuko looked up at him, his gaze hard, his face the same mask of unshakable resolve. He nodded again, and when Jee held out a hand to help him up, the boy took it this time.

Jee smiled at him before retreating back to his side of the improvised sparring circle.

"Again."

Chapter End Notes

Next: There's more alcohol, Jee hates on baseball and Zuko appears wearing nothing but a towel.
Chapter 10: Games

Chapter Notes

Well hello there! An update! Bet you forgot all about this fic in the meantime. I have a lot of excuses for the long wait, but how about I simply skip them and go straight to the fic? That good? Good.

The wait for the next chapter will probably be about a month, too. Blame my Uni. The summer vacation of uninterrupted ficcing really is well and truly over...

Also, I need to apologize to everyone who may feel offended about the depiction of Detroit in this chapter - sorry! I really did like that city, but I have a feeling Jee wouldn't.

And now for the chapter! Which isn't very exciting, to be honest. But it has a towel scene. So there's that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jee remembered Detroit as a messy place, strangely quiet on the surface for a town of its size, shrouded in myths and dark urban legends so heavily it seemed to embrace them and wear them like a cloak; decrepit and rather bleak, but with odd attempts to liven itself up visible here and there which only made the dim ruin left over from the sixties so much starker by contrast. From his one brief visit all those years ago, Jee got the vague impression that the city could not quite shake off its many phantoms – though not for lack of trying.

However, it seemed to manage to at least sweep them under a rug for Detroit Tigers baseball games; the noisy, overhyped crowd pouring out of the baseball park and into the city, rosy-cheeked and waving around absurd, huge-ass gloves, now trickled into the streets like water in a clogged drainpipe, filling the arteries of downtown with light, cheers, carelessly dropped litter and the honking of irritated drivers trying to metaphorically elbow their way into the traffic.

Safely tucked in the backseat of his friend Captain Matt Coulson's car, Jee took out a cigarette and lit it with the window open, enjoying a blissful moment of quiet after having to push and zigzag his way through a throng of emotional baseball enthusiasts, and looked up at the brilliantly lit skyscrapers.

Which were not getting any closer.

"Told you we should have left earlier," he murmured, letting out a puff of smoke out the window.

"Shut up, I'm trying not to murder people here," came the grumbled response from the driver's seat.

"And a fine job you're doing. At this rate we might just find a place to have a drink before dawn."

"Okay, that? Not helping."

"Reckon it would've been faster if we just went on foot?" Shun turned around in the passenger seat to grin at Jee.

"Sure," the lieutenant shrugged. "Or took the shuttle. But good old Captain here calls the shots."
Shun snickered. "Looks like someone is in a laid-back mood tonight."

"I guess I'm just recovering from hours of sitting comatose back there." Jee shifted and stuck his head out the window, silently reveling in the cold breeze. The nightly air felt surprisingly fresh and rejuvenating, or maybe it was just the fact that they were finally out of the damned stadium where even the hot-dogs tasted like they had already been chewed and spat out by someone else, people had to scream themselves hoarse to be heard over the crowd and the benches seemed determined to leave lovely souvenirs from the game, mostly in the form of back pains.

"It wasn't that bad," grumbled Matt from the driver's seat.

"Maybe not compared to watching good old Zhao engaged any activity at all," retorted Jee. "You know I don't like baseball. You should damn well appreciate that I sat through the whole thing without wringing any necks. At least that would have been interesting," he added under his breath.

"Told you," Shun sent a toothy grin to their driver. "He's desperate for some good company."

"Desperate for a drink, more like. Could we just leave the car anywhere and find a pub on foot? Would be faster."

In the end, they decided to leave the car in the parking lot of the hotel they had checked in before the game, and even then it took them a considerable amount of time to force their way at a sluggish pace through post-game traffic, the hotel being located just outside the city centre. Downtown Detroit seemed to be positively tearing at the seams with activity that night, which should not be surprising given that the city's beloved pet champions had just won a game against the Chicago White Sox – jubilation sparkled in the air and left a fresh taste in its wake, lighting up the night not only with corporate electricity, but with communal, patriotic pride and excitement so thick it could be carved with a knife.

Jee couldn't care less. In his opinion, baseball was only marginally less boring than golf and when people at school asked him who was his Tiger, which seemed to be a secret code of initiation for every Michigander, he merely remarked that he didn't much care for felines at all, thank you very much. The crowds in their incomprehensible frenzy sparked nothing in him but irritation.

He dearly hoped they would find a place where they played some other music apart from the damned baseball jingle. Being bored out of his skin for the entire game was enough, especially since the initial pleasure of watching a sport live and being a part of an excited crowd had worn off after about twenty minutes; after that, watching random audience members caught on camera on the giant screens had become the only entertainment of the evening, the game itself being predictably dull.

But Matt bought the tickets as a surprise as soon as they agreed to meet in Detroit and, well. All things considered, sitting in a boredom coma for a couple of hours and putting up with the noise in the stands was not such a big price to pay for seeing some old, familiar faces. Now that the worst part of his evening was over, Jee was looking forward to catching up on Navy gossip over beer and snatching back as much of his old life as he could.

The three men found a decent pub eventually, though further away from downtown than they meant to venture; everything in the heart of the city was already overflowing with adrenaline-drunk baseball fans eager to get drunk on something even more substantial. The bar Jee's little group landed in was a country place, apparently, with a live band making too much racket for civilized conversation to happen, but it served beer and fries and, most importantly, still had tables available, so it was good enough. A grumpy-looking middle-aged waitress led the men to a table mercifully far away from the band and, soon enough, Jee started to enjoy himself.
It didn't take them long to fall back into the old banter they used to share while Jee was still in the Navy, and the conversation flowed in this direction pretty swiftly after both Jee and Shun made it absolutely clear they were not particularly interested in discussing the game. Even Matt, whose love for baseball was equal only to Jee's dislike of it, conceded it would have been a waste of time, especially considering that they hadn't seen Jee in years – so, as a result, the lieutenant spent the next two very comfortable hours laughing at the most recent Navy anecdotes and secretly trying to shut down the old bitter heartache they evoked.

Well, he knew this would happen. His years spent on Navy ships may not have been all sunshine and roses, but he missed them anyway, probably more than he should; he was prepared to have those old wounds, if not reopened by this meeting, then at least throbbing with that annoying itch of a war injury never completely healed.

And he would be damned if he allowed this bile of bitterness cloud his long-awaited evening. He knew better now than to nurse old regrets. Live in the moment and all that motivational crap. There was no use in looking back in anger.

He did allow himself one little lapse, however, and asked, taking advantage of a temporary lull in conversation: "So, how's that Lowell kid?"

As if on cue, Matt and Shun exchanged understanding glances with each other, and Jee barely stifled a laugh when they both turned to him with nearly identical, soothing smiles.

"He's fine, Jee," said Shun, leaning forward over the table. "Was making a name for himself in the SEAL, last I heard. He wanted you to know he's very grateful."

"Seen him recently, have you?" Jee smiled back at the two men, taking a gulp of his beer.

"A few months back," replied Matt, his expression comically soppy now that he had two bottles of Budweiser settling in his gut. "He looked great. Successful. On his way to conquer the world. You really helped him and he remembers that."

"Good." Jee nodded, his smile growing. It was nice to hear. At least his sacrifice had not been entirely in vain. "And that bastard Gibbs?"

"Retired and vacationing in Haiti," a flash of disgust marred Shun's amiable, sun-burnt face. "At least, that's what they say. Anyhow, everyone's better off now that he's gone. The Navy's got enough bastards as it is."

"Yeah," Matt nodded vigorous assent. "Like Zhao. Did you hear that piece of shit got promoted again? Makes me sick in the gut just thinking about it."

Jee murmured in the affirmative, joining his friends in making a disgusted face. There was a note about it in the online Navy newsletter and it had caused Jee to deliver a colorful string of verbal abuse at his laptop screen.

"Well, what did you expect?" Shun shrugged, his expression turned grim. "He's pals with men like Ozai Xi. Of course he'd get promoted."

"That little bitch seemed fond of him all right." Matt spit into a corner. "Disgusting."

"Wait," Jee held up a hand, frowning and trying to pretend that Ozai Xi's name being dropped on him like that did not freeze his heartbeat for a second. "What little bitch? What are you talking about?"
"Oh right, you didn't know." Shun looked very eager to share the story. "We had an inspection a few months back. Lots of bigshots who wanted to see if we're putting their equipment to good use. You know, the whole circus. Ozai Xi decided to send his darling little girl for some reason. Zhao showed her around our ship. You should have seen him grovel at her feet like some damned domesticated poodle. He was this short of fetching her fucking slippers in his mouth."

Zuko's sister.

"What was she like?" asked Jee over the sudden twist in his gut. "Isn't she a bit young to be doing inspections?"

"Hell, you'd think that." Shun shook his head. "She's sixteen. But she knew her stuff all right. Very professional. And damn terrifying."

"No teenager should behave like that," Matt agreed. "I have a daughter her age. But that girl… she was a real bitch. Smart as all hell, obviously well groomed and trained lie a cyborg, but a bitch. You could tell. The way she looked at the men…" He shivered.

"And she played Zhao like you play the guitar," added Shun. "Would have been hilarious if she weren't so fucking scary. If she's like that, I don't ever want to meet her daddy."

"You know what they say about the Xis," muttered Matt ominously. "Ozai is probably pals with every mafia boss in the country. The girl must be eager to take over, she already looked the type to deliver execution orders in her sleep. Those people ain't normal."

Jee did not realize how hard he had been frowning until Shun looked at him and asked if there was something wrong.

"What? No," muttered the man, gazing hard at his beer. Then, he decided to risk it. "But wasn't there a son? I heard there was a son, somewhere. An older brother."

Matt looked puzzled – he hated not knowing something and following media gossip was one of his favorite pastimes – but Shun simply shrugged, uninterested. "Maybe there is," he said. "Don't know, don't care. As long as they sell their stuff to us and not to the other side, I don't want to have anything more to do with them."

"Yeah," Matt seemed to share this sentiment. "But I haven't heard anything about a son. There's always just this freaky girl."

"Maybe I heard wrong," Jee mumbled into his beer, then emptied it with one gulp.

"Who gives a fuck. What's going on with you these days, man?" Shun turned to Jee, grinning. "How's that new school treating ya?"

It was Jee's turn to shrug now, though his heart was still beating too fast for comfort. "You've seen one school, you've seen them all. Only difference is, this one has a lot of Asian kids and personnel. And the principal calls himself Headmaster, probably to feel more distinguished or something. Or he's watched too much *Harry Potter.*"

However ridiculous it was to picture Pakku watching *Harry Potter."

"Think you're going to stay there a bit longer this time?"

"Dunno. Their last gym teacher, the one I'm filling in for, messed up his knee somehow. Nobody knows how long he'll take to get back to work."
"So maybe they'll hire you for good?" Asked Matt.

Jee shrugged again. "I honestly don't know," he confessed. "I'm not even sure if I'd want that. Still, it'd be nice to settle down somewhere for longer than a semester or a school year, I guess."

But not in Summerfield. He couldn't see himself living there permanently… Especially not after Zuko went to college, leaving him without a purpose again, but that wasn't something he wanted to think about.

"I miss high school sometimes," Matt smiled wistfully. "Used to be one of the popular kids. Dated the head cheerleader and –"

"Yeah, yeah, we know," Jee nudged him with his elbow. "You were prom king and banged the queen in the john. Spare us the details this time."

"Do you ever get to go to proms?" asked Shun, chuckling. "Relive the old school spirit stuff?"

"If they need chaperones. Then I usually just stand around and make sure no one fights or tries to spike the drinks. Apparently I'm good at looking intimidating." Jee finished his second glass of beer with one gulp. "I hate it."

"Oh come on," Matt laughed out loud. "It can't be that bad. Lots of nice young girls to ogle…"

Both Jee and Shun raised their eyebrows at him, which only made the captain laugh even harder once he realized his slip. "Okay, okay," he managed between fits, "nice young boys, too. Looking good in tuxes and… stuff. Don't tell me you haven't paid attention."

"You seem to forget that, unlike some people, Jee's not a pedo pervert," Shun rolled his eyes and patted his friend on the back. "Right, buddy?"

"Right," Jee mumbled, trying his hardest not to betray anything by frowning too hard. And not thinking about Zuko in a tux. "Anyway, it's usuallybearable," he said loudly, steering the conversation back to safer waters. "I had to attend the homecoming game, but they spared me the dance this time. Didn't have to do anything for Halloween either. Maybe it'll be the same with prom. Usually they manage to get enough staff for all the school spirit events without including me."

"So what the hell do you do with your free time, then?" Shun wanted to know.

"Not a whole lot. There's this club we have," started Jee, and told them about Dancing Dragon Club, its many colorful members, the kind of stuff he taught, the atmosphere of the meetings, and then mentioned the Jasmine Dragon with its Music Nights and giving private lessons once a week to a talented kid, without mentioning any names. Both of his friends had working brains and were more up to date with everything, so they could make the connection faster than him; especially Matt, with an index of useless celebrity gossip stacked away in his head. Somehow, he didn't want these men to know he was training the son of Ozai Xi and frequenting a teashop run by the man's older brother.

"Between my normal lessons, the club and teaching that kid," he was saying in-between gulps from his third glass, "I don't really feel like doing anything else. Usually I just flop down in front of the TV in the evenings or read something. Dealing with adolescents is fucking exhausting."

"Oh yeah," Matt nodded in understanding. "I love my little girl, but we drive each other nuts whenever I'm home for longer than a week. It's like she's on a planet of her own. And if that kid you're teaching privately is really as bratty as you say, I feel sorry for you, man."

"He's… specific," murmured Jee. "And unpredictable. And angry. But not all that horrible. I'm kind
of getting used to him. And he's a damn good fighter."

"Get him to join the Navy after graduation, then," suggested Shun. "We need recruits who can hold their own against creeps like Gibbs."

Jee almost snorted his beer out. "Hell no. He's not soldier material," he chuckled gruffly. "Shit at obeying orders. Not smart enough to give them. No, you're far better off without him."

For some strange reason, this remark prompted his friends into exchanging conspiratorial smirks. "What?" he asked, genuinely puzzled.

"We kinda know someone else who used to be shit at obeying orders." Shun winked at him. "Or have you forgotten already?"

"Well aren't you two hilarious," retorted Jee dryly. "Are you implying I was too stupid to give orders, too?"

"Hey, all we're saying is, you weren't all that cut out for the job at first either, Jee," Matt held up his hands in a defensive gesture. "You never know."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you actually met the brat."

"All right, all right."

For a moment, Jee was sorely tempted to start talking about Toph now, just to divert their attention again, but he remembered in time the Bei Fong girl was coming to his classes in secret – babbling such a thing to these two could be potentially hazardous. He didn't want to risk messing with the Bei Fongs any more than he already was, especially now that he'd done some research and found out that he had another rich, suspicious family on his back now.

Which, in hindsight, explained the odd looks Zuko kept giving Toph during club meetings. He must have known her, or at least heard of her family, even if he was always careful to steer clear of her and never engaged her in conversation.

Maybe he was afraid she would recognize him.

"So are we to understand that you haven't met anyone in all this time?" asked Shun, downing his glass. "Apart from one-night-stands. You've never mentioned anyone."

"There's no one to mention," replied Jee, frowning again. "Why are you suddenly interested in my sex life?"

"You're not still mourning Stephen, though, are you?" inquired Matt, with his typical subtlety.

Jee glared at him over the rim of his glass. "No. It's been years."

"My point exactly." Matt decided to press it, either deliberately ignoring Jee's glaring or being oblivious to any social cues at this point. "Don't tell me you've discovered that your new calling is being celibate. You haven't hooked up with anyone all this time?"

"As I recall," Jee grumbled, "you used to run away screaming the second I started talking about my relationships."

"We all grow up eventually. Even our dear old Matt," proclaimed Shun philosophically. "What Captain Tact here was trying to say is, well... we've been sort of worried. You need to get laid,
"Your concern is touching." Jee shot them both a death glare. "No, I'm not pining. No, I don't have a partner. No, I'm not even trying to find one. Yes, we can stop this awkward conversation now and move on to other things before we start sounding even more like a soppy bunch of adolescent girls."

The other men nodded in understanding and the topic of Jee's bedroom partners was dropped; thankfully, they had not returned to it over the course of the evening, though Jee got the feeling his friends would start gossiping about it like a couple of little old ladies over stitching the second he left their company. After all, that was what he used to do himself when he was still a regular in their company.

He did not hold it against them. Sailors gossiped like washerwomen. It was one of the facts of life.

Jee did not even want to begin to imagine what they would have to say if they knew about Zuko…

They ended up talking until the bar closed, after which they returned, rather loudly and unsteadily, to the hotel; this meant that Jee would have all of next day to nurse the inevitable hangover and return to Summerfield by train early next morning. Once alone in his room, he collapsed onto the bed in his clothes and fell asleep almost immediately, and later remembered dreaming about Zuko and a faceless girl with a cruel smile, sparring in a ring of fire.

There was nothing scary about this dream, but he woke up early next morning drenched in cold sweat anyway.

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"Like this," he instructed, planting his feet firmly on the ground. "Stay rooted. Don't lose your balance. Focus on your feet at all times, not just when you use them for kicking."

"Okay, okay, I get it," huffed Zuko impatiently. "Let's go again."

He did stay more rooted this time, at least until he leaped absurdly high into the air and went kicking at Jee – and the tiny millisecond when he was back on the ground and regaining his balance cost him the round. They would have to work on him regaining his footing more swiftly after similar acrobatic stunts if he was going to keep pulling them – and it seemed that he was. Sometimes Jee wondered, not without a twist of bitterness, whether Zuko insisted on doing impossible, gravity-defying things with his young, incredibly agile body during their private meetings just because Jee was too old and couldn't.

Still, progress was progress and the lieutenant nodded at Zuko to acknowledge it, wiping the sweat off his brow.

"Better. We will work on that some more next time."

"I want to go again." Zuko did not leave the sparring circle nor relaxed his stance, but he was panting and droplets of sweat crawled down his neck in a way Jee was not going to pay closer attention to.

"No." The man moved over to the bench and grabbed a water bottle. "That's enough. You're barely standing and I want to get home sometime before midnight."

This was ridiculous. They'd been having this argument nearly every time they sparred. The kid simply didn't know when to stop and, clearly, taking other people and their physical condition into account was as alien a concept to him as giving up. Jee enjoyed their sessions, but everything had its
limits and he was definitely not going to spend all evening exchanging blows with a kid, however attractive said kid may be.

"Go and take a shower," he instructed, his back to Zuko. "Good work today. See you tomorrow in class."

"But –"

"Shower, Zuko. Give me a rest. I'm an old man."

And Jee might just follow his own advice and shower before getting into the car himself. Usually he didn't bother – there was no one around who could be grossed out by him smelling like the football team locker rooms – but tonight he didn't have anything to change into and his shirt was already clinging to his body in such a way that he might as well have been half-naked, which was anything but comfortable.

"Fine." He heard a petulant huff and then footsteps when Zuko joined him by the bench and started gathering his things.

"Doesn't your uncle ever worry?" asked Jee casually, strolling out of the gym with a pouting Zuko by his side. "You seem to come and go as you please."

That was true. Their private sessions were supposed to last no longer than thirty minutes, but as time went by, those thirty minutes seemed to stretch into more and more, up until one evening when Jee glanced at his watch between highly satisfying rounds to discover they had been in the gym for over two hours. He paid closer attention to time since then, but extending their practice to an hour had become the routine; and if Zuko could have his way, he would have them stay there for the rest of the night.

Not to mention he managed to talk Jee into meeting on extra days several times already.

The kid shrugged, stepping through the threshold into the corridor and standing to the side so that Jee could lock the gym.

"Uncle knows I'm with you," he murmured. "He doesn't mind. And he's used to me being home late."

Jee nodded, deciding that he couldn't be bothered to judge the effectiveness of Iroh's parenting strategies, and together they walked in the direction of his office and the student locker rooms, which were in the same direction.

It was strange how comfortable those moments had become. Leaving the gym with Zuko had been awkward initially, with Jee not quite knowing what to say and Zuko apparently not interested in saying anything at all, and they used to part ways in silence wrought with tension – but, little by little, with every late training session, the air was getting clearer, the atmosphere more relaxed, the words started to appear all on their own, and when they didn't, the silence seemed infinitely less awkward as well. Now there was practically no trace of the initial discomfort left – well, unless one counted the one that stemmed from sharing any space with Zuko for an extended period of time, as the boy's talent for creating awkwardness out of nothing at all was only matched by his talent in martial arts.

And his temper.

But still.

There were still moments every now and then when Jee would catch a more lingering look or would
lose himself for a second too long in admiring a particularly enticing view of Zuko's body; pauses when the memory of their kiss sparked and trickled into the air between them, generating new tension and filling the space with half-acknowledged, unspoken longing. But those were far and few in between, now; and the two of them seemed to have reached an unspoken understanding to press on in spite of them, acting as though nothing inappropriate had ever passed.

Which was probably mostly because Zuko was too focused on training and getting better, which, as it turned out, was a stronger driving force for him than making out with Jee (and the lieutenant was thankful for that, he really was). Frustrated shouting was more common between them now, and sometimes it turned into pretty heated arguments whenever Jee ran particularly low on patience and didn't feel like dealing with any of the kid's crap. But even after such sessions, when they parted on pretty hostile terms, Zuko always came back for more. It would have been pretentious – or just plain infuriating – the way he would show up in the gym expectantly and stare at Jee, failing not only to apologize for whatever fit he had thrown the week before, but to even acknowledge it with a single word, instead expecting Jee to simply carry on with their session as normal… if it hadn't been so damn impressive.

Jee had to respect that kind of dedication, even if he had to choke on a colorful string of invectives at least once a week because of the brat.

He left the boy by the locker room with a laconic goodbye and strode over to his own office, already looking forward to having a relaxing stream of hot water run down his back to soothe the strain in his muscles – but this particular train of thought was abandoned as soon as Jee stepped into the main corridor and was greeted by the sight on the other side of the tall windows.

Oh.

He hadn't heard the rain back in the gym – neither of them had, too busy with the job at hand. But then again, the only windows they had were high up by the ceiling, so it wasn't all that strange.

Except that it really was, because it looked vicious out there.

Jee stood motionless for a minute or so, watching the torrents of rain beat against the glass and the trees swaying in the wind as if they were about to break, and thought:

_Zuko might not have a car._

He probably didn't. It had been a decent morning, with lots of sunshine and nothing that would herald the storm that was now bent on flooding the school parking lot, and Jee knew that usually, as long as the weather permitted, the kid preferred to ride his bike to and from school. Jee had learned this surprising fact when he first offered Zuko a ride back home after their Thursday practice – the kid declined, even though he was clearly exhausted and barely standing.

It was not the first time when talking to Zuko made Jee feel like he was dealing with a maniac, but it was one of the more memorable.

There was no way the brat was going to ride his bike home in this weather.

Having momentarily made up his mind, Jee nearly sprinted to his office to get his things and lock it, then ran back, intent on catching up with Zuko before the brat indulged his suicidal instincts and took off on his own.

He knocked on the locker room door, but there was no answer.

Fuck. Zuko couldn't have made it out in the short time it took Jee to get his things together, could he?
"Zuko!" the man called out, stepping into the locker room.

It was empty, but before Jee had the time to panic and run out to the parking lot to try and intercept his insane student, he heard the sound of running water in the adjoining shower stalls and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Zuko!" he called out again, louder, taking a few steps into the room until he reached its middle.

And then he stopped, as though colliding with an invisible wall.

He did not trust himself to get any closer to the showers. The temptation to venture those extra few steps and take a small little peep would be too strong. No, he'd stay right here like a good boy, safe and sound, and wait for the kid to return…

And maybe entertain the very appealing mental images of Zuko in the shower in the meantime. But not too extensively. He allowed himself to indulge in similar fantasies more liberally now that the danger of them actually happening was reduced to a minimum, but it was one thing to admire the kid when he was fighting and then contemplate the sight back home, and quite another to fantasize about him in the shower when the very scene was being played out just a few feet away from him.

Not to mention it would be more than embarrassing if Zuko caught him with a hard-on.

"What?" came Zuko's voice, booming with echoes from the shower stalls and muffled by running water.

"I'm taking you home tonight," shouted Jee from his spot in the middle of the locker room. "It's raining cats and dogs out there."

"What?"

"I'm taking you –"

"I can't hear you!"

"Never mind!" Jee ran a hand through his short hair and sighed.

He strode to a bench on the opposite side of the room from the showers, leaned his back against the lockers and waited, trying to shut the images now spinning in his head from getting any more vivid.

Home. He would be home soon. Then he would let himself slip. Not now.

His resolve underwent a fleeting crisis, though, when Zuko stepped into the room a few minutes later, with nothing on but a towel wrapped around his middle.

Oh fuck.

"I said I'll drive you home tonight," said Jee quickly before Zuko could spot his reaction, looking into the boy's eyes and nowhere else. "That is, if you haven't come by car today."

"I haven't. Why?" Zuko opened his locker and started laying out his clothes, looking away from Jee – but not before the man noticed the shadow of a blush beginning to creep into his face.

Brilliant. Here was a potential fuck-up in the making, precisely of the sort the lieutenant had been dreading. Jee stifled a groan and run a hand over his tired face, shutting his eyes for a bit under the pretense of fatigue.
And here he thought he had been doing so well…

"Because it looks like a fucking flood out there," he explained in a strained voice.

"Oh." For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of rustling fabric, and Jee couldn't help but peep through his fingers – Zuko was getting into his underwear, sliding it up his long, strong legs with the towel still wrapped around him, his back half-turned towards his teacher, his body bent over.

Holy mother of…

The expanse of white skin in front of him stirred urges which Jee relentlessly toiled to keep corked and stored safely away. Like the urge to walk up and stand behind the brat, and run his hand over the rippling muscles of his back again – his skin still remembered how good that felt – before caressing those sharp hipbones and grabbing, hard…

"I can still get there on my own," said Zuko, his voice sounding as though it came from another country instead from the other end of the room.

"I'm pretty sure I'd be thrown out of the teachers club if I let you," murmured Jee, shutting his eyes again before his body reacted without consulting his brain. "I'll be waiting for you in the corridor. We'll fit your bike into my car. Hurry up."

Then, he all but fled from the locker rooms, trying to maintain what little dignity he could muster, before Zuko caught on to the situation and decided to do something provocative, like drop the towel. For all Jee knew, he just might.

Once safely back in the corridor and with the door to the locker room shut behind him, Jee took a couple deep breaths and leaned against the wall. Usually, he did pretty well with reigning in such reactions in the presence of the boy, but that had been a close call. He hadn't seen Zuko without his shirt on ever since that night in his room – which was another sign that the kid was at least trying to behave now – and the sight bothered him much more than it ought to. Or maybe it was the damn towel that did it, the towel and the sheer, overwhelming, crushing certainty of what was – or wasn't – underneath.

But maybe he was lucky and Zuko hadn't noticed anything…

Yeah, right. Or maybe Jee was just a delusional, horny old man who really should have known better than to stay in that locker room once he made sure Zuko was still there.

And now he had a brand new fantasy to add to his already creepily impressive collection. Who was he even trying to fool…

But it was okay. Just a temporary slip. No biggie. He'd move past it and behave like a responsible adult, much like he managed to behave all this time. Their practice sessions clearly showed that he could go for extended periods of time without lusting after Zuko.

Really.

Especially whenever the kid acted like a spoiled little brat, because it was hard to appreciate someone's fine physique when you mostly just wanted to clip them nice and good around the ears.

By the time the door to the locker room opened and revealed a decent-looking Xi wearing a loose-fitting red-and-black jacket over a hoodie with its hood put up, Jee had gotten a good enough grip on himself to smile at the kid without much awkwardness. He led the way out of the sports wing in
silence, Zuko following slowly, but sans further protests.

The kid did not comment on the rain, but he did pause when he saw it through the windows.

His bike, looking sad and lonely as the only one still waiting for its owner to unfasten it from the stand outside the entrance to the sports wing, was predictably drenched. Jee looked on, the hood of his tracksuit providing a very feeble shield against the downpour already drenching both of them, as Zuko got the bike free of the chain and hoisted it up with a grunt, not turning to his teacher for help.

Stubborn bastard.

"This way!" Jee shouted to be heard over the rain, then led the way to his battered old Ford.

Fitting the bike into his trunk turned out to be quite the Herculean job and, sadly, Jee could not measure up to the legendary hero – after a few failed tries he gave up and simply jammed it into the backseat instead, getting the seats wet be damned. Nobody used his backseat these days anyway and it would dry off soon enough. Getting himself and the kid into the car was the priority now.

"Shit," he heard Zuko murmur once the kid shut the door behind him and started fastening the seat belt.

"You can say that again," grumbled Jee. "Just let me turn on the heating…"

He had long since abandoned the idea to try and instill some proper discipline into his interactions with Zuko, like stopping the boy from swearing. That would have achieved nothing but unnecessary alienation. Besides, he enjoyed being able to communicate with this boy on a more relaxed footing and it seemed that Zuko appreciated it in his own peculiar way.

Maybe it made him feel more grownup.

Their waterlogged clothes were heavy and dripping and Jee's teeth were close to chattering, but once the engine started and the heat poured blissfully in along with the sounds of his old The Decemberists CD playing on low volume, Jee gradually stopped shivering and glanced to the side to see if Zuko did, too. It was hard to tell – the kid sat leaning against the door, looking ahead with a blank expression. His soaked backpack rested on the floor between his legs – the sight of it made Jee realize something.

"I don't even know what other subjects you're taking," he said, driving carefully out of the parking lot. "Got all your credits already?"

He thought he caught Zuko shrug and draw in on himself out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn't be sure. The blasted rain made it damn impossible to see anything for longer than a split of second, even with Jee's wipes working full steam, so he couldn't very well risk looking at the boy too often or he would get them both killed in a ditch somewhere.

"More or less," he heard the raspy voice mutter, the tone indicating Zuko was not in a conversational mood. "I'm taking AP Calculus, Economics and Comparative Government and Politics. Computer Lab and English, too."

"Three AP classes, eh?" Jee whistled. "Ambitious. And do you like them?"

It was a while before Zuko replied with a small, quiet "No."

Jee nodded before he even caught himself doing it. He suspected as much. All of that sounded like an awful lot of hard, boring workload aimed, no doubt, at pleasing Daddy. And Jee may not know
Ozai Xi personally, nor was he aware of the mysterious circumstances surrounding Zuko’s banishment to Michigan, but he could venture a pretty good guess as to the odds of that happening.

The poor, delusional bastard…

"But you're doing all right?" he asked, just to keep the conversation going.

"I… manage."

"Must be hard."

"It is." And that seemed to be all the brat was willing to divulge.

Right. Obviously Zuko didn’t feel like taking care to keep the ball in the air. Jee resigned himself to a silent ride all the way to the Jasmine Dragon, with nothing but the music and the rain beating down on his windows for company – and it did remain this way for the first chunk of the journey while they were passing the suburban area of Summerfield with the forestry stretch in-between, the school being situated a good distance from the downtown. But once they got nearer to the city park and the lights of downtown proper started to flicker in the distance, Zuko shifted in his seat and took in a deep breath as though gearing himself up for something.

"Did you go to college?" he asked quietly, something obviously making him uneasy.

"I did," replied Jee levelly, focusing on the road ahead. "After I enlisted. You cannot become a Navy officer without a college degree."

"But isn't it unusual, to become an officer after enlisting as a regular?"

Jee stifled a smile. The kid was giving away his background just now and didn't even realize it.

"Unusual, but not impossible," he replied lightly. "I was lucky. Someone higher up noticed me, decided I would make a decent officer and invested in me. They sent me to the US Naval Academy."

His education had been completely paid for by the Navy, so his mother didn't have a reason to protest and bother his dad to send in more money. The deal made everyone happy, especially once his officer salary started coming in. Mom earned her own living just fine, but Jee sent her a regular sum anyway, if only to keep up appearances and put his conscience at ease. That and an obligatory exchange of holiday cards – even if his family had never been particularly religious – had been the extent of his filial duties as far as both of them were concerned.

"Why, are you thinking of joining the military after graduation?" he asked when Zuko didn't say anything for a longer while.

There was more shifting on the seat to his right.

"I… don't know," Zuko confessed. "It’s a possibility, I guess."

Because you sincerely want to try it or because you think becoming a war hero would make Ozai Xi proud?

There was a small opening there, but Jee had to be careful about it. He hadn't had a longer conversation with the boy that didn't pertain to their training ever since Zuko agreed to the private lessons deal, and something whispered at Jee to squeeze everything he could out of this rare opportunity, but it was delicate ground. He had been building something with this boy and
sacrificing it now just to satisfy his curiosity would have been a shame.

Besides, what Matt and Shun said about Ozai and Azula Xi was still gnawing at him.

"Actually, now that I think about it," he started slowly, "wasn't your uncle in the military? I thought I heard his name before."

The way the silence suddenly grew cold and prickly told him Zuko was not happy with this casual discovery. Jee wondered briefly if the kid was going to bluff now. He'd never seen him attempt it before and he imagined it could be quite interesting.

But apparently Zuko realized it would be futile to bluff his way out of this one in front of an ex-military man – or he simply couldn't think up a lie on the spot – and opted for the truth, probably hoping Jee would leave him in peace if he did.

"He was," he admitted sullenly, his tone positively spiky. "But that's not any of your business."

_In other words, here there be dragons_, Jee translated to himself. _Don't go any further or you'll get burned._

Too bad Jee's natural curiosity already shot that horse in the face.

"Just because I allow you to swear in my company doesn't mean you get to be a rude brat," he admonished the boy. "I was just curious. Relax, kid."

If the silence was anything to go by, Zuko didn't relax for a considerable while, but Jee decided to ignore it. They were getting close to downtown now anyway and would soon stop by the teashop, and if Zuko wanted to mutely simmer for the rest of the ride, who was Jee to deny him?

And if he felt a little disappointed Zuko didn't trust him enough by now to confide in him, well then, there was nothing he could do about it. Prodding now would only make it worse.

Time. They needed more time, but they were getting there.

Slowly.

"What's this music?" asked Zuko when they were just a few blocks away from the Jasmine Dragon; his tone still carried some of its previous prickliness, but had enough conciliatory softness that Jee could interpret it as a call for armistice.

"The Decemberists. It's a good band. Do you like it?"

"… Yeah." It sounded almost as if Zuko was ashamed to admit it. "It's decent, I guess."

Jee smiled.

"I could lend you the CD if you like," he offered. "If you have anything to listen to it on, that is. You kids seem to have forgotten what a proper album looks like."

"I noticed you don't have a way to connect an iPod in the car," replied Zuko, his tone more confident now that they steered clear from the dangerous, stormy waters that was his family. "Don't tell me you still use a CD walkman."

"Hey, nothing wrong with that."

"Yeah, right." Zuko almost-chuckled and Jee's smile grew. It was good to see he managed to lift the
boy's mood again, even if was at his expense. "You only say that because you don't know any better."

"Do you want that CD or not, you brat?" Jee asked with exaggerated exasperation, which sometimes worked in putting Zuko even more at ease.

"Yeah, why not. Got anything else decent that's not old people music?"

"Are you trying to insult me?"

There was a silent beat, and then came Zuko's quiet "No," which sounded surprisingly sincere and also strangely gentle, in a way that made warmth spill in Jee's gut that had nothing to do with the car's heating.

They pulled to a halt by the Jasmine Dragon a minute later and Jee rummaged in the small storage space by Zuko's legs to find the packet for the CD, while Zuko got out and started working on extricating his bike from the Ford's backseat. It was still pouring down as though the rain had no intention of ever stopping, and when Jee got out to help the kid with the bike, he silently cursed the world for getting soaked all over again just as he was beginning to feel dry.

Still. He couldn't say the evening had been wasted.

"See you tomorrow, then," he said once the bike was freed and set down on the pavement. "Here," he reached out with the album in his hand. "Bring it back whenever and enjoy."

Zuko nodded, his face blurred in the rain, and reached out to take the CD – his thumb brushed over Jee's hand lightly, in a way that could easily be dismissed as accidental.

He looked up into Jee's eyes briefly, then back down at his feet, tucking the CD into the pocket of his jacket.

"Thanks," he mumbled. And somehow, it was clear he didn't mean the music.

There it was again, that warm feeling in Jee's chest. Oh God, his mid-life crisis was upon him and manifesting itself by turning Jee into a great big sap. He'd better be careful or he'll start watching romantic comedies next…

But no. The evening had definitely not been wasted.

"Anytime. Now run inside before your uncle kills me for keeping you out in the rain."

He got back into the driver's seat of his Ford and watched from the car as Zuko's dark silhouette disappeared around the teashop, probably to the back door; then, he restarted the engine, turned on the radio and rejoined the traffic.

And if he hummed a little along the way, it was purely because the music on the radio was good and definitely, absolutely not for any other reason.

Chapter End Notes

The sneaky little "Avengers" reference was there for the enjoyment and benefit of my good friend Err. Hope you had fun with it, dearie.
And apologies if I had any of my facts wrong. I'm not overly familiar with the way US Navy works.

Next time: Jee does introspection, finds stuff in his pocket and complains about modern punk.
Chapter 11: Baby steps

Chapter Notes

Happy Christmas! :D I hope yours was wonderful. Mine certainly was, for many different reasons. The biggest of all being that "Substitute" now has a fan-fanfic to go with it! "In which Jee discovers that Christmas is not all that bad" written by the lovely Samalane is the ultimate holiday extravaganza filled with warm, fluffy (and smutty too) goodies and can be found at Princebender. It's set in the future, but though Samalane used the Substitute setting, it's entirely her own variation on what she imagines the boys to be like in a year from here, so there's no fear of spoilers. I rec it wholeheartedly.

Another thing is that the Princebender crew is hosting a Jeeko Secret Santa with all sorts of delicious prompts, so I highly recommend cheking out the blog regularly because awesome stuff of all sorts is about to pour in. If you want to claim some prompts, please do, we've got 18 of them and the more the merrier.

Now, on with the show! This chapter is not exactly a Christmas chapter (those will come soon), but hopefully there's enough winter in it to make up for it. Winter and music. And other stuff. In fact, chapter 11 is more like a patchwork of fillers than an actual chapter, but I hope you forgive me for this. I promise chapter 12 will be more interesting. Oh, and apologies in advance if Jee's musings re: modern punk offend anyone. Those are Jee's opinions, not mine! *hides*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Zuko waited until their next private meeting before he returned the CD.

"Wasn't too boring" was the reluctant verdict as the boy slid the album in Jee's direction across the bench where they were both sitting, taking a small rest between the DDC meeting and their training.

Jee looked at him incredulously. "Not too boring," he repeated. "Are you kidding? Or is it simply your teenage way of expressing praise?"

He was surprised to see the corner of Zuko's lips go upward in a smirk that looked as if the boy was smiling at some very private memory. "I know a person for whom not too boring is a huge compliment, you know," he murmured with the same smirk in place and looking out to something only he could see. "But look inside," he added after a pause. "There's… something more."

Intrigued, Jee opened the packet and – well, whadya know. There really was a surprise tucked inside. A new CD peeked up at him from a paper envelope, blank and unsigned.

"Just something I burned," Zuko explained in a voice that he obviously tried very hard to make nonchalant, looking down at his bare feet. "You'll get the names of songs and bands when you play it on your PC."

Jee looked at the blank CD.

Then at the kid.
Then back at the CD.

And all this time, his brain was trying to get him to acknowledge that indeed, he was not hallucinating this, a connection did exist between the two and he really was the intended recipient at the end of this chain... But the concept behind all this felt entirely too outlandish to be true.

"You burned me a CD," he said, because somehow this needed to be said out loud.

Zuko immediately squared his shoulders and stuck out his chin, ready to defend himself as though from a physical blow. "Yeah," he said, as though daring Jee to mock him about it. "Thought you might like it. It's... uh, it has energy. So it's good. For the car."

"Right." Jee still couldn't quite stop staring at the boy as though he'd just announced he was taking up ballet.

"Well?" Zuko got to his feet abruptly, suddenly flustered. "Are we going to get started or what?"

"Yes, fine." Jee followed him to the mats. "Thank you. That's very... um..."


Zuko did that thing again, the one where he almost smiled, but not quite, then shrugged his shoulders as if shrugging off the fleeting moment of intimacy.

"Let's just get on with it, okay?" he pleaded, getting into a stance.

Right. Right. Business first, unusual gifts from confused teens later.

And, beginning their routine round of sparring, Jee wondered how they had managed to move on to music-sharing level.

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He was sorely tempted to listen to Zuko's CD right away, in the car, but some part of him wanted to resist and wait until he got to the apartment so that he could give the music his full attention on his first hearing. Making it into vague background noise whilst driving felt somehow unfair to the Xi kid. Maybe it was a stupid sentiment, but he knew music was damn important when you were seventeen and there was a slight, tiny possibility that the songs the boy selected were meant to tell Jee something. If there was a message there, Jee didn't want to miss it.

Which, the old cynic in him insisted, was a stupid fancy and a hopeful delusion of a horny old fool. But the rest of him insisted on clinging to it anyway.

Energetic, the boy had said. Well. That part held true at least for some of those songs, but what Zuko should have warned Jee about, the man thought as he sat there in front of his PC spinning this way and that on the worn revolving chair and listening to the moaning racket currently violating his poor speakers, was that it was loud. Loud being the key defining feature, and it was only after a considerable while that Jee got used to it enough to pay attention to anything other than the outrageous level of decibels.

Once he found the courage and goodwill to play the CD again in order to actually catch some lyrics
this time, it turned out most of the songs did have something to say about Zuko: mainly, almost all of them were about some sort of misery. In fact, it would be easy – too easy – to dismiss them as cheap, exalted adolescent angst, then put them completely out of one's mind and move on to bigger and better things, like music that's actually good. But given that the Xi kid had selected those particular numbers specifically for Jee to listen to; that he elected to spend his precious time on choosing them deliberately, instead of moping around on facebook or whatever it was lonely kids like him did with their free time these days; the lieutenant felt he owed the boy. So he forced himself to listen on, to somehow see past the trashy garage sound and the overblown sentimentality, to pay closer attention and put them in the context of what he already knew about Zuko, which…

Well. Which eventually brought about some rather interesting conclusions.

The CD played on loop throughout the rest of the evening as Jee prepared himself dinner, ate it and hung the laundry out to dry; it continued to roar out its many laments as the man spent some time online, and it kept on wailing in the background as he flicked idly through the many channels cable had to offer, TV set on mute. Almost against his better judgment, Jee even took the music to bed with him, playing it on his portable CD player with the headphones in as he lay on his back in darkness, eyes closed, arms crossed behind his head on the pillow.

In the end, it was worth it. Little by little, with every new lyric forcing itself into Jee's consciousness, with every drumbeat thrumming aggressively through his body and every electric guitar moan sizzling into the darkness behind his closed eyelids, the picture he had of Zuko grew, deepened, gained new dimensions and colors. The image of the boy, crisp and vibrant and vivacious like Zuko himself, floated on the forefront of Jee's mind through the night with each note, giving new meaning and sense to words which would have been laughably melodramatic, supercilious and just plain dumb without this personal context to shape them; and suddenly they fit, they verbalized what Jee supposed Zuko never could nor would, but wanted to enough to let Jee in on it some other way.

And it was really quite shocking – the lieutenant smirked to himself bitterly in the darkness – to realize how much attention he was paying to what, not so long ago, he would have dismissed out of hand as a passing adolescent rage phase. Hell, this was exactly how he used to think of such music, how he still regarded a good chunk of it. Too loud, too needy, too pandering, too emotional in this cheap, shouty, whiny kind of way. And yet here he was, with this exact whining filling his ears when any other sane person ought to be fast asleep, and wrenching deeper meanings out of it just to better understand a single, confused boy.

He shouldn't care this much. He shouldn't feel this burning curiosity which drove him to this in the first place. He shouldn't want to prod, to poke, to stick his nose into something that, to all intents and purposes, was exactly a passing adolescent rage phase. A man his age ought to know as much.

But no. It wasn't just that. Jee knew that now, had known from the very beginning perhaps. Besides, he had been in a very similar place that Zuko was struggling out of right now, and this perspective made all the difference.

Zuko gave him this CD. He burned it just for him. He wanted Jee to listen to it. He wanted it to speak for him, to give voice to things he could not utter. Which, in the end, meant everything and was exactly why the man was now putting himself willingly through this ordeal. Curiously given his cynical nature, the thought that the gesture meant nothing beyond what it was on the surface – a boy willing to share some music he regarded as good – had never crossed Jee's mind throughout all this. No. It was Zuko, for God's sake, and he never did trivial and pointlessly social things like that without a reason.

This kid trusted Jee with all the things that lay inherent in those songs. He decided to take the risk
and make this one step forward, which, for him, was probably a huge deal.

And it was this knowledge, this realization, which, more than the comforter, kept the lieutenant warm that night and prevented his finger from pressing *stop*.

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He slipped a short note into Zuko's hand when he passed the kid in the sports' wing corridor in the morning, one that said *You call this music?*

In the evening, while checking the pockets of his pants before he put them in the washing machine, he found a crumpled piece of paper torn from a notebook. It was covered in huge, inelegant scrawls that, upon closer inspection, turned out to be letters.

Too intense for you, old man? Want some Justin Bieber next time?

"Sneaky bastard," murmured Jee to himself with a smirk as he tossed the pants in with the rest of the laundry, shaking his head.

The note was in his back pocket. He would have to ask the brat one day how he'd managed to slip it inside without Jee feeling anything.

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Jee refrained from commenting on the CD openly and carefully avoided mentioning any of the observations he'd made because of it to Zuko. And this, as he learned very soon, turned out to be a wise decision. The boy acted slightly giddy and restless the first few days after his surprising gift, as though expecting Jee to make some remark on it, personal or otherwise; but as days went by without a single comment on the music, he became much more relaxed, even confident, during their private sessions. In fact, it felt as if another door had been left slightly ajar, enough for Jee to put a foot in to prevent it from shutting again; an invitation to take that one little step further, and then another. Tip-toe progress, but one that was undeniably there. Jee had never kept a written account of what he would have called "The Xi Project," but if he had, he would have put down the days between him giving Zuko that The Decemberists album and winter break as very promising.

He drove the boy back home after their private sessions almost regularly now – Jee guessed Zuko took to riding the school bus in the mornings just for that, which made him feel much warmer inside than the simple gesture warranted. It had become a time when, their bodies exhausted and their minds eased in that unique way only physical exertion could bring, they either shared silences that, Jee was pleased to note, were not entirely uncomfortable most of the time, or had lackadaisical, pause-punctuated conversations about music, movies, even school on those scarce occasions when Zuko felt more talkative.

And, little by little, it was becoming Jee's favorite part of the week.

Eager to encourage more of this promising development, he lent the kid some more CDs he thought Zuko might appreciate and Xi returned the favor by bringing him more of his own. This usually
resulted in light teasing regarding their mutual tastes, which in turned subtly, sneakily, paved the way for more personal insights and brought Jee that much closer to his intended aim: making Zuko trust him enough to feel comfortable around him.

Baby steps, he kept telling himself. Baby steps.

And it was quite funny, as the lieutenant thought sometimes, how invested he had become in the whole thing. Day by day, night by night, with every minute he spent in the company of the boy, everything not related to Zuko seemed to be getting just a little bit paler, a tiny bit duller. Jee caught himself thinking about the kid without even realizing he was doing it, with a frequency that would have been alarming had he only realized what it was he was slowly getting himself into. But he didn't, so he failed to pay much heed to it and simply carried on, relying on the explanations he had himself concocted to rationalize this unusual fascination. The crux of this reasoning was, he suspected, that he had missed having a purpose. Being useful. Being needed. Making a real, perceivable difference. Ever since leaving the Navy he had been drifting restlessly, pointlessly; moving from one town to another like a vagabond, whichever way the whimsical wind of teaching vacancies blew him; his shoulders hunched under the bitterness of his resignation and perceived disgrace; under the overwhelming perspective of nothing substantial whatsoever waiting for him on the horizon. Teaching, once a rewarding, fulfilling activity against the backdrop of ever-busy boot camp and majestic ships plowing ahead across the ocean waves, had lost its distinct, triumphant flavor now that it had this very backdrop stripped away. Instead, Jee was left with a meager echo of once-familiar routines, bitterly mocking for its lack of bigger significance and all the poorer for comparison.

Somehow, Zuko had changed all that. He was remarkably reminiscent of a Navy cadet without actually being one, even excluding the military background of his family, and he provided Jee with a solid goal which now seemed achievable, an attainable point at the end of the road. Training him, witnessing his gradual yet very measurable progress under Jee's tutelage, was just as engrossing and rewarding as tearing through the boy's many, many inner shells. It was a diversion, more lasting and distracting for the enduring challenge it presented, and for this precise reason it had put Jee's stay in Summerfield in sharper, brighter colors; made the air crisper, the smells richer, the sounds more vibrant, the sights somehow more pleasing to the eye.

In short, clichéd though it may sound, Zuko made Jee feel alive again.

Not that Jee himself would have put it this way. In some respects, he remained in stubborn denial and insisted before himself, whenever those thoughts plagued him late at night in his lonely bed, that he was perfectly capable of leading a life of his own rather than living Zuko's. The kid was not the centre of his world. Nor was he going to become one. The rest of the kids in Dancing Dragon Club were all talented and eager, and seeing them progress was a pleasure all on its own – besides, unlike Zuko, most of them were capable of expressing gratitude, and in actual words and smiles, too. Jee suspected he would have enjoyed leading his Thursday meetings even had Zuko not been a part of them – enjoyed them more, perhaps, for this very reason, as there would not have been anyone to distract him.

Ah yes. That other thing. Distraction. That, too, was a curious business. Jee couldn't in all honesty say that he managed to free himself of temptation – hell no. It was still there between them, casting its ugly shadow on every minute spent together. But, for the most part, that is precisely what it remained – a shadow, something that doesn't interfere but just sits there, a thing that remains unacknowledged and forgotten until something about it catches one's eye. From time to time, either Jee or Zuko would be sharply reminded of its existence and this would manifest itself in a look or a touch that briefly lingered, or in a stutter or the twinkle of the eye; a brief flash of a message that whispered I'm still interested. This couldn't be avoided, Jee thought, given that the very nature of their training required
them to touch one another frequently, if only in combat – and sometimes he had to forcibly fight
shivers from overtaking him when his skin slid against Zuko's in a block or a punch. Such fleeting
moments would pop up, sizzle with sexual tension and grind everything into a halt for the quickest of
heartbeats, only to be pushed aside in the next, when time returned and, with it, the unforgiving
reality.

Besides, it was… flattering. Not that Jee allowed himself to think like that, but every now and again
when he accidentally received more proof of the kid's continued interest, he felt stupidly
proud.

Troubled, too, for a thousand different reasons. But proud.

He still had dreams and fantasies about Zuko. Vivid, detailed ones. But it was all right as long as this
was precisely what they remained. Fantasies never hurt anyone – perhaps apart from the person
weaving them.

And so it went, day by day, week by week, in a rhythm set by music and lyrics, by punches and
kicks, by explosive shouting and tentative smiles, while, while the trees lost what little remained of
their leaves and rain turned into snow…

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Winter arrived violently and with next to no warning. It brought many gifts of welcome, including
snow, blizzards, puddles of melted snow in the corridors, a plethora of sneezing and runny noses and
– definitely worst of all – the plague of Christmas songs playing on every radio station one tuned into
at random. Summerfield underwent the obligatory winter transformation gradually so the dazzling
flood of colorful little flickers at night didn't come as a shock to Jee, but he still scoffed at the stupid,
gaudy, sickeningly sweet decorations on people's front lawns and the gazillion holiday ads assaulting
him from every shop window he passed whenever he drove or strolled through the town. Sure, it
was picturesque – for a given value of the adjective at least, and really, "kitschy" seemed to
encompass it better – but year after year the American people seemed to pride themselves on taking
their festive spirit to new, absurd extremes. Driving through the suburbia, one would think it was a
contest of who would pay the biggest electricity bill – and knowing the general mindset of such
people, it probably was. Jee, who never cared much for the holiday in the first place, found it
ridiculous.

His own apartment was a few blocks away from downtown in an uninteresting, gray, shoddy street
that thankfully cared very little for the festive spirit – possibly because the people here actually knew
what it was like to struggle with the bills. This meant that Jee had been spared the gaudy Christmas
lights winking into his bedroom at night with invasive cheer. The town's Asian district resisted this
Western frenzy as much as it would, too, and with a possessive pride that took Jee by surprise. But
there was no question that winter break was looming on the horizon and the students' attitude – a
very specific kind of distraction, flavored with agitation and giddiness that Jee had seen time and time
again and had long ago ceased to fight – accentuated it very visibly.

It didn't help that the school apparently decided it wanted to embrace the spirit of Christmas,
whatever the hell it was, and everywhere Jee turned he was accosted by red and green and lights and
garlands and other festive shit whose only purpose seemed to be to annoy Jee and make his life
harder by distracting the students even more.

His face must have shown exactly how much he disapproved of this state of things when he first
entered Flowing Creek and beheld the abominable new décor, because Ming laughed out loud when
she passed him.

"Cheer up, Grumps," she said then, nudging him with her takeaway Starbucks cappuccino. "It's only for a few weeks."

_A few weeks indeed_, he felt like shouting after her. A minute of this seemed too much like an early portion of hell…

However, winter also deemed it appropriate to present them with the one thing that was indisputably good: Snow Days. Jee decided to celebrate their very first one by driving out of town, just to see where the road would take him, and he spent a moderately pleasant afternoon wading through a deserted nature park amidst a sea of white, until he accidentally stumbled upon a small, frozen lake. Having encircled it twice, in blissful quiet and calming solitude that only a fresh coating of snow could bring, Jee decided that enough was enough and a warming cup of tea was in order – preferably one made by Iroh Xi.

For many very different reasons Jee had no objections to visiting the teashop these days.

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Unsurprisingly, the Jasmine Dragon was packed. Fall and winter was in all likelihood when Iroh's already popular business boomed – when Jee entered, the shop was bursting with chattering clientele eager for steaming, fragrant cups to warm their hands against. A huge chunk of the crowd consisted of Flowing Creek students enjoying their brief and unexpected freedom instead of, say, catching up on their homework, those lazy bastards. Jee found himself nodding left and right in greetings to familiar, beaming faces as a smiling Jin led him to a table near the kitchen door which had only just been vacated.

Jee realized, to his own surprise, that he didn't mind the crowd all that much. In a way, it felt… good. After his solitary walk the familiarity actually lifted his spirits even more instead of grating on his nerves. Besides, he rarely got the opportunity to stay at one place for long enough to blend in as thoroughly as he had in this town, and to know that, despite his admittedly formidable reputation, some of the students still seemed to like him in a way…

Like that _very_ familiar crowd by the window, for example; Jee smiled when his eyes fell on them. It was surprising to see Toph Bei Fong sitting cheerfully with what Jee came to refer to in his mind as "That Lot": Katara, Sokka, Suki and Aang, sometimes joined by Haru, Korra, Bolin and the kid in the wheelchair whose name, as Jee learned from Ming, was Teo. Today it was just the regular core of the group, laughing collectively at Toph's comment as the girl sat there smirking smugly and swinging her deviously tiny feet in the air.

Jee replied to their friendly salutes with a nod, feeling a new wave of respect towards chief Lin Bei Fong. It looked like the iron lady managed to keep dropping regular smokebombs at the little girl's parents with astounding effectiveness. The lieutenant wished her all the luck – Toph seemed genuinely happy and deserved all of it.

Coming to think of it, maybe he could see if he could do anything else for the girl…

And then he had to forcefully prevent his smile from turning even wider as a shadow fell on the table and a familiar, quiet, raspy voice said, without a trace of its habitual sullenness:
"Hi."

"Jin told you I came over?" Jee guessed, looking up at Zuko. The boy stood there in his teashop uniform, winter edition with longer sleeves and thicker fabric, and gazed down at the lieutenant with an expression Jee was already familiar with: the one that suggested that there was a smile hidden somewhere in there if one cared to look deep enough.

"No. I saw you."

"And decided to wait on me? How kind."

"Shut up." Zuko seemed not a tiny bit bothered by the inappropriateness of addressing a patron in such a brusque manner. The brat. "What are you having?"

"Coffee is out of the question, is it?"

"Afraid so. Uncle is a purist."

"Right." Jee scratched his cheek. "Surprise me then. Tea of the day, or something."

The smirk which graced Zuko's features couldn't exactly be called a smile, but it was close enough and Jee felt – again – a brief pang of warm pride at being the one to bring it about. It was definitely something he could work with.

On the other hand, though, the decidedly mischievous glint in Zuko's eye was a bit disconcerting.

"I'll see what can be done," muttered the boy mysteriously before he turned around and left for the kitchen, the smirk still in place.

Jee watched him until Zuko's back disappeared through the door with some trepidation – Zuko would probably make him pay for the "waiting on" comment. Oh well, too late to do anything about it now. He could just as well enjoy himself waiting. A copy of The Times he grabbed on a whim earlier in the morning was resting in his bag, so he fished it out and started idly flicking through the pages, letting the teashop hubbub envelop him in a warm bubble of sound and smell.

His fears were proven correct after about fifteen minutes, when Zuko returned bearing something that – well, that could indeed be called a surprise. A very sweet-smelling, sugarbrick-thick surprise. When he set the cup and saucer in front of Jee with an unsettlingly smug expression, Jee beheld what was probably the most calories-heavy tea ever created by man.

"Our winter special," the boy explained – and this time his smirk wasn't appealing at all. "Sure to warm you up. There's honey and cherries and – "

"Thank you, I don't think I want to know what else," said Jee with a sigh, eyeing the beverage before him with the utmost suspicion as though it was going to sprout legs and wander off. It smelled like it could. "It looks... horribly sweet."

"Yeah." Zuko grinned in a way that was positively mischievous. "I wouldn't put any sugar in it if I were you."

"Enjoying yourself, kiddo?"

Zuko shrugged, but his expression fooled no one. "Let me know how you liked it," he said before he marched back to the kitchen, looking to all intents and purposes like he was about to whistle.
The slimy little bastard.

Jee eyed the steamy beverage in front of him a good while before he braved a tentative sip and it took a considerable amount of willpower not to wince when it touched his palate. The damn tea was just as sweet as it looked. The smell alone attacked a person’s senses with a fatal dose of sugar-coated, nauseating thickness, even before the first sip exploded with saccharine on the tongue… But it was pleasantly warm, too. And the flavor, while overwhelming at first, slowly eased into something Jee could gulp down without cringing.

He took a second sip. He couldn't let the brat have this round.

So, sitting there in defiance and with his newspaper spread out, he kept on drinking the sickening syrup – in tiny, tiny sips and with long pauses in-between – and catching Zuko's eye from time to time to show how much he wasn't bothered by the prank.

Which was a pretty hilarious situation, coming to think about it. And childish. But Jee discovered that, as far as Zuko was concerned, he didn't mind a little childish every once in a while.

Iroh came over to his table at one point to inquire about Zuko's progress and invite Jee to December Music Night, Ming waved a short hello when she entered with a scrawny-looking guy Jee didn't know and a few more kids saw it fit to salute when they spotted him, but other than that, he was left in peace. He used the opportunity to glance after Zuko whenever the kid entered the room, pretending to read while in reality he followed the boy around as he worked. It was an amusing pastime; Zuko moved without a trace of the grace and assurance he displayed when he fought. Instead, he was jerky and awkward and forceful and radiated the impression that he'd rather punch the customers than serve them, which was probably true. Iroh's decision to allow the kid to wait on tables seemed incomprehensible most of the time…

But then again, the Xis's dynamics were complicated. Jee hadn't had ample opportunities to observe uncle and nephew interact, but what he did see assured him of the fact that either of them would do anything for the other.

Possibly including gruesome crimes. Wouldn't be all that surprising, what with the rest of the family…

"So. How was it?"

Jee blinked and looked up. Somehow, Zuko had managed to soundlessly transport himself from the other end of the teashop to his side within seconds when Jee's thoughts were otherwise occupied.

Teenage ninja waiter indeed.

"Not bad." Jee sent him a crooked smirk. "I drank it. Not really my thing."

"Yeah." A flash of amusement sparked on the kid's face and was obliterated almost immediately when Zuko looked to the floor, clutching the notebook close to his chest.

Jee looked on as the boy's fingers started nervously drumming on it in restless rhythm. Obviously something was bothering him, but he couldn't find the right words.

And it was scary how well Jee was already acquainted with his body language.

"Something on your mind?" he asked, closing the newspaper and stuffing it back into his bag.

Zuko hesitated for a moment longer, standing rigidly by the table and abusing the poor notebook –
and then, his decision made, he suddenly slid into the vacant chair across from Jee.

The lieutenant found himself glancing around to see if this unexpected gesture of familiarity attracted attention, then immediately scolded himself for it. He wasn't doing anything wrong. If Zuko wanted to talk to him, then he could and it was nobody's goddamn business.

"I've been… uh…" started the kid quietly, looking down at the table. Then, that familiar flash of determination took hold of his face. "I thought I'd go ice skating later tonight."

After a moment of silence which passed without any further clarification, Jee nodded.

"All right," he replied cautiously. "That's good. Ice skating is good. I hear the new rink up at the park is fun. And you're telling me because…?"

Zuko shot him an irritated glare before looking down again, as though Jee was being exceptionally dense and he was tired of it.

"I wouldn't mind if you came along, okay?" he murmured. The fidgeting of his fingers turned positively frantic.

…Oh.

Well, damn. A part of Jee wanted to dance and roar in triumph – the kid was actually inviting him to take part in a bonding activity that didn't involve trying to punch the other's brains out. He wanted to spend time with Jee. He wanted them to – and this sounded positively ludicrous in Jee's head – have fun. To hang out.

If that wasn't Jee's greatest didactic achievement, he would shave himself bald and donate the hair to charity. But, for fuck's sake…

It was impossible. As much as Jee wanted to jump at this unexpected chance, there was no fucking way he could. Already people were giving them curious sideways glances; if Zuko showed up on a rink with him for company, the rumor mill would have water on which to run for months. If only Zuko had been a more outgoing, friendly kid, then maybe this wouldn't have been so strange, but as it was…

It could be dangerous. Actually dangerous. And probably quite impossible to explain to a third party – any third party, including Zuko's uncle.

Crap.

And here was Zuko, sitting across from him and too nervous to maintain eye-contact, waiting for an answer that would crush this budding trust, or at least damage it considerably.

Sometimes Jee really, really hated his life.

"Look." He sighed heavily, leaning towards the boy. "I want to. Honestly. Thanks. But…"

Zuko seemed to draw in on himself at the very sound of the word, already expecting rejection. Holy mother of…

Jee wasn't a huge fan of the American society at the best of times, but rarely did the system inspire him with such a wave of consuming, genuine disgust. How fucked up was the world that a teacher couldn't hang out with his student openly without raising a whole army of ugly suspicions…
… That, granted, wouldn't have been entirely unfounded in his case. But still.

"But," he resumed, massaging his temple wearily, "you know it wouldn't look good. People'd start talking. Asking questions. This is how this system works, kid. I'm sorry."

_I am. I really am. I'm not rejecting you. Look at me and see I'm telling the truth._

But Zuko didn't. His head remained bowed, his pale, long fingers squeezing the notebook.

"Zuko…" It shouldn't be that hard to fight the urge to reach out and grasp that hand in his, but it was. The kid shrugged jerkily. "It's fine," he muttered. "I get it."

"I would if I could, honestly," Jee insisted in a whisper. "But everyone in this country is paranoid. Recently they wanted to make _teachers friending students on Facebook_ illegal. How do you think they would react to –"

"I get it," Zuko cut him off, looking up for the first time. The muscles of his face were drawn taut, the red scar tissue made somehow starker because of that. "I do, okay? Whatever. It's not a big deal. I guess you'll be wanting the check, right?"

Jee nodded, running an exasperated hand through his short hair.

Damn. Now he would have to find a way to repair the damage…

But it wasn't until he was driving back home that he realized he actually could. His thoughts flew back to the small lake he'd found earlier in the morning, and then he almost grinned.

It was a stupid idea. Inappropriate and unprofessional from every possible angle, not to mention potentially dangerous.

And, for once, Jee couldn't care less.

Chapter End Notes

On a side note, that bit about the initiative to deligalize students and teachers being friends on Facebook in Michigan is true. I came across an article about it when I was doing research for this story. Regrettably I couldn't find any info on whether or not it was passed eventually.

Next: Jee is rebellious, Zuko asks an inappropriate question and a "Dead Poets Society" reference is made.
Chapter 12: Thin Ice

Chapter Notes

I could use this space to justify how I hardly had any time for ficcing and that I was doing the White Lotus Lunar Year Exchange and that Real Life has been a bit of a bitch and all, but you're not interested in that, are you? So let's just get down to the story.

Thought I would be done with the winter arc in this chapter, but then the scene grew into a chapter all of its own, so nope. You are still getting wintery stuff in chapter 13.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Everything seemed to be in order. The thermos with hot cocoa rested snugly in Jee's gym bag, in a safe nest of extra warm socks; the chocolate bars were all wrapped up and probably freezing into a solid block on the passenger seat of his Ford; and the skates he borrowed from Mike the football coach waited for him in the trunk. Jee ran the list over in his mind one last time after he said goodbye to a cheerful Toph and her formidable aunt (who never bothered to return his niceties, which was all the more reason to bestow them on her), and, satisfied, walked back into the almost-empty gym, whistling a random tune.

All that remained for the crazy plan to be set in motion was to assure the cooperation of one very moody adolescent…

Who was currently standing in the middle of the gym with his arms crossed, pouting.

"Ok," he said as soon as he saw Jee walk in. "What's with the text?"

Jee tried hard not to beam. It was ridiculous to feel excited by the whole thing, but there had been a lamentable lack of excitement in his life for a long while now – or of the good kind, at least, because Zuko had provided him with plenty of excitement of a quite different sort almost from the very beginning – and he would grab what he could, dammit.

"Did you bring the skates?" he asked in lieu of a reply.

Zuko nodded reluctantly. "But I don't see the point," he muttered. "You said yourself we can't go to the public rink. People would…"

Jee held up a hand. "No more talking," he ordered. "You'll see. Get dressed, kiddo, I'll meet you by the exit in five."

And then he stalked out to change out of the tracksuit without looking back to see the kid's reaction, still whistling.

He was enjoying himself. More than he probably had in months, if not years. He couldn't honestly recall the last time he had the opportunity to prepare a surprise of this magnitude for anyone, let alone a good looking lad – though of course the good looking bit was completely irrelevant here. Jee found himself waiting impatiently for the kid to finally show up, anticipating the evening with an eagerness that surprised even him. The air of impropriety and shadiness hanging over the whole thing only added a pleasant spicy thrill of the forbidden, though, as far as Jee knew, what he planned wasn't
strictly speaking illegal.

Which didn't mean that it was legal by extension, but it was useless to deliberate on that. The old rebellious rascal in him had reawakened and couldn't be bothered to give a damn. Jee had gone to some significant lengths to prepare the auspicious field trip – and would probably have the shit ridiculed out of him by his old Navy mates if they saw him now – but what the hell. He was going to enjoy himself tonight and that was that.

And if he could help a confused, angry kid in the process, even if it was just to take said kid's mind off the brooding for an hour or two, well then. All the better.

Besides, weren't unconventional teaching methods actually glorified in this country? In theory, at least? Just look at that Robin Williams movie, the one with poets in the title. Everyone loved it when he made the boys stand on their desks and rip out pages from their textbooks.

So there.

God, he hadn't gone ice-skating in ages. He wasn't all that sure his body was up to it. Making an idiot of himself and landing in a pile of snow was a likely possibility and he would probably ache like hell all over in the morning. But even so, at least he might give Zuko something to laugh at…

The kid needed it. Badly. Ever since the teashop he brooded around the school as though he had a clichéd cartoon stormy cloud hanging over his head.

It seemed that it had assumed a slightly lighter hue for the evening, though, and didn't roar with any more thunders, at least for the time being – Zuko's wary face as he eventually approached Jee suggested that he was putting the thunder on hold in case he needed it again soon.

Jee smiled at him. He was determined to do everything in his power to get rid of that damn cloud altogether, if only for the evening.

"Where are we going?" asked Zuko when Jee marched out at a brisk pace into the parking lot.

"You'll see. It's a surprise."

"Ri-ight." The kid sounded obnoxiously skeptical. "But we were supposed to practice those advanced katas from last week."

"We can do that anytime. Weather like this, on the other hand, is a rare treasure."

It was. The evening was perfect, crisp and glistening with white that was all fluffy and stuff – not that Jee normally used the word "fluffy" – and frosty enough to paint white puffs in the air with every breath. It was cold, very cold, but not enough to freeze their fingers and noses off over the space of two minutes.

Zuko trotted after him in silence until they reached Jee's car, upon which he decided to voice his opinion after all.

"Are you high?"

Jee almost snorted, opening the door on his side and leaning forward to let Zuko in.

Probably. He may as well be.

"No, I'm not high," he replied, clearing the passenger seat by carelessly tossing the snacks to the
The kid did, still eyeing his teacher suspiciously. But – Jee was pleased to note – he seemed to be brightening up. Either he found the situation and Jee's bizarre behavior amusing, and rightly so, or Jee's highly uncommon enthusiasm was somehow contagious. Anyhow, still no thunders in evidence.

Good.

"You do realize the public rink in the city park is off-limits," murmured Zuko when Jee started the engine.

"Obviously. I told you that myself, didn't I?" Jee focused on the mirrors as he started pulling out of the parking lot. "You didn't tell anyone about that text, by the way, did you?"

"Duh." Now Zuko sounded as if Jee was a dense three-year-old. "Uncle doesn't even know you have my number."

"Good." Not that it was illegal to keep in touch with your students via cell phone, but Jee did feel considerable relief at those words. He exchanged numbers with Zuko the first time the kid convinced him to meet for extra training apart from their normal Thursday sessions – it seemed like a logical necessity in case any of them needed to get hold of the other quickly, to cancel or reschedule if need be. All perfectly innocent and professional. But still, it was best kept between the two of them.

Zuko's uncle may not seem like a very dangerous person, but there was something about him, something that made Jee wary of crossing the man. He had no doubts that the retired major general would immediately reconsider his peaceful ways if he had an inkling of suspicion that his precious nephew might be… taken advantage of.

Jee had no idea how Iroh would react to his plans for the evening, but it was definitely safer to not have to find out.

"Nobody seemed to have seen us," murmured Jee under his breath, joining the scarce evening traffic.

"Don't think so," said Zuko. "Lieutenant, where the fuck are you taking me?"

There didn't seem to be any biting fury behind those words, only growing exasperation. Jee decided to take that as a good sign.

"You do know the definition of surprise, don't you?" he said lightly.

That was met with a sullen "I hate surprises." Jee shot a sideways glance at the kid; Zuko was sitting with the arms crossed defensively over his chest, glowering into the dark road ahead.

"Hey." Jee tried to nudge him with his elbow. "Lighten up, kid. You'll like it."

_I hope._

"If you're going to sulk all the way, might as well put some music on," he suggested after a while of stubborn silence on his right. "Go on, pick something."

"You're not turning on the radio?"

"So they can torment us with _Last Christmas_ on a loop? Hell no."

Zuko murmured his grudging assent and started digging in the hold by his legs for something that
wouldn't be manically cheerful or containing jingling bells or George Michael. Not that he'd find anything like that in Jee's car. When eventually he chose to play the CD Jee had originally lent him, the older man couldn't help but smile.

No more questions were asked for the remainder of the longish ride and Jee didn't press for more conversation, mindful of the brat's moods. He had become quite adept at reading them and was content to let Zuko sit there in silence while the music transformed it into something mildly approaching cozy. Sometimes, silence was good. There was no need to fill every longer pause with mindless prattle and, for all his faults, Zuko was a pretty good companion to share silences with when he wasn't in one of his fits.

Which it seemed that he wasn't for the moment. There was hope yet.

All in all, what with the music, the boy settling into a silence next to him and the admittedly gorgeous snowscape they sped through once they passed the lamp-lit city boundaries, it was a rather enjoyable ride. Jee almost wished it had lasted longer. Something about the silent twilight painted bright with the generous brush of snow, the thickening walls of trees fencing the road only to reveal vast open spaces tinted with lights of habitation here and there, and the illusion of solitude, shattered only briefly whenever another car passed them on the way, was relaxing.

But then again, he had the ride back to look forward to. Not to mention the main event of the evening.

And the closer they got to the nature park, the more impatient he was to see Zuko's face.

As it turned out, most of the kid's annoyance had evaporated during the ride to be replaced by curiosity. Jee gathered it by Zuko's tone when, as they slowed down and turned right into a deserted forest dirt road, he murmured:

"Taking me out into the woods? Are you going to rape and murder me here, Lieutenant?"

Jee smirked into the night he was slicing through with his headlights.

"Murdering isn't really my style," he said. "I believe in saving some for later. Besides, now I should deliver a didactic scolding on the wrongness of making rape jokes. Do you need one, Xi?"

Out of the corner of his eye he detected a movement which indicated that Zuko had looked away from him; but he did catch a soft, almost inaudible "Wouldn't be rape."

And then he found it very, very hard not to feel something inappropriate.

Luckily, they were almost there now, so any awkwardness that lay inherent in the moment could be skipped by Jee pretending to be too busy parking to catch that last sentence. It was all for the best. Some light flirtation was fine from time to time, but he couldn't allow Zuko any more openings for more serious... advances.

No matter how much he may have wanted to.

"We're here," he announced rather unnecessarily as the Ford settled neatly into one of the few spots that wasn't a huge-ass pile of snow. "The St. Jerome Nature Park. It's going to be a bit of a hike from here, so get your stuff and put on extra socks if you've got them."

He got out of the car without waiting for Zuko to follow and started collecting his own equipment. First the food from the backseat, then the skates from the trunk. He dug out the flashlights while his partner in crime was busy pulling on extra layers of clothing, and he tossed one at Zuko when the kid
finally crawled out of the car.

"Here," he said, locking the car. "So you can chase away the demons of the forest."

Zuko apparently decided not to grace that with a response, but he did raise his eyebrow at Jee. Then, he directed the stream of light from the flashlight straight at his teacher's face.

"You must have been smoking something," he stated, lips turning into a smirk. "But whatever. Now what?"

"Now, you follow me. Try not to get lost. And no more smart-assing."

With that, Jee set out across the snow, his own flashlight casting a hectic glow over the path he'd already checked last night when he drove over to see if the lake had frozen into a solid enough surface. The light wasn't really necessary — it was bright enough even without it, what with the moon nice and huge and the sky full of stars and the snow making everything so much brighter, but still, better safe than sorry. There weren't any lamps in the nature park.

