

Was it Over Then? (and is it over now?)

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Was it Over Then? (and is it over now?)

by [Liberty_and_love](#)

Summary

Ozai has just assumed power. At twenty years old, Prince Zuko is sent far from his homeland to be married off to the Prince of the Southern Water Tribe.

But Zuko knows much more than he should, and he must get back to his people before it is too late.

He has a lot of things to do actually, but one thing not on that list is falling in love with his future husband.

Nope

Absolutely not

Make a Plan

Chapter Summary

Before you start reading please go check out the absolutely amazing art for this fic by @littlegayteaboy on tumblr! He is so crazy talented. Both pieces of art are for part 2 :-)
Lastly, the editing credit for this fic goes to the lovely @zukkaberg on Ao3 (@transboysokka on tumblr) Go check out his fic for this event too!

Okay, that's all. Happy reading!

Zuko is having tea alone in his room for what feels to him like the millionth time. He always seems to be alone these days.

“I wish Uncle was here,” He sighs aloud, making the dim candle on his small table flicker. The royal sits in silence for a long while, staring at the closed curtains just barely missing his arms as they flutter from the soft evening breeze

He often thinks himself selfish. Most people would kill to have half the life he has, and yet he can't help but be miserable most of the time.

A tentative but firm rap comes at his door, startling him from his thoughts so violently that he jumps and spills his cup all over his left leg. Zuko curses internally at his lack of coordination but feels thankful that both the room and his pants are too dark for anyone besides Azula to notice. With any luck, the person at the door won't be her.

He ponders as he walks to the door why anyone would come to call on him if it weren't for something terrible. At first he wonders if his Uncle has died but quickly shakes the thought from his mind. Although he has been gone for over a year, Zuko receives no less than one letter a week. For seven years his Uncle has been his only connection to the world outside the palace walls. Well... almost.

“Yes?” Zuko speaks before the door is even fully open, feigning annoyance. In truth, he hasn't spoken a word aloud except to himself in days and he is grateful for the sight of another person.

The young woman- clearly younger than him by her babyish face- jumps slightly and takes half a step back. Zuko nearly rolls his eyes. She is obviously new. He just levels a polite but expectant look at her. She clears her throat.

“The- uh- The Fire Lord is expecting you, your Highness.” She bows low and trains her eyes to the floor. Zuko's light up.

“Uncle is home?” He tries to keep the obvious excitement out of his voice. The woman rises with a gently quizzical expression.

“No, your Highness. Your father has requested your presence,” she clarifies. It is not her fault but Zuko seethes at the title.

“My *father* is not the Fire Lord. He is the Prince Regent,” he hisses. “You would do well to remember that.” Without waiting to see her reaction or hear her excuses he slams the door and lights the lamps around his dresser, which takes longer than normal due to his trembling hands.

Father requested him? It has been years since they’ve spoken. That may seem unlikely due to them living in the same building, but don’t underestimate how cleverly people can be avoided when they are doing their best to not be found in the first place.

With hands still shaking Zuko pulls on his formal robes and leaves his room, making sure to lock the door behind him. He decides at the last second to take the long way to the throne room— Father has waited years to address him. He can wait a little longer.

The doors are surprisingly open when Zuko arrives at the threshold. Bad sign. Those doors are only ever open when his father wants anyone and everyone to overhear. To make matters worse, Azula is already kneeling at the dais beside all the advisors and cabinet members that Zuko knows, and a few he doesn’t.

“Father.” He bows low before taking his seat and tries not to notice nearly every set of eyes fixated on the left side of his face.

“Prince Zuko,” Zuko stiffens at the title, but doesn’t object despite its falseness.

“Now that we are all here,” Ozai begins, his tone even but Zuko can still detect the slight bitterness in it on his behalf. “There is an important message our secretary of state wishes to relay to you all. Zhu Da- come forward and speak.”

A squirrely man with thick glasses scrambles to the front of the room, bowing to Ozai and nearly falling over in the process. Zuko stifles a laugh and doesn’t miss Azula’s slight smirk out of the corner of his eye.

Despite his fumbling nature, the man speaks with impressive volume and clarity. Although Zuko supposes he shouldn’t be surprised by this— it is his job after all.

“A message to the court, my family, the citizens of the Fire Nation, and to all others whom it may concern,” Zuko’s hands nearly start shaking again but he balls them into tight fists instead. A letter from Uncle. “I apologize that I have kept you all in limbo for so long. Such actions are unbecoming of my position as Fire Lord. It is, in fact, that position about which I write this letter. As of this day, the 30th of April 102 AG, I, Iroh of the Fire Nation, do renounce my claim to the throne and appoint my brother Ozai Fire Lord, effective immediately...”

The secretary keeps talking but Zuko doesn't hear it. His ears start ringing so violently it makes his vision begin to swim. His father? Fire Lord? He knew his uncle needed some time away after the death of Lu Ten, and Zuko still wasn't entirely over his feelings of abandonment, but this? To simply abdicate the throne and possibly never come back? Zuko can't wrap his head around it.

He stays that way, kneeling in a pool of his own thoughts until his brain fires at the word "dismissed" as it leaves his father's lips. It takes any remaining willpower he has to stand and bow, instead of turning tail and bolting out of the throne room.

This is simply not happening. Not now. Not after everything. Not when his uncle is the only person left who truly cares about him. Not when he is not even allowed to go out and talk to people who *might* care about him. No.

Instead of returning to his quiet solitude, Zuko decides to become someone else. He jams his key into the lock of his bedroom door and quickly slides the bolt into place behind him. The lamps flare as he storms past them and rips out the false bottom of his bureau. A familiar smiling face stares back at him.

~

When the new Crown Prince reaches the roof of the palace he breathes a sigh of relief. It is the only place he can ever truly breathe. From here, he can see the people he truly cares about. His people, now more so than ever. They are obscured by the darkness and the disadvantage of only having one good eye, but it makes him smile anyway.

Quickly and quietly he makes his way around the garden wall to the small fenced archway that lets water flow into the grounds. Just deep enough to properly swim in, Zuko found out years ago that one of the metal bars will come loose if twisted just the right way. From then on, the night was his best friend. Maybe the only one he'd ever have at this rate.

As he comes out the other side, unable to hold his breath any longer, he notices that he was able to swim deeper into Caldera than he usually does. He internally preens— he is getting quite good at holding his breath. If only he was so good at holding his tongue. Then he likely wouldn't have to do this at all.

Unfortunately, swimming deeper into the city means more people, so he had to take a breath and swim back a while to come up in a less populated area. Once he is satisfied, he quietly creeps out of the water and into the brush for concealment so he may use his bending to dry his clothes away from potential prying eyes. After that, it's time to get to work.

Usually his method of helping is indirect. The city police are by-and-large good people. So, normally he doesn't have to do much more than find some way to point their attention to any passing petty crime that is being committed, and they handle it appropriately. This night, however, proves to be a little different.

“Good night,” Zuko hears the voice of a woman at the front door of the apartment building he is currently perched on top of. “I had a great time.”

“Me too,” The man she is with says, and Zuko can’t see that well but he assumes she is blushing until the man speaks again. “It doesn’t have to end, you know,” Zuko rolls his eyes at his suggestive tone.

