More than wind and sand

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More than wind and sand

by FallLover

Summary

Jae and Pavi set out into the Harshlands. But when they stop for a break only a short distance from Ellora, they find a surprise in the form of someone Jae was hoping to leave behind.

Set after Book 1, Chapter 13: The Root Chakra.

Notes

WELL. That was a finale! This is inspired partially by a bunch of theories I was seeing while browsing the tags after the finale, as well as this lovely art by spideyphai, posted earlier this week, and which I wanted to write something for but got distracted by Ao3 being knocked out of commission and everything else.

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

See the end of the work for more notes

Pavi and Jae had been walking from Ellora for most of a day when they had to stop for a break. They were near tall reddish-sand cliffs, with the hot sun burning on their backs, and Jae breathed in deeply and adjusted his pack while Pavi squirreled herself away for some private business.

Jae looked back towards the haven. Towards his home. *Does Karthik even realize we're gone yet? And what about Nisha? How's she feeling after whatever she went through with Pavi?* Jae knew the twins adored each other, mixed with Nisha's fears of abandonment that made her act out often too harshly. But Pavi was clearly furious, and had only spoken haltingly about their argument. He liked to think time apart would help, but he wasn't sure… It certainly didn't change pain. Or that they still loved each other, deep down.

"I still care about you, Jae."

Jae clenched his hands into fists. "You… calling *me* stupid…" He supposed he was *glad* to be leaving Ellora for a lot of reasons. There were too many painful memories in the haven. And this meant he wouldn't run into Datu.

A part of him still wanted to talk and figure things out, if they even could. He'd seen what Kayoko had done, and what Datu had stood by and let happen, and even aided. But Jae couldn't help but think what *he'd* have let happen only a small number of weeks ago. Before he'd met Pavi. Before Karthik had explained more about the Avatars. Before Daemin and then Uki and then Lan had turned on what they believed, and Lan only with Jae's encouragement. Before Jae realized Uki was right about at least some things, and before he'd worked with Agam. Before so many things.

Would I have stood in Datu's place? Jae wondered. *If I was terrified and thought it was for the survival of Ellora?* A more chilling thought was, *Or would I have been in Kayoko's?* He liked to think he wouldn't have been. But he didn't know. And that terrified him. He didn't know if he was as brave as Pavi or Ulan.

But understanding wasn't the same as forgiveness.

"JaeJaeJaeJae!" Pavi said as she ran towards him with Geet right on her heels.

"Pavi?" Jae asked, surprised. "You okay? Did uh… something happen when you were, uh…?" He had some medical supplies, but he wasn't a doctor.

"Sorrrt of?" Pavi said, moving around Jae and turning to glare at the direction she came. She was wearing her clothes normally and seemed fine and uninjured. "I found something!"

"What?" Jae asked, turning to gaze in the direction she was facing. "An animal?" He readied himself for a fight. He didn't know much about the Harshlands, but he'd done a lot of studying over the years. And he was ready for a fight if they had to do one.

"No," Pavi said. Then she frowned. "Well, I'm not sure, actually. Are people animals, too?"

“People?” Jae asked. “Wait, you found a *person?*” He knew Pavi had lived out here, and he assumed others did, like the Faceless had, but he didn’t expect to find new people so soon.

Pavi looked up at Jae and then away, almost warily. She didn’t answer.

“What?” Jae asked. “Did they attack you?” Again, he looked her over for injuries, but didn’t see anything.

“…No,” Pavi said, clearly wary. “But he’s important to you, right?”

“*He?”* Jae asked. Then his eyes widened in shock and he looked at where Pavi came from. No one was showing up.

Jae’s heart raced. *Wouldn’t he have gone back into the haven with everyone else? Why stay out here?!*

But when nothing happened, Jae knew he had to make a choice.

“Stay here,” Jae said. Then he looked at Pavi. “Please?” He knew she was just as likely to disobey as listen. More likely to disobey, really.

She gazed at him warily, before nodding. “Just shout if you need help. Or I’ll show up anyway when I get too worried.”

