Left Behind

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by FallLover

Summary

Datu returns to his duties after the dome is dispersed by Pavi, but life doesn't just go back to normal in the wake of a half-destroyed haven and an Afflicted Chancellor. Uncomfortable with the return of Karthik and his followers, as well as the Faceless and the Avatar, Datu does his best, working through his own anxiety, heartbreak, and frustration. Meanwhile, Nisha wants to get stronger and find her way back to Pavi and Jae, and Datu is one of the only people who can help.

Notes

This will be posted on Archive of Our Own when it's back up.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everyone in the large, huddled group of Elloran escapees a short distance from the haven walls felt the red energy dome devouring the haven vanish. It was like the air was easier to breathe again, even as smoke rose from the destruction of Ellora, and the strange golden-red light line stretched across the sky over them.

Datu's nerves – so frantic to escape the dome and the deathtrap that was the haven - settled as he crouched to the ground, on the very edge of the crowd. His body still shook from adrenaline and fear, but he could think a bit more now. He'd seen up close what the energy could do, and how dangerous it was, and he knew they were all dead if they didn't get away.

But now, in the quiet, they were alive. They'd survived. He almost fell over with relief. But he breathed in and steadied himself, or at least tried to.

"The Avatar!" someone said nearby, making him flinch.

"Did she get rid of it?!" someone cried, and others echoed.

"It's gone regardless," someone else said.

"Is it safe to go home? My children are hungry!"

Even in the new calm, clamor arose once more, and Datu's instinct to get up and help control the crowd fought him. He just wasn't sure if they'd listen to him. Especially if anyone knew his part in what had nearly killed them all. And when all a part of him wanted to do, still, was get away from everyone.

"Datu!" a familiar voice called to him, making Datu look up and see Mirikit walking through the crowd. She'd started working in the guard around the time he had, and they were good friends. "If you can stand, get up! We need everyone on board to get ahead of this, before someone gets injured!" She was as muscular as Datu was, and wore her dark hair in a bun. Her dark brown eyes were bright under the orange starry sky.

Datu pressed his lips together and then stood up, breathing carefully. "Aren't Karthik's people on that? Or the Faceless?" The idea of leaving everything to the traitors repulsed him, but everyone had been following their orders before. Shilpa and Hamka had been in charge of keeping things orderly by the gates!

"They're busy *inside* the haven," Mirikit replied. "And there's too many people to handle. They need all of us."

Datu still hesitated. The new calm he thought he'd found felt fragile, and he worried jumping back into things, familiar as it was, would break what he'd gained.

And then what? He wondered. *Back to running into the sand to die to a storm?*

Mirikit stepped closer. "This isn't the time to lose your nerve. Not after everything. Do you remember the job or not?"

The job is to protect Chancellor Kayoko, Datu thought. *And she's not here.* He hadn't seen her at all, and only had word she'd been knocked unconscious by the dome. But he knew arguing was going to attract more interest from the crowd, which would hurt their chances of maintaining order. And it certainly wouldn't help people trust him rather than turn on him for being a mess.

"People need us," Mirikit said. And he could tell she was increasingly disappointed in his reaction. "We do what we do for the survival of Ellora."

The memory of Jae's pained expression came to him, and Datu pushed it aside. "Okay." He didn't have his spear, but he was broad, tall, and could use his fists. His back and chest hurt a bit from how Jae had thrown him before, but he could still move fine, especially when dealing with civilians. He looked around to see a few other guards also looking around, trying to figure out what to do. There were only a couple benders, trying to calm hundreds of people.

"Everyone!" Datu called, his loud voice instantly getting attention and leading to quiet. "We'll get you back into the haven soon enough! If you remain calm, that'll go faster!"

In the silence, someone called out, "Do you know what the Avatar did?"

Datu glanced at Mirikit, who called back, "We've all been out here, same as you. We don't know. But I'm sure there'll be announcements in the coming days about what's happened."

"Why should we trust you if you're so clueless?" someone else asked. "You couldn't stop that red bubble!"

"You're free to panic out here," Datu said, his anxiety twigging his anger, much as he tried to clamp down on it. "Will that get you home faster?"

Only silence met him as a reply, and Datu tried to breathe more easily. Then he looked at the nearest guard past Mirikit and said, "Joriz, go check with the benders, see if it's safe for people to go back."

Joriz, who was shorter than Mirikit and had light brown skin and short, dark hair, nodded to him before running towards the benders who were closer to the haven.

Datu had considered sending Mirikit, but given she'd approached *him*, he was worried about leaving himself without allies. Though her staying with him didn't stop his worry, either.

He passed the time by keeping an eye on his surroundings, making sure no one left the main crowd. It was basic guard duty he'd been doing since he started working for the council.