“It does, I have to be up for work in the morning.” Their conversation is painfully mundane, but something in Zuko's gut tells him to stay put.

“Come on, don’t be like that.” The man grabs her arm and Zuko's eyes narrow as she tries to twist away.

“I’m not being like anything. I told you, I have work.” Her gentle tone shows that she is doing her best to placate him into going away, but it isn’t working.

“I’ll be quick. I promise.” The man says and pushes them both through the front door of the building. It’s enough for Zuko. They’re not in a great part of town so the building likely does not have security, and there aren't any police for a couple of blocks. Hands-on it is.

It takes him no time at all to slide down the railing of the fire escape and slip in the front door. For a brief terrifying moment he thinks he lost them, but then he hears the man's voice from a nearby stairwell and beelines towards it.

When he finds them, the man is practically dragging the woman upstairs as she tries to wriggle out of his grasp. It takes the prince not even a full second after assessing the situation to knock the man out cold. The woman screams and presses her back to the cold stone wall. Wordlessly, Zuko grabs the man by the wrist and crouches down to haul him over his shoulder with only slight difficulty getting him into a secure position due to the dead weight.

He spares one last glance at the woman to make sure she has no injuries beyond the bruise that will no doubt bloom on her wrist within the next few hours. Satisfied, he starts to walk back down the dark stairwell.

“Wait,” The woman calls timidly. Zuko turns only his head. “What is your name?” she asks. Zuko only turns fully towards her, gives her as low of a bow as he can manage with a grown man slung over his shoulder, and vanishes back into the night.

He drops the man next to the stream he came out of earlier. He wonders for a moment if he should move him further into the woods in case he rolls into the water in his sleep, then decides against it. If the spirits want this scumbag to drown, who is he to stop that from happening?

Satisfied with his night’s endeavors and tired from carrying a grown man over a mile, he decides to head back to the palace. Sneaking in is much easier than sneaking out due to the dense foliage surrounding the underwater grate he needs to slip through. He gets into the garden, repositions the bar, and dries off quickly before waiting for a blind spot in the guards’ rotation to scale the far wall of the palace and climb back in through his window.

Before he can reach his room, another voice comes through an open window a few floors below his. A voice that should be more familiar than it is, but one that he recognises all the same.

“Fire Lord Ozai, are you sure?”

“Yes, we can’t keep letting the Earth King walk all over us. A show of force is the only way.”

“My Lord,” The other voice sounds more worried the more it goes on. “Do you not fear that the Earth Kingdom will see this as an act of war?”

“If they do, then so be it.”

With his father’s final words, Zuko’s blood runs cold and he climbs back to his room as quickly and silently as possible. He is still reeling from what he heard when he slams his window shut and hides his black clothes and mask away once more.

Instead of proper two-piece sleep clothes he opts for a plain robe. Azula would scold his lack of modesty but it is *his* room after all. He can do what he wants. As if summoned by his thoughts, he recognizes a familiar *tap, tap... taptap* at his door.

It’s the same pattern that she has used to get his attention for as long as she’s known how to knock. Zuko sometimes wonders if she realizes it, or if it is more like muscle memory now.

Regardless, he secures his robe and pads across the cold floor. At the last moment he schools his expression. There is a good reason Azula’s schoolyard nickname was “Koh”. The slightest bit of emotion, and she’ll squeeze information out of you like a python.

“Azula,” he greets, monotone. She doesn’t bother responding, simply pushes past him and shuts the door. “What’s wrong?” It is not only her actions that are throwing flags, but her outfit. Usually pressed and perfect, her silk co-ord is wrinkled as if she had pulled it off some forgotten chair.

The plan he had been attempting to put together to warn Uncle of his father’s plan is completely forgotten in this moment. His sister needs him.

“I heard Father speaking about something.” Zuko’s blood runs cold. Could she have heard the same thing he had?

“Azula,” He speaks low and careful, “What did you hear?”

“There is to be an arranged marriage. To someone in the Southern Water Tribe.” They both know the *someone* s of the Southern Water Tribe by name, but Zuko guesses she can’t bring herself to acknowledge this that deeply.

“Why would Father say that? What point would there be? You are his favorite, he keeps you close, and now he wishes to send you to the other side of an ocean? It doesn’t make sense.”

She walks away and sits down heavily on his bed, dropping her head into her hands.

“He wants to foster peace between our peoples. We have been sort of neglecting them as of late.” Zuko supposes that is true, but it is exactly counterproductive to father’s apparent goal of starting another war. Maybe he wants this so that the South will be obligated to side with the Fire Nation in any future conflict.

That would make sense, but he cannot tell Azula that right now. Not until he is sure. If he is right, and this war starts, that means she will be caught right in the middle of it. He internally seethes at the thought of his little sister being used as some sort of glorified bargaining chip.

And there is one other thing that does not add up. That would make Zuko the only heir. He has barely been allowed outside the palace grounds in years, and father intends to eventually put him on the throne? To present him to their people as his heir at the official coronation? That cannot be right.

“I will figure this out, Azula.” he states firmly. At least being heir will mean he has some pull in court. Maybe he could pull for her to return after the wedding. That could work. There is no real reason for her to stay once the allyship has been solidified. Unless she will be required to produce an heir. Zuko shudders at the thought.

There is of course, the slightly more... unconventional option of killing his father after the coronation and bringing Azula back immediately once he assumes power. Irking the South would be far less damaging than starting a war with the Earth Kingdom.

That is a plan he can reassess later.

“How?” she asks, lifting her eyes to meet his. Unflinching. “Father will barely look at you. You truly think you will be able to make him listen?”

“No,” he admits. “But I will be heir. Even if he doesn’t listen to me, the other members of the government will have to, and he will listen to them.” This calms her down slightly, but he can still see the tension in her shoulders.

“Go to sleep,” he says softly. “It’s late. Either way, we have to deal with this. There is no point doing it with a tired mind.”

“Okay, Uncle,” she mocks, but there is little malice in it. Instead of going back to her room though, she pulls his covers back without standing and curls up beneath them.

“Azula?”

“Shut up.”

So he does, and crawls in beside her only a little awkwardly. It has been a long time since his sister trusted him to protect her from the world. Azula moves closer and Zuko takes it for the instruction that it is. He pulls her front in tight to his and places his chin atop her head. She falls asleep almost instantly.

The morning comes too soon. Azula is gone before it does.

Zuko stares at his ceiling as small blades of sunlight slice through the cracks in the curtain and impale his chest. He wonders about time. How many days until the coronation? How many days until Azula is shipped off to a frozen desert? How many days until the beginning of this new war?

And most importantly, how many of those things will he be able to stop? He hopes all of them, but knows that most likely it will be none. Still, he has to try.

It isn't long before he gets his first answer. A sealed letter is slipped under his door later that day to inform him that the coronation will take place in three days. There is no instruction on attire or time, but he supposes those are things the servants need to know. Not him.

Much to his surprise, a second letter comes shortly after the first. Informing him to make his presence in the throne room at sundown. An odd time, but his father was always known for his dramatics. He is living proof of that.