Jae smiled at that. *At least she trusts me again.* His expression hardened as he walked over to where Pavi had come from, wary.

Pavi had clearly gone down a small path between the tall cliffs, covered occasionally with mysterious plant vines or crystal, to find an enclosed space to do her business. And when Jae manipulated the air currents, he caught a familiar smell of shampoo, and followed it to its source.

He found Datu curled up under a rock – where it was shady – with his eyes shut, his arms crossed over his chest. When Jae watched him for a bit, he could see Datu was breathing.

Jae’s instinct was to turn back immediately. Leave Datu alone. Never look back. Go with Pavi to the next haven and see what was there and that would be the end of it. Maybe he’d never even come back to Ellora.

And a part of him wanted to see if Datu was still hurt from their fight. Jae had been gentler than he could have been, but Datu had ripped through those crates. And when he’d fallen, he’d looked so small, despite being the taller, bigger one in the relationship. The pained grunt he’d let out…

Datu grumbled in his sleep and blinked his eyes open.

Jae stiffened, but didn’t flee.

Datu gazed ahead for a bit and then his eyes settled on Jae. Then his eyes widened and he stood up, bonking his head on the rock. “Shit! Ugh…”

“Relax,” Jae said, trying not to laugh. “I’m not going to attack you.” *Yet, anyway.* It wasn’t like he wouldn’t defend himself if he had to. Or defend Pavi and Geet.

Datu pulled himself out of cover and stepped back, wary. “Yeah, sure. And I should trust *you?* After you’ve been *so* honest with me!”

“I didn’t do anything while you were sleeping,” Jae noted. “And what would attacking you even accomplish? We’re in the Harshlands, Datu! I could just airbend away from you and you’d fall down unconscious trying to run after me.” He still had his air skimmer, and Pavi had Geet. They’d be far away before Datu could catch up, if need be.

Datu grimaced. “Fine. Then why *are* you here?”

“Why are *you* here?” Jae demanded. “Everyone else went back into the haven! Pavi got rid of the Anomaly. They’re cleaning things up there!” They needed all the help they could get.

“And be arrested?” Datu demanded. “For abandoning Kayoko? Or get involved in more of whatever’s going on there? Thanks, but I’ll take my chances out here.” He looked away, clearly angry. “At least this place being a nightmare makes *some* sense.”

“You’ll *die* out here,” Jae said. “There’s barely any food or shelter.”

“There’s food,” Datu said. “Remember, we used to go looking for fruit when we were little?”

Jae didn’t want to think too much about their past. It hurt.

“And water,” Datu continued. “And maybe I can find my way to another haven.”

“You don’t have enough supplies,” Jae noted. “You don’t even have a weapon!” He didn’t see Datu’s spear anywhere. *Perhaps it’s still buried in the haven’s underbelly. Good riddance.* Though he wondered why Datu hadn’t grabbed it when he’d gotten out.

“I’m not defenseless just because I’m not a bender!” Datu said, clearly angry. His hands clenched.

“…Yeah,” Jae said. “I know. I saw you stand by while Kayoko threw a man to his death.”

Datu’s eyes widened in shock as he asked, “You *saw* that?” And then he turned. “That... It was *for Ellora!”*

“*How?!”* Jae demanded. “For what reason?! So that Kayoko could test some random idea she had? What answer did she even get?!”

“I don’t know!” Datu replied. “And if I’d said something, it could have been *me* getting dumped into that!”

“So you saved your own skin,” Jae said in disgust. “And let a man die!”

“I didn’t see *you* jumping in to stop it!” Datu retorted, making Jae’s gut twist, because he hadn’t. “Or to stop Karthik attacking Molin! Molin was *right* about the Avatar, and you let

them attack him!”

“He was attacking Kayoko!” Jae cried. “He threatened her! What was I supposed to do?”

“It’s always fine when it’s about you, Jae!” Datu yelled back. “What about the rest of us?! Non-benders, people who don’t know what you do?!”

Jae just stared at him. “You think… You think I kept this from you because you couldn’t bend?”