People seemed wary and nervous, and there were more muttered complaints as time passed.

Datu thought of Kayoko, who'd ordered the energy unleashed on the Faceless. And how *Datu* himself had gotten the scientists to do it. He wondered if any of these people knew. Or if they'd accept that he thought it was for the haven's protection. That Kayoko had always looked after them and wanted to make sure the haven survived, and if she couldn't be trusted, then who?

He wondered of Dr. Champa had family out here. If they knew why he wasn't with them.

But no one accused him of anything.

His mind went back to confronting Jae, after all of Jae's lies, and how much they'd hurt. Datu had only wanted to protect people, and Jae had been undercutting him at every turn.

"What you and Kayoko are doing is wrong."

Datu's hands tightened. *The Brigade was losing members, the Faceless stole food, people were going hungry… I saw benders shouting for justice, what was I supposed to do? Believe a liar? When you told me it would be okay if I just did what I was told?*

But Jae wasn't there to talk to anymore. Datu had ensured that. And it hurt. The fight had been familiar in a way: they'd sparred before, so Datu knew that Jae was a good fighter. But he could also tell that Jae had been holding back in the past, a lot.

I almost feel like we didn't know each other at all, Datu thought, dismally.

Joriz returned with a firebender, Isko, who was shorter than Joriz and had long dark hair, dark brown skin, and a prosthetic metal left arm that glinted in the starlight. Isko looked at Datu and said, "We're slowly bringing people back into the haven. It's not safe yet, and we need to set up proper space for the injured, since it looks like the hospital is going to be overwhelmed."

Datu nodded. "Have you spoken with Dr. Jia?" She would be the next highest in rank with Dr. Champa gone.

"No," Isko said. "I'm just relaying what I heard. Shilpa's helping manage the wounded."

"Then we'll get them back first," Datu said, wondering if Isko thought it was odd to take orders from traitors so readily, or if the Brigade was just falling back on familiar hierarchies. It wasn't like Datu couldn't understand that. "Along with the children." He nodded to Joriz, who went through the crowd and called out for anyone injured to step out to be led to the hospital. Another guard joined him, and they chatted for a moment before she called for children, the elderly, and caretakers to follow her.

The next several hours were busy, keeping people orderly and as calm as possible, keeping children from not running off or staying in place to cry, keeping the elderly moving or resting as needed, and avoiding more fights. When the last of them made it into the haven, it was

early morning, and Datu was even more exhausted than he had been. His feet hurt, and his injuries from the fight with Jae ached.

“They said Commander Karthik took the Chancellor,” Mirikit said as the pair of them looked around at the devastation from the bubble: buildings cut in half and smoking. And the air stank of burnt stone and sand. “They were headed in the direction of the hospital.”

Datu wasn’t sure what to do with that information, though he wondered at Mirikit calling him *Commander* again. Regardless of what happened, Datu wasn’t sure he could trust Karthik, or that Karthik in particular would trust *him*.

“You’re still the head of the guard,” Mirikit said. “Your job is to guard her.”

“…Yeah,” Datu said. “I know.” There would be more fights ahead. And he couldn’t just run into the Harshlands to escape them. As he let the sounds of the haven surround him, he felt angry at himself for even thinking of trying.

But the haven had always felt so safe. And now he knew it wasn’t.

Mirikit was watching him warily, as if he was about to explode or something.

Do I look that upset? He wondered. He’d gotten to where he was for his stability, something that he felt he’d lost when rumors of the Avatar began anew.

“…I’ll head to the hospital,” Datu finally said, straightening as he walked forward.

Mirikit stepped forward as well, keeping pace with him.

Datu was grateful for the company, despite how wary she was of him, but asked, “You sound like you don’t want to go back to guarding her.”

Mirikit looked around. “I think we both know what this haven is capable of when it has a target to attack. And a disabled chancellor is an easy target.”

Datu imagined that was true. “Why would they attack her? She was warning them to stay safe.” *Before telling them to attack the person who saved us, anyway.*

He needed more information on what happened. It seemed like no one really knew, other than, “The Avatar got rid of the dome!” Which wasn’t precisely illuminating.

Datu *knew* the dome wasn’t easy to get rid of. How had a child, even the *Avatar*, done that?

“She kept them from escaping sooner,” Mirikit said, quiet enough that only Datu could hear. “And people are probably going to remember the checkpoints during the lockdown. And someone’s going to talk about the operation.” She didn’t elaborate on that.

Datu grimaced, and then asked, “So you think it’s hopeless?” They couldn’t fight a whole haven to protect Kayoko. They’d only managed to get so many people back into the haven because so many guards were out there with them, along with a handful of benders for protection from any storms.