Sundown also comes too quickly. Zuko is knelt beside his sister on the cold stone floor when it does. She doesn't look at him. She is also dressed a little more formally than himself. He can't help but think it is because she feels that she is about to be given a death sentence.

One does tend to look their best when going to their grave.

Zuko tries not to think about it that way. Luckily his thoughts are quickly pulled away as the wall of fire lights and their father steps through the curtains. Zuko notices it is only the three of them. Even the tray of teaware sits empty and unattended.

"My children."

"Father," they both say, and briefly touch their foreheads to the floor.

"I have some wonderful news." The siblings remain silent. "There is to be a wedding in the family." Neither of them flinch, but the ice shared between them nearly cools the air. They knew this was coming, but so soon?

"Who is to be married, Father?" Azula asks, her voice as cold and unwavering as stone.

A cruel smile snakes its way across their father's expression. Zuko braces for impact. Azula is going to explode, and he would rather not be caught unprepared in her line of fire.

"Zuko."

"Yes, Father?"

"You are to pack your things. In four months you are to be married to Prince Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe."

Time seems to stand still. Suddenly it all makes sense. The pieces fall into place. *He* is the one getting married. Azula will be heir. She might even agree with Ozai's plans. Even if she doesn't, would she be able to stop him? He certainly respects her opinion more, but there is still something-

"Father," He begins, voice steady, "Prince Sokka?"

"Yes," Ozai says simply. "Chief Hakoda was unamenable to the idea of his daughter being married so young, and offered his son instead. We still need this alliance, and since the two of you will be unable to produce an heir- you will leave tonight and remain in the Southern Water Tribe."

Zuko wants to ask for how long, but he knows the answer. This is nothing short of a diplomatic banishment. Zuko will be on the other side of the world, unable to produce an heir. Azula will be heir, his rights to the throne will be stripped, and Father will start another war.

He has been deemed unfit to rule. This is the end. He looks at Azula against his better judgment, only to find she is looking at him too. Father leaves. Azula pulls a golden dragon ring off her finger and presses it into his palm before leaving in silence.

It is now in that huge empty room he realizes this cold was never meant for her. The name on the coffin is his.



"Sokka! Katara! Could you both come in here for a moment?" Sokka rolls his eyes but reluctantly throws off the pelt he had tucked in around his legs and places the carving he was working on on the small table beside his arm chair. It wasn't turning out right anyway.

When he gets into their living room a chill runs through him from the warmth of the fire. Maybe he'll bring his carving and work in here instead.

All three of them sit on the pile of furs in the center of the room. It is something they have done thousands of times, but something in the room feels cold in a way that has nothing to do with the temperature.

Katara senses it, too.

"Dad, what's wrong?"

Hakoda sighs. "I have had to make a decision, and it affects you both." Sokka does not like the sound of that. When neither of them speak, he continues, "Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation is on his way here. His father and I have put together a diplomatic arrangement." Sokka picks up on his meaning first.

“An arranged marriage, you mean.” Hakoda winces slightly at the harsh bluntness of his tone, but nods in confirmation. “Katara is only seventeen! The Prince is twenty!” Sokka protests, unable to keep the edge from his tone. Their dad holds up a hand and he falls silent.

He spares a glance to Katara who is wordless for once in her life. Her mouth is hanging slightly open, unable to process what is happening to her.

“Katara will not be getting married,” Hakoda explains

“Well Yue is barely any older! Arnook will barley let her leave the palace but will send her around the world to be married. Typical.” he seethes

“Sokka,” Hakoda snaps. Sokka shuts up. “Neither of the girls will be getting married,”

“Oh,” Sokka breathes out a sigh of relief that is quickly replaced with confusion. “Well then who-” The slightly guilty expression on his father’s face puts all the information on the board. “No. You can’t be serious.”

“Sokka, I’m sorry. I didn’t have another option. The Fire Nation is not a people we can afford to have against us.”

Sokka sits in silence for a moment, simply mulling the situation over. At least Katara isn’t getting married, or Yue. He likely would have volunteered to take either of their places anyway. His father knows that. He was probably just trying to spare himself the trouble of having to amend the agreement with the Fire Lord.

If this is something that has to happen, this is actually the way he is most comfortable with. If he has to be shackled to some pampered palace prince then so be it. At least his sister will get to live her life, and his best friend won’t get carted off to a foreign land.

“Fine,” He says finally. “So when do I leave?” His family seems slightly surprised at his resignation to the situation.

“You don’t. Prince Zuko will be here in a month, you will be married three months after that, and he will remain here.”

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As far as first impressions go. At least the Prince is punctual.

Zuko arrives exactly when Hakoda said he would, not a day sooner or later. Sokka has told himself he will make the best of this situation. There are very few cons actually. He gets to help broker peace, he doesn’t have to leave his nation, and it isn’t like he actually has to raise a family with the guy. For all he cares they can ignore each other after the wedding. Although he would prefer if they could at least be friends.

The large metal ship is a job and a half to get anchored in their harbors which are far more accustomed to the wood of the Water and Earth Kingdoms, but they do it. Sokka notices that there is barely a skeleton crew. Even the captain helps unload the prince's things onto the dock.

The three of them are well versed in Fire Nation customs, and knows that if they approached during unloading, their work will come to a full standstill and be replaced by frivolous formalities. No, it is much better to let them finish their work.

Once the milling about has ended, the captain comes down the gangplank once more, but fully dressed in his uniform now. He bows in the Fire Nation style to the three of them as they approach from a distance.

“Chief Hakoda, Prince Sokka, Princess Katara,” he greets in turn. “My name is Captain Jee. I hope we have not disrupted any of your port’s daily tasks with our arrival.”

“Not at all,” Hakoda says with a smile. “You are most welcome. Once the Prince is settled, my daughter will show you all to where you will be staying until you wish to leave. I am afraid the space is quite large. We expected a much bigger crew.” The man looks a bit startled at this.

“The crew is perfectly amenable to boarding on the ship, my Chief.”

Hakoda waves a hand. “Nonsense, we have plenty of room. You all have been sailing for weeks. I’m sure there is nothing you would like more than a warm bed and a hot meal. Here in the south, we never turn away guests.”

The Captain still looks confused, but bows again and backs up a couple steps before returning to the ship. A moment later he returns, but in front of him is someone who Sokka can only assume is the prince.

He takes him in slowly as the pair carefully make their way down the slowly icing gangplank. Shoes and robes that -while beautiful, in deep reds with golden embroidery- do not at all look appropriate for their current climate. A tall frame that Sokka realizes with some annoyance is at least slightly taller than his own.

But it is his face that forces Sokka to consciously keep his expression pleasant and neutral. A sharp jawline, high cheekbones, and jet black hair are brutalized on the left side with a large, angry scar. It weirdly reminds Sokka of the spirit lights. He thinks it is the most beautiful face he has ever seen.

What feels like a year later, the captain and the prince reach them, feet crunching in the packed snow. If the prince is cold, it doesn’t show. He and the captain both bow again, but only the prince speaks.

“Chief Hakoda, Prince Sokka, Princess Katara. It is an honor to meet you.” His words are polite, but he doesn’t smile.