The snow and ice crunching beneath their boots, the frost digging into their faces and seeping into skin, the darkness kept at bay with the dancing beams from their flashlights, the two of them made their way in silence, one following the other, until Jee caught the familiar glimpse of frozen water behind the black, leafless trees.

"We're here!" he called out over his shoulder, seeking out a bench he'd found earlier. "Dig out those skates."

He carefully picked his way over to the bench, got rid of the snow covering it, then sat down heedless of the damp and pulled out his own borrowed pair. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Zuko standing by the bench — the boy was curiously running the flashlight over the pond, his expression closed and vague just like it usually got when the boy's head was plagued with too many thoughts at once.

Or at least by Jee's guess, which was only slightly better than anybody else's.

"We're going to skate here?" came the quiet question, slow and cautious as though the brat didn't quite know what to make of all this.

"No, we're going to bake s'mores and sing Kumbaya. What do you think?"

"Is it allowed?"

Jee shrugged, tying the skates. They were a little too big, but hopefully not enough to impair his skating prowess. Which at this point was probably nonexistent anyway.

God, he was such a great big moron. A part of him couldn't believe what the other part was doing. If the parts were person-shaped, the first one would be delivering snide comments from the sidelines while the stupid one ignored it and stuck out its tongue.

"Don't see why it wouldn't," he said, ignoring the temporary personality crisis. "The ice is solid, I checked. No one is likely to come here. Are you going to join me or what?"

"Why are you doing all this?" Zuko's voice was soft, hesitant. And strangely small. As though he couldn't believe why anyone apart from his uncle would do anything nice for him. Which… well, which only assured Jee that this had been a good decision.
"I was bored. Wanted to try something new. You suggested it." He looked up from the bench at Zuko, trying to ignore the cold damp that was already seeping into his pants. "Don't you want to anymore?"

In lieu of a response, Zuko finally made his way to the bench and started putting on his own skates without a word – but he did glance up at Jee once, a timid, raw sort of look that carried such a wealth of unspoken emotion that it hit Jee like a punch in the face, but of the sort that hurt for entirely different reasons.

He had never met anyone who would wear their emotions out in the open like that and be this secretive at the same time. It was clear the kid was struggling with a violent onslaught of different feelings, but it was impossible to tell what they were.

More than anything, it made Jee want to just go ahead and kiss the brat. Worse, he found it increasingly hard to find sufficient reasons to resist those urges.

Which was only further proof that he had never fully grown out of his 'Fuck The System' phase. It was exactly what prompted him to organize this outing in the first place, after all.

It didn't occur to him that the brat might misread the whole situation and treat it as something entirely different from what it was intended to be, right until that look – and when the thought finally materialized, it was too late to do anything about it. Jee could only press on and deal with another potential fuck-up as it developed.

Zuko tied his skates on in silence – a modern-looking, gleaming, showy pair, black and red, of course they would be black and red – and carefully made his way onto the ice, tentatively shifting his weight onto the frozen surface without looking over his shoulder at Jee. Perhaps he didn't trust his own face not to betray too much, and it was this realization, more than anything else, that helped Jee put his pang of anxiety aside and focus on the main goal of the evening.

He was here to help someone. And he would damn well do his best.

He stood up on legs that wobbled a little too much for his liking, then took a couple of careful steps towards the water where Zuko was already getting warmed up, the ice creaking under the blades when he began on a circle around the pond.

It felt weird. The blades were digging into his soles rather uncomfortably and the shoes really were too big – he had way more room for his feet than he was used to. And damn, he was having trouble keeping his balance. Given how often he used to do that back home when he was a kid, that was not a little humiliating.

He refused to lean on a tree for support before getting on the ice, though – his pride wouldn't let him. He couldn't let an adolescent see his temporary weakness and then tease him for being an old cripple.

By the time he finally did reach the ice Zuko was already on his second circle, getting more and more confident as he sped past Jee with surprising grace. His ice-skating was marked by the same inner, hardly-contained violence of feeling that characterized Zuko's every other action, but as Jee watched, the kid was beginning to let loose just a little bit, the movements of his arms getting more fluid, his legs striking the ice with less force as he slid across the surface in a way that looked surprisingly effortless.

Great. Now Jee was going to end up looking exactly like an old cripple by comparison.

Not that he cared.
"You're pretty good," he said, pushing himself forward just to get the familiar feeling of being on the ice back into his flesh memory. His muscles were slowly remembering the drift, thank God.

"Thanks!" the brat called out, speeding away confidently, leaving a distinct trail on the fragile, glimmering surface. The sound of his skates hitting the ice rhythmically resounded rather nicely in the dark, dark silence all around them. "Are you just going to stand there like that all night?"

Well, look at that. Someone was getting cheeky. Good. That meant that the plan was already working.

"You just wait," Jee shouted back, slowly getting into the old, familiar motions that his body now decided it remembered. "I'll show you how we do it in Minnesota."

"You're from Minnesota?" Zuko was far away now, on the opposite bank, but his voice carried rather easily over the frozen water. Jee set out after him, enjoying the crusty sound the skates made as they cut through the ice.

"Yeah, and?"

Zuko turned over so that he was skating backwards facing Jee, the smug little show-off. "Nothing!" he called out with a smirk that was very visible despite the distance, the beam from his flashlight jumping all over the place. "It's just that I'd expect a Minnesota guy to know his way around the ice a little better!"

Oh, so now it was a challenge, eh? Very well. Jee'd be damned twice over before he let a bratty adolescent tease him on his own territory.

He sped up, his legs much more confident now that they had a little time to adjust, and chased after Zuko, who also accelerated as soon as he caught on to the situation, no longer facing Jee. The game was on.

Zuko was good, better than Jee was willing to admit, and he moved across the ice as confidently as he did on the training mats back at the gym, but Jee had been doing this every winter of his childhood since he was big enough to go out into the snow on his own. He would not be outdone by some pampered California brat and that was that.

"Where did you learn to skate like that, kid?" he asked on a curve, having barely missed catching Zuko by the sleeve of his huge, expensive-looking jacket; the brat pulled away at the last minute, gracefully swerving to the side.

"I travel a lot" was the shouted explanation, as if that explained anything; Zuko's voice was hoarse now and a little breathless as he sped away, having only barely avoided landing in a heap of snow. Jee followed him, reaching out again to catch the brat in the strange, spontaneous game of tag they seemed to have fallen into without any kind of prompting.

It felt… nice.

"You need to be faster, old man!" Zuko shouted at him, looking over his shoulder with something that was definitely more smile than smirk and damn, if it didn't make Jee feel proud as all hell.

"I'm going easy on you, rookie!" he shouted right back with a grin of his own, feeling lighter and better than he had in months. So maybe the temperature was dropping drastically now and Jee's sideburns were probably frozen solid; his nose was running like a holey drainpipe, too, and more than once he went faster than he intended, having to fight for control before he skated himself into a heap of snow on the bank. None of it mattered, though. Not even the strain in his legs and back
which promised him a very rough wake-up call in the morning. He hadn't been on the ice in ages and he had missed it subconsciously, he must have had, and it was a strange little thing to realize.

It was probably the simplicity of it all. Just like in every other sport, but better because there wasn't even a clear aim to go for – there was only the frozen space, without any rules or regulations, and when you were on it, nothing else mattered but the sheer exhilaration of speed. The only thing Jee could compare it to was driving, or better yet, riding a motorcycle. And when there was nobody else around, when there was no danger of tripping someone over and no need for endless, tedious zigzagging between agonizingly slow bodies…

Oh yes. Speed. Speed was good.

Apparently, Zuko thought so too – he remained just slightly out of reach, the little bastard, turning this way and that whenever Jee got close enough to get a grip on him, and he was enjoying himself too, that much was as clear as the moonlight reflected off the snow. He was trying to taunt Jee – and that was quite hilarious because Zuko was the worst at taunting – turning over his shoulder every once in a while with a grin so wide that it looked almost alien on that ever-frowning face, his cheeks red and frost-bitten, his lips chapped, his hair messy, his eyes bright and gleaming and Christ, he looked absolutely fucking adorable. Jee wanted to kiss him.

He wasn't sure how much time they spent there just pointlessly chasing each other, shouting stupid taunts and challenges, speeding up and slowing down and practically dancing around each other in that unspoken agreement that Zuko would never speed away too fast and Jee would not actually try to grab him, not sooner than necessary anyway. Maybe an hour, maybe fifteen minutes. It didn’t matter. And especially not when he actually heard something that could only be a chuckle, or even an actual burst of strange-sounding, strangled laughter when at one point he swore and flailed his hands a bit in a decidedly undignified manner after Zuko escaped his grasp rather violently and consequently tipped Jee off-balance.

He made the brat laugh. He actually made the brat laugh. If that didn't land him the title of the Most Awesome Epic Badass Teacher of the Year, nothing would.

So what if it was at his expense. His pride could take that one blow and his inner Minnesota patriot would just have to suck it up.

And as he chased after the ever-elusive boy, his thoughts flew back to their conversation in the Jasmine Dragon. The memory prompted a new, fresh wave of rebellious indignation that washed over him with a sudden warmth that had nothing to do with pleasant fluffy feelings but a lot to do with the contrariness embedded deep into his nature. Look at the poor fuck, he thought, watching Zuko grin at him over his shoulder as he baited Jee into following him by slowing down just a tad, only to speed away again as soon as Jee picked up the pace. Just look at him. He is happy. This is good for him. Zuko was more easy-going and relaxed than in all the months Jee had known him; and it was in a situation most people would regard inappropriate and condemnable without even bothering to bat a single eyelash. If anyone walked in on them right now there would be screaming and accusations and righteous indignation and maybe even a court case, just because what Zuko needed happened to be slightly at odds with the society's definition of proper. And just what was society anyway? What right did they have to dictate how human beings should interact with one another? If it were up to them, Zuko would just steam and simmer in his consuming rage until the bitterness got the better of him and prompted him to do something stupid, just as it would have happened to Jee if not for some lucky incidents which took place at just the right time.

And who was to say that Jee couldn't be a lucky incident to happen to Zuko? The kid needed one,
that much was obvious. And it did seem like it was the right time. So maybe…

Besides, since when did Jee care about that vague, abstract concept that was the society? It was nothing. Just a set of unspoken rules that people broke all the time anyway, that meant nothing, that only served to preserve what was a ridiculous lifestyle to begin with.

It wasn't only that, of course – there was the very tangible threat of prison to consider, too. And a billion other things that would be messy, complicated and hard to deal with if he were to give in in the end. But there was a voice in him now, nagging louder and louder every time he nearly caught Zuko by the sleeve…

Supposing you don't get caught? What other reasons not to can you think of? Which exactly is the lesser wrong here?

God, he was getting old. He had gotten sucked right into the whole machine without even realizing it. He had grown stagnant. Comfortable. And actually gave a damn about what some faceless bunch of bastards thought of him.

Of course he had grown enough now to know that the sort of rebellion his teenage self advocated was ridiculous and led to absolutely nothing. Looking back sometimes, he couldn't believe the sort of things he used to think, what an arrogant, gullible, delusional fuck he'd been. Eventually life taught him otherwise, often quite brutally, and he'd learned to go with the flow most of the time; it wasn't the perfect solution, but it landed him in significantly less trouble than his previous attitude. In all that time, he had grown to believe that yes, the system was pretty fucked up, but there was nothing he could do about it, so the best he could do was to float with the current as best he could and try to avoid the more jarring absurdities.

Now, though, with a very confused, angry boy skating away from him and grinning because of something Jee had done against the rules, he felt the familiar stirrings of years-old anger and denial bubble up to the surface again.

Zuko needed him. And Jee could go on trying to help him in such simple, half-assed ways, but in the end taking him ice-skating after dark would not shield Zuko from the hurt and disappointment that was still in store for him; would not guarantee a safe passage through the stormy seas of an adolescent sexuality crisis. Building trust, yes, that was all well and good. Necessary.

But just what was Jee planning to achieve once he had gained it? Help the brat was a very vague concept now that he thought about it, and as he sped after Zuko, he realized he had no idea how he wanted to achieve that without giving Zuko what the kid so obviously wanted.

He had no idea what the hell he was doing anymore.

It was with that chilling thought that the specific kind-of dance they had been indulging in suddenly took a different turn – Jee reached out once again, absent-mindedly this time, deep in his dark thoughts, and was surprised to discover that his fingers actually closed over solid matter.

He caught Zuko. Whether it was because the boy let him, he would never know, but suddenly he was pulling the brat towards him, Zuko's back hitting his chest as he wrapped triumphant arms around him from behind, and Zuko was struggling but it was obviously a half-assed effort, and he was making little choked noises that could actually be laughter.

"Got you," Jee said, pulling the brat even closer, his arms wrapping around him even tighter, his head bowing down to rest on Zuko's slightly damp woolen hat.
And then Zuko stopped struggling. Instead, he pressed himself up against Jee even closer, his head falling back, his hands going up to close over Jee's.

"Yeah," he uttered softly. "Looks like it."

…Okay, so now they were hugging. There was no other word for it. He was hugging Zuko from behind and the brat was not only letting him – he was returning it. Which wasn't really surprising, given how it was Zuko who initiated the whole damned mess, and Jee should let him go now, he should find a way to diffuse the mood that was now developing as surely and inevitably as a continental drift… But he didn't want to. And not only that, but he also had a hard time convincing himself that that was indeed the right thing to do. Because – well, was it? All things considered? Who would really benefit from Jee constantly pushing Zuko away? He used to think that it was for the boy's own good, but now – now he wasn't so sure anymore.

Not to mention that he certainly did not benefit from that continued denial.

God, he was so frustrated, and it felt so good to hold Zuko like that…

Zuko was an unstable boy. Probably clinically depressed, and if not, then surely full of unresolved issues that almost certainly warranted professional therapy if only the boy permitted such a thing, which Jee was sure he didn't. He wasn't exactly the best judge of his own needs and feelings, especially not in a situation such as this one that had the potential to turn very ugly very fast. Jee should not – could not – see his consent as something granted, something unquestionable, and he could not treat it as justification for giving in to his own lust. That was something he could not lose sight of, whatever steps he was going to take next.

But he was hurting the boy either way. He knew that. He had been in a similarly dark place himself, after all – he could imagine all the things going through Zuko's head even if he did not know the reasons behind them. Rejection, dashed hopes, the bitter sting of being pushed away, of having his already shaky self-confidence trampled on, were all things he was only too well acquainted with. To be aware that he had been doing it all to Zuko, all this time, was painful and made him feel like a right old bastard, little better than Zhao. And it did not help that he was doing it all to save the kid. Because… was he saving him? And from what? Was his restraint really helping anyone?

He used to believe, even back there in Zuko's bedroom when he had him in his lap and was kissing the living daylights out of him, that he could tell with a significant dose of certainty which was the lesser wrong. It had seemed clear. The boundaries and limitations obvious, the possible damage bright and glaring at him. But the more Jee thought about it, the more time he spent with Zuko, the more he saw of the boy and how he reacted to Jee…

It could have been a different man, Jee realized with a pang of dread. Someone who wouldn't have any qualms of taking advantage of a confused boy's attraction, someone who would use him and then leave him and not bother to do any teaching, any guiding. If Zuko felt drawn to Jee, then who was to say he couldn't feel a similar attraction to other older men?

It could have been someone like Zhao. Or Gibbs. Someone who didn't care about the damage they inflicted. And Zuko would not be able to defend himself against them – he was tough, but not in a way that would shield him from such psychological catastrophe. The boy's emotions were raw and out in the open, exposed like a throbbing nerve, and there were people out there who delighted in trampling all over such vulnerable honesty. Such men could crush Zuko. Perhaps beyond repair.

And if Jee kept rejecting him, Zuko would turn to someone else sooner or later, someone who could only deepen the hurt. Providing he wouldn't shut himself away from people completely, which was
just as likely and exactly as damaging.

The thought made Jee tighten his arms around the boy protectively before he even realized what he was doing.

He was not naïve or conceited enough to believe that he was the perfect choice for Zuko. That would be a laughable sentiment. In many ways he was probably just as fucked up, even if age and experience gave him an edge over the boy. But he was not malicious. He could watch over the kid in his most vulnerable moments and make sure that his sexual awakening was safe and pleasurable. Jee could teach him how to feel confident about something other than his fighting skills, how to explore physicality with someone he could trust, who would never abuse him, who would care. He could teach him how to relax, to let go. How to feel safe.

He could make it good. Maybe that was exactly what Zuko needed.

Or he could make everything so much worse.

Shit, he didn't know. He honestly didn't know. The only thing he did know was that he was holding Zuko in his arms and it felt good, and he wasn't feeling like letting go.

"Hey," he heard a raspy whisper as the head he was resting his own against moved, pressing itself sideways into his chest. Zuko's breath was louder now, quicker, puffs of hot air dissolving in the frosty night. "You okay, coach?"

No. He was not okay. He could see Zuko's healthy ear peeking out from under the hat and black hair, and the pale cheek painted rosy by the frost, and a hint of neck under the scarf, and he wanted to kiss it, all of it. Wanted to feel the cold skin turn warm again under the pressure of his chapped lips. He wanted…

It would have happened. He would have done it. His mouth was moving closer and closer to the shell of Zuko's ear even as the furious battle of pros and againsts raged on in Jee's head, and Zuko must have detected the movement because he was this close to panting, tilting his head even further to the left and exposing more skin to Jee, perhaps even unconsciously. He was excited, he wanted it to happen just as badly and shit, Jee would have done it because fuck it all, they didn't have to get caught after all and there was a wealth of stuff he could teach Zuko that way and he was so damned tired of denying himself and he would have taken that one step to cross the line – if not for a sound that jolted them both awake and froze the blood right in their veins.

The sound of breaking ice.

"Shit," Zuko swore, petrified into perfect stillness just as Jee was. "Now what?"

Jee risked a glance around, shifting one of his arms painfully slowly out of the embrace so that he could aim the flashlight at their feet. There it was – a crack, tiny for now, zigzagging like a jagged bolt of lightning from right under Zuko's ice-skates.

Damn, they must have stayed in one place for two long. Their twin weights combined pressing into the same spot must have been too much. They needed to move away from there as soon as possible before more cracks appeared or this one turned larger…

"Okay," Jee whispered, leaning into Zuko's ear. "You jump as far away from this spot as you can when I tell you to. Try to aim for that pile of snow on the bank right behind us. Got it?"

"What? No!" Zuko tried to move, but Jee firmly held him in place. "What about you?"
"I'll be right behind!" Jee hissed. "Just calm down and do as I say. It's not too bad yet, but it will be if we stay here any longer."

He held the brat down for as long as it took to calm him down; by the time another crack jumped to life with an ominous sound, no doubt sparked to life by Zuko's tensing.

The kid could really be a damned idiot sometimes.

"Right," Jee breathed once he felt Zuko still in his grip again. "Good. Ready? On my mark, one, two, three –"

He was gearing himself up to push the brat away from him to give him an extra boost, but he was not prepared for what actually happened at the count of three. Zuko, that fucking stubborn little critter, turned around in his arms in a flash and instead pushed at Jee with so much concentrated force that it was enough to land the man in the very pile he wanted to help Zuko get to – though part of it could have been sheer surprise, as all of it happened in less than a blink. Before Jee knew it, he was lying on his back, his upper body on the snowy bank, his legs spread gracelessly on the frozen water, the flashlight he had dropped landing somewhere next to him, and there were cracks resounding in the quiet night, and Zuko was still standing there, the idiot –

The brat jumped at what seemed like the very last moment, just when the ice started to break in earnest under his feet. Jee reached out almost on instinct and pulled him close trying to cushion the fall, both of them breathing hard.

It wasn't a big hole – just enough to drown a squirrel, maybe, or a slightly larger wood animal, but not to swallow a growing teenager of Zuko's bulk. Still, it could have been much larger if Zuko hadn't jumped away in time, and it certainly would have been dangerous if it was Jee who stayed behind.

Which didn't make Zuko's insane strategy any better.

"What the fuck," Jee wheezed, pressing the boy close, "did you think you were doing, you crazy bastard? Why didn't you just listen to me?"

"Are you nuts?" Zuko pulled himself up a little to look Jee in the eye. "I'm not going to let anyone put themselves in danger for me. You're heavier. You would've made it worse. The pressure would've been even bigger."

Jee shook his head at him, eyes wide. The brat was un-fucking-believable. "And what exactly do you think would happen if you were harmed in any way?" he grumbled. "I'd be in a shitload of trouble with basically everyone."

Zuko sniffed and wiped his runny nose on his sleeve. "Still better than being dead and frozen. Trying to help you out of that lake would've been hard."

"And anyway, I knew you'd save me if I fell," he added quietly after a pause, glancing behind him at the spot of broken ice. "I wasn't afraid."

… Well.

"I'm beginning to think you don't know what the word means," murmured Jee, reaching out to ruffle the kid's hat a bit, then pulled him closer again. Impossible, the brat was. Utterly impossible. "Have you ever been afraid, kiddo?"

Zuko looked up at him then, eyebrow furrowed in a hard frown, eyes bright even in the snow-lighted
darkness – and even through the layers and layers of clothing Jee could feel how tense he was. But then he lowered his head on the man's chest, clung to him and quietly whispered, "Yeah."

There was history behind that one word, Jee was sure of it. Connected to the scar, maybe? To his family? It was impossible to tell, but the fact that Zuko chose to trust him enough to admit his own fear was astonishing on its own, so much so that Jee filed it away to ponder later.

He allowed them a moment to just stay like that, simply holding the boy close and breathing – Zuko's weight felt more comfortable resting on him than he was willing to admit. However, it wasn't quite enough to make him forget about the coldness in the air and the snow, which was now seeping into his clothes and turning them into a damp mess. They needed to get up now if they didn't want to catch something nasty out here.

"That's enough fun for one evening," he grunted eventually, trying to prop himself up on his elbow and thus give Zuko a hint to kindly get himself off of Jee. "Time to head back. I have some hot cocoa waiting for us in the car."

Zuko complied, rolling himself to the side and right into the snow. He was a mess of white fluff within seconds and Jee had to bite back a chuckle, glancing at him as he struggled to his feet – it was a pretty hilarious picture and oddly sweet at that. The brat was not sweet – most of the time he could serve as a textbook definition of anti-sweet – but he did have the occasional moment when he could almost pass for cute and this evening proved that without a shadow of a doubt.

It proved a lot of other things as well, but apparently Zuko didn't feel like addressing that for the time being and neither did Jee. They made their shaky way around the lake to the bench where they had left their boots – Jee firmly put his foot down when Zuko suggested they just skate across, they didn't need to take any more unnecessary risks and that was that – and it was a very silent trek, filled with heavy breaths and the crunching of snow under the blades of their skates and not much more.

It remained like that all the way back to the car. Jee got the engine running as they settled into their seats just to get the heat back into their bones before they set off, and tossed the thermos with hot cocoa at Zuko, who accepted without a word. The thermos was Jee's old trusted friend and lived up to the task this time around, too, keeping the drink warm just as it was supposed to. The sweet liquid felt heavenly as it spread down his throat; they enjoyed it in silence, both of them, Jee refilling the small plastic cups until they ran out. He then offered Zuko the chocolate bar and this, too, was consumed in silence, one that didn't feel uncomfortable at all, just – natural.

Almost companionable. Almost, because what happened out there on the ice before it started to give way could not be pushed away that easily.

It was clear that Zuko needed the space to think about it and, went it came down to it, so did Jee.

However, if the lieutenant allowed himself to hope for a second that his companion would not allude to his slip-up and the hug that night, those hopes were dashed once they got on the road again.

"So," murmured Zuko, clearing his throat as he was wont to do before starting a conversation he felt awkward about, "what was that about? Back there?"

Jee stopped himself from groaning, but it took a considerable effort. His eyes never leaving the dark road spreading ahead, the music idly playing to cover up the discomfort, he tried to look for the right words and failed.

"I wish I knew, kid," he finally confessed, gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. "I'm sorry."
Zuko was silent for a while, a pattern Jee was already familiar with – the brat needed time to get his thoughts together in any difficult conversation and that was a damn hard conversation if Jee ever had one.

"So you do want me," he whispered finally and Jee tensed even more. "Still."

There was no bluffing his way out of this one. Not after everything.

"Yeah," Jee admitted grudgingly, hoping against hope that the music would muffle it. It didn't.

"And what are you going to do about it?" Zuko asked after another pause; Jee refused to glance over to him, but he was fairly certain that he had a pair of golden eyes set firmly on him, and he could imagine the intensity of the gaze very vividly as it burned through.

Nothing but honesty would do now. Zuko would doubtlessly detect any attempts at dodging that that would be it. And at the end of the day, Jee simply did not have the answers.

"There is nothing I can say to that, Zuko," he said in a low voice. "I am sorry. I just – I don't know."

Another pause, longer and so much more loaded, during which Jee wished fervently for the power to just open up Zuko's head and peek inside into his thoughts. It would clear up a whole fucking lot.

But the brat remained silent for a good long while, probably mulling over everything that had happened, and opened his mouth again only after they passed the stupidly cheerful WELCOME TO SUMMERFIELD board.

"You should come to Music Night next week," he said quietly.

"What?" That was probably the last thing Jee expected to hear.

"Next Saturday. You should. It will be… uh, there will be something. A surprise. You might be interested."

"Um… All right." It wasn't as if he had anything else to do next weekend, and if Zuko thought he should…

So did it mean the previous conversation was dropped? That was – surprising to say the least. Zuko was not the type to let things go just like that, especially not when it came to Jee. So next week's Christmas Music Night must be significant in some way.

Curious.

"Anyway, thanks," said Zuko when they drove into downtown, the brightness of the Asian district a stark contrast to the darkness of the nature park. "That was… fun."

"You have a strange definition of fun," replied Jee, lips curling up into a smirk.

"Maybe." Zuko's voice sounded lighter now which was both relieving and slightly disturbing. "But still. Thanks."

"You're welcome, kid."

He owed the kid more, much more, he knew that, but he had no idea what else could be said that would help. He needed time. A lot of time. He needed to get his thoughts in order, he needed to separate the legitimate worries and concerns and benefits from his own wishful thinking, he needed to sort himself – and Zuko – out and decide yet again where they could go from here. He could not
do any of that in the space it took them to reach the Jasmine Dragon.

Winter break could not come soon enough.

"So," said Zuko when Jee pulled up by the teashop. "This is it, then?"

Jee nodded, massaging his tired eyes. God, he felt so drained…

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

"Saturday," Zuko replied quietly in a voice that sounded strangely tense. "Be there. Promise you'll come."

"All right, I promise, but why –"

Zuko didn't wait to hear the rest of the question. He got out, took the backpack out of the backseat and was gone with a click of the car door shutting close.

Chapter End Notes

Next: there is a certain Revelation, Jee goes to a counselor and everyone attends a party.
Chapter 13: The Lesser Wrong

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter for which you can get your champagne. I won't say anything more other than it may still seem rough, because it was finished and edited in a hurry to get it out of the way before I plunge myself fully into thesis-writing, and I apologize for any snags I may have missed. Also, it's LONG. As in, over 14k long. So grab a tea or something, k?

A HUGE thank you to the amazing Princebender brainstorming group who helped shape a lot of this chapter, down to the details.

Also, the lovely Tyblistaire drew an adorable sketch for chapter 12. The colored version is up on Princebender too. Thanks again!

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jee should have known this would not go down well. It had no right to. And he knew the kid found the whole Christmas Music Night important for some mysterious reason he chose not to share, but he honestly didn't expect the face Zuko made when Jee mentioned that he might possibly not make it.

He looked like Jee had just kicked over a whole box of meowing kittens.

"What do you mean?" he asked. His good eye narrowed. It was never a good sign.

Jee stood his ground, crossing his arms over his chest. He didn't feel good with what he'd just said, but if there was anything important going on with that damned event then Zuko could tell him, dammit. There was no need for all that ridiculous secrecy.

"I mean exactly what I said. Some of my old friends invited me over," he repeated firmly, ready to match Zuko glare for glare and gearing himself up for a shouting act. It would be a pity to have to endure one after the lake, but Zuko's short fuse was legendary at Flowing Creek after all. He was a fool to expect this to go peacefully. "And it would be nice to spend Christmas with them. People do have friends, Zuko. I'm considering it."

"But you promised!" For a moment, Zuko's good eye widened in a spell of plain uncommon desperation and Jee felt a stab of guilt, but refused to yield just like that. "You promised you'd come to the teashop!"

"I'm well aware of that," Jee replied, bending down to pick up his stuff and throwing them to the gym bag. His voice was getting tense. That wouldn't do. He needed to stay calm. "But the invitation's come up. These things do happen, kiddo. I'll probably go unless you convince me that I should stay by telling me what's so important about this Saturday."

Oh, hello there. The glower was back on with full force, joined by balled fists and flexing muscles.

"I shouldn't have to convince you," the brat spit out, rigid with anger that was just unwarranted. "You promised! That should be enough!"
"So you want me to stay here for the entire winter break for no reason other than you want me to attend one event," Jee summed up with growing irritation. "And you won't even tell me why."

"If you won't keep your word then maybe it's not worth having you there after all." Zuko started stomping around the gym, picking up his things as well. If Jee was any judge, he was close to popping a vein.

Right. He was prepared to deal with the brat's more volatile moods, had been ever since he decided on the private lessons, but this was getting ridiculous.

"Just tell me, for God's sake," he gruffed out, picking up the bag. "What's the big deal? Why is it so important to you?"

"It just is, all right?!!" Zuko shouted at him. "Or was. There is a reason. But I'm not even sure I want you to know anymore. Just forget it. Go fly to Minnesota or wherever."

Oh for crying out loud…

"Zuko." Jee grabbed the kid's elbow when he tried to stomp past, into the locker rooms. They were both sweaty from training and Jee's hand slid a little, down to Zuko's forearm. "What. Is. The deal?"

"Other than wanting someone to keep their promise?" The brat snarled at him, trying to wrench his arm free. Violently. "Just let me go. Fuck off! Do whatever the fuck you want!"

Jee did let go of his arm then, if only because for a moment he feared that if he didn't, Zuko would bite his fingers off. He watched him go, feeling anger boiling close to the surface, but even closer was the shame he absolutely didn't want to admit he felt.

He'd never been one for sticking to his promises. He had never met a man who would be. Until now.

Christ, he'd fucked up again, hadn't he, and just when things were going so well… But he really didn't understand. And he didn't fancy sitting around in Summerfield through Christmas while the idiots that called themselves his friends boozed and gossiped and enjoyed good, home-cooked feasts without him. Was it really so bad to consider it?

Of course he could always fly over to Shun's after the damned Music Night. Which was an option neither of them considered until it was too late and the fuck-up had already happened.

Typical.

He didn't drive Zuko home that night – when he knocked on the locker room after he'd changed in the office, the brat was already gone.

***

"Jee, you're in some deep shit."

Jee frowned, his finger pausing on the remote mid-press.

"No I'm not," he said immediately, and realized only too late that perhaps it would be a good idea to try and not sound automatically defensive. "What the fuck gave you that idea?"
He heard Shun sigh at the other end of the connection and it only made him frown harder. He detested that sigh. It was condescending and made him feel like a stubborn, moronic twelve-year-old.

"I know you," his friend said in a tone of saintly patience put to the test. "I know how you get when you're in trouble. You sound exactly like you did when the Gibbs affair was going on, right before you decided to kick yourself out."

"I don't sound like anything, you idiot," Jee protested on principle, swearing inwardly.

"Just tell me what you've done this time, man," Shun insisted. "You're in trouble again. I can hear it. You'd tell me why you're not coming otherwise. So just get on with it, I'm not going to hang on the phone forever."

"Then don't because there is nothing to tell." Jee changed his position on the couch, flipping his legs up over the armrest and stretching them. They were talking about the Middle East on CNN again, not that he paid any attention.

"For fuck's sake, Jee. You and your stupid pride. I'm not going to tell anyone, you know that, and maybe I could help."

Now it was Jee's turn to sigh. "You can't," he grumbled, shutting his eyes. "It's my mess. I can't tell you."

Honestly, how did a conversation which was only started because Jee wanted to tell his friend he wasn't flying over after all, and which then degenerated largely into Shun whining about his wife, turn into that?

His friend was silent for a long moment. It was a foreboding pause. Jee didn't like it one bit. "Well, at least you admitted it," he said at long last, just as Jee took up channel-surfing again. "Fine, I'm not going to press you for information, but just… if there's anything…"

"Yeah, I know. Thanks, man."

Shun was a good man. Someone who could be relied on to always be there for his mates. And he respected their privacy, which was invaluable. But there was no fucking way Jee would ever tell him about Zuko. Not him, not anyone. And especially not now that his thoughts on the matter were such a goddamn mess.

There was nothing Shun could do that would help, except maybe yell at Jee for even considering it in the first place. Which Jee was. Every night since the ice-skating. And just now in the shower. Vigorously.

Hair still damp and dripping down the back of his neck, he massaged his forehead and eyes, swallowing down a groan. And tried hard not to think that there could have been a handsome boy with him right now, snuggled up to him on the sofa, who could kiss the weariness away. Imagining such things while knowing that the only reason it wasn't so was because Jee refused to let it be only led to more frustration.

"Don't wait until you fuck up royally," Shun said, though the dark tone of his voice implied that he already suspected Jee would do just that. "Call as soon as you need anything. You still have pals around here. People remember. We can help."

"Good luck with your wife," Jee murmured; he didn't want to admit that he was oddly touched by that sentiment.
People remembered, huh? Well then. That was good to hear, even if anyone who actually knew what had been going on back then didn't do jack shit to help Jee or the poor bastards who suffered because Gibbs couldn't keep his grabby paws to himself.

Jee understood. It wasn't as if little men like him actually had a real voice. People wanted to keep their jobs. That was normal. No one wanted to get involved in anything too ugly and after all, Jee only didn't look the other way because he suffered from a temporary spell of noble insanity.

But it was good to hear that there were people who respected him for his choice, meaningless in the long run though it was.

An exasperated huff was the last thing he heard before Shun ended the connection, and then the cell phone landed on his coffee table between the sofa and the TV as Jee stretched, glancing disinterestedly at the screen.

The news again, a stupid sitcom, ads, some ridiculous game show, more ads, a horror flick he'd already seen, "Grey's Anatomy," more ads…

He could be fucking Zuko now. On the couch. Right this moment. He could be gripping those sharp hipbones, leaning over the taut line of the kid's back, reaching to pull a fistful of black hair, driving himself home, finding out exactly just how tight Zuko was, how hot inside, and how eager as he pushed back against Jee…

The signal of an incoming text tore him out of the fantasy he'd slipped into without even realizing, and when he saw the name of the sender – ZX – he bit on the inside of his cheek hard enough for it to hurt. It was ridiculous to fear that the kid could somehow see into his debauched mind and read his thoughts – obviously he couldn't and Jee was not as stupid as to be seized by such moronic sentiments – but his timing was nothing short of uncanny.

It's tomorrow. Do whatever you want, read the text.

Right. Iroh's Music Night. The thing that made Jee put off his flight and miss the entire thing as a result, because of course all the other flights had been booked already. And if Zuko bothered to remind him of it even despite the bloody stupid fight, then it must really be important. For some reason, and Jee could not begin to imagine what could be so special about that particular night apart from it being somehow Christmassy because of the season.

Maybe Zuko would sing. Jee almost snorted at the mental image. As if.

He deliberated briefly whether or not to reply, decided against it, then returned to his channel-surfing, his eyes blank and not seeing a thing.

Or maybe the kid would dance. Wouldn't that be a sight. Looking at all the grace, or lack of thereof, Zuko displayed on daily basis, seeing him dance would probably be some pretty good entertainment, not that it was ever likely to happen…

But, as Jee lifted himself off the sofa and wandered over to the kitchen counter in order to make himself a sandwich, his mind started wandering again. Supposing the kid would choose some sexy music to move to? And supposing he would start… stripping? On the table? Or take Jee to the private room at the back and then dance for him there? Taking off bits of his uniform, slowly, teasingly, maintaining eye contact all the time, and then…

Scrambling into Jee's lap, the man imagined idly as he spread peanut butter over the bread that had already gone a little stale. Yes. To straddle him. And then Zuko moving, moving, moving, to a slow,
languid rhythm, giving out little whimpers, like he did when Jee kissed him in his bedroom only louder, and Jee would put his arms around him, help guide him, then push Zuko's hips against his groin…

Perhaps it was good that the TV chose this particular moment to run a news feature about a female teacher put on trial for having sex with her sixteen-year-old student. Jee froze, all dirty fantasies instantly forgotten and leaving a cold stab of guilt in his gut, knife suspended over bread, and listened to the news presenter condemning the woman as a "freak," "sex predator," "pervert." "Monster." *Who would ever do such a thing to a child, What are the school officials going to do to keep our children safe, Who can we trust with their welfare, Why would their trust be abused in such a vile manner…*

The knife ended up stuck in the wooden chopping board. Jee didn't even notice.

***

Toph and her aunt were there. That was the first thing Jee registered when he entered the Jasmine Dragon the following evening, sporting a white shirt and an old, ironed suit he had managed to dig out of the dark recesses of his closet.

So the chief of police herself had decided to grace the merry gathering with her luminous, grumpy presence. The sight of the two Bei Fong ladies only spiked Jee's curiosity as he made his way over to a table where Ming, Pakku and Piandao already sat, Ming waving him over.

"Aren't you looking smart this evening," she teased when Jee pulled up a chair and nodded at each of them in turn. "Are you meeting someone? Is there something we should know about?"

"If there is, my colleague has been most secretive about it," Piandao said with a polite smile. "I did not detect a single detail pointing to a significant other."

Jee rolled his eyes, muttering "Oh for the love of…"

"I quite agree, Lieutenant," murmured Pakku, his expression the epitome of profound disinterest. "I would rather not hear any gossip about my employees this evening if that's all the same to you."

"Right, I forgot the slightest mention of romance turns you into a prickly hedgehog," Ming smirked over her tea. "Sorry, headmaster. But what's with the dress up, Jee? You haven't suddenly decided to become proper, have you?"

"At my time of life? Fat chance." Jee leaned back on his chair and took a look around, searching for more familiar faces. It seemed that it was mostly the same crowd as last time, plus the Bei Fong ladies, one of which was currently dangling her feet in the air and chatting while the other glared straight at Jee.

He smiled out of the corner of his mouth and inclined his head at the chief. As usual, it only made her quirk her eyebrow at him.

"I don't know, it just seemed like a good idea," he said, turning back to Ming. It was partly true. He didn't need to add that he thought it would be a good idea because it might impress Zuko enough for the kid to stop sulking for a few seconds. "It's supposed to be a special night, right?"
"Well yeah, but it's not like there's a dress code –"

"What makes me curious, Lieutenant," interrupted Pakku, leaning back in his own chair and crossing his arms over his chest, his face fixed into the habitual frown, "is what brings you here in the first place. As I recall, you once expressed a sentiment that it was not your, ah, cup of tea."

"A cup of tea is not his cup of tea," Ming saw it fit to add, chuckling. Jee rolled his eyes at her again, if only to play for time.

She hadn't been all that quick to forgive him, not enough to want to socialize with him again for a long time, but they got there eventually. Apparently buying her beer after beer when they finally got around to hanging out in a pub worked wonders at getting back into her good books.

Jee was glad. It was always good to have one more person he could talk to openly. Sort of openly, at least.

But he had a question to answer here, didn't he…

"Zuko asked me to," he said finally; he couldn't think of a better cover story, and besides, there was nothing inherently wrong in that, was it? Maybe his table companions would know what the whole deal with tonight's Music Night was. "He seemed to think it's important. No idea why."

For a moment it looked like he'd hit jackpot; as soon as the words left his mouth, he caught Piandao and Pakku exchange surprised glances. Ming, too, looked positively shocked, but the reactions could have just as well been due to the fact that Zuko attached any importance at all to Music Night. The kid made no secret of how much he hated the event.

Jee waited, looking at each of them in turn, until Pakku cleared his throat. "Well," he started. "Congratulations, Lieutenant. It would seem that the boy has finally found a person here in Summerfield he likes well enough to invite here tonight. It hasn't happened before, to be sure. Keep it up and I might have to begin to suspect you of supernatural powers."

"We understand each other," Jee murmured, looking straight at Pakku and slipping easily into his blank Talk To Officers expression. "As much as anyone can understand him, if that counts as a supernatural power. I guess it does. But what's the deal here? Do any of you know?"

"You will learn soon enough, friend," said Piandao with a smile that looked unnervingly cryptic. "Just wait. Tonight is a special night."

"Yeah, I managed to gather that for myself, but why –"

"Ah, Jeong-Jeong." Pakku smiled wryly as he looked up at someone standing behind Jee. "Well. But where is Bumi? You were supposed to be on loony-sitting duty tonight."

"Distracted by a snowball fight outside the teashop." The drama teacher took the vacant chair next to Piandao and greeted each of his colleagues in that typical, brisk manner of his that made one think of a wolf. Or a lion. That would go better with his intimidating mane and the scars on his face which Jee continuously forgot to ask about. "I assumed he's sane enough to find his way here on his own. Has it begun yet?"

"Take in the general lack of people singing and deduce that for yourself." Pakku gestured around the teashop that, indeed, had a surprising shortage of amateur musicians performing live, which was supposed to be the main highlight of the whole thing after all.

Jee took the opportunity to look around again and indulged in a brief game of Zuko-spotting, which
failed to produce satisfying results. No sulky kid stalked around the teashop taking orders – and, for that matter, no robust uncle filled the space with booming conversation and belly-deep laughter. Jee was hardly a regular, but even he could see that the absence of the two made the teashop seem strangely bereft.

Not that Jee was particularly eager to face Zuko after their fight – the kid missed classes on Friday – but still, Jee had cancelled a visit with his friends just for the sake of the brat.

"Iroh is busy with the annual game of Coax the Nephew Out of his Den," remarked Pakku drily, somehow managing to make the capital letters fall right into place as he spoke. "He's been gone for an hour now, so my guess is it should take them roughly thirty minutes more."

"Honestly, such a fuss." Ming shook her head, her expression suddenly sad. "Why the kid insists on making everything a hundred times more difficult is beyond me. And he's so goddamn stubborn, too. Jee, you're a regular hero for being able to handle him so well."

"Indeed," Piandao piped in. Jee turned his attention back to the table and caught Pakku giving him a curious, searching look, eyebrows furrowed, while his office-mate continued: "A change in Zuko is definitely visible. He hasn't gotten into a single fight ever since you started giving him private lessons. I daresay he looks less gloomy, too. Well done, Lieutenant. He has really taken to you."

It was a good thing Jee wasn't eating or drinking anything, or he would have choked on it. As it was, he only shrugged and did his best to keep his face expressionless, mainly because he could still feel Pakku's interested gaze on him and was smart enough to know when a gaze was very pointedly not inquisitive yet. More importantly still, he knew damned well how little it took for the not yet to be reevaluated.

"Some of those kids respond better to a tough approach," he said in a fake bored monotone. "I guess my experience with boot camp came in handy here. Zuko doesn't want coddling, he needs a firm sense of direction. A solid goal. That's what I'm building on."

"Goodness knows there are more kids in Flowing Creek who would benefit from being on the receiving end of your firm approach," Ming said, chuckling. "How about we send all the troublemakers to you now, huh? So you can get full-on Navy at them?"

"How about I spill that tea in your lap?"

"Children, behave," said Jeong-Jeong in a deadpan, expression never shifting, which made Piandao's lips quirk up in an amused little smile.

"Oh. Less than half an hour, then. Our good lieutenant's tough approach really is working wonders," remarked Pakku quietly, looking towards the kitchen entrance; and consequently, all heads turned in that direction as if on cue.

Zuko was there, right enough, but he was not wearing his normal waiter's uniform. Instead, he was dressed surprisingly smart, in a sharp, immaculate black suit and a buttoned red shirt that looked as if it had been ironed within an inch of its life. The get-up emphasized the boy's fine physique most flatteringly, as though it had been tailored specifically to hug that criminally fine figure. His hair remained the usual shaggy mess, but it was obvious someone went to considerable lengths to make the kid look presentable.

And hot. Really, disturbingly hot. Though that was probably an unexpected side-effect.

Jee decided to focus on that rather than on the fact that a seventeen-year-old's suit looked way
cleaner, crisper and much more expensive than his own.

Iroh shuffled in right after the boy, pushing him forwards a little, and his outfit looked suspiciously elegant too, though the man remained faithful to his roots and chose a fancy robe over a suit. Jee, who was watching the pair closely, noticed that both uncle and nephew looked upset over something, and though he would have dismissed it out of hand if it were only Zuko, it was clear from Iroh's expression that they must have had some kind of a row.

The impression was confirmed as soon as Zuko entered the teashop fully – keeping his head low, not looking anyone in the eye, he stalked over to the only table that was still vacant and sat there, scowling into the wood. Meanwhile, his uncle did his best to keep up appearances and schooled his face into a smile that was almost close enough to the real thing. Then, he started on a round around the teashop, greeting everybody.

"I suppose some things will stay the same no matter what," said Ming quietly, looking sadly at the center of furious doom that was Zuko's sequestered table.

"The kid never did like attention," Pakku agreed. "I tried to convince Iroh to let it go this time, but of course the old fool didn't want to hear a word about it."

Jee frowned, glancing at Zuko. Even though he had no idea what was going on, he couldn't stamp down the feeling that Pakku had it all wrong. Zuko did want attention. But of a very different kind.

If he hoped that his staring would activate Zuko's awareness and make him look up, though, he was disappointed – the brat seemed entirely happy ignoring everyone else and oozing hostility so thick that it practically solidified around him and sealed him off in an impregnable bubble. Which was rather irritating, considering that he was the one who pestered Jee about coming to the event in the first place. Jee had a brief impulse to text the brat with something provocative just to see his reaction and make him look up before he realized how childish that was.

Still. Imagining the face Zuko would make if he read something like *You look very fuckable tonight* was entertaining enough on its own.

On the other hand, maybe that would distract the kid from whatever he was brooding on…

Jee did not get a chance to consider the idea, though, because Iroh Xi arrived at their table moments later, looking considerably cheered up after talking to people other than his nephew.

"So good to see you all here tonight," he said, his voice as deep and warm and rumbling as ever. "We shall begin in a moment."

"What was that about?" Pakku asked, gesturing in Zuko's general direction. "You said he resigned himself to the whole party idea."

"Ah," Iroh's face fell. "Well. I'm afraid it's rather complicated. But not to worry, I'm sure my nephew will feel better once we have some lovely music."

"And I'm sure you're a delusional old optimist," murmured Jeong-Jeong. "But let us hope so, for your sake."

In response, Iroh only beamed at him good-naturedly. "I will be right back with you," he said. "Let me just open the festivities."

"He makes it sound like he's about to lead a New Year's parade or something," muttered Jee as Iroh wandered off towards the stage.
"The fondness for drama seems to run in the family," remarked Piandao; Jee very pointedly didn't comment with a Look who's talking. He could restrain his tongue. Sometimes.

In the meantime, Iroh found his way to the stage and was tapping at the mic, drawing the attention of everyone in the teashop. Heads turned to him one by one like ships drawn to the glowing lighthouse in the middle of the night, the good-natured hubbub quieting until it died down almost completely to be replaced with a spontaneous, if a bit awkward, round of applause. The old man was clearly pleased by this – his smile deepened as he hid his hands in the vast sleeves, sweeping a benevolent gaze over the gathering. It made him look like the epitome of an Asian Santa Claus.

"I bid you all a very warm welcome," he announced, his voice carrying easily. "Now, before we begin, I have an announcement to make."

Jee perked up at this and craned his neck to see the old man better. Finally, some answers.

However, as it often happens, Iroh's next words only lead to even more chaos in his brain as they settled there with the all the gentleness and subtlety of a detonated atomic bomb:

"Tonight we are celebrating my nephew Zuko's eighteenth birthday."

... WHAT.

Jee's eyes snapped to the brat on automatic before he was even done processing what Iroh's words meant. Zuko still wasn't looking at anyone, not even at him, and it would have been insulting if Jee had the presence of mind to analyze it. As it was, he could only stare as Iroh continued his speech with some birthday wishes and introducing the bands and whatever, Jee had tuned the rest of it out already, too preoccupied with the big revelation.

And it was a pretty fucking huge revelation as far as he was concerned. With even bigger potential implications.

Zuko was eighteen now. Eighteen. Which meant he was legally an adult. Which meant he was no longer underage. Which meant that he could legally have sex.

They could have sex and Jee wouldn't automatically have the entire force along with the federal court descend upon him if anyone saw him shoving his hands down the brat's pants. Not anymore. Not right on the spot, anyway. Probably.

Christ, so that's why the kid had been so adamant about Jee coming here tonight.

Subtle, Zuko. Real subtle.

They needed to talk, and they needed to talk soon.

Like, now.

Jee almost made it out of his chair before he realized he had no idea what to say to the brat, upon which realization he promptly sat back down and folded his hands on the table. In hindsight, it was an excessively stupid thing to do; he must have looked like a proper weirdo and his table companions did not hesitate to shoot him skeptical glances.

"Something wrong?" Ming asked in a whisper, leaning over to him; Iroh was still talking, Suki and her band setting up their stuff behind him in all their face-paint glory.

"No, I just thought I forgot about something," Jee mumbled gruffly in response, wondering with a
pang of dread how obvious and telling his surprise really was. A part of him was conscious of Pakku's gaze once again gluing itself to him.

_Congratulations, Jee, you are laying out all your cards right here on the table even before the game's actually begun. Idiot._

But he couldn't bring himself to genuinely care about any of that. Mostly because his thoughts were still swirling with the massive, massive change that had shifted the ground beneath his feet as soon as Iroh let the words out.

Zuko could have just as well sent him a gilded invitation and a map to his bed. Where he would lay naked and waiting, legs open, a *FUCK ME* sign hanging from his neck.

Jesus…

Scrambling to hold himself together, Jee ran a hand through his hair and scratched the back of his neck without even thinking about it. Now, well… What the hell was he supposed to do with that knowledge? There was a part of him that insisted on giving the sneaky brat a birthday kiss and throw himself joyfully into a lusty adventure with a mentally unbalanced boy who was easily young enough to be his son, had Jee ever wanted one. Another advised caution regardless – there could still be severe repercussions and anyway, he still didn't free himself of doubt regarding Zuko's motivation. That voice of reason was dwindling and growing quieter with every passing second, though, drowned out by Iroh's one word.

Eighteen. Fucking eighteen.

There was nothing for it. They needed to find a way to talk in private. Maybe if Jee stood face to face with the boy he would find the right words. Or the right thoughts.

Because only one thing was horribly certain at this point: it was Jee's call. Zuko couldn't have made his position any clearer if he tried and now everything hinged on what Jee would do. He needed to make his final decision, now, and then stick to it no matter what. No more skirting around it like a miserable coward, no more grasping for excuses. If he accosted Zuko tonight, the kid would no doubt ask again and this time, Jee could not back out with vague, half-inarticulate "I don't know"s.

In the meantime, Suki's girls started their performance, drawing most of the attention, and Jee seized the chance – he turned in his chair to try and steal an inconspicuous look at the object of both his lust and misery. It looked like abducting Zuko for a few minutes of privacy would be easier said than done. The brat's table was suddenly surrounded by people. The magic of birthdays, Jee thought sourly as he watched the parade of patrons who obviously must have forgotten all about their dislike rushing over to pat the birthday boy on the back and wink and him and bellow condescending stuff such as "So, you're a big boy now, eh?". Jee wondered how much of it was genuine if misguided goodwill rather than the urge to suck up to Iroh.

Judging from his face, Zuko had no such doubts. His glower was thunderous.

It was a miracle the table had not been reduced to smithereens yet.

"I'll be right back," Jee said, getting out of his chair and shrugging his jacket on as Iroh ambled back to their table. "Need a smoke."

Like hell he needed one.

As soon as he found himself outside, the music and chatter muted and distant, he fumbled for a cigarette and lit it with an urgency that surprised even him. The drag felt good. Jee honestly couldn't
remember the last time smoking brought him such profound satisfaction.

The frost instantly clinging to his cheeks and fingers also brought relief, grounding him back in the moment and reminding sharply just what was at stake.

However, it brought something else, too – a memory of a frozen lake in the middle of a dark wood and a warm, flushed boy, laughing.

Maybe Zuko wouldn't require an answer right this instant. Maybe he would still give Jee a little more time to think…

The problem was, his body – and, indeed, his common sense, too – was telling him he didn't need any more time. He already knew what he wanted. And he had to admit that, day after day, his resolve not to reach out for it dwindled, muted by all the counter-arguments he kept coming up with to justify his own lechery.

The lake planted doubt in his mind, a strong, strong seed that was now bursting into bloom as if it had been fed plant steroids. The lesser wrong. The things he could teach the kid. The companionship. The good things he could do. The subtle guidance he could try to provide. The self-confidence he could bring out and strengthen. The rage he could bank, or at least channel into creation rather than destruction.

His empty, lonely bed.

Dammit, he was tired of being alone. Of falling asleep without another person's warm, regularly breathing body right beside him. It'd been years – fucking years – and at that point he knew, with the kind of certainty that it was impossible to deny, that he wanted the person to be Zuko.

Jesus, just imagining what it would feel like to hold the brat naked against him was enough to send familiar heat stirring in the pit of his stomach, which was just pathetic, plain and simple.

He was seriously too old for this shit. He shouldn't be reacting like that. But it had been so long…

Besides, it was even more absurd but somehow, he had come to think that maybe, deep down, Zuko was actually… Well, not a good kid, he was still a brat, but – fuck, but Jee liked him. In a funny sort of way one might come to like an annoying cat that scratches all the furniture and pisses everywhere. They had managed to form an understanding of sorts, a truce – even when they fought – a way to interact that already was way beyond what the officials saw as appropriate, but the bottom line was that Jee enjoyed spending time with the kid.

Mostly.

Because sometimes he still wanted to give the kid a good, solid walloping.

It was a blessing, actually, that they got to interact in a space that allowed them to be raw, physical and – basically, when it comes down to it – to beat the shit out of each other under the sanctioned pretense of training. Both of them needed that space. Zuko probably more, but Jee was grateful for the opportunity to let out some stress that way too.

Zuko was a good sparring partner. And a quick student, even despite being an incredibly infuriating one. And of fucking course Jee's mind would immediately leap to imagine how those two qualities combined would manifest themselves in the bedroom, even as he took another hearty drag.

Eighteen, the brat was. Eighteen. Mother of God…
"Quite nice outside tonight, isn't it, Lieutenant?"

Okay, the way he almost bit right through the cigarette was definitely undignified, as was the way he almost jumped away from the warm, female voice when it sounded too close for comfort. Shit, he must have been really caught up in his thoughts not to hear the woman approaching, the one who was now shuffling for something in her handbag and looking distinctly familiar with her huge grey hair and heavy make-up and round, chubby face and –

Oh right. The guidance counselor, the one everyone called "Aunt Wu," the one Ming said had been flirting with old Iroh. Jee vaguely remembered having a few idle chats with her back when he had been installing himself into the school community. She seemed decent enough, warm and friendly in a way that did put the word "aunt" to mind, but they haven't actually interacted much. For all her warmth, the guidance counselor had struck Jee as someone too… fluffy. Too maternal. People who found as much joy in interacting with youth as she did usually were.

And now she was making herself quite at home beside Jee, bundled up in her huge, heavy coat and taking out a cigarette and a lighter as though the two of them were thick as thieves.

"Evening." Jee nodded at her and leaned back against the wall of the teashop, watching the woman warily.

Would it be polite to just bugger off? He really, really didn't feel like chatting with anybody.

However, the counselor forestalled any such hopes by addressing him directly as she lit her cigarette. "I'm glad I caught you out here, Lieutenant." She took a deep inhale, then smiled as she let out the smoke. "I've been meaning to have a chat with you for a while, but you always seem so busy back at the school."

Well, damn.

There was nothing for it, then. Grudingly, Jee decided to just keep smoking, resigning himself to a few minutes of conversation as he tried to put his spinning thoughts on hold. Pretending to not be terribly reluctant to continue the conversation was suddenly harder than usual and Jee didn't really feel like putting much effort into it anyway. Maybe that woman would sense his mood and make herself scarce.

On the other hand, maybe a break from all the Zuko thoughts would be good for him. A distraction. Could just help him see things straight again.

Well, as straight as the situation warranted.

However, as Jee's rotten luck would have it, it was precisely Zuko that the lady wanted to talk to him about.

"I was so pleased to hear that you have been giving young Zuko private lessons," she said lightly, smiling at Jee. "It's very good of you to devote so much of your time to the boy."

This made Jee glance at her sharply, long and searching – he couldn't help it, the reaction just kicked in like an old defense mechanism. But there was nothing of Pakku's vague, blooming suspicion in this woman. Mostly, she seemed amiable and relaxed, and was regarding Jee with something that could perhaps pass for amusement, but also with a tint of professional respect.

The latter was so uncommon in Jee's life nowadays that it was enough for him to put his reluctance on hold.
"It's not that much of a sacrifice," he said brusquely when it became clear that Aunt Wu expected some kind of input from him.

Her smile grew. "Don't sell yourself short, my good man. Many people would say that it's quite the contrary and that, sadly, includes most of Zuko's teachers. Not one of them seemed to find a way to connect with him on a more personal level, even those who cared enough to actually make the effort."

Jee cocked his head to the side, ash from his cigarette falling on the sidewalk. My good man? In-fucking-deed. "Not a good student, then, is he?" he murmured.

"Oh, he is. Most studious. His report cards rarely contain anything lower than Cs. You wouldn't think that of him, would you?" Aunt Wu smiled when she saw Jee's surprised face. "But the boy struggles. Iroh tells me he spends twice as much time on homework as young men his age should – the subjects he insists on choosing are not something that comes easily to him, though he tries so very hard. And he never asks for help, not even back when I first tried to treat him…"

"Wait." Suddenly, Jee found himself completely engrossed in the conversation. "You treated him? As in, actual therapy? And Zuko allowed it?"

It was too late to bite his tongue and stop the words from flowing out, but thankfully Aunt Wu didn't take too much notice of his incredulity; she shook her head, the smile gone to be replaced by wistfulness.

"Hardly. I'm afraid we – that is, Iroh and I – only managed to force him to sit through a handful of sessions when he first arrived, and then he declared that he didn't want any of it. He was very vocal about it, poor boy. Of course, as a close friend of his uncle's I have been able to keep a closer eye on him nonetheless, but he would not allow me any further attempts at active therapy. He's reluctant to even hold a casual conversation with me now. Probably afraid I would find a way to drag him back into the sessions somehow, even though Iroh and I agreed that it's no use as long as Zuko remains so hostile to the idea. It's impossible to help someone against their will, as I'm sure you know."

"Yes." Jee nodded, letting out a puff of smoke. Damn right he knew. "But did you manage to – well, did he tell you anything about – "

He didn't need to specify what he meant. The counselor shook her head even before he could articulate any details. "I only managed to scratch the surface, I'm afraid," she said. "He never told me anything substantial. It's quite obvious that he has been abused in some way and that his father is behind most of his anxieties, but other than that, I know nothing. Whenever I tried to prod deeper, he would clam up immediately and refuse to speak a word. Though of course I wouldn't tell you even if he did confess anything." Here, she winked at Jee, but it was only a momentary flicker of playfulness before it was replaced by seriousness again. "I suppose he hasn't confided in you…?"

Jee was quick to shake his head. "Not a word. I only know that he's eager to place well at the championship."

Aunt Wu nodded at that, as though that was exactly what she expected to hear. "Still, it seems that you have done a wealth of good for the boy," she said. "The very fact that you're here tonight… And it seems that it was on Zuko's invitation?"

Jee very pointedly did not look away when he confirmed that yes, Zuko invited him, but he didn't deign it necessary to elaborate on what the occasion actually was.

He didn't add that he almost let that trust down and didn't come. That was not the sort of thing one
bragged about.

The smile he received in return felt suspiciously as if the woman had just given him a trophy. "This is exactly what I mean. Apart from you, there hasn't been anyone else who could interact with Zuko on a deeper level… Well, maybe apart from that Jet boy, but that didn't end well at all."

Jee struggled to retain the posture of casual disinterest, but it was proving excessively difficult. "What Jet boy?" he asked, flicking the ash on the sidewalk again. "He never mentioned anyone of that name."

But Jin had, Jee remembered. Back with the Great Drunk Zuko On Boxes fiasco. There was someone called Jet she had invoked who was supposedly a point in favor of Zuko being gay. An ex-boyfriend, then?

If that was the case, then Jee definitely wanted to know. It could clarify a whole fucking lot and if Zuko actually wasn't a virgin…

… Then that would be a tad disappointing. True. But it would also make things considerably easier if they were to get down to do the nasty, which, Jee had to admit before himself, was more and more likely by the minute.

As long as Zuko still wanted him, which wasn't all that obvious anymore.

"No, he wouldn't, would he," murmured the counselor in the meantime, her gaze locked far ahead. "It wasn't a good episode for him. He was a very lonely child when he first arrived and, well, I suppose that made him very impressionable too. He met this boy, who was extremely troublesome in his own right, and for a while they stuck together. It must have made sense for Zuko to associate with someone who was a bit similar to him… But Jet was, as you might call it, a bad influence."

"You mean drinking, smoking, that kind of thing?"

The woman's face remained vague as she looked at Jee again. "More or less. I don't know any details, but… When it ended, it was messy. And Zuko was in a much worse shape for a long, long time, poor boy."

Jee looked to the ground. "So what became of that other guy? This – Jet?" It was good to know. If Zuko really had a rebellious "bad influence" ex hanging around, it was better to be prepared in case things got – messy.

Not that it was anything Jee couldn't handle. But he was already dealing with more pesky teenagers on a daily basis than was probably healthy and he really didn't need a new source of potential headaches.

"I believe he was sent to a reformatory in Detroit, or was it Lansing? He is an orphan, you see, and lived with a bunch of foster families before he finally crossed the line."

_Crossed the line._ A perfect euphemism for some deep shit if Jee ever heard one. "What did he do?" he asked in a low voice. "Busted some cars, painted obscenities on people's houses, mugged someone? Or was it more serious?"

"Vandalism and assault. Which, indeed, were repeated offences in his case, so our good chief of police rightly decided that it was time for a more serious intervention." Then, the woman looked at Jee with a searching, wistful expression before she added, "Please don't ask me if Zuko was involved, Lieutenant. His association with Jet is something only he is entitled to talk about, if he ever feels so inclined."
"Huh." Jee lit another cigarette, out of the need to have something to occupy his hands with rather than anything else. "Thanks for telling me, anyhow." Zuko confiding in him about this particular episode was just as likely as Pakku repainting the school pink, but he stopped himself from saying so out loud. This lady seemed to believe that he was becoming Zuko’s – what, role model? Friend? Confidante? Whatever it was, Jee didn’t feel like dispelling that particular misconception just yet.

 Mostly because he saw this as a chance to prod a little deeper. The full meaning of Zuko’s consent was still something that was holding him back and if this lady held the answers…

 If only he could frame the right questions.

 "Like I said, he doesn't actually confide in me," he started cautiously. "I'm his coach. We train. That's all there is to it, but it's good to see that it's helping him."

 "From what Iroh told me, it is." The smile was back on Aunt Wu's face. "Which is why I wanted to talk to you, Lieutenant. I want to encourage you to keep it up. Don't give up on him. We all know Zuko is a difficult boy, but I'm sure he's worth the effort. And if at any time he does or says something that troubles you, do not hesitate to let me know, maybe I would be able to help."

 Well, this was it. His opening. Time to see if his people skills really were what he believed them to be.

 "Has Zuko ever dated anyone?" he asked, letting out the smoke and trying to make it sound casual and non-pervy; it wasn't exactly a difficult feat seeing as the other teachers gossiped about their students' relationships all the fucking time. Normally it drove Jee up the wall and after spending only a few minutes in the teacher's lounge on any given day he felt that he would either leave or start breaking things. "I never heard anything about it and it seems –"

 "Ah, yes, I see what you mean." Aunt Wu nodded. "Not to anyone's knowledge, no. If he has, he kept it a secret. There were – ah – rumors going around about him and Jet, but only Zuko knows how true those were. However, you must have noticed that he isn't exactly well-suited to a romantic relationship at the moment. He's never seemed interested in that sort of thing."

 Not interested, huh? Oh, the sneaky brat.

 "So you wouldn't advise it?" Jee asked, face blank. "Don't you think it might do him some good?"

 "Oh, with the right person and the right attitude, yes," the counselor remarked. "A world of good. Iroh believes that it would magically cure all the boy's troubles if he found himself a nice girl, actually. I'm not sure I quite agree, though, because it's easy to see that Zuko already suffered more heartache than any person his age should and relationships at this stage could only make it worse. You know how kids are these days, Lieutenant."

 … Right. It wasn't exactly what Jee expected to hear, but he could see the sense in that. His own adolescent exploits had been one petty disaster chasing another and Zuko definitely didn't need that.

 "But with a mature partner," Aunt Wu continued after a pause, "someone who would look past his rage, someone who would be patient and caring enough to love him for who he is when he's not wearing that shell of is, someone who wouldn't add to his insecurities… Yes, that would help him a great deal."

 "Insecurities?"

 "Oh yes. I may not have treated Zuko for a long time, Lieutenant, but I saw and heard enough to ascertain that the boy is absolutely terrified of rejection. A very common issue with young people
like him, I'm afraid, and usually indicating some sort of internalized trauma. Family issues is the most obvious thing in his case and from the looks of it, his father isn't helping… Are you quite all right, Lieutenant?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, sorry." He must have been frowning harder than usual, which wasn't a good sign. But he couldn't possibly help it.

**Terrified of rejection.** Damn it, he was such a fucking idiot.

"You have, of course, realized who his father is?" asked the counselor while Jee was busy trying to pull himself together and squash the guilt monster that was even now gnawing at his gut.

So she knew? Of course she would, she was close with Iroh and it seemed that most of the staff, or at least those who frequented Iroh's little Pai Sho competitions, knew that they interacted with a family of billionaires. No point in playing dumb.

"Ozai Xi," Jee murmured darkly. "But Zuko didn't tell me."

"He never tells anyone. But it's good that you know. You should, if you are serious about helping the boy. Are you?"

"Yes, I am," Jee said, looking straight into her eyes without flinching. "I may not be much of an educator, I know, but I want to help if I can."

That much was true. He did. It was only his means that she would object to if she had an inkling of suspicion, which, amazingly, it seemed that she didn't.

So there were still people out there who didn't immediately jump to dirty conclusions? The thought was strangely comforting, even through the guilt which still wasn't letting up and probably wouldn't until Jee found a way to make the situation better somehow.

"Thank you." The counselor smiled at him again. "I'm sure he appreciates it in his own way."

There wasn't all that much to add, so Jee didn't and simply nodded at her, finishing the second cigarette. There were so many questions he still wanted to ask, but – perhaps luckily for him – at that time they were joined in their little smoking circle by Jeong-Jeong, whom Aunt Wu promptly engaged in a conversation about the winter play, so Jee saw it as his opening and took his leave of both of them, sneaking back into the teashop.

He still didn't quite know what to do, but maybe intercepting Zuko now would be a little easier.

It wasn't. Just as he walked in to the lively tunes of Sukki's band still permeating the space, he saw that the brat's table was now blissfully free of hypocrites, but someone else had taken their place – That Lot. The kids had surrounded Zuko like a noisy flock of chattering birds, Sokka sitting close enough to sling an arm around his neck companionably, which in itself was such an unholy sight that Jee involuntarily paused in his step just to stare. They were pressing something into Zuko's hands. From what Jee could tell it looked like presents – duh, birthday boy, they must have known. And lo, Zuko wasn't actually flipping the table and snapping at anyone and storming away from them! He seemed uncomfortable, sure enough, but he wasn't pushing Sokka or anyone else away. Rather, he was simply looking to the side, away from everyone, and mumbling something.

The tableau was uncommon enough that, for a moment, Jee was seized by an absurd notion that he didn't really know the brat at all.

Well then. There was nothing for it but wait.
He ambled back over to his own table and watched with barely concealed disinterest as the old geezers played their strange board game – Ming had absconded somewhere in the meantime, she was nowhere to be seen – but it was probably a good thing that his companions were too engrossed to pay him much attention. Otherwise they would have surely noticed his glazed, absent expression and then Pakku might have gotten even more suspicious.

It was with some sourness that Jee thought he should be so used to the Zuko-related whirlwind in his head by now that they were almost drinking buddies.

He held out for another five minutes before taking out his phone.

Happy birthday, brat. There. That should do it.

It was downright strange, not being the center of Zuko's attention for once. However stupid it felt to realize it. But maybe he deserved the snub. Maybe Zuko was simply sick and tired of waiting for him. Maybe the gym was the last straw, maybe he'd drawn it out for too long and now the tables had turned…


Just as he caught Jin and asked her for a beer – it was on the menu tonight, bless the god of alcohol-deprived ex-sailors – the Kyoshi girls started to clear off the stage amidst a highly enthusiastic applause to be replaced by Iroh once more. He tapped the mic, his amiable face wrinkled and warm and so damned good-natured that really, it would have been impossible to picture the man in an army uniform if Jee hadn't already seen the pictures.

"Any volunteers tonight?" asked the ex-major general, sweeping the crowd for prey. "Come now! I'm sure we have a lot of talent here among us."

Oh. Jee vaguely remembered Ming mentioning something about there being karaoke on Music Nights, but the last one Jee'd been to, he had been too busy making out with a drunk kid in the drunk kid's bedroom to notice any karaoke-ing. Probably for the better.

Iroh's invitation was followed by the usual nervous murmurs and taunting and frantic shaking of heads that usually happened whenever someone announced open mic – it was a procedure so standard that it was probably a law of the universe by now. However, Jee was surprised to see that the ceremony of awkwardness was cut remarkably short that night, and by none other than his own students. Aang, his bald head and unusual tattoos as striking as ever, was dragging a blushing Katara after him onto the stage and smiling so wide that it consumed half his face.

"Happy birthday, Zuko!" the exchange student sing-sang at the microphone, waving in the direction of Zuko's table. "This song is for you!"

Jee almost sputtered his beer. If anything could make Zuko's mood even worse, it was definitely this and indeed, when the lieutenant glanced over at the brat, he was sitting with an expression that was borderline miserable, mortified and furious at the same time.

The song Aang and Katara chose for their duet was a pleasant enough little ditty, probably straight off the top 40 charts, about loving yourself and being perfect and pretty much exactly the kind of motivational crap Jee would expect from the pair. They had pretty good voices, too, both of them, and sounded nice in harmony. They must have practiced it before, there was no way they could just harmonize like that at the drop of a hat, and Jee very much doubted Zuko would appreciate the message of the song, but it was definitely well-intentioned if a little misguided.

Still. In all the months he'd taught Aang, he'd come to learn that the kid was this impossible ray of
sunshine and rainbows and a tireless distributor of smiles, as long as he wasn't made to do something that was at odds with his Tibetan monk teachings. He probably wouldn't recognize Zuko's moods well enough to know that doing something like that was the last thing that the Xi brat needed.

But watching him and Katara on stage did give Jee an idea. A strange, nagging little idea that was rather ludicrous and yet wouldn't leave him alone even as the next person – Sokka – took to the stage…

Zuko still hadn't texted him back. And he was still refusing to acknowledge Jee's existence.

Jee kept drinking his beer and watched as Sokka performed a not-so-impressive rap song with an attempt to beatbox, and the idea kept on growing, planting its treacherous little seeds in his brain…

In the end, he wasn't sure what ultimately prompted it. He sure as fuck wouldn't be able to explain it to a psychologist if he was made to lie on a couch and tell them about his problems. Maybe it was spite, maybe it was a decision finally made and wanting to manifest itself somehow, maybe he just wanted to feel the brat's scorching gaze on himself again or maybe he just missed playing with the crowds.

Maybe he simply wanted to see Zuko's reaction.

Whatever it was, it guided his legs up to the podium, but not before it prompted him to grab a guitar which had been resting in the corner by the stage, probably waiting for other musically-inclined guests to pick it up.

Ming had wanted to see him play. He had a perfectly valid excuse to do this if anyone asked and he winked at her when he finally spotted her in the crowd; her jaw was hanging open and she was unwittingly spilling her drink across the lap of none other than the esteemed Chief Bei Fong. The Iron Lady also had her gaze locked on him and seemed no less shocked.

Jee smirked. He liked that. Oh, he did like that.

"How about a classic, huh?" he called out, strumming the guitar once to test it. It had a good, clear sound and fitted easily into his hands as he rested his left leg on one of the speakers on the edge of the podium. "Anyone here a Beatles fan?"

A loud, collective cheer indicated that yes, there were fans of The Beatles in the house. Either that or the of-age company had already consumed enough quantities of alcohol to cheer even if Jee insulted their mothers, which was likely the case. Jee tried out a chord just to get friendly with the guitar, then sought out Zuko in the crowd. The kid was gaping at him, utterly floored. It was all the encouragement Jee needed to start with the song. Bingo. As soon as he begun to sing, Zuko's expression immediately froze into complete and utter disbelief followed closely by outrage. It felt incredibly satisfying. His selection couldn't have been more obvious if he tried – what else could the brat infer from a song that started with Well she was just seventeen, if you know what I mean? And it was exactly the interpretation Jee wanted from him.

The song was popular enough to pass unnoticed by the rest of the crowd and Jee was careful not to look at Zuko too often as he sang, but as soon as he started, he realized he meant it. Truly meant it. The crux of the matter was that he had cracked, he had made his decision even before he realized it had been made, and now all that remained was to let Zuko know and see where it would take them from there. If only the kid would let him.

He wanted Zuko. And he was all out of excuses.
The Jasmine Dragon patrons seemed to enjoy his little gig well enough – they were clapping and singing along all through the song and demanded an encore after he had finished. Jee didn't really want to stay up on stage, largely because he was feeling, very acutely, the heat of a pair of stormy golden eyes on him; but he obliged the crowd anyway, if only to play it safe and not give Pakku any more reasons to glare a hole in his head. *I Just Saw A Face* had always been a crowd pleaser and it proved its worth this time around as well, with the clapping and the singing-along during the chorus being even louder, and his eyes may have drifted in Zuko's direction a bit too often than he meant them too, but it was all right. Something in him, probably enforced by the beer, felt the beginnings of elation, of something large and insistent growing in him, and he was impatient to let it out.

He didn't let himself be bullied into another song, though he enjoyed himself well enough and it was actually a nice reminder of all the nights out he used to spend with the guys, when he and his guitar had provided some nice, light entertainment. The insistent ringing of an incoming text in his pocket was enough to have him put the guitar away and jump off the stage, just in time to catch a glimpse of Zuko retreating towards the kitchen door in a hurry.