“I don’t know anymore!” Datu yelled. “I thought you were afraid, or just confused about your loyalty with Karthik whispering in your ear. You idolize him, and I got it. Especially when I kept secrets, too. But then you *kept hiding things*, and Ellora’s safety was even more at risk. I thought putting my trust in Kayoko, in you, in the *Brigade*, was right. What did you want me to think when you told me things would be okay? When I should trust *you!* Trust *her!*”

“You’re saying this is my fault?” Jae demanded, his voice quiet. His eyes felt hot.

“I…” Datu looked at him, clearly afraid. His chest was moving rapidly with his fast breathing. “…I don’t know.”

They stared at each other. Jae’s heart felt full of ice.

“Listen, buster!” Pavi said as she stomped into the area, with Geet behind her. “Leave Jae alone! He’s saved everyone time and again!” Pavi glared at Datu and raised her hands, clearly ready to fight.

“Pavi, wait,” Jae said, moving to stop her. “Leave him alone.” He didn’t want to see Pavi fighting Datu. It wouldn’t solve anything. So long as Datu stayed away from her, and, well…

Datu stepped father back, raising his arms in front of himself in a defensive stance. He was clearly afraid as he looked at Pavi.

Yeah, Jae thought, *that’s not a problem.* Jae remembered the first time Datu met the twins. He thought they were cute. He was so happy.

Jae breathed in deeply and said, “Datu, this is Pavi. One of the Avatars.”

Datu did *not* seem reassured by that.

“We’re going to go help the other havens and try to fix things,” Jae said. “Perhaps to fix the world. And you should head back to Ellora. You could do some good there.”

“I’m not going back there,” Datu reiterated.

“You’ll *die* out here!” Jae said. “This isn’t just a trip like when we were kids!” There was no one to help them this time.

“*I* survived out here,” Pavi pointed out. “And I’m a kid!”

“You were starving, Pavi,” Jae pointed out. “And you relied on the haven for food and supplies.”

“True, true,” Pavi said with a sage nod. “But he’s stronger than me. He *might* be fine.”

Datu seemed wary of this whole conversation. “*She* got rid of the Anomaly?” He gazed dubiously at Pavi.

Pavi glared at him. “Yeah, I did! Avatar stuff!” She raised her nose haughtily.

“So… we really did cause the dome,” Datu said, quieter. He seemed conflicted, at least.

“Kayoko flooded the tunnels while you looked on, so yeah!” Jae said, angrily. “What did you think would happen?”

“Kayoko said it was the Avatar,” Datu replied. “That she was creating it… Making it worse!”

“*She’s nine years old*!” Jae said. “They’re both nine! What did you and I do when we were nine, Datu?!” Jae’s eyes were hot again. “I know you’re afraid, but for f—! Get a *grip!* Look at what you’ve done! Look at what Kayoko’s done! And Pavi *saved* the haven anyway! Even after you were hunting down her sister!”

“I was following orders…” Datu said, quietly.

“That’s not an excuse!” Jae yelled. “Sometimes orders suck! You’ve always been telling me off for being too rigid, for focusing too much on duty and rules. And now here you’re hiding outside the haven like… like a fucking coward!” His face was burning, and tears were leaking down, making his vision blurry. “And you have the *gall* to tell me this is my fault?! I didn’t *make* you do any of it!” Everything that felt solid in his world had been coming apart. The Avatar being really real, and *twins?!* And not some super bad enemy, but actually little girls who liked cat-monkeys and bugs and eating a lot and playing pranks. Karthik being a traitor, but not really. Jae joining him… And Datu, throwing everything they’d done together in his face, when Jae was just trying to save lives. To protect the haven.

Why is this so hard? He thought. *Uki said I’m inhuman for what I do, but I feel so powerless right now.*

“Jae…” Pavi said, worriedly, touching his leg.

Jae realized he’d cursed where she could hear him and he reached up to wipe his face. He was a mess. “I’m sorry, Pavi. I… I need a break.” He turned and left the area, and walked until he could find a quiet place to sit down.