“Prince Zuko, welcome to the Southern Water Tribe.” Sokka steps forward with a wide grin. Zuko’s eyes widen slightly and it is then that he notices only the right one is able to open all the way. He wonders if all Fire Nation citizens are as easily startled as these two men. “I know it is not your home, but I do hope you will enjoy your time here.”

With that, Sokka gently takes the Prince's ungloved hand and bows to place a kiss upon it. His skin is like fire. When he lets go, Zuko holds his hand to his chest, and Sokka can't tell if he is blushing, or simply flushed from the cold.

“Thank you. I’m sure I will.”

Execute the Plan

Zuko spends the better part of his first night trying to figure out how to arrange his bed in a way that doesn't make him feel like he is being smothered by animals. He can still hear his crew singing and dancing with the tribespeople. He is happy for them, but much too focused on his goals to take part in their merrymaking. Even if it was appropriate for a prince of the Fire Nation to do so.

He thinks about writing a letter to Uncle, but who could he trust to send it? What if it gets lost along the way? What if it gets intercepted and his father finds out he overheard? What would become of him? He is no good to his nation dead.

After a long (bright- does the sun ever set here?) night, Zuko wakes up and decides the only way to help his sister and his people is to prove that he is fit to be heir. So, he will be the Perfect Prince. He will send his father daily reports, and he will prove that he should be brought back to the Fire Nation as soon as possible.



To Sokka's surprise (and annoyance), Zuko does everything exactly by the book. You would think after a week or so he would start to loosen up, but no. He still flinches every time he is touched, and only shivers when he thinks no one is looking at him. Sokka tries to spend time with him, but he only seems interested in biding his time until their wedding day.

Sokka has had quite enough of his posturing. He speaks with Katara about it about two weeks after the Fire Prince's arrival, which is one week after his crew left. Sokka found this strange- not even one person stayed with him. He can't imagine what that must feel like. Across the world in a foreign nation, with not even one familiar face at the end of the day.

He confides his feelings in his sister and -as usual- she has a brilliant idea.

"Maybe it's all the people that make him uncomfortable. Maybe you two just need some alone time."

"What, you mean like take him on a date?" Sokka crinkles his nose teasingly and Katara smacks him with a stuffed animal.

"I *mean* take him hunting. You said he's smart right?" Sokka nods. "I bet he is a fast learner. You don't actually have to catch anything, just show him the ropes. Get him to loosen up a little."

It is actually not a bad idea. So the next morning, Sokka knocks on Zuko's door bright and early. He gazes out on the sunrise as he waits. It is getting both brighter and earlier as they

head into March. As usual, Zuko is already awake and opens the door almost immediately. He bows. Sokka wishes he would stop doing that.

“Good morning!” Sokka says brightly. “I have plans for us today!”

Zuko nods. “Very well,” and steps forward to shut the door behind them. “Lead the way.” Sokka suppresses the urge to roll his eyes. They are in the coldest place in the world, and yet his fiance somehow manages to be colder.

“We’re going hunting.” Sokka says pointedly. Zuko nods again. When Sokka says nothing Zuko gives him a confused look. “Are you going to wear that?”

Zuko looks down at his heavy robe and leather shoes. “All of my clothing is variations upon this.”

“You didn’t bring your hunting clothes?” Gear he could excuse, the northern weapons probably wouldn’t be effective against their game. Then again, what do the people of the Fire Nation even hunt?

“I don’t have hunting clothes.” Zuko says simply.

“You don’t have-? Okay never mind, I think I have some things you can wear.”

“I can pay for my own clothes,” There’s a slight bitterness in his tone.

“Do you know how long it would take for me to make you a brand new parka? Much less snow pants or boots? No. We’d be married by then. You can wear mine. You’re a bit taller than me so if anything is too small, you can wear my dad’s.”

“Can’t we just go into town and buy me some?” Sokka slows down and turns to face him, the wind whipping strands of his wolf tail free.

“Okay, lesson one-” He gestures to himself, to their homes, to the large pot flipped upside down over the communal fire. “Everything you see was handmade. For communal things and houses we help each other, but things like clothes are made by family for family. Everything is from scratch. You can buy pelts and things in the markets but most of the time if you see someone wearing fur, it is something they killed themselves.” They begin walking again as Sokka rambles on.

“So, what was this?” Zuko nods to Sokka’s parka.

“The fur was an arctic fox. Killed it last summer when I was about to grow out of my old one. Gave the bones to my grandmother and dried the meat for traps. The rest is sealskin. Waterproof and warm as anything. It was a big one too, ended up sharing it so it wouldn’t go bad. Three people can only eat so much seal.” Sokka laughs lightly to himself. Zuko just nods in acknowledgement. He is like a sponge, soaking up any information he can get and cataloging it away for La-knows-what. He’d make an amazing librarian- maybe Sokka should introduce him to Shina.

When they reach his home Zuko stops at the threshold and begins to pull off his shoes. Sokka notices the lack of footsteps and turns around.

“What are you doing?” he asks with amusement in his voice.

“I’m taking my shoes off,” Zuko counters defensively.

“You’re going to get frostbite doing that. Come on. You can take them off by the fire. They’ll dry and be warm the next time you need them.” Zuko still looks somewhat annoyed at being corrected on matters of manners, but he does as he is told.

Zuko stops again, this time at the threshold of Sokka's bedroom.

“Come on in,” Sokka teases, opening the heavy lid of the trunk at the foot of his bed. “I won’t bite.” Zuko walks in and stands awkwardly in the middle of the room as Sokka rummages around, and silently prays to the spirits for strength. “Here,” He says finally, pulling out his spare parka, snow pants, and boots. “See if these fit.”

Zuko takes them and looks around the room. Sokka wonders what he’s looking for, then remembers.

“Oh I forgot. Fire Nation and their modesty rules. I’ll be outside, *your Highness* .” Sokka mocks playfully and leaves the room. A few minutes later Zuko walks out dressed in the clothes, but holding the boots.

“I couldn’t get these on.”

“That’s fine. My dad always has extras.” Sokka takes the boots and puts them back in his trunk. He notices Zuko's old clothes folded neatly on his arm chair. He smiles fondly at that, though he isn’t sure why.

The two men make their way down and across the short hallway. Sokka throws open his father’s door with an unceremonious “Dad! Zuko needs boots!” before throwing open his curtains to let the light in. Zuko turns white as a sheet.

Hakoda grumbles and sits up in his bed, shirtless as he always sleeps. Zuko's plaid expression quickly becomes bright red, and he spins around to face the empty hall so fast he nearly falls over. Sokka does his best not to laugh.

“They’re in the closet. Was it really necessary to wake me up?” Hakoda complains but pulls on a warm shirt and pulls out the boots.

“You know it was. Thanks! Zuko, try these on!” Sokka calls. The other prince turns cautiously, his face still bright red, but relaxes significantly once he sees a fully-dressed Hakoda. He pulls them on and shifts a little bit on his feet.

“They’re perfect. Thank you.”

“No problem. You can have them on one condition.” Hakoda says. Zuko looks a little worried as he places a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t let my son bully you.”

“I do not bully him!” Sokka protests. Hakoda only smiles as Zuko nods, then pats him on the shoulder and leaves the room. They stand there in silence for a moment until Zuko declares he is ready to go. “Your shoes aren’t tied.” Sokka says simply.