Jee knew better than to follow him immediately. Instead, he strolled over to Ming, who was still sitting with the Bei Fong ladies and waving him over so frantically that Jee feared her arm might fall off.

"Here," she pushed a full glass of beer towards him once he sat down, "on me, Mr. Rockstar Guy. That was epic."

"The only epic thing about it was the amount of *ridiculous,*" countered the chief when Jee accepted the beer with a smile. "But I guess I cannot arrest people for being embarrassing."

"Old people music," commented Toph with a grin. "Fitting."

"I'm not that old." Jee nudged the girl with his elbow as he took a swig.

"Oh yeah? How old are you, coach?"

"Old enough to be considered a respectable elder," Ming supplied cheerfully. "Even after singing The Beatles. What's gotten into you, Heng? You're suddenly a party animal?"

"Well, someone had to save you all from the deluge of adolescent wailing." Jee drank some more, glancing back to the stage over his shoulder; Aang and all of his friends were back on the stage and singing a group version of *Man in the Mirror.* Talk about motivational sap…

"How good of you," Chief Bei Fong murmured. "We are so lucky to have a brave lieutenant such as yourself to deliver us from the wailing with the aid of annoyingly chipper and inappropriate songs."

"Of course that's something you would pick up on, Chief." Jee rolled his eyes at her. "Forever vigilant."

"It's my job to look out for any disturbing vibes. A middle-aged man singing about dancing with seventeen-year-olds definitely counts as disturbing."

"Cut him some slack, Lin," Ming interfered before Jee had the chance to find a response. "It's just a song. Unless you meant to woo some unsuspecting nymphet, Heng?"

She winked at him then and Jee knew precisely what the wink was meant to project: *We both know it's not a nymphet you'd be looking for.* As though it was an exciting secret or something. And maybe it would have been amusing if not for the sudden coldness of apprehension that spilled in the pit of Jee's stomach.
"Oh, you know me." He shrugged, smirking and doing his best to keep his cards hidden. "Always on the lookout for hot sixteens. They're so attractive with their heads bent over their cell phones and all that acne."

"I don't have acne," Toph observed.

"No, you don't, Champ," Jee agreed, reaching out to ruffle her hair. "But don't go breaking too many hearts over winter break. Those boys are fragile."

She grinned in his general direction, her milky gaze lighting up with playfulness. Jee knew better than to call her adorable to her face – this kid was a tiny death machine – but he could still think it in the privacy of his head. "One heart a day, then?"

"One heart a day is good."

"Jee, you're bad influence." Ming raised her glass to him. "Stop corrupting Lin's niece right in front of her."

This prompted an exasperated huff from Toph, who suddenly looked decidedly deflated. "It's not like I'll be breaking anyone's heart during winter break," she complained. "My folks are taking me to Los Angeles. Boring! At least Zuko's going skiing. That's fun."

"Is he now?" Jee asked, taking a sip just to mask his surprise.

"Yeah. To the Alps. Lucky bastard."

"Toph, what did I tell you about language in front of people who aren't cops?" Lin rolled her eyes again.

"But coach's an ex-soldier," countered the kid smugly. "And Ming's, like, almost a cop. It's not like they'll cover their mouths all dainty-like if I say fuck."

"True." Ming nodded her agreement. "But if you do swear on school premises, Mr. coach here will box you around the ears."

"Yeah. Because people like Sugar Queen might faint." Toph smirked momentarily before her expression fell again. "They're going skiing too. All of them, together. Twinkletoes said they wanted me to come with them, but…"

She didn't finish the thought. She didn't have to. A telling silence fell over the table as each of them contemplated the casual, mindless cruelty that some parents were capable of in the name of "the good of the child."

Just thinking about it and seeing Toph's face made Jee want to break something. Seriously, what was wrong with those bastards…?

Just as Ming leaned over the table to pat Toph's hand comfortingly and murmuring something about the girl getting a tan, Jee's cell phone vibrated in his pocket again.

The back door. Outside. Where the fuck are you.

The smile tugged the corners of Jee's lips marginally up before he could stop it.

"Excuse me, ladies," he said, getting up and leaving his almost-emptied glass on the table.
"The showman's middle-aged bladder isn't what it used to be?" Chief Lin smirked at him, which prompted an amused snort from both Toph and Ming.

"Quite the opposite. I'd invite you to check, Chief, but – "

"Geez, stop flirting already." Toph pulled a disgusted face at them. "I just ate."

Jee left them with the sight of the chief's mortified expression and the sound of Ming's throaty laughter booming behind his back.

Right. This was it. As he maneuvered his way through the cheerful, singing crowd, Jee's heart started hammering like it hadn't in years and there was a very familiar surge of warmth getting ready to pool in his stomach, even as he replayed everything Aunt Wu said in his head.

Yeah, she had a point. A failed relationship could wreak havoc in Zuko's already unstable head. But Jee wasn't some cheeky moron of a kid who had next to no idea about handling another person in bed. He cared about his partners, no matter how casual they were. And he would care about Zuko. Especially since in a way, he already did.

The kid was by the back entrance all right, leaning against the wall and idly kicking snow-covered pebbles around. His thick, expensive parka was draped carelessly over his shoulders even despite the piercing cold, no scarf or hat in evidence. Nose, healthy cheek and tip of healthy ear colored red by the frost, hair as mussed-up as ever, expensive suit showing under the coat, he looked disturbingly charming and very, very kissable.

Shit, but Jee wanted him.

"Hey," he said once he found himself outside and immediately wished he had taken his own jacket with him. It was cold.

Zuko glanced over to him, his expression slightly sullen but mostly unreadable. "What the hell took you so long?" he asked, looking down at the snow he had turned into wet slush.

So they were not going to allude to the fight after all. Good. Jee didn't quite feel like admitting what him staying might actually mean.

"Caution. It would look strange if I followed you here immediately, genius." Jee stepped out of the teashop and closed the back door behind him, then stuffed his hands under his armpits to keep them warm.

It was quiet here. The teashop was bordered with a high fence that detached it from the neighboring buildings and closed the back area from view – but there was hardly anything to see but a couple of dumpsters. The noises of the streets were still audible, but muted by both the distance and the noises coming from the teashop itself. By contrast, the little space seemed entirely deserted.

"What was that?" Zuko murmured, still not looking at Jee and stuffing his hands in the pockets of the parka. Jee resisted the urge to pull the fur-rimmed hood up over the kid's head.

"A song," he explained, leaning his left arm against the closed door and cocking an eyebrow up at the kid. "Need a definition?"

Zuko shot him a half-hearted glare, then looked down at his own boots again. "But was it…"

Jee took a deep breath. Suddenly he regretted not bringing a bottle of wine out here to share between
them – it would have made things simpler.

"For you, yes," he admitted. "I thought that much was obvious."

"Why would you sing a song for me?"

Right, so he wanted straight-up and honest. Jee could give him straight-up and honest. But all in good time.

"Well, kid, I don't know," he started. "Why would anyone sing something for another person?"

Zuko stood with his good profile to him, giving Jee a front row seat to the show that was the kid's face, expressions pure and un-twisted by the scar. Usually whatever was going on in that face was distorted by the permanent glower of the fixed, burnt flesh, making it hellishly difficult to discern when the brat had anything other than anger to communicate – which, admittedly, wasn't often. But now that Jee could watch him from his vulnerable side, he saw the shift there, the flash of emotion that was raw, open and exposed.

It made his heart feel strangely heavy.

Months of this, months if tip-toeing and rejection and bumping from one side to the other like a car lost in a fog, and he'd had enough. They both had. It was time to make amends. Time to let go.

Jee already knew what the lesser wrong was and now that he had this knowledge, he couldn't be bothered to give a damn about the rest.

"But I'm not a girl," Zuko whispered, his voice raspy as ever but slightly thicker than usual. Wetter. "You were singing about a girl. And dancing. We never danced."

"I know you're not a girl, Zuko. Believe me, I tend to notice things like that. But some people say that martial arts are a bit like dancing," Jee pointed out with a smile.

Zuko looked at him then. The left side of his face glowered at him as it always did, the tortured, mangled fresh around the slit of the eye grotesque and foreboding and signaling a past and darkness that was still beyond Jee's reach. But the right side was young and fresh and beautiful, and right now it seemed almost hopeful, but with a nervous kind of hope that lurked in the doorway, afraid to pass through the threshold because it might have the door shut right in its face.

This had to stop right now. Jee was done shutting doors in Zuko's face.

"So what does it mean?" asked the boy, taking a step closer. "What was that supposed to tell me?"

"It was supposed to say happy birthday," Jee replied quietly, also taking a step towards the kid. "Among other things. That is," he gave the kid a stern look, "if you still want it to mean anything. I'll understand if you don't. After all, I'm just a grumpy old dick."

This earned him a smirk as Zuko looked to the side, clearly trying to hide the temporary crack in his carefully maintained aloofness. Jee didn't have the heart to tell him how transparent he was being already. For an heir to a business magnate with possible criminal ties, the brat was astoundingly crap at poker faces.

And then he got his answer. As it was often the case with Zuko, it came without words; after a beat the kid reached out and tentatively took Jee's hands in his own. "Yes, you are," he whispered, guiding Jee's arms inside the warmth of his fur-lined parka. "You're also a cold one."
Jee allowed his arms to be guided so that they ended up right around the kid. The warmth of the inside of the parka, with Zuko's body heat already absorbed, felt toasty warm and the fluffy fur brushed the rough skin of Jee's palms as they rested on Zuko's back and hip. They stood flush against each other now, chest to chest, and there was no mistaking the rhythm of Zuko's heart; its frantic pace was belying what little surface calm the boy could still muster.

Yes. This was definitely it. Jee had never been surer of anything in his life.

"Come here," he whispered, encircling Zuko with his arms more firmly and pulling him even closer. The boy, for once, read him correctly. His heart was hammering against Jee's chest when he tilted his head up in expectation.

Objectively speaking, the kiss that followed was hardly spectacular. Certainly no movie director would feel the need to put it in a dramatic scene – it lacked the necessary passion, length and tongue. But to both of them, it was groundbreaking mostly because of the months of tension that led up to it. As soon as Jee's cold lips met the boy's, which were equally cold and chapped, he felt right, like he'd finally made the correct decision – which was laughable because kissing and groping his student was anything but correct.

Fuck that. It didn't matter anymore. Jee had been fighting a losing battle from the moment he decided to claim the high moral ground. That ground had never suited him. He was anything but high and his morals were at best tattered and frayed around the edges. After almost forty years of fuck-ups, small and large, he knew himself well enough to accept it – fuck, to embrace it. He was a small, insignificant grump who liked to drink and swore and fucked other men without shame, who had a chronic disregard for authority for authority's sake and who messed things up on a regular basis. That was just another bad decision on top of a lifetime of bad decisions and he would deal with the consequences if, or when, they came.

He would make it good. For both of them. He liked this kid, dammit, and he knew he could turn this mess into something positive. He would teach Zuko everything he knew and make sure that they both enjoyed it – and, in the process, perhaps he could make the kid confident enough in himself to actually open up and start leaving things behind.

Which, actually, was just a fancy way of thinking about sex. Jee knew as much. But he also knew that, even if sex didn't solve all the world's problems, it sure as hell made it all much, much better. In the end, maybe Zuko needed exactly that.

So he kissed him, his hands going up and down the kid's back inside the parka and absorbing his body heat through the fine material of the suit. Zuko filled the clothes just so, Jee could practically feel the muscles he'd admired so often moving underneath. God, the boy's frame fit him perfectly, his hips felt as though they were designed to be held by Jee's hands and it felt so, so good, Jee had no idea why he kept resisting for so long, he really didn't.

Idiot.

He had always been a crass, physical man. Zuko seemed even more so. There was no point in fighting it anymore, as long as it was something they both wanted.

He was tired of falling to sleep in an empty bed, goddammit. Of wanking to fantasies of the boy he now held in his arms. Of getting the short end of the stick. It was time to get something nice out of life.

It felt good to kiss Zuko. There was no wine on his breath now, his mouth was getting warmer and he allowed Jee to take the lead, pliant and following. Sweet. Young. Eager.
It wasn't long until they broke apart, but only far enough that Jee could look at Zuko and see the reaction. The brat was just tall enough that his hair tickled Jee's nose when he lowered his head, but from the flush of his healthy cheek and the light in his eyes Jee was fairly certain that they had just sealed something mutually beneficial.

Or at least one could only hope so.

"We're going away for the winter break," whispered the kid, reaching out to rub at Jee's arms, up and down. From how slow he was doing it, it seemed that he was almost tentative about it, as if he wasn't quite sure if this was allowed.

It made Jee feel like even more of a bastard.

"I know. Heard it back there," he replied, leaning in and burying his nose in Zuko's hair. It smelled good. "How long?"

"Two weeks."

Which translated into a bloody long time in Jee's book. Anything could happen in two weeks.

"My birthday isn't really today, you know," Zuko whispered, still rubbing at Jee's arms. "It's January 2nd. But uncle wanted to throw this stupid party now so I wouldn't miss out. As if I cared. He always does that even though he knows I hate them."

"But you still wanted me to come," Jee pointed out, holding him close.

"… Yeah."

Well then. One more birthday kiss definitely wouldn't hurt.

Jee disentangled his right hand from out of the parka and used it to tilt Zuko's head back up, but the kid hardly needed any prompting and opened his mouth as soon as he sensed Jee's intention. Christ, he was so eager, so young and eager and fresh and attractive and his.

When Jee kissed him again, he did it harder, grabbing the side of Zuko's face and holding him there, fingers threaded through black hair. They felt so soft, so nice to the touch, and Zuko's skin was exactly as smooth as it looked and yes, Jee had known this before, he had tasted this mouth before, but it seemed ages ago now and he needed to rediscover it all again.

Zuko responded just as urgently, standing up on tip-toe and slinging his arms around Jee's neck. Pressed against each other as close as it was possible, their mouths still moving with a need that was building up by the second, Jee shifted them both so that Zuko's back hit the wall of the teashop and nearly covered him with his own body. The boy responded by opening his mouth even wider and letting out a breathless, urgent little noise – he liked it, oh God, he liked it. After everything, just hearing it made Jee practically lightheaded, or maybe it was the beer, not that it mattered.

By the time they parted again because of what sounded like footsteps dangerously close to the back door, Jee was this near to shivering with cold, but he had also groped his fair share. It's not like he could help it – the kid's body felt so firm and delightful now that he could touch it all without feeling like a blasted criminal and his hands wandered everywhere, into the parka, over Zuko's chest through the material of the red shirt – the jacket came unbuttoned in the meantime – and across his abdomen, just because he fucking could. And Zuko was not only enjoying this rough treatment, he was encouraging it, practically climbing over Jee with his leg hooking itself over Jee's, rubbing up and
Jee had half the mind to just fuck everything and pack the kid with him into a cab, then drive to his apartment. He had a hunch Zuko would be down with that, the horny, delectable brat.

But they did hear footsteps, and then they did have to break apart, not a second too soon; when Jin opened the door and looked around in search of something – or maybe she was looking for Zuko, which was likely – they were both doing their best to hide the heavy breathing and to not look as though they had just been making out.

And it was really quite telling that even Jee, who had years of experience sneaking around dark corners of ships for illicit trysts with his partners, found it difficult to keep a straight face.

He was elated. He allowed himself something good and the burning aftertaste of Zuko's lips on his didn't inspire any guilt this time. He wanted more.

It was difficult to say whether they succeeded in their charade or not; the girl smiled at them both, but her expression was discreet. Either she clearly mastered this poker face business much better than Zuko had or she didn't suspect anything, though admittedly the latter was less likely given the last time the three of them found themselves alone.

Great. They had been at it for less than half an hour and already they were almost caught red-handed.

"There you are," she said, beaming at Zuko. "Come in, you two, your uncle brought out the cake."

Zuko groaned, throwing his head back against the wall. Jee had a suspicion he was overdoing it a little, probably to cover up his I've-Just-Been-Snogged look. It was a good look on him as far as Jee was concerned and he wanted to see more of it. "Not this again," the brat mumbled. "I told him I don't want a stupid cake!"

"As you do every year, Grumps. Come on. You too, sir, it's too cold to stay out here without a proper jacket."

Jee followed the two of them back inside, rubbing his hands together and breathing warm air into them to get his blood going again. Zuko didn't look back at him, but it was all right.

After all, the game was now on.

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Back in the cab a couple of hours later Jee's cell buzzed again.

So what happens now? it read. Jee smiled, his face lit up by the light from the screen.

We'll talk when you get back, he replied, then spread one arm over the back seat and looked out the window at the lights of Summerfield flashing by. He would have to change Zuko's name in his phone address book to something less obvious. They had to be sneaky about it now.

It was beginning.

He would be lying if he claimed he didn't have any more doubts now. They were still there because after all, Zuko was still his student and sleeping with him was definitely unethical. If they ever got
discovered, there would be hell in store for both of them. Not to mention he wasn't all that sure he could handle Zuko with all of the kid's issues.

But he was confident now. The damage was done and there was absolutely no way of turning back, unless Zuko changed his mind during the two weeks away in Europe.

Jee knew he wouldn't change his. He'd settled for the lesser wrong. Now there was nothing for it but wait.

Chapter End Notes

Yay, celebration! This chapter is both the tipping point in the story and a personal milestone, because I hit 100k total with it. The champagne is doubly warranted and so is my sincere thanks to everyone who stuck with me until this point. You're all fantastic.

Next: an arrangement is made, decisions are followed up on and I use the word "cock."
The days that followed felt like the absolute longest damned two weeks of Jee's life. He filled them as he usually filled his time off: gym in the morning, grocery shopping on his way back, breakfast, then some cleaning, putting stuff in order, laundry or anything else that needed his attention around the modest apartment. After that it was time for lunch, then whatever the hell he felt like doing with what was left of the day. So maybe he spent a bit more time than usual working out. And maybe he came back to the gym in the evening as well several times. And okay, he had also taken to doing an extra round of push-ups every night before going to bed. He liked working out and none of it had any direct links to the fact that he expected to get naked with Zuko in the immediate future and would prefer it if the brat did not change his mind after taking Jee's shirt off. He knew he was fit; he tried to stay in shape no matter what. But still. It never hurt to put some extra effort into it.

Ming agreed. She insisted on tagging along with him when he shared his plans with her one evening, which turned out to be a curse disguised as a blessing; on the one hand having a work-out partner was usually fun, but on the other, Ming also saw it fit to contribute with comments that sounded perfectly embarrassing when they were directed at him. Jee was sure he did not appreciate having his "booty" complimented in a room full of sweaty people busy with their own workouts. He glared for all he was worth at everyone who dared to let out as much as a snicker and bantered right back at Ming, trying to turn the jabs around, but that didn't stop him from feeling ridiculously embarrassed for the rest of the session, which he had decided to cut short that night.

Still, he kept coming back, with or without Ming; and in fact, it was during one of his visits to the gym that he got his first text from Zuko. All right, maybe calling it a "text" was pushing it – it was nothing more than a picture of a snowy slope in brilliant sunshine, with blurred figures skiing right down it into a cozy-looking valley, with no captions to speak of. Jee only saw it when he came back to the locker room and got dressed, and
it was a blessing that Ming did not go with him that particular morning – normally Jee wouldn't be caught dead wearing those ridiculously sappy expressions he sometimes saw kids sport in the hallways, but the sight tugged the corners of his lips up as though with a magnet.

It was only when he sat down to breakfast in a McDonald's in downtown Summerfield that he decided how to reply, and sent the kid a picture of his table with the hot bagel and a cup of coffee. Not the most exciting digital offering in the history of digital offerings, Jee knew, but any reply to Zuko's picture he could come up with using actual words sounded dumb and shallow in his head, so that would have to do. At least it let the kid know that Jee did get the picture and wanted to stay in touch.

That he was still interested.

And boy, was he ever…

Thus the little pictures game had started. And once had did, it continued all through the winter break, so by the time classes recommenced Jee had a small collection of his very own personalized postcards straight from the Alps, which he most certainly didn't gaze sappily at before going to sleep every night because that would be cheesy and just plain disturbing. Jee was many things, true, but the only cheese in himself he was willing to acknowledge was that which he had eaten and digested during the day.

Still, those were nice pictures. All picturesque and snowy and stuff. Inasmuch as could be captured through Zuko's untrained eye, of course, and it was clear that the boy would not shake the world of photography with his genius anytime soon, but – well, Zuko took them specifically to send to Jee. That had to count for something and Jee did like looking at them from time to time, especially in those evenings when there was nothing to do around the apartment and he couldn't be bothered to go out in search of company.

In exchange, he kept sending the kid pictures of whatever was before him at any given moment – the TV, the view outside his window, the school corridor, the park, the inside of his car, the teashop, the mug of beer he'd been in the middle of drinking. Which probably left Zuko's cell with a bizarre collection ripe for an excessively dull study in rather depressing, average randomness, but the kid didn't complain – he just kept sending his own random moments, which were admittedly much more interesting.

Jee was particularly fond of one – a picture of a fireplace. It was a warm-looking interior of something that looked like a typical, generically rustic hunting lodge in the mountains, or rather like one that had been specifically made to appear as rustic and generic as can be for the gullible tourists eager for a genuine mountain experience and convinced that every house in the mountains had to look like plucked directly from a romantic comedy. In the dim picture the hearth was ablaze and there was a glimpse of the dark wooden floor covered with a fluffy-looking rug, and a coffee table with a mug of something that looked like cocoa. The dimmed light suggested the picture had been taken late at night, and indeed, it arrived at a time when Jee had probably been close to midnight over in Europe; it had this cozy, intimate atmosphere of a deserted hotel lounge after everyone had already gone to bed. But what Jee liked best about it was the hint of Zuko's feet. The brat must have been sitting cross-legged on the sofa – there was just a hint of a pair of grey, fluffy socks on the very edge of the frame, as well as the suggestion of a jeans-clad knee. Jee may have spent unnecessary amounts of time just looking at it because it was the only time a picture from Zuko had ever contained any suggestion of the juvenile photographer himself.

At least until a point.

Other than that, his days passed in a monotonous beat that usually accompanies underlying
expectation. Obligatory Christmas phone calls, including one to his mother, a visit to a pub with the other gym teachers, school-related paperwork… And so it went until school reopened, a week before Zuko was scheduled to return, with each slow-passing hour stretching spitefully until the passage of every damned second was very acutely felt. Jee was almost glad to stride back into his office in the first morning of the new term – even a week of that dull sitting around was enough to crawl right under his skin with not only the bug of restlessness, but a whole fucking swarm of them.

Normally he enjoyed his days off as much as the next guy – especially when they gave him a respite from the spotty balls of bottled-up hormonal mixtures of awkwardness, confusion and misdirected rage that were his students – but not when the insistent whisper of that one promise kept urging his blood to run faster and faster with every signal of an incoming text. In those particular circumstances he was more than ready to embrace the distraction work offered with his arms wide open, and took some considerable relief in yelling at kids.

It was a couple of days before Zuko's return, after the new term had started, that he felt the familiar buzzing in the pocket of his jacket again after having just gotten home. And it was fortunate that the new picture had arrived once he was back upstairs in the apartment and not sooner, when he had been driving – otherwise the kid would have been likely to visit Jee in hospital after a gruesome car accident rather than in his bed.

Holy mother of…

He stared. And stared. And then stared some more until his eyeballs felt sore enough that he had to rub them, and the saliva he swallowed scraped as it travelled down his suddenly desert-dry throat.

Christ, the kid was impossible. Plain fucking impossible. The conviction was not at all diminished by the fact that Jee had fantasized about Zuko sending him other kinds of pictures, much like the one he now, inexplicably, had before him – because he hadn't actually expected it to happen. Mostly. Fantasies and wishful thinking hardly counted as expectations.

But now he was looking at a picture of a very, indisputably, gloriously shirtless Zuko – selfies, they called them nowadays, didn't they – and could only stare his eyeballs out and think, in capital letters, how much he wanted to have this gorgeous sight in his bed right then so he could fuck him into the mattress. Repeatedly.

His mind thus sent a-reeling, he could only conceive of one answer to that; and he sent the kid back a picture of his own bed hoping that Zuko would understand. Not that there was a chance he wouldn't – it was a fairly straightforward message by any standards and Zuko invited it first because there was no misunderstanding the intent behind his picture. Anyway, that wordless communication between them seemed to work well enough.

Words could be a messy business, especially with one so sensitive and prickly as Zuko. They could lead to confusion, misunderstanding, conflict, all sorts of ugliness when taken the wrong way, which was only too easy. Whereas this – Jee understood this perfectly.

Zuko would be back in just two days. Only two days more. Jee was not a toddler, for God's sake, he could wait that long.

And then… They would see.

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When he came to work on Thursday, Jee was fairly certain he already knew what to expect from Zuko after their illicit exchange of graphics. Especially after that shirtless picture, which, sadly, had only been followed by one other message Jee had received on Wednesday night: the picture of Zuko's own bedroom up above the teashop. It was nice of the kid to let Jee know they had landed safely and that he was indeed back in town, but Jee couldn't stamp down a crazy feeling of disappointment.

Their silly picture exchange had taken such a nice, promising turn after all… And, damn it, the lecher in him really had hoped for more.

But no matter. Obviously the kid needed his space to figure things out and it was perfectly fine by Jee. That one message was enough for him to ascertain that his partner-in-crime-to-be was still serious and thought of Jee in the same terms Jee thought of him, and that was a pretty solid start. The finer details still needed working out, but the foundations had been laid and it was obvious that they were both after the same thing.

That knowledge should have been enough for Jee to get through his classes with the minimum of fuss.

It wasn't.

Because as soon as he saw Zuko enter the gym, something changed in the air – something very distinctive. Not a smell, not any perceivable shift in attitude, not something Jee could name – not with his relatively limited military vocabulary, anyway – but it happened, and spread into the gym to suck any and all moisture right out of the air. It was as if the boy had carried in his own, personal air and poured it in with one look of his bright, bright eyes, which found Jee immediately.

One look from Zuko, one look across the noisy, student-crowded gym, just a split of a heartbeat, a second sliced out of time. And it was more than enough.

His throat suddenly feeling as though someone had tried to make a sandpit in it, Jee watched him walk in and absurdly thought that someone should have given this moment slow motion. He wouldn't have been able to look away from the brat even if a troop of soldiers with tutus pranced across the gym, and instantly his thoughts flew back to the shirtless picture, to the uncovered expanse of smooth white skin all ready to be touched and kissed, to the expression on Zuko's face, to the unspoken promise his eyes had conveyed…

And it seemed, at least from the distance, that the way Zuko was looking back at him now was exactly the same.

Something was going to happen today. Something. Zuko's eyes told him as much. And if they hadn't, Zuko's body language would have because there was no question that it was different – as if more purposeful, more aware, tense in a completely new way.

Tense in expectation, Jee realized. Expectation. It was right there in the way Zuko walked, in the way he held Jee's gaze as he marched in, in the way he controlled his body and stretched out his movements, full of deliberate intent. As if exclusively for Jee's benefit.

It was like he wanted to say, I know you see me. And I want you to keep looking. A bit like in the early stages of their – whatever the hell it was, when Jee felt Zuko's gaze on himself in class and couldn't refrain from reciprocating. Only much, much more defined.
Much better.

And somehow, none of the students seemed to catch on. Not one of the boys gave the two of them odd looks of suspicion – at least as far as Jee could tell, and it was likely he would miss them, preoccupied as he was in his own little Zuko-bubble. But the irrational fear was there, and it forced him eventually to tear his eyes way.

They had to be careful. Careful. The stakes were much higher now than they had ever been before and it really wouldn't do to appear so obviously, blatantly distracted…

But with the air so dry and oppressive on his lungs, Zuko's positively electric bright gaze right on him and his own thoughts ramming insistently on the door of restraint he had tried in vain to bolt, it was all Jee could do to start the routine warm-up with barely a hitch, though he may have cleared his throat unnecessarily a few times. To cover it up, he put some extra effort into shouting – that always worked well – and demonstrated a shorter fuse than usual when dealing with adolescent incompetence, which did relieve some of the tension, but only for a few precious moments.

Chan's face when Jee pointed out exactly all the things that were wrong with his stance was especially rewarding. Jee really did try not to play favorites, but it was excessively difficult with the likes of him in class. There was something about Chan and his cronies that made Jee fantasize about how well their faces would look with his fist jammed in them.

Anyway, it was definitely better for his sanity to concentrate on that rather than on Zuko. Who was… much easier to concentrate on. For a variety of reasons.

All things considered, it was a miracle when the full hour passed without Jee once touching the brat. Even if each look they happened to exchange felt like an obscene caress and another promise, though promise of what exactly was still left largely unclear. Even if his head was full of the memories of their kisses and the way Zuko's skin felt under his fingers. Even if his blood was roaring by the time they finished.

God, this was already impossible. Just when Jee had thought he couldn't land himself in any worse messes than the last one that had been his share, the universe decided to land his ass in a fucking lion's cage.

That sure was a great deal of nerves inspired by simply being horny.

"Are you quite all right?" Piandao, concern clear on his frowning face, asked when Jee marched into their shared office and slammed the door before he could control his hand.

"Fine," Jee barked, then winced and added in a calmer, saner voice, "Fine. I'm good. It's just a headache."

"Ah. In that case, I do carry some useful pills and I'll be more than glad to –"

"No, thanks." Jee sat down to his desk and forcefully massaged his temples, trying to burn the afterimage of Zuko's white limbs from his retinas. "I can handle it."

"If you say so." Piandao sounded skeptical, but he did rather diplomatically drop the subject and left for his next class moments later.

Once Jee was left alone, he searched for his phone and opened Zuko's shirtless picture. It wasn't the best decision in the circumstances, but he'd earned it, dammit. He didn't remember ever feeling this starved for anyone before and he'd known his share of lovers.
The months of teasing. That had to be it. They let it brew between them for too long and now it was like…

Like a shaken up soda bottle, about to be uncorked and hissing ominously and likely to explode all over the place once opened.

There was still the rest of the day to get through, and the DDC meeting which was likely to be as big of a nightmare. But then, he… He would have Zuko to himself. And with things progressing as they were, God only knew how that would end.

This was worse than the Gibbs affair. So much worse. Back then at least Jee had had the comfort of knowing he'd been in the right. Now…

Now he just wanted to bang a beautiful boy. A very simple, basic thing. Which in reality was anything but.

Things got easier once he had some time to collect his wits in private, and the next class contained no Zuko so it went much more smoothly by comparison. Yes, he may have acted testier than normally and got a dozen more frightful looks than usually, but at least he'd regained a pretty solid grip on his sanity and fortified himself as much as he could before the club meeting; so when Zuko entered the gym the second time around, Jee was able to not gape at him.

Mostly.

"Right, you lazy brats," he hollered, then blew the whistle as everyone gathered in the gym. "Get your behinds moving. We'll start with some nice laps around the place to shake you lot awake. On my mark!"

The order was met with a few groans, but the kids did start springing around the spacious gym when he blew the whistle again. He stood in the middle and watched them run while his eyes kept fighting a losing battle with his reason and insisted on following one particular figure, as distinguishable by now as a rose in a cabbage patch…

… And now he compared Zuko to a flower. By God he needed rest.

But there it was in the air again – that silent, unspoken promise. It rose up to Jee's nostrils just as the faint dust under the feet of the running students, sparked into being by every look Zuko shot his way. And by the lack of those glances, too, ironically, because somehow the impossible brat managed to make heat pool in Jee's stomach by just being there.

And maybe it wasn't anything new from how they had interacted before. But it was. Because now there was expectation, and the memory of the kisses they shared in the cold night air by the backdoor of the Jasmine Dragon was almost like a tangible, physical pull between them.

It really was a wonder that none of the other students were scorched in the crossfire.

But Jee kept it together. He tried his best to ignore the prickling under his skin as he called a halt to the running and went on with the warm-up, then started demonstrating a new set of katas with barely a tremor in his voice.

*Keep it cool. Keep it professional. The fact that you're close to bursting doesn't mean you can neglect your duties.*

Even if all he wanted was to call the meeting early and finally be left alone with the boy who was clearly sent from the very deepest pit of hell to torment him.
Not that it was exceptionally wise to do anything even remotely dirty on school premises. But it would at least give them a chance to talk it out, even if no actual groping would take place.

He walked around the gym and corrected the kids as they performed the sets over and over, trying hard to project his usual self, and pointedly avoided approaching Zuko; he refused to give in to the temptation to use the excuse of correcting his stance to touch him. That would be low, even for him, no matter how much he wanted to do just that.

There would be time for that later. He hoped.

At least the DDC kids were much less annoying and actually devoted to their training, which made it considerably easier to focus on them and on the work at hand – even if Aang looked rather put out again when Jee ordered him, again, to be more aggressive.

"You will learn to fight like you mean it within the next thirty seconds, kid, and you will show it, or else you'll have me as your sparring partner for the rest of the session," Jee stated, arms on his hips in a pose that clearly showed he meant business.

It worked. In a fit of near-panic, Aang kicked the air like his life depended on it; if he had a sparring partner, said partner would have likely went down in an instant. Jee nodded at the kid in terse approval and moved on.

At the end of the class he ordered the little rotters to sit a circle on the mats and had each of them go against him to demonstrate how they mastered the new form, which was one of his standard teaching techniques that all of the students had been well used to by now, so there wasn't anything strange or new about the situation. But there may as well have been for the deep, gut-wrenching agitation with which Jee waited for Zuko to finally take his turn.

Katara, needed a bit less fluidity and more force… Korra, too much force in this one, he would have to remember to make her practice with Katara more… Sokka, mind all over the place, he was probably thinking about his girlfriend all along… Toph, ouch, did the girl have some sort of vendetta against all authoritative figures of the world or what… Bolin, trying so hard, good kid… Haru, they would have to pay more attention to his balance… Suki, flawless as usual…

Zuko.

A spark, invisible but piping hot nonetheless, flew between them when they looked at each other purposefully probably for the first time since the club meeting began, and then Zuko was charging. The kata was short, just a series of jabs, blocks and kicks and a roundhouse flourish, all in rapid succession, and the whole thing probably lasted no longer in real time than the other students' turns, but…

They had learned each other's bodies so well already. Hours upon hours of training together with no one else but the two of them in a gym smelling of sweat and hardly-contained tension, the kind of intimacy that was perhaps even more personal than sex, and it was impossible, practically impossible, that no one noticed anything. Jee felt this intimacy now with every miniscule contact of skin next to skin, in the way his body responded to Zuko's typical speed and force, in the way Zuko's responded to his in kind. Jee made a point of adjusting to each of the students he sparred with to take into account their strengths and weaknesses, but this was already much more than that – him and Zuko moved together like years-long partners.

Jee must have missed the point where they got there – and it probably wasn't even a fixed point in time, it never was as simple as that – but when he realized it, in the seconds it took Zuko to complete the form that felt like a membrane impossibly stretched, he felt a shiver starting at the base of his
spine and going all the way up.

It had to be obvious. There was no way anyone could miss it. Or the heat that was almost sizzling between them as they looked at each other and fought. The dangerous game they had decided to jump into was now turning into something potentially lethal, and Jee knew it, but he also wanted it to happen way too much to stop.

He was a fool, a horny, paranoid old fool.

The grim thought stayed with him as he tested the rest of the students, one by one, and finally, **finally** announced the end of the class after the last student – Lucy the "Dancing Dragon" inventor – got his seal of approval.

"Toph really is enjoying herself," muttered Chief Lin, punctual as always and leaning against the doorframe as she waited for her niece to change. "It's good for her."

Jee nodded. Somewhere behind him, Zuko was drinking water and toweling, waiting for their private training session, and the mental image was reigning pretty much exclusively in Jee's head, but something in the woman's voice caught his attention.

"You don't sound too happy about it, Chief," he pointed out.

Lin looked at him, curt and sharp, and for the first time since he met her Jee was struck by the weariness in her eyes.

"I'm happy she has this," she admitted grudgingly. "And that you're treating her as just another student. She needs that. But we're on borrowed time as it is, Lieutenant, and I have no idea when my brother will decide to move again, or when he'll find out, what he'll do. Toph needs a real change. She needs a way to break free. And I just feel so –"

"Helpless?" Jee suggested in a soft voice, watching her struggle against the feeling.

Finally, she looked down at the floor, her expression grim, the wrinkles around her eyes suddenly much more pronounced. "… Yes. Thank you for your input."

Jee didn't comment any further. There really wasn't anything he could add, other than the suggestion to frame Toph's parents in some light but reputation-damaging crime so Lin could claim custody. That probably wouldn't go down well with the chief of police.

Toph approached them a few seconds later, led by Sokka, who suggested a group excursion to the Jasmine Dragon after training and if they could take Toph with them would the Chief object pretty please. The Chief did not object, but set a fixed time for picking Toph up, and then followed her niece and the group of content, chattering kids out of the sports wing.

Which left Jee standing in the doorway to the gym, alone, with the faint sounds of other extracurricular activities happening around him and the absolute, cement-strong certainty that he was about to be alone in a room with Zuko.

Slowly, his blood rushing, his throat going dry again, every vein in his body pulsing with expectation, he took a step back, then closed the door – and the deliberate click it made sounded like the last nail driven decisively into the lid of a coffin.

And then he turned to look at Zuko.

"So," said the kid quietly after about an eternity of them staring at each other across the gym.
"So," Jee echoed stupidly. Suddenly he had absolutely no idea what to say.

Should they try to work out an arrangement? Set a day? Sit down and talk about how Zuko could find Jee's apartment, how and when to get there without being seen, what hours would be most appropriate for both of them, lay down the rules? It was probably necessary, but Jee couldn't force the first words out, nevermind whole sentences. They would be talking about sex, about meeting to have sex, and somehow now that Jee could see the brat before him, he couldn't imagine talking about the practical issues surrounding it to his face.

It seemed ridiculous and hellishly inappropriate.

In all honesty, all he wanted was to march up to Zuko and sweep him into his arms to kiss the living daylights out of him, maybe more, definitely more, and maybe that would work better with the brat who didn't seem all that fond of words either, but...

They were at school, goddammit.

The charged, heavy seconds ticked by, each of them cut away by Jee's heartbeats, as he struggled in indecision, Zuko standing in the middle of the gym and waiting, arms stiffly by his sides.

And then the brat slid into a fighting stance. Just like that. Still holding Jee's gaze, his body moved, the stretch of the mats under his bare feet eerily loud in the silent gym, and now he was standing in the middle of the spacious dojo issuing a clear, wordless challenge. An invitation. His impossibly radiant eyes looked fixed and sharp as he waited for Jee to respond.

Well. It wasn't what Jee expected from him, but maybe it was good enough. Maybe a good fight was exactly what they needed to get started.

Words got them tangled up in awkwardness and misunderstandings like underwear around one's crotch, anyway. The kid was right: it was better to dispose of them altogether and focus on their bodies. He knew the word of Zuko's body well enough for that.

He walked up to Zuko, each slow step measured by the sounds creaking sounds the mats made under the bare skin of his feet as well as by the tension enveloping both of them freely now in its charged cocoon. Then, when he was closed enough, he nodded curtly and got into a fighting stance himself.

A beat passed when they just looked at each other, wordless messages of want and expectation passing back and forth.

And then Zuko threw himself right at him.

Jee's body had been half-expecting it even if Jee's brain hadn't, and he caught Zuko's fist in his hand before he was done fully processing the situation – but there was Zuko's left hand flying at him now, at a slanted angle from above, and Jee ducked and swiveled away seconds before it had a chance to land a hit.

Zuko's fist in his grip was a thousand pinpricks of fire seeping right into its skin and leaving a scorching imprint when it disappeared, as was the kid's forearm when Jee blocked it with his own. Both of them were still sweaty, and skin slid against heated skin easily when they both shifted as though in an instinctive dance, Zuko pushing, Jee letting him stay in the offensive for now.

The minutes ticked by. The gym was huge and silent except for the squeaks of the mats, the slaps of one body hitting another and a duet of panting, heaving breaths. None of them gave a sound as they let the fight between them develop into something beyond training, but their breathing grew more
labored with each exchange of blows, with each kick that barely missed its target. Under the bright glare of electric light bulbs, the two of them moved, teacher and student, in a strange spell that was changing slowly, morphing from a controlled, familiar routine into something much more personal, much more primal and vicious.

Soon, Jee couldn't even pretend. It wasn't training anymore. It was a fight, and they were both getting into it with a new sort of savagery that would have surprised him if he stopped to think about it. All he really knew in the moment was that he was alone with Zuko, and the kid was pushing him, constantly pushing him, and forcing him to push right back.

There weren't even any rules to it. Not anymore. The practiced, sanctioned techniques were slowly flying out the window, replaced by dirty moves that would get anyone disqualified right on the spot in any modern tournament. There was much more physical contact between them than there had ever been in any of their spars together, and Jee felt a current almost like electricity roar in his blood every time Zuko's skin so much as brushed his – and from the look in Zuko's eyes, he knew the brat felt the exact same thing. There was wildness there, in that bright gaze, a brutal rawness and vulnerability that proved to Jee that he was not the only one affected, that this current coursed both ways.

Something was changing tonight. Each of their moves, each split breath and skin contact, however brief, was sending a spark to ignite a load of dynamite that would eventually not so much burn their bridges as blow them all up to charred smithereens.

Their struggle, no longer constrained to any unofficial boundaries they usually marked, took them all over the gym in an inegalant blur of bodies. Jee was too busy concentrating on every flicker and flex of Zuko's muscles, on the intents flashing like lightning-fast spasm across his face, his ears too full of the erratic rhythm of breath, to realize how close he had gotten to the wall until he felt his back slam against its unyielding coldness. And then, suddenly, he was trapped between the cool wall and Zuko's savage heat pressed up right against him, and Zuko was looking up at him and breathing heavily and so close, so very, very close…

It would have been so easy to change this into a kiss. Zuko's eyes shone in a fever that was practically begging for it to happen, and he was pushing himself up on his toes, the material of his tank top sliding right up against Jee's t-shirt. But even as he did that, the mood changed again, and Jee decided he wasn't done yet.

His right hand closed around Zuko's wrist, his left grabbed the well-muscled shoulder. In a blur, he turned them around so that it was Zuko's back hitting the wall now, Jee's body trapping him in place. Following up on it, Jee grabbed Zuko's other wrists as well and pinned both of them up above the kid's head, smirking down at him as he panted, so close that his hot breath grazed Zuko's hair-covered forehead.

Now, Jee decided with that warm glow of contentment that stemmed from arousal about to be satisfied, now he could allow for things to develop…

It had bled into a game. Somehow, the savagery of their earlier struggle had melted away with their breaths, perhaps hissed into steam from the heat of their touching bodies, and now Jee knew, with that unshakable certainty one feels when they see a waiter coming over with their order, what was going to happen within the next minutes. They were as close to each other now as can be. Jee could feel every muscle of Zuko's chest heaving sharply against his, and there was that distinctive, tantalizing bulge pressing into him that he was positively aching to grab…

And Zuko, the little devil, sensed the change just as well, he must have – the corner of his mouth had gone up too.
But when Jee leaned down to finally claim him with his lips as he wanted to do all day, the brat strained against him, somehow used the support of Jee's grip on his wrists above his head to bring both his knees up between them, and used them to push Jee away.

So he wanted to play some more, Jee thought with traces of breathless amusement as he reeled and looked at Zuko, who was now almost-grinning, his healthy cheek flushed bright red and his mouth open.

Fine. They could play.

When they locked hands again in a renewal of the fight, the nature of it had shifted into something else yet again. The difference had been made up against that wall and it prevailed, forcing them to touch much more than was necessary, to press their bodies against each other momentarily only to break apart again, each of them fighting to get the upper hand in a play that was now as erotic as it was undignified. Jee could feel Zuko's erection now, hot and insistent as it touched him through the kid's sweats, and it made his own blood sing with desire as it rushed down in response. Knowing that this was a game now, that they were fighting for dominance in something altogether different from an ordinary fight, Jee let his hands stop and linger – at the back of the kid's neck, on his forearm, on his shoulders, on his hips, leaving a brief caress before moving to block a hit, and the sheer sensuality of it made him lightheaded.

If anyone saw them now, if anyone happened to open the door to the gym and peek inside, they…

But Jee was too far gone to think about it. Much too far gone to care about anything other than the boy right in front of him. If they got in trouble, so be it – he couldn't bring himself to give a flying fuck.

He wanted it too much.

And then, just like that, they were rolling on the mats. Jee had no idea who tripped whom, how did it happen that they both lost their balance like that – all he knew was a sudden sense of vertigo, of the world moving, and then he was hitting the mats hard and Zuko was right on top of him, his breath a flower of heat on Jee's neck.

That was it. That was when they crossed the boundary between a pretense of a fight into a purely erotic act. Jee sensed it even as he fought to roll them over so that he would end up on top, and Zuko resisted – they were ready, both of them, and the only thing keeping them from giving in were the last vestiges of play-pretend, of defiance, neither of them wanting to be the first one to show weakness and give in.

It only lasted for several more sweaty, panting-filled seconds. And then it was over, and Jee knew it was over just as he gazed up into Zuko's eyes and let the boy straddle him, to hover over him with his hands spread palms-down on Jee's chest. It was like someone had blown a whistle – in the sudden stillness Jee could feel something like a snap in the atmosphere, a signal, and he stopped moving completely, the air coming out of him in greedy, ragged heaves. There was silence loud and ringing between them, this wordless gap of sound, but they didn't need any words to communicate that they were both beyond ready to change the situation again and let the tension bleed out of them right into the atmosphere.

Zuko was right there, sitting on him, leaning over him, his face flushed and beautiful, wisps of dark hair clinging to his face, his lips wet and parted. His weight pressing deliciously into Jee's groin, he was still, very, very still, with only his chest heaving as he struggled to calm down his own breath – and though Jee couldn't feel the beating of his heart, he could almost fancy he could hear it, the
frantic rhythm thumping in a roar of need.

Much like his own.

Maybe Zuko was so still suddenly because he was becoming aware of the moment. Of the precarious, critical tipping point. They brought themselves to a point in time which would determine their immediate future, one way or another. Jee watched him and waited, impossibly aroused, his head a dizzy cloud of sensual awareness, and knew, deep inside, that it was all down to what Zuko would do.

He could still back out. He could decide, at this very last moment, that he was too scared, that he didn't want to risk it, that he wasn't up to it after all. Jee would let him – grudgingly and with deepest regret, but he would. He himself wasn't going to falter any longer, but Zuko – Zuko was still young, still vulnerable, he had no real idea of what he was willingly getting himself into. And maybe it was precisely that which was dawning on him now as he sat there, his arousal painfully, beautifully evident, looking down at a gruff brute of a man more than twice his age.

For a few painful heartbeats, they were suspended in this bubble of uncertainty, balancing on a tightrope, ready to fall one way or another, in or out, forward or back. Jee tried his best not to reach out and touch, not to persuade with caresses, not to coax with kisses. It was Zuko's decision and he had to make it on his own.

What do you want, boy? Jee wanted to ask, though he was pretty certain his eyes spoke it for him. What do you want?

Eventually, in a plunge that really did set their bridges ablaze, Zuko licked his lips and showed him.

The roll of his hips as they pressed down was as maddening as it was delectable – Jee had to shut his eyes against the sudden spark of sweet, relieving pleasure. And then it came again, and again, slowly, artless but full of intent. Jee's both hands shot up to each land at Zuko's hipbones, and when he opened his eyes again, he saw the brat gazing down at him with a determined finality that let no room for any lingering doubt.

That was it. It was happening, and it was happening now.

Fuelled into action by that finality, Jee squeezed Zuko's hips – his hands fit there perfectly, as if Zuko's body was tailored specifically for him to hold. He meant only to encourage, but Zuko apparently took it as his cue to ground his hips into Jee's crotch harder, gasping a little as he did so.

Oh fuck.

Keep going, Jee wanted to grunt, but his hips did it for him, jumping up a little to feel more of that heat pressing into them. And then he almost lost his grip on reason entirely because Zuko moaned in response, a small, desperate moan, and the sound felt entirely too loud in the silent gym and utterly, utterly delicious.

Jee knew he should order the kid to keep it quiet, but damn, he wanted to hear it again.

On an impulse, he let go of Zuko's hips and propped himself so that he was sitting up, then grabbed the back of the brat's neck and pulled him in for a kiss that could bruise.

They shouldn't be doing this here. School was definitely not the place for any of those activities. They had been interrupted in their training only once before, true, and that was only because Korra had wanted to watch and declared she would sit in on their session ahead of time, but Jee knew the narrative laws governing the universe – as soon as their training stopped being innocent, someone
was bound to come in.

However, the thought didn't stop him from forcing his tongue into Zuko's hot, already open and pliant mouth and drinking up the sounds from the back of the brat's throat as though they were the gods' favored drink. With that sweet, gasped moan still turning his brain to cotton, he kissed this delectable creature for all he was worth, showing him exactly what he was doing to him. A bit like during the ill-fated kiss in Zuko's bedroom that night, but different, because this time Jee was not trying to prove any points – rather, he wanted to share in a pleasure, to seal a promise and to overwhelm without scaring.

Jesus, but he had never had a lover this fresh and young before. This inexperienced, this open to his needs. Sure, he had been the first of a couple of men, but even they hadn't had that air of desperate, throbbing need when he touched them, hadn't radiated such unguarded, unlearned passion. Zuko was allowing him to play him like an instrument, trying to give back as good as he got, good boy, good boy, and being so warm, so incredibly warm.

I'll make it good for you, Jee's thoughts hummed through the haze, so good, you won't regret it for a second, just let me guide you through it, you sweet, sweet boy...

And in that moment, Zuko was sweet, and it was all so easy to forget about the scar and the nasty temper and everything else when he had that mouth on his and that body pressed so close, inching even closer, and the evidence of Zuko's arousal was digging so tantalizingly into Jee's abdomen.

Normally, he liked to draw things out and take his time exploring, especially with a new lover. He enjoyed savoring his pleasure as much as possible. But there was nothing normal about this situation, had never been, and what little remains of common sense Jee still had somewhere at the back of his mind insisted that if they were going to do it, they should make it quick – and so he let the hand not keeping Zuko's head in place close over that bulge.

Zuko's new moan of surprise and pleasure, though muffled by the kiss, flew right into Jee's mouth and then into his head and groin at the same time, sending a shiver over his entire body.

Yes, this was it. Zuko earned it – and, by God, Jee did too.

The brat then tried to get even closer to Jee, his hands roaming aimlessly in a blind frenzy for purchase, and that was okay. With any luck, Jee would show him later what it was to explore consciously, deliberately; what it was to map out the body of one's lover to memorize all the little spots that got them going; what it was to be aware and pleased at the same time. For now, the blatant enthusiasm was more than enough; and when Jee let his fingers roam over the waistband of Zuko's sweats, then into them, past the elastic waistband of his underwear, grazing hard abdominal muscles and little tufts of sharp pubic hair, he let the kid break the kiss and bury his face in the crook of his neck.

Zuko was shivering. His breath felt moist and ragged, almost like words, mouthed right into the salty taste of Jee's skin. He could feel the boy's lips, open in a desperate, soundless moan, moving, never quite letting any words out but moving nonetheless. And as he cradled the boy's body close to his chest, one hand roving over the wonderful planes of back muscle under the shirt, his other hand closed around hot, impossibly hard flesh and started moving too – slowly at first, to outline the handsome shape of Zuko's cock appreciatively, to acquaint himself with it, to cherish this first moment of contact even if just for a little while, and then with a firm, deliberate aim.

Zuko tensed all over, grabbing two fistfuls of the back of Jee's shirt, and his breath stuttered.

There wasn't much room to move his hand like Jee wanted to, not with Zuko's trembling body so
close to his, but he tried anyway, maneuvering the boy a bit to the side. He wanted to make this lovely thing come, wanted to feel the spasms of orgasm ripple through Zuko's body and know that he was the one who caused it. Wanted to feel his name mouthed into his skin in that wet, trembling, raspy voice…

… Later. The time for words – instructions, assurances, warm whispers in the dark – would come later. Now, he withdrew his hand from Zuko's pants and underpants to spit into it, and wormed it right back inside. Zuko bit him at the contact, a shallow, desperate attempt to reign in the moan that Jee was sure would have boomed in the gym otherwise. The man's mind sang in triumph.

His hand moved up and down, smearing precum and his own spit down the pulsing length, as Jee held the boy close and soothingly kissed his healthy ear, his temple, the crown of his head. His own erection demanded urgent attention, but he forced it to the back of his mind as he focused on Zuko entirely – on every tremor of his body, every soundless gasp, every twitch of muscle.

Fuck, he'd wanted it for so long, all of it, and here it was, writhing in his lap, strong hips jerking into his touch, a pair of arms around his neck. Sweeter than any fantasy he'd ever conjured up. So much more intense than he could ever hope. Jee almost couldn't believe it was real, that it was in fact happening, that he was allowing it to happen at last. He wanted the boy so very, very much, every bit of skin longed for contact, and now he had it and it was bliss.

Messy, sweaty, hurried bliss full of aggression and wetness and volatile emotions, which only made it more cherishable.

Zuko wouldn't last long. It was evident from the way he was reacting, from the way his fingers frantically clutched at Jee's shirt and his body tensed. It was all right. He was young, he had waited for this for so long and Jee wanted him to come, wanted to bring him undone from his touch only. But when he sped up with that very intention in mind, he was a bit startled to feel one of Zuko's hands detach itself from his back and snaking between their bodies, then worming its way down, down, down. Zuko's head turned a bit so that his forehead instead of his mouth was pressed into the crook of Jee's neck, and then the kid was slowly trailing his fingers along Jee's cock, very noticeable now even through his loose tracksuit.

Damn, he actually wanted to… He was going…

The fingers paused. May I, they seemed to be asking, halting and uncertain as they hovered just inches from the bulge in Jee's pants.

Jee brought himself to nod. The fingers dove in and closed.

Fleetingly, Jee thought that Zuko should have been a bit more uncertain than he was; that he should have displayed some unfamiliarity with the angle at the very least. But startlingly, there was none of that. The brat sought out the shape of Jee's cock with a trembling hand, but once he found it, he started moving his hand over it with as much gusto and assurance as an experienced lover.

Okay, how did – How was that even –

Nevermind. Jee would save those questions for later. For now, he kissed Zuko's forehead briefly, then resumed his work inside the boy's pants with renewed determination, biting back on his own groans.

It felt heavenly to have that relief, finally, even if Zuko's fingers stuttered and lost their rhythm as Jee brought him closer and closer to the edge because damn it, the kid was trying, he was actually trying…
Zuko came first. Of course he did. Jee felt it first when Zuko's hand stopped moving over him entirely; and then the flesh he was touching tensed, the kid's entire body went marble-stiff, his breath caught in his throat and then he was coming, coming all over Jee's hand, with a high, sweet noise Jee had never heard anyone make before that sounded much too loud and impossibly intoxicating.

For that moment, everything seemed to stop. Hearts thumping furiously against one another, Jee's hand still moving over Zuko's come-slick cock to draw out the aftershocks, the boy's body trembling all over, they stayed like that, absorbing what had just happened. It seemed surreal. To feel the tremors reverberating against his skin, to have Zuko's hair tickle his neck, to feel the drips of his white come over his fingers…

After everything, it seemed too fucking surreal.

Jee wanted to cherish that moment and take his time to engrave it on the slabs of memory in golden lettering, but his own need was impossible to ignore any longer. He was harder than he had been in months, maybe even years, and when Zuko's aftershocks finally subsided, he took his hand out of Zuko's pants, kissed his ear in vague apology and shoved it down his own clothes.

His back was starting to protest, having spent all this time in a hunched position without any kind of support, but Jee ignored it. He would cope. For now, there were more urgent matters to attend to, like his own pleasure. Zuko shifted dazedly in his lap as the man started to tug at himself furiously, giving him more space, and though Jee couldn't see his expression from this angle, he could imagine pretty well that the kid was staring.

And then, Zuko's hand, the one he had used to caress Jee before, moved. It rasped over Jee's forearm, then trailed down it, leaving a trail of goosebumps, until it reached the waistband of the tracksuit pants.

Then, it pulled.

Jee paused, too puzzled and cotton-brained to protest, as Zuko tugged at his pants to get them out of the way far enough to reveal the swell of his erection and then did the same with Jee's underwear. Jee's cock sprang free, hard and leaking and insistent, and there was another moment that felt as if stolen out of time when Zuko just… looked.

Then, Jee felt rather than heard him gulp, and the next thing he knew was Zuko's hand closing over his and urging it to move.

Jee did move it, up and down, up and down, with Zuko's hand still covering his, and after a few times the warmth of that young, strong palm left his to move to the tip of his cock. He wanted to take over, clearly, and Jee let him, his throat drier than the Sahara desert, and held Zuko close as the boy started to pump his hand in earnest.

Technically, it wasn't the best handjob Jee had ever had – despite all his enthusiasm and determination, the kid did lack a certain finesse. But *hot damn*, he was definitely not going to be picky. Zuko's hand was warm and firm and purpose-driven, and, most importantly, it was *his*. That was enough. More than enough. As Zuko touched him, Jee replayed the sounds the boy made when he came, and buried his head in the crown of black hair, inhaling their scent, the scent of boy, the scent of Zuko.

And thought, *Yes. And Finally. And So good.*

*So very fucking good.*
It was when Zuko kissed his neck that he truly lost it – when his orgasm crashed over him in a blissful wave, Jee slumped back on the mats with a muffled groan, boneless, pulling Zuko down with him. He lay there, staring blindly at the ceiling, with the hot, panting mass of boy overtop him, Zuko's hand still on his twitching cock, and waited as the sweet, well-deserved throbbing diminished slowly in pulsing ebbs.

Fuck. *Fuck.*

His brain was screaming at him, urging him to start paying attention to important things. Like the fact that he had just gotten off with his student in the damned gym and that he'd better tuck his cock back into his pants quickly, *now,* before someone barged in on them. Or the fact that both of them were a mess and that they should wipe themselves clean, or as clean as they could, to destroy the evidence. But those were practical matters that seemed to be of little import now that he was here, spent and sated, and with an equally sated boy plastered to him and breathing in tune with Jee's calming heart.

God, that was…

Jee closed his eyes against the bright glare of gym lamps.

Un-fucking-believable, that's what it was. And Jee had clearly just made the worst and the best decision in his miserable life.

"Oh God," he heard a raspy whisper against the material of his shirt on his chest, where Zuko's head was pressed. "Fuck."

Jee smirked and reached out to gently pat the boy's head.

"Yeah," he murmured in agreement, affectionately running strands of black hair through his fingers. He knew exactly what Zuko meant.

Funny, how those were the first words they had spoken to each other since the whole thing started…

Just as the thought popped in Jee's head, he felt the boy lift himself off him, then climb over so he could lean in for a kiss. It was given gladly. As Jee returned it, the pleasant, lazy thrum of his thoughts turned even more cottony.

It was pleasant to kiss the boy like that. In the afterglow. Slowly. Without the kind of urgency that drove them before during each kiss but that memorable one in the frosty air at the back of the teashop. Jee could definitely get used to it. That and many, many other things.

He could teach this boy so much. He would. Bring him into his own bed, strip him, worship that beautiful body with kisses and caresses, show him what real pleasure was, bring him to the very brink and make him appreciate to take things slow, to lose control, to give in.

To trust.

And they were off to such a good, good start.

"We need to be more careful," Jee heard himself mutter distantly, Zuko breaking away from the kiss. "Can't repeat it at school."

That was dumb, even for his standards. But it wasn't as if either of them could stop.

Zuko looked at him, his brow furrowed as though it had only now hit him how dangerous it was. Then, he gave a terse nod.
"Yeah," he acquiesced. Then, entirely too soon, he rolled off Jee and started getting to his feet.

Jee sighed, running his hand over his face. He felt too tired to move and his back was really starting to act up now, but he had to get up and clean himself to appear as presentable as possible given the circumstances. The next few minutes were spent in silence as both of them tried to get rid of the evidence, wiping down their clothes and the mats where they got soiled, and then…

It was time to go.

"I'll drive myself," Zuko said when he faced Jee at the door to the gym. His voice was oddly small. "I came by car today."

"All right." Jee nodded at him, feeling both disappointed and relieved.

Zuko stood before the door for a few more seconds, obviously trying not to appear awkward and making it awkward as a result, until he flashed another look up at Jee and curved his lips into –

Into a true, genuine smile.

It was gone in a flash, but it was definitely there and suddenly Jee wanted nothing more than to kiss it back into existence.

"Thanks," the boy mumbled. And then took a step forward, as if wanting to get closer to Jee again, but stopped, indecisive.

Jee smiled, almost shaking his head. Oh, kid. Honestly, hadn't he made it clear enough that there would be no more rejection, not on his end anyway…?

He walked up to the kid in two steps and kissed him, briefly but firmly. His hand went up to ruffle Zuko's hair.

"You dork," he muttered into his lips before stepping away.

Zuko flashed him that lightning smile again.

They could talk it out later, Jee decided when he watched Zuko disappear into his locker room. Work out the details some other time. For now, he was going to get back home, take a nice, long shower and live off the memories…

Until he had the chance to make some new ones.

Chapter End Notes

... So. This is it. I hope you enjoyed yourself. Many thanks to everyone who stuck with me until this point as well as to new readers. Wish me luck, please, I'm defending my BA thesis tomorrow so I can finally call myself a professional translator ;)

The next chapter may again take a while. A window will be crucial, nerves will be vanquished and Jee's bed will finally be of some use. Till then!
Chapter 15: Learning to Breathe, part 1

Chapter Notes

Look at that, it's already been over a year since the prologue of this fic hit the net for the first time! And we're finally getting somewhere. I present to you part 1 of a scene that was supposed to be a single chapter, but which turned out to be so long and complicated that a split was inevitable. The good news is that I already have a bulk of part 2 written, so it shouldn't take me too long to get it ready for y'all.

That being said, enjoy part 1 in which Zuko reveals his inner creeper, Jee drinks some mulled wine and a kitchen counter plays a pivotal role in the proceedings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As soon as Jee found himself alone and driving away from Flowing Creek, he instantly started wishing he'd had Zuko in the car with him after all. The urge to abduct the kid and drive him back to the apartment to spoil him rotten with more kisses had flared up absurdly seconds after he'd let him disappear into the locker room, red-faced, tousle-haired and thoroughly, deliciously debauched.

Equally quick, though not nearly as pleasant, was the sudden flare of irrational panic which, instead, had Jee back in the gym and checking for security cameras which he'd known weren't there. Pakku was going to install security cameras in classrooms, but only once he got extra funding for it from the school board, which was not going to happen for months yet. But the horrible vision of someone catching their illicit deed on camera gave Jee the cold sweat anyway – the panic spell had not subsided until he made absolutely sure there were no electronic devices in the gym that could record them.

He wasn't stupid, despite some recent evidence to the contrary; he knew that if they were ever caught in a situation like the one he'd allowed, quite thoughtlessly indeed, to spark back there, he'd have criminal charges shoved right in his face, eighteenth birthday or not.

By some immense stroke of luck, though, they hadn't been caught and there were no security cameras to record their clandestine transgression. For now, they were safe.

Safe to drive by the drugstore on his way home, for example, and stop there to buy a fresh supply of lube and condoms, as Jee was doing now. Feeling the weight of the bag in his hand when he scrambled back into the car, he was seized once again by that flash of absurdity; of the strangeness of their new situation, which he expected was to stay with him for a while yet. There he was, driving home with a bag of newly-purchased sexual necessities, fully expecting to use them sometime in his immediate future on his own student.

If anyone had told him this would happen to him the moment he left the Navy to peruse a less-than-stellar career in public education, he would have probably laughed the bastard in the face and made him buy him a round.

Which was probably why he was so surprised to discover that the thought wasn't even that scary anymore. Jee had half-expected to start panicking and second-guessing the whole thing again as soon as Zuko with all his youthful charms was out of his sight, but there was no panic now. Not even a tiny flicker. Nor, strangely enough, was there any remorse. Baffling as it was to realize, especially
given the endless parade of doubt and guilt that had plagued him before, he did not regret any of it. He didn't feel guilty, either.

Okay, maybe a little bit. But mostly, he was experiencing something very familiar: a calm, quiet sense of expectation that usually came from having his desire temporarily satisfied and with a view for more sexual pleasures to come. It was almost anticlimactic, the way he couldn't muster up much inner turmoil over what he'd allowed to happen between himself and Zuko – unfair, almost. Zuko wasn't like any of his other lovers and Jee wasn't about to treat him like one, but he did expect to be more shaken by the experience.

Instead, he felt sated, and almost happy, with a pleasant sort of impatience for more, and really couldn't bring himself to regret anything as he remembered, over and over, the way Zuko's body shuddered against his, the way Zuko's hand moved over his flesh, the way the brat's lips felt as he keened against Jee's skin when he climaxed.

… Yeah, Jee wanted more. If there was anything certain in his world right now, it was that. Maybe the other, more sensible thoughts would come later. In the morning, perhaps. Once he realized fully what he'd done and what it meant in the long run, for him and for Zuko. For now, he was quite content for the unexpected mental respite, and he plopped down on the sofa still nurturing that sense of quiet fulfillment with a cool beer and the memories still hotly bright.

And really, what harm had it done? As far as Jee knew, nothing. The brat certainly didn't seem as if Jee's grabby hands had damaged him in any way. He'd smiled, for fuck's sake. He'd kissed Jee after they were done. And he had been the one to initiate pretty much everything, Jee had been very careful about that. So where was the harm? Who was hurt? If anything, Zuko seemed better.

Just as he would keep getting better, if Jee had anything to say on the matter. He would make sure of that. He'd sooner chop off his own hand and eat it than let Zuko come to any harm in his bedroom, and maybe, little by little, the brat would start opening up to him in more ways than one.

That was not to say that Jee had gotten rid of his doubts regarding Zuko's motivation and clear-headedness. The kid was as disturbed as disturbed went, but when all was said and done, rejecting him really hadn't done any of them any good. And Jee may not be an expert psychologist, but even he could tell that the smile back there had been genuine.

But if he wouldn't manage to bring Zuko out of his bubble of anger after all… well. The sex alone was still nothing to sneeze at, if the evening was anything to go by.

Zuko was such a quick learner when it came to certain things. And it seemed that he'd already had some experience. Jee had questions about that now, naturally – lots of them, and he was no champion when it came to being patient. But for this, he would wait as long as it would prove necessary, if only to see Zuko bloom into the kind of confidence and self-assurance in bed Jee already knew the brat was capable of, and then…

Jee smiled at the TV.

***

*Wait for me*, said the text that woke him up with its shrill buzz the morning after their first properly sexual encounter. Jee rubbed his eyes, his brain still sluggish and slow to make sense of the message,
but once it hit him, it hit him good.


The thrilling promise inherent in the text aside, it was nice to know the brat was bright enough not to text him with anything overtly incriminating. In all honesty, Jee was probably supposed to delete the shirtless picture from his phone just in case, but he simply couldn't bring himself to do so — not making it his phone background in the first place had been difficult enough.

Besides, it wasn't as if anyone had any reason to go through the contents of his phone at the present moment. Jee would just have to be careful to keep it that way.

Now that some of the tension between him and Zuko had found an outlet, it was remarkably easier for Jee to go through his day; and the looks they exchanged in class, though still charged and full of clear, unspoken expectation tinted with the vivid memory of yesterday, were now decidedly less volatile and didn't threaten to burn the entire school down. And if Zuko smirked at him in passing on his way back to the locker rooms, it was a fleeting, almost unnoticeable smirk that was as private as the butterfly-light brush of fingers.

It was quite adorable really, those tiny attempts at flirting. Who would have expected that, Jee thought with an amused smile directed right back at Zuko, the afterfeel of warm fingers brushing his sending tiny sparks of electric warmth up his arm. It could have been dangerous, but the action was discreet enough that Jee decided to let it slide without comment.

The brat seemed so proud, dammit. Like a five-year-old who got himself a shiny new toy but was afraid to let the other kids know about it because they might snatch it away from him. It was very cute.

Jee kept himself warm with that mental image while he dutifully waited for a sign — a text, a note slipped into his pocket, anything, just like Zuko's morning text had told him to. All through the day he kept checking his phone and patting himself for any sneakily concealed missiles, but, to his utter disappointment, it was in vain. By the time the final period ended, Jee was forced to drive home without any clear pointers as to what to do or what to expect... And, in the end, he never got anything like that.

He got something much, much better.

Wait for me. Ha! In hindsight, the memory always inspired Jee to snort. Wait for me indeed. In the end, the brat couldn't have made it more any more straightforward if he tried.

Not a message. Not a sign. Me.

Back then, however, Jee had no reason to suspect what Zuko actually meant by that, and when the first knock resounded against the windowpane in his living room later that evening, Jee still almost choked on his readymade chicken nuggets.

What the...

The strange knocking sound happened again. Jee was on his feet instantly, looking around for its source with an expression that must have looked pretty haunted, but fuck, he had every right to be gobsmacked. Especially when the urgent tap-tap-tap finally directed his gaze to the window; and what he saw there nearly gave him a heart attack.

Jee's life had hitherto included many strange incidents that he could recall, and, he suspected, probably even more that he couldn't on account of being drunk at the time. Handsome boys crouched
on his windowsill and knocking insistently to be let in, however, were most definitely a novelty.

Up until that point.

"Jesus, kid," Jee breathed through the temporary stupor, running to pull the window open and stepping to the side to let Zuko in. Immediately the heater-warm air in the apartment was pierced with a gust of bitingly cold wind courtesy of the blizzard raging outside, which also threw in some snow into the bargain.

The little demon looked a freezing, snow-white mess.

"Took you long enough," said mess mumbled reproachfully, pulling off his snow-covered hat and gloves once he slid gracefully through the window and into the apartment. The thick coating of snow fell off his winter boots right onto the carpet.

"Well, forgive me for not expecting you to turn up at my window like a damned ninja." Jee shut the window as soon as Zuko was safely inside – the air was freezing enough to turn all liquids into popsicles within seconds, the bloody blizzard tearing through the streets like some unholy wrath of elemental gods. Once he barricaded them against it, already feeling the chill creeping up his bare forearms like a colony of ants, Jee turned back to Zuko, still feeling decidedly unsure of his footing. "Who does that? What's gotten into you? And how do you even know where I live?"

Zuko shrugged as though turning up at someone's window unexpectedly was no big deal, and started stomping on the carpet to get rid of the messy residue of snow. It was already melting off him and forming more dirty puddles on the floor, not that Jee cared much about that.

And as soon as Zuko opened his mouth, he started caring even less.

"I followed you once," the brat confessed in the middle of unwinding his scarf from around his neck.

He WHAT.

"You WHAT," Jee said out loud right before he nearly choked on his own shock.

"I followed you," the kid repeated somewhat more forcefully, perhaps finally discovering that it would show good sense to feel embarrassed about it; Jee really couldn't tell. Not while his mind was too busy screaming like no tomorrow, especially as Zuko kept talking. "A while ago. Don't look at me like that, I was bored, okay?"

Right. Right. Punching the brat's teeth out probably wasn't a productive start to Jee's evening, but for a moment that was all he felt capable of thinking about.

The little fucking nutter. Jee couldn't even start wrapping his head around that. Zuko had followed Jee home, actually followed him, and a while back to boot, and he was admitting it now as casually as if he'd told Jee he'd had beef for dinner; as if he hadn't done anything wrong, like it was no big deal and nothing to get worked up about, like Jee was the irrational one…

"When did that happen?" It was hard, letting the words out at a volume that wasn't yelling, but he managed. For now.

Jesus fucking Christ…

Now Zuko looked defensive, standing there in his heavy expensive parka, biting his lower lip and still dripping melted snow where he stood. "Nevermind," he muttered, stuffing his hands into the pockets of the jacket. "Why are you so angry about it?"
"Why am I angry about – "

Easy there, Jee. Don't shout. Think of the baby next door. You don't want to hear it wailing again.

Think of the sex. Yes, think of the sex.

He tried, shutting his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose while the angry shout that was just short of reaching his throat fought to be let out. He wasn't about to let his own anger get in the way of more pleasurable things, but, for crying out loud…!

"Zuko, you can't do things like that," he forced out once he made sure it wouldn't come out as a snarl. "It's all kinds of wrong. You can't just spy on people."

And of course, once he thought of the word *spy* he immediately pictured the brat perched somewhere on the neighboring rooftops and watching Jee through the windows, for who knew how long. After *that* particular mental image, it was all he could do not to throw the brat out right then and there.

"I was just –" Zuko started, but Jee cut him off immediately. Any lame excuses and he just might start shouting for real.

"Stop talking, kid."

"But I –"

"Stop. Talking."

Okay, he needed to take stock of the situation here. Rationally. As of that moment it consisted of: one sexy, currently rather sullen brat standing in his living room half-frozen and dripping snow on his carpet; a few beers and some mulled wine in the fridge; a rapidly impending headache and a growing need for a cigarette. Apart from that, Jee could also feel a fit stirring in the pit of his stomach, and the way he saw it, it could go both ways – either he indulged in it and started yelling at the kid about privacy and dignity and plain simple human decency, after which Zuko would surely leave through the window in high dudgeon and Jee would fall asleep alone again; or he could swallow the fit down and be satisfied with a shorter admonition, then try to compose himself enough to focus on nicer things, which is what Zuko undoubtedly came here for in the first place.

The choice was simple, really. All Jee needed to do was calm down, and that, unfortunately, was easier said than done.

At that point Zuko sniveled and wiped his nose on his sleeve in a decidedly undignified manner, blessedly prompting Jee to focus on practical things.

"You look like death warmed over," he said with a heavy sigh that, he hoped, signified an end to the previous topic, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Did you go on foot all the way here?"

"Took the bus at one point," the kid replied quietly, looking him challengingly in the eye. "But yeah."

"Why didn't you take the car? It's a long way."

Zuko glared at him. "Because I didn't want my car to be seen around here."

"You could have parked the car a few blocks away and walked here," Jee pointed out. Zuko's glare only got more heated.
"No, because then Uncle would have noticed the car is missing," he bit back, mirroring Jee's militiant pose. "I'm only here because Friday nights is when he's having his stupid Pai Sho sessions. He won't notice I slipped out of my room if I'm back by tomorrow morning."

… Right. There were definitely layers upon layers of subtext in that sentence and Jee needed a moment to parse it.

"You're soaked," he stated, opting once again to return to the practical for the time being; that was probably the only way to stay sane. "Did you fall into the snow or something?"

"Whatever."

Fine. Jee sighed again, eyeing the kid's soaking wet apparel. "Go take a hot shower," he commanded, coming to a decision. "We'll lay your clothes out to dry in the meantime. I'll make you something hot to drink."