The tears wouldn’t stop coming. He tried to settle his breathing, but it was hard. He tried rubbing his face, but the pain wouldn’t go away. He really was abandoning everything he knew. He hadn’t even said bye to Lan, Daemin, or Uki, let alone Karthik, or anyone else he knew. What was even left of his world? He didn’t know other White Lotus connections in other havens. He didn’t know the history of things like Karthik, Shilpa, and Hamka did. He

was a newly made commander who'd lost the title quickly. He was a traitor and a liar and a bad boyfriend and… and…

Small hands reached out for his arms and tugged them. "Jae, you need to stop clawing at your face. It's not good for you."

Jae sniffled and lowered his hands, looking at Pavi through watery eyes. "Pavi, I'll be okay, just…"

"No," Pavi said, quietly. "Sometimes it hurts, doesn't it?" She sniffled and said, "When people you care about turn on you." She wiped her eyes. "Like Nisha."

Jae's heart broke. Here he was, upset, and here was this little nine-year-old, who'd saved the whole haven and lost the only member of her family she had. "Pavi…" He reached out and hugged her, pulling her close. "I'm so sorry."

She breathed heavily, and he could hear her crying against his chest. It was like a dam had broken between them.

Jae shut his eyes, wishing he knew what to say to comfort her. To make everything right. *Karthik would. But he's not here. And I'm not him. No matter what right decisions I make.*

He heard a crackle of stone, and opened his eyes to see Datu standing in the distance, watching them.

Jae sniffed and then glared, knowing he wasn't in much good shape. "If you try to do anything to her…"

"How could I hurt the Avatar?" Datu demanded.

"…You were ready to attack Nisha in the dining room," Jae replied.

"I had a spear then," Datu noted. "And I wasn't alone."

Jae supposed that was true.

"Jae…" Datu said. He moved as if to step forward, and then stopped. "I… I don't know what to believe anymore. And… you're right. I *am* a coward."

You're just realizing that now? Jae thought, remembering Zi's words.

"I was afraid when Molin confronted me about the Avatar," Datu said. "I was afraid when Molin confronted Kayoko. I was afraid when Nisha appeared in the dining room. And I thought… I don't know. I thought I was doing the right thing, protecting Ellora. Protecting *myself*. But everything I did was wrong, somehow. It just ended up hurting our people. Our friends. You."

"How long were you afraid without saying?" Jae demanded. "You could have *told* me you weren't happy about things rather than insult my cooking while the world was falling down around us!"

Datu shut his eyes briefly, clearly pained. “You stress bake, Jae. I didn’t want to say anything to make things worse.”

Jae supposed that was true.

“Also it was sweet,” Jae said, with a sad smile. “You always tried to make me feel better. And that made it harder when it was a lie.”

Jae’s heart hurt.

“And I…” Datu sighed. “You should go. I won’t tell them where you went.”

Jae frowned. “What?”

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” Datu said, clearly deflated. “Whatever it is.” He turned back to return to where he’d come from.

“You’re just going to stay here?” Jae demanded. “Rather than try to fix things?” Jae was trying to do something, why wasn’t Datu?

Datu paused and glanced back at Jae with a frown. “I never said I *stopped* being scared. I still am. I’m not useful to anyone like this.”

“You have to face your fear,” Pavi said, making Jae look down at her. She’d turned in his arms to frown at Datu. “You can’t keep running forever. The Anomaly, or maybe something *worse* will find you.”

Datu stared at her for a while before shrugging and saying, “Maybe I deserve that, then. I’m not as strong as you, little one.”

Pavi scoffed and turned away. “I’m not strong. *Jae* is strong.”

Jae’s eyes widened in surprise.

“He’s been holding it together all this time,” Pavi said. “Even when he’s scared, he’s been working through things.” She clutched Jae’s shirt. “He’s inspired me almost since we first met. And maybe we both destroyed each other’s worlds, but we’re trying to build something out of the rubble.”

Oh Pavi, Jae thought. His eyes were wet again, but this time from pride.