“Oh,” Zuko looks down at the intricate laces, meant to keep out all water, blood, and dirt. “I can’t say I’ve ever had shoes with laces before.” This man is just so strange that Sokka can’t help but wonder if he ever even left the fire palace.

“They’re to make your boots tighter and keep out the elements.” Sokka explains, and pats the bench at the end of his father’s bed in a gesture for Zuko to sit down.

“Well, we don’t really have elements to keep out in the Fire Nation. It is pretty much just hot all the time. It rains, but nothing more than an umbrella can handle.”

“Wow,” Sokka says to himself and kneels before him. He laces up Zuko's boots quickly, barely having to think as his fingers remember the motions he has done thousands of times. Zuko tenses when Sokka tucks his under layer into the boots. He doesn’t mention it. “There you go!” He stands and admires his work. Zuko shifts on his feet again.

“That does feel better,” he concedes.

“Great! Let’s get our weapons and get going!”

It does not take long for Sokka to realize that Zuko knows about as much about weapons as he does about weather appropriate clothing. Which is fine by Sokka, it just means they have more to talk about. Well, it means that *he* has more to talk about. Zuko is still painfully short when it comes to conversation.

“Like this.” Sokka mimics throwing a spear, making his movements slightly exaggerated so that Zuko can get a clear understanding of what he needs to do. “You try.” Zuko copies his movements almost perfectly. “Okay, one sec.” Sokka runs to a snow dune about ten yards away and draws a huge ‘x’ on it. “Try to hit that,” Sokka instructs once he returns to Zuko's side.

He hits it dead center.

“Wow!” Sokka beams. “Either you’re an amazing student, or I’m an amazing teacher.”

“Or both,” Zuko says, and Sokka thinks a ghost of a smile might just be trying to emerge.

“Yeah,” Sokka just stares at the scarred side of his face, still smiling. “Or both.” The winds begin to pick up and they both pull up their hoods. Zuko needs a little help, and blushes when Sokka's gloved hand tucks his loose strands behind his ear before tugging the hood into a more secure position.

“Okay, I am fairly confident that you will not accidentally kill yourself or me while trying to use a spear. So let’s go!” The two men make their way out into the tundra, backs to the wind. They walk for less than an hour before Sokka finds tracks that they begin to follow. He explains how to track and what kind of animal makes which prints as they walk.

Unfortunately the wind makes the trail disappear before they can find their prey, so they settle between two large dunes for a quick lunch.

“Won’t predators smell this?” Zuko asks as he attempts to gnaw on a strip of blubbered seal jerky.

“Nah, jerky doesn’t have a very strong smell. I didn’t see any predator tracks, and I put us between dunes for a reason. We’re blocked from the wind.” Zuko nods in understanding and goes back to assaulting his piece of meat with his canines. Sokka tries not to stare as he eats his own.

He hears the snow shift, and freezes. Zuko notices and does the same. Sokka mimes for him to grab his spear as he grabs his boomerang, and puts the small wooden box of jerky back into his pocket as silently as possible.

They both stand and listen, backs to each other like Sokka taught him. Anything that silent is not something Sokka wants to deal with right now.

“Did you hear that?” Sokka says as quietly as possible. He feels the hood of Zuko's parka shift against his own in a ‘no’ motion. It makes him feel slightly better, until he remembers the prince's one mangled ear. He probably can’t hear very well out of it if at all.

He is about to let his guard down, hearing nothing else, until a low rumble cuts through the whistle of the wind.

“That, I heard.” Zuko whispers. Sokka shifts his weight to his toes, scanning the still landscape. Boomerang in one hand, the other close enough to Zuko's unoccupied wrist that he could grab it and run if he needed to.

Before he has a chance to assess his options and make a plan for them to leave, the snow shifts in front of him, and directly out of the dune something slams into him.

As soon as he feels the weight, he rolls so that the weight doesn’t cause Zuko to fall forward onto his own spear. Then he is wrestling with the animal. His boomerang was lost in the roll, but he manages to get his knife from where it’s strapped to his thigh. He feels the creature's claws rip holes in his parka and curses. He tries to flip them, but he can’t land a hit while he is so focused on not getting his face mauled by the huge mouth gnashing at him.

“Hold still!” He hears Zuko shout, and he sends up a prayer. Zuko may be an excellent student but he is still a beginner, and adrenaline is likely coursing through his veins, making him shake. He is just as likely to hit Sokka with the spear as he is the large cat currently trying to make him its lunch.

Then, the weight is gone. Sokka gulps down air and sits up, trying to figure out what just happened. He looks to his right and there is Zuko, bare hand on the predator's neck as it sizzles and smokes. Sokka is too in shock to say anything as the animal slowly stops moving.

“Zuko,” He breathes, then it all hits him at once. “You saved me, you’re a firebender. You saved me and you’re a firebender!”

“Yeah,” Zuko says sheepishly, pulling his glove back on. ‘Sorry I didn’t tell you.’”

“You’re so- Zuko! You just body slammed a ghost cat for me! Don’t be sorry.” Zuko still looks unsure. “I could kiss you right now. I’m never going on another hunt without you.” Zuko blushes.

“Well, it was my fault you got attacked in the first place.”

“What? How?”

“It was hiding in the dune behind you, the one I was facing. I should have seen it.”

“Do you see that thing?” Sokka points and they both look at the pure white cat. “They are called ‘ghost cats’ for a reason. They blend in perfectly with their surroundings, and they’re patient.”

“I wouldn’t have seen it anyway.” Zuko states firmly.

“What do you mean?” Sokka asks, Zuko points to his scar.

“I can barely see or hear on this side. I’m sorry. I know that doesn’t make me a very good hunting partner. I should have told you before we came out here.”

Sokka stares between his fiance and the thing that almost killed him and sighs. He walks over to his -thankfully intact - pack, and pulls out two long ropes.

“Let’s just get this thing back home.”



Zuko can barely see a damn thing. Even aside from the obvious, something is seriously messing with his vision. He has never seen snow before coming to the south but still- who knew it could be so bright?

They do manage to get the ghost cat back to the tribe without any more incidents. Sokka grumbles barely audibly about having to stitch up his parka from where the claws sliced it open. When Zuko looks at the three large gashes in the side it sends a chill up his spine.

What would he have done if Sokka had died? Could he have killed the cat? Would he have had the strength to bring the younger prince's corpse back to his family? Would he even have the strength to explain what happened? Would they even believe him?

It is of course far more likely that he would have tried, and then gotten lost on the way back. All this way just to freeze to death with his fiance in a frozen desert. That would be an awfully poetic end for the disgraced prince of the Fire Nation.

Sokka insists that he keep the clothes, and though he protests he is grateful. His breath of fire has barely been enough to keep him warm in the weeks since he arrived. If he sleeps in the parka, if he has to consciously ignore the fact that it smells like Sokka- that's his business.

When Sokka knocks on his door the next morning it actually wakes him up, he was able to sleep through the night due to the warmth of the coat. Zuko is unsure if he will ever get used to the freezing temperatures.

"One minute!" He calls. He quickly brushes his hair and pulls it into a top knot, securing his crown in place. Not that it matters much now. He opens the door to the smell of hot butter.

