The right decisions to make

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The right decisions to make

by FallLover

Summary

As Jae hugs Datu following Molin assaulting Kayoko, Jae thinks over the hard decisions he's made, keeping the Avatar's identity and existence a secret. And he decides it's time to talk to Datu, properly.

Set in the middle of Book 1, Chapter 5: The One Left Behind.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

“It’s gonna be okay,” Jae said, holding Datu close, and feeling the way his tall, strong boyfriend shook ever so slightly, even as the noise of the scattering crowd still filled the air, and Jae struggled to erase the memory of Molin, nearly calm, being trapped in that surprising air bubble. “I promise.”

But his words felt empty, when he hadn’t even been able to talk down Molin. And beyond that… there was so much they didn’t know. The red light in Molin’s eyes was like an increasing number of those affected by the red rocks. And people were angry about the rumors of the Avatar, which didn’t seem likely to fade. Meanwhile, the Faceless attacks seemed likely to continue.

Between fears of the Avatar, the Faceless, the Anomaly… there was so much fear, rightfully so, given recent history and the world they all had to live in.

Jae hugged Datu, not knowing what to say to really help. He could be honest about a lot, but not the Avatar, and that, in the moment, was bothering Datu the most. When it would have been the easiest fear to clear up, because at least the Avatar wasn’t some bogeyman waiting to jump them all, but two real little girls whom Datu had already met.

And how would I have acted in his place? Jae thought. He remembered his shock when he’d seen Pavi bend. His fear when he’d gone to Karthik. *Will Datu hate me?* And less selfishly, *Would he try to hurt Pavi and Nisha?*

He remembered Datu saying he didn’t want what Molin was doing. And that he’d said he was just writing his thoughts out, *not* plastering posters around the city… Or at least he sounded that way.

“Jae, you’re holding a bit tightly,” Datu said.

“Oh yeah,” Jae said as he stepped back, feeling bad. He’d been too tense.

Datu looked down at him, still worried about everything. The hug had helped a little, but not *that* much, it seemed.

“So you weren’t putting up posters everywhere?” Jae asked.

Datu shook his head and replied, “No. Molin and some of the other guards were. We talked about it. It just felt… strange.” He looked away, towards the Brigade Compound. “There have been incidents before, but nothing like this. Molin was *sure* of what he saw. Not drunk or anything…”

“But did you see the red light in his eyes?” Jae pressed. “Like those other people and animals who’ve been affected by the red rocks after the Anomaly?”

Datu frowned, clearly thinking back. “I guess I… thought it was just his fear. And I was distracted by what he was saying.” He looked at Jae and continued, “There’s so much going on, I didn’t think about it…”

“I get it,” Jae said with a calming smile. “We still don’t know what’s happening with them… and he might have gotten worse since last he spoke to you.” The red had been so bright during the speech.

Datu tightened his hand on his spear. “I hate this! I hate how much we don’t know! I feel powerless!”

Jae grimaced, knowing Datu was someone who liked being in control and being ready to act and help when he could.

And it was wrong to keep him in the dark. *Plus,* Jae thought, *what if something worse happens due to fear?*

He could Karthik’s warnings in his head. But Karthik wasn’t here. And Karthik had nearly killed a man to disable him over something that shouldn’t be a secret anyway.

He thought of Pavi and Nisha. Two little girls against the whole world.

They have me, Jae thought. *If worse comes to worst… I’ll get them out of the city, myself.*

He breathed in deeply before saying, “Hey, come back with me to my room for a bit? Please?” He smiled a little wider, hoping to be convincing.

Datu frowned at him, but obediently followed when Jae took his hand.

Jae tried not to think, *I hope I'm doing the right thing.*

“No secrets since last you were here, huh?” Jae asked as Datu set his spear against the wall and sat on Jae’s neatly made bed. The door was shut and locked, and Jae had a light wind running past the wind to muffle any noise prying eyes might hear.

Datu looked around thoughtfully at Jae’s extremely neat and up to regulation room, and then shook his head. “No.”