“My job is to protect the Chancellor,” Mirikit said, firmly. “Until someone takes that job from me, that’s what I intend to do. Maybe the Avatar will sort something out.” There was almost a hint of humor in her voice.

“She’s a child,” Datu said, remembering her sitting in the cart that first time, or facing against Agam before cowering behind Karthik. “I don’t know how much sorting out she’ll do.”

“Really?” Mirikit asked. “After seeing her do *that* to the sky?” She gestured to the stars above, with its golden line. “I’m not sure what she *can’t* do.”

When they arrived at the hospital, it was very busy, with makeshift beds in the lobby and aides, nurses, and doctors – those who weren’t injured or Afflicted themselves – running around with supplies and directions for all kinds of errands. The staff member they got ahold of said Kayoko wasn’t there.

Dr. Jia herself finally appeared to see what all the ruckus was about. She looked as tired as everyone else, and had a clipboard. “If you’re looking for the other guards, they’re up on—” She stopped when she gazed properly at Datu, and then her expression grew a bit horrified.

Datu felt his hands twitch. “We’re not here for the guards, though we can check on them to see how they’re doing. We’re looking for the Chancellor.”

“…She’s not here,” Dr. Jia said, as her eyes narrowed slightly. “It’s a mess here, but she’s not on my list of patients, and I gave orders that I’m to be seen for any high-ranking politicians. We already have one council member here, passed out from the stress and a near heart attack.”

Datu grimaced.

“What about the Afflicted?” Mirikit asked.

“They’re still Afflicted,” Dr. Jia said. “Do you need them for something?” She glanced at Datu with slight accusation, as if he was going to attack them.

“We just wondered if they were healed after whatever the Avatar did,” Datu said.

“Well they’re not,” Dr. Jia replied, sounding exasperated. “Now if you’ll excuse me.” She didn’t even nod before heading off to meet more newcomers.

“If she’s not here, where would she be?” Mirikit asked. “She wasn’t where she fell before.” They’d asked before showing up here.

“…Let’s ask the others,” Datu said. “Maybe they know.”

Unfortunately, none of the other guards knew anything. They hadn’t even seen Karthik show up amidst all the chaos. A lot of them were injured from the fight with the benders and Faceless down in the prison. Some were coughing from all the smoke. Others had gotten in fights with civilians. Others were wary of what to do now.

“The Faceless are just wandering the haven now,” Riona, a younger recruit said. “And the Avatar… Do we just… leave them alone?”

Datu looked at Mirikit, who was wary, and then he looked back at Riona. “They were helping with evacuations, and they seem to be cleaning up after everything. For now… we leave them alone.” Things would change if he got different orders. Kayoko had said she meant for the Faceless to rejoin the general population of the haven eventually, so it wasn’t like this *wasn’t* her goal. Though he didn’t imagine she just wanted to welcome them all back without punishment other than a *very* brief prison stay.

And he wasn’t sure what to do with the Avatar. He didn’t personally *want* to confront someone who could get rid of that giant dome, let alone whatever else she was capable of. She’d seemed small when Jae was looking after her, but now…?

“What if they start stealing again?” Another guard, Natsuki, asked.

“There’s not that much to steal at this point,” Mirikit noted. “Too much is half buried or was annihilated by the dome.”

That sobered a lot of them, and the other guards backed away to settle down a bit more.

Datu walked to the edge of the balcony to look out over the railing, dumbstruck by everyone laid out on makeshift bedrolls on the floor. It had to be uncomfortable, but people made do, or were unable to complain much amidst busy medical staff.

This, he thought, *on top of the existing Afflicted.*.. It was miserable, and they didn’t have enough people to help. Benders ran around helping move people, and he even saw Hamka and Shilpa among them.

His hands tightened again. *Do we really just trust them now? After all the lies? If they’d been honest in the first place, would this have happened?*

He didn’t know. And it didn’t matter at this point.

The front door was kicked open, and heads went up to see Commander Karthik holding the Chancellor by his side.

Kayoko looked like she could barely stand.

“Come on,” Mirikit said when Datu didn’t move. “Let’s go.” She looked at another pair of guards, who were in better shape than the rest, and nodded at them. The pair moved closer.

Datu breathed in deeply before following her down the stairs, leading the other pair.

Dr. Jia was directing Karthik to place Kayoko on a spare cot in a corner of the room when the guards joined them. Dr. Jia glared and said, “This is a *hospital*.”

“We’re just here to guard the Chancellor,” Datu said.

“Of course you are,” Dr. Jia said. He’d never heard her say a rude word in his life, but he could tell she was holding back.