"I don't need you to fuss over –"

"Just do it, kid. I need a moment."

There must have been something in Jee's voice that spoke to Zuko on a personal level – the kid held his gaze for a moment, then started to take off his soaked winter clothes in silence, with more force than was necessary.

It looked like he really did land in a snow pile, and not just one – his jeans were similarly wet and, strangely enough, so was the sweater underneath. "I'll get you some spare pants," Jee said when he noticed it, taking the clothes from the boy and hanging them on any suitable furniture he could find.

"Don't bother."

"Don't be stupid, of course you need something warm to –"

"I said don't bother."

… Okay, that didn't sound good. Jee turned around to look at Zuko, and when he saw the brat's face he immediately started cursing himself to seven hells.

Damn him and this bizarre situation twice over…

"Hey, kid," he tried in a more conciliatory tone, then cleared his throat in sudden nervousness. "I didn't mean to –"

Zuko looked away from him, biting his lower lip. "If you don't want me here just tell me, I'll go."

Shit.

"It's not like that," Jee said immediately, leaving the parka to hang over a chair and walking up to Zuko, who still wouldn't meet his eyes. "I'm glad to have you here. But you should have let me know, I never expected you'd just turn up at my window like that."

When Zuko still wouldn't look up, Jee stepped even closer and put his arms around his rigid, reluctant body, then tried to make it better by kissing the crown of his head in apology. "You really shouldn't have followed me home," he whispered into wet black hair. "But what's done is done. You're here now, I'm glad and we won't let tonight go to waste, hmm?"

The kid had made his way to Jee's apartment through the blizzard, and it really was a fair distance
from the Jasmine Dragon. Now that Jee really thought about it and held Zuko's chilled form in his arms, it was –

Well.

It made him feel like kissing the stupid brat.

So he snaked a hand under Zuko's chin to tilt it up – and the kid let him. The kiss that followed was short and cold, with Zuko's lips still frostbitten and shivering slightly, but it only made something warm and sappy spill in Jee's stomach in response.

"You're impossible," he whispered against those cold lips, determined to warm them up again. "You'll drive me crazy before the week is done."

In response, Zuko only strained up and kissed him again. "You're not mad anymore?" he asked quietly when they broke apart again and rested their foreheads against each other. There was something unbalanced, something wobbly about his expression, and Jee couldn't quite meet his eyes anymore.

"I'll think about it," he said with a smirk to cover up the discomfort. "Once you go take that shower and get your circulation working properly again. Then… we'll see."

A quick peck to the brat's forehead sealed the deal, and then he was showing Zuko the way to the bathroom and the kid was shutting himself in there, leaving Jee alone to regain some semblance of composure.

The mulled wine helped. When Jee sat down on the stool by the kitchen counter and let the heady, fruity taste spill over his tongue then down his throat, leaving a trail of delicious warmth, he replayed the situation over in his head.

It could not be done, he discovered, without a certain amount of wincing.

So it could have been played better. But no one could blame him for losing his cool faced with Zuko's – all of it, really, and he was still justifiably mad and unsettled by the spying business. Hopefully, though, he'd managed to turn the situation around and once Zuko got out of the shower, all warmed up and changed and looking like a human being instead of an icicle, they could get down to something.

Something good.

Yes, the evening could still be salvaged…

But first Jee needed to ensure their privacy. He started on a round of pulling the blinds down in every room, mug of steaming wine in hand, and paused at the one Zuko used to get in to ponder just how the brat had managed to achieve that fit. Jee's floor wasn't the topmost and there were no fire exits on this side of the building. He must have climbed the wall somehow, Jee really saw no other way for him to enter.

Huh. Looked like Zuko the Cat was a phrase that was going to stick.

With any luck, none of the people in the neighboring building saw Jee's clandestine guest come in – most of the windows there had the blinds drawn in the rooms that were lit. But still, it could have been risky…

Even so, Jee returned to his perch at the kitchen counter feeling slightly more optimistic about the
whole thing. The sound of running water reminded him that there was a very handsome, very naked, and probably very willing boy in his shower right now; a boy who had braved this shitty weather only to visit Jee at night.

A boy who had come into Jee's hand only yesterday, all trembling limbs and hurried breaths and needy lips.

Yes, Jee was still deeply disturbed by that spying business, but all things considered, the evening was slowly shaping out to be rather – promising. And there was that one thing Zuko said…

He won't notice I slipped out of my room if I'm back by tomorrow morning.

Jesus Christ, Zuko came here fully intending to stay the night. And that could only mean one thing.

Jee smiled to himself, taking another gulp.

"What's that?" he heard about ten minutes later. Zuko was out of the bathroom and walking towards him as he toweled his wet hair, wearing a loose plain black t-shirt that hung past his hips; it teased Jee with a glimpse of tight-fitting black briefs and the sight of a pair of long, pale, beautifully muscled legs.

Long, pale, beautifully muscled and exposed. Damn, Jee had forgotten all about those spare sweats in the end.

Suddenly, he was glad he had.

"The smell," Zuko prompted, and only then did Jee manage to tear his eyes away from those stunning legs to look up at the brat's vaguely amused face. "Is that mulled wine? Can I have some?"

He hopped onto the stool on the other side of the counter, resting his elbows on it once he put the towel – Jee's favorite one – in his lap. Jee sent him a smirk, surrounded by the strong smell of cinnamon and ginger.

"No," he said with emphasis, turning around to fill the mug he'd prepared for the kid with boiled water. "You're getting hot cocoa. That's strong stuff and I'm not trusting you with alcohol tonight."

He heard Zuko huff at that and it only made him smirk wider. "Why?" asked the kid when Jee put the mug with cocoa in front of him.

"Because, brat," Jee leaned over the counter towards him, close, so close that he could smell his own minty toothpaste on Zuko's breath – good God, he'd even brushed his teeth, that was just adorable – and continued in a low voice, "I want you to be consenting and fully in control of your faculties when I take you to my bed and ravish you until you forget your own name."

Oh, hello there, blush. Aren't you a lovely one. Jee watched with immense satisfaction as it spread over Zuko's good cheek, his healthy eye going wide and sparkly, his Adam's apple bobbing as the kid tried to swallow. For a frozen moment they sat there facing each other, with the counter and the pair of mugs between them, looking at one another and breathing each other's air; Jee felt the beginnings of desire boil in him with every passing second, getting closer and closer to the surface, and he let it.

It was happening. Zuko was here, in his apartment, and Jee could see the open bedroom door behind the kid, inviting them both in. The rest of the night was for the two of them only, and they could take their time because no one would come knocking.
They were alone. Free to do whatever the fuck they wanted. And the knowledge hovered between them, suspended in the moment, filling it to the brim with palpable lust.

Zuko was the first to break the trance. With a whispered "fuck," he suddenly became a blur of white limbs as he jumped onto the counter, bare knees hitting polished wood, and slid across it to capture Jee between his legs. His movements were so fast and efficient that Jee hardly saw it coming before he was being pulled against a hot, insistent body and not kissed so much as attacked, Zuko's coordination somehow failing to take into account the force of impact and the need to align their mouths against each other. It was a wonder that Zuko managed not to knock their mugs over and spill hot liquids all over the counter and both of them in his hurry to get to Jee.

Oh yes. Good, good boy.

Jee hummed into the kiss, angling his head so that they wouldn't bump noses and knock their teeth together awkwardly, and tried to slow Zuko down a bit with his own mouth and hands even as his thoughts buzzed in contentment. Not that he didn't understand the urgency – the tangible evidence of which was now beautifully clear and trapped between their bodies, and by gods was the kid horny – but they had the whole night. Unlike the gym, there was no reason to rush through something so nice and pleasurable now that they had nothing better to do than just feel, taste and explore.

He hadn't been a teenager for a good while now, though, and he'd practically forgotten what it had been like back then, with his body an active volcano of lust that was liable to explode lava all over everything at the tiniest hint of anything remotely sexual. Zuko was eighteen now, granted, so by all means he should have sailed past those stormy waters of boyhood already, but one could never tell with those things and the perpetual sexual tortures of adolescence probably wouldn't leave him for a few years yet. Jee wasn't sure whether it was a curse or a blessing – it was hard to make up his mind now that he was nudge Zuko's mouth with his tongue and sneaking it inside, and the boy was gasping into him, making those little noises of need that Jee found so delectable.

Zuko's hands were on his neck, kneading the hard skin there with the insistence of a toddler exploring a new, fascinating toy, and every now and then they brushed the sharp, bristly edge of Jee's short, gray hair. It felt nice. Very nice. Even as Jee reciprocated with some explorations of his own, both of his arms resting on Zuko's hips and caressing the heated skin under the loose t-shirt, going up and down those smooth, strong thighs, he felt tension draining out of him in waves with every press of the kid's long, surprisingly firm fingers.

The boy's skin was so soft. Incredibly, deceptively so given all the hard muscle that bulged and shifted underneath. It almost seemed wrong, to have that lovely smoothness brush against Jee's own skin, which was rough, full of little scars and scabs and, on the whole, marked mercifully by the nearly forty years of life he carried on his back, a life that was anything but soft. He was coarse just as his body was coarse, and it sparked a moment of self-consciousness, but Zuko didn't seem to mind at all – on the contrary, the more he touched Jee, the more eager he seemed, and it was easy, so very, very easy, to lose himself in that eagerness; to let go; to kiss the brat and caress his mouth with his tongue, to knead the warm flesh over his hips and legs with old, calloused hands, to let the edge of his sideburns brush against the delicate, fine skin of Zuko's face.

The kid smelled differently than he had in the gym – the smells of mint toothpaste and Jee's own shower gel dominated over the faintly detectable, natural smell of skin, but it was all right. Jee would make sure to bring that out later and learn it by heart. For now, he focused on touch, and slowing Zuko down as much as he could by taking control of the kiss, and reveled in the physical closeness of their mouths and bodies pressed right up against one another. When the boy's hands moved from his neck to feel his shoulders through the material of his shirt, Jee decided it was time to introduce some more skin-to-skin contact into the equation and started pulling the hem of Zuko's t-shirt up.
He'd deserved it. He'd deserved to have that beautiful young chest revealed to him, to touch and
care it just as he'd wanted to ever since he saw it for the first time in all its glory. Zuko was a
gorgeous boy, even with the scar, and now that he took over and pulled the t-shirt off in one swift,
violent move, which left him sitting there on the counter in nothing but his dark, tight-fitted briefs,
Jee could have stared at him until he shivered and keeled over from old age; and it would have been
a happy death.

By gods, but the brat was a vision. His hair still mostly wet and clinging to his face, his healthy
cheek red, his eyes bright and clouded by the thick sheen of arousal, his legs parted and squeezing
Jee's middle just so, the muscles of his thighs strong but with just the right amount of softness, the
plains of gorgeous white skin and obsessively sculpted body now revealed, the pair of pink nipples
pert and standing at attention, not to mention that thick, unmistakable bulge outlined through the
dark, stretched material, he was…

Shit.

"You're so hot." Jee couldn't help himself – he leaned in and breathed the words right into Zuko's
good ear, then started nibbling at it, eager to find sensitive spots to make that wonderful incubus
perched on his kitchen counter writhe. "So gorgeous. Christ, Zuko, I want you so much."

He hadn't quite meant for it to slip out. But it was hard to reign the words in when his mouth moved
down to Zuko's finely lined jaw, then under, to the straining tendons of the boy's smooth, long neck.
From the way Zuko's hips jerked and practically dug into him and from the strangled whimper, the
object of his loving ministrations didn't mind the words at all, nor the wet trail Jee was leaving all
over his throat with his lips. Zuko's skin was slightly salty there, shower-warm and smelling of soap,
and Jee could almost feel the veins straining as the kid threw his head back to give him better access,
grabbing and clawing wildly at his shoulders and gasping with every deeper kiss and nib.

Oh, a sensitive neck then. Good. That usually made things much more fun. Jee continued to relish
the reactions as he kept on kissing heated skin, and soon Zuko's hips were bucking into him almost
regularly, at a frantic, almost panicked pace.

He took advantage of that to snake his hands under Zuko's buttocks, squeezing. My, my, that sure
felt good. Jee hardly had a chance to get a proper look, but from what he had seen, he suspected the
boy's ass was a beauty, as nicely sculpted as the rest of him; and it really did feel heavenly in his grip.
He massaged it and kept squeezing in order to help the kid calm down a little – as much as Jee
appreciated his fervor, it really wouldn't do to have Zuko come before they even made it to bed.

"Shhhh," he murmured into the crook of the boy's neck. "It's all right. We have all night."

"I can't –"

But whatever Zuko was incapable of remained forever unvoiced. The brat abandoned coherent
sentences in order to breathe out a throaty moan when Jee pulled his hips to grind against his, and
Jesus, those sounds, Jee would remember all of them for as long as he lived. He was still reveling in
them, in all of it, when he felt the brat tugging at his shirt, all semblance of control flying out the
window; and he stepped back a little to allow Zuko to pull it off him. It landed on the spot where the
kitchen tiles met the living room floor with its wooden paneling, probably not far away from Zuko's
own t-shirt and the long-abandoned towel.

Yes, yes that was much better, holy shit. It felt so good to have Zuko's hands run over his naked
chest. And the brat was staring, his mouth open and swollen from kissing, everything about him
screaming arousal as if…
As if he really liked what he saw before him. As if he genuinely found Jee and his body attractive. As if he didn't mind the weathered texture of his skin, the scarce chest hair, the tattoos, the rough marks of life. To have that beautiful, beautiful boy stare right back at him with such astounding, lusty appreciation, it was – was there anything to compare it to?

Jee wasn't insecure about his body, he'd fought off such stupid sentiments ages ago. Nevertheless, he didn't expect anything like the appreciation he was now seeing in Zuko's eyes and deep down, he had to admit that he'd been worried, just a little, and –

Zuko leaned in and kissed his sternum with hot, kiss-swollen lips.

Oh God, but Jee missed it. He never realized how much. It'd been so long, too long, and now having someone else touch him like that felt like the best damn thing that happened to him in years. Zuko's hands quested over his tired old skin, leaving caresses that were so hesitant they almost seemed shy, and tracing little shadows of warmth over his pecs, his shoulders, his biceps, then back to his chest, then lower, to his abdomen, the boy's eyes feeling just as warm as they followed the surprisingly slow patterns of his hands. He had pulled back to look properly, but his mouth still hovered near Jee's body, close enough that he felt every trembling breath dissolve into heat on his skin.

He decided to let the moment go on, to give Zuko time to adjust. They had, after all, reached an entirely new level of intimacy. These days Jee didn't much care for ceremonies, but this time it felt like something that needed to be acknowledged, like another landmark on a windy mountain trail. Even though the signs pointed to it, Jee really had no idea if Zuko had ever been this intimate with another person before – maybe a chance to ask would present itself soon, now that they had breached yet another wall – and the boy seemed not a little overwhelmed.

Jee reached out to stroke his hair. His heart may have jumped a little when Zuko leaned into the gentle touch.

"Like what you see, kid?" It was out before Jee could stop himself, but maybe it was the right thing to say; for one thing, it helped to bring Zuko back from whatever higher planes of existence he had been gliding over down to planet Earth.

The brat's left hand paused where it had been tracing the tattoo of a US Navy logo on Jee's right shoulder. "Yeah," he breathed quietly. And then added, as if to cover up the moment of what he probably perceived was awkwardness, "I didn't imagine you'd have tattoos."

"No? Didn't you hear all sailors had them?" Jee smiled, his hand moving to stroke Zuko's good ear and down to his throat, rasping over drying hair.

So you imagined me shirtless, did you?

"That's so quaint." Zuko smirked up at him briefly, glancing to the seagull Jee had tattooed on the left shoulder. "And patriotic."

"Hardly, I was young and very drunk at the time. In such moments patriotism is usually the last thing on your mind."

"Do you have more?"

Jee smirked at him, leaning in to kiss Zuko's reddened cheek. "You'll see soon enough," he whispered, his lips moving right beneath the boy's eye. "And I'll tell you all about them if you want. We have time."

When he started pulling back, he suddenly found himself immobilized in the trap of Zuko's arms
around his neck and a pair of deliciously strong thighs wrapping themselves firmly around his middle; and then Zuko was turning his head to capture Jee's lips, too. Which was definitely okay. Kissing Zuko was more than fine and apparently neither of them could get enough of it.

At least until Zuko decided to speak again.

"Fuck me," he whispered, clinging as close to Jee as was humanly possible without melting their skin into each other. And while the first two words were quiet, almost hesitant, others followed on the heels of the electric jolt which coursed through Jee when he heard it, flooding him in a heated, impatient torrent: "Now, do it now, fuck me, I'm sick and tired of waiting, God, I want it, I want you now."

… Right. There went Jee's reason. Bye-bye, common sense, it was nice knowing you. But Jee would gladly challenge anyone to keep their cool when faced with consent thus expressed – and hell, as far as consent went, one really couldn't get any more expressive.

Later, he would blame his next action on that: a temporary fit of insanity inspired by Zuko's incredible, debilitating sexiness. It simply was more convenient that way than beating himself up for being a complete, overachieving moron.

And what he did was exactly what an overachieving moron would do: driven by a mad impulse to impress, he whispered "Hold on," used the leverage Zuko's thighs wrapped around him already gave him and pushed the kid up, off the kitchen counter and into his arms. The brat yelped in confusion and the grip of his limbs around Jee went vice-tight, but the man only kissed whatever planes of soft white skin were pressed into his face and started on the perilous journey to the bedroom with his living, squirming burden.

It shouldn't have come as a surprise that Zuko was heavy. All that lovely muscle had to leave its toll on the kid's weight and Jee did let out a few grunts as he carried him to the bedroom, already cursing his bravado in the privacy of his mind. His back would not thank him in the morning and that was as sure as the sticks Pakku swallowed daily for breakfast. At least there was nothing on the floor for him to step on because that would just be fucking embarrassing.

But perhaps the childish, pointless, stupid display of strength would pay off. Zuko was clinging to him and looking at him like Jee was the world's eighth wonder, which was definitely a nice way to be looked at. And then there were those hot, pliant lips suddenly pressing against his again, and for a moment Jee had to pause and push Zuko's back against the wall next to the door to the bedroom – it hit with a small thud, but Zuko didn't seem overly bothered by that – just to return the kiss properly. The feeling of their chests sliding right against each other, pressed so close, and that little tongue worming itself shamelessly into his mouth, would have been enough for him to stumble and lose his balance. The brat felt incredible in his arms, his butt firm and perfectly rounded, his body hot, his erection hard and jutting up as it strained into Jee's abdomen, and Christ, it was surely his karma paying off, that had to be it, and it was long fucking overdue.

Still kissing, Jee resumed the journey to the dark bedroom after a few wet, panting heartbeats, hands kneading Zuko's buttocks and clutching hard as he held the brat up, and when his knees hit the bed he dropped Zuko right onto it without ceremony, rusty springs squeaking as the kid bounced on the mattress with a surprised grunt. The light streaming in from the living room area was enough to allow Jee to take a second to appreciate the view, and he almost whistled in pleasure – here was a stunning vision of every gay man's wet dream, spread out and wanting in his bed.


"What are you waiting for?" Zuko asked, propping himself up on his elbows and looking at Jee from
under his tangled bangs like a little tempter from an adult storybook. "Come here."

Apparently indulging in the lovely visuals was too much to ask of an impatient, hormonal adolescent, but Jee really couldn't bring himself to mind when said impatient, hormonal adolescent was practically naked and looking at him like Jee imagined he would in his most depraved fantasies.

It was showtime.

So, without any more ceremonies, Jee complied, climbing onto the bed with the springs squeaking under him, and towered over Zuko, who immediately locked his arms around Jee's neck and brought him down onto himself. For a split of second Jee worried his weight might crush the breath out of the kid, but Zuko didn't so much as wince and kept demanding more kisses, straining up to rub his erection against Jee's crotch.

It was all too easy to give them, and even through the waves of electric shocks of sensation Jee couldn't stop the smirk when Zuko gasped at the feeling of Jee's hardness through the jeans. He would have liked to take more time exploring, to map out every bit of that lean body, but Zuko's hands clawed at his back insistently, those sharp nails most likely leaving scratchy marks, and there was a wet whisper in his ear, demanding, "Take them off, your pants, take them off!"

It was a good idea, Jee would not dispute it. He left one more kiss to keep the brat's lips tingling, then rolled off and started undoing the fly. Zuko, in his impatience, tried to help, which only resulted in some fumbling; but soon the jeans were pushed down Jee's legs and Zuko was climbing overt top him, the sensations his skin left against Jee's hot and delicious.

Jee held him close with one arm and reached with the other to grope for his reading lamp, then pulled the switch on. There was no point in staying in the dark if they didn't have to – the blinds would shield them from prying eyes and Jee wanted to look.

"Do you mind?" he asked in a whisper; Zuko, who had been busy kissing along his collarbone, pulled back to look at him with those impossibly bright eyes.

"What, the light?" He shook his head and murmured fondly when Jee brought his hand up to scratch behind his ear. "No. It's better like that."

"It is," Jee agreed. Zuko's face looked lovely in the warm glow. At least the healthy side, because the shadows that now played over his features turned the scar into a dark, ugly mess of ridges that almost seemed pulsing, so close to Jee that he could practically trace the history of its healing, with mangled, burnt tissue darker in some places and lighter in others. Zuko's slitted eye gazed down on him from mutilated skin, lash-less and brow-less and brutally grotesque next to the perfect smoothness of the other half.

Jee had avoided touching the scar up to that point. It wasn't even a conscious effort – just a hunch that Zuko would most likely not appreciate it. But maybe signaling that Jee was actively trying to avoid the area was the wrong way to go about it. Didn't everyone stress these days that any abnormalities should be acknowledged without ceremony, that ignoring it and pretending they weren't there would only worsen the situation? Would it be better if Jee touched it like he would any other part of Zuko – casually, naturally, without comment or unnecessary fuss? Would the brat prefer it?

If only Jee knew the history behind it. How old it was, how the kid got it in the first place, in what circumstances, how damaging the experience had been emotionally. That would have given him clues as to how to go about treating that part of him, the one that Zuko must have been self-conscious about.
Jee didn't want Zuko to think he was grossed out by the scar – though admittedly it was horrifying, especially up close. But he also didn't want to make the kid uncomfortable by bringing it to the foreground. What to do, what to do…

In the end, though, he didn't have to do anything. As soon as he so much as raised his hand hesitantly in a half-formed attempt to maybe reach out to the scar, Zuko turned away first his head, then his body, pulling Jee insistently back on top.

"Come on," he whispered hotly into Jee's ear, clinging close. "I want you to fuck me."

… Well. Okay then. There was only one more thing.

"Do you know what you're asking for?" Jee propped himself up on an elbow and eyed Zuko with a quizzical look, one eyebrow quirked up. And it was quite a feat; the hardness in his own underpants was making it more and more difficult to think clearly, especially when Zuko's legs insisted on sliding up and down his own, their relative smoothness feeling so tantalizingly good against Jee's. And then, because clearly it was the best time to pose the question, he added, "Have you ever done anything like that before?"

Immediately Zuko looked both offended and embarrassed; the blush which deepened on his healthy cheek to go with the pout and the glare was all too revealing.

"I know what to do," he mumbled, looking to the side when Jee stroked along the side of his face in a gesture he hoped was soothing.

"Oh, do you?"

"Yeah. Get on with it."

Jee sighed, still stroking the side of Zuko's face, then nudged it so that the brat was looking at him again. "Believe me, there's nothing I'd like to do more right now," he whispered, then leaned down to plant a quick, reassuring kiss on Zuko's lips before continuing: "But I need to know how much you've tried before so I don't hurt you. It's nothing to be ashamed of, kid. You can tell me."

It took a while. Maybe several minutes, Jee really couldn't tell. He lay there, half on the bed and half on Zuko, watching as the struggle went on behind those golden eyes, clear as the blizzard outside. Zuko's Adam's apple bobbed up and down several times before he finally decided to be truthful, and even then he couldn't meet Jee's eyes when he admitted:

"There was one boy."

"Yes?" Jee said encouragingly; his suspicions were already being proven true, might as well probe some more. And the way Zuko was reluctant to admit to having a liaison with another boy while he was in a grown man's bed and asking to be fucked was really quite hilarious.

Zuko glared up at him. "Well, what else do you want to know?"

Jee reminded himself not to sigh. It really wouldn't do. "I need to know how much you've done with him," he explained, tracing a pattern around Zuko's hardened nipple. The boy's breath hitched and Jee smirked a little in response.

"Not much," Zuko breathed almost reluctantly. "We didn't… Not all the way."

Right. Right. Which meant that the whole process would have to take infinitely more time, but Jee would be lying if he said he wasn't pleased. It meant that Zuko probably wasn't warped by any
negative sexual experiences, or at least not so much that it would take a while to change his view on things; and what little Jee'd heard of that mysterious ex so far did not paint a picture of a considerate lover. Jee still had the opportunity to make that first experience as good and memorable as he could… And there was also the not-so-small matter of watching Zuko grow and learn under his tutelage, which was a very thrilling thought indeed.

Thrilling and arousing. Jee listened to his instinct and dove in to kiss along Zuko's collarbone and listened with some satisfaction to the boy's panting before asking, "How much?"

"Huh?"

"How much have you done with him?"

"Just a few handjobs, okay? Why does it even matter?" Zuko sounded indignant and started squirming under Jee; in an attempt to appease him, Jee moved his mouth down, closed it over a nipple and hummed around it, satisfied.

A few handjobs. Very well then. He knew how to work with that. And if Zuko didn't want to talk about the other brat tonight, it was more than fine by Jee, who didn't want him to focus on anyone other than him.

"It doesn't matter," he murmured over a low, throaty moan, feeling Zuko's hands grasping his shoulders frantically. "You forget all about him now. Tonight, you're mine."

"Fuck."

Zuko's hands were scrambling for purchase now and his hips were bucking up into Jee's groin, sending electric jolts of teasing pleasure at the contact, and Jee ground right back with a low grunt. It felt so incredibly good; and the desperate, strangled little noises Zuko was letting out every time their hips met sent Jee's blood rushing in a needy roar. So he heeded its call devoted himself to exploring without any more doubts. He still needed to be careful – handling a mentally unstable virgin in bed was no easy feat – but it was all right. They could take their time, even with Zuko's obvious impatience, and Jee would damn well make absolutely sure the ex drifted back into black seas of obscurity and the needy brat remembered tonight in glowing letterings for as long as he lived.

Zuko was giving himself freely and Jee would treat him like a fucking prince.

With that thought in mind, he lowered himself onto Zuko so that their chests rubbed right against each other, and started moving his mouth across the boy's throat again in deep, deep kisses.

"Easy now, kid," he murmured into hot skin, settling a nice, slow rhythm for their hips to move in. "Just relax and let me make you feel good."

His hands were sliding over the wonderful smoothness of Zuko's chest, his sides, his back, which now was arching off the bed at an astounding angle only the really physically fit were capable of. Muscles bulged and shifted under his touch, the brat's strong young body responsive and almost liquid in the way it twisted, writhed and reacted to the gentlest new sensation. Every touch, every kiss, every breath ghosted over flesh elicited some kind of response, whether in a twitch of the body or a noise, or a heavier breath, as though what Jee was doing was so heavenly new, fresh and wonderful. It went straight to Jee's head and only made him try to bring out more and more, to map out that lovely young body and memorize every little hotspot, every heated bundle of nerves. And damn, but the kid's skin tasted so good. So fresh, so soft, so strangely delicate and sensitive, so fine…

Jee was too far gone already, he really was. But worrying about it was way beyond his mental
capabilities now, and what was the point? All was good. He had Zuko willing and responsive in his bed now, all his. The world, for once, was a good place.

He went slowly, kissing a trail down Zuko's body and making his way down at a lazy but inevitable pace, and soon his lips met the waistband of the dark briefs. Zuko's breath stuttered; Jee felt his fingers rasp over the top of his head.

"All right?" he asked quietly, raising his head to look at Zuko; the kid had propped himself up on his elbows and was looking at Jee with an expression that was the very textbook illustration of sin.

"I need to –" The brat gulped, scrambling for words like a man falling off a cliff would for purchase. His voice was even hoarser than usual and positively thick with arousal. "I can't –"

Jee smiled and nibbled on the tender flesh of his hip. The reaction was instant – a high moan pierced the air just as Zuko bucked his hips wildly like a scared foal. His erection, straining impossibly in the underwear that hugged his figure in such a delicious, sensual way, nearly hit Jee in the face.

All right, time to give the rotter a break.

Jee climbed back up the trembling body and captured Zuko's lips in a bruising kiss, swallowing down the panting breaths as he held the boy's head in place. Zuko seemed to appreciate the relief from sensory overload and clung to him instantly, letting out a sigh of pleasure in between kisses. His mouth was slick and wet and only too pliant, opening up easily to invite Jee's tongue, and all of him felt so firm and good and warm that it was all too easy to lose himself and just keep kissing. In the meantime, his hands wandered low again, rasping over oversensitized flesh, until they reached the waistband of the briefs again.

"Can I?" he asked, lips moving over Zuko's, pulling away just enough to let the words out into the boy's mouth. His own voice was dark and hoarse with want by now, the situation getting to him as much as it did to Zuko.

The kid had his eyes closed, but they peered up at Jee at the words, half-lidded and almost liquid through the sheen of desire. He swallowed once, loudly, still locking Jee's neck in the toasty embrace of his arms, and nodded.

Good boy. Jee smiled and kissed him one last time, long and deep, then pulled himself up again and turned his attention south. Sliding down Zuko's body, he made sure to stimulate it with his lips and hands some more as he went and leave the kid on the very edge of endurance so he wouldn't be too self-conscious about being naked with a man for the first time – or what Jee supposed was the first time. It seemed to be working. By the time Jee sat down and pulled Zuko's legs on either side of himself to tug the briefs off, the kid was reduced to an impatient mess of sensations, nearly incoherent and eager to get his relief as soon as possible.

"You look so good like that," Jee complimented him, leaving a tender kiss on Zuko's knee. "So very good."

He massaged the brat's thighs soothingly to emphasize his appreciation, hands moving in firm, growing circles over defined muscle and smooth skin only slightly dotted with hair, before moving them lower, over Zuko's hipbones. His lover to be was watching his every move with eyes bright and clouded, chest heaving in shallow breaths. Jee patted the lower part of his thighs lovingly and smiled at him before reaching for the elastic waistband.

It was expensive underwear. Designer. Very fine quality, delicate yet firm, hugging the body it covered like a lover. For a moment Jee was sorry he never got to see how it looked on Zuko's ass,
but maybe another opportunity would present itself later. For now, he tugged it down with no regrets and slid it over Zuko's bent legs in quick, assured movements, then tossed it away to the side. No point in dwelling on nice views when an even nicer one was currently spread out right in front of him, for his viewing pleasure exclusively.

Oh yes, the brat was a right and proper gift. His pelvis just as gorgeous and well-defined as the rest of him, his lean, handsome cock straining up, dark with blood and more than ready for attention, he looked even lovelier than in Jee's filthy fantasies and that was quite a feat.

He may have taken too long staring again – it came to his attention when Zuko started squirming in what must have been either discomfort or embarrassment, or quite possibly both, his legs closing around Jee's middle, a heel digging into his back.

"Sorry," Jee murmured at the unspoken accusation, taking one shapely leg and kissing the ankle. "But you look incredibly hot."

"Now you," Zuko urged in a raspy not-quite-whisper, falling back down on the pillows. "Your turn."

"Very well, majesty."

There was no way of removing his own underwear without dislodging himself from the comfortable, sweet cage of Zuko's legs, but Jee consoled himself with the thought that he would return to it soon enough. Zuko had just as much right to look his fill as he had, and if Jee remained clothed while he was so exposed, the brat might start feeling even more self-conscious after all. So Jee kissed the ankle one last time before letting go and moving away, first backward and then to the side as Zuko sat up with notable eagerness.

Jee almost asked him if he wanted to help. The brat sure looked like it, good eye wide and bright in the lamp's glow, his face a curious mixture of excitement, nervousness and lust. Maybe next time, though, once they got more comfortable with each other in intimate situations.

And Jee had absolutely no doubt that there would be a next time.

Feeling those startling eyes on himself, he smiled at the kid briefly and pulled off his own underwear, careful to make it quick and casual to emphasize that it was not a big deal; that nakedness was perfectly natural.

"Wow," he heard Zuko breath out behind him as he sat back. There was a pair of warm hands on his shoulders now, touching tentatively, and drying hair tickled his ear when Zuko leaned down to look.

It wasn't as if he hadn't seen the goods already, but Jee understood the need to appraise the situation. After all, the circumstances now were drastically different from the gym and Zuko had asked to have the very cock he was gaped at stuck into him.

In the end, the kid kept himself from commenting; after several heartbeats he licked his lips and whispered with some wonder creeping into the words, "You know, it's strange that it's really happening."

"I know." Jee craned his head around to kiss Zuko's temple. He understood the sentiment perfectly – his own mind kept chanting finally all through the proceedings. "But it is. And I want you to know that you can back out at any time. Just let me know."

"As if I would." A kiss to his shoulder emphasized the statement, as did the hand that wormed itself down to touch his cock. "I wanted it pretty much since the beginning of school, in case you can't
There was only one way to respond to that, and it was to twist his body in Zuko's direction and kiss the breath right out of him. The kid seemed only too happy to play along, and he let out little humming noises that vibrated down Jee's throat. In a tangle of limbs, Jee started lowering Zuko down onto the pillows again, holding him firmly to assure him there was nothing to be nervous about; that he was well in control of the situation and the brat could just lie back and enjoy it.

For a moment Zuko looked like he wanted to say something, but it was gone in a split of second, devoured by the deepening blush. Instead, his hands started moving along Jee's shoulders and biceps as Jee showered him in tender kisses again, their cocks, now gloriously free and exposed, brushing against each other skin to skin. Zuko's hips were straining up into the contact again, his breath out in shallow gasps, and Jee didn't try to hold him down. All signs pointed to Zuko not lasting very long on their first try – already he looked like he was only a few strokes away from coming, and it was okay. If his stamina in training was anything to go by, he would have no problems recovering and then they could play properly…

So Jee encouraged the kid, stimulating all the little hotspots he'd discovered already with his mouth, nibbling, sucking, tonguing. At the same time, while he used his right arm to support himself up, his left wandered down, down, down, along Zuko's long, lean torso arching so beautifully into him, to close around a firm, delectable buttock. Squeezing and kneading it was so easy now that Zuko's hips were mostly up, the brat's legs wrapping themselves again around Jee's body in an attempt to be as close as possible, and that was just adorable. Jee helped him by guiding his hips into a regular rhythm, massaging the buttock and pressing Zuko's body into his once, twice, thrice, over and over again, his own hips down moving to meet Zuko's in slow, circular motions.

It felt so fucking good. He would have been content to keep doing just that all night until they both came from it. But Zuko asked him for more, didn't he, and he would get it, just as soon as Jee gave him his first orgasm for the night…

Several times Zuko's hips jerked up into his insistently and hard, in a way that almost felt reluctant – as if the kid was trying not to give in too quickly, but found it impossible to fight.

"Wait," Jee heard him moan wetly, desperately, the words framed by panting breaths. "I – I can't – I don't – want to –"

"Shhhhh," Jee murmured into his mouth. "It's all right. Just let go, I want you to –"

But he was never meant to finish the thought. Because his cell phone chose that exact moment to start ringing.

Chapter End Notes

Raise your hands, all you people who hate me right now ;)

Many heartfelt thanks to the Princebender brainstorming crew for all the help with that pesky giant, to everyone who reads and comments and to Anankhe for being her glorious self. :*

Next time: Pink Floyd will be cockblockers, the efficiency of a bathroom lock will be questioned and Jee will tell a story. Till then!
Chapter 16: Learning to Breathe, part 2

Chapter Notes

... I promised part 2 would appear soon, didn't I?

I do have an excuse, though, and that's Jeeko Week. Besides, I've been rather busy travelling and getting into MA studies, and this particular scene is a real harlot to write, so I do hope you'll forgive me...

... That it's still not over. Yes, I've decided to make yet another split, but it really is for the best as the scene is getting more and more giant every time I sit down to write it. The upside of that is, um, more sexytimes? Please forgive me another cliffie, the final part should not take so long to get ready. Oh, and definitely check Princebender, there's quite a lot of gorgeous new fanart for the story!

Oh, possible trigger warning: the later part of the chapter has some consensual, but potentially disturbing graphic descriptions of uncomfortable first time.

A cookie goes to whoever recognizes which TV show inspired one of the scenes here.

Lots of thanks to Samalane for the speedy beta!

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jee's first thought was: No. This can't be happening.

But there was no denying it. Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" pierced the panting-filled silence so suddenly that Jee's heart stopped for a moment, and they both froze in a position that hadn't felt in any way wrong or unnatural a second ago, but which now, Jee realized very acutely, did. It was that familiar stab of vague, directionless guilt that seized him whenever a possibility of getting caught loomed over the horizon to carve right through the pleasant pink bubble of want like a butcher's knife. Inevitably it brought undesired sharpness to his thoughts, much like having the pleasant alcoholic bliss fade away overtime only to present his sober life in starker – and usually unfavorable – contrast.

He cursed and looked down at Zuko, who looked absolutely, comically terrified. The song was still gliding through the air around them – and though Jee normally loved that tune, now it rang as unpleasant and grating as a police siren at three in the morning.

"It's all right, kid," Jee sighed, kissing his forehead. "It's just my phone. Ignore it."

"Your phone?" For a moment Zuko sounded as if the very idea of a phone was as alien to him as advanced quantum mechanics.

"Yeah. Doesn't matter. It'll stop in a moment, so let's just..."

But it didn't stop in a moment. It even failed to stay silent after the normal ringing loop ended, because after a few blessed seconds of silence which Jee tried to use to bring back that much-desired
glow, on it went again, merrily destroying the lovely mood Jee had built up so carefully.

Right, *that* was fucking *it*. Whoever saw it fit to call him at – whatever time it was at the moment – and then call him *again* was going to be brutally murdered with a blunt teaspoon. And have some chopsticks shoved in questionable areas.

He tried to go back to kissing the brat regardless, but after the third time Jee barely managed to swallow the string of expletives and grudgingly slid off of Zuko. It was simply impossible to carry on pretending the ringtone wasn't there, because it had already bludgeoned right between them and shattered the sexy atmosphere into a sad pile of shards. Jee felt it with the way Zuko's kisses became hesitant and nervous, the way his hips stilled and his legs slid off of Jee to rest, knees bent, on either side of him.

"Hang on," Jee muttered with a deep sigh, reaching for the nightstand where the culprit kept making its oblivious racket. "I'll get that real quick and tell whoever it is to put their phone where the sun don't shine or they'll never stop calling. Sorry."

It was Ming. Jee let out another heavy sigh and massaged the space between his eyebrows when he sat back on his haunches, ensconced in Zuko's legs.

Whatever the fuck possessed that crazy woman to call him had better be life-threateningly serious or else he was going to brutally defile her office and all of her precious tracksuits.

"Look, Ming, I don't have time –" he started as soon as he accepted the call, gazing apologetically at Zuko; the brat looked so pitiful and out of his depth that he resembled a large cat in the middle of a thunderstorm.

At a loss for other means to comfort him, Jee reached out and started gently stroking his cock.

"Oh, you're alive!" Immediately Jee realized that Ming's voice sounded strange –the words were painstakingly, carefully enunciated and smoky, and that could only mean one thing.

Having murderous thoughts about people was by no means a novelty for Jee, but rarely was the urge as real and tangible as when he realized the woman chose him, out of all people, tonight, out of all the fucking nights she could have done that on instead, as the object of her drunk-phoning.

"Ming, what the fuck – !"

"I thought maybe you had an accident or sumethin," slurred his fellow teacher. "Wouldn't pick up an'all."

"I'm busy," Jee hissed into the phone, his free hand still stroking up and down Zuko's shaft at a slow, easy pace. The boy beneath him started squirming slightly and Jee squeezed a little harder in a sympathetic attempt to soothe. "If it's nothing serious, I'll call you back."

"Whatcha doin'?"

Oh great, drunk *and* chatty. *Someone please put me out of my misery.*

"None of your business," he snapped; Zuko's squirming was getting more noticeable and he was grabbing at the sheets now.

Maybe the brat was just so impatient to get down to business again, and indeed, so was Jee. He was tempted to just shut the phone down without ceremony, but that wouldn't give him any guarantee that Ming wouldn't call again.
"But I just wanted to tell you about this guy, he's invited me home and I'm not sure if I should go or tell him to piss off, and you know, you're gay and all so you should know that stuff —"

"Ming, for heaven's sake." Really, that was just unfuckingbelievable. Did she think he was her personal sassy gay friend now or what? "Do whatever you like, you're a grown-up! Why should I tell you what to do?"

"But I'm drunk and not in full possessssion of me faculties," the woman pointed out. "I'm in the ladies' room and he thinks I'm peeing, he's kinda hot I guess but I dunno…"

Oh for crying out loud…

His grip on Zuko's cock never faltering, Jee sighed into the cell and tried to think of a way to cut this whole mess short. "Tell him to get lost," he ordered curtly. "If he needed to get you drunk he's probably nothing special. Unless you really, really, really want to get laid."

"You think?"

"Yes." Jee emphasized it with a squeeze to the dick in his hand. Zuko started making semi-coherent noises and arching his back just so, and shit, Jee just wanted to get back to business right fucking now. "And if he gives you any trouble tell him a navy lieutenant is going to come kick his ass."

"Ex-lieutenant," Ming saw it fit to emphasize, but she did follow it up with a giggle. "Okay, yeah, maybe he's not that hot…" Yes, good, that meant she might hang up soon. Unless she was still feeling chatty, but then Jee would just bark at her to call tomorrow. He had much, much more urgent matters at – ha, ha – hand; Zuko was scrambling for purchase and staring up at Jee with eyes wide open, and it was such a beautiful, beautiful sight, especially when he started throwing his head back while his back kept arching, and Jee wanted to encourage more of it so while Ming kept talking, he pumped his hand harder…

… Which, in hindsight, was an excessively stupid thing to do. He really should have seen it coming, he had been encouraging Zuko to come just seconds before that blasted phone call, and now that he thought about it, the kid's desperate noises and gestures were really quite obvious giveaways to what was going on.

But the damage was already done. With a high, strangled cry, the brat's body shot up and then he was coming into Jee's hand, wet spurts dripping down white and hot, and it took Jee a painful few seconds to realize that, a) that noise had been loud and b) Ming had gone very, very quiet.

"What," came Ming's voice after about forever, confirming all of Jee's fears, "was that? Or should I ask: who?"

"Nothing, it was nothing," Jee assured hurriedly over the stab of cold dread that was rapidly spreading down in his stomach, but Ming was faster.

"You've got someone in there," she declared delightedly, sounding as excited as a schoolgirl in a
zoo. "In your bed! You're getting some! Who is it?"

Jee sent Zuko a helpless look, but the kid wasn't looking at him – he was currently disentangling himself from Jee and turning on his side, burying his face in the pillows.

Fuck, fuck, fuck! But at least Ming didn't seem to recognize Zuko's voice…

"I told you I didn't have time," Jee hissed. "Now would you please hang up, take a cab home, drink some water, go to the fuck to sleep and don't call me for the rest of the night?"

"Yessir! Enjoy." Jee heard another giggle, but then the phone went blissfully quiet as Ming hung up.

Fucking finally. Now, to try and salvage what was still salvageable…

… Which wasn't much. Zuko seemed bent on firmly avoiding any eye-contact. His face was pressed into the pillow and he was turning away from Jee as much as he could on the bed, stiff and rigid and generally as unresponsive as a newly-chopped log. The contrast he made now with how he'd been before Ming saw it fit to ruin the evening almost made Jee want to cry.

They had been making such good progress, damn it all to hell…

"Zuko," he tried, putting the phone away on the nightstand. "I'm so sorry."

No response. Of bloody course.

"Hey, it won't happen again." On a sudden flash of inspiration, Jee picked the phone up again and shut it down. "See? I'm turning it off. No one else is going to interrupt."

That did win him a reaction – a muffled, unintelligible one murmured into the pillow. Jee scooted closer to hear better and poked Zuko's shoulder with his finger, silently cursing Ming, drinking, cell phones, dudes in pubs and pretty much everything but the contents of his bed twice over. "What was that?" he asked gently.

"Should have turned it off in the first place, instead of picking it up."

… And for once, Jee really had no answer.

Yes. Yes, he should have. That would have been the logical thing to do. Reach out, take the phone, shut it down and put it back on the nightstand, not once leaving the warmth of Zuko's embrace. But, as it happened way too often in his life, Jee had been too much of a lust-addled, preoccupied idiot to see the simplest solution.

That probably would have meant Ming might have found herself in danger if she'd chosen to go home with the damned unknown Casanova, but the threat was vague at best and Jee was certain she could handle herself just fine in a tight spot. She did not need chaperones, drunk or not, but Zuko did need his attention – undivided attention – now more than ever.

Jee was an idiot, plain and simple, and when his palm met his forehead the resulting slap sounded as loud in the now-silent bedroom as his ringtone had.

"Yes, you're right," he admitted. "I'm sorry. I can't believe I didn't think about it."

In response Zuko only curled in on himself, his back to Jee, the grip he had on the pillow threatening to improve on its dull, plain look by adding ten finger-sized holes.

Jee swallowed the building groan and reached out again, this time to guide his hand along Zuko's
shoulder, as gently as he could but mindful not to tickle. "Hey," he whispered after a heavy pause, "no harm done. She didn't recognize your voice. It's all right. Zuko…"

"It's not!" If possible, Zuko's body went even more rigid, to the point that he looked like he might just snap in half – and Jee had a cold feeling the kid didn't shake off his hand only because he was already curled up on the very edge of the bed and that would mean falling off.

Then, the words poured out, practically screamed into the pillow. "I didn't mean to – I tried to – But I just couldn't and I tried to let you know but you just kept going and I couldn't, it was too much, I –"

Oh.

If he chuckled now, Jee was pretty sure the entire evening would go hang and Zuko would disappear through his window faster than he could say "cock," so he tried not to – but suddenly it was hard.

The realization that Zuko was not worried about Ming possibly recognizing his voice, but about blowing his load all over Jee's hand prematurely, it was…

So perfectly, utterly juvenile. And also not a little hilarious.

Precious, precious brat.

Jee decided to risk a possible outburst and leaned in to graze Zuko's perfect bicep with a soft kiss, then deepened it and nibbled a little on a flash of inspiration. Hopefully the playfulness would distract the brat from his current wounded pride-fuelled angst.

It worked, at least for the split of second it took Zuko to gasp and shudder, and Jee had to hold him still lest the kid fall right off the bed for real.

It was then that he realized he had not wiped Zuko's come off his fingers, but his grumpy bedfellow didn't seem to be in a state to pay attention to any residue fluids sticking to the hands holding him.

"It's all right," Jee whispered, holding the kid close and nuzzling the back of his neck, or as much as he could reach through Zuko's tangled hair. "Don't worry about it. I wanted you to come."

As if it hadn't been obvious enough when Jee'd been grinding their hips together while he caressed Zuko's butt, but maybe Zuko needed these things spelled out for him.

"Don't give me that." The kid snorted. There were still notes of anger and hurt ringing in his voice. "Your face when I did told me something else."

"Oh for crying out loud," Jee groaned, then set about Operation: Distraction.

Largely, it involved kissing every inch of the sullen brat's neck and shoulder he could reach and spooning up to Zuko so he could give that young cock a bracing squeeze.

"I was talking to one of your teachers who interrupted something very important, I was not expecting it then, that's all there is to it."

As he spoke, he emphasized each word with a kiss, a caress, a stroke on Zuko's cock. It was already twitching in response – oh, youth – and that made Jee all the more determined to keep sending ripples of sensation all over the body he had in his arms to show that he was still very much interested in the proceedings. "It was my fault more than anything," he murmured between kisses. "I knew how high-strung you were and I was doing my best to make you come before. I shouldn't have kept touching you like that. But like I said, I wanted you to come. I tried to make it happen. There's nothing. To be. Ashamed. Of."

It was working. Zuko's body was starting to move against his, reacting to the rhythm Jee's hands and
hips were setting, and his breath was coming short and shallow again, broken by high-pitched
whimpers. His hips were starting to jerk back and forth, between Jee's crotch and his hand moving
over Zuko's reawakening erection, as if he couldn't make up his mind which sort of friction he
preferred. Jee had gone mostly soft while he was talking to Ming, but now, having Zuko's ass grind
into him, the softness of those perfectly rounded buttocks brushing his groin, his own cock was
starting to take a very active interest in things again – and once Zuko felt it, he started seeking it out
even more ferociously.

"But… why…" the brat managed to pant out, thrusting back into Jee's hips and keening a little when
Jee met the movement by moving his own hips into it. "Why did you… When I asked you to fuck
me… I wanted to…"

In response, Jee grabbed Zuko's leg and held it up so he could push his cock into the cleft of the kid's
buttocks. They closed around him firm and solid and so, so good, he could have wept with relief.

"Because," he ground out, imposing a rhythm he made Zuko settle into with a firm grip on the kid's
hipbone when the kid started wriggling and gasping, clawing at the sheets and pushing back into Jee,
"that was not the main course. Just an appetizer. And you were so wound up, I didn't expect you to
last long, which is okay." He stressed it with a long, shallow thrust, at which Zuko's buttocks
clenched around him and God, that alone would have made him hard instantly if he hadn't been
getting so already. "You're young. I'll teach you how to last, but for now, I just want you to enjoy
yourself. And the more orgasms you have the better." That particular statement was asserted with a
nibble to Zuko's earlobe, their hips now moving in a fluid, almost dance-like rhythm, Jee's hand
moving back up Zuko's raised thigh to help keep it up. "And you look incredible when you come,
Zuko."

The body pressed against his arched at that, the slender leg going even higher, and Zuko's arm shot
up to caress Jee's head behind him and bring it even closer. Jee kissed it, as high as he could reach,
and then mouthed a path down the bicep to the shoulder, then the neck, then the kid's face, which
had turned enough towards him that he could reach the cheek and the closed, unscarred eye.

God, the brat was hot, so incredibly, incredibly hot. Jee couldn't believe he was such a lucky fucker.

The next few minutes were spent in utter, sensual bliss: the two of them locked close to each other,
Jee's chest sliding against Zuko's rippling back, their hips moving in a rhythm the kid seemed now to
settle into almost naturally – and Jee knew this particular thing would be easy for him to get, he
reacted so well to Jee's body, he learned so quickly, fuck, this was getting so incredibly good. And he
was managing to hold his leg up with seemingly no trouble at all, proving exactly how flexible he
was as he hitched it higher and higher to trap Jee's cock between his strong cheeks all the more
securely.

For a moment Jee felt tempted to let it continue like that. To keep Zuko pressed against him and fuck
between his buttocks, which clenched and relaxed around him in rhythmic pulses that nearly had him
seeing stars. With every thrust he wanted to go deeper, harder, to just grab that sharp hipbone and
keep Zuko still and move against him until he reached his climax that way. The grip of the brat's
body was smooth and firm at the same time, closing his sensitive flesh in a warm furnace of muscle
that felt better than most of what Jee had experienced in years. Letting the situation unravel like that
would have been more Zuko-friendly, too, because as relaxed as he was getting under Jee's
ministrations, his being ready for actual penetration was a whole other matter, especially now after
Ming's little interruption.

Maybe if Zuko was too far gone to notice, he would let it…

"Oh God, fuck me, I need you inside right now!"
… Right. There went that particular hope.

Not that Jee had anything to complain about – the profanity falling from Zuko's lips again had him shuddering from head to toe and grasping Zuko's thigh so firmly he was sure there would be finger-shaped bruises on that soft, delicate skin in the morning. And it would be so incredibly easy to shift their positions, just a little, and slip inside…

Okay, obviously they were both more than ready.

Jee kissed Zuko's shoulder one more time before he whispered, "Stay like that" and forced himself to move away.

It was the single most painful thing he'd done that night, up until that point.

Turning on his back in the direction of the nightstand, Jee silently congratulated himself on his foresight – if he hadn't bought the supply of lube and condoms the other day, he would have found himself in a rather stupid situation right now. But the essentials were waiting patiently in the top drawer, hilariously conspicuous resting next to the school paperwork Jee had been poring over a few nights before.

Nevermind that. Jee grabbed both the bottle of lube and the packet of condoms without a second glance at the stack of papers and shut the drawer with a bang, thus forestalling any and all attempts from his conscience to stab him with guilt.

He had more important things to take care of.

When he turned back to Zuko, he saw that the kid was bent on proving exactly how difficult it was for him to obey orders – he had moved from his previous position and was now on all fours, peering at Jee and his supplies curiously with his head cocked to the side, his lips parted, eyes half-lidded, and looking like an illustration taken straight from the better-quality Kama Sutra.

"So," he whispered, and his voice managed to crack even on that single word. For an insane moment Jee had to resist the impulse to ruffle his hair. And then Zuko's eyes flew to the lube and condoms in Jee's hand, as if to say, *This is it*.

"Yeah." Jee smiled in confirmation. Then, he made the inhuman effort, schooled his face into a serious expression and asked, "Are you sure? We don't have to do it right away on our first night. We can go slow. It could be fun for you too. We could experiment with foreplay, see what feels good, we –"

Zuko shook his head so vehemently that for a moment it looked like he might lose all his hair in the process. "Are you kidding?" he asked, sitting down but still supporting most of his weight on his arms. His voice was low, husky, and shook a little, the kid's breathing still unsettled. If the brat ever decided to record smutty romances for a living, he might likely make even more money than his Daddy dear. "The whole fucking term was like one huge foreplay session. I've had it. I want you inside, tonight."

Then, before Jee could pick his jaw from the mattress, he moved and lay down on the bed on his stomach, pulling his knees under himself so that his ass was facing up. Which was probably the most obvious and straightforward invitation Jee was ever going to get.

The sound of the lube bottle being uncorked for the first time seemed uncommonly loud, made sharper by the silence which now seemed heightened and charged with cottoncandy-thick expectation settling on both of them. When Jee glanced at Zuko, he saw a golden slit watching him
as intently as though whatever he was doing was of federal importance – and for the kid, it probably was. Jee really didn't want to flash back to his first time, but he could definitely empathize.

"Zuko, do you know what I'm doing?" he asked slowly, dipping his finger into the cool, oily substance. It was good quality stuff – he'd been careful about that. Transparent, it glistened on his fingertip in the gentle lamplight like liquid promise.

The brat was still lying in the same position he'd assumed before, but Jee could see his muscles tightening as he swallowed audibly. "You're going to prepare me," he whispered, the scarred eye sharp and bright as it watched his every move.

Jee smiled at him.

"Correct. And you know what this is, yes?"

"I'm not a kid." Zuko's tone sounded strained, and Jee let it slip. Obviously the brat felt the need to assert some sort of control over the situation, however slight, and it was a need Jee had no trouble understanding.

He smoothened a hand over Zuko's ass, gently skimming over each buttock, and patted it lovingly when the kid drew in a sharp breath.

"Are you sure you want to do it like this? From behind?" he asked quietly, still petting the gorgeous butt that was now gloriously spread out for him to admire.

He'd been right – it looked just as uncommonly good as it felt.

It wasn't how Jee imagined their first real fuck – he'd always fantasized it would be something more personal, at least allowing him to read Zuko's face as they got going.

"Yes," the brat murmured, the scarred eye closing for a moment as he took a few deep breaths. "I mean, I want – That way it'll be – That way's better."

Jee shrugged. "All right." Far be it from him to dictate how Zuko should prefer his first serving of cock-up-the-ass, and tonight was supposed to be all about him anyway. If he wanted it doggy style, he would get it.

And now that he was thinking about it, Jee found it pretty hilarious that Zuko didn't even question the fact that he would bottom. At first Jee was going to ask him about it, but it seemed that the brat had come to him with his mind already made up and didn't even consider the other possibility.

Which was more than fine by Jee. He suspected he wasn't as sensitive down there as most of his partners seemed to be, and as he dearly hoped Zuko would turn out to be as well, and overall he did prefer to top. Not that he didn't enjoy things the other way around from time to time, but on the whole, it was not quite his thing. Still, that Zuko wouldn't even think about it was slightly –

"Are you going to do it sometime tonight or should I go make us some coffee?"

Jee lightly slapped the cheeky brat's butt in response and got some more of the lube on his fingers before scooting closer to Zuko and spreading his legs a little so that he was sitting between them.

"I'm going to put my finger in now. Try to relax. It might feel a little strange," he whispered, massaging the skin before him.

"Just do it!" If not for the arousal in Zuko's voice, the order would have sounded like a bark. "I know
"Oh?" Jee frowned, letting his finger circle Zuko's opening teasingly. "But you said you and your ex didn't –"

"No, we didn't, not with him, it's just that I…"

Oh, that little fiend. The images that instantly flooded Jee's head were bound to stay there and haunt him at night for a long, long time.

When he asked, "Tonight?" his voice sounded much hoarser than he wanted it to.

"… No," came the soft answer, nearly inaudible when Zuko once again opted to speak to the pillow. "Not tonight. I wanted to… I wanted to know how it feels when you do it. You know. For the first time."

Jee had to swallow over that. Several times. And fight the urge to just shove his cock into the boy right then and there, as it was positively twitching for it by now. When he prodded inside with his finger, though, the hissing intake of breath and the instant clenching of muscle around it was just as rewarding.

"Relax," he cooed, flattening his other palm over Zuko's butt while he tried to push his finger in to the second knuckle over the sudden, instinctive tightening of flesh. "It's all good. Shhh, just relax and let me in."

This was the part he had been hesitant about. During all the months he'd known Zuko, he saw the kid let his guard down only a handful of times, and that included the night in Zuko's bedroom when he'd been drunk off his ass. The words "relaxed" and "Zuko" simply didn't go together, and Jee suspected that it might give them some trouble once they got it on.

Maybe he should have fed him some mulled wine back there… But no. He really did need Zuko sober for this and that was that.

However, if the brat's current state was anything to go by, his fears were perfectly justified. The kid was clearly struggling not to fight the intrusion, even though the amount of lube Jee coated his finger in was as generous as possible and his finger was sliding in fairly smoothly even despite the tightness.

"Easy, kid," he pleaded, doing his best to sound reassuring. "Deep breaths. Just keep breathing and let go."

"I'm trying!"

Jee shook his head and leaned down, attempting to calm the kid some other way since words clearly weren't doing the trick. As he started to gently move the finger out, his lips met the delicate skin at the small of Zuko's back and moved over it, sucking gently. From the reaction he got, he worried for a second that the distraction was a bad idea – Zuko's body went viciously taut under him, so much so that his finger found itself momentarily trapped. But then he heard the brat let out a shuddering breath, followed closely by the softest of moans, and the body beneath him began to unwind, bit by bit, muscle by muscle.

Jee allowed himself a smile against soft white skin and kissed the spot again, proceeding in his attempts to stretch Zuko out as subtly and non-intrusively as possible. Distracting the brat as thoroughly as he could with his lips – kissing, sucking, nibbling, leaving marks that would no doubt turn to hickey's come dawn – he moved his finger out, then in again, each time curling it and
wiggling around a little in the impossibly tight heat, and his cock throbbed mercilessly at the thought of being buried there. If only the kid could relax some more – which it seemed he couldn't, damn him, because even with the little gasps he gave out almost continuously now, he was alternating between loosening up and resisting, and if he was like that with only one finger…

"Hey," Jee whispered, caressing Zuko's back. "You all right?"

"Fine, fine, I'm *fine*, I can take it, keep going!"

Jee frowned. By now he knew Zuko well enough to recognize when the brat was being idiotically stubborn and all signs were pointing to it at the present moment. Obviously he had trouble forcing himself to trust Jee enough with his body to let him in fully, which stung a little; but it was not about him specifically, or at least Jee hoped so, and it was up to him now to prove to Zuko that the list of people who wanted to hurt him, however long it might be, did not include the occupant of this bedroom.

There was more at stake tonight than Jee had initially realized. He'd already made one grave mistake – another one might cost him *all this*. He'd known it would be no walk in the park, what with Zuko's many, many issues, but suddenly he realized just how careful he needed to be; even more careful than a man handling delicate china, since at the end of the day, china could be glued together. Zuko on the other hand gave the impression that he'd been broken and glued together so many times before that there were jagged lines of cracks running over the surface, cracks that threatened to shatter him for good upon another blow.

Which is why, when Jee coated his middle finger in lube until it glistened down to his palm, he added it as slowly as a surgeon performing a complicated procedure on an open heart.

It was worth it, he kept convincing himself. Absolutely worth it. His own erection was nearly driving him mad with need at this point, but stretching his patience now to give Zuko as good of an experience as the kid himself permitted would bear plenty of fruit, he was sure of it. Just a little more…

Immediately there was a sharp hiss, an intake of breath, and Zuko's body went taut as a bowstring again before he visibly forced himself to breathe out. Jee used that moment to push both fingers into the temporarily lax passage and tried to scissor them experimentally, just enough so Zuko would feel it, and immediately the strong inner muscles clamped down on him again as the boy wriggled violently. Whether it was to get away from Jee's fingers or to impale himself deeper, Jee had no idea, and he had an inkling the brat himself didn't know.

He cooed soothingly and set about calming the kid down with his lips again, triggering more choked-back moans and desperate murmurs as Zuko's body jerked under the sensation. Lube-coated fingers moved more freely now, but the passage still felt too tight for comfort and Zuko couldn't quite stop himself from squirming and fighting against the new feeling, even though Jee could see he was still hard – several times Zuko rubbed himself down on the sheets, hard.

Good. At least he was still enjoying himself despite some evidence to the contrary. Jee knew what it was feeling overwhelmed during one's first time with someone else, and he hoped to God it was mostly that and nothing more serious.

If he could only find the kid's prostate, he was sure things would go uphill from there…

He tried, going for different angles whenever it seemed that Zuko temporarily succeeded in letting go, and prodded deeper and deeper every time, making sure the brat was kept distracted. And even though he was concentrating too hard to fully appreciate the situation, a part of him couldn't help but
wallow in how incredibly hot it was – the picture Zuko presented, lying on his stomach and spread out just for Jee, squirming and writhing while Jee's fingers disappeared in and out of him.

There it was, the guiltiest fantasy of his life, right here in his bed.

Focusing on it was disastrous, though, as it sent a dizzying rush of blood straight to Jee's cock, and he worried that there might not be enough blood to be distributed anywhere else at that point, he was so goddamn hard. So he tried not to dwell on it too much and let his attention center on the preparations. He would look his fill later, when they were past that volatile point. For now, he needed to make sure that they got there in the first place.

A moment's hesitation preceded the addition of a third finger; when it happened, Zuko suddenly went disturbingly still. Jee paused, the three fingers in to the second knuckle, and watched, but the only movement from Zuko now was the frantic heaving of his chest as he struggled to even out his breathing, and the tremors that shook him time and time again.

That… didn't look good.

"Zuko…" Jee started, but the kid only grabbed the pillows under him viciously and stuck his butt up, pushing Jee's fingers in even further. "Kid, wait, you'll hurt yourself!"

"No!" Zuko tried to push back even further as Jee tried to dislodge his fingers in alarm. "Keep going, I can do it, I know I can!"

Jee should have protested. He should have put his foot down and put an end to it before the situation escalated, as he'd already suspected it could. All the signs were there for him to read, clear as the words in the half-finished spy novel from the library resting on the floor resting on the floor by the bed. In hindsight it all seemed so glaringly clear…

… But he didn't. Because it was not only Zuko's wounded pride and seemingly ridiculous ambition that put them at risk – it was Jee's own pride, as well. The stupid need to impress, to appear better and more skilled than he really was, to make Zuko think of him as a good, trustworthy lover. Working out, carrying Zuko to the bed, even the private lessons and their regular gym class – they were all aimed to impress that one messed up brat and had been for some time now. The bottom line was, Jee wanted to look good in front of the kid.

Which is probably why, ultimately, he didn't stop when his better judgment told him to. He got overconfident in his own abilities and wanted to go on, to prove before himself as well as the brat that he was skillful enough, experienced enough, adult enough to guide them both through Zuko's crisis. And so, when the kid told him to keep going, he did, cheerfully ignoring the alarm bells and working his three fingers in carefully into the tight, tight heat of Zuko's body, murmuring calming nonsense and exchanging caresses for common sense.

It was a mistake. His second one that night, and even greater than the last.

But if Zuko was in any actual pain, he went to great lengths to conceal it; mostly, his wriggling and squirming looked more like the kid was simply being overwhelmed by new sensations and didn't quite know what to do about it. Hoping that he would get used to the intrusion eventually if only they kept it going long enough, Jee added a little more vigor to his instrokes and started pushing his fingers apart a little to help Zuko grow accustomed to the sensation of being filled by something larger. All the while, he kept watching carefully for any signs of overt pain, but Zuko either didn't feel any or refused to give him much to go on – the discomfort was clear, but the brat apparently insisted on being his usual stubborn, destructive self and never stopped thrusting up into Jee's fingers regardless, fingers clawing viciously at the pillows.
This was starting to resemble a fight more than anything else, with Zuko determined to go through with it even if it meant Jee ripping him from the inside out. Which would most definitely not happen if Jee had anything to say about it.

"Okay, okay, I'm ready!" Zuko rasped out after a few minutes of that struggle, sounding and looking anything but.

"Zuko, you're not," Jee stated firmly; he still hadn't found the kid's prostate, mostly due to the object of his ministrations squirming and moving so much, and didn't want the kid to plunge into it without knowing how good it could really feel. "Trust me. I'm the experienced adult here."

"I'm an adult too!"

*Having an eighteenth birthday a couple of weeks ago does not make you an adult, kid,* Jee thought with a stab of concern. *Especially not in bed.* Zuko might have come of age on paper now and some parts of him were admittedly too grown up, but others...

He was still mostly a boy lost on his way to manhood.

Well. Jee would rectify that soon enough, if only the brat would let him do things his way.

"You are not ready," Jee stated, channeling all the authority he could muster into his voice since the brat had long ago stopped meeting his eye. "Just a little more, you need more preparation, you're still too tense and I want to make this good for you."

"I'm not, I want –"

"Zuko." Jee emphasized the urgency in his voice by spreading his fingers inside the brat, which earned him a high-pitched half-hiss, half-moan. "I only have three fingers in and you're having trouble relaxing into it. My cock is bigger, you know that. Be reasonable, kid, and let me do this the right way."

Later, Jee would smack himself for his choice of words as clearly it was the wrong thing to say on several levels. For one thing, he should have refrained from calling Zuko *kid* – the word was enough to spark that overambitious streak which prompted Zuko to do insane things just to prove that he was not. Besides, the brat had the infuriating tendency of understanding everything in the worst possible way and the sentence must have somehow implied to him that he was failing, that he was not doing well enough, which only furthered his frustration with himself and added to the tension Jee was trying so hard to alleviate.

Consequently, though he did allow Jee to prepare him some more – with a fresh coating of lube to make it easier – and started reacting rather well to caresses, enough so to force himself to loosen up to a point that created the illusion of relaxing, he still demanded that Jee go on and fuck him not five minutes later.

Which was when Jee's second mistake bore its disastrous fruit. The kid had appeared more relaxed, yes, and his muscles had loosened up enough for Jee to move the three fingers more smoothly, more freely. And in a situation in which his cock had been throbbing for action for what felt like hours, endless, agonizing *hours* with that sinfully good view and a boy so hot it was practically lethal; with the blood roaring traitorously in Jee's ears and covering up what little reason he had left; with pent-up need so overwhelmingly strong it threatened to crash right through the feeble dam of restraint he was slowly losing a hold of; that was enough of a greenlight to agree with a lust-addled, unstable brat whose self-destructive tendencies had been well-established even before Jee'd arrived in Summerfield.
He really, really should have known better.

But he wanted it so. Fucking. Much. There was not enough restraint in the whole world to stop him from acting on it now, and Jee never had all that much of it to begin with – the last remaining vestiges would, he suspected, be better spent on trying to control his pace once he actually found himself inside the brat, because for now he feared he might just snap and lose it the moment his cock met that warm, soft skin. He was that starved for relief.

Zuko didn't protest when Jee's hands grabbed his hips sharply to pull them up, but he did let out a muffled, alarmed howl when the three fingers left his body with an obscene wet sound.

"Shhhhh," Jee hummed, smoothening his hand over the beautiful plains of Zuko's back as he gave himself a couple of bracing strokes – the touch alone was enough to force a relieved grunt out of him as some of the urgent tension found an outlet.

He didn't remember ever being this hard.

"I'm going to go slow," he whispered, positioning himself on his knees behind the boy. "As soon as anything feels wrong, painful, uncomfortable, whatever, you let me know, understand?" His hand squeezed Zuko's left buttock in emphasis. "Don't let me hurt you."

"Yeah." That was as much as Jee got as far as acknowledgments went, but he was too wound-up to be bothered by it. Stroking Zuko's smooth thighs up and down with one hand, he used his already lube-covered one to fumble with the packet of condoms.

The rustling must have caught Zuko's attention – he turned and tried to peer at Jee over his shoulder, curiosity piercing through the dominating glaze of arousal. "Why do you need that?" he asked in a small voice. "I've never had proper sex before, I'm not diseased."

Jee ignored him and fished out one condom, which he unwrapped with his teeth in swift, practiced movements. "Did you get yourself checked?" he asked, letting the wrap fall to the side of the bed.

"... No."

"Then we're using it. According to the tests I took last year, I'm clean, but you can never be too careful. Now, keep breathing. Nice and deep. Try to relax as much as you can. Think of something sexy."

It was a fascinating sight, the way Zuko's eyes glazed over again and the blush blossomed on his white, healthy cheek anew. The good eye was fixed on Jee's hands quickly unrolling the condom over his waiting cock. The boy's lips were slightly parted as he stared and he was panting, and shit, he looked amazing, so hot, so entirely fuckable.

Jee sent him a quick smile. Maybe next time he would let Zuko do the honors – the kid sure looked curious enough. It was really quite adorable.

Spreading the lube over himself after such long and painful neglect felt entirely too good, even through the condom, and he didn't fight the sigh which slipped from his mouth. He only closed his eyes for a second, but when he opened them again, he was greeted by the sight of Zuko's arm moving rhythmically down below while the kid pressed his forehead into the sheets.

Damn, if it wasn't the hottest thing Jee had seen in his whole fucking life...

When Jee spoke, it was in a voice so low and throaty it surprised even him, but at this point he could barely think straight anymore and some part of him needed to spell out in words exactly what was
going to happen, if only to regain some control over their little, private reality.

"I am going to fuck you now." Going closer on his knees, he grabbed his dick in hand and touched the tip over Zuko's ass, which trembled slightly; the kid's hand stilled, as did his entire body, but Jee had no doubt he was holding onto himself for dear life. "I'm going to push in, slowly."

"God." Zuko practically mewled, a visible shudder running through him from his toes up to his head.

Jee refrained from making cheap jokes about Zuko invoking his name in vain and instead assumed the most comfortable position to make one of his dirtiest dreams come true, one hand on his cock and the other leaving finger-shaped bruises on Zuko's hip.

When he finally pushed in – little more than an inch and even that was enough for stars to spark before his eyes – he shuddered all. Zuko's stretched and lubed-up body opened up for him just enough to accommodate that initial intrusion and closed over the head almost instantly, creating a rush of pleasure so sweet and dizzying that for a moment Jee needed to still himself on the small of the brat's back.

Christ, he knew it would feel good, but this…!

Zuko had gotten tense again, however, and when Jee tried to get any deeper, the sudden cramping tightness made it almost impossible. Zuko was breathing heavily, each panting gasp wrenched out of him with the underlying whimper just short of being voiced, as though he was trying to fight his own body – and losing.

"It's okay, I'm all right," he managed to gasp out, as if reading Jee's mind – his voice was constrained, though, choked up and just as tight as his body, the words bleeding out of him almost by force, which was anything but reassuring.

"I don't think –" Jee tried to protest, but the attempt sounded feeble; his whole body was vibrating with Zuko's words, the boy's shudders somehow making their way into his own blood, and it felt debilitatingly good.

"I'll be fine, just keep going and I'll do better!"

Do better? Jee frowned at the choice of vocabulary and actually managed to open his mouth to say it was not a competition, but a low moan was all that escaped him when Zuko braced himself against the mattress and pushed back violently, without a warning, just as he had with Jee's fingers earlier. The man's cock almost slipped out – it would have, Zuko's hole having gotten too closed-up for him to slide deeper if not for the grip he still had on himself to steady the thrust. Instead, it did go in further, and a high, desperate moan, too sharp to be caused by pleasure, filled Jee with rising panic.

"Stop that! You really will hurt yourself!" That came out louder than he'd intended, but he really was getting scared now – scared that Zuko's stubbornness will ruin everything beyond repair on their very first night together.

He wanted the kid, but not so much as to rape him, dammit…!

His outburst only made it worse, though. Zuko started wiggling, writhing in the sheets in a way that could have been sexy if not for the distressed sounds he couldn't hold in any longer, breathing even more heavily when he tried to impale himself on Jee's cock and move away from it at the same time.

"I – can – do – it –" he panted, even as his body tried to shut itself against further intrusion.

This was bad. This was very, very bad. Jee stopped moving entirely, impossibly hard though it was,
and grabbed Zuko's squirming hips in as iron a grip as he could manage before the kid got it into his head to force himself even further back and actually rip something. "Stay like that," he ordered in a voice that scraped at his dry throat almost painfully. "Stop moving. Get used to it first, for fuck's sake take it slowly if you have to, there's no shame in it."

There was a strangled moan from Zuko, one that quickly turned into coughing – apparently Jee's throat was not the only one that had gone desert-dry. But, praise be to whatever perverted beings that chose to watch over them tonight, he did stop moving for a few seconds, Jee's cock halfway up his ass, muscles bulging and pulsing with exertion, his inner muscles throbbing so hard Jee's almost echoed it in sympathy.

Which left Jee with another dilemma. Whatever he did now – pull back or try to push himself all the way in – it would hurt Zuko, really hurt him, because there was clearly no way on Earth he was going to relax at this point. They couldn't stay locked like that forever, either. The safest option would be for Jee to go flaccid and then pull out, which…

… was getting more and more likely. The sight of his cock buried in Zuko was hot as all hell, but not while it was driving Zuko to such obvious distress, and the muscles hugging him no longer felt as good while Jee was conscious they were closing over him in pain and rejection rather than pleasure.

"I think it's getting better," he heard after an agonizingly long minute. "I'm getting used to it. You can move."