"Slow morning?" Sokka teases. Zuko scowls but then notices he is holding something. He has to squint through his extra blurry vision to make out a stack of books. Balanced precariously on top of those books is an assortment of still steaming muffins and fruit he doesn't recognise. "I noticed you like to learn, and I love to teach. So I brought breakfast and books!"

How Sokka is always so happy to see him, Zuko has no idea. It makes him a little uncomfortable. No one is ever happy to see him, but he lets him in the door anyway. Sokka sets the books and food down on the desk then shivers.

"Man, it is freezing in here! Why is your fireplace covered up?"

"Fireplace?" Zuko asks. If he knew there was a fireplace in here, Zuko definitely would have used it.

Sokka walks next to the desk and yanks a tapestry off what Zuko had assumed to be some sort of ornate shelf. Underneath is, in fact, a fireplace.

"Have you been sleeping in here for two and a half weeks without a fire? How are you not dead?" Zuko thinks it is a joke, but Sokka looks genuinely concerned.

"Oh, uh" He blows out a little puff of fire. "Firebenders can regulate our body temperature."

"Oh!" Sokka looks both intrigued and a little wary. "Handy. Doesn't that make you tired though? I heard bending uses up a lot of energy."

"The cold keeps me up," Zuko says without thinking. Sokka looks guilty. Zuko means to retract his statement, but he doesn't get the chance.

"I'm sorry buddy, I should have made sure you were okay. I guess I just assume everyone knows these things." Zuko supposes that's fair. Sokka probably has never known anyone who didn't already know these things.

"It's alright." Zuko says, and is surprised to find that he means it. "Let's just get it warm in here before the air freezes our breakfast." Sokka gives a sort of relieved smile.

"Good idea." Zuko wants to offer to light the fire himself. It would be easy after all, but for some reason he doesn't. He just stands there and contemplates what a life married to this man

would be like. What a life here would be like. Despite it being below freezing every day since he arrived, the South Pole still feels like the warmest place he has ever lived.

It was strange at first, but he has come to find that he very much enjoys it. Sokka is still a blur of blue and brown, Zuko rubs his eyes and even warms his hands with bending to try and clear his vision. Did his eyeballs freeze yesterday or something?

“There!” Sokka declares triumphantly. “It should warm up in here pretty quick.” Zuko looks and there is indeed a blur of orange now gracing the wall across from his bed. Sokka grabs one of the blankets off his bed, spreads it out on the ground in front of the fire, then grabs a book and the muffin tray and makes himself comfortable.

“Well?” He says expectantly. Zuko assumes he must be staring back at him, but he can’t tell. “Are you going to join me or am I going to have to eat all these by myself?” Zuko relies on muscle memory and the feel of the fire to sit down across from Sokka. This is starting to get annoying. He grabs a muffin, unable to make out what kind it is and just hopes it is one he likes.

“Okay, so we’re going to start with sailing.”

“Shouldn’t we be on a boat for that?” Zuko would probably fall overboard right now, but that isn’t the point.

“Typically yes, but we had a bit of an eventful day yesterday, so I figured we would just have a warm day in. So- constellations it is.”

“Very well.” Zuko says as Sokka opens the book. He is grateful to not be going on another hunting trip any time soon, and the fire is so warm it is making him tired.

“Okay, so how much do you know about the stars?”

“Pretty much just what I can see from my bedroom windows.” Sokka is probably giving him a look, but Zuko can’t make out his features. He resists the urge to rub his eyes again.

“Okay so let’s start from the beginning.” The open book hits his lap. The navy blue of the page gets periodically interrupted by Sokka's dark complexion pointing out which stars are which. Zuko can’t make out any of it, but he nods along.

“And this is the North Star.” Sokka says after flipping a page backwards. Zuko squints just slightly but still can’t make anything out.

“Got it.” He says.

“Zuko, that’s the title page.” Sokka says, and he looks up instinctively. “You can’t see, can you?”

“What?” Zuko protests. “Of course I can.”

“Yeah? What kind of muffin am I holding up?” Zuko does his best to focus his eyes, but he can barely make out that it is in fact a muffin. Much less the type. He sighs.

“Whatever,” He folds his arms indignantly. “My eyes are probably frozen solid from being in this icy wasteland.” Sokka scoffs but then is silent for a moment.

“When did it start?” He asks, more gently.

“Yesterday, on our way back.” He hears Sokka breathe out a small sigh of relief.

“Okay, that I can work with. Be right back.” Before Zuko can even ask what is going on Sokka has left and returned, holding something he can’t make out. Sokka takes his hand but he flinches away.

“You have snow blindness, just trust me.” Zuko reluctantly lets Sokka help him off the floor and lead him to his bed. “This is what happens when you stare at the snow too long, the light reflects off of it and burns your eyes.” Sokka murmurs to himself softly. “You would be the one to stare at the sun.”

Zuko hears something squishing but closes his eyes and lets himself relax on the bed. It’s colder over here, but he doesn’t dare move with Sokka sitting so close he can feel the depression in his mattress.

“Okay, these are cranberries. I’m going to put them on your eyes. The juice will help your vision. It’s going to burn but it’s better than losing your vision.”

“Well I’ve only got half of it to lose, so no harm no foul.” Zuko jokes in spite of himself. Sokka doesn’t laugh. When the weird substance first touches him he flinches, but relaxes at Sokka's gentle touch. It's a weird feeling, being taken care of like this. Lying down in his bed like he is a child.

“We have to let this sit a while.” Sokka says eventually, “Don’t worry, I won’t leave you alone.” Zuko wants to scoff at the implication that he needs to be looked after, but all that comes out is, “Thank you.”

To his surprise, Sokka pulls the crown from his hair, declaring that it can’t be comfortable to lie down with. It isn’t, but Zuko never would have said anything. He is a Fire Royal, discomfort means you’re probably doing it right.

“You know, my mom taught me this remedy.” Sokka says softly, Zuko can hear his fingers hissing across the fur as he plays with it.

“I would like to meet her.” Zuko says, matching his careful tone.

“I would like that too,” Sokka says to his surprise. There has to be a reason they weren’t introduced at his arrival. She could be in another tribe, or even in another country.

“What is her name?”

“Kya,”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“I think so, too.”

“My mom’s name is Ursa.”

“That is beautiful, too.”

“I think so.”

They sit in a weirdly comfortable silence for a good while longer. Zuko thinks about his mother and gets the feeling Sokka is thinking about his, too. How strange that neither of their mothers are around for them. Although he thinks that Sokka's mom is probably on some diplomatic errand. She probably hasn't abandoned her children like his own.

“You said you gave your grandmother the wolf bones. What does she do with them?” Zuko asks after a while. He’s been thinking about it since Sokka mentioned it yesterday.

“A lot of things. She made spear tips, arrow tips, jewelry sometimes, utensils, anything they were big enough for. Wolf bones are very sturdy.”

“That’s interesting. I’d like to meet her too, if that’s okay.”

“Of course,” There’s an odd sort of fondness in his tone. “They’re together so it’ll be easy.”

“I only ever knew my grandfather.” Zuko doesn’t know why he says it, but he does.

“Why’s that?”