“Then why call the Brigade *liars and traitors?*” Jae asked as he sat next to Datu. “Is that what you think of *me?*” He’d almost expected Datu to refuse to come on principle.

“I told you I was just venting!” Datu insisted, looking annoyed. But there was a wariness, too, like he was afraid of being open.

Jae reached out for his arm, knowing what it was to feel ashamed of secrets. “About what?”

“That if the worst was true, then…” Datu wouldn’t meet his eyes.

We deserve to be exposed by any means necessary, Jae thought.

“We depend on the Brigade for our survival,” Datu said. “But if we can’t trust the Brigade, then… what is there to trust?”

Jae understood that. It was why the lies about the Avatar were so wrong. They were all they had here.

Jae shut his eyes and breathed in deeply before saying, “Datu… Look. What I say here has nothing to do with the Brigade. It’s not a reflection on them, okay?” He would keep any names he could out of it, for now at least. *He* was the one making this choice.

Datu frowned at him. “Okay?”

“And I need to know you mean it when you said I can trust you,” Jae said. He’d always trusted Datu, but that was different when two little girls’ lives were on the line.

“You can,” Datu said, perking up a bit, seemingly worried for a different reason.

Jae’s hand went to his ear, and then he put it down, holding it still. He was so nervous, and he didn’t want to screw this up.

“Jae, you’re freaking me out,” Datu said, as time passed.

“I freak myself out,” Jae said as he breathed in deeply. “And I owe you an apology for… well, everything.”

“For what?” Datu asked.

“Datu…” Jae began. He gazed into Datu’s eyes, and then down at the floor. “The Avatar *is* back. But she’s not going to hurt you or anyone in Ellora.”

When Datu made to move, Jae reached out to hold his left arm, to keep him on the bed, and gazed at him, firmly. “They’re little girls. They wouldn’t hurt you. And they care about the people here.”

“They’re little…? *Girls?”* Datu’s eyes widened. “Why are you saying that like there’s more than *one?*”

Jae frowned at him. “Because, for whatever reason, there are two of them now. Twin sisters.”

“Twin sisters…?! Wait… Those family friends of yours?!” Datu’s eyes were wide in shock.

Jae sighed and began, “Datu…”

Datu pulled away and stood up, and his expression was alarmed and pained. “You’ve been hiding them?!”

Jae stood up, but it was hard to meet Datu’s eyes. “Yes. Kind of.” *Karthik was hiding Nisha long before I came along, and Pavi hid herself for a long time.* “They dislike hiding or staying anywhere in Ellora for long. Because they’re nine and they want to know where their parents are. And they love sweets. And stuffed animals. And their cat-monkeys. And playing jokes. And Nisha loves bending. And Pavi loves meeting people. And animals.”

“Jae…”

“Do they sound like monsters, Datu?” Jae demanded, glaring at him, and wondering if Datu could tell he was shaking. “You thought they were cute in the wagon the other day! Are you afraid of them now?” When Datu’s lips parted, Jae demanded, “What do you even *know* about the Avatar?! Pavi rescued a *bug* from being stepped on! A bug! Because she hates seeing *anyone* get hurt!”

Datu just stared at him, but now slightly confused.

“They’ve both saved my life now,” Jae said, thinking of the tornado in the Harshlands, and the fight with the Faceless, or the camodillo. “A few times. I’m losing count. They didn’t have to. They don’t owe me anything. They’ve worked to protect Ellora. They saved us from the Anomaly. And they’re *nine*, Datu.”

“They saved us…?” Datu asked, quietly. “But…”

“So yeah, I’m a liar,” Jae said, when Datu trailed. His eyes felt hot. “Am I a traitor, too? For protecting people in Ellora? For not wanting to jail two little orphan girls?”

“Jae…” Datu began, stepping close again.

Jae turned away, feeling his face heat. “I don’t know what to do, Datu. Everything in this haven is falling apart, and it’s hard to keep a secret like this. It’s been hard. But they’re good kids. And they need people who care about them. And since they’re the only ones who can do anything about the Anomaly, *we* need them, too! And if being a traitor means turning my back on them, I—!” He couldn’t do it. It just wasn’t in him.