Not surprising, Datu thought. *She watched the woman she’s trying to help kill an innocent man.* It had been to chase out the Faceless and the Avatar, but still nearly destroyed them all.

“What you and Kayoko are doing is wrong.”

Datu pressed his lips together.

“It’s fine,” Karthik said as he gently placed Kayoko on the blankets. “I’m glad.” He looked between the group and nodded. “She’s non-responsive at this point. She has one of the worst cases of Affliction I’ve seen.”

Datu grimaced. “The council needs to know about this. If she can’t lead, then…”

“I’ll alert them,” Karthik said. “Or Jae will.”

Datu focused on his breathing, disliking how a traitor – or whatever Karthik was – fell back so easily into command, like nothing had changed. Like he hadn’t been lying for a long, long time. As if he’d just *take* his role back now that Kayoko was out of the way. “We’ll send a guard detail to tell them. We don’t know where they are.”

“Of course,” Karthik said, acting all unbothered. “I’ll go with them.”

Datu eyed him warily, and Karthik eyed him just as warily. This was the man who’d convinced Jae to turn his back on everyone.

For the person who saved us, Datu reminded himself, bitterly. *At the risk of her destroying us all.*

Reality didn’t change the pain. It also didn’t change the fact that Karthik was one of the highest-ranking and most stable members of the government at the moment. Traitor or not, he was working with the haven, and people were listening to him, including a sizable contingent of the remaining benders. And the Faceless seemed to work with him, too.

Datu remembered being tossed aside by Jae. He knew Karthik was stronger, and all the guard knew that. If it came to a fight, they wouldn’t win, since Jae wasn’t on their side. And the Avatar was on Karthik’s, even if she wasn’t seemingly present.

“Okay,” Datu said. He could stay with Kayoko and choose his battles.

Karthik gazed at him for a while before asking, “You’ll stay with… with Chancellor Kayoko? And protect her?” He sounded nervous, which was strange for Karthik. He’d sounded afraid in the dining room when he’d been captured, but given Jae’s deceit and his collusion with Karthik, Datu didn’t know how much of it was a lie.

“Of course,” Mirikit said. “It’s our duty.”

Karthik nodded at her, then looked back at Datu. “She’s counting on you. Don’t let her down.”

You’d know a lot about that, Datu thought, venomously, as Karthik glanced once more at Kayoko, then the nurse looking at her, before turning towards the guards up above. Datu had heard a few of Kayoko’s increasingly incensed rants about Karthik’s betrayal, after all. And he’d hoped he and Jae would never experience that. That their trust in each other meant that could never happen, even after Jae revealed he’d *been* lying.

I’m wrong about a lot of things these days, Datu thought as he got his group to set up a perimeter around Kayoko.

Staff and patients eyed them curiously, but left them alone.

“We’re going to have to move her to a private room,” Datu said, not liking how open this place was.

“They’re all full,” the nurse looking over Kayoko said. “We’d have placed her there if there was space.”

Datu looked at Teruma, who was watching Kayoko and their surroundings, but caught Datu’s eye. “Go see if you can find something. Don’t push anyone out.” He wouldn’t have pushed, but this place wasn’t defendable.

Teruma nodded at him before jogging off.

The nurse sighed in exasperation, but kept looking over Kayoko.

We’re going to need a shift change soon, Datu thought as he looked at his team. *We can’t keep this up forever.* But he wasn’t sure how many people were still in good shape. There weren’t a ton of guards here, and most of them were patients themselves.

It’s going to be a long day, he thought, dismally. And he imagined he was going to have too much of it to think about things. Like where the Avatar was and what she was doing now.

Or where Jae was, and what *he* was doing now.

“Hey,” Mirikit said, pulling his gaze up to her. She was watching the nurse, but glanced at Datu. “Cheer up. At least we’re alive.”

Datu had to cover his mouth to stop laughing, it was so absurd. Everything was a mess now, and Datu wasn’t sure, exhausted as he was, that he’d be able to sleep after everything that happened, with how tense he was.

His throat was too dry: he hadn’t had anything to drink in a while. And he was starting to get hungry. Orderlies were handing out food, and Datu knew he’d have to get some for his people. Life continued, despite uncertainty.

When he finally had control of himself, he said, “Yeah. Yeah, we are.”

Chapter End Notes

During the montage in Book 1, Chapter 13, there's a shot of the hospital where you can see people on bedrolls or cots on the floor in the lobby, and up on the balconies, there are a handful of guards. There are two in particular on the right side, one looking out over the balcony, and another laying alone between other guards with their head turned away from the camera, who COULD be Datu. Maybe. I like to think that's maybe why he's not otherwise in the montage: because he's in that shot.

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