“My mother was sort of forced to marry my father. My grandfather picked her for him, so her parents probably resented us, if they even know about us at all. My dad’s mom died before I was born.”

“Was your grandfather good to you at least?”

“He did his job as Fire Lord. I never really knew him as anything else.”

“Wow, harsh.”

“Yeah, it’s okay though. I don’t really mind. He was no worse than my father.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know how fathers are. They expect so much of you, and when you fail...”

“Yeah,” Sokka sighs, “They’re disappointed.” Zuko laughs bitterly.

“You could say that.”

It's silent for a while longer until the fire starts to die. At least, Zuko assumes it does because he feels Sokka stand and then hears a couple logs clatter into the flames.

“You know, I had a really funny thought about you a couple days ago,” Sokka says when he sits back down.

“What was it?”

“Thought that you acted like you’d never even left your palace walls. How ridiculous is that?” Sokka laughs to himself.

“Not as ridiculous as you might think.” Zuko murmurs. He knows he shouldn’t be talking about this but... if they’re going to be married won’t he find out eventually anyway?

“What? Seriously?”

“Yes and no,” He sighs heavily, trying to distract himself from the cranberry juice gently burning his eyes. “I went out a lot when I was young, but this is the first time Prince Zuko has left the palace grounds in seven years.”

“Since you were thirteen? Why?”

“I had an accident, and was deemed unfit to stand in the public eye.”

“Oh,” Sokka says quietly, then seems to realize something. “So this. This is a punishment for you...” His voice is small and there is a twinge of hurt in it.

“Sokka-”

“No, it’s okay, I understand.” The bed shifts as Sokka stands. “When the fire starts to fade you can wipe your face. Give it a little and if your vision isn’t better come find me. I have to go.”

Before Zuko can say anything else, he’s gone. Taking all the warmth of the room with him.

“Stupid,” He curses himself. He always manages to say the wrong thing.

It’s probably for the better though. Being the “perfect heir” obviously isn’t working. At least while he’s stuck in this bed he can come up with a new plan. He can’t call off the wedding, Father wouldn’t hear of it. He’d be lucky if he didn’t get properly banished for directly defying him in such a way.

Trying to sabotage the wedding would likely only postpone it, not cancel it altogether. That won’t work. He can’t make enemies with Hakoda, Father would have his head for that. Maybe... maybe he could get Sokka to call it off. He’s got one hell of a head start so far.

So, a plan is hatched. Later that night (once he can see again) he makes his way to the chief’s house in search of the one person he hasn’t yet had a proper conversation with.

“Prince Zuko!” Katara stands from the low table where she’s drinking tea as Zuko bows to her in greeting. “Do you need me to find Sokka or my father for you?”

“No actually, it’s you I came to see.”

“Me? Why?” She sits back down on the floor and pours a second cup of tea. He takes the invitation and sits as well, even though the smell of this particular blend is completely foreign to him. It's delicious.

“I was hoping to talk to you about your brother.”

“Yeah, you really upset him.” He winces at that.

“That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about. I was hoping you could give me a list of all the things Sokka doesn’t like. That way I can avoid doing them. I’m not very good with social skills and I am a stranger here. I don’t want to do anything else to upset him.”

She thinks about this for a moment while sipping her tea. “Alright,” She says finally. “I’ll help you.”

Expect the Plan to Go Off the Rails

Zuko has never really considered himself the “plan guy”, but he does find himself patting himself on the back for this one. The list Katara gave him of Sokka’s most hated things is strange, to say the least. He supposes if anyone would know though, she would. So it is time to get to work.

1. *Casual touch*
2. *Invasion of personal space*

Zuko does find this a bit weird considering Sokka seemed to have no problem with physical touch in general. He hugged or shook hands with any and all who came to speak with him. Zuko doesn’t dwell on this long though. He knows better than most that one must choke down their own wants for the sake of duty and perception.

Sokka arrives at his door the next morning as usual. This time instead of muffins, he is holding a cloth-wrapped loaf of bread.

“I figured we can just use the butter and jams from yesterday,” he says by way of greeting, making no fuss about walking right in and stripping off his parka and gloves in the warm room.

“Sure,” Zuko says, a little nervous now about implementing the list. He wants Sokka to call off the wedding, sure, but he doesn’t want to be hated. That would not be very beneficial to convincing Father to name him heir.

Then he thinks about his uncle, off somewhere doing Agni-knows-what. He thinks of his father attempting to incite another war, and decides that one annoyed prince is worth keeping his people and his nation from harm.

“What’s this?” Sokka asks, moving to pick up one of the many papers littering Zuko’s desk. He springs into action before Sokka can possibly figure out what he was writing. Zuko snatches them into a neat pile and places them face down in the nearest drawer.

“Geez, sorry.” Sokka huffs and holds up his hands in mock surrender. Zuko takes a steadying breath. In truth the papers don’t hold much. Somewhere between receiving the list and the sun going down Zuko had turned his temporary study space into a graveyard of letters. Some were meant for Azula, most were for Uncle, none would ever be sent.

Before Zuko had managed to draft a letter with all of the most important details, he realized that any effort would likely be futile. If he sends a letter there is no guarantee that it will reach Uncle— he doesn’t even know where he is. If he sends a letter to Azula, that comes with the risk of Father intercepting it or her showing it to him of her own free will.

Once his heartbeat returns to a reasonable rate, Zuko lifts his eyes to meet Sokka's. There is something there. Concern, maybe? That certainly will not help his current scheme.

"Sorry," Zuko takes a casual step towards his companion, gauging his reaction. Sokka doesn't flinch or move backwards.

"It's okay, I understand. I don't mean to pry." Sokka says evenly. This only frustrates Zuko more. Sokka is remarkably even-tempered. A trait that is very unlike both what he is used to, and what he was told about the People of the South in his studies. While a good quality, it is going to make his task that much more difficult to accomplish.

"Yeah," Zuko decides that returning to his typical coldness is the way to handle this situation. They have been becoming close over the past few weeks. Closer than he has been with anyone besides Azula. It is strange to him, and he wonders if in another life they might be true friends.

Maybe after all this is over, Zuko can return and explain why it has to happen this way. The thought of that possibility puts him more at ease.

"Let's just study," Zuko finishes, and begins perusing the books Sokka brought yesterday. He finds them far more interesting now that he can actually see them.

"Actually," Sokka interrupts, placing a hand on the cover of the book Zuko was about to open, "I was thinking you could meet my mom and my grandma, if you still want to."

Zuko mentally kicks himself. Getting acquainted with more members of Sokka's family would make this whole process that much more difficult. Unfortunately, it is necessary to fulfill his duties as prince of a foreign country.

"Of course." Zuko moves to his borrowed clothes which he had laid out by the fire last night. Sokka's tip about keeping boots by the fire so they were warm and dry proved to be wonderful. It was a little more precarious doing it with fluffy furs, but eventually Zuko had managed to organize them in a way that they were close, without worrying about them catching on fire while he slept.

He is grateful he did. The warm layers were wonderful when he was given them, but now, warm and soft from the heat, he can't help but smile to himself and think it feels like a hug.

Sokka pulls on his own parka before helping Zuko with his boots again. Zuko attempts to protest, but fails to lace them himself and eventually concedes his defeat.