Pavi looked up at Jae. She looked sad and her face was covered in dried tears, but she was determined, too. “You still love him, don’t you?”

Jae’s lips parted, but he didn’t say anything.

Pavi just stared at him. Steady, like the earth.

“…Yes,” Jae said. He smiled sadly, and didn’t look at Datu. “I do.” Perhaps he wouldn’t forgive himself for that. “He’s a coward and an idiot. But I can’t change that fast. Not

anymore than I have." Maybe with time, he would.

"And you?" Pavi asked, turning to Datu. "You still love him, don't you?"

Datu frowned at her, and then looked away. "I… It's complicated."

"*Everything* is complicated!" Pavi yelled with a broken voice, making both men look at her. "I just left my sister back there and I feel like my *heart* was ripped out of my chest! But I can't talk to her, and maybe I won't ever, again!" She sniffed and wiped her face. "She hurt me! She hurt us both! And I'm sick of people doing that!"

"Pavi," Jae said, putting his hands on her tiny shoulders, and feeling her shake. "It's okay…"

"It's *not!"* Pavi said, glaring at him. "Is that what happens to us? We unblock a chakra and then everything we care about falls apart? I'm sick of it!" She looked at Datu. "You can die out here if you want! You're probably going to!"

Datu frowned in confusion.

"Or," Pavi began. "You can come with us."

Jae's eyes widened in surprise. "Pavi…"

"*If,*" Pavi continued, "*Jae* says it's okay. Because I know he's going to tie himself into *knots* being anxious about you. And since I'm going to be anxious about my sister, we don't need *both* of us being anxious over each other."

Both men were quiet after that, until Jae hesitantly met Datu's gaze.

Datu looked confused still. Clearly, he was as lost as Jae felt.

"You don't have to come with us," Jae finally said. He supposed Pavi's idea *did* make sense. He'd worry, and tell himself to not worry. But he'd still worry. "But so long as Pavi's okay with it, and you keep your distance from her… Yeah. You can come with us. We could always use another set of eyes. And arms." It would make keeping watch at night easier. And finding food and shelter.

"Even though I'm not a bender?" Datu asked. And for whatever reason, the way he wasn't hostile to it gave Jae hope.

"You'd consider it, even though you don't like my cooking?" Jae demanded. "Because we're probably going to share that duty."

"As you've pointed out, my alternative is starving to death or being eaten by something," Datu noted. "It's not like I have a lot of options, other than returning to Ellora."

"Which you should do," Jae replied.

Datu sighed and looked at Pavi. "You're really okay with this? You sound like you hate me."

“I kind of do,” Pavi said. “You hurt Jae. And you sound horrible. But I’ve seen the way he thinks of you. And… we’re already giving up a lot. And if you died out here, Jae would never forgive himself. And family sticks together.” She looked at Jae and smiled, sadly.

Except for you leaving Nisha, Jae didn’t say. He knew Pavi was a problem solver. Always trying to help people. To save a bug who’d lost its family. Of course she’d help Jae before herself. It was probably easier. Jae smiled down at her instead.

“…Okay,” Datu said. “I guess… it’d be a chance to learn what the Avatars are really like.” He looked at Jae. “And we could talk more. If you want.” He looked uncomfortable. “I… I think I want to.” He looked at Jae warily, clearly ready for rejection.

Jae breathed in deeply. His heart still hurt. And he didn’t know if they’d truly recover from this. But he couldn’t be weak in the face of Pavi’s bravery. “Yeah. I want to talk more. But we should walk a bit more before setting up camp for the night and finding food.” So long as no other difficult secrets were hiding out here. Though he only had the *one* boyfriend, so… Or whatever they were.

“There’s some fruit around here,” Datu said. “I was going to try it later when my stomach settled. But I can show you where I saw it.”

“Huh,” Pavi said. “Not *entirely* useless, I guess.”

Jae smiled. “Yeah.” He looked up at Datu, who perhaps smiled a little, too.

They could do something with this, maybe.

End Notes

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