He thought of Pavi’s small hand in his. The way Nisha worked so *hard* to be brave for herself and her sister. The desperate hope in Karthik, Shilpa, and Hamka’s eyes when they saw the girls bending…

Strong arms wrapped around him, pulling him into Datu’s embrace.

Jae’s eyes widened in surprise.

Datu pressed his face into Jae’s shoulder. “This is what you’ve been bottling up? Why you’ve been jittery and awkward for days?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” Jae said, trying not to wince as his wound from the Faceless fight was still a little sore. “I just couldn’t. It’s too dangerous.” He didn’t know what to do with his hands. Hug Datu back? What if Datu was still mad, even now?

“I get it,” Datu said, not letting him go. “I’ve been listening to a lot of conversations lately with the other guards and non-benders. It’s hard out there. I wouldn’t want to put little kids out in front of that, either.”

Jae finally, slowly, reached his arms around and hugged Datu back. Datu was so warm and strong, and more stable than Jae felt. Jae tried to even out his breathing, but it was hard.

“How long?” Datu asked, eventually.

"…Since the festival," Jae said. "I saw one of them in the crowd and chased her into the Harshlands."

"*That*…? Since then?" Datu breathed a sigh and then laughed. "And you've been keeping a secret *that* long? Jae…" Datu pulled back and cupped Jae's cheek. His expression was sad. "How have you…?"

Jae looked away, ashamed. "I had to. Their lives were at stake. And I owed Pavi."

"Why are you telling me now?" Datu eventually asked.

"Because when I saw what you were writing," Jae said, "I was *scared*. And with so much happening… This at least, I can maybe help with." He gazed into Datu's eyes, willing Datu to understand. "If you're the man I know, the man I *love*, then I know you'll understand. That you could support those girls as much as I do. Because they're *not* the reason we live the way we do. They're just kids, trying to figure out life like the rest of us." He remembered Pavi and asking Karthik to help her and Nisha find their parents. And he knew how hard that was. He was so proud.

"…You wanted to help me?" Datu asked, shocked. "After all the lies?"

"I know I don't deserve forgiveness for that," Jae said, hating the whole situation, no matter how necessary it was. "I never meant to be cruel… But…"

"Sacrifices have to be made," Datu said, sounding bitter. "I get it."

"You're *not* a sacrifice I want to make," Jae said, seeing Datu's eyes widen in surprise. "I've been told to harden my heart, and that I'd have to give things up to do this, and I don't see why. I don't agree with the paranoia. I think we *lose* something by cutting ourselves off from each other. And Ellorans *need* each other to survive." He put his right hand up to cover Datu's over his cheek. "I need *you* to survive, Datu. I can't live without you."

Datu's eyes grew wet. "Jae…"

"If those girls were a danger to the people here, I'd tell you," Jae promised, even as his heart raced. "And maybe something will happen in the future. But that hasn't happened yet. It might never happen. And so much was lost from Avatar Korra's time… We just don't have a full picture of what we *should* be afraid of. And part of all this, that I'm doing now, is trying to find answers."

"You are?"

"Yes," Jae said. "Those girls have helped me investigate the Faceless, and we've even dealt, a little, with those impacted by the red rocks. They're key to all this, and perhaps helping to end it. They didn't *cause* it. But they believe in helping us solve it."

Datu still looked worried.

"I'm not asking you to like them," Jae said, trying to steel himself. "I'm not asking you to trust me the way you used to, because, well…" He knew he'd burned his bridges. "But

believe me when I say that the Avatars *aren't* your enemy. Nor is the Brigade or the council. The council doesn't even know about any of this."

"They don't?!" Datu asked, surprised.

"They don't," Jae said. "Most leadership doesn't know. I think, anyway. There are people in the city who know whom I'm not aware of." He thought of Daemin showing up. "But I know Chancellor Kayoko doesn't know."

"What about Commander Karthik?" Datu asked.

Jae's lips pressed together. There was no way to properly answer that.