That… didn't really sound convincing, not with Zuko's voice being tight like that, but on the other hand, if he really felt like that…

Okay. One more try to test Zuko's endurance and give him another chance to make up his mind, and then Jee would decide…

The grip he had on Zuko's hips must have hurt and there would without a doubt be a lovely collection of fresh bruises on that fine, young skin, but Jee needed him still and steady when he tried to thrust forward as much as the kid's body would let him. The lube made the tight, tight passage possible if not exactly easy, and Jee wished dearly he could actually see Zuko's face, but the kid was ramrod-still and shaking a little from the effort, his head firmly set downward.

And then he jerked. It was an involuntary gesture if Jee ever saw one; it rippled through the brat's body entirely against his will, that much was clear to see, and though the sudden tightening of muscles to a practically inhuman degree indicated that Zuko tried his damnest to fight against it, it still forced him to attempt a shift forward to the headboard, away from Jee. The accompanying sound, wrenched as if with the help of pincers from the depths of the brat's throat, did not sound good in any sense of the word.

It sounded plain fucking terrifying.

And put a definite end to things, as far as Jee was concerned. Whether the brat liked it or not, Jee was pulling out of him and stopping this madness before Zuko's self-destructive pride did any more damage. He was not a rapist, damn it, and there was nothing even remotely arousing about the situation anymore – not when the partner, however sexy he might be, was so obviously in distress.

He was hurting Zuko, he'd allowed it to go this far even though he never should have, and he was already hating himself for it.

"Don't move," he ordered in a whisper, keeping his hold on those trembling hipbones good and firm.
"What are you – argh!"

The protesting yelp came as soon as Zuko felt Jee sliding out of him, and it was accompanied by not-quite-muffled whimpers which only confirmed what Jee was already sure of: they could not carry on like that, no matter how much the brat chose to yell at him. That was not how Jee had planned to introduce Zuko to the pleasures of sex, and he only kept that suddenly bucking form more firmly in place when he pulled out fully, already going soft even despite the friction.

He could only hope it wasn't too late already.

"Don't stop!" Zuko practically yelled. His voice was tight, hoarse and carrying glistening, alarming hints of approaching wetness when he shot Jee a desperate, nearly crazed look over his shoulder. "Don't, do it again, I can take it, I can, just give me another chance, I –"

"No." Jee sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'm sorry I didn't pull out earlier when I should have."

"Please, I –"

Jee wondered briefly if the sound of his heart breaking was audible to Zuko too. By all means it should have been heard in the entire building.

"Zuko, I can't." Jee sat back on his haunches again and looked at the brat; the pull of the skin on his face wrinkling in belated apology was almost painful. "I promised you I wouldn't hurt you, but I already have. I'm sorry."

The look he received in return as Zuko collapsed onto the bed – slowly, as though his strings were being lowered joint by joint by an invisible puppetmaster – stabbed right into him more painfully than a knife would have, and not because of any anger behind it. There was no anger as far as he could tell, and instantly he wished there was. It would have been much better than that tight, mask-like expression that looked mere seconds away from crumbling into a thousand pieces, already close to leaking.

"What are you saying…?" The voice was just as bad – small, carefully controlled and yet barely kept together with mortar more fickle than sand. "That you don't… That I –"

Jee wasn't entirely sure whether Zuko paused because he couldn't find the right words or because he couldn't form any kind of words at all, but a cold, terrified part of him grimly suspected it was the latter. The boy's throat sounded completely blocked all of a sudden, as though he'd almost choked on a sob.

Fuck.

"I'm not saying anything. You did nothing wrong, Zuko, but I could see you were in pain and no one in their right mind would go on in this situation," Jee said quickly, reaching out to stroke Zuko's back.

It was when the boy moved away from him as though he'd been burned that Jee realized exactly how badly he'd fucked things up.

"Hey, it's no big deal," he tried, sliding up towards the headboard next to Zuko, though by God the bile in his throat made it hard to speak. "We can try again later when you feel better. No pressure. Just…" Ahhh, fuck, what could he possibly add to make it better? "Just breathe, okay? Keep breathing. It's going to be –"
There was no warning. None whatsoever, other than the lightning-quick glimpse he caught of Zuko's face when the brat suddenly bolted off the bed and, buck-naked, ran away, straight into the bathroom through the extra door in Jee's bedroom. The resounding bang of the door shutting and the sound of the lock clicking into place hardly registered through the chilling, numbing shock that cut right through Jee in the moment he saw Zuko's eyes.

They were glistening wet.

Chapter End Notes

... Sorry.

Next time I will try to put the "comfort" in h/c, Jee really will tell a story and a post-coital cigarette shall be had.
"Zuko!"

But it was too late for that. The closed door to the bathroom glared at him in stubborn defiance, flatly refusing to give him even the tiniest sliver of hope that maybe it was all just a bad dream.

It wasn't, good God, it fucking wasn't. The sight of Zuko's tear-filled eyes was much too fresh, much too vivid and shocking as it burned itself into Jee's eyeballs, to be anything but real.

Oh, he'd done it now. He'd really outdone himself. He'd gone and not only taken a barely legal youngster to his bed, he'd also been stupid enough as to go too far and actually hurt the kid this badly on their very first night.

What was that, you old idiot? You promised you wouldn't? You promised you'd treasure the brat, that you'd treat him like a young rajah? Well, we all know where you can stuff that promise now…

He'd hurt Zuko. He'd hurt the poor bastard enough to make him cry and lock himself in Jee's bathroom, Jesus fucking Christ.

And of course now, now he had no fucking clue what to do. He had never been in a similar situation before. He'd never been the one to inflict the damage and have to repair it, especially not with someone so young, so vulnerable – too young, absolutely too young for all of Zuko's sweetness and promises and lust, and Jee really was an idiot to go through with all this. Comforting other people in a serious crisis was an art he'd only vaguely grasped the concept of as it was, and this…

This was serious. Incredibly serious. And probably already cost him Zuko, for good.

Shit, whatever possessed him to make him believe for a single second that he was well-equipped for the job? Oh, how hilariously, dreadfully wrong he'd been. He wasn't. Not even close. Just because Zuko seemed to enjoy his company; just because he reacted rather well to Jee in a public, controlled environment; just because he seemed to want him, didn't automatically make Jee an expert in issues-heavy adolescents. He should have realized. He may have thought he'd been through similar experiences Zuko was burdened with, but he really didn't know anything, did he? Not about the scar,
not about the true extent of Zuko's sexual experiences, not about the fights the kid had gotten himself into, not about the daily struggles and the amount of abuse…

Abuse. Ye gods. Was that what he'd seen just seconds ago? Evidence of some dark, deeply-rooted trauma? Zuko's behavior had been plain disturbing, he'd seemed so genuinely terrified, and that…

Shit. Jee really didn't know anything and it froze him to the very core that the answer to that question could very well be yes, for all he knew.

He was a fool. A delusional fucking fool. He should have insisted on taking things slow, on teaching Zuko about his body first, for God's sake he should have stepped up and put his foot down when there had still been time, he never should have done this in the first place…

A sound tore through the deafening silence. It startled Jee out of his stupor like a slap to the face – a stifled, angry sob, coming from the bathroom.

…Right.

No time for self-pity. No time for second guessing himself now that the damage had already been done. All he could do now was try and fix it, however poorly prepared for it he may be, even if only to send the kid home with his injuries at least partially licked.

Though the sound of Jee's voice was probably the last thing Zuko wanted to hear.

When he moved his arm to tug the now-useless condom off, his body felt as if his bone marrow had been replaced with lead. The numbness stayed with him as Jee pushed himself off the bed and approached the bathroom door carefully, step after dragging step, and his hand hovered uselessly over the doorknob.

Should he alert Zuko to the fact that the lock on the door was broken? Or should he simply walk in even if the kid didn't want him to…?

Eventually Jee leaned against the hard wood and put his ear to it, listening for any further evidence of distress. He knew what he would have preferred in Zuko's situation, and that was a bit of space to pull himself together. He definitely would not appreciate other people seeing him in the brat's current state. Yeah… It was better not to force himself on the kid just now and let him breathe.

Loudly, from the sound of it. The door muffled the noises a bit, but not much, and the cheaply-made walls were only a little more resistant than cardboard, so Jee could hear the broken, heaving sobs with a clarity he wished wasn't there – and each one felt like another hammer blow to his gut. Soon it became obvious that Zuko tried to suppress them by sticking something in his mouth, maybe a towel, because the little wet gulps of breath grew less audible and altogether different sort of muffled, but…

It wasn't getting any better.

Okay, Jee, no more hiding. You need to do something now. That crying has to stop.


There was no answer, but then again, he didn't really expect one. He pressed on anyway, each word quiet, hesitant and hilariously inadequate in the ringing not-quite-silence. "I'm sorry. I really am. I should have seen, should have done things differently, it's all my fault. You didn't do anything wrong."
Some of his words were swallowed by the street noises outside and the blur of voices from the apartments around his, but he was sure Zuko could hear him. Even so, the tiny, painful noises from the bathroom kept floating to him and making his ears bleed even as he swallowed around a few sentences that sounded horribly, hilariously wrong.

And then he latched onto a sudden idea like a tick worming its way into skin, because, well… Why the hell not. It could hardly spoil things at this point.

"My first time wasn't all that great either, you know?"

Silence. Jee let his forehead rest against the door as he tried to put the story together in his head; it wasn't a memory he liked to revisit, but maybe it was what Zuko needed to hear.

"It was a disaster," he whispered into the barrier of wood. "The guy I did it with was two years older, a senior, but it was his first time too. And it wasn't even someone special, just a decent-looking guy in my Government class I talked to several times. I guess I wanted to know what it felt like so badly I would have gone with anyone, so we ended up in a dirty janitor's closet. We had the most awkward time deciding who would top, playing macho to cover up that we were both scared shitless. It was ridiculous. We were a pair of clueless morons, not even out of the closet back then – you know, the figurative one, but our location of choice was pretty ironic I guess. Ha! For all I know, today that guy could be married with a bunch of kids in a neat little house in the fucking suburbs."

Oh God, he was rambling. He wasn't making any sense. But once he'd started, it felt as if he'd opened up a house in the middle of a flood, and the memories kept pouring in, straight into his mouth without consulting the brain. And on the other side of the door, there was silence.

Zuko was listening.

"I ended up bottoming for him," Jee went on, his voice growing bitter just as the memories did. "Standing up with the mops and buckets everywhere, my ass between him and the wall. It hurt like a bitch. Didn't even let him half way in before I turned around and punched him in the face because he was too drunk to take my 'stop' for an answer."

Not the proudest moment in Jee's history, he would be the first to admit, but they had been drunk on a smuggled mixture of something that may have started out as whisky but, under misguided high school creativity, had degenerated into an unidentifiable brown liquid so disgusting that Jee wouldn't give it to anyone, not even to Zhao. And it hadn't been as if either of them had a clue what to do – educational pamphlets on everything, including on how to be a healthy gay boy, hadn't exactly been the rage they were now, and no one'd even dreamed of the kind of internet access that was a given nowadays. Violence had seemed as good a response as any. Anyway, kids always understood violence. It had gotten his point across.

Zuko still wasn't saying anything, but Jee replied to a question he imagined the kid might have asked if he were better predisposed: "We decided to pretend it never happened," he said with a bitter half-smile. "Stumbled out of the janitor's closet like the idiots we were and went right back to the homecoming dance, still drunk off our asses. I remember him dancing with the head cheerleader later, pretending he was a proper ladies' man and not a great big fag… It took me months to try again with someone else, and even then it wasn't all that great. Just okay. But then it got better."

He sighed, closing his eyes for a moment as he tried to dress the next bit into words that would actually make sense. "Look, what I'm trying to say here is… It's never perfect. You probably expected a lot tonight, and you had every right to because I promised you it would be good, but… Things happen. Stuff goes wrong. And it's not anyone's fault, it's just because we're people. With
real bodies that don't always work like the bodies you see in porn flicks. And that's that. You try, you make mistakes, then you either learn from them or stop doing things altogether, and that's all right. There's no law that says that everyone has to enjoy sex or rimming or blowjobs or what have you."

Ye gods, what was that stuff coming out of his mouth? He was just grasping at straws here, and missing the point he'd wanted to address entirely.

And it was a pitifully transparent attempt, wasn't it. A pathetic plea to get Zuko back between the sheets, to show him that things were still redeemable between them. A low move. Jee needed to change gears here, to embrace his fuck-up and drink up the bitter consequences… And he would.

He would.

Even if it was damn hard.

"Look here," he whispered after another pregnant pause, shutting his eyes again. "I'm sorry, but you probably don't want to hear it. I know I messed things up and you probably won't want to see me anymore, but if you'd just let me drive you home, I'd –"

The click of the lock opening – or at least moving, seeing as the bathroom locks had been broken even before he'd moved here – startled Jee so much that he nearly jumped away from the door. No words of invitation were spoken, but the message was clear: *Come in.*

Jee heaved a deep breath, waited for a beat, then turned the knob and pushed the door open.

The bathroom was dark, of course – Jee knew it would be, there had been no light visible through the door. Some of the soft bedside lamp glow streamed inside from the bedroom and threw Jee's long shadow onto the floor, and once his eyes adjusted, he made out a pale figure hunched over the sink, back to the entrance, a lighter outline in the shadows.

Seeing the miserable bastard like that, Jee suddenly felt glad he had not thought to put his underwear back on; it would have given him an unfair advantage over the boy whose exposed ass visibly quivered and tensed at the creak of the door being opened.

It was only fair for both of them to be naked.

Jee's first instinct was to walk up to Zuko and take him into his arms. Instead, he hovered over the doorway, held at bay by the invisible wall of silence that, somehow, was just as impregnable as a solid block of concrete.

He tried to clear his throat to make a crease in it, however small, and then started calling out to the boy – but he never got past the first "Zu –" before the kid cut right into it.

"You messed up?"

Jee frowned, leaning against the doorframe. He still couldn't find enough courage to actually cross the threshold.

"Yes, I have," he said quietly; his voice sounded alien to him, too low, too scratchy. "I admit it. And if you don't want me to touch you again, I –" he had to swallow over that one; suddenly the words just refused to leave his throat properly. "I'll understand."

For a few agonizing seconds – or maybe minutes, he wasn't sure and for all he knew it could as well be years – there was no answer. And when it did come, it surprised the living daylights out of him.
"Look, if this is some veiled, elaborate way to get me out of here, don't bother, I know I fucked it all up and you're fed up with me."

That remark made so little sense that it had Jee finally walking into the bathroom, if only by a couple of footsteps. "What?"

His only answer was a hitched breath and the sight of Zuko's fists tightening their grip on the bowl of the sink.

"I don't want you to leave," Jee whispered into the darkness, then followed it up with a few more steps towards the boy, the cold from the bathroom tiles seeping into his bones through the feet. "Why the hell would I?"

"Because I'm a --" the last part of the sentence was whispered so quietly that Jee completely lost it; only the suggestion of words, small and painfully moist, reached him, tugging him forward by another step.

"What was that?" God, he felt like a right moron asking Zuko to repeat himself, but this was fucking important.

A breath. And another, deeper one. And then:

"Because I'm a fucking failure, that's why!"

The words hit Jee with enough force to make him stumble back a step, partly because the shout resounded in the quiet bathroom as though amplified with speakers, and partly because…

What?

Zuko still wouldn't look at him – his back to Jee, he looked tense down to every nerve as he held his head down over the sink. Jee couldn't even see his face in the mirror because the dark hair fell all over it, shielding Zuko and whatever turmoil there was to be seen in his face from the world.

But Jee could see him shaking. And that sure as fuck wasn't a trick of the shadows.

A failure. The brat thought he was a failure. What the actual…

"What in the world are you talking about?"

But of course, now that it was out Jee couldn't hope for any more answers.

Nevermind. He was putting a stop to it right now.

It was a matter of seconds to walk up to the boy and force an embrace on him, and "discouraging" would be the mild way to put it. Zuko didn't exactly push him away, granted, but he didn't reciprocate either. Instead, he clearly decided that the best thing to do in this situation would be to turn himself into a marble slab.

Jee held on anyway.

"You're not a fucking failure," he whispered forcefully into the sweet-smelling hair. "You're. Fucking. Not. I'm the problem here, I admit it. You did nothing wrong, damn it, will you just listen?"

"But I -- you saw me, I didn't --"

Words. Yes, thank you, words were good. Finally some progress. Jee needed to encourage it. "I saw
that you were in trouble and the situation was getting out of hand, and I should have put a stop to it sooner. Zuko, I don't even understand why you're blaming yourself for it when clearly –"

"No, you don't understand! I wanted it to be good, I wanted it so bad, to be good for you, so you'd – so you wouldn't – "

Oh God. So Jee wouldn't what, kick him out? That was just too ludicrous to be true and yet…

"Zuko, you are good." Jee held on more tightly – it was easy, he was so shaken that he needed to hold on to something. "You're so very good. Of course you'd be nervous, it was your first time and no one ever gets perfect it on their first try! I should have kept a lookout for that and taken things slow, you did nothing wrong, kid, I –"

"WILL YOU FUCKING STOP CODDLING ME!"

Jee froze right on the spot.

The yell was still ricocheting from the bathroom walls when Zuko's body gave a violent jerk; Jee was too shocked to enter into a strength contest with him, so he let his arms fall back to his sides. He took a step back, too, and watched as Zuko lifted his head to glare at him in the mirror. It was still too dark to see his expression clearly, but it was a glare, there could be no doubt about that.

Probably because even in the near-darkness it looked more twisted, more monstrous, more intense than any other glare Jee had seen on Zuko's face before.

"Don't," Zuko breathed at him, his voice just as tight as his face. "Stop that. Stop treating me like a dumb kid. I ruined everything and I know it, so just… stop!"

"How am I treating you like a dumb kid?" Jee whispered slowly. A part of him wanted to stagger back and onto the closed toilet seat – maybe if he actually sat down this situation would slowly start making sense again.

And when Zuko looked right at him over his shoulder, Jee almost did. There was something akin to a force field radiating from the kid's eyes and it tried to push him back.

"You're sheltering me." Zuko gripped the porcelain bowl more tightly. "You're trying to take all the blame to make me feel good. Codding me. That's not what I want from you."

"I…” Jee didn't understand.

Or did he?

"But you didn't ruin everything," he insisted after a brief mental slap to the face. It was the only constant for him to hold onto now and he would damn well stick with it.

"Oh for fuck's sake…!" Zuko tore his gaze away from him again, his body beginning to shake. "You're not listening! I just told you not to take all the blame just to make me feel better and that's exactly what you're doing!"

And of course, Jee's knee-jerk reaction was to protest that some more, preferably in a raised voice, because honestly, no one here was coddling anyone…

He got as far as "Zuko." And then his brain finally started working.

Codding. Was that really what he'd been doing? There was a part of him, the vaguely responsible
one that had kept him from responding to Zuko's flirting for months and months, that immediately rebelled against the idea. No matter what Zuko said, Jee was the responsible adult here and it was his job to know better, to read the signs, to set the brat straight and to keep the situation under control. And he'd failed rather spectacularly in that regard. But…

… But. That wasn't the whole extent of it, was it. And as Jee watched Zuko grip the sink so hard there were veins popping out all along his muscular arms, he finally understood what the kid meant.

It wasn't only his fault.

Zuko was the one who insisted they keep going. He'd been the one to try and impale himself on Jee even though he'd already reached the limit of how much he was able to take, and he'd been the one too riled up to even try to relax. He'd been the one to push Jee for more.

Those were the plain facts. That was how it had happened. And Jee could take all the blame, as he still thought he should, but that didn't mean it would take away how Zuko saw the situation, and suddenly Jee understood.

Or at least he understood some of it.

"What do you want from me?" he asked quietly. And then he did sit down. His world was being put on its head and he needed some purchase, even in the form of his own toilet seat.

"I told you." Zuko's voice sounded alarmingly wet again, but when he turned to look at Jee once more, there were no tears in his eyes. Only a sparkling, burning – something. "I don't want you to treat me like a child. Stop sheltering me. I want sex from you, not charity."

Okay, that stung. But Jee swallowed that sting together with the bile in his throat and tried to see the situation clearly, without any kind of goggles.

…By gods, the brat could be right.

"It's not charity," he started slowly, mulling the words over – they were only now beginning to form in his head properly. "The facts remain. You're not the failure here –"

"But I am, I always am, aren't you listening –"

" – or, should I say, you're not the only failure," Jee finished forcefully, nipping the protests in the bud and filing the I always am to consider later. "The way I see it, I should have stopped much sooner than I did and not let it go so apeshit, so it's my fault too."

There. The admission Jee hoped Zuko wanted. The equality statement. The kid was right in that Jee really shouldn't coddle him, however much his instincts may be screaming at him to do just that. He really wasn't doing the kid any favors by sheltering him, and maybe it was time to stop thinking in student-teacher, adult-child terms and introduce some partnership into the equation.

If they were going to make it work, Jee would have to switch some gears, and switch them now.

But that didn't mean he would let Zuko take all of the blame.

"So you accept that I did fuck up…?" Zuko half-turned towards him, examining him carefully. Jee bore the scrutiny with a straight face and brought himself to nod.

"Partly. You were too pigheaded to think clearly. But I fucked up too. I need you to accept that as well. You know, if we're going to make this whole mess work."
For a moment, Zuko just stood there, looking at him. Jee had an inkling he saw his lips moving, but it really was hard to tell with only some of the light falling on the kid. So he took a deep breath and waited for the verdict…

…And the curt nod he saw was definitely not a trick of the shadows.

"All right." The whisper was raspy and low, barely audible, but at least the traces of wetness seemed to be gone. "I think I can accept that."

Thank fucking God. Jee almost let out a long wheeze of relief; the tension draining his body was nigh too overpowering.

_He can accept that._ Well then. Another step forward.

"So you still want to?" Zuko asked after a moment. His voice was quiet, hoarse and so very, very small, as though letting the words out was a Herculean effort. "Make it work."

Oh, kid.

Maybe it wasn't the right decision. Maybe, all things considered, they were better off apart, since Jee clearly was not prepared for the many, many unnamed issues Zuko brought with him, and the reasonable part of him insisted that there would be many such incidents awaiting them in the future if Jee decided to go through with it.

The rest of him told the reasonable part to go hang. He was not abandoning the kid now.

Jee found his way back to Zuko in a matter of a blink, and this time it was not a marble slab he took into his arms, but a breathing, shivering boy. "Of course I fucking do," he said, closing his eyes when he felt Zuko's arms hesitantly settle around him. "I was scared shitless you'd just run away on the spot."

"I…" There were nails digging into the skin of his back, but Jee only held Zuko closer. He was too relieved to care about such trivialities as physical pain. "I thought you'd kick me out. That you'd be too fed up with my shit."

Jee kissed the crown of Zuko's head, and then, because he really couldn't find any words anymore, started following up on it with kisses all around the areas of the brat's face he could reach. "You idiot," he muttered. "Don't fucking scare me like that again."

"I really wanted it to be good." He could hardly hear the words now – Zuko was whispering them in a broken, choked-up voice right into his collarbone. "I'm just so fucking mad. I wanted to do it, so much, I didn't want to fuck it up like that, I really thought I could, and now it's just… I was so scared you'd…"

"Hey." Jee used both hands to force the kid's face up so he could finally see his eyes clearly. "What did I say? The first time is never perfect, you idiot, trust me on that. And we both fucked up, not just you. If anything, I fucked up more, what with the stupid telephone and all."

And immediately Jee cursed himself for being an utter idiot, because reminding Zuko of his earlier mishap was probably exactly the wrong thing to say. Zuko's face sort of – wobbled, it twitched and shook violently as fresh wetness made his eyes glisten, and the kid bit his lip, his gaze escaping downwards.

But then…
"Heh. Yeah, I guess you did fuck that one up."

Jee smiled in dizzying rush of relief and kissed the shy beginnings of a smirk straight from Zuko's lips. Anything to not give this stupid, beautiful boy any more time to mope.

Okay. Okay. It looked like they were on the mend, if Zuko opening up into the kiss was anything to go by. Jee's fingers traced the salty remains of wetness on the good cheek, wiping the rest of it away, while his other hand travelled down to the back of Zuko's neck and started gently kneading there, soothing, it's all right, it's all good, you're okay…

Zuko shivered against him and whimpered softly, and then his arms drew Jee even closer so that there wasn't the tiniest breath of space between their cold, naked bodies. Jee held him, massaged his neck, kissed him and didn't laugh with relief only because his lips were busy.

Good boy. You're all right. You're gonna be all right…

He couldn't very well promise Zuko that. Not anymore, not when he'd seen exactly how burdened the kid was with – whatever it was he'd been through. But he could promise to keep doing his damndest to try.

Zuko's lips tasted of sweat and salt, wet with both saliva and tears. When Jee's tongue moved to lick the taste off, the boy let him.

Mouths opened. Tongues met. Skin grew warmer. Hands clutched at bodies, shudders travelled up and down, veins throbbed with reawakening blood. A sound, a wet moan of pleasure, echoed in the silent bathroom, audibly marking the gradual transition in the air, and before it was swallowed it opened the door for more of such sounds to follow.

Ye gods, Zuko still wanted it. Still, after the whole fiasco of earlier. He was giving Jee another chance to make it better, a chance to finally make him feel good.

And Jee would damn well not waste it this time.

"You're so good," he hummed into the kiss, both his hands now hard at work applying steady pressure to the back of Zuko's neck. "So incredible. I want you so much, you have no… fucking… idea…"

He needed to get Zuko to relax, first and foremost. And there was one way which never failed to work for him…

Never breaking away from the kiss, he applied a little more pressure to the back of Zuko's neck as he started kneading it with some more purpose. The skin under his fingers was heating up slowly and Zuko was reacting by angling himself to give Jee better access, his breath heavy and punctuated with purrs of pleasure.

Good. Good.

His hands met hard muscle as they travelled to the sides, along Zuko's lovely shoulders. Jee massaged them as well, careful to apply the same amount of pressure everywhere, his thumbs moving contra, his fingers pressing down together with the inside of his palms to make it even better. It was hardly a professional massage, but one didn't need to be a certified masseur to do that, and Zuko appreciated it well enough if the way he reacted was anything to go by.

It was a bit of an awkward position for what Jee would have liked to do, though, and they would have been much better off on the bed so he could take his time just touching, smoothening his hands
down the beautiful planes of Zuko's back and working methodically to turn that gorgeous body into sensual putty. Another time, maybe. If he broke away now, it might pull Zuko out of the haze and once again alert them to what had passed and Jee definitely didn't want that; and anyway, they were fine here for now, fine for what he could do…

He started moving his hands down. He took his time, wandering over insultingly soft skin, and his mouth joined hands, leaving the warmth of Zuko's lips to kiss the way down. "You're gorgeous," he kept whispering between kisses, relishing each little shiver and gasp. "So hot. So beautiful. I'm so lucky."

"Nngh…"

"Shhh. It's all good. Just breathe…"

His fingers pressed into the curve of Zuko's spine at the same time his mouth closed over the left nipple, and Zuko bucked, his moan loud and clear. Jee smiled around his mouthful and teased the skin with his tongue, his hands stilling for a moment to keep Zuko in place. It was going well again, thank God, so well, but he had to stay careful…

And he really didn't have it in him to tell the brat to stay quiet. Not yet.

Inch after inch, he kissed and massaged his way down Zuko's body, lowering himself until he was almost kneeling on the cold floor, Zuko moving backward to support himself against the sink. The floor sent a jolt of coldness through Jee when his knees hit it, but what the hell. He was a grown man and he could take a bit of discomfort for the sake of…

"Yes. You. Hello there."

"Are you going to – ?" Zuko's breath stuttered when his hand flew down to land on the top of Jee's head. Jee looked up at him and smiled at the question reflected in those glazed, heated eyes.

"Relax," he hummed in response, his hands resting on the beautiful, squeezable pair of buttocks. He pressed them hard, fingers spread over delicate skin, reveling in the immensely satisfying sensation – that was probably the most perfect ass he'd ever had the pleasure of touching. The way Zuko's lovely, young and definitely aroused cock jumped when the kid jerked his hips at the caress looked incredibly good as well, and…

There really was no reason to waste any more time.

It was so sweet, the moan that tore itself out of Zuko's mouth when Jee took the head gently between his lips and sucked. Sweeter than Jee had any right to imagine. But it still didn't beat the taste of the kid, that fine, lean flesh, so young and handsome, and Jee wanted so much more, so he slowly moved his mouth until it was almost all the way in.

Oh, it really had been too long.

"Fuck." The hand on Jee's hair gripped, tightly; Zuko's hips bucked again and Jee hummed in approval. Yes. *Fuck* just about covered it.

Hands kneading that perfect ass, he started slowly moving his mouth, sliding it along Zuko's length and savoring the sounds it tore from the boy, and – yes, there it was. That rush of power. That sweet, incomparable knowledge that the other person was completely at his mercy now, falling apart from the inside out with every swipe of the tongue, every pull and tug of his lips. He could feel it in the tremors wrecking the body he held, in each frantic pull at his hair, in the way Zuko's knees trembled, and suddenly the mystery of all the things he could make Zuko feel with just his mouth was the most
fascinating question on Earth.

Jee set about exploring it without wasting any time, and tried to commit every different gasp and moan to memory because the sounds were too good to miss.

Really, how could anyone not love this? Having this much control over another person, the intimacy of taking the most vulnerable part of them in one's mouth, the trust… It went straight to Jee's head. It always did. There was an art to these things, a fine, delicate art, and he liked to believe he learned a fair bit – or at least enough to keep Zuko distracted while his right hand slowly sneaked its way down the buttock, between the brat's smooth thighs.

His fingers were still sticky from the lube and, combined with what residue of it still clung to Zuko's body, it should be enough for at least one finger to go in relatively easily…

"Oh!"

Jee paused, but it wasn't a noise of distress this time. He was fairly sure of that. It sounded more like surprise than anything else, and Zuko followed it up with a deep, throaty moan when Jee sucked on the head again. His body seemed infinitely more relaxed in comparison now, inner muscles flexing at the intrusion but not trying to push him out, so the finger continued its careful journey in, searching and questing and…

There. Right there. Jee looked up just in time to see Zuko's whole body going taut, still, perfectly still, the brat's mouth open in a soundless scream and his eyes – both of them – open as wide as Jee'd ever seen them, and there was no mistaking that reaction for anything else.

Fucking finally.

Smiling around his mouthful, Jee rubbed the spot again and almost laughed when Zuko responded with a high, protracted noise and a violent shudder that seemed to reach the very tips of his toes.

*See, brat? That's what happens when you listen to your teacher.* Jee was sorely tempted to say that out loud, but instead he resumed his enthusiastic sucking while he slowly worked the second finger in, the tight passage still slippery enough to grant him entrance and make the slide relatively easy, especially now that the muscles of Zuko's body quivered in pleasure rather than nervousness.

"All right?" he asked just in case, letting Zuko's cock out of his mouth for a moment; there was simply no such thing as too much caution anymore, for all that the brat's reactions seemed definitely encouraging now.

Zuko looked down at him. And even in the near-darkness, his face was a vision Jee knew instantly he would never, ever forget.

"More," the boy croaked, and even that simple command sounded more like a moan than a word. Jee barely registered it – he was too busy staring into those bright, bright eyes, boring into him with a new, feverish intensity and a hunger to match that of a starved man's in the middle of a desert.

Oh, he would get more. So much more.

Jee took him into his mouth one last time, gave him a few hard, loving sucks, then whispered, "Come on. Let's go back to bed."

"Yeah." Zuko's voice was as shaky as his legs when he tried to stand upright, hand shooting out to cling to Jee's shoulder. "Yeah."
Jee smiled and led him out of the bathroom by the hand.

Traces of previous nervousness still hung around the bedroom, draped around it like old cobwebs, and Jee paused when he crossed the threshold to examine Zuko's face properly – but the boy strode right past him and straight to the bed, which he climbed onto without any hints of hesitation. As if there was no trauma waiting for him there, as if he hadn't run out of it with tears in his eyes not an hour ago. As if he hadn't been hurt at all.

Jee's heart did a little twist when he saw it, and it may have tripped on something when Zuko looked at him over his shoulder and quietly said, "Well? Are you coming?"

Right. Right. Jee swallowed the massive bile of guilt, shook himself into focus, and marched to the bed.

He was sure the memory of his fuckups that night would forever stay in his head to chill the living daylights out of him at the least opportune moments until the day he died – and he deserved it. But now was not the time to dwell on it. Now was the time to make things better, to prove to this boy that his trust had not been entirely misplaced. And he damn well would.

"You have to promise me this," he whispered, climbing onto the bed after Zuko. "You will communicate with me. You will not pretend to be some kind of Rambo. If it gets too much, if you feel any kind of discomfort at all, you will tell me. Deal?"

His hand was tracing a random pattern along Zuko's smooth, smooth thigh, but his eyes were trained on the brat's face.Missing anything was not an option at this point – too many things went wrong for them tonight to allow something else to blow up in their faces. A pair of bright eyes gazed up at him from the pillow, brimming with an odd little mixture of arousal and the remains of nervousness, and that little hint was enough for Jee to start grasping for more reassuring nothings just to soothe both of them…

But then Zuko's left leg, the one Jee's hand was absently caressing, rose and bent at the knee, the foot running down Jee's side with shy, gentle promise.

"Okay."

Jee smiled and captured the foot in his hand. The ankle felt smooth and sharp against the roughened texture of his lips, and Jee already knew it was one of his favorite places to kiss. One of many. Okay.

He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve to have this kid open up to him again, open his lips and his arms and his body and, in a way, his very self, because no matter what they both claimed, Zuko was laying himself out here in more ways than one. And yet that was exactly what happened – his legs gently manipulated to rest on either side of Jee's body, perfect chest rising and falling in a forced rhythm, cheeks flushed, eyes burning, cock wet and hard and ready, Zuko watched and waited. So young, so vulnerable, so raw.

So beautiful.

"That's right," Jee whispered; his voice sounded rough, unusually tight, and he had to blink to force his melting thoughts back into solid form. "Just breathe. Keep breathing. You're so good."

And, because he really couldn't help the wave of rather moist feelings that suddenly decided to batter at his throat all at once, he leaned down and kissed Zuko's knee, mouthing a quiet "Thank you."

It didn't matter whether Zuko understood it or not. Jee simply needed to say it.
"Should I…" The brat gestured vaguely, angling his body as if to move onto his stomach, but Jee held him in place by the hipbones. No. They were going to do this properly and this time, Jee wanted to see Zuko's face.

"Stay like that. This is good. And deep breaths, remember."

"Yeah, I know." The brat actually had the gall to roll his eyes, the little bastard; and, conscious or not, the meek attempt at playfulness gave the mood a much-needed push, dispelling the spell of sap to replace it with focus again. Jee seized it gratefully and furthered the change into more familiar territory by delivering a light slap to Zuko's thigh, then leaned down and kissed him roughly, trapped between the sweet heat of Zuko's legs once again; and his blood purred in voiceless triumph when the kid's mouth opened up to him immediately.

The physical ground was safe ground. As long as they stuck with that, they would be okay for the night, and Jee could try working out the rest of it all he wanted tomorrow, with Zuko's warmth no longer there to distract him.

And physicality was easy, now that the air was clear again. Their bodies knew each other somewhat already, knew how to settle into a rhythm, knew how to adjust; and Jee let it happen naturally, just as it usually did in training. Soon, Zuko was coming undone again, a sensuous picture of coiling want, and Jee was shoving another pillow under his hips for a better angle and reaching for the bottle of lube again – and this time Zuko's body engulfed rather than rejected his fingers when he pushed two in at the same time.

The kid froze at the touch and lay still, very, very still, his breathing loud in the concentrated silence, fingers grasping at the sheets. When Jee looked up, he saw that Zuko's eyes were screwed tightly shut, lower lip caught between sharp white teeth, his face the picture of furious concentration. It didn't look nearly as bad as before, but Christ, the kid was still trying so hard to let go instead of just letting go…

Jee started contemplating continuing the blowjob to distract him – it had worked so well back in the bathroom – but Zuko's cock looked ready to burst already and they couldn't afford another snafu at this point. Which was when his thoughts flew back to that little eyeroll from before, how well it worked, and…

Hmmm.

Experimentally, Jee let his other hand – the one not stuck knuckles-deep in the brat's ass – trace a feather-light trail of touch along Zuko's sides. When his fingers lingered on the hips, just above the defined hipbones, and teased the delicate skin drawn tight there, the reaction was instant – Jee nearly got an elbow to the face when the kid's whole body gave a violent jerk that was as much surprise as anything else.

And the noise – good God, the noise. For a moment the bedroom was filled with something that sounded as if a panicked tropical bird had its feathers plucked with pincers.

"What the fuck!"

"Ticklish much?" Jee smirked, drumming his fingers on the sensitive area and dragging his nails lightly over it; and the breathless, scratching hiccupy thing that tore itself out of Zuko's throat that must have been a laugh, there was no other way for it to be anything else.

It was strange, but very cute, and Jee repeated the gesture just to hear some more of it.
"Stop that, shit, you fucking –" There was that laugh again, louder and even more spontaneous, a shocked, incredulous vibrant thing that trickled down Jee's throat and wrenched a responding short laugh for company, because it was just too precious. Zuko's body was flailing wildly, trapped with one of Jee's hands sneaking around for more tickling and the other still working inside the kid's body, and it was such a surreal sight that Jee regretted not having a video camera in his brain.

"I'm gonna get you for that! You bastard, fuck you, stoAHHHH."

It worked. It fucking worked, Jee could hardly believe it. He had snuck the third finger in during Zuko's flailing and curled all three of them to rub at that one spot, and as soon as he did, Zuko's body went bowstring-tight, back bent and lifted off the bed in a striking arch, the startled moan flying high and loud to linger in the air long after the brat's voice died into a series of breathless, incoherent gasps.

Fuck, that was so hot.

Jee nearly bent in half to plant a long, open-mouthed kiss on the tickle-sensitive spot, and sucked on it while his fingers rubbed inside Zuko so hard Jee almost lost all feeling in them. But damn, was it worth it, and the deluge of desperate noises it unleashed went straight to Jee's head – and lower, until he felt drunk on them and the ache in his cock grew downright painful.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, oh God I can't, I – oh fuck –!

"That's right," he murmured, the words thick and wet and kissed into pale skin before he bit down on it again, if only to cover his own needy grunts. "That's very good. You're doing so well. I want you so much…"

The neighbors could probably hear all that. Through the roar of blood in his ears Jee could faintly register, as though through a layer of cottoncandy, the TV in the apartment next door going louder, but he was beyond caring. Next time he would worry about it, but not now, not while Zuko was finally letting himself be carried away, nerves evaporating from him with every sob wrenched out of his throat.

Besides, his own need was driving him into animalistic desperation he hadn't experienced in – he didn't even know for how long. Jee honestly could not remember if he'd ever gotten such a workout for his cock before during one night, teenage absurdities notwithstanding, and now he could feel his goal approaching in every deep breath Zuko forced himself to take; in every loosening of the kid's inner muscles; in every hoarse moan that tore itself from those trembling lips. They were getting there, so close, so very, very close…

And then it happened. Zuko's hips shot up into Jee's hand and pushed back against it, actually pushed back in a stuttering, circular move, and he didn't say anything, but the motion itself and the sound that went with it – the very voice of pure lust if Jee'd ever heard one – were enough of a greenlight. More.

He took a good look at Zuko's face when he twisted his fingers deeper, just to make absolutely sure that the kid wasn't playing the tough guy again, and bit down on a sigh of relief. They were fine. Zuko's hips responded to the push automatically with a jerk forward, going up on the supporting pillow, and the kid planted his legs further apart to get even more, but most of all, his face – Jesus, he was out of it. So far gone that his eyes resembled that of a junkie's, impossibly bright and overflowing with glazed want, and the redness of his blush was feverish.

He was looking up at Jee with those clouded, unseeing eyes, all coherence gone out the window, lips open and trembling in a plea he was suddenly too overwhelmed or too inhibited – or both – to
articulate, and Jee really would have cried with relief.

Oh yes, boy, you will get more.

Jee couldn't have scrambled for the condoms any faster if he tried, and his hands shook when he pulled another one out of the packet and struggled with the wrapping. The seconds that followed felt as if taken out of time, the pull of the rubber against his aching skin stretching into forever despite it lasting no more than a couple of blinks, and he almost dropped the lube leaking onto the bed when he squeezed it into his hand, rubbed a little to make the liquid warmer, and spread it onto his cock. He was so hard that the contact actually hurt, and he gave himself a few relieving tugs before pressing in – mostly because if he didn't, he was sure he would blow his load into the kid the moment he found himself inside.

"Up," he croaked, hardly recognizing his voice and not caring; he reached for Zuko's legs and hoisted them up on his shoulders, where they stayed obediently, the kid pushing himself forward so that his hips were lifted almost off the pillow. Now he was ready, beyond any doubt. No porn star in any of the flicks Jee'd watched over the years ever looked this thoroughly debauched, this good.

There we go.

It was all Jee could do not to come right then as soon as his flesh started sinking into Zuko's – there was some resistance in the muscles, but with this much lube it didn't do much apart from providing some fantastic friction, and though the now-wet passage was perhaps smoother than Jee usually liked, he really couldn't care about that because – fuck. The tight heat opened up for him and closed around him in a dizzying grip, so warm and soft and inviting, and it felt so much better now that Zuko was breathing loudly and allowing himself to let go, and Jee didn't start moving immediately only because he could still see tears gleaming in those angry eyes, could still hear the bang of the bathroom door.

But by God, it was his new favorite place and if he didn't move now, he would die.

Zuko had his eyes closed again, his breaths deep and measured, and though his single eyebrow was drawn in a tense arch, his face looked infinitely more relaxed than during their first failed attempt. Suppressed, swallowed noises were trying to get past his lips and he was biting on his lower lip again, but with each breath the tension was growing smaller and smaller, releasing the skin of his face from the grip of nerves.

Jee kept his left hand on Zuko's hip, then tugged at the kid's cock with the other. "Breathe, kid," he whispered; the words scratched at his dry throat and he almost coughed them out. "Breathe."

Zuko could only bring himself to nod, eyes still closed, his hands clawing at the sheets. Jee's grip on his hip grew tighter, tighter, tighter, just so he could stop himself from pulling out too fast and slamming back in, but then Zuko's body shifted – his hips rose, legs tensed around Jee's neck, a hoarse gasp cutting through the air when he thrust his head back.

He was trying to get more.

"Can I move?" The question almost took whatever self-control Jee had left, and he used the last vestiges of it to pull out slowly when Zuko's head flew in a jerky, close-eyed nod.

Jee really had no idea how he managed to make those first few thrusts careful and even, but maybe there was a higher power watching over them that night after all because he was able to stop himself from heeding the call of his blood and actually established something resembling a rhythm. Both hands now firm on Zuko's hips to keep them in place, he moved in measured strokes, nice and deep,
and the slick slide in and out felt so ridiculously good that he would have died happy just moving inside the kid like that. And Zuko was helping, sweet God, the brat was actually trying to help, tensing and moving his hips inexactly in an attempt to meet Jee’s on the instroke, and he looked so good like that that it was almost painful to watch him.

Close your eyes, Jee tried to tell himself. Don’t look or you’ll lose it completely. Already he could feel the tension building in his lower gut, his balls growing tight, both relief and increasing roar of need making him light-headed. But he couldn’t stop looking, not with Zuko spread out for him like that, not when he was this shuddering, moaning picture of freshness and sensuality, and in his wildest fantasies Jee hadn’t imagined anything this perfect, and now it was his. Zuko was reacting to each stroke now as though it was the best thing he ever had happen to him, as though it was all so new and overwhelming and wonderful, his entire body writhing messily, his hands grasping at the sheets and – and at his own cock now, already leaking and so dark with blood it looked painful, and he was making those sounds, and –

Fuck.

Jee’s body moved before he could stop it, and the hard thrust drove Zuko so far back that his head almost hit the headboard. One leg slid down Jee’s shoulder in the meantime and rested at the elbow, and Zuko screeched, the noise high and breathless and lingering, and it went right under Jee’s skin even as he tried to still himself and apologize –

"No," the kid wheezed, eyes snapping open as he locked them on the ceiling. "Again. Fuck, do it again."

Jee stared. Swallowed, hard. And then did it again.

And again, and again, and again, pausing a few times to readjust himself because Zuko was trying to drive himself onto his cock now too which made settling on a rhythm nigh impossible; but it didn’t matter because at this point, rhythm was the last thing either of them needed. Rhythm or care, it seemed, because Zuko looked just as desperate now as Jee felt, everything about him tight and wanting and so utterly beautiful.

Headboard hitting the wall, the bed groaning underneath them, the wet slap of skin hitting skin. Jee's grunts. Zuko's moans. The heavy smell of sweat, lust, boy and lube, dizzying and sweet. The slide of flesh engulfed in the grip of tight muscle, the warmth, the sweet, sweet bliss of touch. The sheer intimacy, the abandon, the trust. The unforgettable picture of Zuko's back arching off the bed again, head thrust back, his hand gripping his own cock viciously hard, and then the beautiful sharp cry, long and breathless and ringing with completion, white liquid escaping through pale fingers, drops of it falling on Zuko's stomach.

All of it, even with the tension building in Jee's lower back and heralding a rough awakening full of pain, all of it, it was just too much, too much –

He only managed four more frantic thrusts while Zuko rode out the aftershocks before he had to pull out, roughly, perhaps too roughly – and then his hand went flying over the condom, chasing that looming wave of pleasure that would crash over him anytime now, he was only seconds away, a heartbeat –

He only needed five or six strokes. Maybe not even that. He'd already been on the very edge of orgasm when Zuko reached his, and now that it finally seized him, he could only sit back and shudder in time with the pulsing, white-hot sensation, and wish that he'd taken the condom off so that he could see his come fall on Zuko's stomach and merge with the kid's own.
Later. They could have that later. For now, he could finally do nothing else but feel…

Ye gods, what a night. What a fucking night.

He needed sleep. And a shower. And possibly a drink, and a cigarette. But first of all he needed to unscrew his eyes open, and check if there was anything wrong…

His heart almost stopped.

There was nothing wrong. Nothing in the world could ever be wrong again, not in that moment, not when this was lying on his bed, free, undone, shaken completely apart, flushed and sweaty and covered in specks of white, with messed-up hair sticking to his face and falling all over the white sheets, and looking up at Jee with that utterly overwhelmed, dazed expression, like – like –

He almost crashed down on Zuko in his hurry to kiss him, kiss him breathless, kiss him with everything he had. It didn't quite turn out as Jee intended – he was still breathless from pleasure and so was Zuko, both their hearts still hammering against their ribcages at a frantic speed that was only beginning to slow down, and as a result the kiss was sloppy and wet, much shorter than it was meant to. But Zuko didn't seem to mind. His legs still open, he opened his arms as well and cradled Jee close, puffing hot air on Jee's shoulder, seemingly not bothered by the considerable sweaty weight pinning him down. Jee decided to take advantage of that and let himself settle down on the kid's body, boneless and utterly exhausted, and closed his eyes against the crook of Zuko's neck, where his head rested. If he wanted to, he could probably lick the slick sheen of sweat right off that perfect skin, but suddenly it felt like too much of a bother to even shift his head.

He was never moving again.

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In the end, he did move, if only because if he didn't, his muscles would have gone on strike completely.

It was with a bit of a shock that he opened his eyes after what seemed like only a few minutes but must have stretched into a full, long nap, because his eyes felt bleary and sticky with sand while the electronic alarm clock on his bedside table was now telling him it was half past one a.m.

And he still hadn't rolled off of Zuko.

Jee swore inwardly and tried to gently prop himself up on his elbows, wincing when he felt the stickiness clinging to his lower body – they had been too tired to even bother wiping the sperm off Zuko and now it stuck to Jee as well. Dear God, Jee even had the blasted condom still on. What a mess…

But the thought was dull, distant and idle, like that little voice that sometimes told Jee it was time to clean up when he was in the middle of watching a game, and it was never strong enough to actually get his ass off the couch. Now he simply looked down at the mess on the bed, at himself and Zuko, and smiled absently when he saw the kid's relaxed, sleeping face, the steady rise and fall of his chest, his half-open mouth, his head falling slightly to the left.

Deeply asleep, even with Jee's body crushing him like that. He must have been even more exhausted than Jee.
Not that it was particularly surprising, what with everything that had passed…

Fondly, Jee tried to brush some hair away from Zuko's face as gently as he could, leaned in to give the still-warm skin there a soft kiss, then lazily moved to the other side, careful not to shake the kid awake and putting Zuko's right arm by the boy's side – the left one had already moved off of Jee and to the side, sprawled awkwardly.

His head wasn't even on the pillow, Jee realized with quiet amusement. It had been pushed to the side at some point during their fucking and was now resting a few inches away from Zuko's head, the other one still under Zuko's hips.

Damn, Jee had never let himself fall asleep with someone in such a disarray ever since he'd turned twenty.

Something about that thought inspired enough amusement in him that he had to bite down on a chuckle, and then he slid off the bed, shivered slightly in the night chill and dragged himself to the bathroom in search of a towel. Once there, he finally pulled the condom off and tossed it carelessly into the toilet, then took a moment to steady himself and wipe the sticky residue off his abdomen.

Cleaning the kid was sort of necessary too, but he would have to wake Zuko up for that…

And he didn't want to. Let the kid sleep. Zuko needed it.

Quietly, the damp towel still in hand, Jee moved to the living room, rummaged for a while for a spare blanket, then returned to the bedroom and did his best to clean what little he could without waking Zuko. Then, he flung the blanket over the sleeping kid, because it was easier than trying to tug the bed covers from under him.

The boy hadn't stirred during all this, but he did now that his body was hidden under a blanket – heaving a deeper breath, he rolled slightly to the side.

For a while, Jee sat there and petted his hair, strange thoughts floating idly around in his head, the sound of Zuko's steady breathing lulling him into a kind of conscious stupor. Then, he moved to his feet again, reached for the cigarettes in the drawer by the bed, turned the bedside lamp off and moved to perch by the windowsill.

So, his thoughts hummed idly when the tiny glow from the lighter gave the room some shifty, organic light. It happened.

Cigarette aloft, Jee leaned his back against the windowsill and looked at the shape of Zuko in the darkness, and tried to take stock of the situation.

He'd fucked up. Majorly. And yet the kid was still here, breathing deeply, sleeping in Jee's bed, his body still bearing all the signs from having his ass very thoroughly banged, and in his sleep he appeared so trusting and satisfied as though none of the more painful episodes of the night had ever taken place.

Jee envied him. He would much rather forget it all himself.

But it wasn't as if Zuko had forgotten, was it. No. He would probably remember it for as long as he lived, just as Jee remembered his own first time, and he really didn't want to wonder with what kind of feelings Zuko would revisit that particular memory because it sure as fuck wasn't a resounding success.

He had only decided to sweep it all under the rug, move past it instead of dealing with it properly,
and Jee had gone along with it because – well, what else had there been for him to do? And maybe that was for the best – he'd opted for that himself when he'd been younger, and did so even now most of the time. But that didn't change the lesson that night had taught him, and it was that despite what he may have fancied, Jee was not prepared to deal with this kid.

Ha. Not even close. He was as ill-equipped for the job as could be, no matter how similar they appeared to be on some levels. Jee still didn't know about the most basic things: about the scar, about the kid's family relations, about what had happened that he was banished here to this shithole… And though Jee had thought that it didn't matter in the long run, not for what they both wanted, it did matter because clearly it had a colossal impact on what went on in that funny little head, and Jee would continue to fuck up in small and large ways because there was simply no way he could avoid it with his level of ignorance.

So where did that leave them?

Jee let his head hit the frosty windowpane as he took a hearty drag, flicking ash on the sill.

Nowhere. He'd already went and taken the kid's virginity and now there was nothing else for it but go right ahead. He would take responsibility and face everything the kid had to throw at him, he would make good on his promises and he would deal with any consequences. What he would not do is balk out now and leave the brat to cope on his own because that would be the lowest thing of low and he simply didn't want to.

He'd had a taste, he wanted more, he wanted the kid to stay in his bed. He wanted to see the progress that he knew was possible, and he still wanted to be the one to bring it about.

He wanted…

There was a hint of movement in the darkness. Jee's eyes, now with their night-vision activated, settled on Zuko again, just in time to see the kid stretch lazily and hum in that soft, thick-sleepy way which suggested that he was somewhere between sleep and consciousness; and then he rolled fully onto his side, the scarred, half-open eye falling on Jee.

Jee watched him, cigarette in his mouth. He had no idea what to say.

A beat passed, the two of them just looking at each other across the space between the bed and the window, and then Zuko smiled.

"Come back to bed, coach," he whispered, pulling the blanket more securely over himself.

His voice was thick and sleepy and still hoarse from sex and Jee had never wanted to kiss a voice before, but now he did.

*It will be fine*, he thought when he slid under the blanket with Zuko, grabbing the pillow from under Zuko's hips to use it for himself just as the brat snatched the other pillow to put under his head. The bed wasn't exactly ideal for two people – too narrow for that – but they settled down on it somehow, Zuko snuggling up against Jee's side almost immediately.

Jee put his arm around him, stroked the messy, sticky strands of hair, and closed his eyes.

They would be fine.

Chapter End Notes
Phheeeeeeewww. *takes a deep breath* It feels good to be done with that monster. I must have gained at least a handful of grey hair just from writing those three chapters. Please let me know what you think!

Next time: a routine will be established, Iroh will whistle a tune and Jee will see some men in black.
Chapter 18: Of Cake and Lady Friends

Chapter Notes

Not a lot to say here, only that there has been a Substitute spoiler fest on my personal tumblr; a little Substituteverse ficlet also made it's way there recently (probably won't be published here in a while, if ever). Also, the amazing Nele drew a BEAUTIFUL illustration for the previous chapter, check it out at Princebender. Seriously, it's amazing. And NSFW. There's a butt.

Wanna hear Zuko's side of the story? Head over to "The Locker Room" for a short, hurried and pretty crappy drabble.

As for this chapter? FILLEEEEEEEEER.

The first time Jee woke up, it was to the sound of the shower running, and for a moment he blinked into the pillow, perplexed as to why it would be running while he was in bed.

But then his sleep-sticky eyes fell on the empty space beside him, the rumpled pillow, the tangled sheets. Through the heavy curtain of lingering dreams he registered the smells – sex; sweat; boy. Zuko.

Jee turned to the side and let his eyes fall closed again, smiling into the pillow.

***

The second time he woke up, it was to the shivers and goosebumps on his bared skin, a gust of frosty air blowing in through the open bedroom door.

This time the leap into semi-coherence was faster, and he managed a mumbled “Zuko” before the sound of the living room window being shut again left a hollow bang ringing in his head.

“Stay,” his lips mouthed quietly, his eyes already closing again.

Before he fell asleep, he managed to roll onto the other side and grab Zuko’s pillow to hug it close. It still held his smell.

***

Need to go. Didn’t want to wake you. Old people need sleep.

Thanks.
Jee smiled fondly, smoothing the note over the countertop. The little shit.

His eyes kept straying back to the haphazard scribble as he munched on his breakfast-slash-lunch. He’d made the scrambled eggs too salty, but they would have had a hard time going down his throat anyway because it kept being blocked by the taste of memories.

Some of it being very, very fresh indeed, aided by the fact that the note was not the only thing Zuko had decided to left behind. Back in Jee’s bedroom, thrown onto the pillow in a bunched-up heap, lounged the sinful briefs the little demon had worn last night – and Jee may or may not have spent a good portion of the morning pressing them close while he waited for his abused back to stop burning, or at least enough so as to allow him to move.

The offering itself, plus the mental image of Zuko sneaking commando back to Iroh’s in the middle of winter, only made it worse because laughing really wasn’t advised during one of Jee’s pain spells.

The coffee was strong, black as sin and sugarless as it helped wash some of the too-salty eggs down his throat; Jee’s hand moved from the note to absentmindedly trace circles over the countertop.

Where Zuko had been sitting last night, almost naked, kissing him.

Well, yeah, so maybe eating on the very same counter that had been graced with Zuko’s glorious ass the night before was not the brightest idea when it came to helping Jee concentrate. But that was what he got for engaging in illicit activities on functional furniture. Jee gulped down some more coffee, smoothed the note on the counter with affection he would vehemently deny if anyone saw it, and regretted absolutely nothing.

That is, until his back screeched in protest again and he had to support himself on the counter, counting to ten while the hot flash of pain diminished back into a dull throb; upon which he decided that maybe, possibly, carrying the brat all the way to the bedroom had taken it a bit too far.

Besides, it was a lie anyway. He regretted a lot of things. But the countertop make-outs definitely didn’t count among them.

Did Summerfield have massage parlors? Maybe Jee could treat himself to a visit. He hadn’t been to one in a while and after last night, he had a feeling he deserved it…

Kind of. In a way. If he were to look past some events of last night that were better left in the back of his memory.

Yeah. A massage would be nice.

He’d been in the middle of researching that online, computer in his lap and mug of coffee going cold, when the doorbell invaded his safe, Zuko-scented space with its shrill noise; and then the surprise had him biting his tongue on accident.

“It’s Ming!” The muffled voice from the other side of the door sounded both amused and apologetic. “It’s past noon, I thought it would be safe now. Can I come in?”

Jee’s first reaction to that was to keep her out. The memory of the damned phone call was still much too fresh in his mind for any goodwill to be mustered towards her; being subjected to any more of her teasing wasn’t a thrilling prospect either. Besides, whiffs of Zuko still lingered around the apartment and Jee really didn’t want to chase them away for good any sooner than he absolutely had to.

But then she added:
“Um, I brought cake?”

… Well then. Perhaps just this one time. So he could berate her properly.

“I’m sorry,” was the first thing Jee heard when he dragged himself over to open the door; Ming stood there looking contrite and smiling sheepishly in her winter coat, holding out her peaceful offering of confectionaries. “Is he gone now?”

Jee sighed and stood to the side to let her in. She shuffled inside in a gingerly manner that looked as ill-fitting on her as it would have done on Zuko, an act of humility which Jee suspected wouldn’t last long.

He was right – as soon as she crossed the threshold, she gave Jee a lingering look and pronounced, “Well. You certainly do look like someone who’s gotten laid.”

Jee glared at her and was disappointed to see it had next to no effect on the infernal woman. He really needed to work on his glares some more.

Then, however, he saw Ming’s growing smirk and suddenly remembered that he had yet to put on a t-shirt, and his failure at intimidation seized to be so surprising.

Damn it.

“I take it last night was a success?” Ming asked, giving him one last once-over before confident strides took her over to the counter where she set about depositing her peace offering.

“I’m not discussing last night with you,” Jee snapped, settling down on the couch. Ming was already making herself quite at home without any prompting, so there was little need to stand on ceremony.

And damn it all to hell if he’d ever feel self-conscious about being caught wandering around his own apartment in old sweatpants, half-naked. He hadn’t been expecting any company and that was that.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? How was I supposed to know you were getting some if you never tell me anything about your plans unless you want to go drinking? And in all honesty, I wouldn’t have picked up if I were you.”

Jee frowned at the blank TV screen and refused to acknowledge any logic of that statement.

“I didn’t,” he insisted, sounding like a petulant grump even to his own ears. “I ignored you the first three times, remember? Other people would have gotten the hint.”

“Yeah, yeah.” There was a succession of rustling noises, a brief spell of silence, and then Ming floated back into Jee’s field of vision again, bearing apple pie. It smelled of sugar and apples and childhood and some vague, Hollywoodish vision of home that had only ever been an abstract idea to Jee, and immediately he found himself better predisposed towards his unexpected guest.

“All right.” Ming set the delicious-smelling pie down on the coffee table and made herself comfortable on the armchair next to the sofa, looking at Jee with a small smile. “So, he’s an early riser, that mystery man of yours?”

Jee’s head snapped to her at once, his eyes wide. How on earth would she –

“Easy there, pal.” She laughed, then jerked her head in the direction of the counter. “I saw the note. Good of him to write it, you know? And stop looking at me like that, Jesus. I couldn’t help it that it lay right there, my eyes just – fell on it.”
“Right.” Jee groaned into his hands, massaging his forehead. Fucking lovely. It was a good thing Ming had never taught Zuko or apparently helped him with his homework – if she’d recognized that near-illegible scrawl as his handwriting, they’d have been done for, all because Jee was too braindead to stay alert.

“Thanks for your advice, by the way,” Ming offered after a pause, her voice softer. Clearly she wanted to make peace. “I would have been fine, but it probably saved me a world of embarrassment.”

Jee grumbled something unintelligible in response. The pie could have smelled delicious but that didn’t mean he had to act *nice* because of that.

“If anything, the whole affair made me feel old,” Ming went on, her voice going rather pensive as her little, private smile grew wistful. “You know? I didn’t tell you that last night, but the guy was young. Probably fresh out of college. He called me a milf, for Christ’s sake, can you imagine? And he was cute, but not all that special, and I was quite drunk, but it was the first time I went out clubbing in a long time and let me tell you, it didn’t make me feel any better about my next birthday.”

She chuckled, and Jee looked over to her in time to catch the tiniest undertone of bitterness in her expression before it winked out of existence. Throat tight, he nodded, because he had nothing to add. After all, his bed still smelled of an eighteen-year-old twink. Which, oddly enough, really didn’t make him feel any older…

Yet.

“Is it someone I know?” Ming asked after a moment of pie-scented silence, immediately bringing the frown back to tug at Jee’s face. “You can tell me that much, can’t you?”

No, no I can’t.

“No,” Jee lied, reaching out to grab a cut piece of the pie straight out of the brown cardboard wrappings. “You wouldn’t know him. And I really don’t want to talk about it.”

He expected a fresh barrage of teasing to come his way, but – oddly enough – Ming kept quiet, sitting in the armchair and looking down at her hands. Finally, she said, “So it wasn’t quite the success, then?”

“Stop it.”

“Is it because of me? Look, I really am sorry if that’s the case. I know you’ve been sort of lonely.”

Jee’s eyes flew to her again. Where the hell did that come from?

“I haven’t been *lonely,*” he spat out, mincing the word as he would a lemon.

Ming didn’t say anything for a moment; the arch of her eyebrow going up supplied an eloquent enough commentary.

“Whatever,” she shrugged when Jee once again tried to glare her into submission. She leaned in, grabbed a piece of pie and sat back down. “Kill me for misinterpreting your grumpy face when people discuss their relationships around you. I’m just saying, I’m sorry I ruined your – what was it, a date? Or a one-nighter? Or is the guy a keeper?”

Jee sighed and took a bite of the pie. It tasted like silicon childhood.
“I don’t know,” he supplied at last, crumbs falling down all around him in the world’s least threatening avalanche. “He might come back. It was – I mean. Fine. He was fine.”

Even that questionable oratorical feat cost him, and he only felt worse when Ming laughed, apparently pleased with Jee’s discomfort. Jee had long ago learned that when it came to being a bastard, both women and men were perfectly capable of it in equal amounts so most of the time he didn’t entertain any notions of women being particularly evil; but moments like this one did precious little to make him regret embracing his homosexuality very early on.

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” Jee sent her another glare. “And what if I did? Would that shut you up?”

“I sound like Zuko,” he realized as soon as the clipped words left him. The thought was rather terrifying, but he kept glaring at Ming anyway for good measure.

Too bad it was wasted; Ming was too busy coughing to notice. Jee idly wondered if he’d be sorry to see her die of suffocation – after all, she would have brought it upon herself, laughing so hard with her mouth full of apple pie.

“Sorry, sorry,” she pleaded, thumping herself on the chest, tears in her eyes. “Okay, I’m good. I think. God, you should have seen your face! Is talking about your personal life really that bad all of a sudden? You’ve never been this secretive before.”

She was right, he wasn’t. He’d never been one to share explicit details, but he’d also never shirked from talking about himself when the topic came up. He was not an unsociable recluse… most of the time.

This defensive behavior really would not do. He needed to get a hold of himself – Ming was not suspecting anything and he couldn’t give her reasons to start.

“Sorry, I’m just tired. It was a long night,” he said, forcing an apologetic smile. “And there’s really not that much to talk about. I had sex, it was good. Might happen again. No big deal.”

“Oh!” Ming nodded, still visibly amused. “Okay, fine. But it would be cool if I could meet him, you know, if he stays for a bit longer. Go out for drinks. Maybe Lin could join us some time.”

“Somehow I don’t think our illustrious chief of police would enjoy it.” Jee smirked at the mental image of going out for drinks with Lin “Iron Lady” Bei Fong.

“You’d be surprised, Jee. She’s more fun than you give her credit for. And I do enjoy watching you two bicker.”

“What’s up with her family, anyway?” Jee asked, pouncing on the opportunity to change the topic. “Do you know them?”

“Not personally.” Ming’s smile faded when she glanced out to the window, at the whiteness covering the buildings. “They have several homes all around the country and come to the one here every once in a while, supposedly if they want to catch a break. That’s what Lin says. And when they do, she gets to look after Toph, offer the poor girl some entertainment. But then they always pack up their bags and leave again, off to God knows where, so there’s only so much she can do.”
“And Toph’s tutor? Do you know them?”

“No.” Ming shrugged. “It’s not anyone from around here. They’ve hired someone to travel around with them and babysit Toph. I never met her, but Lin says the woman’s terrified by Toph’s father and doesn’t dare cross him. Frankly, I’m not surprised. The fact that she turns a blind eye on Toph’s escapades and hasn’t ratted them out yet is quite remarkable in her case.”

Jee frowned, finishing his pie. “Poor kid.”

“Yeah.”

And that was pretty much all that could be said on the subject, sad though it was. They couldn’t do anything for the girl, apart from what they were trying to do already. The Bei Fongs may not be in the same class as the Xis, but they were powerful enough to remain intimidating and frankly, Jee had no idea if there was anything that could be done if they kept objecting to introducing Toph to the normal world.

Jee was just a nobody from nowhere who was already biting more than he could chew with one disgraced heir. Taking another rich brat under his wing was definitely not in the cards for him.

“What are you looking for?” Ming prodded him with her foot, nodding at his laptop. “You’ve got Google Maps open. Going somewhere?”

“Only a massage parlor,” Jee replied, shaking himself into the here and now. “My back’s hurting like a bitch. Do you know any good ones?”

For a moment, Ming looked as if she was getting ready for another round of teasing, but she must have read the warning in Jee’s eyes correctly because in the end, she only smiled knowingly and thought for a moment. “There’s one by The Jasmine Dragon,” she said. “A pretty good one. I’ve been there three times before, they’re cheap and do a solid job. I could take you there and then we could go to Iroh’s for a bit? I haven’t seen the old bastard since they came back from their little skiing holiday.”

Jee took a few minutes to consider. It probably wasn’t the wisest idea to tempt fate, but…

Oh, why the hell not. He wanted to see Zuko.

“All right,” he conceded. Getting his ass off the sofa prompted another angry flower of pain in his lower back, forcing him to take it slow; he caught Ming’s worried expression and twisted his mouth in a bitter smile. “Just – give me a moment.”

It turned out to be more than a moment, and Jee instantly regretted ever leaving Ming alone in the apartment while he’d shut himself in the bathroom to change; for when he emerged, he was greeted by the sight of her standing in his bedroom and examining Zuko’s memento briefs with an expression which said it all.

“They’re not yours,” she stated with a devilish smile at Jee. “Much too small. So you prefer them smaller than you, huh?”

Fuck fuck fuck.

“Okay, put them down.” He sighed, cursing himself three times over for having forgotten all about the little souvenir. He should have expressly banned Ming from going into the bedroom, dammit. “You’ve had more than enough fun for today. Why don’t we start behaving like grown-ups now.”
“Ah, come on. He’s obviously going to come back for more.” Ming seemed disturbingly ecstatic at the thought and Jee would have spared a moment to worry about the state of her sex life if he wasn’t so desperately trying to keep his a secret. “You can’t convince me he left them here accidentally, you old fox.”

Jee decided that smirking and letting it go without further comment would be the best course of action here. Any more words and his voice might start trembling, and he’d much rather not let anyone on to how hard his heart was hammering.

God, he was being such a moron, leaving clues lying all over the place. He really, really needed to get on top of this. Especially if they were about to visit Iroh.

Hah. Facing the old man with the memories of his nephew’s naked body closing in around him was not something Jee was looking forward to, but the sooner he got around to it, the better.

Stay casual. Nothing is happening. You’re not fucking your own student who’s barely legal. They have no reason to even start suspecting.

Yet.

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Oh, that was much, much better. One thorough back-pounding, one long lecture on creams and exercises and one considerable purging of the balance on Jee’s credit card later, he felt as good as new and very, very interested in seeing Zuko again.

Just as interested as he was in getting Ming off his back. He had reasons to suspect that the sight of her wouldn’t make his new lover comfortable, what with everything that had passed; but she was not having any of the hints he tried dropping her way once she emerged, refreshed and scrubbed clean, from the spa she’d indulged in while he was having his back put in order.

“I want some tea,” she insisted, “and I want to talk to Iroh. I’ve been considering a trip to the Alps since forever. I want to drill him about everything.”

And that was that.

Mercifully, the place wasn’t crowded, with only a handful of patrons warming their hands against steaming cups. Jin was there, chatting amiably with a very pleased Haru, and they both sent smiles their way when Jee and Ming made their way to a table by one of the windows.

Jin’s smile looked a little wider than normal when she directed it at Jee. But maybe it was only his paranoia.

“Hey, your boss in?” Ming called without ceremony, which was the way things seemed to be done in this place, especially with no crowds. At any rate, Jin didn’t seem at all surprised, but nodded and told them to wait while she went and got Iroh to come over.

Zuko wasn’t hanging around anywhere in sight.

“Have you ever been to Europe?” Ming asked while they waited, leaning backwards in her chair.
Jee rolled his eyes at her. “I was a sailor, Ming,” he said. “Traveling is kind of the whole point.”

“Well, duh, but have you ever – you know, saw any of the famous places? Like actual recreational sightseeing?”

“Not a whole lot, no.” Jee looked out the window; snow started to fall again in the meantime. “But I did have some fun every now and then.”

Ming looked wistful when she crossed her arms over her chest and smiled. “I’ve never left the States,” she confessed. “Not even to go see where my grandparents came from – they’re Chinese. Your life must have been so exciting.”

Jee shrugged. “It had its ups and downs. Believe it or not, being at sea all the time gets boring too. But…” He swallowed down the lump of memories that suddenly cloyed in his throat. “Yeah, I guess it was pretty exciting.”

“So why did you leave?”

Jee shifted uneasily in his seat, but thanks to some uncanny timing, he was saved from answering that one by a very cheery, very noticeable Iroh who ambled over to their table humming something that sounded like Cole Porter. For the first few seconds Jee couldn’t put his finger on why the man looked different, but then he realized – instead of traditional Asian robes he’d seen him in previously, today Iroh was wearing a warm, red sweater and a pair of jeans.

For some reason that made Jee feel as though he’d seen a character in Disneyworld take off their costume’s head in the middle of a crowd of children.

“Well now, someone is in a good mood!” Ming beamed at Iroh, patting the spare chair invitingly. “Don’t tell me you had another date with our dear guidance counselor.”

“Oh no, I haven’t been so lucky.” Iroh laughed, wasting no time in accepting the invitation. “I believe she is still cross with me for the late postcard. But, my friends,” he leaned in then, lowering his voice and looking at both of them with an expression that was equal parts delight and playfulness, “I have reasons to believe that my nephew has found himself a lady friend.”

And in that moment, Jee both lamented and felt grateful for the fact that there were no mirrors in the teashop. Not thinking *I fucked your nephew last night* in circles over and over again was hard enough; for the first few heartbeats following the whispered bombshell, Jee had absolutely no self-control left to think of what his face was doing.

Jesus Christ, was Zuko really that obvious? Did the idiot brat let anything slip? Were they –

But Iroh didn’t look at all like a man who had any leads to suppose that his precious nephew-slash-adopted son had spent the night in his gym teacher’s bed. Rather, he looked like any caring parent would if they found out that their child was getting some action – both secretly pleased and seconds away from reminiscing about their old golden days of teenage courtship.

Not that Jee had any personal experience with that; neither of his parents had ever shown any particular interest in his conquests. But he’d witnessed enough of such expressions every time he’d been forced to interact with parents since he’d taken up teaching. His fellow teachers bore that expression disturbingly often, too.

He breathed out, forcing himself to stay calm. Iroh didn’t suspect anything. And, mercifully, both he and Ming were too preoccupied with the news to notice much of what Jee’s face was doing.
“What makes you say that?” asked Ming, her tone skeptical. “It’s a little hard to believe…”

“I know.” Iroh nodded. “But you cannot deny that his behavior has been improving for some time. Besides, I noticed that sometimes he acted in a stranger way than usual, like he was keeping some fresh secrets, and seemed awfully confused about something, but refused to talk about it… Well! This morning, not only did he get up late, he also came down and smiled at everyone! And there’s more! When I caught him making breakfast for himself, he was humming!”

“Good grief.” Ming looked appropriately stunned. “Now that’s a disturbing mental image. Is he – you know, is he all right?”

Jee barely caught that, and he missed Iroh’s enthusiastic answer completely. He was too busy trying not to grin like an idiot.

Smiling. Humming. Being in a good mood. Good God, Jee was a miracle worker. The swell of stupid pride threatened to cut his chest right open and flood everyone within a ten-mile radius with the warmth that coursed through all of him like a jolt of electricity.

He wanted to see the brat. Badly.

“– when dear Jin asked him. He blushed and changed the subject immediately, and he got all flustered when I tried to inquire. There must be something in it!”

“I don’t know, Iroh.” When Jee forced himself to tune back into the conversation, he noticed that Ming looked both skeptical and rather cautious at the same time. “I mean, yeah, it does seem terribly bizarre, but even so, don’t keep asking him about a lady friend. He might take it the wrong way. Even you can’t deny there was something between him and that damned Jet brat. If he’s seeing someone in secret, it could just as well be a boy and you’d hurt his feelings.”

She took a quick glance in Jee’s direction when she said that and he nodded slowly, schooling his features into neutrality. Iroh didn’t seem overly concerned.

“Not that I would begrudge the boy any kind of happiness,” he said, “but I think he is past that phase now. He was very hurt and lonely when that happened and I think we’ve all been there. He still finds girls attractive, his crush on his childhood friend was very adorable, I wish you could see it!”

“Look, I know you want grandchildren.” Ming sighed, giving Iroh a small smile. “But I also think you may be a little delusional. Maybe that’s why he’s keeping it a secret again, didn’t you consider that? If you pester him about a girlfriend and he – you know, swings the other way – that would discourage anyone. I’m just warning you so you won’t blunder into anything icky.” Then, she looked at Jee, her expression thoughtful. “Say, you didn’t notice anything odd about him recently, did you?”