Datu just gazed at him for a while, clearly getting the message. He shook his head and said, "I just… this is so much…"

"I'm sorry," Jae said. He wished he could make this easier.

"I wondered why you chased someone into the Harshlands," Datu said. "The other guards were joking about it… I said you had a good reason…"

"I *did,"* Jae insisted. "She was a little girl running into a storm. And I worried about an untrained earthbender getting into trouble."

Datu smiled at him. "Always worrying about everyone. About the haven. What if you hadn't made it out of that storm?"

"Pavi saved me," Jae insisted. "She nearly died doing it."

"Pavi?" Datu asked. "I'm asking about *you*, Jae."

"I'm an airbender," Jae noted. "I was fine!"

"Yeah?" Datu asked. "And what did she save you *from?"* Datu's left eyebrow was raised, in expectation.

"Ahh… a tornado? But I was trapped under some rocks and… well…"

Datu pulled Jae close for a tight hug. "By the havens… I can't let you out of my sight, can I?"

Jae hoped this meant Datu was maybe not *too* mad at him. Which would be a nice sign. After all, if Datu didn't trust him at all, surely Datu would have left by now.

And there was more Jae had to say. "You can't tell anyone else. It's not safe."

"I can imagine," Datu said before pulling away, but keeping his hands on Jae's hips. "I'm pretty sure anyone I told would whack me on the head and lock me up…"

Jae grimaced and replied, "Probably…"

Datu smiled briefly before saying, “You know this can’t stay secret forever.”

“I know,” Jae said. “One day, probably sooner than we think, people will know. Even if the secret stays quiet for longer, they’ll be adults at some point. They’ll go out on their own and confront the world.” *And I doubt things will stay quiet until then. It’s amazing Nisha stayed where she was for three years, and no one knew…*

“Hunger isn’t helping,” Datu said. “Everyone’s stretched thin, tired, and hungry, and that makes them push for something tangible to blame, what with the Faceless vanishing into the night every time they attack. And the Brigade hasn’t been able to deal with those rocks.”

Jae nodded. It was all a mess.

Datu sighed and then said, “I’m glad you told me. Even though you’re scared. Even though it was a risk.”

Jae’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “But I lied to you…”

“Yeah,” Datu said. “And I kept things from you, too. About what the other guards were doing. The posters…” He looked down, sadly. “If I’d been more honest with my feelings, when I’m always talking about it… maybe you’d have felt more comfortable saying something sooner.”

“It’s not…” Jae winced. “There’s more involved.”

“Yeah,” Datu said. “Molin showed us that.”

Jae nodded, sadly. “I didn’t know the Commander was going to do that to him. I just wanted to talk him down.”

“I know,” Datu replied. He reached up again and wiped away some fresh tears from Jae’s face. “Annoyingly optimistic, right?” His voice was fond. “Well, I don’t find it annoying that the guy I’m in love with cares about people. Even when it’s dangerous.”

Jae smiled, just a little.

“It doesn’t fix everything,” Datu said. “But knowing people like you are working this problem… That helps a lot.”

Jae knew that was probably the best to be expected. “And us?”

“What about us?” Datu asked. “You thinking of dumping me?”

Jae rolled his eyes. “Datu…”

“We’re still *us*,” Datu said, smiling now. “And… the rest, I guess, we’ll figure out. Okay?”

“Yeah,” Jae said with a painful smile. “Okay.” She sniffed and then ran a hand over his face.”

“Oh, Jae…”

Jae felt like a fool right now: everything was better, and probably the best it could be, but he felt like collapsing… “It’s just… you know, I’ve been *panicking* about it for so long and now *telling you* and oh, havens, Karthik is going to *kill* me…”

Datu pulled him close again. “I won’t let him. If you need me at your back, I’m there.”

“I know,” Jae said. He hugged Datu tightly. “And I think he’ll understand.” *Someday*. But Jae felt this was better. Datu was calmer. Just like Jae had changed his mind, Datu had changed, too. Maybe he still needed more convincing, but a better world was *possible*. And was worth fighting for.

They kept hugging each other tightly, soaking in the warmth and closeness.

End Notes

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