“That’s right!” Iroh’s face swung in his direction as if slapped by the wind. “He seems to respect you a great deal, Lieutenant. Did he perhaps mention anyone…?”

“Um, no.” Jee cleared his throat quickly, hoping to God it wouldn’t come off as nervous. “No, sorry. I don’t know anything. Um…” He considered, then gave up – there was no harm in asking, was there? And the need was starting to itch like a mosquito bite. “Where is he, by the way? Not home?”

“He is back in the kitchen, doing the dishes. Which he volunteered to do, by the way, even though I wanted him to have the day off. I was most shocked, let me tell you!”

“Yeah, I can believe that easily.” Ming still looked torn between skepticism and incredulity. “Huh. Whadya know. Actually…” Here she looked to Jee again and a vague spark of foreboding traveled
through his system. “Heng, why don’t you try to talk to him next time the two of you have private
practice? He likes you. Maybe he’ll spill.”

“I don’t think that’s likely, actually, he –“ Jee tried, but it was too late; Iroh was once again drilling
him with that hopeful expression.

“Besides, if it really is a boy, you could help more than Iroh could,” Ming said; Jee tried not to
throttle her on the spot, but the initial urge was strong. “I mean, you’re –“

And then she finally read his warning signs correctly, thank God.

“ – experienced with talking to confused young men,” she finished after only a quick double take,
raising an eyebrow at him. “From your navy days. That’s what you told me.”

“Yeah.” Jee shrugged, then glared at her when Iroh looked away from him. “I am. I could – try. But
I can’t guarantee anything.”

“Still, I would be most grateful. I’m afraid my nephew finds it difficult to connect with me and
perhaps I haven’t been entirely… correct in my approach to him in the past.”

Oh, so there was history there. Some ugly history. It was written all over the slightly bittersweet lilt to
Iroh’s softening voice, in the dying flicker in his eye, in the tightening of the corners of his smile. The
old man was blaming himself hardcore for something in the past, and possibly for Zuko’s current
state.

Not that Jee could do anything to alleviate it. He looked to the window again.

“Actually, Iroh,” Ming said after a beat of herbal silence, “I was hoping I could talk to you about
your holidays. I’m kind of interested in a similar trip myself and I thought that maybe, if you’re not
too busy…”

“Not at all!” The old man perked up again immediately, giving Ming his warmest Santa Claus smile.
“There’s very little business today and I’ll be glad to chat. Just let me know what kind of tea I could
bring you and we’ll get right to it.”

“I’ll have the one with cinnamon and honey, please. Jee?”

Jee looked to both of them, as usual feeling helpless in the mysterious land of tea he’d never heard
of. “… Same? Or just, you know, something regular. Black. Yeah.”

Both Iroh and Ming laughed at him, but he took it like a man. There was no shame in being ignorant
about bloody tea, and he had had no idea so many blends of the damned stuff existed before he first
set foot in this place. The best thing could hope for on a ship was coffee thicker than glue and strong
enough to keep a sailor up and running at full speed for the whole day.

Jee had had to learn how to make the stuff after he’d left because by then his stomach regarded
anything less than that as weak piss.

“Never fear, Lieutenant!” Iroh announced, standing up. “I shall prepare you the most regular,
blackest tea ever made by man. I’ll ask Zuko to bring his laptop, too, so we can show you the
pictures.”

For a moment, Ming looked panicked. “No, that won’t be necessary –“

“But it’s no problem at all and I’ll be most happy to share! I’ll be right back.”
And with that, he made a beeline for the kitchen, picking up the cheery tune he’d been humming before he approached their table. Jee allowed himself a small smile as he watched him go.

One battle won. God knew how many still to go.

“Shit, what have I done,” Ming despaired, hiding her face in her hands. “I subjected both of us to the old holiday pictures torture.”

“Can’t be all that bad,” Jee murmured. He found himself rather looking forward to seeing Zuko in skiing garb. “But doesn’t the guy ever have to work in this place?”

“He’s trained a small herd of assistants,” Ming explained. “There’s always at least a couple of them at the back so he can take breaks whenever he wants to. Perks of running your own business, I guess.”

Jee shrugged. His head was too full of Zuko to care much about whatever Iroh had to say about the glory of the Alps. Would it be terribly suspicious if he kept looking at the kitchen door to catch the brat when he entered…?

“Jee, can I ask you something, while we’re still alone?” Ming pitched her voice low, into a half-whisper. “Why wouldn’t you let me tell him you’re gay?”

Ah. That. Jee unglued his eyes from the kitchen door and faced her, his arms resting on the table. “Isn’t it obvious?” he whispered back, frowning. “I’m a teacher.”

“Well, yeah, but do you really think – “

“Yes. Yes, I do,” Jee cut her off before she could come up with any of the tired arguments he’d already gone over a hundred times. “I don’t particularly fancy dealing with all the outraged parents protesting against a gay coach being anywhere near their precious kiddies.”

Wow. I managed to say that with a straight face. Go me.

Ming looked conflicted. Jee decided to press on, squashing the discomfort his own words inspired in his gut. “And Iroh? I’m giving his nephew private lessons. I don’t care how tolerant the guy is, he’s not going to be happy when he finds out. And trust me when I say I’ve dealt with enough of that shit to last me a lifetime.”

“Okay, fine. Maybe you’re right. But you could still talk to Zuko, couldn’t you? It could really help the poor kid.”

Jee could only bring himself to shrug and looked out the window again. It hurt to think that his particular brand of help would cost him Ming’s friendship, if she ever found out – hers and probably everyone else’s.

He didn’t have the chance to ruminate on it properly, though. Even before the heavy load of guilt started to settle on his back and bend it with its weight, it was wiped out entirely as soon as the kitchen door swung open and produced one tall, messy-haired, smiling teenager carrying a laptop and heading towards their table, his eyes instantly glued to Jee.

Jee smiled back. It wasn’t even a choice.

Zuko walked over to them, Iroh in tow bearing a tray with three cups, and he looked so good, the damned brat, so very good in jeans and a loose black sweater whose collar was wide enough to give Jee a glimpse of the pale collarbone he had been kissing and licking last night; of that long, sensitive
neck which had sent such delicious shudders down Zuko’s body and produced such beautiful sounds.

Damn.

“Hello, Miss Ming.” The brat nodded at Ming, stuttering only for a moment, and there was a blush threatening to spread over his face as he tried not to look at her; which wasn’t surprising, considering that Ming had heard him climax over the phone. It was quite a miracle that he managed to address her coherently at all.

And of course the blush instantly made Jee remember a very different one, shining eyes looking up at him, beads of sweat, tangled sheets, a cry of pleasure and the firm grip of flesh –


Jee looked at him and remembered everything, everything: the phone call, the tears, the naked embrace, the sullen defensiveness, the passion, the shy touch, keep going, I’m ready, the pale skin against his lips, the hoarse voice crying out, stop coddling me, the mint-scented kisses, fingers tracing his tattoos, eyes closing in pleasure.

He wanted to kiss the beautiful fucking bastard so damn much.

“Hi,” he said instead. And had to swallow everything else.

Vaguely, he registered some commotion as Zuko suddenly broke eye contact – after what felt like a long, long spell of just looking at smiling at each other – to set the laptop down and pull a vacant chair close to their table, and then he was sitting down on it backwards, straddling it and folding his arms over the backrest, sitting so close to Jee that their knees were touching. Meanwhile, Iroh set the three cups down and sat down in his previous spot, scootching the chair a little to make place for Zuko. The laptop was pushed as far back as it would go, the lid resting against the window, and both Ming and Jee moved their chairs a bit into the huddle to see the screen better.

Which had allowed Jee to press his thigh into Zuko’s. And he realized he already had it bad when he concentrated on the warm touch so thoroughly that he’d missed Iroh’s introduction almost entirely.

“So, you’ll be joining us, Zuko?” Ming asked, and only when the name was dropped into the conversation did Jee’s eyes focus again.

Only to fall on Zuko’s profile as the brat’s head turned to Ming, giving Jee another good look at that long neck brushed by strands of hair. That loose sweater was a thing from the deepest pits of hell.

“I don’t have anything better to do,” he shrugged. There was still a smile playing on his lips when he glanced at Jee and then looked back to Ming. “Uncle exaggerates a lot. And I want to stop him from showing too many pictures, he took thousands of them.”

“O-okay.” Ming was clearly utterly confused by his behavior, but smiled back when Zuko settled on his chair more comfortably, accidentally nudging Jee’s leg some more.

Jee wanted to laugh. Zuko was a damned incubus who only now bloomed into his true form.

And he wanted nothing more but to abduct him back into his bed.

It only got worse as the late afternoon bleed into darkening evening and Iroh’s rambling voice, interrupted by Ming’s questions and Zuko’s quiet, infrequent corrections, faded into a steady, warm buzz. The game had started with Zuko’s hand idly brushing Jee’s thigh under the table at one point –
a small, fleeting gesture that could have been an accident but very clearly wasn’t. Jee reciprocated by nudging his ankle with his shoe while he pretended to be very intent on the picture of some people skiing down a slope. Then Zuko’s arm pressed against his as he moved his chair strategically, ostensibly to see better. Jee leaned into it even more, which allowed him to run his fingers over Zuko’s palm under the table and out of sight of the other patrons. In response, Zuko turned his palm upward, snatching Jee’s fingers and lacing them with his briefly. They didn’t so much as glance at one another, but their fingers brushed and pressed and caressed, moving as much as they dared without signaling anything out of the ordinary, and every time Jee felt his roughened fingers skim over Zuko’s smooth skin he felt a thrill, like a juvenile shot of adrenaline that made it absolutely impossible to stop.

The heightened awareness of doing it with other people present, with Zuko’s fucking guardian sitting right next to the brat, instead of making Jee see reason, only added to the excitement. Which was utterly ridiculous because Jee wasn’t a witless kid who didn’t know any better…

Zuko’s fingers clasped his again, firmly, and Jee really couldn’t care less.

Jee didn’t dare ask him if he could come tonight – but there was another way. He fished out his phone, pretended to text while he typed Tonight?, and then passed the phone to Zuko under the table, putting it in the kid’s lap.

And, damn him, the brat could be sneaky. Jee almost missed the moment when he glanced down to read the single word and looked back up immediately, smoothly pushing the phone back to Jee over their joined thighs. The way he shook his head was almost imperceptible, and he made it look more natural by running a hand through his hair – nothing to see here, just a boy trying to keep his hair out of his eyes.

Nice.

Jee would have been even more impressed if not for the slight blush which fought itself onto Zuko’s good cheek again.

So that was a no. Fuck.

The knowledge turned Zuko’s next furtive touch into torture, but Jee held on anyway because if that was as much of the kid as he was going to get today, he would damn well snatch as much as he could.

God, he was going crazy.

In the meantime, he did get to see a few adorable pictures of Zuko in the mountains and wondered idly if he could perhaps ask the brat to send him some later. That could send the wrong message, though – after all, they were not a couple. Just two people who happened to be attracted to one another, fucked once and would most likely fuck again.

Whenever that would happen.

The evening got so dark it turned into night by the time they were ready to go, not because Iroh’s tour down memory lane had lasted that long but simply because dusk fell early at this time of year in Michigan. Jee held onto Zuko’s hand a heartbeat too long before he let the brat stand up and take the laptop away.

Before he disappeared, Zuko said goodbye to both of them, sending Jee one more smile over his shoulder. The glint in his eye, his preoccupied air and the way he kept unwittingly licking his lips
gave Jee a fair idea that he wasn’t the only one with impatience gnawing at him; and then his mind inevitably leapt to some inappropriate images of what Zuko would do once alone in his bedroom, after which he needed to shake himself awake and preferably splash some snow down his shirt.

He didn’t even want to imagine what their classes would look like from now on.

“Iroh,” Ming said in a low voice a few seconds after Zuko left them. “Are you sure Zuko is… you know. Not on drugs?”

Jee couldn’t help himself – he snorted so hard he had to bring his hand up to his mouth. *On drugs indeed.*

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, dear girl.” Iroh sounded pretty confident, even though he too seemed amused by the suggestion. “He may be confused, but he’s a good boy.”

“I’ve never seen him so – normal.” Ming looked as though the experience of seeing Zuko acting normal had shaken the very foundations of the universe. “He really was smiling! And he sat down with us, just like that, instead of going off somewhere to sulk! I never thought I’d live to see the day. And he did look pretty stoned, Jee, did you notice? The blushing, and how bright his eyes were? He looked pretty squirmy, too. Iroh, you’d do well to do a discreet search of his room when he’s at school, I’m telling you.”

Ming held on to the idea even after they’d finally said their goodbyes and she was driving Jee home, mumbling *weird* and *That’s not normal* and *A girlfriend is one thing, but this*… Jee left her to it and murmured some noncommittal nothings, his head too full of the damnable brat and his sneaky touches.

*Can’t tonight. Maybe tomorrow,* said Zuko’s text which sent Jee’s phone abuzz shortly after they left the teashop, and Jee allowed himself a smile. He clearly wasn’t the only one who didn’t want to wait as long as next Friday.

Oh well. He could wait one night, providing Zuko would really find a way to come tomorrow…

“Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, catching himself in time; he’d been too wrapped up in his own thoughts to notice the two men exiting his block and had bludgeoned right into one of them.

They said nothing. With one obscure look at Jee, they were back on their way, and Jee absent-mindedly noted that he hadn’t seen them before. He would have remembered two dudes in sharp black suits, identical ties, white shirts, leather coats and expensive-looking hats hanging out anywhere in his area, and definitely if they drove around in such a shiny, sleek Mercedes that the two of them got into. If anything, they looked like a pair of agents plucked directly form a spy novel. Maybe on their way to a costume party.

Anyway, not Jee’s business.

By the time he made his way upstairs and to his apartment, his head was filled with images of Zuko again and the two strangers dissolved into nothing, together with their shiny Mercedes and their vaguely hostile, expressionless faces.

He had better things to think about.
A huge THANK YOU to the irreplaceable Princebender brainstorming support group and to Sam for her lightning-fast beta. Ilu guys <3

Next time: Class is endured, some rules are set up and Sokka makes an inappropriate joke.
Chapter 19: Teaching Patience

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the long wait, but I cannot promise that the next chapter will come out any sooner - my life has been pretty crazy and leaving precious little time, or energy, for ficcing. For that same reason this chapter is not exactly packed with goodies, but I hope you'll enjoy it anyway.

Also, I'm working on a little side-dish, a Christmas Special, if you will, so with any luck, I might just finish and post it - soonish. It's proving a lot more work than I anticipated, but keep your fingers crossed.

And for now - enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Jee heard Zuko’s eager hand rapping against his windowpane the following evening, he was ready.

The blinds in all the windows save the one Zuko had used to come in have been drawn, the beer was cooling in the fridge, some of his favorite records were playing quietly on the stereo – good classic rock with nice guitar riffs and belting vocals, no sappy 80’s power ballads thank you very much, he hadn’t stooped that low – and the apartment itself had been cleaned and polished into a state of near-perfect, even soldierly orderliness. Not that the brat would deign to comment on, or even notice, any of it in the first place, but Jee had some standards. And it had kept him busy through the day where otherwise he would have spent it pacing and possibly tearing his hair out, or sitting on the couch all day and jerking off.

This way was more productive for everybody. Besides, it had gotten to a point where the layers of dust were thick enough to doodle in, which definitely called for some major battle-waging with the aid of a deadly washcloth and even deadlier cheap spray from Wal-Mart which had his apartment smelling like the inside of a detergent testing center.

The point was, it wasn’t all for Zuko and why would anyone think that and – damn, who was Jee trying to fool here, of course it was all for Zuko.

Which became laughably clear the moment he sprang from the couch, where he could barely sit still anyway, like an overgrown and very un-colorful jack in the box, and raced to the window as soon as he heard the first tap. Opening it wide was a matter of seconds, and so was shutting it with a flourish as soon as Zuko’s form slid into the warmth and safety of his place, once again bringing snow and frost and a warm glow that had nothing to do with either.

Right. There went Jee’s pretence at not spending every waking moment since the teashop thinking about it and wanting it like a five-year-old in Toys R Us wailing for a shiny new superhero LEGO kit. Only his shiny new superhero LEGO kit didn’t come with any instructions and probably wouldn’t shred his foot if Jee accidentally stepped on it.

Luckily, Jee only had a grand total of three seconds to meditate on the grave of his sacrificed aloofness. Maybe four and a half. Because Zuko hadn’t even gotten rid of his winter wrappings
before he looked up at Jee and flashed him a sheepish smile, the kind of smile that some kids could say “hey” with while they fumbled with the hem of their shirts and shuffled their feet awkwardly, and the power of that smile on Zuko’s perpetually scowling face was enough for Jee to be overcome with a compulsion to sweep him into a crushing embrace and hold on.

“What was that for?” Zuko asked when Jee let him go, his expression adorably baffled and still pinked with frost.

“Grown up stuff.” Jee shrugged, turning in the direction of the fridge. “Now get out of all that like a good boy and come here.”

It was better to face the fridge now, infinitely better. Zuko would probably think weird things about him if he saw his stupid grin.

The Corona bottle had cooled nicely and left an icy sheen of dampness on his fingers when he set it down on the sink next to him. He could hear the rustle of various garments being removed behind him when he rummaged for clean glasses – or pretended to, since he’d made sure it would all be spotlessly clean, but of course Zuko didn’t need to know that.

“I don’t have much time tonight,” Zuko said, his voice muffled. He was probably untwisting the scarf from around his neck. “Won’t be able to stay the night.”

… Oh. Right. That put a bit of a damper on things.

“Is it because of school tomorrow?” Jee asked, opening the drawer to pull out a bottle opener.

“Yeah. Uncle thinks I went to bed early and I’ll have to go back so everything’s normal tomorrow morning. Usually he sleeps in anyway, but…”

… But. Yeah. The but hovered unspoken in the air, not icy, exactly, but introducing a bit of a chill to swirl in and mix with that warm glow, reminding Jee of the precise nature of their situation.

“Sure, okay,” Jee murmured, prying the lid open with a quiet pop and a hiss of disturbed bubbles. And then, riding on the coattails of a sudden absurd spark of an idea before his brain could filter it, “Or I could drive you tomorrow morning. To school. We’re going the same way and all.”

The idea was punctuated by a moment of piercing silence, and though Jee couldn’t see Zuko’s face, somehow the silence painted him a very clear picture of the expression he would find as soon as he turned around. That expression would probably say “You’re a Massive Idiot” and it would be right, too. It was an excessively stupid thing to suggest.

Still. Now that it was out, Jee had to defend it like his non-existing honor.

He turned around with two filled glasses with the intention to do just that and lay some pointless arguments on the table just for the sake of saving face in front of a goddamned twink – ye gods, what had the world come to – but then he froze.

And looked at Zuko. And went as far as to open his mouth, but the only thing that came out was empty air.

Zuko smiled.

“Right.” Jee cleared his throat, setting the glasses on the counter. “Right. You know, when I told you to take your clothes off, I didn’t exactly mean all of them. At least not quite yet.”
The brat had the gall to shrug and *fuck*, he was still smiling, an innocent little smile as if he was a fucking cherub without a single stain on his childlike honor and not standing buck-ass nude in a pool of his own clothes in the middle of Jee’s living room and already going hard. And yeah, why was Jee across the counter from him again?

“I told you. I don’t have much time. We shouldn’t waste it,” the naked demon said, clearly enjoying Jee’s reaction and also baring little hints of self-consciousness, like a slight twitch here and there, a lick to his lips, the tint of the blush going darker. Which sent a jolt of electricity straight to Jee’s sweatpants because he realized it – Zuko wasn’t quite sure about it. But he was doing it anyway, being playful, teasing Jee, pushing his own boundaries, taking the initiative.

For him.

That was… shit.

And suddenly, Jee saw no point in drinking the beer anymore. Sure, they hadn’t gotten the chance to celebrate their first time properly and maybe it would be nice to offer Zuko a drink, but – yeah, why waste a perfectly good evening on something so mundane when clearly there were other ways to entertain themselves and a beautiful boy was being naked and beautiful in his living room. They could drink some other night.

Besides, maybe they didn’t need any celebrating. Maybe it was enough just to – get on with it. Maybe ceremonies didn’t suit either of them.

The glasses stayed on the counter, forgotten, and Jee went and got on with it.

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“You know, I could still drive you,” Jee said in the half-light later, much later, whispering the words into the sweat-damp, salty skin of Zuko’s neck.

The bed hummed as Zuko stretched and shifted in Jee’s embrace, the scarred side of his face no longer pressed into the pillow. He looked too exhausted for elaborate facial mockery, but the disbelieving arch of his lone eyebrow in the lamp’s soft glow made it pretty clear what he thought of that suggestion.

Jee took the opportunity and kissed his cheek. It was still hot.

“No, you couldn’t. Unless you want everyone to find out,” the brat murmured, voice still hoarse and thick with post-orgasmic haze. “What do you think they’ll do if they see – “

“Not tomorrow, brat,” Jee huffed even as his lips found Zuko’s eyebrow. “Tonight. I can drive you back to your place.”

“Oh.” For a while, Zuko just lay there in his arms, allowing himself to be kissed. Jee took full advantage of that. He was going to enjoy as much of it as he could, because…

“We should probably think up a schedule,” he murmured, teeth catching on the shell of Zuko’s ear.

The brat made a quiet noise which was caught half-way between pleasure and annoyance. “Yeah,” he agreed sleepily, closing his eyes.
Jee kissed him on the eyelid because why the hell not.

“Friday nights?” He suggested, lips moving up to Zuko’s eyebrow. It was still damp from sweat and Jee smiled against it, remembering how Zuko arched his back into him as he came not twenty minutes ago.

It had been good. Christ, it had been so good. A little guarded, a little unsure, a little mechanical at first, but – oh, but the brat had wanted him. Enough so that he had willed himself to look past any lingering insecurities; and though they were still there, and though Jee had seen how the kid tried to fight against them even as Jee worked hard to help him to do just that, to lose himself in pleasure, he had done so well. Despite everything, despite what had happened on Friday, despite his lingering trust issues, Zuko had come to him, and he had led Jee to the bedroom, and had lain on his stomach almost immediately, demanding.

Not asking.

Demanding.

Perhaps he should start teaching the brat some lessons about bedroom authority and proper etiquette, Jee thought lazily, his lips kissing their way up the forehead and into Zuko’s hairline. That and staying quiet because if they kept it up, the neighbors would soon demand Jee’s head on a spike. It could easily turn into an interesting game in and of itself, and Jee smiled again at the thought, holding Zuko closer so that he could push his now-flaccid cock closer against that firm ass.

Yeah, they should do that. Later.

Zuko breathed out, shifting a little so that he was lying further on his back now, but still on his left side.

“That’s the only day that makes sense, isn’t it,” he whispered, stretching. “I can’t keep coming to you on Sundays because of school, and Saturdays… I can’t do Saturdays.”

“Why?” Jee lay back on the pillow, cushioning his head on his bent elbow. Zuko’s hair was still in his face and he breathed in the smell unabashedly.

“That’s none of your business.”

Jee would have frowned if he could be bothered to expend his precious energy on that.

“Don’t be a rude brat,” he murmured instead, “or I’ll tickle you. What’s so special about Saturdays?”

“They just are, okay?” Zuko huffed, turning back fully onto his side. He took Jee’s arm right along with him, though, and hugged it close, which took the bite right out of the snub.

Jee closed his eyes, smiled and hugged him back.

“If you must know,” Zuko muttered after a beat, “we have a rule about Saturdays. Uncle set it. We don’t normally spend a lot of time together, not really, and this… Uh. It’s supposed to be our together time. Don’t laugh.”

“I’m not laughing,” Jee assured him over the shit-eating grin that spread on his face immediately. Nuzzling Zuko’s neck seemed like a good pacifying strategy, so he did it, but oh, together time? That was too precious. “So what do you do for your together time?” he asked and promptly got a kick to his ankle.
“I said don’t laugh. It’s his rule, okay? He leaves me alone as long as I don’t break it. I think it’s his subtle way of keeping tabs on me so I don’t… stray.”

Now that didn’t sound good. And was a pretty shitty tactic, if Jee was any judge. Surely no adolescent high school student should be required to spend Saturday evenings with his elderly uncle when he could be out partying and getting laid?

Of course, the crucial element of this equation was that it was Zuko he was talking to. Which didn’t register until after he lost the filter and blundered:

“What if you had friends who wanted to hang out with you?”

He kicked himself mentally as soon as the words left his mouth, but it was too late. Zuko did not appreciate the question.

“In case you haven’t noticed, Lieutenant,” he snapped, shaking Jee off suddenly and sitting up on the bed, “I don’t have any. I’m not exactly the most popular guy at school.”

“Maybe you’re hoarding some in secret, outside of school, how was I to know?” It was a pitiful attempt at saving face because really, Jee knew Zuko was a lonely kid. Still. “What about Jin?” he asked, trying to put an arm around the brat again. “She seems to like you all right.”

“Jin is – okay,” Zuko admitted with a sour face, as though it pained him to admit that he found the existence of someone else his own age agreeable. “I guess. But you’re the only one apart from the teashop people I’ve been spending time with outside of school.”

And as soon as he let the words out, Zuko dislodged Jee’s arm, pushed himself off the bed, mumbled something about needing a shower and marched off to the bathroom. The door went shut with a finality that signaled the brat had not meant the confession to see daylight (well, nightlight) and was not going to stick around for the resulting awkwardness.

Jee was kind of grateful. There really wasn’t much he could say because of course he knew it was true.

The realization that he had just cut their together time short with his thoughtless blunder hurt just as acutely, and Jee groaned, running a hand over his face. Nice going, old man.

And he would have to wait until next Friday for a repeat, damn it.

Unless…

His gaze fell on the closed bathroom door.

… Why the hell not. Jee had lived nearly forty years firmly believing in that sacred phrase, “It’s worth a try,” and while it had gotten him in trouble more times than he cared to admit, it had also provided nice things in equal amounts. Besides, he needed a shower too and he had been serious about driving Zuko home.

As soon as he heard the water running, Jee sat up and got off the bed, then strolled over to the bathroom, fuelled by the new resolution to not let the brat stew and simmer in his broodiness any longer. The door gave way easily under his hand and he stepped inside, into the room which was already being filled with hot, swirling steam.

And yeah, okay, maybe it was a low move to deprive someone of their post-coital privacy time in the shower. Everyone had a right to enjoy their post-coital privacy time in the shower without being
disturbed. Still, Jee knew for a fact that those showers could be just as good with some company, even if the cabin was too small to allow for any of the more strenuous activities, and he wasn’t about to put up with any of Zuko’s sulking tonight. Not while they still had some time together that could be spent in more pleasurable ways.

Anyway, it was worth it, if only to see Zuko’s face.

“What – how did you –” The brat’s eyes were oh-so-wide when he whipped his head around at the sound of the door opening. The wet hair falling over his face made the expression doubly endearing. “I locked the door!”

Jee shrugged, smirking, and slid the shower cabin open to let himself in without ceremony, because hey, wasn’t that their motto for the night?

“Lock’s broken,” he explained, nudging Zuko a bit to the side. “Move over. I need a shower too.”

“What do you mean, lock’s broken?” Zuko kept staring at him with that comical expression of part horror, part outrage, but he did move over, if only out of necessity because the shower cabin really was small. “But the other night –“

“Been broken since I moved here,” Jee said and followed it up with a wink. “Now pass me my shower gel. Smells nice on you, by the way.”

Zuko stared at him, water running down his suddenly open, vulnerable face. The expression was a fascinating study, it really was, and Jee was quite content to just stand there patiently, being sprayed by hot water and watching the different stages that fought its way through Zuko’s poorly-constructed barriers of self-control. He couldn’t tell what the brat was thinking, exactly, but he could pinpoint the exact moment when the events from Friday night really clicked into something coherent in that pretty little head – it was when Zuko turned his back on Jee abruptly and reached out for the shower gel, but not quickly enough to hide that shy little smile that tugged at the right corner of his mouth.

Jee responded by patting his ass. That should dispel that little moment of awkwardness nicely.

“Sorry for implying you had friends,” he said, taking the bottle from Zuko and squeezing a generous amount into his palm. “You can keep sulking about it if you want, but stay still for a moment.”

“I’m not –“

Sulking died on Zuko’s lips the moment Jee started lathering him with the shower gel in a series energetic swipes, taking care to touch every inch of that gorgeous, gorgeous back. It involved some elbow bumping against the walls of the cabin, which was inevitable, but at least Zuko did stay quiet and still while Jee ran his hands over him, all professionalism and efficiency apart from the few moments when he let himself linger, mostly on Zuko’s ass because that really was one fine ass, damn that kid.

“… Do you really like it that much?” he heard suddenly, which was when he realized he might have been voicing his appreciation out loud.

“Well, yeah.” Jee cleared his throat, trying to sound like he’d meant for it to slip out, absolutely. “It’s gorgeous.” He decided to give the object of the conversation an affectionate squeeze, just to make his point. “And so’s the rest of you.”

“Hmpf.” The snort resounded in the cabin with no small degree of skepticism, but Jee let it slip over him and right down the drain with the water when he crouched and started lathering Zuko’s legs with the soap.
And was greeted by a lovely, lovely sight between Zuko’s legs which proved that the whole aloofness thing was exactly as much of an act as Jee expected. Instant erections was not a thing he had considered before he decided to take a twink into his bed, but it definitely provided that additional – spice.

Brushing the tightening balls with his fingers as he worked, now much more slowly and deliberately, proved that revenge did indeed taste sweet.

Smirking, Jee kissed one shapely buttock before drawing himself up again – with very little grace indeed, because the cramped cabin space and slippery floor did not create proper conditions for any attempts at being graceful.

“Okay, turn around,” he commanded, planting another kiss onto Zuko’s wet shoulder.

The taste of soap wasn’t exactly pleasant and Jee decided that he should look into some edible paint – just in case Zuko was into that. But he kept leaving small kisses all over Zuko anyway as his hands merrily went on touching and groping, now with very little pretence left because who had time for pretence when Zuko was looking at him like that again, his growing erection digging into Jee’s thighs?

Not them. And words, clearly, were just as unnecessary.

In no time at all they were both panting heavily, Jee’s palm closed in a tight grip over both their cocks and Zuko clinging to him in a hot, wet embrace, his teeth scraping over the skin of Jee’s shoulder, his jutting frantically and without any attempts at rhythm. Just a shuddering, panting mass of want, rutting against Jee with his eyes screwed tightly shut – soon, Jee will try to force him to look, but not yet, not yet, it was still too early for that, they had time – the shower cabin heated with thick, swirling steam and bearing imprints of the brat’s eager hands as he tried to brace himself somehow in the cramped, slippery space.

When he came, it was only because Jee had been holding onto his ass with his other hand that he didn’t crack his skull against the glass of the cabin as his legs buckled and gave. “Shit!”

“It’s okay, I got you,” Jee laughed breathlessly, holding onto the kid’s ass with one hand and to his still-pulsing cock with the other.

Zuko was still panting, his eyes wide with both shock and pleasure, as he held on to Jee’s shoulders. “Shit, your handjob almost killed me.”

“I prefer to think it swept you off your feet with its excellence.”

He got an elbow to the ribs for that. But then a warm, strong hand closed over his own cock, so, in the end, it was all right.

***

They stopped a block away from Iroh’s so the old man wouldn’t notice Jee’s car parking by the teashop, on the off-chance that he was still awake at half past two in the morning. It had been a quiet car ride, the silence a strange mixture of companionship and lingering not-quite-tension, not-quite-ease, dispelled by Zuko’s gift of a record which filled the space with aggressive, overly dramatic angst.
Jee refrained from commenting on Zuko’s poor taste this time. Mostly because he had a feeling that any attempts at banter would tip them over the scale right into awkwardness, and there was quite enough of that between them as it was.

So he waited, no word spoken between them, for Zuko to get out of the car and disappear into the freezing night.

And waited. And waited some more.

“Hey,” he tried after a few minutes passed, killing the engine and finally putting a stop to the godforsaken racket. “You okay?”

Zuko glanced at him, biting his lips. And then looked away, out the window at the streets lined with snow piles.

“Yeah.”

Jee sighed and slumped back against his backrest. “So I’m to understand that you simply enjoy sitting in the car in the cold, is that right?”

“Should I come next Friday?” the kid asked suddenly, Jee’s sarcasm washing right over him just as the water from the shower had. He was still looking away, but Jee noted the way his hands had been fiddling with the buttons of his parka.

“Sure,” he nodded, slightly taken aback. That was a new, weird mood if he ever saw one and caution was recommended. “Yeah, please do come next Friday. I’ll leave the window open for you and all. If you still prefer the window.”

“It’ll be safer,” the brat said softly.

“Yeah. Sure, whatever you say.” And then, not because he particularly wanted for Zuko to go, but, well, sitting in the car was not his idea of a good night and he really needed to get back to bed if he wanted to function on a manageable level tomorrow, “See you in class, right?”

Zuko looked at him again and nodded, holding his gaze this time. For about half a minute, before he went back to his odd fidgeting.

Okay, something was definitely wrong, but before Jee managed to ask him what, Zuko said, so softly it could as well be a whisper: “Look, thanks. Tonight was – good. Very good. And thanks for driving me. And, you know. For not. Back then. When I was, uh. Thanks for – not coming in.”

“You’re welcome,” Jee mumbled, bewildered, and watched as Zuko, blushing rather furiously from what Jee could see of the healthy side of his face, finally opened the door and scrambled out of the car, then all but ran down the dark, silent street towards his home.

For a while, Jee simply sat in the strange, heavy silence Zuko had left in his wake, watching him; then finally shook his head, turning the ignition back on.

He had no idea what kind of a man Ozai Xi was, or even if he was the one responsible for Zuko’s current state, but if he was, and if the kid felt the need to thank someone like that for showing him the most basic level of respect and plain human decency…

Well, if that was the case, Jee hoped he would never, ever get to meet the bastard.
When “You look tired” was the first thing your convivial office mate had to say to you on a Monday morning, you could make a pretty confident guess that it was not a good start to your day – or, indeed, to the whole damned week.

Jee grunted something noncommittal in response and rubbed his face awake yet again, trying to will the bags under his eyes away. Piandao looked concerned, and that, of course, only served to piss him off even more.

“Had a rough night,” he murmured, walking over to the desk to sort through the papers and fish out the proper attendance list for the first class of the day. Ha. Rough weekend, more like, not that having sex – and pretty incredible sex, Friday’s numerous snafus notwithstanding – with Zuko was a bad thing, but, all things considered, it left Jee with precious little sleep. “Let’s just leave it at that.”

Piandao, blessedly, didn’t comment. In fact, he disappeared from Jee’s field of vision entirely, sweeping out of the office, and Jee didn’t wait for him to come back before he ventured out of the office again, into the student-infested corridors and towards the gym.

The swordmaster returned exactly five minutes before the first period was scheduled to start. Smiling, he tapped Jee on the shoulder and held up a plain mug steaming with thick, black coffee, the kind that cloyed in your stomach and made hair grow on people’s chests.

“Here,” he said, offering the mug of liquid life to Jee. “Hopefully it’ll help. I take it this is how you like it?”

Jee accepted the mug with a very, very sincere nod of gratitude. Piandao was a great man and he would never think a bad thing about him ever again, or at least for as long as the coffee lasted.

He fully expected the class to be a lesson for him rather than for his students – and it was. A painful, difficult lesson in patience. The day dragged, the teenagers seemed even more pesky and bothersome than they normally did, and when Zuko’s class finally rolled around, it didn’t get much better, because suddenly not thinking about their weekend activities was a task worthy of a mythical hero.

And Jee was just a simple man, so of course he failed, and failed badly.

Not that it ever got so bad that he actually had to hide a boner while teaching. He had more sense and self-control than that, and he knew the second any of the students saw anything they might find suspicious, he would find himself flat on his face and out of a job faster than he could say “Oh shit.” On the whole, he felt he did a pretty good job of not singling Zuko out in any way whatsoever and keeping up the act that nothing, nothing at all, had changed between the two of them.

With a few stolen glances here and there, some of them intercepted and returned with a little less subtlety than was wise, but then again, that was Zuko. Not winking at Jee and flirting with him outwardly was probably as much subtlety as he could muster.

Friday, Jee’s brain kept chanting whenever he caught a glimpse of familiar muscle, now branded as his. Friday, Friday, Friday, Friday…

But it was better. Oh, so better, without comparison to what had been boiling between them before Jee finally cracked and allowed this goodness into his life. The tension was there, but it no longer burned them with frustrated fire that was all angry spark and no kindling – no, now it burned with a warmth that was tingling and almost pleasant, because it sang of delicious, delicious promise, as
thrilling as it was impatient.

Only four days. Four more days, and then he would have Zuko in his bed again, and they would try new things, slowly, no rush, because the term was full of Fridays, and then…

There was no use thinking about then. None at all. Jee didn’t need to worry himself with what would happen after Zuko’s graduation because it wasn’t as if what they were building would last. Already they were balancing on a precarious line that only a few misplaced words might topple, and it was all right. Jee would take what he could get, and as it was, it was already much more than he had any right to hope for.

For now, his only concern was making it good for Zuko and making sure the brat would not regret his decision. And if he had to re-learn some valuable lessons about patience in the meantime? He would.

*Friday, Friday, Friday…*

***

… Thursday.

And Jee was feeling like murder.

“Now I feel better about you wiping the floor with me in class yesterday,” Sokka announced from the bench. “Those are some sick moves, man.”

Zuko didn’t respond to the compliment, but his expression shifted a little from furious determination into slight bewilderment as he looked over to his classmate. “Uh, thanks?”

Sokka smiled wildly and gave him the thumbs-up. “So when’s the big tournament?”

“Yeah, when is it?” Jee butted in, giving Zuko a pointed look. “Xi here never saw it fit to tell me.”

Change of topic. Yes, good. It gave him a distraction so he no longer simmered in criminal thoughts of throwing Sokka out of the gym, right on his stupid face.

The annoying buffoon couldn’t have picked a worse time to sit in on their private practice and play overly-enthusiastic cheerleader.

“The tryouts start in two weeks,” Zuko muttered, grabbing a water bottle from where it had been sitting on the bench next to Sokka. “Mine is scheduled for the middle of February.”

“Then you need to up your game, kid,” Jee decided, moving to the centre of the mats again. “Break’s over.”

Zuko nodded mutely and moved into a stance across from Jee, in his usual spot. Sokka stayed where he was. Jee tried not to frown him out of there.

Still, maybe it was for the best. If they only had until the middle of February to get Zuko in top shape – and Jee wondered sourly if the brat would have told him before the big event or if he would have simply went there without a single word of warning – they could not afford to waste time on flirting, not that Jee was stupid enough to initiate a repeat of their previous training session. Even so, Sokka’s
presence there on the benches felt plain wrong, an intrusion into a space that was supposed to be just his and Zuko’s.

Besides, Sokka was an annoying idiot who was obviously going out of his way to outdo himself and prove how much more annoying he could still get.

“I would’ve gone right personally,” he decided to comment once they got going again, only proving Jee’s point. “Oooooh, nice. Hey, coach, he almost got you there! Careful, Zuko, he’s gonna do a kick – okay, sorry, maybe not, good one, coach! Damn, that was great. Take a left, take a left – ooooooooooh, so close! This is great, I should have brought some peanuts or something…”

“You’re – not – helping!” Zuko barked at him, busy blocking Jee’s attempts to throw him off-balance.

“Look out for your right,” Jee admonished him before launching into the offensive again. “And you,” he snapped at Sokka, “stop distracting him.”

“Sir, yessir!” And then, after only two minutes tops, “Watch out, buddy, he’s gonna getcha from the…”

“Quiet!” Jee barked just as Zuko shouted “Shut up!”, and then Zuko did a furious roundhouse kick which would have gotten Jee right in the face if he hadn’t ducked in time.

“Easy, kid,” Jee panted, catching Zuko’s foot in the air and twisting it a little so that the sneaky brat was forced to hop if he didn’t want to land face-first on the mats. “No fighting dirty today, understood? We can’t have you disqualified as early as the tryouts.”

“Yeah, Zuko, behave or the Lieutenant is gonna send you to clean the toilets!” Sokka was clearly having a field day. Jee briefly entertained himself with some mental images of decidedly illegal violence against a minor.

“Why are you even here?” Zuko asked his classmate helplessly once Jee released his foot.

Sokka shrugged and scratched his arm idly. “Korra said it was good entertainment and I’m stuck here waiting for Suki, Aang and Katara to finish rehearsals.”

“Rehearsals?” Zuko cocked his head to the side, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“For the winter play. Jeong-Jeong is doing The Crucible. Katara says that’s his passive-aggressive one-man rebellion against the establishment and the requirement that winter plays should be jolly, or whatever.”

“And they got parts, did they?” Zuko asked quietly.

Jee decided he would allow them both a little break. He was getting winded himself, not that he would ever admit it.

Besides, it was probably the first time he saw Zuko having a civil conversation with a peer. He wasn’t about to walk all over that.

“Yeah.” Sokka shrugged again, as though acting in a school play was all in a day’s work. And maybe for Katara it was, because then Zuko mumbled:

“Well, right. Katara’s pretty great on the stage.”
Okay, that was definitely news to Jee, but Sokka jumped at the reluctant praise immediately. “Dude, you have no idea what it’s like at home, she makes me sit with her and rehearse the lines all the fu – sorry, coach, all the freaking time! She gets so wound up about it, too. Thank God Suki is more chill about the whole thing, but of course she’s in the play too and between the two of them, I’m trapped, man, trapped. And you should see Aang, seriously, the guy looks like he owns that stage and he’s not even trying. Jeong-Jeong and Miss Bell are already conspiring to make him the choreographer of the spring musical and he’s having the time of his life.”

“You know, I’m surprised you’re not in it,” Jee muttered under his breath. “With your penchant for showmanship.”

The boys ignored him. Zuko pondered Sokka’s words for a minute as he slowly caught his breath, his expression closed off, but in a new, rather strange way. Maybe he was having trouble parsing that barrage of information, and if so, Jee didn’t blame him.

“What’s the spring musical going to be?” he asked softly after a beat, as though he was ashamed of his own curiosity.

“Katara says they can’t decide between Fame and Footloose.”

“Oh.” The brat stood there for a moment, sipping from his bottle and still wearing that strange, somewhat wistful expression, and then shrugged, turning back to Jee. “Whatever. Ready for another round, coach?”

“Bring it, kid. And if I hear another word from you while we train, you smartass, you’re gonna wait for your friends out in the corridors, clear?” The last part was directed at Sokka, who sprang to a pitiful attempt at attention where he sat, puffing out his skinny chest.

“Yessir!”

“Good. Now,” he faced Zuko again, “let’s get going.”

It was in the middle of their fourth round of sparring that the unwanted audience expanded to accommodate a shy Aang, whose bald head popped into the gym almost fearfully before he tiptoed over to sit next to Sokka, followed closely by Katara and Suki, who walked in with much less ceremony, smiles on their faces. There was no sign of Toph anywhere, but then again, she had been picked up by Chief Lin straight after the Dancing Dragon Club.

Jee tried not to groan and focused on Zuko with doubled determination, but it was hard not to feel miffed by the presence of third parties, even if they helped to bank Sokka’s enthusiasm.

At least Aang was clearly afraid of Jee and kept his mouth tightly shut as he watched them. Small mercies.

However, there was a small consolation to being observed – suddenly, with people watching him, Zuko was flying. Drawing on reserves of strength he got from gods-knew-where, he was putting in even more effort, even more skill, and suddenly Jee found himself deflecting violent, artful assaults which left very little room for improvement and would definitely overpower a less advanced opponent.

Which was when it hit him: the brat was showing off.

It became crystal clear once Zuko started going for the more flashy moves, like that crazy acrobatic stunt he did with scissoring his legs in the air, spinning on his hands and shoulders, which looked more like something out of break-dancing than martial arts but was definitely spectacular. Jee
decided to let him have his fun and said nothing, not even when the brat left himself wide open after doing a series of impressive leaps and kicks which was, no doubt about it, pure showmanship.

Complete with applause, which washed over them as soon as they reached a stalemate with Jee’s hand hovering near Zuko’s ribs and Zuko’s hand stilling by Jee’s neck.

“Okay, that’s enough for tonight,” Jee decided in-between heavy breaths, a half-formed smile playing on his lips. “That was decent. Keep it up, Xi.”

Still panting, his face red, hair sticking to it in sweaty clumps, Zuko beamed at him. Complete with teeth, a glint in his good eye, expression both smug and triumphant, and he looked so much like the boy Jee had taken in his bed that for a moment, his breath caught, his throat ran dry and the urge to close the distance between them grew embarrassingly strong.

But then Zuko turned around to face his impressed classmates and silently accepted the water bottle from a smiling Suki, the shadow of his own smile still visible somewhere in there under showy, fake aloofness, and Jee swallowed over the flare of lust and went to grab his own bottle. And listened.

“That was amazing!” Aang was saying, his voice hushed but sincere in its enthusiasm. “I knew you were good, but – wow!”

“You’ve gotten much better,” Suki opined, her voice more level but still ringing with conviction. “I’m sure you’re going to rock that competition.”

“I –” Zuko tried awkwardly, clearing his throat. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, whatever coach is doing is clearly working, that was pretty amazing,” Katara joined in, and she was perhaps the most reserved about her opinion. She kept her expression guarded, clearly wary around Zuko, but decided to praise him anyway. That had to mean something.

And it did. A quick glance at Zuko proved that. He was standing there in front of them, looking awkward, torn between pride and the need to keep himself distanced from them, and moved from foot to foot, looking down at the mats, staying silent.

The sight awakened an old ache in Jee’s heart that he thought had died long ago.

The little fool. The sad, miserable, lonely fool.

He wanted to yell at the kid suddenly, to thump him over the head and tell him to accept the offer of friendship when it was being given so fucking clearly; to just reach out and take what he so obviously needed, perhaps even wanted. But it was not his place.

But then…

“Congratulations on the play,” Zuko offered quietly. Jee glanced back to him, shocked; the kid was still looking at his feet, but the words had been uttered, there was no doubt about that, and their aftermath was visible in the way Katara’s eyes grew big and her mouth first formed a surprised “o,” and then, slowly, shifted into a hesitant smile.

“Thanks,” she replied, and this time there was warmth behind the words.

Jee turned away from them, careful not to break whatever it was that was happening there. It was obvious there had been some history between them, history Zuko would probably never tell him
“Which parts are you guys playing?” Zuko asked, glancing up for a split of second before he escaped from their eyes again, as though completely and utterly out of his depth.

As if the question was a cue Aang was waiting for, he jumped in with excited explanations, so eagerly that Katara and Suki tried to tame him a little and took over. Jee only listened in with half an ear as he towed the sweat away – he knew jack shit about the play and the names and events meant nothing to him.

In the end, he left them alone in the gym with a short command to lock up and leave the key in the janitor’s office when they were done. Fifteen minutes later, when he was out of the office again, showered and wearing clean, non-sweaty clothes, he passed by the gym again and smiled at the sight of Zuko facing off against Suki in what appeared to be a very friendly match.

Perhaps, he thought. Perhaps they would finally find a way through to him, if they wanted.

The flush on Zuko’s face and the upturned corner of his mouth suggested that there was a chance. A small one, true. But it was there.

So he left the kids at it and buggered off without saying a word, and his thoughts hummed along a very straightforward, simple line:

Friday.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everyone who’s been reading, commenting and sticking with this story despite my infrequent updates.

Next: ... *sigh* Hell if I know.
Chapter 20: Zuko Nights

Chapter Notes

Again, please excuse the wait. At least it wasn’t three months this time...?

Lots of smut in this one. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pakku was not impressed.

Jee had known something was up the moment the secretary had informed him that the headmaster wanted to see him, and Pakku’s “Sit down, Lieutenant” sounded about as cheerful and welcoming as a prison sentence in Texas.

And now there was a silence, so telling in its pointed, aimed disapproval that lesser mortals would undoubtedly start fidgeting in the uncomfortable plastic chair. Too bad Jee had been subjected to similar silences in the past, and by men far more adept at humiliation and experienced in directing them at people than Pakku, and had never been a cowardly person to begin with, so he just matched the guy stare for stare and waited. There was nothing, he knew, that unnerved a superior of Pakku’s pedigree more than an employee being silent right back at them.

He had to give it to the man, though. Pakku definitely knew how to radiate displeasure.

“Lieutenant, I am disappointed,” he said at length, probably once he realized that Jee was not going to sweat fear just from the heat of his pointy glare. “Mr. Lockley, the janitor, tells me that last night you left a bunch of students in the gym, after hours, unattended. Given your experience, which by all means suggests you should know better than that, this is nothing short of baffling.”

Ah. Jee was pretty sure his emotions did not show, but he allowed himself a smidgen of relaxation and unclenched some of the muscles that had been singing in tension since the moment he’d gotten the summons. Again, nothing about Zuko specifically. Compared to that sin, whatever else he’d done wrong he could deal with ease.

The thought amused him briefly. It was quite remarkable how much perspective on one’s life and failures was shed by a tryst with one who, in the eyes of the righteous, was still very much a minor.

“Yes, sir,” Jee said, defaulting instantly into his military voice and choosing a point on the wall, slightly above Pakku’s right ear, to stare at; an old, navy-bred habit which, he’d learned long ago, never failed to unsettle his civilian so-called betters.

“You mean you confess?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And need I remind you that if anything were to happen to those children, the fault would be yours and, by extension, mine?”

“No, sir.”
“And why would you even do such a thing? I was given to understand that you would use the gym to train young mister Xi and that he would be under your constant supervision.”

“I apologize, sir. It was a lapse of judgment on my part. I was foolish enough to assume that this particular group of students, two of whom are already of age, would know better than to get maimed or murdered in a gym padded with mats, sir.”

Pakku’s already quite formidable frown hardened into stone. “Let’s have none of that cheek, Lieutenant. You must realize it is more serious than that. The students could have left the gym to roam the school and cause significant damage.”

“Not these students, sir.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Aang was with them.” Jee’s stare remained unshaken. “And Katara. Together with Suki. Those children are not prone to mischief as far as I know, sir.”

“Be that as it may, that was an act of foolishness that could have grave consequences and I hope it will not happen again.”

“No, sir.”

“You do understand the gravity of your misjudgment, I hope, Lieutenant.”

“I do, sir.”

“Mr. Lockley was quite indignant.”

“IT am sorry to hear that, sir.”

“You are using your dumb voice on me, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pakku sighed, shuffling the papers on his desk. “That is all. Do make sure that next time you train in private, the students are not left to their own devices.” There was a pause, during which Jee almost managed to get to the door, before the words were followed up by a quiet “Even if it means that mister Xi will have to do his long-overdue socializing elsewhere.”

Jee smiled with his hand on the doorknob. “Yes, sir.”

***

The jazz from the apartment next door was muted, but still audible enough that Jee could make out the occasional lyric and discern familiar melodies – which had, by now, become very familiar indeed ever since the young parents discovered that jazz had a sedative effect on their wailing kid. The monotonous music clashed with the sound of shooting from downstairs, where Jee’s other neighbors were apparently watching an action movie and felt the need to share this fact with the rest of the building.

For once, Jee didn’t mind. Besides, it gave him an idea.
“We will learn a new lesson today,” he whispered into the back of Zuko’s neck, then bit the skin lightly, settling down on top of him. The kid was strong. He could take Jee’s weight for a few minutes.

“I thought you hated being a teacher,” Zuko breathed, tilting his head so he could glance at Jee out of his healthy eye through the curtain of messy hair.

Jee smiled and reached out to catch a strand of it between his fingers. “There are some lessons I enjoy teaching very much,” he confessed. “Don’t act like you haven’t benefitted from it already.”

“I don’t know. Have I?”

Jee leaned down and bit on the shell of Zuko’s ear. _Cheeky little shit._

“Now,” he murmured, his lips brushing the sensitive skin there. “Not that I don’t love all the different sounds you make… Because I do…” His lips closed over the ear again and his tongue teased it a little, eliciting a most delicious shudder. “And I’d love to be able to hear what else I can get out of you, but unfortunately there are people living all around us. And some of them would appreciate a quiet Friday night in, without any suspicious noises disturbing their well-deserved rest. So, Mr. Xi…” another little nip, just to keep Zuko’s attention, “do you think you can learn to be quiet?”

There was a sigh, directed mostly into the pillow Zuko was hugging to the scarred side of his face as he let Jee pin him to the mattress. The sigh was very telling – and most of what it told Jee could be summed up in the simple sentiment that being quiet was boring.

Jee agreed, but only to an extent. There were ways to make everything fun and being discreet was no exception.

Though he was oh, so sorry to wave those beautiful sounds goodbye.

“Let’s make a game of it,” he suggested, shifting his weight so that his crotch lay directly on Zuko’s jean-clad buttocks. What he had in mind was a bit risky, especially since it was only their third night together and a fourth time total doing anything sexual, but Jee had a certain hunch regarding Zuko, and the hunch was now telling him: _go for it._

Zuko’s question only confirmed it. “What kind of game?”

“You’ll do your best to be as quiet as you can.” Here, Jee nibbled the back of Zuko’s neck, but gently enough so as not to leave any marks Zuko would have trouble explaining. “And if you fail, well then… We will have to find some way to _help_ you stay quiet.”

A sharp intake of breath that followed could mean two things: either Zuko was appalled at the implication, or he was very, very turned on by it. And judging by the sharp movement of his hips under Jee’s weight, it was definitely more of the latter.

“Like what?” the kid asked quietly, voice already thick with desire.

Jee smiled and silently congratulated himself on his judgment.

“Like a gag, for example,” he hummed into Zuko’s skin.

Suddenly, it was no warm, pliant boy lying under him anymore – it was a plank of wood. A hitched, held breath, muscles going so rigid that Jee’s own contracted in sympathy, expression suddenly frozen in bewilderment – it was a bit much for just arousal. Immediately, it sent Jee back down the memory lane to their previous Friday night and stabbed his gut with the icy dagger of self-loathing.
“Hey, hey, it’s all right,” Jee cooed, reaching out to stroke along Zuko’s shoulder before the moment of discomfort could grow into something worse. “It’s fine. We won’t do anything that makes you uncomfortable, okay? Deep breaths, remember?”

“I’ll try to be quiet,” Zuko whispered. The breath he forced himself to take afterwards was so deep that Jee could feel his lovely muscles unclenching, one by one. “And don’t patronize me.”

Jee reigned in a sigh of relief even as he patted Zuko’s head playfully, earning himself an exasperated huff into the pillow. If the kid was comfortable enough to be his obnoxious self again, they were good.

“Okay, in that case we’ll start with something simple,” he whispered into Zuko’s ear; then, he gave it one parting kiss and rolled off the boy. “On your back.”

“You like ordering people around, don’t you, Lieutenant?” Zuko asked, thick-voiced, obediently turning onto his back.

Jee kept his face blank as his eyes roamed over the beautiful sight the kid made, lying there shirtless with his hair in disarray and his jeans riding low on his hipbones. “Well, yes. Why do you think I joined the military, genius? For the excellent food and the bonding experience and the weekly music nights?”

Zuko snorted at *bonding experience*, watching while Jee scooted closer to him again and started leaving a trail of light kisses on his chest, nearing the right nipple. “You know what they say about sailors.”

“You’re going to keep all the stupid gay sailor stereotypes to yourself if you want to keep your nipples,” Jee threatened and blew hot air of warning on the right one, so pert and dark. Zuko shuddered as though he’d been electrocuted, biting down on a moan.

 “… But you *are* gay. And you’re a sailor,” he murmured stubbornly once Jee’s lips moved away from the hot spot and up again. “Or was.”

Honestly, had the kid no self-preservation instincts at all?

“What did I say, brat?” Jee tsk-ed at him and immediately closed his lips, and then teeth, over the nipple, pulling lightly.

“Fuck!” Zuko’s back arched off the bed violently, but Jee only held him down and kept teasing the nipple with his teeth, careful not to inflict any real pain but daringly enough to suggest that a bit of pain was definitely a possibility.

“You seem to be missing the point of this game,” Jee told the nipple once he released it. “You were supposed to be quiet. You’re not.”

“Well, you’re doing – “ Zuko swallowed over his sudden constipation of eloquence, opting instead to gesture at Jee and his own body with an expression of pure helplessness that was unnervingly adorable.

Jee smirked at him. “I intend to do much more than that. That was just a warm up to see if you’re up to the challenge and judging by your performance so far, I’m afraid it’s an F, Mr. Xi. Can you do better?”
Zuko just looked at him. It was a very, very pointed look, one that was usually reserved for people who tended to point out that the sky was very blue today, wasn’t it. He could definitely recognize a challenge when he saw one, and if there was one thing Jee knew for sure that Zuko loved, it was a challenge.

“Let’s see it then. Hips up.”

The brat rolled his eyes at him, but he did lift his hips, probably because the lovely erection outlined very clearly by the tent in his jeans was driving him crazy. The sight of it drove Jee a little crazy, too, mostly with impatience and delicious, delicious anticipation.

Oh, he was going to take his time tonight.

Slowly, he pushed the jeans down Zuko’s legs, then pulled the underpants off with much the same, leisurely pace, humming a little under his breath. Zuko’s cock sprang free already as hard as it would get and Jee smiled in greeting, then licked his lips slowly, fully aware of Zuko’s hungry eyes on him.

“Remember,” he whispered, looking briefly into the brat’s eyes as he lowered himself to kneel on the floor at the foot of the bed, between that pair of strong legs, pushing Zuko down the bed with him so he could go down on him comfortably. “Quiet.”

Zuko nodded jerkily, already biting his lips. He was propping himself up on his elbows now to watch, eyes very bright with anticipation, and Jee wondered idly, not for the first or the last time, how anyone’s eyes could possibly have that beautiful golden color.

Beautiful. And all his.

To his credit, Zuko did try to stay quiet. He tried so very, very hard, and the first time Jee took his cock into his mouth, the only sound the brat let out was a sharp sucking of breath as he tried to reign something much louder. Jee hummed in approval around his mouthful, then drew back, slowly, until only the head was trapped between his lips.

He looked up. Their eyes met. And Jee couldn’t help but smirk at the sight because oh, kid. So easily impressed. Zuko was already so out of it that he was letting his own mouth hang open, tongue darting out nervously and wetting those pretty lips that Jee would love oh-so-much to see around his own dick…

Maybe later. Possibly, if he could stir Zuko’s curiosity enough for the kid to want to try it. For now, this was good, more than good, and Jee winked at him before licking at the head with swipes that he knew were more teasing than satisfying. A stifled gnnngh! told him as much, but he kept his pace, taking his time and alternating between caressing the tip with his tongue and sucking lightly, his mouth already sticky with precome.

When he looked up again after a few minutes of this, he nearly choked on a bark of laughter; Zuko was all but pushing a whole fist into his mouth and biting down on it, still looking at Jee, and his expression was the textbook illustration of desperation. Too proud to beg, was he? Too stubborn to give in? Very well. He was not the only person in this room to enjoy a challenge and Jee was suddenly very, very curious how long he could keep this up until Zuko broke.

He let Zuko’s cock out of his mouth slowly, then kissed the head, first lightly, then more firmly, taking the root into his hand and squeezing a little. The first breath of relief tore its way out of Zuko’s throat before the rest of it got violently swallowed, and he managed to stay quiet when more kisses followed at a pace that was surely maddening, especially in his state of arousal. In no time at all Jee had to keep one arm over Zuko’s hips to keep them from bucking as he worked, making the kisses
more open-mouthed and pausing in the middle of Zuko’s shaft to take it in sideways and sucking, hard. That earned him another stifled *gmmnggh!*, louder this time, more guttural, and the little, mewling noise that followed clearly meant that the whole fist-in-mouth strategy was no longer helping.

Still, Jee was moderately impressed. He didn’t expect Zuko to last even this long and decided that in this case, some more teasing was in order. He started sucking on the head, first lightly, then with a little more pressure, and gradually began to go lower and lower on the downstroke, but never as low as the middle of the shaft. His grip on the root stayed firm and immobile throughout all this, refusing to yield even a little mercy.

After about five minutes of this Zuko was ready to come. Jee knew this mostly by virtue of Zuko’s other fist, the one the brat wasn’t currently trying to gnaw off, which had started banging against the mattress sometime during Jee’s playtime and was still doing so, faster and faster. His hips, too, had declared open rebellion and were trying to writh from out of Jee’s control, slithering this way and that, but mostly up, as far up as Jee would let them, which wasn’t much. Thankfully he was still stronger than the brat, even if Zuko was putting up more than an adequate fight, and he managed to keep the situation under control, even though his young lover was clearly growing more and more desperate. From time to time, Zuko was letting little strangled noises out now: another sure sign of Jee’s impending victory.

Impending, but not complete – not until Zuko begged. Jee would show no mercy until then, even if his own pants were growing tighter and tighter to the point that ignoring it became a challenge. He was patient, he could wait. This was too good to pass up on. So he kept going at his own pace, relentlessly, relishing every stolen sound that wrenched itself out of Zuko’s throat, every jerk of the kid’s hips, every bang of the fist on the sheets, until…

Zuko let out a desperate little sound caught somewhere between a moan and a yelp, vibrating with frustration, need and anger all at the same time, and suddenly the fist was no longer banging fruitlessly against the bed – it was twisting in Jee’s short hair, pushing his head down.

Jee laughed, his mouth still wrapped around Zuko’s handsome young cock. And then braced himself, hollowed out his cheeks and dove in, taking it in as far as it would go.

To the victor, the spoils, he thought in hazy amusement, sensing rather than seeing Zuko collapsing back onto the bed with a deep, deep moan of pure, unadulterated pleasure that he had not managed – or maybe not even bothered to – stop. And indeed, it had only taken two more similar dips before the fist in Jee’s hair pulled in warning – Christ, that hurt – and Zuko’s cock pulsed with the beginnings of orgasm.

Jee would have dearly loved to stay put and let Zuko empty himself into his mouth. It was perhaps a little too tempting. But he was still very much teaching the brat, setting an example, and Zuko needed to know that, in spite of all that porn could have taught him, it was okay not to swallow your partner’s cum and that, in fact, a lot of people didn’t. Besides, Jee might have been a little too enthusiastic about wanting to taste Zuko again and accidentally-on-purpose forgot to put a condom on the kid first, and it was paramount to teach Zuko safe sex practices so Jee heeded the warning and pulled out just in time despite his own inclinations.

He didn’t regret it, anyway – not since it allowed him to actually see the show. And, God Almighty, what a show it was. Jee had to give himself a relieving rub through the pants just to ease some of the tension because the sight of Zuko coming in a state of complete and utter abandon was enough to make him *ache* with need. The sounds, too, not quite bitten down on, not quite reigned in, but deep, hoarse, breathless, positively ringing with relief, and – Jesus fucking Christ.
“You’re the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen,” Jee might have said – and out loud, fuck, but it was too late now and Zuko deserved to know that, anyway. His fist was slowly going up and down Zuko’s still-pulsing cock, to draw out that beautiful moment for as long as possible.

If Zuko heard him, he didn’t let it show – he was too busy writhing and throwing his head back and letting out some more of those small, deliciously desperate noises, until the final white drop squeezed itself out to freedom and he collapsed in a beautiful, panting heap of boneless limbs.

“Also,” Jee smirked a little breathlessly, climbing back up and hovering over him, “I win.”

“Fuck off” is what Zuko was going to say, but he didn’t get to express his sentiments in full because Jee decided that instead of tolerating such foul language, he would kiss him.

Apparently Zuko was not going to protest.


“Good weird or bad weird?” Jee asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

Zuko shrugged and looked away. “Just – weird. Doesn’t it taste weird to you?”

“Nope.” Jee smiled and kissed the tip of his nose. “I got used to it. Actually, I quite love it. You taste really good.”

“Yeah?” Zuko looked back at him with the smallest ghost of a smile.

“Yeah.”

“You’re weird,” Zuko pronounced with a breathless little chuckle which Jee immediately locked away in his memory.

“No weirder than you, brat,” Jee countered, rolling off him enough to lay on his side. “And I’m not done with you. You weren’t quiet.”

“So what will you do, gag me?” Zuko rolled his eyes, but there was something tight about his smirk that helped Jee say the right thing.

“Not tonight,” he said, twirling a nipple. “Only if you want me to. Remember that communication thing? Surprisingly enough, it’s still in effect.”

Zuko gave him a long look while his breathing and heartbeat were slowly returning to normal. “And does it work both ways?” he asked quietly, his expression going surprisingly serious for someone who was cumming violently not a minute ago. “If you want something, will you tell me?”

“Sure.” Jee smiled, his finger moving to trace circles on Zuko’s pectorals. “But I’m not the one exploring here.”

“Oh, right, because you’ve done absolutely everything there is to do.” There was that adorable eye-roll again Astonishing, how easy it was in bed to find adorable that which, under any other circumstances, would have been annoying.

“Not everything, granted, but I’ve done enough.”

“So how many were there?” Zuko asked suddenly, perking up a little. That tightness from around his mouth was gone, replaced by a curiosity tinted with nervousness which usually clung to Zuko’s attempts at conversation. “Other gay sailors? How many boyfriends did you have?”
Jee quirked and eyebrow at him. “You want me to tell you about my exes?”

“Maybe.” Zuko looked away again, in a transparently fake act of aloofness. “Why not. You’ve probably had a lot.”

“Boyfriends? No, not really.” Jee pushed himself up so that he was resting on a pillow, and Zuko followed him. “Sexual partners? Yeah, I’ve had a lot of those.”

“Oh.” Whether Zuko was disappointed or not, it was impossible to say; his head was down and he was worrying his lower lip between his teeth, probably trying to settle on one question out of many until he finally decided on: “So, any other sailors?”

Jee sighed, loudly. “Why are you so fixated on gay sailors?”

Zuko shrugged. “Because it’s funny?” he tried. “And I’ve, uh. Might have… Nevermind. Who was your last boyfriend?”

Jee shot him a suspicious look, but couldn’t maintain eye-contact for long because Zuko’s ridiculous expression of feigned innocence was too hilarious to behold without bursting into laughter.

“Tell you what,” Jee said over a smile, opening his arms and bringing Zuko closer. “I’ll tell you about my last partner if you manage to stay completely quiet next time.”

Zuko swallowed. Nodded. And moved even closer, rubbing his hips into Jee’s erection.

Ye gods, the little demon was already bracing himself for another go.

“I’ll do my best, coach,” he whispered, tilting his head up for a kiss.

Jee obliged him. They still had time, lots of time before Zuko had to leave. Enough to slow down, enjoy the kisses until they bled into more passion naturally and Zuko got more of his energy back. Soon enough, Jee let the boy fumble with his fly, push his pants off and hump him; he let Zuko roll onto his back and push Jee down on top of him; he let Zuko’s wet, energetic tongue explore his mouth as much as the kid liked. And when the brat whispered, in a voice once again filled with that delightful adolescent urgency, “Fuck me” …

Zuko did not manage to stay completely quiet for the rest of the night.

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Jee knew what it was like to live from Friday to Friday. Practically everyone did, at some point. But it was not until his Friday nights turned into Zuko Nights that he truly appreciated how much he’d missed having something tangible, something regular and dependable, to look forward to.

Even if what they had could hardly be called a relationship, it made things… easier. Jee had felt before that helping Zuko had given him a palpable purpose and that had helped him get through his tedium before, but now that he could count on a warm boy in his bed every Friday, getting out of bed early for his workout-breakfast-work routine felt like even less of a chore. He felt lighter, too, if only whenever his misbehaving memory supplied him with inappropriate memories during class, and it was a bit easier to smile at the simple things with those memories in his head – and the prospect for more – too.
Apparently he was not the only one to notice.

“You haven’t said anything grumpy for the whole day,” Ming informed him on a Tuesday afternoon during lunch in the teacher’s lounge. “Getting laid regularly is clearly good for you.”

Jee glared at her then and quickly looked around to assess the damage, but thankfully everyone else was busy with their own socializing to pay them much attention. Ming laughed and called him paranoid and he retaliated by asking if she’d gotten drunk in a night club recently, but secretly, he agreed.

Getting laid regularly was good for him.

For some reason That Lot decided that they wanted to keep watching their private Thursday sessions – honestly, didn’t those people have anything better to do with their evenings? – so it was not as if Jee could flirt with Zuko in any way at all, but seeing as the kid only had less than a month to prepare for his try-outs, it was for the best. They worked hard, pushing each other past their limits and setting up new ones, and each of them knew that there was a reward waiting for them at the end of the road.

And it really was a reward. Their fourth night together was mostly spent on silent, surprisingly rough fucking, with Zuko decidedly not in a conversational mood; and it was quite amazing even if the brat did not stay to sleep and leave at dawn this time, opting instead to sneak out in the middle of the night, almost as soon as he’d gotten his breath back, insisting he had lots of homework and abandoning Jee in a bed that still smelled of boy and sex.

On their fifth night together, Jee greeted him in the window with a kiss before Zuko could climb in properly. Judging by the kid’s surprised, but clearly pleased response, the greeting was not entirely unwelcome.

That night, Zuko did stay. Choosing the right side of the bed so he lay on his side facing Jee, scarred half of his face pressed into the pillow, he curled up and hugged Jee’s arm while he allowed the other to rest on his pale hip. Jee had always been quick to adapt to his bedfellows and was asleep in no time, but he did find himself wishing, vaguely, that Zuko would move closer.

And then, when he woke up at ass-early o’clock to find the right side of the bed empty again, that there had been a way for the kid to stay for at least one morning.

One of those wishes, at least, was granted on their sixth night after both of them collapsed. Jee was close to dozing off, Zuko in his curled-up position again, when he felt the bed move and heard the sheets rustle softly as the counterweight next to him shifted.

“Mmmm?” he hummed drowsily in question, cracking one eye open to glance at Zuko in the not-quite-darkness. Zuko’s eyes, he remembered, were bright in the faint light from the street.

“I…” a nervous swallow. “Look, it might feel weird. But can I – “ out of words, he moved and Jee felt his hair tickle his chest as Zuko lowered his head onto it, not quite resting it against Jee’s skin yet.

And Jee may have been close to sleep, but he was awake enough to recognize the anxiety behind what, for most people, would have been a very, very simple thing.

“‘S fine,”’ he mumbled soothingly, raising his arm to put it around Zuko and fork it through his hair. He pushed the head a little lower, too, to make his point. “Sleep.”

A second passed in silence. And then another. And another one, before Jee finally felt the burnt, mutilated tissue of the scarred cheek rest against his chest. It felt a little weird, not quite like skin and
more like – rubber, maybe? Tougher, with ridges and rough bits and not at all like the softness that covered Zuko’s perfect muscles everywhere else. But… not entirely unpleasant.

Jee hugged the boy close – maybe closer than necessary, but the urge to show Zuko that he wasn’t bothered trumped moderation – tried not to think about it too much, failed and then just pretended to be asleep while he listened to Zuko’s breathing slow and deepen.

And wondered.

***

It was amazing, it really was, how quickly things that would, normally, appear strange, inappropriate and quite possibly insane, could wedge themselves into a life, settle down there among the furniture and the cutlery and the coffee machines and the TV, and sneak into routine when you weren’t looking.

Routine – funny word, that, in and of itself. It sounded as if it should imply normal. Maybe even dull, for a lot of people, and Jee usually counted himself among them.

Waking up naked to the musky smell of a kid twice his junior should not be normal, and yet, for Jee, it was. Three visits were enough for that smell to mingle with the other odors of the apartment; by the fifth one it had made close friends with them; and by the sixth, it had made itself quite at home and taken up permanent residence in Jee’s sheets.

Maybe a part of it was that he still kept Zuko’s memento briefs in the bedroom (nightstand, bottom drawer), but that was neither here nor there.

And then there was the simple matter of sleeping. Sure, it was only one night a week, hardly enough to get used to another guy – and besides, Zuko staying was by no means a given if night four was anything to go by – but Jee liked sleeping with somebody else. Zuko, when he did stay, didn’t move much, or at least not enough to jostle Jee out of sleep, and he was warm and soft and made nice noises and – yeah, Jee kind of wanted to get used to it. The lack of the warmth and the softness and the nice noises didn’t deprive him of sleep when Zuko was away, no; but it was enough to instill a vague sense of wrongness, of something being not quite right, and he did have to change positions a few more times than usual, found it that little bit harder to fall asleep, when the bed was empty.

And then there were the other little things. Like that one Wednesday after work, between Zuko Nights number six and seven – more or less around the time when both of them pointedly ignored such a silly thing as Valentine’s day, not without a touch of awkwardness during class – when Jee suddenly found himself staring at the cereal aisle at Kroger, wondering what kind of breakfast food Zuko liked and whether he should get some for him. Having realized this, he slapped himself mentally into common sense again, reminded the stupider part of his brain that Zuko could never stay for breakfast and it was a waste of money, and moved on.

And then went back and bought some randomly-picked cereal and milk anyway, because hell, who knew. Besides, they said cereal was good for you and maybe Jee could try having some on one of those mornings. For health and shit.

It didn’t end at cereal. Soon, Jee’s usually-unimpressive fridge and pantry contents boasted cartons of juice (he’d noticed Zuko drinking orange juice in the student cafeteria during a break a while ago), a
few cans of root beer (Jee hated root beer, but Zuko had drunk it in his car once) some fruit (just in case), candy bars, chocolate milk, chips, chocolate-chip cookies and more pop and beer than one person should be able to imbibe. Of course, it wasn’t as if he actually expected to treat Zuko to any of it, but it was good to know that, should the opportunity arise, that junk was there.

His house had gotten cleaner, too. Other than that first Sunday which he’d spent making the apartment look presentable, he didn’t exactly remember cleaning it all that often, not consciously – and yet it definitely looked neater now, more organized, less like a bachelor’s dirty hovel and more like a space where someone could actually live. Not that Jee’s places ever looked completely like dirty hovels – some habits die hard and the one of cleanliness had been one of the more deeply ingrained in him since the Navy – but he was the first to admit that he did tend to lapse in his housekeeping duties when there was no one to impress. These days, there were fewer bits of clothing lying around on the floor and on assorted pieces of furniture; the grease and coffee stains tended to be wiped before they could set; dust disappeared as soon as visible layers of it accumulated over flat surfaces; and there were no longer dirty dishes lounging around at random areas of the apartment, like the bathroom.

Little things. So easy to miss when one went about one’s business day after day. Adding up, one by one, hint by hint, sneaking in tiny, almost imperceptible changes and ingratiating them into a life so that one day a guy would blink and realize that they had become an integral part of it when his back was turned.

Jee had not quite reached that moment of realization by the time Zuko Night number seven rolled around, but he had been observing the small changes of his routine like a person sitting at a hairdresser’s and silently watching the emerging haircut, which was not what had been ordered, but which it was looking pretty okay as it was.

“So, try-outs next week, huh,” Jee said as Zuko shed his parka and assorted winter paraphernalia.

“Yeah.” Zuko’s voice sounded tight, but maybe that was just the scarf he was unwinding from around his neck.

Jee nodded. Zuko was ready for the try-outs, he was sure about that, and there was no need to be nervous at this stage in the game, especially given all the hard work that the kid had been putting in and the resulting progress; but Zuko was the kind of person who was nervous about everything.

And Jee didn’t quite know why yet, but he was definitely planning on finding out.

He’d been half-expecting the kid to jump him right away, keeping the nervousness in mind and remembering how aggressive the kid had been during their Thursday work-out, but that never happened. Instead, Zuko stood awkwardly in his spot by the window, looking at the floor, and cleared his throat a couple of times as though making way for something he wasn’t quite sure how to phrase.

“What is it?” Jee asked after the session of throat-clearing number three; by then Zuko looked both angry and miserable and they really couldn’t waste precious time on sulking.

Zuko glanced up at him. Looked away. And then suddenly stomped over to the couch, flung himself on it and sat there, hugging himself as though he had no idea what to do with himself.

And then: “Can I have some beer?”

Silently, Jee congratulated himself on his foresight and went over to the fridge to retrieve the alcohol. A Corona for Zuko and some whisky with ice for himself should do it.
“Nerves?” he asked, sitting down on the couch next to Zuko once he’d set down the drinks on the table.

Zuko shook his head. “I just feel – weird.”

Jee shrugged and reached for his glass. “You don’t have to confide in me, but you could if you wanted to. Just so you know. And if you ever tell anyone I gave you alcohol, I’m failing you.”

“It’s just that –” Zuko played with the bottle of Corona, twirling it lightly in his long, strong fingers. “It’s just that I’m not even sure –” A sip, so jerky it seemed almost angry. “I’m not even sure if I’ll get into college even if I place.” Another sip, and then, more quietly: “Uncle thinks it won’t make a difference.”

Jee leaned back against the couch, watching the kid carefully. “He told you that?”

“He doesn’t have to tell me.” Zuko’s expression was slowly moving from strangely forlorn and nervous into familiar anger, the fingers on the bottle flexing. “I know he thinks I should just give up and apply for some of the local colleges. He doesn’t think it’s worth it.”

Jee considered this. There was precious little he could say now that would not risk destroying this fragile confession mood, but then again, staying silent was not an option either. So in the end he settled on a nonchalant-sounding, “You know, you still haven’t told me what colleges you are applying for.”

Zuko took another sip, a long, deep one, and Jee stifled the urge to tell him to drink slowly. There was a time and place for life lessons like teaching youngsters how to hold their liquor; clearly, this wasn’t it.


Jee only whistled in response.

“What, you think I can’t do it?” Zuko’s head snapped to him immediately, fire already ablaze in those striking eyes. Christ, that boy was itching for a fight, and Jee was not about to give him one when he was like that.

“That’s very ambitious, is all.” Jee stayed where he was, in an ostensibly relaxed pose, and sipped on his whisky. The ice clinked when he swung the glass this way and that to see the amber liquid slosh from side to side. “And to be honest, I haven’t heard about any scholarships for martial artists before. Didn’t know it was a thing. Football, basketball, baseball, sure, but kung fu is not a very common thing to reward around here.”

“They told me they would consider me if I place,” Zuko insisted stubbornly. “I sent some e-mails. I asked around. That’s what they said. If my GPA and SAT results are good, they’ll… That’s what they said.”

“Oh, okay.” Jee took another sip, gave Zuko a moment to calm down. “Then you have nothing to worry about. As long as your grades are good…?”

“They’re – okay. They’ll be better by the time I graduate.”

Jee smiled with his lips against the glass. He knew that tone – it was the voice of someone who was not making predictions but stating a fact. And Jee found himself believing that Zuko’s grades would, in fact, get better, because one simply did not argue with that kind of rock conviction. Zuko would make it happen or die trying, no compromises, no middle ground.
He was rather amazing like that.

Still… “Don’t you think that’s a bit much, though?” Jee risked, glancing up at the brat. “Such high profile schools only? What is it that you want to study in the first place?”

That earned him a glare. A very, very pointed one. “I need to get into management and economics. Maybe law, if I can. And I need to get into one of those schools. You don’t understand.”

Jee frowned, filing away the need – need, not want – for future consideration. Then, he consulted his glass. Should I tell him how much I know or should I wait until the next time he broaches the subject? Will there even be a next time?

The glass, predictably, stayed mute. Jee frowned at it some more, but it remained unimpressed and yielded no answers.

Ah, fuck it. The brat would find out eventually.

“I may understand better than you think,” he started slowly, looking over to the kid again.

What he saw there made him pause. It was as if someone had pulled the shutters closed on the kid – Zuko’s face was suddenly as carefully, painfully blank as it he was not a living, breathing boy, but a mannequin, a wooden puppet someone put on Jee’s sofa. Except for the eyes, which were bright with emotion, and not the good kind.

Back off, back off, back off…

Ye gods, Jee was a coward.

“I mean that I know what it’s like to have some expectations placed on you,” he backpedalled, trying to make it sound like that was what he was going to say all along. “Not that my parents particularly cared about my career, I was never expected to become a successful doctor or anything like that, but I was still a disappointment to how I was supposed to turn out, as in, no stable job, some black spots in my record…”

Zuko swallowed, loudly, and it was quite fascinating how he willed his body into relaxation again, slowly, limb by limb. His face was the last to follow and did only once the kid downed the rest of the beer, and when did he even manage to drink all of it so quickly?

“What kind of black spots?” he asked quietly, putting the emptied bottle down.

“Well.” Jee smirked, then gestured at Zuko. “You’ve probably figured out by now that I’m not the most law-abiding citizen you’ll ever meet.”

Zuko almost smiled at that. Almost, but he reigned in the twitch of his lips before the corners went fully up. “But you still held out for fucking months.”

“Not anymore, though.” Jee didn’t try to hold back and treated the kid to a proper smile.

And suddenly, a pale hand was taking the half-emptied whisky glass away from him and setting it down on the table. Jee’s smile widened when Zuko climbed into his lap, straddling him, long fingers stroking along his sideburns.

“No, not anymore;” Zuko whispered, gazing down at him.

The pent-up tension and earlier aggression had not quite left him. The kiss that followed was
anything but gentle, with teeth and tongue and an angry kind of insistence, as if Zuko was trying to seduce not only Jee away from his thoughts, but also himself.

So be it.

Jee kept pace with him, giving the kid what he so clearly wanted, but keeping himself from overpowering Zuko. It was still early for any true power play or introducing anything more kinky and Zuko needed to know that he was still very much the boss here. Following his lead, Jee let himself be straddled, kissed and coaxed into giving more, and when Zuko’s hips started undulating in his lap Jee’s hands wandered down to encourage more of that lovely, lovely friction, but Zuko was the one setting the pace, calling the shots and guiding them into more, and he seemed to appreciate it.

“Tell me what you want to do,” Jee breathed into him wetly when Zuko’s lips moved from his mouth to the side of his face. “I see you have something in mind.”

“I – want to try –” Zuko’s breath was hot in his ear, his hands impatient as they roamed over Jee’s shoulders and kneaded them. “Here – on the couch.”

Oh, yes. Yes, please. The image Jee’s imagination immediately conjured up sent a jolt of thick, hot electricity straight to his groin, urging his hips to jerk a little into Zuko. The brat clung to him even more violently. “Like that?” he asked, the voice scraping at his throat.

“I – yeah – I wanna –“

His hips bounced a little in Jee’s lap to illustrate what his words couldn’t, not yet. Jee couldn’t kiss him quickly enough and sent a silent prayer to a vaguely-defined higher force.

Thank you.

“Hang on, let me get… I’ll go get the stuff from the bedroom,” he said after another round of making out, this one even more urgent than the previous one.

“Okay.” Zuko kissed him one last time and scrambled off his lap, to the side of the sofa.

Jee managed not to run to the bedroom, but it was a close call.

A part of him insisted weakly that he should not have let Zuko divert his attention that easily. Maybe he should have pressed the kid for more explanations, got to the bottom of all that anger and anxiety – or tried, maybe offered more help. Maybe he should not have chickened out and told Zuko he knew who the brat’s father was, that he had a good guess what really lay behind his insanely high ambitions.

It was only too easy to put that part on mute. The message in that guarded look was crystal-clear and the last thing Jee wanted was to drive Zuko away from him now. He could, for one night, be selfish, and anyway, therapy was probably the last thing Zuko wanted from him tonight.

Was he thinking with his prick? Most likely. But at least he wasn’t the only one.

When he made it back to the living room, he found Zuko sipping on his whisky and making a hilariously disgusted face.

“That’s foul,” he pronounced. And then took another small sip, only to shudder and make the same face again. “How can people drink that?”
“Some of us get used to it,” Jee said, walking over to the couch with his handful of lube and condoms. “Now put that down, kiddo. Let’s get back to business.”

Zuko did put the whisky down. And then he got on his knees on the couch, reached out, closed his hands around Jee’s neck and pulled him into a kiss.

Yeah, talking it out was out of the picture tonight, and if Zuko had felt the urge for it initially, there was no trace of it now. Which was just as well. Jee did want to know the kid better and to get him to talk about his issues, but he was also acutely aware how easy it was to fuck up whenever things got personal.

If the kid wanted distractions, he would get them.

In no time at all they were both back on the sofa, hands pulling at clothes to get them out of the way, skin seeking warm contact, mouths eager to please. Once naked, Zuko climbed back onto Jee’s lap, and he was trembling, but it couldn’t have been from the cold. Sharp teeth bit down against sounds on Jee’s shoulder while the boy was being prepared, hips rocking into Jee’s fingers with only the smallest traces of inhibition, healthy cheek pressed tightly against the side of Jee’s neck while nails dragged over Jee’s bared back more out of the need to hold on than a formulated intent to please.

Jee didn’t mind. Zuko was already making progress and damn, it felt good even if the kid didn’t really know what he was doing.

“You’re doing so well,” Jee breathed, fingers caressing Zuko’s prostate. “That’s so good.”

Zuko let out a sound, not-quite a moan but more than a sigh, and his hips stuttered out of rhythm. “I’m ready. Come on.”

Jee nodded, kissing his ear. The brat really was ready this time. Jee had learned enough of him to be confident in this by now.

“Up,” he ordered, fingers slipping out of the kid to help him get on his knees over Jee. “Turn around. It’ll be easier like this.”

Zuko obeyed, his breath heavy and ragged. Jee half-wanted to ask him if he was really sure about the position – it could be tricky for a beginner – but the brat was very much in one of his determined moods and really, life was too short for Jee to waste it on unnecessary arguments. Besides, one of his fantasies was about to play out in his living room in a matter of seconds and only an utter idiot would ruin it with stupid questions. Instead, Jee helped Zuko position himself, which took some awkward maneuvering, and grabbed his cock to steady it as Zuko attempted to sink down on it.

They made a fascinating sight, Jee mused when he spied their reflection on the black screen of the TV right in front of them. Over Zuko’s trembling, perspiring shoulder, Jee could see how the kid closed his eyes at the first entry; how the muscles of his chest moved as he tried to balance himself; how his thighs clenched and twitched, supporting his weight as they straddled Jee’s legs. Unwittingly, his arms snaked around Zuko’s torso, to touch him just as much as to help keep him upright because fuck, he was so painfully gorgeous.

“Steady,” he hummed, kissing Zuko’s shoulder. “Good, good, don’t rush it. Now, move, find the right angle. Try leaning forward a little – like that, yes. Look for a way that feels good.”

Zuko was sinking lower and lower, inner muscles flexing around Jee’s cock in the most maddening, wonderful way, and the brat was leaning forwards a little, bracing himself both on Jee’s knee and on the edge of the coffee table. Jee grabbed him by the hips to still him, then urged him to roll them in
search for the right angle. Zuko let himself be guided until he gasped and jerked, nearly falling off Jee’s lap.

From then on, Jee only held him to keep him from falling and thrust up from time to time, but Zuko took over. It was awkward, inevitably – the position was not the easiest to maintain, especially on a narrow sofa with ridiculously springy cushions that sucked you right in, and they tended to fall out of rhythm more than actually established it; Zuko needed to adjust his legs every few seconds in order to stay in place, too. None of it mattered. Jee knew it would be like that and the view in the blank TV screen – good God, Zuko looked amazing. Once he’d gotten used to the position and its inherent difficulties, once he’d figured out which angle worked for him best, once he’d actually started moving for real, seeking out pleasure with his eyes closed and a look of furious concentration on that mismatched face…

Jee barely held back from imposing his own rhythm on him because sweet Jesus, he was losing it, he really was. The boy felt amazing around him, it was so good, to fucking good to be true, and now Zuko was speeding up and opening his eyes and looking straight into Jee’s via the TV screen, and his mouth was open in a soundless scream, and then he all but fell forward onto the table and held himself up by the hands, and he was no longer just moving, fuck, he was fucking himself down on Jee, quick, dirty, shameless, no longer bothering to hold anything in, and it took everything Jee had not to grab his hips to the point of bruising and just thrust until he exploded.

Relief, though bittersweet, came soon enough. Bittersweet – because the sight was so, so good, and it felt amazing, and a part of Jee never wanted it to stop even as the other part roared with the need to move. Zuko was past the point of lucidity now, or so Jee thought because the boy did manage to grunt out a strained: “Come on, I need you, I want – rough – “ And then, suddenly, he forced himself off Jee’s lap and tumbled down to the side of the sofa. Before Jee managed to protest, though, Zuko got on all fours, ass raw and begging to be filled once again as he leaned over the armrest of the sofa in an offering so clear it could not possibly be mistaken for anything else.

Jee groaned and scrambled to get on his knees behind him. It was straight, rough and primal fucking from there. And over much, much too quickly, for both of them, but Jee would challenge any man to hold out longer than a few minutes of frantic thrusting once Zuko did that keening noise of his and emptied himself right there on Jee’s couch.

There would be stains. Jee should have thought about it and brought towels. The amount of fucks he gave amounted to a grand total of zero.

Still, once he’d caught his breath he forced himself to abandon Zuko’s overheated, sweaty body and staggered to the kitchen for something to wipe the mess away, if only for the two of them to then snuggle on the sofa without smearing body fluids all over everything. Zuko watched his rather futile attempts wordlessly, still struggling with getting his breathing under control, and Jee dearly wished he could just snap a picture because the view of a freshly post-orgasmic Xi sitting there on his couch was spectacular. Every second he had to tear his eyes away from it felt like the waste of a lifetime.

Thankfully he kept a blanket draped over the couch, so there was no need for him to disappear into the bedroom. The used condom discarded on the carpet, his hands oily with lube, both of them sweaty and in dire need of a shower, they lay down almost tentatively, Jee opening his arms for Zuko. The boy accepted the invitation and settled slowly on top of Jee, under the blanket, and soon there was that strange press of burnt flesh against his skin.

Jee wanted to ask about the scar. Badly. But just then, it was surprisingly easy to reign in his curiosity, probably because the echoes of his orgasm and the fresh, beautiful images already bleeding into memories left precious little space for anything besides the press of Zuko’s body against his
The silence, when it settled, was comfortable. Exhaustion tended to have that effect, and after six nights together Zuko was clearly getting used to enjoying their afterglows quietly. It suited Jee just fine and he closed his eyes, his head resting against the armrest, the smell of Zuko musky and potent and so sweetly familiar.

Yeah, now? Now he could fall asleep easily.

It was never that simple, though, and after a few minutes of this silence, which was growing comfortably drowsy, Zuko lifted his head to look Jee in the eyes.

“Uncle says he wants you to come with us,” he whispered slowly. His fingers were tracing small patterns over Jee’s collarbone.

“Hmmm?” Jee cracked his eyes open and met his gaze.

Zuko was looking down now, at Jee’s chest, his finger moving down to trace the seagull tattoo. “To the try-outs. He says it’d be good if you came along.”

_His uncle_, eh?

Jee slid one hand off Zuko’s back and closed his hand in his own. “Why not. Sure, I’ll come, if I can convince Pakku to give me the time.” No need to tell him that he’d already asked Pakku about it and gotten the permission. He didn’t want to come across as overeager.

Neither did he need to ask if Zuko wanted him there too. The answer was obvious in the way the muscles of the kid’s face relaxed into a not-quite-smile at the words, his eyes flicking up briefly to meet Jee’s.

“Okay.”

Then, he lowered his head back onto Jee’s chest. The impulse to start stroking his hair flared instantly, nearly automatically, and Jee did not hold back.

Zuko stayed that night, but as usual, he was gone by the time Jee woke up the next morning. The living room felt colder than before, his back and neck ached as though he’d slept on bare rocks and, of course, the stains were still there.

Jee stayed under the blanket, soaking up what little smell still remained.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you ever so much for the continued support. I hope you're still with me.

Next up: the try-outs are attended, Jee is careless and Iroh expresses his worries.
Chapter 21: Secrets

I know. I KNOW. It's been 3 months and I'm really sorry. This chapter has been a real pain in the ass and I've rewritten it more times than I care to remember.

*curls up in a ball and cries*

Jee hadn’t given much thought to how they would get to Ann Arbor for the tryouts. It seemed pretty obvious that they would be taking a car, just the three of them, and have a nice little road trip during which Zuko would pollute the interior with his dark clouds of brooding and nerves and Jee would quietly sweat in his seat next to a man whose nephew he’d been shagging.

What he was not expecting was a schoolbus filled with hyperactive, chattering brats trying to kill their anxiety by talking right over it, but that was exactly what he got.

“Good morning, Lieutenant!” Iroh bellowed once he got out of his handsome ford and made his way towards the merry group, a very grumpy Zuko in tow.

Jee acknowledged the greeting with a nod. He didn’t trust himself to speak just yet, not while every word that got out threatened to turn into a curse.

Of course, it made sense and Jee should have felt worried about his gross oversight – and, it had to be said, his pretty damned obvious favoritism. Just because other students in Flowing Creek did not pester him for private training time didn’t mean that they were not going to compete in that very same tournament, especially with so many kids in the school practicing martial arts. It was a logical move on Pakku’s side to order a bus to take all of them there together.

That still didn’t mean Jee had to like it.

“All ready to depart?” Iroh asked, patting Jee on the shoulder in a friendly gesture that would have seemed preposterous if it were anyone else.

“You could say that,” Jee muttered, watching as the kids filed into the bus in a way that even an extreme optimist would be hard-pressed to call orderly. Zuko shot him a forlorn look before following them, a picture of perfect, undisturbed moroseness that would easily give Edgar Allan Poe a run for his money.

“Anyone else joining us?”

“No, it’s just the two of us chaperoning.” Jee crossed his arms against the chill, even though it was the first morning since winter truly hit that carried the hope of a warmer front in the wind. “Pakku thinks we don’t need any more for this lot.”

“Quite right.” Iroh nodded, taking a long sip out of a thermos that, and Jee was willing to bet his lifelong savings on it, could only contain hot tea. “We’ll do just fine. Now, shall we get onboard and face adventure?”

This disgusting display of chirpiness was followed by a short, rumbling laugh which only pulled the
corners of Jee’s lips further down. Iroh had no business being chirpy so early in the morning in the face of a couple of hours trapped in a bus with noisy brats. Jee held his tongue, let the man into the death trap on wheels and followed, fully indulging his inner grump.

For the first half an hour, though, the ride had been blessedly uneventful. Jee had only been required to take one stroll down the aisle to glare the pack of brats into submission, but it hadn’t been very bad to begin with; only the standard amount of noise and tomfoolery that was to be expected on a bus full of teenagers. The kids who were ambitious enough to go for the competition were, for the most part, well-behaved, and Iroh had proven invaluable in keeping them entertained with anecdotes and jokes, some of which were just barely on the acceptable side of bawdy.

Jee was happy to leave him to it and, for the most part, sat in silence, gazing out into the passing landscape filled with slowly melting snow. Sneaked an occasional glance at Zuko, too, if only to ascertain that the moody brat was still being appropriately moody, sitting on his own, leaning against the window and shutting the world away with the assistance of headphones and a book open on his lap.

That is, until about forty five minutes into the ride, when Jee received the first text.

*I’m still thinking about last time.*

Once he read it, Jee blinked and looked up immediately, staring ahead maybe a little too forcefully to appear nonchalant. But sexting? From Zuko? That was probably an even bigger surprise than a bus full of brats.

Nevertheless, if Zuko wanted to play…

*Oh yeah? Which part?*

He did not crane his neck to steal a glance at Zuko this time. Imagining the brat’s face was fun enough.

*I want to ride you again.*

Jee smirked, making himself more comfortable in his seat. This was turning out pretty promising.

*Wouldn’t say no to that. Details?*

This time Zuko took a little longer, probably searching his wits for something appropriately sexy, bless his grumpy soul. The result, for its apparent lack of originality, was not disappointing.

*In my room. On my bed.*

*Might be tricky,* Jee replied, but allowed himself to enjoy the mental image anyway. *I’m too old to climb any windows.*

*What if you could come over? If Uncle’s away?*

Jee thought about Zuko’s room, which he still could conjure up in disturbingly vivid detail. The red walls, the black furnishings, the decorations, the pictures, the Fire Industries logo… He wondered if the bed would hold. It didn’t look very sturdy, but then again, the Xis weren’t likely to fill their houses with second-rate junk. Fucking the kid among all those mementos from his past life had the potential to be remarkably creepy, but…

He could sort of see the appeal.
Is that an invitation?

I don’t know. Maybe.

Jee smirked again, gazing up at the road. Charming.

So I’ve earned bedroom privileges, huh?

I said maybe.

Awww, look at the big baby trying to play coy. Jee was half-tempted to tell him he was being very cute.

So what can I do to earn more privileges?

I’m sure you can think of something.

Which was… a bit anticlimactic, it had to be said, and didn’t leave much in the way of further kinkiness, but Jee was still impressed. Zuko started a sexting game, all on his own. On a bus full of his classmates and, more importantly, just as full of his uncle. Zuko, it seemed, really did like some adrenaline in his life.

It would be a crime not to indulge it.

You look very hot today, how’s that for a start? Jee typed, feeling pretty damned pleased with his life for the moment.

Not bad. You too.

It was pretty hard to reign in the smile and Jee wasn’t sure he quite managed it. It stood to reason that Zuko found him attractive in return, but the kid was still inhibited to the tenth degree and didn’t voice his appreciation much – or at all – so an admission like that was practically a book of sonnets.

Wanna hear what I’ll do to you if you do well today? Jee asked, reveling in the idiocy of the situation. It was stupid, the whole thing, and the texts were rather ridiculous, which only made it more fun. It had been a while since Jee had done something equally juvenile.

Curiosity getting the better of him, he decided to glance over at Zuko to see the kid’s reaction. Zuko was clearly pretending to read, hiding the phone behind a brick of a book that had a dragon on the cover, and his healthy cheek wore that delightful pinkish tinge that was already spreading down to his neck, growing redder.

Apparently Jee wasn’t being stealthy enough because Zuko looked up and caught his eye. Still blushing, he was just starting to smirk in a way that, to Jee, appeared completely and scarily obvious, when Sokka suddenly saw it fit to block Jee’s line of sight and plop down on the vacant space on the seat next to Xi.

Damn that oaf and his atrocious timing.

“That’s one of the Game of Thrones books, right?” he heard Sokka ask as he quickly looked away and back to the road.

“… Yeah?”

“Which one? I’ve only seen the show but Suki keeps pestering me to read the books. Are they good?”
“That’s the fifth one…” Zuko’s voice sounded as if the boy was trying to figure skate in ballet shoes on a grassy football pitch – which, Jee knew, was his normal conversation voice most of the time. “Actually, I’m rereading it. I’ve, uh, read the whole series before. Not that, you know. Not like I’m a fan or anything… But yeah. They’re good. Better than the show.” Here, his voice suddenly gained confidence, as if social interaction was shaky ground but the world of books being better than shows was something that he could navigate in the dark, with his eyes closed. “Though the show has good things too, I guess. The acting. And the sets. And, uh, costumes and stuff. And I like how they made Margaery’s role bigger, and…”

“So when does Joffrey die? Because he does die, right? Tell me he does. And Tyrion lives. I’m gonna stop watching if they kill off Tyrion.”

“Uh… Don’t you want to find that out on your own?”

“Naaah, I like to know things. It’s annoying when I don’t know what happens next and Suki does. Actually, do you have the first book? Can I borrow it? Might as well give it a go and at least show Suki I’m making an effort.”

“Uh, sure, why not, but… You know, it might make you feel weird. The characters are much younger in the books. Like, Jon’s fourteen and Dany’s thirteen and…”

It was at this point that Jee decided to tune them out, smiling a little to himself.

His boy was a fucking geek.

A geek, spending his Friday nights in his gym teacher’s bed, on his way to beat people up in a civilized and orderly manner and looking, to all intents and purposes, like the poster image of a jock. Which only went to prove that labels were about as useful in measuring real, breathing people as social statistics and psychology magazines.

Jee let them talk geek – though since one of the talkers was Zuko, the conversation was filled with awkward pauses and clearing of throats and clumsy backpedaling – and texted Zuko with a short How about I just show you later.

He didn’t expect a reply. Especially not when Suki was drawn into the conversation and started arguing with Zuko about characters with strange names, a topic that, for all his reassurances that he was not a fan, Zuko clearly felt hotly about. Soon the two of them dissolved into a discussion about theories and lineages and hair color and who was and wasn’t a bastard while Sokka could be heard asking pathetically for “no spoilers, guys, come on!”. But that wasn’t the end of it because soon enough, Aang and Katara orbited towards them, upon which the debate turned to feminism and nudity and sex scenes and excessive violence, with the word “gratuitous” being thrown around a lot. Jee had no fucking idea what they were talking about. He suspected he was much happier for it.

But Zuko, for once, was talking to people his age without shouting and growling at them, and it had to be a good thing. In a very abstract, amused way, Jee was proud of him.

And so, it would appear, was Iroh – when the old man took his seat across from Jee again, he was beaming and gave Jee the thumps up as he inclined his head in Zuko’s direction.

Jee returned the conspirational smile. Yeah, the kid was doing well.

The geeky arguing continued all the way to Ann Arbor.
“Ladies, your locker room is this way, the boys are over here. Get your registration papers ready, I’ll be collecting them…” Jee looked around, searching for a suitable rendezvous point in the crowded gym full of running teenagers and shouting adults. “Up in sector C,” he decided, spotting a place in the audience which seemed to have sufficient vacant space. “Meet me over there in fifteen minutes. Now scram and don’t waste any time, round one’s about to start in half an hour. Go!”

“Yessir!” a small chorus answered, among a few chuckles. Jee glared at them for good measure as the kids did scram, Zuko throwing him a long look over his shoulder before he followed the rest to the locker rooms.

Jee sent him a smile, as genuine as he could make it – which, in the circumstances, wasn’t much. The grumpiness the bus ride had relieved him of temporarily was back with a vengeance, fuelled by lots of people bumping into him and running past him, the noise and the general chaos. Standing in line for the registration forms didn’t help matters. The general atmosphere of the place did remind him of the Navy, the first day of boot camp to be precise – and this time, it was not a good thing.

“Fucking mess,” he muttered to himself, pushing his way to the stalls with Iroh in tow. As a substitute teacher, he was hardly ever required to chaperone field trips and he’d been damned well grateful for that.

“No worries, Lieutenant.” Iroh made himself comfortable next to Jee once they claimed stall space. “Most of the children are no strangers to the way those tryouts are organized, they will know what to do. And they’ll take care of the first-timers.”

_They’d better, Jee almost said. I’ve no fucking idea what I’m doing._

It wasn’t strictly true – he had escorted some kids to similar events before, albeit rarely and with a lot of grumbling and grudges involved. He hated the general atmosphere of tournaments, with the noise and the chaos and the waiting, always the fucking waiting. Most of the gig, in fact, invariably consisted of sitting around without a purpose while the kids swam in a pool of their own nerves, then short, intense moments when they were finally allowed onto the podium to have their few minutes of glory, and then more waiting. It would be hours upon hours before they’d be finally allowed to go home, especially with their little group that would be spread out in several categories.

They were going to be stuck here for ages.

Jee should have brought some beer disguised as coffee in a thermos, but he hadn’t had the necessary foresight in the morning, when he’d almost arrived late. Well, in that case he’d just have to get himself some actual coffee from the many vendors hoping to cash in on similar events. It would be daylight robbery, of course, and the coffee would taste disgusting, but Jee refused to sit through the rest of the afternoon here without some form of liquid reinforcement.

Iroh’s tea, he suspected, wouldn’t exactly help.

Still, he waded his way through a curt, rather unimpressive pep talk – some of the kids tried not to laugh, apparently sharing Jee’s sentiment that the whole tradition of pep talks was criminally overrated – collected the registration forms and left Iroh with the kids to stand in yet another line to hand them in. It took a good twenty minutes, and by the time Jee finally collected the numbers and nametags, signed what needed signing and got the general outline of the tournament with instructions, the middle schoolers were already beginning their rounds – with an hour’s delay.
Which meant that they’d have to wait a couple hours at least before it was their turn. Lovely.

“Here, get your stuff,” he grumbled, handing out the numbers and nametags among his little group once he’d gotten back to the stalls. “Looks like we’re in for a nice long wait. There’s a delay because apparently some of the school buses were stuck in traffic.”

The news was met with a collective groan.

“How about we consider this an opportunity to get a good warm-up,” Iroh suggested, trying to remain perky in spite of the rest of the universe. “We could find a spot where we wouldn’t be in the way and use this time for some light, last-minute training, how about that?”

Jee considered this, glancing behind him at the podium where one spotty kid was just sloppily pushing another out of the ring. “We do have allocated warm-up time, but it’s not a bad idea,” he mused. “That is, if we can find a place here without people running all over us.”

“We can beat some guys up and make the space,” Korra suggested helpfully. Jee deeply regretted not being allowed to agree with that plan.

“Well, we won’t find anything unless we go look,” Katara pointed out. “Let’s go. Worst case scenario, we can do a few laps outside.”

“I’ll keep your seats here,” Iroh promised, “and I’ll phone your coach as soon as the situation changes. Have fun!”

“We’re not here to have fun, Uncle,” Zuko barked suddenly. Apparently he was back in sulky mood now, too.

Jee could relate. Nerves tended to affect everyone differently and it seemed that Zuko reacted to them largely by radiating even more hostility than he normally did. Too bad there was probably no way to sneak in a kiss or a grope – Jee was pretty sure that would have helped.

At least, it would have helped Jee. Which was a start.

He had to content himself with sending Zuko a meaningful look, which was lost on him as the kid kept his gaze fixed on the ground. Fine. Jee sighed, called for the kids to follow him and once again made his way down into the moving, shouting mass of fretting youth.

Only to concede defeat after about half an hour of scouting. Katara’s worst case scenario, it seemed, would have to come to fruition.

At least it wasn’t freezing outside. Jee leaned against the wall of the school building and lit a cigarette, letting the blessed silence and the crisp air soothe his thoughts. Spring was already in the air, evident in the warmer temperatures, the fresh smell of rains and the puddles of melting snow, some white patches of which, dirtied by the mud and street dust, were still clinging to life here and there. The sun beating down on the world already brought more heat than it had through the entire winter, promising a nice, warm spell sometime soon.

It couldn’t come soon enough.

Jee waited for the kids – those few who decided they did want to jog – to put on their hoodies and file outside, reveling in what would probably be his single moment of peace for the whole day, at least until he’d be allowed to get back home. He’d resolved before that Zuko’s mood would not rub off on him, but he had to concede that it was already too late for that; the sense of relief fresh air brought showed him that he had been worrying, even against his better judgment.
Zuko was good. Those tryouts were nothing. In all likelihood the brat would just breeze through them without breaking a sweat and then he would be left in peace to fret some more over the rounds that would follow. But…

Jee sighed, closed his eyes and leaned the back of his head against the wall, letting the sunlight warm his face.

Zuko’s fears about the future – that was part of it, too. And there was that other thing, the one that Jee wasn’t allowing himself to consider now. Time was passing quickly, much too quickly now for Jee’s liking, and Zuko’s graduation would be upon them in no time at all…

He finished the cigarette. Let it fall to the ground. Stepped on it.

Then, he started running.

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“Just in time,” Iroh greeted him later when, properly warmed-up and uncomfortably sweaty, Jee rejoined him in the stands, nursing his freshly-bought, ridiculously-overpriced, tasteless cup of something that no doubt wanted to be coffee when it grew up.

“The kids are about as ready as they’ll ever be,” Jee judged, sitting down. “The warm-up went well enough. The first ones will be up in a few minutes.”

“Indeed, with our exceptional exchange student going first.” Iroh beamed, scanning the crowd for Aang’s tattooed head. “He’s a talented boy. I’d love to see more of him.”

Jee followed his example and spotted Aang easily in the rippling crowd below. “Yeah, he is,” he agreed quietly. “He going back to wherever he’s from when the year’s over?”

“That’s what I heard from Pakku and his guardian, the good Gyatso. But he told me once that he’d love to return permanently, if he can. I do hope they find a way, the boy is lovely and positively fascinated with our western culture.”

Jee smirked faintly, taking a sip of his almost-coffee. He had a pretty good guess what had been the source of this fascination – Katara was standing right next to Aang, her arm protectively over the smaller kid’s shoulder. The boy looked just about ready to barf rainbows all over the gym.

Good kids, both of them. Suki and Bolin, too, and though Jee had his reservations about Korra’s hotheadedness and Sokka’s tendency to goof around, they were good kids as well. And Haru, and Lucy, and Gina with the wild curls and the swearing problem, and Toby when he wasn’t too busy shoving pencils into his nose, and…

Shit, they were all decent kids. And they all deserved as much attention as Jee could give them, no exceptions.

Okay, old boy, that’s it. No more favoritism after today. You can do better than that.

Another sip of the horrible almost-coffee sealed the deal, and Jee felt a little better when he watched Aang ascend the podium, all giddiness and smiles that could be seen even from their place in the stands.
He watched the short round carefully for stuff he could correct later during class, and did the same for the other students, one by one, after Aang had won his tryout almost effortlessly and still apologized to his opponent when it was over. Katara had little trouble in her round too, and looked radiant and beautiful when she received her score. Three more kids from Flowing Creek also qualified, with another three who didn’t make it but did not seem overly concerned by that fact. Before the seniors had their turn, Jee had scribbled down notes for things to work on in class and in DDC meetings to consult with Piandao, occasionally exchanging comments with Iroh, who never failed to find things to compliment on in the students’ performance.

And then Jee thought about Toph. She would have a blast if she could only come along…

Poor girl.

“Zuko is always very nervous about these tournaments,” Iroh commented quietly when the first competitors in the seniors’ category, from schools somewhere up North, faced off.

“Ya think?” Jee murmured, spotting Zuko’s shaggy head in the line to the podium. The brat was standing next to Suki, who looked confident in her training gear, and Sokka, who was performing what could only be his own version of cheerleading.

“Of course, the stakes are much bigger this year. Has he told you?”

Jee thought back to the conversation they had had last time Zuko came over; he nodded, fiddling with the pencil in his hand.

“And what do you think about it, Lieutenant?”

Jee glanced over at Iroh in surprise, then sought out Zuko in the crowd again. “I’m not sure I’m entitled to have an opinion here. I’m only his coach.”

“A coach he respects very much.” Iroh gave him a big, slightly wistful smile, and Jee felt a stone dropping into his gut. “He would think about what you say, even if he might not show it. Do you think his ambition is hurting him or am I wrong to not encourage his drive?”

“I really don’t think it’s my place to – “

“Oh come now, friend. You’re an intelligent man. I know you are aware of Zuko’s situation, at least partially, and of the fact that we share a common background. That kind of thing can never remain a secret for long. Or am I mistaken?”

Jee squirmed in his seat, looking into the black contents of his cup. “You are not,” he muttered quietly, and then added, “sir.”

“No need for that.” Iroh patted him on the back. “I haven’t been anyone’s sir for a very long time and, well, I suspect we both have quite interesting stories to tell. Maybe one time, Lieutenant.”

Jee nodded curtly, his eyes on the podium. All of a sudden he was feeling rather daring, so after a moment, he asked, “So you think he shouldn’t try so hard?”

“That’s the thing,” Iroh replied, reaching up to stroke his beard. “I’m not sure what is the right way. The grand universities, the courses he wants to take – those are not Zuko’s choices. Not really, and it worries me how little he understands that. I have watched this boy having his own dreams taken away from him, being molded into his father’s image and ordered around, practically all his life, and I couldn’t do anything about it. My brother is not a forgiving man and I’m afraid that Zuko, with his sweet nature and his deep understanding of right and wrong, has always been a disappointment to
Ozai’s own unscrupulous worldview. It hasn’t been easy on the boy.”

“Sweet nature?” Jee raised an eyebrow at him before he could stop himself, but it was too late to hide the skepticism now.

Iroh didn’t like it.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” he said firmly. “He used to be a very sweet boy. Took after his poor mother a lot, bless her wherever she may be. And he still is that boy deep down, underneath all the anger and hurt, which, I believe, is why he struggles so much… But, I am glad to say, I’ve been seeing glimpses of the old him recently, from time to time.”

Jee bit his tongue before he tried to comment. He’d be damned if he blundered into the same trap twice.

But something did not add up and since the old man was feeling conversational…

“You mentioned his mother,” he said cautiously. “What happened? I – I read about a divorce, but you said “disappeared”…?”

Iroh waited until the cheering after the last round died down. Korra was on the podium now, looking to all intents and purposes like she was going to chew her opponent and spit her out, and Jee should have paid attention, but suddenly, he found himself hanging on Iroh’s every breath whether he wanted to or not.

The old man took his time, considering Jee subtly while also letting him know he was being considered. Suddenly self-conscious, Jee straightened his back. His respect for Iroh, already capricious, was rising again.

“I understand that this curiosity comes out of a place of caring?” the old man asked finally.

“Of course.” Jee tried to appear only moderately interested. “You’ve asked me to connect to Zuko more and that’s what I’ve been trying to do. But it’s tricky, not knowing his circumstances.”

Too bad they didn’t give awards for bullshitting proficiency. Maybe then Jee would have something to boast about.

“Yes, there was a divorce,” Iroh said at last. On the podium, Korra was winning in her usual, aggressive style. “Or at least my brother claims there was. I do not doubt that there were grounds for it because their marriage had been deteriorating for a long time, but… It was very sudden. Shockingly so. Ursa… Well, she did disappear, that’s the only way to describe it. One night we were talking on the phone about my father’s cancer, and the next, she was gone, with only a short note and a scant press announcement from Ozai. It was very hard for the children, especially Zuko. He was his mother’s little darling.”

“What, she actually disappeared just like that?” Jee didn’t even bother to conceal the puzzlement in his voice. “Sounds like something out of a spy novel. No offense.”

“All families harbor some skeletons in their closets, Lieutenant,” Iroh admonished him gently, but not without adding a low, “Some more than others. I liked Ursa a lot and I miss her, but I do not presume to guess what happened between them that night. My brother – is, well. He is a difficult man.”

“He sounds difficult, all right,” Jee agreed grimly. “And you think he’s brainwashing Zuko into something the kid isn’t?”
“Is that what it looks like to you, Lieutenant?”

“Frankly?” Jee rested his chin on his hands. “Yes, that’s exactly what it looks like. Zuko wants to learn to run his father’s company, isn’t he.”

“He seems to think that it is the only thing that will earn him some worth,” Iroh agreed in a wistful, almost sorrowful tone. “It may sound old-fashioned to you, but he’s been brought up to believe that it’s a birthright he needs to fight for and that the only thing that will make him worthy is his father’s approval – which, it has to be said, is impossible. Ozai doesn’t love the boy. The only thing he values is strength, and not of the good kind, and Zuko’s talents have always been insufficient to him. It’s toxic, Lieutenant, plain and simple. The thing is, it’s difficult to extract a poison after it’s had years and years to enter the system. Zuko doesn’t want to hear anything that might put his father in an unfavorable light and that is that.”

Jee murmured agreement, frowning at the podium. It was almost Zuko’s turn.

“You’re not going to tell me what happened between them that he sent Zuko here, are you?” he asked, and was proven right instantly; Iroh shook his head and started clapping, suddenly engrossed in the goings-on on the podium and shouting loud encouragement.

Jee watched, too, his head spinning. If he needed any more proof that what he’d read on the internet was made-up bullshit, there it was. And now…

Now he was left with the really important questions.

Just like he’d predicted, Zuko had no trouble against his opponent, a bulky, blond white kid who looked like he could match Bolin in muscle-flexing. Xi was faster, more skilled and obviously more vicious; he didn’t let the other boy land one single hit on him. And just like that, with a few quick, almost blurry movements, a referee’s whistle and a short announcement, it was over, and tension was deflating from Jee like from a punctured balloon.

“Excuse me,” he found himself saying, standing up.

Iroh simply nodded and let him pass.

He caught up with Zuko before the boy reached the men’s locker rooms and grabbed his wrist. The brat did not seem too surprised; he even gave Jee a small, breathless smile before he nodded in the direction of the toilets nearby.

Jee let him go first, waited a beat, then followed him.

Stupid, his brain went with the insistence of police sirens, stupid, stupid, stupid. But the bathroom, by some divine or diabolical intervention, was empty; and the stall at the far end was open in obvious invitation; and really, he couldn’t wait any longer, he’d been itching to kiss Zuko’s stress away all day.

And now he could, and licked the adrenaline rush from Zuko’s hot lips.

“Congratulations,” he hummed once the first insistence wore off a little; his hands were on Zuko’s ass now, squeezing with no small degree of affection, and Zuko was trying to hook one leg over Jee’s hip as though he was going for an outright bathroom fuck and not a stolen make-out. “You did great.”

“It’s only the first stage,” Zuko protested breathlessly, but his eyes shone with triumph anyway.
“You’ll do even better next time. Now come here, I want to kiss you again.”

Iroh’s words were still on the front of his mind, teasing him with dark secrets and scandals even as Zuko’s lips were eagerly warming his own. Technically, Jee knew he should stay away from both, the secrets and the brat they came with, but it was already too late for one, and as for the other…

One thing was becoming obvious; if he wanted to learn Zuko’s secrets, he would have to share some secrets of his own.

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Perfect opportunities had been as rare in Jee’s life as drill sergeants with a respect for other people’s personal boundaries. Which was why the fact that the following Zuko Night did bring one of those was so surprising.

“You know,” the brat started uncertainly, voice low and face pinched with doubt as he slowly drank the cheap wine Jee had offered him to celebrate the tryouts. “You know how you said that… Uh, that you could gag me?”

Jee did know, and it was only because he’d already swallowed his sip that he wasn’t choking on his own wine right this second. “Yes?” he said, stamping down on the shiver of excitement.

But then Zuko’s face flushed deep crimson and the shiver of excitement decided to fuck the police and bloomed anew like a fucking little daffodil.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Zuko offered quietly. He was trying to act like it was all in a day’s work, bless him, and failing miserably. “And, uh… I think we could try?”

Really now. And he’d been thinking about it, had he? Jee didn’t know what was more adorable: Zuko’s face looking like you could roast a medium-rare steak on it or the image of him giving long and serious consideration to kinky games in the bedroom.

“You know,” Zuko assured him quickly, as though determined to go through with it before his brain got the better of him. Jee could definitely sympathize. “And, uh… I think we could try?”

“I am,” Zuko assured him quickly, as though determined to go through with it before his brain got the better of him. Jee could definitely sympathize. “And you own ties, don’t you? Let’s use one of those.”

Then, with a definite air that put a stop to any further conversation, the kid put his almost-empty wine glass on the counter, slid off his stool and marched to the bedroom like a man on a mission. And that was that.

Jee finished his wine and followed him seconds later, shaking his head and thinking that maybe he should see if he had a lucky star so he could thank it. Zuko was many things, God knew, but he was never, ever boring.

“Got a safeword?” Jee asked, coming into the bedroom and to the sight of Zuko trying to appear ever-so-nonchalant.
“Why would I need a safeword for this?” The kid seemed genuinely puzzled, which at least put a stop to the anxious fiddling with the hem of his shirt. “It’s not like we’re doing BDSM or anything…”

Jee reached out and ruffled his hair before Zuko had the chance to swat his hand away. Oh, child. “I still want you to feel comfortable,” he explained, then belatedly realized that gagging and safewords didn’t exactly go together. “Tell you what, not a safeword in this case, but knock on the headboard three times if you want the gag removed. Okay?”

“Okay.” Zuko looked away, to the bed, but he was trying not to smile – Jee could tell from the strained pull around his mouth.

It would appear he’d earned some brownie points. Good – now he could see how far that would get him. If Zuko was feeling a little adventurous, then maybe…

“Sit down,” Jee ordered in his best grizzled officer voice. “Take your shirt off.”

For a time-stopping moment, Zuko looked at him in comically wide-eyed shock. Jee smoothed his face into mild exasperation and waited, crossing his arms over his chest and hoping to God he hadn’t just made a huge, catastrophic miscalculation. Yeah, the brat was willing to give up some of the control Jee had given him, but that didn’t necessarily mean…

… Or maybe it did, because suddenly Zuko was plopping his ass down on the bed and pulling his t-shirt over his head.

“Good.” Jee cleared his throat, taking care not to loosen up his frown into betraying his relief. “Now your socks.”

And again, instant obedience, not even a token a word of protest. Only bright, bright eyes locked with his and darkening with pooling lust.

“Pants,” Jee commanded, strangely fascinated. The misbehaving part of his brain decided to step in at this point and put a few more words into his mouth before he could stop it: “And make it worth my time.”

Red-cheeked, open-mouthed, Zuko complied. Fingers fumbled with the fly and new inches of tight skin blinked into view as the jeans slowly made their way down, coaxed by nervous hands. Long, long legs soon stretched before Jee, strong and warm and ready to be wrapped snugly around his middle, all his for the taking.

Just as Jee was about to search his brain for whatever magic lay hidden in him to achieve this, Zuko cleared his throat and glanced up at him from under his messy bangs.

“That’s hot,” he mumbled.

“What is?” Jee shifted his weight from one foot to another, taking a few steps back to lean against the doorframe.

“You, being – like that. It’s hot.”

Is it now. Wasn’t the kid just full of surprises tonight.

“You like that?” Jee asked lazily, lips curling into a smirk. “You like it when I take charge? Well then, don’t just sit there like a pretty idiot. Get the lube from the drawer.”
Jee’s insides were starting to burn as though someone had installed a heater in his stomach and turned it up to maximum power. Zuko was reacting well to being ordered around, good heavens. What next? Jee was half-expecting to see meteors flying over the sky and smashing civilization to its long-overdue doom if he glanced to the window.

No meteors came. Instead, Jee was treated to a lightning-grin and the sight of an almost-naked Zuko rummaging in the drawer of the bedside table and producing a brand new bottle of lube. In other words – all things were just as they should be.

“Your underwear,” he commanded, feeling pretty damn pleased with his life. “Off.”

“And you’re just going to stand there and – “

“I said, off. Don’t make me repeat myself again, Xi.”

Zuko swallowed, loudly, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. Jee watched as he hooked his fingers over the waistband of another piece of tight-fitting designer underwear and started pulling it down his legs, his cock popping to freedom already dark and hard.

*Atta boy.*

“What now, Lieutenant?” Zuko asked. His legs were slowly gliding over the bedcovers, as if the kid was enjoying how the material felt against his bare skin.

This gave Jee some ideas.

“Open the bottle,” he ordered, still leaning back against the doorframe. “Put some lube on your fingers. I want you to prepare yourself for me.”

Zuko swallowed again, bending his legs at the knees. “And you’re gonna –“

“Yes.” Jee smiled easily. “I’m gonna watch.”

He congratulated himself on an excellent idea immediately; Zuko sucked in a breath and his cock twitched a little, obviously excited. The brat was already aroused to his limits and looking so painfully young. If Jee knew that taking charge would get him similar results, he would have tried it even sooner.

Slowly, Zuko picked up the bottle and unscrewed the cap. He squeezed, capturing the transparent substance on his index and middle finger and rubbing them together. Then, he glanced at Jee, a question reflected in the uncertain tilt of his lonely brow.

“Go on,” Jee encouraged him. “You know how to do it. I’m waiting.”

“And when will you – “


“…Okay.”

Zuko lay back on the bed. Parted his legs, giving Jee a perfect view of his tightly-drawn balls and his hole, still closed and quivering slightly. Brought his lubed-up right hand down…

The fingers didn’t go straight to that beautiful little spot. First, they lingered over Zuko’s thighs, the strong muscles there visibly tensing at the feather-light touches going down without a hurry. They smoothened over that lovely skin Jee loved to kiss so much, skimming lightly over the sparse, barely-
visible hair there, smearing little drops of lube; they travelled down the sensitive insides of the thighs and teased the balls a little. Zuko sighed like a man without a care in the world, stretching on the bed and parting his legs even further, teasing himself, and Jee had to drop the nonchalance act for a minute in order to readjust his jeans because holy fuck…

Oh yes, Zuko had learned. He’d paid attention to what Jee had done to make him feel good and was recreating it slowly on himself, showing Jee that he’d learned. His fingers were now pressing into that velvety spot just behind his balls, drawing little circles there before moving down to the rim of his ass, and Jee found himself holding a breath in anticipation because the view was better than any porn he could ever watch.

“Don’t push it in all at once,” he instructed Zuko roughly, hunger building up in him with delicious promise. “Go slow.”

“Yes, sir,” Zuko whispered. The first finger reached its goal.

Jee loved his life.

His eyes were starting to water, but he didn’t care – blinking was simply not an option. Not when Zuko’s long, strong finger was slowly beginning to breach the barrier of muscle and pushing into the heat Jee could recall as vividly as though it was closing in on him. And then it pushed even further, to the first knuckle, then the second, and Jee watched, transfixed, as the muscle resisted at first, only to suck the finger in possessively as it began to withdraw. And then the finger pushed back in, deeper and faster, and the again the flesh resisted, then clung to it. And again, and again, and then the second finger joined the first, stretching the rim wider…

Another sigh pierced the lust-heavy air, loud and relaxed. The fingers pushed as far deep as they would go and Zuko lifted his hips a little, clenching the muscles of his ass over the fingers stuck inside, before retrieving them. Jee swallowed and nearly had a coughing fit – his throat had gone uncomfortably dry as he watched, blood surging down to his groin in a sweet rush that he knew would be satisfied soon.

Soon. But not quite yet.

“Three fingers,” he let out, voice rough and scratchy. “Keep going.”

His response was another sigh, deeper, and then Zuko was bringing his hand up, coating his hand with more lube and pushing it into his loosening hole again, third finger obediently making the stretch bigger. The sight was hypnotic. Jee’s eyes registered every twitch of Zuko’s muscles, every glisten of liquid on his moving fingers, every slight tremor in his wrist. And the brat was letting himself go, circling his hips and moving them into the thrust of his own hand, bolder and bolder.

And then it hit Jee: the little bastard had practiced.

Jee had felt the urge to kiss that reddening rim before, but never as strong as it was now. Maybe…

Well, it was time to up the game anyway.

“Keep going,” he repeated, rubbing himself over the jeans a little. Then, he detached himself from the doorframe, licking his lips, and wandered over to the closet. The noises Zuko made followed him, taunting: the heavy breathing, the wet squelch of fingers still moving in and out of flesh, the rustle of bedsheets being rumpled. It drove him mad in the best way possible as he forced himself to keep his eyes on the bowels of his closet, looking for the best item to tie around Zuko’s mouth.

The green tie? No, he liked the green tie, it was a gift from Steve, he wouldn’t want saliva all over it.
The black one? That’s the one he used most often. No. The navy one with the stripes? He hadn’t worn that one in a while, but then again, it went well with the only other decent suit Jee owned…

“I – need – “ Zuko’s voice was breathy, hoarse, insistent. Jee clenched his teeth and snatched the first tie his eyes landed on – a dull brown one, a Christmas present from his mother from back when he’d still felt obliged to come home for the holidays.

It would have to do.

He turned around, lay the tie on the bed where Zuko could see it, and started unbuttoning his shirt in a leisurely way that was probably a poor cover for his roaring hunger. Zuko was arching his back off the bed and still fingering himself, only there were four fingers massaging his reddening hole now, the greedy little fuck. His eyes, half-lidded, were fixed on the tie, then flew up to Jee, wordlessly urging him to hurry up.

If the sight of Zuko working himself open for him hadn’t done it, his face in that moment would have. Jee’s cock was straining in his pants now, painfully eager, but he bit down on the need to simply jump on the bed and just slide in and took his clothes off first, trying to stay calm.

Slowly, he climbed onto the bed and stretched beside Zuko, the tie in his hand.

“You’ve done this before,” he hummed, bringing the tie to Zuko’s flushed face and gently sliding it over Zuko’s healthy cheek. The brat closed his eyes, tongue darting out to lick along his red, red lips.

“You’ve been touching yourself. Have you?”

“Yes.” Zuko’s word was a breathless gasp, hand kept moving at a steady pace, a rare display of control from him, as Jee playfully caressed his face with the soft material.

“Have you been thinking of me?” he whispered. “Of this? Of my bed? Of my cock inside of you, when you stretched yourself open?”

“Yes.” No hesitation, no pause this time, only lust, and Zuko’s teeth catching the tie between them.

Right, that’s it. Jee growled, pulled the tie away and pinned him down, kissing him stupid.

His fingers cupped the back of Zuko’s head, bringing the tie there. He didn’t want to stop the kissing, but Zuko had asked for this, so after a few moments of shared breathlessness he broke away and wound the fabric around Zuko’s face, covering his mouth.

“Quiet,” he instructed, tying it behind the kid’s face, trying not to pull at his hair.

Zuko nodded and brought Jee’s face down again, briefly. Jee kissed him over the material.

He rolled off the kid. Pushed him over onto his side. Reached for the condoms, rolled one onto his cock in a hurry, lubed himself up. Then, he pressed himself flush against Zuko’s mouth-watering back. When he reached to lift Zuko’s right leg up, it was already rising on its own, inviting Jee in.

Christ, so easy. It was so easy. Zuko’s body was loose and open for him and he could just slam himself in if he wanted to, but he decided to go slow anyway, pushing in at a steady, even pace which Zuko responded to, moving his hips contra. The brat was reaching back, too, hooking his arm behind Jee’s head to bring him closer, tilting his face towards him, and Jee was kissing every inch of that face he could reach as he thrust in.

The heat. The tightness, closing in around him, stretching and clenching over him with every push. The closeness. Zuko’s burning skin under his lips. Shit, it was so good, all of it, and Jee never
wanted it to end but he knew he wouldn’t last, not like this…

He held out, though. Held out as long as he could, until his balls felt like they would explode and the waves of oncoming orgasm couldn’t possibly be kept at bay any longer. Zuko was spasming around him by then, coming down from his own messy release, his grunts and moans swallowed by the cotton over his mouth and leaving a wet stain on the material, and it was okay, okay, everything was okay.

Jee was kissing him over the tie again when he finally let it go.

Later, it seemed much later, he watched as Zuko slowly removed his makeshift gag and sat up, bringing a pillow up against his back and leaning on the headrest. His fingers crawled up to sift through Jee’s short hair.

It felt good. Jee rolled onto his stomach, hugged his own pillow and closed his eyes.

“You really liked it, didn’t you,” a low voice whispered after a few moments. “Watching me.”

“Mmm,” Jee replied into the pillow. “You’re hot,” he clarified after another moment during which the fingers scratched his head.

“You really think so.”

“I do. Very.”

This was greeted with a soft chuckle. “You think so very?”

Jee smiled against the pillow. “Yeah.”

He let another moment of silence pass them by with nothing but their settling breaths and the quiet rasp of Zuko’s fingers over his scalp. It felt nice. He didn’t really want to end the evening with anything else…

But he owed Zuko something, didn’t he. And they’d had a deal.

So after counting to ten he heaved himself up, despite the reluctance, and sent Zuko a smile. “Wait here,” he told him, then made his way out of the bedroom on groggy legs that would have preferred to stay asleep.

It only took him a few minutes of digging through the memorabilia box that he’d never bothered to unpack properly to find what he was looking for. He took the old photograph, blew on it to scatter the dust and brought it with him to the bedroom, where Zuko was still half-sitting up against the pillows and looking like any normal person would look after a good fuck: relaxed, sleepy, completely at ease.

The knowledge that he was probably the only one allowed to see Zuko like that both expanded his chest and pinned it with needles.

“What’s that?” the brat asked, pointing to the photograph in Jee’s hand.

“I promised you something, didn’t I?” Jee smiled at him, climbing back onto the bed and settling in snuggly next to Zuko. “You earned it tonight. Ready for storytime?”

Zuko’s eyes lit up.

“Here.” Jee passed the old photo to him, smile turning softer. “You wanted to know about my last
Zuko took the photograph from him, forehead wrinkling slightly into a curious frown as he eyed one of the few mementos Jee had kept from his time with Steve. It was interesting to try to imagine seeing it for the first time from the brat’s perspective: the broad shoulders, the round face, the prominent jaw, the crooked broken nose. The glasses and the bald head. The severe, distant expression of a man who never had time to think the deep thoughts.

“What’s his name?” Zuko asked.

“Steve. Steven. We met on my first ship after they moved me from boot camp. Hooked up about a year later.”

“He’s…” Zuko looked at the picture more closely. “He’s good looking, in a – “

“– rough sort of way?” Jee let out a short chuckle despite himself. “Yeah, a lot of people said that. It’s the stubble. And it’s was, kid. The guy’s been dead for seven years.”

He’d expected the words to hurt more, but they didn’t. Now, they only produced a dull pang that was an old echo of hurt, tattered and distant and altogether unreachable. When he looked at the photograph now he felt many things, like fondness, gratitude for the good times, a bittersweet kind of ache. But he wasn’t hurting any more. Hadn’t been for a while.

Which was why he was able to meet Zuko’s shocked expression with a calm one of his own, leaning further into the pillow. “Afghanistan,” he explained. “He insisted on going with the provisions team that was supposed to deliver weapons to one of our bases there. It wasn’t his job, but he really wanted to see the country and meet the people. He was mad about that kind of thing, travelling… Anyway, they stumbled onto a landmine field. No one survived.”

“Fuck,” Zuko whispered, eyes back on the picture. He was biting his lower lip, hard, and fisting on the sheets. “I’m sorry. It must have been horrible.”

“It was,” Jee agreed. “We’d been together on and off for a long time. The only real relationship I’ve had, actually. And even that couldn’t be considered normal because we spent most of the time hiding it from our superiors when we served on the same ship and meeting up on leaves when we didn’t.” Which, now that Jee thought about it, was probably why it had lasted so long – they had never had the time to get bored with each other. As soon as some sort of a routine had crept in, they had always been separated and forced to establish new ones. That way, he suspected they’d never had to work on all the typical problems other long-term couples struggled with.

That was not to say they hadn’t had their own. But still, it had been… different.

“Do you still miss him?” Zuko asked quietly.

Jee put his arm around his shoulder, bringing him closer. “Sometimes,” he admitted, seeing no reason to sugarcoat it. “Like I miss other things. The Navy. Boot camp. My friends. That other life. But not in the romantic way, if that’s what you’re asking, kid. It’s been a long time.”

Tentatively, still clinging to the photo, Zuko leaned his head on Jee’s shoulder.

“How do you do that,” he whispered. “How can you let things go? Sometimes you seem as if you’d rather tear the whole town to shreds than spend another minute here, and sometimes you look like it’s okay, like you don’t mind, like you’re… okay with it. But you miss things. Doesn’t it make you angry?”
“I suppose it does.” Jee sighed, letting his head fall back. “Many things make me angry. But wallowing in it will not help anyone. I’m just trying to move on, as best I can.”

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“Who knows. Maybe you’ll learn one day. Remember that I’m twenty years older than you. It gets easier when you get older. Well… some things do.”

“So why are you here?” Zuko asked, placing the picture on the bed between them. His hand lifted to rest on Jee’s abdomen, then started stroking it in idle patterns. “What happened that you’re a sub now instead of a sailor?”

Jee sighed, bringing the kid closer. “It’s a long story, Zuko.”

The brat shifted against him until he was half on his side, half on Jee. “I want to hear it,” he murmured, then kissed the seagull tattoo. “If… if you don’t mind.”

Jee thought about it, bringing his eyes up to stare at the ceiling. Did he mind? With anyone else, he would, mostly because it wasn’t really his story to tell. Too many people were involved, the risk was too big, there was no evidence and in the end, it was nobody’s goddamned business. If it had been Pakku doing the asking, or Piandao, or even Ming, he would have told them to stuff it and got on with his day.

But Zuko…

Fuck, the kid had been putting his fingers in his ass and letting himself be gagged for Jee not ten minutes ago. Acknowledged or not, there was some level of trust between them now, and if Jee had any hope of gaining more of it he had no choice but to trust Zuko in return.

Besides, it wasn’t as if the brat would go blab it to anyone. Jee was pretty sure he wouldn’t.

“The last ship I served on,” he started, resting his head on Zuko’s, “I was responsible for the rookies. Well, not quite responsible, but it was one of my duties to oversee them and make sure everyone was up to the task. It made sense since I worked in boot camp before, and I was pretty good at it. Most of the new ones liked me well enough. Anyway, there was this guy who was our Medical Officer… Gibbs. He had what you might call a reputation.” It was a mild way to call it; Jee frowned at the memory. “Now, you must realize that a ship is like a small city. Many different departments, everything must go smoothly, but it’s hard to keep things secret. There were rumors about Gibbs, and by rumors I mean that everyone pretty much knew they were true, but since he was pals with our Commanding Officer, nobody dared to do anything about it.”

“What kind of rumors?”

Jee closed his eyes and kissed the crown of Zuko’s head. “Nasty ones. That he… that he liked the new recruits. If you know what I mean.”

“… Oh. That.” Yes, it seemed that Zuko did know what Jee meant, so he went on.

“Yes, that. Well, one day he crossed the line. He assaulted one of my protégées, a kid the name of Lowell, which was a bad call because Lowell was from a rich family and wasn’t about to cower in fear before the glory of our MO. He went to me for help and told me what happened.” Again, an understatement; Jee could still recall the redness around the poor kid’s eyes, his shaking hands, his unsteady voice, the crying. On instinct, he kissed Zuko’s head again; it helped shake the memory away.
“And you… helped him?” Zuko asked quietly.

“I tried.” Jee let out a bitter laugh. “I was responsible for those bastards and even though I suspected what was going on before, none of them had ever approached me directly about it. Now that someone had, I had no choice but to step in. And I would have done so sooner, I think, if only I had some evidence. Fuckers like Gibbs deserve to be tossed overboard for the sharks to take care of.

But… Like I said, he was pals with our Commanding Officer, Zhao.”

“Wait. Zhao?” Zuko froze in his arms, hand on Jee’s abs rapidly balling into a fist. “Commander Zhao?”

Jee looked at him curiously. “Yeah, do you know him?”

Of course he does, his mind berated him. Shun had said that the piece of shit was pals with Ozai Xi. Bloody hell.


Jee eyed him quizzically, but then decided to let it go. Now was not the time to let himself slip up.

“I took it up with him anyway, and convinced some of the other boys to testify against Gibbs,” he continued. “All of them had been molested by that sleazeball in some way. Obviously, Zhao didn’t like it. I really hated that bastard, he was even worse than Gibbs in many ways. The worst officer I’ve ever served under, bar none, and he hated me just as much. But he knew that if I went public with the accusations, both he and Gibbs would be up to their asses in trouble, especially with the media, so he took me to his office and offered me a deal. He would send Gibbs away… If I filed my resignation.”

He paused, then, because really, that was pretty much it. And Zuko was oddly stiff in his arms now, breath forcibly still, which was… worrying.

Had he met Zhao? Had Zhao ever visited his house when Zuko was a kid? Even thinking about it made something under Jee’s skin crawl with revulsion. Fuck, now he needed to know.

“You made that deal,” Zuko stated at length, voice just as stiff as his body. “You took the dive.”

“I did.” Jee threw his head back again. “On the ship, it was an open secret. Most of the people there knew but pretended they didn’t. Nobody wanted to risk their wages over me and I understand that. I wouldn’t have stepped out of line if… I don’t even know. Anyway, it was the right thing to do. Gibbs is out of the picture now and that’s one creepy fucker less to worry about. I don’t regret it.”

Except he did, sometimes, mostly when he couldn’t sleep and stared at the ceiling at three a.m. and wondered what his life would have been like if he’d kept his trap shut. But he wasn’t about to tell Zuko that. Especially not now, when the brat was sitting up and turning and looking at Jee with those strange, bright eyes, glistening with something – something –

Zuko kissed him, and Jee let his lips and tongue lick the memories, with all their bitterness, away.

This was his life now. A sleepy town, noisy teenagers to teach, secrets locked in the past and a rich, troubled brat in his bed every Friday. All in all…

It could have been worse.
We haven’t heard from Zuko in a while, so I thought this would be a good place. Apologies for any typos - this was written and edited in a hurry so I would get something out there before Easter.

Enjoy!

Sex, Zuko thought while the nasal voice of his AP Comparative Government and Politics teacher droned on, was strange.

It shouldn’t be a big deal, all things considered. The very basics, when it came right down to it, mechanically speaking, were just person A putting a part of their body into an opening in person B’s body and then withdrawing it, and putting it back in, and then repeating the move until some bodily fluids came out. For some strange reason nature decided that it should feel good, probably to encourage people to make more babies, but in the end… What was all that fuss even about?

Zuko didn’t know, but he couldn’t deny that there was a fuss; he felt it even now as he fidgeted in his chair, and it made it difficult to contain a smile. The lingering tingle kept distracting him with memories that were much more pleasant than the lesson on the many committees in the European Parliament. He tried to pay attention anyway, but his disobedient thoughts drifted and soon all he could see were Jee’s warm, brown eyes as the man hovered over him and pushed in.

He shuddered, and closed his eyes for a moment to hold on to that image just a little longer. Christ, but he wanted to feel it again and again and again until he couldn’t think straight anymore, and it was changing him, he knew it was.

There was something new inside him now. He didn’t have the vocabulary to give it a name, or even to describe it so he himself could understand, but he had noticed that his step had gotten lighter; his head, held higher; his eyes, no longer glued to the floor.

He had a new secret, one that, in contrast to the big one he would probably take to his grave, was almost… exciting.

He was doing it, he was having sex with someone – a real man. And other people weren’t. Thinking about it felt – good.

It colored his perception of other people, too. When he passed them in the corridors these days, he found himself wondering if they knew what it was like to be with someone else, or, if they didn’t, whether they wanted to know, like he had wanted before. Even now his eyes roamed idly over the backs of heads of the students in front of him, and he wondered – did Jackson know? Did Sally Bryant know? Did Katara have anyone in her life to make her feel like she was treasured, like she was worthwhile, like she was a wonder to be unpacked layer by layer? Did that scrawny girl with the hipster glasses and the Doctor Who trainers from 10th grade know what it was like to have a part of someone else’s body inside your own? Did the Martin kid know what it was like to move his lips over someone else’s skin and feel it heat up in response?
And the thoughts that followed were even more satisfying, because they couldn’t know. Not really. They didn’t have Jee.

It was like a spark of static stinging his fingers from a new sweater: the name, and the echo of a burn in his ass it summoned, and Zuko closed his eyes again against the memory of that thick cock sliding inside of him. He bit his lips, twirled the pencil in his fingers and tapped it eraser-first restlessly against the almost-empty page in his notebook, but it refused to go away and soon, he gave up.

“… representatives, and general elections are held periodically in each country to choose them. Now, who can tell me how long those representatives serve when elected? Sally?”

Jee, Zuko’s thoughts hummed as he shifted in the chair and swung one leg across the other under the desk. Jee, with his tattoos that spoke of a life Zuko still couldn’t quite imagine. With his coarse hands that felt as though they had held hundreds of ropes and punched thousands of people, calloused by life and kissed by the sun, that had been sprinkled with sea salt and scarred by hard steel – and touched him with all that coarseness, with all that history, and remained gentle, sometimes even tender when Jee thought Zuko wouldn’t notice. Jee, with his broad shoulders and muscles that looked and felt powerful enough to snap a man’s neck, and held him sometimes with care, sometimes with recklessness because Jee knew he wouldn’t break. Jee, with his hilarious expressions and his rough voice and his narrow bed and his snoring, and his way of moving that showed that even if he’d known the meaning of shame, he had forgotten it long ago.

Zuko swallowed, the grip on his pencil going tight. These days he’d been spending most of his martial arts classes half-hard, but to get a boner during Comparative Government and Politics was something else entirely.

He tried to focus again and start taking the damned notes, but it was no use. All he could think about was Friday and Jee’s bed, and it had gotten even worse now that he knew the man’s story.

Maybe he really can understand me.

It made him feel… weird. A bit giddy. He knew about Jee’s pantry – he wondered if the man noticed that he’d been drinking the chocolate milk and sneaking the chocolate bars out in the mornings – and that in itself had been a bit confusing, but now…

He caught himself wondering, from time to time, if he would work better on his homework in Jee’s apartment… eventually, after the sex. He started thinking if Jee would enjoy Zuko’s movies, and what it would be like to watch one with him, maybe with some beer and popcorn and a blanket to…

Well, not cuddle under. But maybe sit close together.

Did Jee play video games? Probably not, Zuko hadn’t seen any around the apartment. But maybe he would enjoy one. Like some of the war games Zuko owned that had multiplayer. It had been ages since Zuko played with someone else and maybe Jee would curse a lot – he looked like he might.

The mental image caught him unawares and Zuko almost snickered, but caught himself just in time. The teacher was frowning at him strangely as it was.

And so was the rest of the class, coming to think of it…

Shit.

“Uh, yeah?” Zuko asked, blinking back to reality and trying to appear as though he’d been paying attention the whole time.
Mrs. Stibbons sighed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Apparently Mr. Xi has mastered the art of sleeping with his eyes open. Congratulations. It won’t do you much good on the test next week, though, so I’d pay attention if I were you. I asked if you watched the coverage of the parliament sessions over the weekend like I asked everyone to do.”

“Oh.” Zuko ran a nervous hand over his hair, fighting down the cold bile that suddenly came up his throat. “Yeah, I did.”

“And?” Mrs. Stibbons raised an expectant eyebrow, and Zuko couldn’t help but think that it wasn’t nearly as effective as when Jee did it. “What can you tell me about your impressions?”

Someone at the front of the class snickered. Everyone was staring at him. Zuko ignored them and rummaged his memories for something to say that wouldn’t make him sound like a complete idiot, but he’d been distracted enough when he tried to watch the sessions that he only remembered a bunch of middle-aged people talking over each other.

“It was… uh… “Boring as fuck. “Interesting?”

“I expect an essay on how the European Parliament sessions differ from ours, 500 words, by Wednesday. Maybe that will teach you to pay attention next time, Xi. This class is supposed to teach you critical thinking and to acknowledge that other forms of government exist that differ from ours, and that maybe, just maybe, the American government is not the best one out there. But to do that you actually have to show some interest in the first place, and that, unfortunately…”

Zuko tuned her out, biting on his lip and feeling the beginnings of nausea churning in his stomach.

But it was all right. He would sweat out the damned essay if it killed him, and anyway, he had Jee’s class next, so he would have a way to let the stress out some and look his fill, and get even more impatient for Friday.

Besides, he had Jee. Mrs. Stibbons didn’t. And just now, the thought that the man was probably distracting him from schoolwork – which could have a negative effect on his grades – didn’t matter quite as much.

He only thought of Ozai and how he would disapprove of his negligence much, much later.
Chapter 22: The Trouble With Trust

Chapter Notes

This chapter is once again a bit all over the place, sorry about that.
I hope it's sort of presentable anyway.

Considering how well last Friday had gone, and the tryouts, and how successful their nights together had been in general – and that in itself had to count for something because God, they hadn’t fought for real even once since the whole thing had started – Jee thought he had a right to feel at least cautiously optimistic.

Which should have been the first signal to start looking over his shoulder for trouble, of course, because Jee knew he could never count on the good things lasting long. He was too much of a great fumbling ass for that and Zuko was still a dynamite kit ready to blow up in his face. The brat needed someone who could tiptoe and be delicate, not someone who didn’t know any better than to play with matches around him or to carelessly throw cigarettes in just the right place to light the fuse.

At least they got to bang before Zuko stormed out through the window, which he ultimately did, and with so much ostentatious force that Jee was afraid he would find a Zuko-shaped dent in the sad residue of snow by his window the following morning.

That’s what trust got people into, though. Arguments and misunderstandings and all that ugly shit Jee was starting to stupidly think they could avoid. They would have been perfectly fine if they had just fallen asleep right after sex, or if Zuko had left immediately afterwards.

But trust was exactly what Jee had wanted, and now he remembered why he had never asked Santa Claus for anything.

Zuko didn’t leave immediately that night, or even settled to sleep. Instead, once he’d caught his breath, he swung his long legs off the bed and marched, a little unsteadily, out of the bedroom. And that was a tad surprising, but Jee opted to enjoy the view of his firm, bare ass as the brat walked instead of thinking too much about the strange exit.

Right until Zuko came back, carrying his backpack over his shoulder and dumping it onto the bed.

“Aren’t you a bit young to be hauling sex toys around?” Jee asked, stretching and not caring much whether his words made any sense. His body felt as though it was made of cotton candy and he would bask in the relaxed bliss for as long as he wanted to, dammit, regardless of any strange backpacks on his bed.

“I don’t haul around any sex toys,” Zuko protested, but for a moment his expression looked more than a little intrigued, as though he was ready to entertain the idea.

Then, he set about to prove his point and took out a notebook, of all things, and a pencil, and…

Jee blinked. “That’s a textbook for AP Economics.”

“Yeah.” Zuko fluffed up one of the pillows and leaned against it, half-sitting with the textbook on his
lap as though he’d been doing that in Jee’s bed for ages.

However, Jee was pretty sure there had never, in living memory, been an AP Economics textbook in his bed, or an AP textbook of any persuasion come to think of it, so he decided that some explanation was due.

“What, and I do realize I may not like the answer, is an AP Economics textbook doing in my bedroom?”

“I have homework.”

Jee opened his mouth, found no words to adequately express his mounting confusion, closed it again and finally settled on:

“Homework. You’re gonna do homework. Here.”

“Yeah.” Zuko looked at him as though Jee had just questioned the ability of humans to walk on two feet. “It’s still early and I thought we might have another go later, but since you’re old and need recovery time I thought I’d do some work in the meantime.”

“You did, did you?” Jee hoisted himself up and felt his face settling from relaxed into its default position: the frown. “I’m not that old.”

“You said you’re twenty years older than me.”

“Yeah, well, when you put it like that it sounds bad.”

“And you actually look older than 38.”

“Shut up or I’ll bite your dick off.” Jee rolled onto his side and watched while Zuko, unaffected by the threat, grabbed the pen and the notebook and searched for something in the textbook. “So you’re really gonna do your homework now, naked, in my bed?”

“Any objections?”

Jee almost snorted. As if he was going to object to Zuko doing anything while he was naked.

“No, no, suit yourself. But maybe go under the blanket. You’ll get cold,” he blundered, and then nearly bit off his tongue.

What the hell was he, a substitute for Zuko’s goddamn missing mom? They were both naked in his bed, for fuck’s sake. A parental figure was the last thing he could possibly want to pose as in their current circumstances, and the amused little look Zuko shot him spoke of a very similar sentiment.

“I’m good,” the brat said.

Are you, Jee wanted to ask, eyeing the textbook from hell suspiciously. But Zuko’s lonely brow was already furrowing, the muscles in his face tensed in concentration and his eyes focused on the open text, and he let it go.

Homework. Fucking homework, right after a round of rather spectacular rough banging, too. The brat had been ordering him to go “Harder!” not – what, two minutes ago? – and now he was taking notes about… Jee leaned over to give the offending text the stink eye… mergers, and his face was rapidly losing all traces of that cherubic post-coital relaxation.

Such a damned shame.
Jee watched him scribble away, tongue darting out and eyes straining to see better, then sighed and got off the bed to fetch his laptop. Might as well catch up with the news while his boytoy was busy being productive.

He tugged the blanket from under Zuko and buried his legs under the toasty warmth once he got back, and opened the laptop on his knees. “News reports won’t bother you, Jobs Junior?” he asked with just the tiniest hint of acid.

Zuko only shrugged, tucking the pencil behind his mangled ear as he brought the textbook closer to his face. He was chewing on his lower lip, too, and Jee wondered if he had any idea that he was laying bare all of his admittedly charming little mannerisms for him to admire.

And, of course, that was exactly what Jee had been angling for all these months. Trust. _So why does it bother me now?_ he wondered as the laptop buzzed to life and started warming his legs through the blanket.

He had no idea, but a small part of him _was_ bothered. Irritated for no reason and confused by his own reactions, he tried to kick the stupid itch of a feeling into submission and focused on his screen, listening with half an ear to the scratch of Zuko’s pencil on paper.

If he hoped the CNN would offer something sufficiently distracting, though, he was woefully disappointed. The many grim headlines flashing at him from the homepage failed to produce anything that looked remotely entertaining, and he skimmed them with a growing frown. Tax controversies, a vaguely-familiar politician caught with a hooker, a celebrity couple getting divorced again, the pope doing something for the poor – and the fact that something like that made the news inspired Jee with a brief, rather cynical amusement because shouldn’t that be in the old bastard’s job description in the first place? – a chain restaurant owner arrested for embezzling…

And then, just as he was on the verge of clicking over to something more entertaining – like music videos from the 90’s on youtube, just to get a rise out of Zuko – one headline did catch his eye.

_Fire Industries Branching Out Again! Is Ozai Xi On the Path to World Domination?_

Heart suddenly twisted into bundles, Jee glanced over to Zuko – still engrossed in his work and writing messily in great big letters in his notebook – and clicked on the article with a featured video interview. His eyes flew over the text, not really taking much in apart from the bare gist of it, which boiled down to Fire Industries apparently being in the process of buying up another bunch of smaller companies like some sprawling leviathan trampling through the ocean with its great-ass maw open and swallowing everything in its way. Jee’s hand threatened to twitch tellingly when, after a tense moment in which his stomach tangled into more knots and two fractions of his mind battled for dominance, he clicked on the video, but he forced himself to stay still and aloof. Nothing unusual happening, just a grizzled old ex-sailor watching an interview with a corporate big fish on a whim…

“Is Fire Industries about to dominate yet another sector of public life with the launch of their brand new Firephone line?” asked an attractive middle-aged white woman with a noticeable New York accent, gazing seriously at the camera against a backdrop of – of course – the American flag. “How will it affect the communications market and the company’s primary source of income: the weapons industry? We’re here with Ozai Xi himself to discuss Fire’s increasingly aggressive policies and their effect on the country’s economy. Good evening, Mr. Xi, thank you for being here with us. Could we begin by discussing your latest strategies and the acquisition of Bundale’s Inc.? Some critics claim that you are aiming for a total monopoly.”

When the camera zoomed out to show Ozai sitting there in the studio in an immaculate black suit ironed to within an inch of its life and with edges so sharp that they looked as though they’d been
design for murder, Jee became very aware of the thumping of his own heart and of the sudden stillness next to him. There was no more scribbling. No breathing either, for that matter.

He willed his eyes to stay on the screen.

Where Ozai was sighing and shaking his head with a vague little smirk, as though all this was very amusing indeed and he was the only one in the room smart enough to get the joke, his trademark long hair tied back into a neat no-nonsense ponytail and his goatee just as lethal as the edges of his suit. Jee’s instincts flared up in hate even before the smug bastard opened his mouth.

“If it is all the same to you, I would really rather we left the conspiracy theories in the tabloids, where they belong,” he said smoothly. “My only goal is to offer the American citizens a viable choice. Bundale’s Inc. was on the verge of bankruptcy and acquiring them has been beneficial for both parties, not to mention that their particular brand of expertise in firearms now allows Fire Industries to provide even more innovative and reliable equipment for our armed forces. As for the other recent strategies, we have been successfully providing alternative services in technology to the public for many years now and I do not see why the release our new Firephone FI X model should cause such controversy. If anyone should be accused of building a monopoly in this particular area, it’s Apple, but I don’t see them accused of malicious practices.”

“And what does the new Firephone model offer that can compete with the iPhones?”

“Not can, Ms. Baxter – is. We are already leading in sales and that is only the first week of the FI X model being out in stores. Clearly the customers believe our product is superior and I will let them make the decision, rather than blow my own horn. But since you want specifications, let us start with the battery, which is three times as durable as in any average smartphone…”

Next to Jee, the textbook flew shut with a decisive thump as heavy as only a surplus of dry knowledge could make it. The bed shifted as Zuko slid off the bed, knocking the backpack to the floor as he went. That was when Jee finally allowed himself to look at him, Ozai sliming his way through even more condescending bullshit.

The boy was shaking, gathering up his own clothes and definitely not looking at Jee, and it made him ache.

“… Furthermore, for a limited time we also provide a discount on our portable power banks that have been very popular since their first release two years ago. We are still particularly proud of them since, in the modern world, users should be able to charge their technological devices on the spot without the need to look for electric outlets. The upgraded versions not only do that, they also offer an even longer battery life and faster charging. But I believe we were here to discuss the heinous aspersions cast on my company by paranoid college activists, so perhaps let us move on to that?”

“Why are you watching that?” Zuko’s voice was tight, clipped, and shakily quiet as he began pulling his underwear and pants back on. He still had the pencil behind his ear, but Jee knew better than to point that out.

He found it in himself to shrug, the gesture entirely lost on the brat, and scrambled for something that wouldn’t incriminate him on the spot. “I don’t know, I thought maybe watching people talk about monopoly might be interesting.” He cleared his throat. “You’re right, I don’t know what I was thinking. What’s gotten into you, anyway? I thought you said you wanted another round – “

Zuko pulled his black shirt on so violently that he might have as well screamed – it shut Jee up just as effectively.
“Stop fucking around,” he snapped.

Jee took care to look offended. “I am not fucking around,” he protested, but his heart wasn’t in it – Zuko’s eyes flashed to him and pierced him like a couple of bullets, and then he wanted nothing more than to bash his own brains out with the offending laptop, repeatedly.

He was such a colossal old *dick*.

On the laptop screen, the journalist looked only a breath away from rolling her eyes, her careful professional mask cracking to hint at the tiniest smidgen of disgust for her guest. Meanwhile, Ozai was taking full advantage of his status and gravitas to steamroll right over her with big words and even bigger smirk.

Compared to him, his son looked really, really small.

“*You knew.*”

Jee opened his mouth to keep insisting on his innocence, but the tightness in the way Zuko started shoving his textbook of doom and the notebook into the backpack told him it would only make his situation worse.

“Who told you?” Zuko snapped, head bent down and veins popping up angrily on his wrists.

“Zuko, sit down,” Jee tried.

“Who *told* you?!”

Jee pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes for a moment, feeling the beginnings of a headache throbbing right under the skin of his temple. Ye gods, he was an idiot and didn’t deserve to be admitted into a high school as a student, let alone a teacher. “I was waiting for you to tell me,” he confessed in an attempt to pick up the pieces. “I thought maybe clicking on the video might prompt you to do it, kid. I didn’t expect you to fly off the handle.”

He wanted to swallow the words back even as they were leaving his mouth, but now they were out there, sinking into Zuko and shattering whatever chances Jee’d had of mitigating him into sad pile of rubble.

“Fly off the handle,” the brat hissed. “Is that what you think? That I’m *irrational*? That I shouldn’t be angry when you go and find stuff about me behind my back? And how did you learn in the first place? Have you been spying on me?!”

“No,” Jee lied automatically. “Of course not. Look, Zuko, you can’t really expect people not to connect the dots when your surname is Xi and you have that fucking logo displayed on the wall in your bedroom –“

Something flashed across Zuko’s face, like a spasm of hurt that pulled his entire face into sharp, jagged lines. He stopped moving entirely and for a moment, Jee couldn’t pull his eyes away from the trembling in his arms.

“I asked Piandao,” he said quietly, thinking on his feet. “After that night. Just to see if what I suspected was true. He confirmed it. That’s it. I was waiting for the right moment to try and talk to you about it.”

“You went behind my back and you never said anything.”
“Jesus fucking Christ, Zuko.” Jee ran a hand over his face, trying to massage away the throbbing that was quickly turning into pounding in his head. “So you’re a son of Ozai Xi, big deal. What do you think that’s going to change, huh? Did you expect me to think any different of you if I find out? Why make it a secret in the first place?”

“You don’t understand anything!”

“So explain. We’ve got all night and I’d listen gladly, believe me.”

But Zuko didn’t stick around to hear the rest of that sentence – backpack slung over his shoulder, he stalked out of the bedroom, picking up his socks as he went.

Jee groaned, head hitting the headboard. Fucking lovely. Way to go, old boy.

Grabbing the blanket from the bed and covering himself with it as though it was a cape, Jee followed the brat into the living room, only to see that Zuko was well on his way to getting completely dressed, sulking like there was no tomorrow.

“Look, Zuko, I’m –”

“I don’t owe you any explanations,” the brat said.

“Yeah, you’re right, you don’t,” Jee agreed, cursing his stupid ideas twice over. “But, believe it or not, I actually care about what happens to you and I think we should talk about your father.”

“I don’t want to talk to you about anything.”

Jee closed his eyes and silently counted to ten.

“Is it really such a disaster that I know?” he asked, voice strained. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

“I’m hearing enough lectures from Uncle, I don’t need them from you too.”

Stung, Jee glared at him, pulling the blanket tighter around his shoulders. “Why would you automatically assume I want to lecture you?”

“My father knows what he’s doing, all right!?” Zuko snapped, voice raw. “He’s smart and he’s trying to help me to be better and smarter and stronger!”

“I never said – “

“But you’re thinking it!” Zuko was pulling the jacket on, but he was too angry to notice he was putting it on backwards. “I know what you think about me and my father but it’s not true! He wants what’s best for me and he’s giving me a chance to prove myself! I need to work for his respect and that’s a good thing! None of you people understand it!”

“Now just wait a minute here.” Jee crossed his arms over his chest, the blanket tightening all around him like armor. “Stop putting words into my mouth, goddammit, and calm the fuck down so we can – “

“I need to finish my homework.” Zuko finally put the jacket on the right way and lifted his backpack one last time.

Jee dearly wanted to yell at him. Some choice epithets were even now scrambling up his throat and shoving one another out of the way in their hurry to get out, and his head was pounding, and his
mouth was dry with mounting indignation that he knew would leave him seething in frustration for the rest of the night, and it only got worse when Zuko popped out the window without bothering to shut it after himself.

Cold air swirled inside immediately, leaving Jee there feeling old, chilled and very, very stupid.

“It’s all your fault,” he snapped at Ozai Xi’s smug face when he dragged himself back to the bedroom and threw himself on the bed in a huff. Then, he shut the lid of the laptop with entirely too much strength.

“I am an adult,” he whispered into the empty room pointlessly.

Yeah, his thoughts commented helpfully, an adult who can’t carry a simple conversation with a sulky twink without said twink storming out in high dudgeon. Well done, you.

Jee groaned and started beating his pillow up into submission.

He’d deal with it later.

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“So,” Ming knocked back her vodka shot, made a face and looked back to Jee. “What crawled up your ass and died?”

Next to her, Lin Bei Fong snickered and tried, though not very hard, to cover it with a sip on her black beer. Jee had to give her that – the woman looked dignified even wearing a cashmere sweater and jeans and well into her second pint.

Damn her.

“Had a rough weekend,” he grumped, clutching his glass full of amber whisky.

“I’d suggest washing it down with booze until nothing remains, but we got to be functional tomorrow morning, so…” Ming shrugged, her expression a convincing picture of utter woe.

“You do,” Bei Fong pointed out. “I don’t. I’m not on duty tomorrow. Your health!” And with that, she tipped her glass back again, her smile insultingly unrepentant.

“Someone remind me why I decided being a teacher would be a good career choice,” Ming whined, rocking back on her chair while the country music warbled on and the familiar mist of smoke and conversation floated around them.

“Next time we’re meeting on Saturday to have the time to nurse our hangover,” Jee decided grimly, shooting Bei Fong a dirty look. The woman smirked right back at him, failing to be impressed.

“Oh God, imagine the two of us coming to school on Monday morning with sunglasses.” Ming giggled. “The students would eat us alive. Well, maybe my girls wouldn’t because they’re all on a thousand different diets and I’d disagree with their delicate vegan stomachs, but Sokka for one wouldn’t hesitate.”

“I always thought that the cheerleader myths were a load of crap,” Jee said. “Are they seriously all on diets?”
Ming shrugged as though she was trying to shake herself free of all teenage absurdities at once. “Hell if I know. I tune out half the stuff I overhear – preservation strategy, otherwise I’d start stirring my coffee with my slippers within a month. But I did hear them talking about a Five Hands diet the other day and some of them sounded suspiciously enthusiastic.”

Both Jee and Lin frowned at the same time. “What the hell is a Five Hands diet?” the police chief asked, her expression eloquently communicating that to her, it sounded like some blobbly thing washed up on a beach that she wouldn’t touch with a ten-feet pole.

“I decided it’s safer not to ask.”

The three of them nodded commiseratively in a strange little moment of bonding over teenage idiocy. Jee glanced at the two women sitting at the table with him and took a leaf out of Ming’s book – some things were better left unquestioned, like how in hell did he find himself having drinks with the local police chief.

Sure, Ming had said she would be bringing a friend, but Lin Bei Fong was the very last person Jee had expected to see.

“I had the Huang brothers in my cells overnight on Friday,” she said. “They were talking about diets too. That and whether you can find stuffed alligators in town for demon summoning purposes, so it couldn’t have been terribly important.”

… No, Jee did not mind sitting in a pub with her.

“Maybe we should look into it,” Ming suggested. “The diets, not the summoning of demons with stuffed alligators, though that does sound less painful. I mean, Jee here is already on a strict workout regime because he’s feeling old and flabby, am I right?”

“I’m happy to say I’ve never felt flabby in my life,” Jee said, raising his glass. “That’s one thing the Navy’s good for. But I’ll grant you old,” he added, thinking about Zuko’s angry eyes and sharp accusations while his stomach wriggled uncomfortably.

“Careful there. Next thing you know, you’re gonna be eating raw eggs or other such nonsense,” Lin advised. “Toph asked me the other day to feel if my face is wrinkled because apparently I sound like it is. She said the same thing about you, Jee.”

Jee bristled, alcohol sloshing inside of him pleasantly. “I’m not even forty,” he declared, as though that was going to impress anyone.

“She didn’t say that as a bad thing,” Lin announced over a smirk. “She said that she prefers interesting faces and apparently we sound like we have interesting faces. She also said that you sound like cigarettes and seedy bars. I didn’t argue.”

“I see someone needs extra laps when she comes over again,” Jee murmured, but he found he couldn’t argue the point either. Even he could see it was a lost cause and he supposed he did sound like cigarettes and seedy bars, when it came right down to it.

“Yeah, well.” Lin shifted in her seat, face settling into a scowl. “I’m not sure when I’ll be bringing her over. My brother is starting to smell a rat and he threatened he won’t let her come with me to town anymore.”

“Shithead,” Ming proclaimed seriously. This prompted them to clink their glasses together once more, after which Jee got up to fetch another round.
“But can’t you do anything about it?” Ming was saying when he got back to their table, carrying the goods. “They’re hurting this kid. Surely there’s a – a paragraph or a – I don’t know, something to bring up against them to stop them holing her in like some cavegirl? Can’t you file for child abuse?”

Lin looked distinctly grim – more so than usual – and uncomfortable when she accepted the drink from Jee without sparing him a glance.

“I thought about it,” she confessed, then let out a bitter, smoky laugh. “Hell, Toph even asked me to do it one time. Said she’d much rather stay with me than with her folks and I can’t say I blame her. But there’s a reason I don’t have kids. I wouldn’t be any better in the long run, you know, with the way I live. And besides, my brother would have me fired or shipped off to a desert somewhere the moment I moved my pinky finger against him and that would be even worse. Without a good reason and evidence I can’t do a goddamn thing.”

“She and Zuko should have a chat,” Ming decided cynically. “I saw him in the teashop the other day and it looks like whatever tryst he’s been having is over. It’s back to the old stormcloud now. I can’t help but feel like the balance of the universe has been restored, even if it breaks my heart to see poor Iroh. He’s still hopeful and says it’s natural for kids to fight, but I dunno. You better be ready, Jee, there might be a fight for you to break up.”

Jee opened his mouth to say something over the sudden lump in his throat, but Lin beat him to it.

“You’re sure he’s been seeing someone?” she asked with a sour face. “Only I feel like I should know. The last time he got involved with anyone the little goddamned bastards doubled my paperwork.”

“Heard anything about the other kid?” Ming asked, leaning forward on the table. Jee almost told her to cover up because her cleavage was now exposed for everyone to ogle, but he thought better of it. The presence of Lin at their table was enough of a creep deterrent.

“Nah,” Lin shrugged noncommittally. “I round up a few of those kids that used to hang around him from time to time, but I never asked the Detroit police to send me reports if he acts up over there. He’s not my problem anymore and after what he did to Iroh’s place, he shouldn’t be yours, either.”

“Wait, what?” Jee held on to his glass. “Can someone please fill the new guy in so I stop being so fucking confused all the time? What the hell happened to Iroh’s place?”

“Zuko’s ex trashed it,” Lin explained curtly.

Ming ran a hand through her hair. “Now, Lin, we don’t know if he was Zuko’s ex –“

“Yes he goddamn was. I know that Iroh prefers to run circles around it but I saw the two of them together out in the streets more often than anyone should, and lemme tell you, Zuko ain’t so vanilla. That Jet kid sure as hell taught him some stuff. Anyway,” she turned back to Jee, her expression stony, “I don’t know what went wrong between them, but one night that kid just showed up with some bricks and started throwing them at Iroh’s windows.”

Jee looked at his whisky, mind flashing back to a frosty night and a somber Aunt Wu, telling him quietly about vandalism and assault. Hell, he had a feeling he might need something stronger than cheap whisky now.

“I heard it was ugly,” he said over the knots tugging at his stomach. “But I never heard about no windows getting busted.”

“What happened between them is Zuko’s business, but I did have to haul Jet’s ass to my cells so they
made it my business. Still, Zuko never got in any serious trouble after that, so I don’t blame Iroh for trying to sidestep the whole episode. It’s over and done with.” Lin took a heroic gulp of her beer. “But you said he’s seeing someone?”

“I don’t know,” Jee said just as Ming shrugged and said, “Iroh certainly seems to think so.”

They looked at each other, mildly amused, and Ming snorted. “He’s been better behaved than usual, that’s it,” she explained eventually. “And Iroh thinks he’s sneaking out at night.”

Jee sat up straight and reached for his glass again. “Oh really? I didn’t hear about that one.”

“Yeah, well, maybe we should leave the topic alone,” Lin suggested unexpectedly. “Discussing teenagers’ love lives is not how I expected this evening to go.”

“Occupational hazard. You spend so much time with teenagers, you start finding their pathetic lives more absorbing than your own and that is when you hit rock bottom, my friend. Anyway, it’s not like our love lives are something to write home about.” Ming shrugged. “Jee, still got that mystery man of yours?”

Jee glanced up just in time to see one elegant eyebrow of Lin’s shoot up, and he was just about to bark at Ming for giving him away, but then the police chief coughed and leveled Jee with a calculating gaze.

“Caution is understandable,” she said slowly, staring him down with something strange flickering in her eyes. “If I were in your line of work, I would probably exercise it myself… for the same reason.”

Jee stared at her right back, and thought distantly that his open mouth must have made a distinctly unattractive picture. “…Oh,” he managed, then cleared his throat and abruptly knocked his glass back in an attempt to burn the awkward with liquor.

Next to him, Ming filled the thick air with her rich rumble of a laugh. “Oh Lin, I love you but you’re always so fucking dramatic,” she said in between hiccups, patting herself on the knee. “I wish I’d recorded it so you could see your face. And you!” Here, she stopped patting herself and moved on to patting Jee’s shoulder instead, probably for variety’s sake. “Oh God, you pair of dumbasses. Don’t worry, Heng, I wouldn’t have given you away if I didn’t think the company was trustworthy…”

“You shouldn’t have done that, period,” Lin said in a clipped voice which instilled some sobriety back into her friend. “I understand that you always get chatty when you drink, but you should be more careful than that with someone else’s secrets.” Then, her eyes slid back to Jee, who was still looking between the two women feeling like an idiot. “I think some form of punishment is in order, don’t you, Lieutenant?”

Jee looked back at her. He smiled. “Absolutely. Ming, you’re paying for the rest of the night.”

“Oh, fine.” His colleague sighed and pushed her chair back. “Hang on and try not to put rainbow flags all around the place while I’m off buying your booze.”

“We wouldn’t do that,” Jee called after her, some of the weight lifting from his shoulders. “Not this early into the night anyway!”

“Yeah, we have a strict No Rainbow Flags Before Midnight policy,” Lin chimed in.

Ming flipped them the finger and sauntered away – well, attempted to, and Jee would definitely need at least three more drinks to burn that image away from his memory – and Lin visibly relaxed in her chair, gracing Jee with a secretive little smirk.
“So,” she offered, raising her glass and sloshing what little of her Irish beer remained in it. Jee returned the smirk and clinked his glass against hers in a rare moment of human connection. “So.”

They toasted, drank and sat back in that awkward kind of silence that was also strangely companionable and made Jee feel almost – almost – content.

“You’re not going to say anything, are you?” Lin asked. “To Pakku and the rest of the school.”

“Not damn likely.” Jee thrust an arm over the back of his chair. “I can’t afford to lose my job at this point.”

Lin considered this, looking into the bottom of her glass. “You know, I don’t think that would happen,” she said. “The people here are not as bigoted as all that. Yeah, of course there would be some voices of dissent, but I like to believe that at least a big portion of the community have evolved past Puritanism.”

“Chief. I teach gym. Include that in your calculations.”

That earned him a widening of the smirk and a twinkle in those cold, gray eyes. “Well. Point taken. But I still believe that not everyone would automatically assume you’re prowling for some spotty adolescent boy meat.”

And then she very wisely pushed her chair back because cheap whisky went flying everywhere. She waited politely until Jee stopped hacking, her expression unchanged and grimly amused, and Jee tried to use that to cover up what really caused the explosion.

“I don’t know what unsettled me most,” he confessed once he was done snorting whisky from his nose. “The mental image or the way you said spotty adolescent boy meat.”

“I’ve been known to have my moments,” the chief said. “Are you okay now or do I need to call 911?”

“No, I think I’ll survive without a heart attack.” Jee wiped his chin and sent her a smile. “So, is there a lady waiting for you when you get home?”

The wry turn of Lin’s mouth told Jee everything he might possibly want to know. “Not in so many words, no. I’m not an easy woman to put up with. Anyway, being a cop is not something you can just leave on the hanger when you get home, it’s a 24/7 kind of job. I’m actually surprised I haven’t been buzzed for some crisis yet – and, just to be clear, kids shoplifting counts as a crisis for my dumbass assistant.”

“Sounds tough,” Jee agreed. “The Navy was like that too. I was lucky to have a partner who was a sailor just like me. Some of my friends have relationships with civilians, but… I don’t know, I don’t think I could have made it work like that.”

“But you are making it work right now, aren’t you?” Ming said, standing over their table with a tray full of booze. “Here ya go, you dickheads,” she offered affectionately, setting the tray down.

“What took you so long?” Jee asked, grabbing a bag of peanuts Ming had apparently provided as a peace offering and tearing it open.

She shrugged, sliding into her chair. “There was a cute guy at the bar,” she explained. “I might give him my number later. Whatever. What about that man, huh?”
“I don’t know,” Jee replied, getting irritated again. “We had a bit of a – disagreement.”

“Oooh. A serious one?”

Jee shrugged, crunching on the too-salty peanuts.

“Leave him alone, Ming, the man’s obviously not keen on sharing the sordid details.”

Why did he ever dislike Chief Lin? Chief Lin was wonderful. In gratitude, Jee pushed the bag of peanuts her way and she accepted gracefully.

“Well, at least that explains the lousy mood,” Ming judged. “Okay then. Wanna talk about cheerleading championships instead? Because I feel like I might blow this place up if I don’t get a good rant in.”

So they let her rant, making all the appropriate noises where necessary and exchanging knowing little glances whenever they thought they could get away with it. By the end of the night, Jee was pleasantly buzzed with the mix of alcohol, food and good company, and the strange, unexpected sense of kinship with Lin Bei Fong added to the lazy warmth in the pit of his stomach and helped him believe that he could handle tomorrow and whatever fits Zuko was going to throw his way.

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He was wrong.

“Hey!” he snapped, running to the corner of the gym where Zuko was currently being held back by a disconcerted Bolin – not very effectively – and Chan stood a safe distance away, rubbing his jaw. “What the HELL is going on here??!”

He pushed Chan back and stood between them so that he could stop any potential bloodthirsty lunging, giving both idiots the evil eye.

“Xi went crazy, coach,” Chan wailed, glaring daggers into a furious Zuko who looked like he might start foaming at the mouth.

“You called me a cocksucker!” he yelled back, lunging in Bolin’s grip.

Jee sighed, rubbed his forehead and glared at Chan. “That true?”

No it’s not, his mind supplied helpfully. You haven’t sucked any cock yet, kiddo.

Jee told that part of his brain to shut up and focused all his energy to scorch Chan’s face into a smoking pile of stinking ashes with his eyes alone.

Chan didn’t say anything, but glared at the mats under his bare feet.

“He said my Uncle was dealing crack!” Zuko growled, veins popping up on his muscles as he struggled to break free.

“I never said anything like that, you deaf scumbag! Go get your ears checked, Jesus Christ.”

“You fucking did, Bolin heard you!”
“I – yeah, maybe?” Bolin’s gentle face was twisting in pure, unadulterated panic. Jee looked to the ceiling for help. *I don’t get paid enough for this.*

“Chan, did you call Zuko names and accused his uncle of being a drug dealer?” he asked, directing his glare at the bully and trying to ignore the tense look Zuko drilled into him. “Think carefully about what you’re going to say because the wrong answer is going to get your ass in trouble. And by the way, there is no right answer. So, did you?”

“He’s a punk, coach.” Chan balled his hands into fists, his jaw swelling where Zuko managed to punch the holy Jesus out of him. “He shouldn’t be allowed out.”


The gym fell into tense, tight silence that stretched like a membrane. All eyes were on their little group. Jee waited, morbidly curious if Chan really was as idiotically suicidal as he looked.

“… Maybe.” And then, just as Jee was prepared to amend his opinion of him a little, he saw it fit to add, “So what’re you gonna do about it, coach? You’re not gonna punish him ‘cause he’s your little pet?!”

… Yes, Chan was exactly as idiotically suicidal as he looked.

*See that, Lin?* He thought grimly, trying to ignore the cold stab of panic. *You would have me come out to this charming little group? I think not.*

“All right, ladies, I think I get the picture.” Jee crossed his arms over his chest. “Bolin, make sure you get both of them to our benevolent principal – I mean, headmaster. Tell him I fully expect him to give them both detentions. And you two, if you so much as look at one another on the way, your friend Bolin here is gonna tell me and you’ll both spend the rest of the term doing push-ups until you have to be carried out on stretchers, is that clear?”

The only response he got was a fit of sullen mumbling from Chan and a stormy silence from Zuko, and then Bolin, looking a little green and distinctly uncomfortable, led the two brawlers out of the gym, followed by a grim hush.

Jee’s eyes snapped to the rest of the boys. “Well, what the hell are you sons of mothers looking at? I don’t remember giving anyone permission to stop! Four laps around the gym, go!”

“He did do it, sir,” Sokka said by the end of the class, approaching Jee and looking uncharacteristically sheepish. “Chan. He’s a complete bag of dicks, sir, and I heard him say all that stuff about Zuko and his Uncle, and more.”

“I know, kid.” Jee leaned against the wall for a little bit, glaring up at the ceiling. “Honestly, I’ll deny it if you tell anyone, but I hate those punks. I couldn’t let Zuko get off easy, though. I may have wanted to cheer along when he delivered that punch, but that’s not exactly appropriate now, is it?” Sokka snickered, tugging at his ridiculous ponytail. “Yeah, I guess. Being a teacher is hard, huh.”

“Harder than you can imagine, kiddo.” Jee closed his eyes and took a deep breath, a heavy weight dropping down his body and nailing him to the floor. The brat really had no fucking idea… “And Sokka?”

“Yeah?”
“Don’t say *bag of dicks* when you’re talking to a teacher. Just a friendly word of advice.”

“Yeah, but you’re not like a regular teacher, sir.” The *duh* was left unspoken, but it hovered on the edges of Sokka’s expression anyway. “You’re cool.”

*Cool.* He was a cool teacher. Well, that – certainly happened, hadn’t it.

Jee watched Sokka go, tried to sort the events of the last few days into something that made even the smallest amount of sense, and failed.

“Apparently I’m a cool teacher now,” he complained to Piandao, walking into their shared office. His colleague beamed at him and raised his Starbucks takeaway plastic cup. “Well done!”

“So that’s a good thing, then?”

“Absolutely, my grumpy friend.” Piandao leaned back in his chair, apparently pleased. “It means you’ve forged a meaningful connection with youth and created a positive classroom environment!”

“I have?”

“We will definitely miss you if you ever choose to leave,” Piandao offered. “Have you discussed your future career with Pakku yet? Because I’m not alone in thinking that you’ve fit into our little fold splendidly.”

Jee rubbed the back of his head awkwardly before he could stop himself, perching on the edge of his desk. Now what the hell was he supposed to do with that?

“I don’t know yet,” he admitted. “That all – depends.”

Once again his traitorous mind went to Zuko, and to the kid’s graduation, and to his angry, angry eyes. Piandao considered him for a moment, then stood up, walked over to Jee and put a solemn hand on his shoulder.

“I do believe you’re in need of coffee,” he decided. “Come on. There’s still time before the next class.”

Jee followed obediently and with a grain of gratitude, but once Piandao left him alone, he whipped out his phone and selected Zuko’s number.

*Sor*ry, kid. *But I couldn’t let it slide.*

The phone buzzed at the beginning of next period and Jee checked it surreptitiously while the kids were busy making laps.

*Whatever.*

He pocketed the phone again, feeling distinctly more shitty, and resolved to do something about this stupid little crisis before Friday – or maybe even Thursday, if he could, because he did not like the idea of private practice with a sulking Zuko one bit.

If the brat would even show up.

By the time he got home, vague ideas were already forming in his head.
“Okay, old man, time to admit defeat: you have no fucking idea what you’re doing,” Jee muttered to himself, glancing outside the window just in case someone in the neighboring building saw him and laughed.

The windows failed to produce any kind of mirth whatsoever. Jee sighed and looked at the couch, where his weapon of choice was waiting to be picked up.

It was Thursday evening and still no progress had been made on the Zuko front. Jee had hoped he wouldn’t be forced to resort to his contingency plan, but the brat had not deigned to show up for the DDC or for their private practice, and that left Jee with no choice. It was time for desperate measures. It was time to prove himself a man. It was time…

To do the thing.

His very own last stand.

“Ready to be embarrassed in the name of sex?” he asked the room at large, and reached for his can of beer to settle the matter. “Fuck no. But I’m gonna do this anyway.”

Then, he settled on the couch and picked up his terrible weapon – the guitar.

For a moment he considered the shudder-inducing idea of picking something more trashy and loud from Zuko’s unsavory mix CD – a thought that had been harassing him since Monday. He’d even gone to the trouble of listening to the horrid thing again, the entire selection, God help him, but he’d given up at the point where it had felt like the noise might slosh right out of him through his nostrils and take his hearing capacity along with it if he’d listened to one more wailing note or a piece of emo lyrics. There was no way he was subjecting himself to that again because there was desperation, and then there was beating oneself to death with the stick of bad teenage taste. Jee may have caused this entire crisis because of his fumbling ineptitude, but he was not ready to sacrifice that much in order to make it right.

So no.

Thankfully, there were a few songs on Zuko’s mix that were not entirely beyond hope, and even one or two he recognized – notably, Oasis. Jee could handle Oasis. At least they didn’t sound like someone dropped a bunch of instruments down a staircase right on some poor bastard’s head. He’d never minded listening to them and had even played a song or two back in the day when the younger recruits pestered him into an impromptu gig.

Which helped. It helped a great fucking deal, but Jee still chose to think of the whole thing as going into battle, if only to make himself feel less ridiculous.

The strategy was brilliantly simple – the kind Jee liked best. It went like this:

1. Pick song.
2. Rehearse song so as not to make self look like giant pillock.
3. Record song on phone.
4. Send song to twink.
5. ????
The logical part of his brain insisted that the problem ran deeper than that and Zuko had no reason to jump back into his bed just because Jee made himself look like a soppy idiot, but Jee had firmly told that part to go hang. The point of this subterfuge was to subtly breach the enemy’s defenses, and Jee knew from experience that there lurked a strange, irresistible power in the combination of a guitar, some nonsensical yet vaguely poignant lyrics and a suitably sad expression.

Not that Zuko would actually see the suitably sad expression, but Jee hoped that it would echo in his voice enough to achieve similar results.

Right then.

Wielding his weapon of choice and feeling like the greatest turd who ever lived, Jee started strumming like a man on a mission. His fingers felt their way through the song several times until he was sure of the chords and the strumming patterns, and then he went over it again with the heavier artillery of vocals added to the mix.

If he had actually written the list down, points one and two would have been crossed out at this point. Which left him at point three.

Jee stopped playing and eyed his phone like someone could eye a hand-grenade in the hands of a man suffering from a twitching disorder. It sat there on the coffee table and stared at him right back with the complete, unshakable indifference only inanimate objects were capable of.

“Okay,” Jee told it with an air of issuing a death threat. “Take one.”

It took him a while to find a voice recorder among the many ridiculous and unneeded apps on the phone – he should probably get around to learning how to use the damned thing properly one day – and by the time he did, his innards were twisting this way and that merrily in a tangled mess of nerves and self-consciousness that came entirely out of nowhere. He’d never had problems with stage fright before and this shouldn’t cause him any trouble either, but then again, he’d never tried to actually record any of his drunken musical exploits for other people to hear.

The fact that he was doing it now for the sake of cheering up a grumpy teenager was – well, best not to think about that now. Too much navel-gazing would not help him get on with it.

Resigned, Jee gritted his teeth, improvised a cheerful little melody to fortify himself, and got on with it.
I know. I know, and I'm sorry. Let's just say that this was the single most exhausting summer of my life and leave it at that, okay?

Now, let's get this show back on the road!

Some mornings, as the law of the universe dictates, are simply destined to be bad.

Now, Jee was sure that his own experience at least scored him some brownie points for originality. Not many people woke up to a half-panicked memory of I serenaded a grumpy adolescent with Oasis and recorded it as hard evidence tolling in their heads like gods-be-damned church bells at 6 am, before they even opened their eyes properly. Not that it made a whiff of difference in the grand scheme of things. A bad morning was still a bad morning, no matter how one had made an ass of oneself the night before.

And, of course, a scrambling-blind attempt to bring his cell up to eye level only exacerbated the sentiment by mocking him with an absolute lack of texts from the aforementioned grumpy adolescent he had been stupid enough to serenade in the first place. Self-humiliation was bad enough, but self-humiliation with no feedback – as every artist could attest – was remarkably like pushing an icicle into your own eye and then having someone else jam it in so it protruded from the back of your skull.

Jee put the phone down, rolling to his side and squinting begrudgingly at the coming dawn, which condescended to stripe his floor with sunlight through the shutters. He'd never been a morning person anyway.

But the alarm clock ticked away mercilessly – or would have ticked if it hadn’t been an electric one – showing there were only a blessed fifteen minutes left before its noise would shriek merrily in that rhythmic, mechanical signal that sounded vaguely like the wail of a cat whose tail had been stepped on. Rather than listen to the wretched noise, Jee decided to do the smart thing and use the extra time to squeeze a little jog into his morning routine. He hadn’t done that since the frost had settled, and now that it was being very noticeably, if lazily, deposed, it was probably time to stop driving his bum around everywhere.

A quick shower later there was still no reply from Zuko. Jee frowned at the phone, pocketed it into the inside of his jacket and tried to convince himself that he absolutely wasn’t bothered.

Still, it was Friday and it would have been good of the brat to at least let Jee know if he should plan on a night in or if he was allowed to do something other with his evening than wait for Zuko to crawl in through the window like a fucking Spider-Man.

The phone stayed perfectly still as he jogged through the park, passing the bench where he’d come out to Ming on the night when Zuko literally fell right on top of him; and it persisted in its silent state as, sweat-soaked and disgustingly out of breath, Jee parked by the school with enough of a margin to take a quick shower before class.
And still it stayed after the first period, only to nearly send Jee into a cardiac arrest with a text that turned out to be an ad from his communications provider.

Jee wouldn’t be caught swearing at a phone in his own office, so he didn’t, but he did frown at it for all he was worth when he made sure no one was looking.

“Give him some time, he’ll come ‘round,” Ming offered unhelpfully, sticking her head into his office during the break and catching him in the middle of the fascinating activity of snapping the lid of the phone open and closed again.

“Get out,” Jee snapped.

Ming laughed, toasting him with her plastic cup of coffee. The noise coaxed Piandao out from behind his newspaper, but before he could fold it properly and direct his ever-polite interest his way, Jee told him, “Don’t ask.”

Bad enough that he was, to all intents and purposes, regressing into his own unremarkable puberty over a twink. Coming up with a convincing lie to explain his bizarre mood to Piandao would require altogether too much mental energy, and current evidence showed that Jee had none to spare.

Luckily for him, his office mate had already proven to be an apt scholar of the Lieutenant Jee School of Reading Your Colleague’s Grumpy Moods and hid himself behind the newspaper again without a word.

Good man.

Then, third period rolled around without a message, and then the fourth, which Jee spent restlessly strolling around the school corridors and peering into classrooms, probably looking like a creep until Mrs. Westerling of the 3-D Art workshop very nearly swatted him away with a papier-mâché leg. After that, his dignity dropping to Mariana Trench levels, he retreated to the safety of the Piandao-free office and sat there, spinning this way and that on his chair and staring his paperwork into spontaneous combustion.

Zuko’s class would be next, and damn if that didn’t make him feel like a school of wriggly little fish had somehow swam into his stomach by accident and commenced to flail in panic.

Annoyed with himself for reactions unbefitting a man of his age and stature – well, age, anyway – Jee reached for the first sheet of paper cluttering his desk and eyed it accusingly, as though the entire mess was its fault.

It was the grade 12 periodical assessment sheet for the girls. One he still hadn’t filled in. So he’d been right that it was guilty of something.

Fine, then.

Soon, the office crooned with the sound of the pencil scribbling away, and Jee was visited with a rare tinkling of pride when he realized he didn’t even need to consult his attendance sheet to remember which girl was which. Discovering that he actually had something to say about most of them was uplifting, too. Propelled by this highly unusual sense of achievement, Jee reached for the other papers that had been languishing in his pigeonhole and, for wont of anything better to do, applied himself.

It would be nice to have something constructive to say for a change next time the universally detested parent-teacher conferences rolled around. That and, well, Jee was a teacher here after all. Zuko, no matter how absorbing, had not been what had brought him to town in the first place. Sometimes it
didn’t hurt to be reminded he had an actual job to do.

And that was how Piandao found him: shoulders drooped over his desk, pencil in hand, squinting at the charts he’d begun to draft to come up with new midterm assessment tests, the filled-in sheets already stacked into his cleared-out pigeonhole like an offering on an altar, all ready to be swallowed up by that most hungry of monsters, Educational Bureaucracy.

There was a silence. A very pointed one. Jee scribbled on, electing to ignore its pointedness right along with the implications, mostly because they were true.

“… Having a busy day, I see,” Piandao asked in a voice that somehow managed to be loaded without sounding loaded at all.

Briefly, Jee considered taking offense. Surely it wasn’t that uncommon to see him doing productive things?

But then he remembered the due dates on some of those documents he’d only just filed away and, wisely, kept his mouth shut.

“Aren’t you glad we don’t have to grade actual tests?” he asked conversationally instead, still poring over the charts. “Never been a fan of paperwork.”

“Yes. I know,” Piandao said.

Jee shot him a suspicious look. Piandao shrugged, but the twinkle in his eye definitely spelled amusement. It was all Jee could do to keep the corner of his mouth from twitching in response, which probably meant that enough was enough.

“Gonna go grab a sandwich,” he decided, pushing back in his chair with the kind of snap-to-it finality that only the military could instill in a man.

In a way, the fact that pining made him productive came as no surprise, he mused on his way back to the gym, the lovely combination of bread, bacon, ham, cheese and lettuce, all bathed generously in mayo, sweetening the way. It had happened a lot in the past, especially with Steve. Whenever they’d fought, Jee had always delivered his paperwork not only on time, but in advance. It had gotten to a point where his superior officers had started to suspect a pattern. To this day Jee nursed a nasty hunch that they had started placing bets somewhere in the middle of the relationship.

Maybe he’d write to one of them one day and ask.

But there were two major flaws in this theory, the chief one being that he was not, in fact, pining. That would imply that he sought more from his relationship with Zuko than just sex, which…

Granted, perhaps it was partly true. He did, after all, continuously want to help the brat get better, which had landed him in his current mess to begin with. But helping him and considering him a potential long-term partner were two entirely unrelated things, and frankly, Jee had no idea if he was ready to even begin to see anyone in this way, let alone a moody, temperamental brat with an attitude.

Sure, it had been a long time. And maybe Jee missed the domesticity, the ease, the *rhythm* of a long-lasting relationship, unusual though his had been. The comfort it brought, the familiarity, the dependability – those were all fine, good things that he’d enjoyed and might want again sometime in the future. But he couldn’t dump the baggage of all this on someone who, in many ways, was still a child, anymore than he could treat Zuko as a substitute for a romantic partner his own age. That would be unfair to both of them and to the brat most of all.
It was just that it would be really super peachy to know whether or not Zuko was still in a sulk.

He strode into the gym with those thoughts brewing in his mind, and then his eyes fell on Zuko. Who chose that particular moment to bend over and press his hands flat against the mats, his sweatpants stretching over the beautiful, squeezable curve of his ass, because of course. In Jee’s imagination, the ass was singing, *See this? It’s what you might not be getting tonight. I haven’t decided yet.*

Jee gritted his teeth and wondered if the brat would claw his eyes out if he tried to spank him.

It was mostly that spark of irritation that had him reach for his whistle, release its shrill cry to bounce off each spotty teenage head in the room, and call out, “There won’t be any beating each other up today.”

The collective groan this elicited from the group probably said a lot about the mentality of teenage boys. Not that Jee was interested in studying it. He’d been a teenage boy once and that had been more than enough.

“It’s good old-fashioned form building today, boot-camp style,” Jee announced, staring the little punks down. “My dear old mum is in better shape than some of you and she needs a walking stick. Get running. Last man to get his feet moving will hold the kicking shields for the entire class.”

For a split of second, Zuko looked at him, and Jee could very nearly *taste* the intensity in his eyes. But nothing definite came out of this fleeting moment of eye-contact, and then Zuko was running with the rest of the group, and Jee was leaning against the wall watching him with only the barest traces of shame.

The hour slugged on, with the boys sweating up a storm and Jee whistling at them with enough restless energy to power the damn thing into ultrasounds, and if he hoped Zuko would hang behind and damn well talk to him, well, disappointment was his bread and butter after all. The kid condescended to give him three lingering looks – three, Jee counted – and one last one at the door, from over his shoulder, and that was it, honestly, Jee had no idea what to make of it.

He’d stay home anyway, he decided on his way back. A quiet night in would to him good either way.

And still the phone stayed silent.

***

It had been a good decision to stay in. A few hours later there he was, His Sulkiness himself, standing there by Jee’s window and dripping rainwater all over the floor, which probably didn’t even mind at this point. It must have gotten accustomed to Zuko dripping on it by now.

Jee only wished he could say the same.

“Just because you sent me a song doesn’t mean I’m not mad at you,” Zuko announced without preamble, stuffing his hands into his soaked pockets and looking disturbingly small for all that he was trying to act big.

The weather outside made for a nice dramatic backdrop to the scene, Jee had to admit. Zuko’s
expression matched the torrents of early Spring rain almost poetically. With his bangs hanging wetly over his eyes and dripping all over his sulk, he looked not entirely unlike some boogie creature that had crawled out of a Japanese horror movie to strike terror into sailors-turned-teachers’ hearts.

And it was working.

“Right.” Jee cleared his throat, leaning against the back of the sofa. The school of fish were wriggling in his stomach again – he told them firmly to get lost. “Right. Okay.”

Words like So why are you here? were trying to elbow their way out now, but Jee swallowed them down just in time. Zuko’s expression did not invite it, or anything else for that matter, but he was here, in Jee’s apartment on a Friday night, and it was a step forward. Jee would not fuck it up again.

So. His cue.

“I’m sorry,” Jee offered, pushing himself away from the sofa and towards the kid.

Zuko flinched as though he’d been pinched in the arm by an invisible pixie. He took a deep breath, flicked his eyes to the floor.

“For?”

Jee sighed. “For asking about you behind your back.”

“And?”

“And…” Oh for crying out loud. “For not telling you sooner that I knew about your dad.”

Eyes lifted. Lips pursed into a tense line. Zuko looked straight at him over his wet hair, and Jee felt as effectively pinned by that gaze as he would have had Zuko actually shot him. The brat’s face was stretched, somehow, too tight, the skin too small for the bones it clung to, and the scarred eye speared him almost angrily over the gnarled, pinkish flesh.

Not good enough. Right.

“And I’m sorry for being a turd and abusing your trust,” Jee tried, feeling distinctly like an explorer on National Geographic trying to navigate the shifting sands.

Zuko blinked and pushed some of the hair out of his face, only for it to plop back down in a sad, wet mess. “So you get why I was upset,” he whispered, and the lisp which crept its way into the sentence almost tugged Jee’s lips into a highly inappropriate smile.

No time to be distracted. Jee took a moment to parse Zuko’s words, along with the fact that he apparently now knew the brat well enough to discern the patterns of his speech impediment, and stumbled to find words he could only hope were the right ones.

“I think so. You kept the information from me for a reason, and I should have respected that even if I didn’t understand what the reason was.”

Of course, none of this would have been a problem if Zuko hadn’t tried to make such a ridiculous secret of his family background in the first place, but Jee knew better than to push the point when Zuko was finally showing signs of thawing.

“When you sent me that song,” the brat whispered, “I thought you were just trying to placate me. Like it didn’t matter that I was upset and it would just go away.”
Well now, that wasn’t too far off the mark. Jee locked his legs to stop them from shifting, but only just. “I thought that if I embarrassed myself for you, you’d take it as an apology,” he said instead, quietly grateful for years and years of practice in saving face.

“So it was an apology. I wondered.” Zuko shifted his weight from one leg to the other. Then, he coughed, pushing his hands further into his pockets. “I didn’t think it was embarrassing. Though Don’t Look Back in Anger is not what I’d call subtle, Lieutenant. It sounded a bit like you were telling me not to be upset anymore.”

“Coincidence,” Jee said quickly. “I wanted to do something from your mix and that was one of the songs I could bear to listen to more than once.”

And then, something wonderful happened: Zuko bristled. Very visibly, so much so that had he been a bird, all of his feathers would have stood ruffled and prepped for a fight. And in the process, the tightness in his face finally let go and cracked into the more familiar, adolescent outrage, so much easier to navigate than the foggy swamps of his earlier moroseness. This time, Jee did risk a smile. He was safe.

“Are you saying I have a bad taste in music?” the brat demanded.

“No.” Jee rested his hands on his hips. “I’m saying you have a terrible taste in music. And if I were the kind of man who did interventions, you’d have had ten by now.”

“Says the guy who has a secret stash of country albums under the table.”

“What the – !” Now it was Jee’s turn to ruffle his feathers. “How the hell did you know about that?”

Zuko shrugged. His face was tightening again, but it was the tightness of a suppressed smile rather than the unsettling, quiet rage from before. “I had a glimpse of them when we fucked on the couch.”

Okay, great, now Jee’s face was pulling into a smile again. “I’ll have you know that country can be really good. Much better than the kind of racket you choose to destroy your ears with.”

“You’re so out of touch, old man.” Zuko shook his head like a mourner at the funeral of Jee’s musical sensibilities.

“I’ll show you a touch,” Jee murmured, not entirely coherently while his pride took a sting.

Zuko smiled. The sting, just for a blink, softened into goo.

“Not tonight,” the brat said. “I’m still mad at you.” And then he flushed, looking decidedly not-mad. “But, uh, I did bring a movie,” he mumbled, eyes seeking refuge in the patterns of the floor again. “Well, not bring bring, I just kinda had it in my backpack because, uh. Because someone – a kid at school, you don’t know him – gave it back to me, and. I wasn’t gonna bring it just to watch it with you but since I have it, I guess we could – whatever.”

Ah. Jee leaned against the sofa again, his eyes trained on the awkward child – and Zuko really was a child, in this one slice of a moment – while his brain fuzzied around the edges.

“All right, let’s whatever,” he said softly. “Put the whatever on while I make you some hot cocoa. What is it that you’re punishing me with?”

“The Dark Knight,” Zuko replied quickly, putting the backpack on the floor and bending over it to take the DVD out. “Have you seen it?”
“No. It’s one of those Batman flicks, yeah?”

Zuko rolled his eyes at Jee and his prehistoric ways. “Yes, it’s a Batman movie. Only one of the best superhero movies of our age, no big deal.”

“No need to go geeky on me, kid,” Jee retorted, ambling over to the kitchen. “Get out of those wet clothes before you sneeze all over my furniture.”

“I’ll go look for sweatpants in your closet.”

“Yeah, you just – wait, what?”

But Zuko was gone, leaving behind the lingering smell of fresh rain and the outdoors, probably to make good on his word and rummage through Jee’s bedroom unapologetically. Because he was a spoiled, hypocritical little brat whose understanding of other people’s privacy extended about as far as his pinky finger.

But then Jee imagined Zuko swimming in his own clothes and the irritation, once again, steamed away much like the vaporized hot water misting over the glass of his electric kettle.

If he was going to be left blue-balled for the night, the least he could do was entertain some amusing mental images, which promptly solidified into fact anyway when Zuko emerged from the bedroom, looking so very much like a child in Jee’s oversized dark blue t-shirt and grey sweatpants, which pooled around his ankles and barely stayed on his hips, that Jee instantly felt that old, familiar stab of guilt poking at his insides.

Something vulnerable hung about the kid, too. It lurked in the set of his lonely brow and in the way his healthy eye drooped a little, prone to gazing at the floor rather than straight ahead. It clung to the downturn of his mouth, too, smoothened out of its tight line into something softer, part-scared, part-melancholy.

Maybe it was the fact that his hair still dripped rainwater, draping him in that wet-kitten aura. Or maybe Zuko wasn’t quite all right yet, and he knew what he’d meant when he’d said no sex tonight.

But he also looked like a man who wasn’t sure whether he had a purpose in this apartment other than sex, and suddenly Jee felt like kicking himself for being the biggest shitfaced turd in existence. He remembered what it was like to feel exposed against one’s will, and more exposure, even plainly physical, was not the way to make it better.

As soon as he realized it, the sight of Zuko hiding behind oversized clothes – from him, Jesus Christ, hiding from him – struck a chord in his chest so painful that it sent his blood vibrating with echoes all the way to the top of his head and down to the tiniest toe.

No, the miserable bastard wasn’t okay. And Jee would damn well watch a Batman movie with him on a rainy night if that was what the crisis called for.

“Get the Oreos, too,” Zuko told him, making a beeline to the couch in Jee’s socks.

“The Oreos? How do you know I have Oreos?” Jee asked distractedly, stirring the cocoa.

“Don’t act like you haven’t been buying stuff for me and putting it in the pantry,” Zuko murmured, crouching before the DVD player. “I’ve been taking food out in the mornings before I leave. You have Oreos. And thanks, by the way.”

Why, the dirty little bugger. Jee hadn’t even noticed the junk he’d been stocking up in the pantry
going missing, though coming to think of it, that chocolate milk jug in the fridge had gotten a lot lighter.

“I noticed you have a sweet tooth,” Jee muttered. “Though I’ll be damned if I know where you store all that junk.”

“There you go talking about my junk again.” The DVD flickered into life, proudly bestowing the Sony logo unto the undeserving living room, and Zuko crawled back to the sofa. “I’ve got a fast metabolism.”

“Well, help yourself, anyway. I only bought this stuff because I figured that you might be hungry. Sometime. Just in case.”

And not because I want to have a serious relationship with you. Jee needed to keep sight of that, and of the signals he’d been inadvertently sending. Especially now that he could see the back of Zuko’s head leaning on the sofa’s armrest while the rest of the brat curled up on his side, hugging his knees in Jee’s clothes. The picture made for such a disturbingly domestic scene that the fuzziness in Jee’s brain spread like gangrene, only of the less painful kind.

He hoped.

The cocoa, when it entered the scene, only made the domesticity more prominent once it sat in two mugs on the coffee table, oozing steam that smelled of chocolate. Then, the packet of Oreos joined it, and once Jee made himself comfortable with Zuko’s feet poking him on the thigh, the brat pressed play.

Jee tried to pay attention. He really did, if only because it wasn’t entirely out of the realm of possibility that the little nerd would spring a pop quiz on him later. But through the explosions and the gloom and the Heath Ledger, the touch of Zuko’s be-socked feet rested against his thigh, two points of warmth, and that was plenty distracting on its own. At one point, Jee gave in and simply grabbed those feet and placed them fully in his lap. Zuko stretched and gave him a half-smile.

Jee couldn’t resist – he rubbed Zuko’s foot, and then kept rubbing over Zuko’s amused “Pay attention.”

But his raspy voice was already coated with a thick sheen of exhaustion and Zuko’s eyes had been reddening steadily ever since he’d come in. Jee looked back to the screen, where Heath Ledger was regaling everyone with the thrilling story of his scar in a voice spiked with sandpaper, and started to count in his head.

He had to give it to Zuko: the brat fought bravely. Jee spent a rewarding half an hour watching him struggle against his own drooping eyelids, and doing a funny little jolt as though someone blew pepper into his nose whenever he allowed them to close. But try as he might to stubbornly squint at Batman – who, Jee was comforted to see, still moved in that hilariously stiff, constipated way he remembered from the good old days – it was obvious that this was a battle he was doomed to lose. Jee was half-tempted to just tell him to drop the movie and go the fuck to sleep, but even he knew enough to realize that it would only have the adverse effect. So he settled down comfortably, enjoyed the show and let nature take her course.

Sure enough, half an hour later the boy was snoozing to kingdom come, his hand hanging loosely off the sofa and his scarred cheek being squashed against the armrest. Fingers wandering aimlessly over the brat’s heavy feet, Jee kept his eyes mostly on the TV – which now, disturbingly, flaunted a guy with half of his face burnt off – but he kept sneaking peeks at Zuko, mostly because the kid looked so damned young. That unsettling vulnerability that had pricked at Jee’s conscience earlier in the
evening now did away with subtlety altogether and kicked Jee right in the teeth, springing at him from the tired curl of Zuko’s half-open mouth and the darkening shadow under his good eye. It lurked in his breath as well, loud and regular, the rhythm of it teasing Jee with the memories of it puffing hot air right into his ear.

It also brought back the recollection of the leathery ridges of burnt skin resting against his own body. Jee hadn’t realized he’d been missing it, but the sparks of dull longing the memory fanned into life educated him in that regard well enough.

Had he really managed to fall so hard without even noticing?

*Bad news, old boy. Bad news.*

Carefully, he turned the volume down and sat very, very still until the movie ran its bleak course. Then, gently, he lifted Zuko’s sleep-heavy legs off his lap to stand up and move away from the sofa. The brat stirred slightly when Jee spread a blanket over him, but only enough to press his head into the armrest in a position that promised an infestation of nasty cricks in his neck come morning. Jee winced in sympathy and wondered if he should wake the kid, but…

No. Unlike him, Zuko wasn’t a middle-aged grump who had to coddle his ageing body for fear of it falling apart at every slight inconvenience. He’d be fine.

Still, the weirdness of being in bed alone when the very person he most wanted in there with him was napping in the next room settled on the pillow with Jee the moment he turned the light off, and refused to be swatted away. Jee turned onto his side, trying to keep his eyes shut in the darkness, and thought, *Well, it’s your own fault.*

It wasn’t until the alarm clock displayed 3:23 am that he stirred and blinked grudgingly, roused by the feeling of the mattress tipping. He turned in time to see Zuko’s dark silhouette, his pilfered clothes rustling extra loud in the quiet night, slipping into bed beside him and tugging the blanket over himself.

Jee reached out. Zuko turned his back on him.

“If we’re to keep doing this, you have to promise me one thing,” he whispered, his voice thick with sleep and something else entirely.

The school of fish in Jee’s gut lurched frantically. Jee narrowed his eyes at the shape next to him.

“What is it?”

“You won’t try to talk to me about my father.”

Ah. Jee let his arm fall on the bulge of Zuko’s hips over the duvet.

“I can do that,” he whispered.

“Or my mother. Or sister. I don’t want to talk about any of that. Don’t ask any questions.”

Jee sighed. Rolled his eyes. “Okay.”

The body under his hand seemed to relax a few inches after that, and Jee took it as a sign that he could risk scooting closer. When he pressed his chest to Zuko’s back and rested his arm over his hips, Zuko didn’t push him away.
He still smelled of rain, Jee decided, closing his eyes as his face pressed into the kid’s hair. Rain and tea and chocolate, and that tangy, sticky smell of sleep. He kissed the top of Zuko’s head absently and murmured a goodnight, and though Zuko didn’t exactly reply, he did press his back against Jee’s chest a little.

Jee smiled, and said nothing.

Next time he opened his eyes, pale, grey strips of light were struggling inside through the shutters, and instead of a cold space that still smelled of boy there was Zuko, kissing him awake with an urgency that matched his restless spirit much better than his mood from last night had.

“Quickly,” he panted into Jee’s ear, his breath hot and wet and heavy. “I need to go soon.”

Jee kissed him back without a word, happy to be forgiven; and tried not to be too disappointed when, half an hour of graceless handjobs later, Zuko hurried out of the bedroom, leaving behind a press of chilled morning air where his warm body had been and a trail of Jee’s own clothes on the floor.

Jee stayed in bed, sprawled on his back, and pulled the duvet up to his chin as he gazed idly at the ceiling fan. Out in the living room Zuko was mapping out his activities with half-muffled noises – the rustle of dried clothes being pulled on, the pantry door creaking open, the annoying squeal of plastic wrapping being torn apart, the pantry door creaking closed again, rushed footsteps, and finally the window opening and closing with a none-too-gentle thud that Jee had come to recognize.

He glanced over at the alarm clock. 7:30 am.

He sighed and, limbs heavy with sleep and sex, rolled out of bed. Maybe Ming would be up for a morning jog.

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His resolution not to tie Zuko down with his own expectations, to keep him separate from his other, older partners and not project anything that would put the kid in a stifling position, still held. Jee felt strongly about that particular thing.

But that one pale, brisk morning, and the lonely breakfast afterwards, bred something. Not an idea, as such, but... an inkling. A shy little inkling, prickling his heart with a needle from the inside, which kept growing throughout the week into a concept, then into an idea, until it bloomed into a full-fledged plan – and it did so on Wednesday evening, thanks to Jee’s friend Matt Coulson.

Which was surprising, because Matt was not what one would think of when one was looking for sources for good ideas. Most of Matt’s own ideas tended to either blow up in his own face or – just as often – in other people’s. But serendipity was on Jee’s side that evening, and he realized on the sofa, a can of beer half-empty in his hand and Matt’s amiable face grinning at him from the Skype screen on his laptop.

“Don’t ever have kids, pal,” he lamented, striving – and failing – for a sorrowful tone.

Jee called bullshit, and told him so over a smirk.

“No, I’m serious,” Matt insisted, still grinning. “I’d make my serious face at you but I was never very good at those anyway. I’m gonna dig that bastard out of the ground if I have to.”
“The only thing you’re gonna dig for is your own sense of authority,” Jee bit back, relaxing on the sofa. “You’re so fucking proud of Lizzie you’re practically barfing rainbows. It’s disgusting.”

Matt’s smile turned obscenely beatific. “I always knew she took after me,” he said.

Jee laughed. “Sorry to break it to you, man, but that little plan sounds more like something your wife would come up with. Time to face the music.”

“I need better friends.”

Jee toasted him with his beer.

“That was an impressive scheme, though,” he agreed after a sip. “How long did it take you to figure it out?”

“The fourth time,” Matt admitted, looking vaguely embarrassed and still disgustingly proud. “It was Carolyn who figured it out, actually – don’t you say anything!”

“I wasn’t gonna,” Jee declared, putting his hands up; but he did laugh, and loudly, and caught Matt murmuring something about “better friends” again.

“You’ll settle for the friends you deserve and you’ll damn well like it,” Jee told him, grinning. “Now. The story.”

Matt tried to glare at him. He’d never been very good at it, though, and usually ended up looking like he needed to go to the bathroom. The grainy picture of the Skype window only amplified the effect, and Jee felt his smile settling in for good.

He’d missed the stupid fuck.

“Carolyn decided to talk to Lizzie’s art teacher and ask her about all the exhibitions that they were supposedly going into,” Matt said, aborting his sad attempts at glaring and switching back to disgusting pride mode. “She thought something was up the third time Lizzie told us about a weekend field trip, but we decided to let it slide because the little shit probably would have made all our lives a living hell if we said no. But after the fourth time Carolyn said, fuck it, and of course it turned out that there were no bloody field trips. Carolyn demanded to see Lizzie’s e-mails and it was ugly as all fuck.”

Jee considered this, and asked, “But how the fuck did she magic up the money? You didn’t notice any suspicious withdrawals on your card, did you?”

Matt shook his head. “It was the guy she was hooking up with. Apparently he borrowed his parents’ credit card, or something, and that’s how they paid for the flight and the hotels. And the fucker’s in college. I’m gonna break both his legs and shove them up his ass.”

“Only you could be so happy about your own daughter having you on,” Jee decided.

“She’s so smart,” Matt gushed, plans of gory revenge apparently forgotten. “She can run circles around anyone, I’m telling you. She’s of my blood and no mistake.”

“You daft fucker,” Jee told him fondly. “So where were they meeting?”

“Chicago. Some three-star shack. I checked it out on Google Earth and there is an art gallery across the street, so it’s not like she lied to us completely. They must have gone there at least once so she could take some photos to show us. She’s a smart cookie.”
“And you’ve got a blind spot a mile wide as far as she’s concerned. Still,” Jee swirled the sad remains of beer in the can. “I’m surprised she made it work twice before either of you started to suspected her.”

Matt shrugged, the grin still plastered to his face. “I’m away more often than not, and we do make a point about trust. It’s important to a kid, trust is. She likes to be treated like she’s a grown-up. Or so we thought. We’d probably draw the line at her flying out to Chicago to spend the weekend in bed with some college dude she’s met on Tinder.”

Jee frowned. “What the fuck is Tinder?”

“Some dating site. Hell if I know.” Matt shrugged. “And they were posing as brother and sister, can you imagine that? Because she’s underage. They got twin beds and everything. I can’t believe she got away with it four fucking times. That’s my girl,” he added fondly.

And that was it. The drop. The idea blooming into beautiful clarity, right then and there, pulling Jee’s thoughts into a vortex of possibilities that were stupid and dangerous and outlandish, but fuck, that were still possible.

He froze there on the couch, the empty can light in his hand, and must have missed a good chunk of the conversation because Matt was looking at him strangely and clearing his throat.

“Sorry.” Jee shook his head, hoping to dislodge the plan that was already wriggling into his head. It wouldn’t budge. “Weird thoughts. What?”

“I asked, what about you?” Matt swiveled this way and that in his chair. “What’s life been like in that shithole with an inappropriately cheerful name?”

Jee pulled his eyebrows down, trying to focus on his friend and not on the sweet, sweet possibilities that were trying to pull him in.

“I made friends with the lesbian police chief,” he said. And then, “Or I think I did. She’s tough to read. Or just tough in general.”

Matt whistled. “She out of the closet, then?”

“I – think so?” He never thought to ask, did he?

“Well, that’s good. Looks like the community’s not as Republican as you expected, right?”

“Yeah,” Jee mumbled. No, I don’t know. “I did hear from my sister,” he said then, changing tack. “She sent me an e-mail. Got herself another boyfriend, the incorrigible bint.”

“Howa. What number is that?”

Jee took a moment to consider this. “I have no fucking idea,” he declared finally. “But he might just become husband number four and then I’ll have to borrow a tux again, dammit.”

“And your brother? How’s he?”

“Lenny’s good,” Jee said, the smile pushing its way back. “He wrote to me for Christmas. His little girl’s in kindergarten and pretty much owns the place, like a little toddler mob boss.”

His heart squeezed, and then let go in a warm, warm rush. He spent a moment browsing through his photo folder until he found the picture Lenny had sent him along with the digital Christmas card,
then sent it to Matt while he wallowed in the adorableness that was his little niece Maura.

It wasn’t often that he actively missed his family, but sometimes it hit him like a kick from behind, and he’d feel warm all over at the memories, and wonder what it would have been like if he hadn’t made a point of living his own life away from them.

He wouldn’t have minded being a regular presence in Maura’s life, for one.

“She’s a cute little pumpkin, ain’t she,” Matt crooned. “Chubbier than Lizzie was at her age. You gonna see them soon?”

“Nah.” Jee leaned back on the sofa again. “Not likely.”

Because those spells of longing, however strong, always paled whenever he thought of having to interact with his mother and her husband for longer than a couple of hours. That right there? A sure recipe for drama, and not of the interesting kind.

Nope. He’d chosen to stay away for a reason, and it was better for everyone involved that things stay that way. As long as he was still on their holiday card list, all was well, and there was no need to change a trend that worked.

The call ended half an hour later, after a few more rounds of gossip, some of which revolved around the school – Matt seemed to be disturbingly interested in staff room shenanigans. Jee enjoyed their idle chatter more than he’d openly admit, but as soon as the call died, he brought the laptop into his lap and started looking for hotels in Detroit before he could talk himself out of it.

It didn’t have to mean anything, and maybe he could have actual breakfast with his lover for once.

***

Zuko crawled in through his window regular as clockwork that Friday night, and Jee gladly lost himself in the flurry of bodies and warmth and urgency. It wasn’t long at all before his bedroom smelled of sex and their combined sweat, and with the kid on all fours offering himself up to Jee on his bed, the resolution to go through with the crazy idea only solidified. He wanted him, he wanted this, and as he thrust in at a lazy pace with the muscles of Zuko’s back tensing and untensing to his rhythm under him, he was damn sure he wanted more than just one night a week.

And the way Zuko kissed him afterwards, sighing deeply as Jee’s fingers threaded through his hair… He might just not be entirely averse to the idea.

No time like the present, then.

“I was thinking,” Jee murmured, fingers still massaging Zuko’s scalp as the kid curled himself up against him.

Zuko let out a sleepy, lazy sound caught somewhere between a purr and a murmur. Jee took it as a sign to keep going.

“How about the two of us go away for the weekend?”

This time it was a snort that shook both their bodies. “Yeah, sure,” Zuko muttered, not moving from
his comfortable-looking position over Jee’s chest. “And we could get my Uncle a souvenir while we’re at it.”

“I’m serious.”

“Sure you are.”

“Zuko.” His fingers closed around a clump of hair and pulled none too gently. “Listen to me. There’s a hotel in downtown Detroit I stayed at with some of my friends a few months back, and it’s not expensive. We could crash there for a night or two and be back by Sunday evening.”

This here, now – this was the reaction he’d been expecting. Zuko lifted himself up on his elbows and looked at him, his lopsided eyes bright with an intensity that shot through him almost as fiercely as the one from a week ago.

“Fuck. You are serious,” the kid whispered.

Jee smiled at him, smoothening his hand over the spot he’d pulled at. “I think it could be fun,” he offered.

Zuko tilted his head at him, eyebrow drawn into a flat line. “Well, it’s not gonna be fucking possible,” he muttered, eyes flitting down. “What would I tell Uncle? I can’t just go away for a couple of days without a reason.”

Jee shrugged. “Make one up,” he suggested. “Tell him you’re going with friends.”

Zuko shot him a nasty look.

“Make them up, too,” Jee offered. “You’re eighteen. You should be allowed a fun weekend away from home.”

“Uncle knows I don’t have any – “ But then Zuko paused, mid-sentence, and his face took on a pensive look as he considered a hitherto unexplored possibility. Or so Jee hoped, and perhaps not unjustly, because a moment later Zuko blinked and whispered, “Mai.”

Jee frowned. “Wouldn’t that be too far off? I know the weather’d be nicer, but I was thinking more in terms of two weeks from now, or –”

“No.” Zuko shook his head, exasperated. “No, I mean – Mai, like M-A-I. She’s… an old friend of mine. From – before. Uncle knows about her, and if I told him I’d be meeting her…”

Suddenly, Jee was reminded of a dark-red room and a corkboard littered with photographs. “The girl on your wall?” he asked before he could bite his tongue. “The one with black hair?”

A thunder took over Zuko’s face for a moment, and Jee held his breath, certain that the kid would storm out right then and there. But then –

A rushed breath, whistling a little on the exhale. “Yeah. She’s – we used to be close.”

Jee nodded, taking it in stride. Stings of jealousy were absurd when he had Zuko naked in his arms, a sheen of cooling sweat sticking to both of them, with a used condom thrown to the floor by the bed and his cock still tingling pleasantly from the warmth of Zuko’s body.

“But wouldn’t your Uncle object if you told him you were going to see a girl?” he asked, pulling Zuko closer just because he could.
Zuko snorted, some of the spit sprinkling Jee’s chest. “Please. He’d push me out the door himself if he thought I found myself a lady friend.” And then he added, “He practically did once, with Jin. She asked me out and he said yes before I could even process what was going on.”

Jee thought back on his conversations with Iroh, especially the one they’d had after his very first night with Zuko. He sort of got that impression.

“Didn’t work out?” he asked instead, to diffuse the tension.

Zuko rolled his eyes at him, but there was a smile lurking there somewhere in the bright twinkle of his healthy eye. “No, it didn’t.”

Jee smiled at him. “Shame. She’s cute.”

Zuko threw a pillow in his face.

And naturally, Jee couldn’t let such a blatant assault on his person slide, so pushed the pillow right back at the brat, and lunged at him, and wrestled him onto his back. Zuko tried to pry himself free, but it was clear that his heart wasn’t in it; it was altogether too easy to grab both his wrists in Jee’s hand and pull them over Zuko’s head.

“There’s still one more thing,” he said, pressing Zuko into the bed.

“Yeah? What?” Zuko’s eyes were positively sparkling, and though he wasn’t smiling, exactly, Jee could read the smile in them now, and he couldn’t help himself – he leaned down and kissed it out of him.

“You still didn’t say if you like the idea.”

Zuko looked up at him, good eye hooded and cheek tinted red.

“Okay,” he breathed.

And then he lifted his head just enough to bring their lips together again, and Jee pinned him to the bed, and when the mattress sunk under them both it felt remarkably like falling.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Jee takes a life-changing field trip with Zuko. Oh, and another very angry young man turns up to make things complicated.
So, the thing is, "Substitute" has gotten huge.

So huge, in fact, that I decided it desperately needed a makeover, because not only did it spiral way past 200k as I worked on the new chapter, it also changed significantly from the very first chapter I posted. Besides, my style has been evolving over the three (!) years that I spent working on this story, and I need the change as much as the story itself does, to shake myself out of the slight stupor of previous chapters and hopefully breathe some fresh air into the whole thing. The plan to divide "Substitute" into smaller chunks is an old one, and initially I was going to do it after "Lesser Wrong," to mark the transition between pre-relationship stage and then make two more parts to divide the other two major story arcs. In the end, I didn’t do it because I thought I could still contain it within a single whole, but that no longer applies. Therefore, dear readers, this time the story really IS getting a makeover, and what better point to mark the split between arcs than hitting the whooping 200k benchmark?

Storywise, the splitting point is no longer so obvious and clear-cut, but careful readers will likely see the logic behind it. The boys' relationship was at an important transition point, and the first chapter of the new arc will hopefully shed some more light on that.

The good news is that the middle arc, which I'm starting now, will not be very long. Not nearly as long as the first one, anyway, and we're definitely closer to finishing the story than a few chapters ago. The third one will be the last, and will bring the long-awaited resolution, so I hope you'll stay with me through.

The other good news is that you can check the first chapter of the second arc right now, if you only click over here.

Now, let me take this opportunity to say a massive THANK YOU to everyone who stayed with me and gave this story a shot; for all the comments and kudos and hits; and for all the beautiful fanart, and messages, and encouragement. I never expected this little experiment of mine to get any kind of audience beyond maybe a handful of people and your response has been mind-blowing. Thanks for keeping me going.

Works inspired by this one: [zuko-xi-buttshots.tumblr.com](http://zuko-xi-buttshots.tumblr.com) by Nele

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!