Soon enough, they are walking side by side through the bright morning. Zuko squints at the light, mainly using Sokka's shadow to navigate. It doesn't take long for Sokka to notice.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" he exclaims, which causes Zuko to startle. Sokka stops in his tracks and pulls what seems to be a piece of wood from his pocket. "Here!"

"Uh, thanks," Zuko says awkwardly, inspecting the bobble. Sokka laughs.

“Here,” Sokka takes it back gently before stepping behind him. Zuko’s breath hitches for a moment. He remembers the southern tradition of betrothal necklaces. Was Sokka giving him one now? Zuko does not think he can deal with that. Before panic can fully grip him, his vision is obscured and he jerks backward, nearly falling.

Sokka feels warm as he steadies him against his chest. Zuko feels slightly embarrassed, but at the same time ticks item number two off of the list.

“It’s okay. Trust me,” Sokka’s voice so close to his ear makes a shiver skitter up his spine, and all he can do is nod. A moment later Sokka adjusts what Zuko realizes to be bone across his eyes and secures it. “There,” he says triumphantly. “Isn’t that better?”

“I guess?” Zuko says. He doesn’t fully understand the point of being blindfolded. He is wonderfully susceptible to snow blindness but still, this seems excessive.

“Oh, sorry!” Sokka’s boots crunch in the snow before Zuko feels the soft brush of gloves against his forehead. A slit in the cool bone settles itself snugly on the bridge of his nose, and a sliver of bright light coming through forces him to blink to adjust. “Is that better?”

When his eyes finally adjust, his vision is mostly obscured, but he can see one thing- Sokka.

For a moment, Zuko doesn’t think he is breathing. No, he is definitely drowning in the blue of the eyes staring back at him. Agni, he’d never before noticed just how beautiful they were. Maybe he didn’t want to. He was very content to distract himself from Sokka whenever given the opportunity, but he doesn’t have one now.

It’s just him and those blue eyes with no other task. After too long of a silence, he finally clears his throat.

“Yes, thank you.” He reaches a gloved hand up to adjust them slightly. Sokka grins and pulls out a pair for himself as they continue walking. Zuko does his best to remain in his personal space, their hands even brush a few times which makes his heart jump. Sokka doesn’t even seem to notice, or maybe he is just being polite.

“Here we are,” Sokka says as they approach a large stone building.

“This is the only building I’ve seen made of stone.” Zuko remarks.

“You’ll see why.” Sokka says softly as they approach the open doorway. As they walk through the threshold, he understands. It’s a tomb.

Along each wall at multiple levels are drawings and paintings of faces accompanied by small metal plates for offerings and incense. Some look as if the paint has barely dried, while others have become barely recognizable over time.

Sokka leads them to the back wall where a small table stands apart. Upon it are two pictures. For a moment, Zuko thinks one of them is a painting of Sokka himself, but as they draw closer he notices it is a woman's face smiling back at them.

When they reach the dark wood table Sokka kneels. Zuko bows before doing the same. It simply feels right to him.

“This is your mother,” Zuko gestures to the picture on the left. Sokka looks at him with a surprised expression, as if he couldn’t have possibly known that. Zuko almost smiles at his puzzlement. “You look just like her.”

Sokka brings a now ungloved hand to his own face, as if he had never before considered the possibility.

Zuko doesn’t know what else to say, but he does notice a small basket of incense lying beside the table. He picks two and lights them. Something glistens in Sokka's eyes as he hands them over.

“So often,” he says as he places one stick in front of each, “I worry about the day I will forget what she looks like. I have so few memories of her.”

“I understand that, I think the same.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” Zuko lets out a breath that clouds in the freezing air. “I haven’t seen my mother in many years.”

“Is she...” Zuko catches his meaning.

“I have no idea.”

They sit in silence for a while. Zuko wonders if now would be such a terrible time to implement the first item on the list. Somehow it feels right, so Zuko pulls a glove off and takes Sokka's hand in his own.

Zuko decides to put his plan on pause for the rest of the day. Instead they spend their time on the soft furs by his fire, reading the books Sokka brought. He can’t remember the last time he felt so peaceful. The last time fire was truly something meant to give life and warmth.

It is both strange and comforting. As the sun sets and that fire becomes their only light, Zuko can’t help but stare at the way it seems to make Sokka's dark skin glow as if he was crafted from it. He nearly smiles at the way his brow furrows slightly in concentration.

Katara shows up to check on them near dinner and gives them a strange look that makes Sokka blush. Zuko shoves that aside. It is none of his business.

~

The next morning, it is game on. He has no idea how long his father will wait to provoke the Earth Kingdom. He can’t afford any more delays. He picks up the list.

3. Being forced to spend the whole day in town.

That immediately becomes Zuko's plan for the day. He insists on it when Sokka arrives, saying that he wants to get to know the other tribesmen better. Sokka looks at him strangely but agrees. Zuko links their arms which violates rules one *and* two, but Sokka doesn't seem to mind. So he moves on.

4. Tea and mooncakes

When Zuko suggests a tea house they pass for lunch, Sokka agrees with a smile. When Zuko presses him to split a mooncake with him, Sokka complies without so much as a word of protest. If he thought Azula was the best at keeping her true feelings hidden, he doesn't anymore.

5. Carving

This one at least makes sense. It explains why Sokka hasn't given him a betrothal necklace yet. Zuko could also understand where he was coming from. He also does not like to do things that he is not good at. He assumes this is the reason Sokka hates carving.

Zuko makes a point to stop into a carving shop and look interested in all of the different tools and possible designs. After a while, his enthusiasm shifts from performative to genuine.

"Would you like to learn?" the tall shopkeeper asks him as he nearly slices himself on the carving knife he was admiring.

"That's okay Anaak," Sokka answers for him. Zuko internally smiles. He finally found something that will get under his skin.

"Actually," he counters, "I would love to learn." Sokka looks surprised at this but shrugs.

"I can teach you then."

And he does. Anaak allows them into the back of his shop under the supervision of his apprentice, Willow. Sokka turns out to be a wonderful carver and an even better teacher, with a much more even temper than any of Zuko's former ones.

In the end, Zuko is the one who ends up getting frustrated with his lack of natural skill in the subject. They move on.

6. *Storytelling*

For this particular item on the list, Zuko tries a more direct approach.

“Tell me a story,” he blurts as they are making their way back to his quarters.

“What kind of story?”

“Anything,” he says honestly. He won’t admit it to himself, but as the days roll on, Zuko is becoming more and more contented by the sound of his voice.

“Okay then, come this way.” Sokka instructs. Zuko links their arms again. Sokka gives him the same confused look that he has been wearing for most of the day, but doesn’t protest.

“Shina!” He calls as they walk into a warm wooden building. A woman shorter than Sokka pokes her head out from behind a stack of books and scrolls with a large smile. She runs up to them and kisses Sokka on both cheeks. The two have a short conversation that Zuko doesn’t really pay attention to.

Before long, they are headed deeper into the maze of texts. Sokka searches until he finds the one he is apparently looking for.

“My mom used to tell me this one.” The two princes settle cross-legged on the floor beside each other. Zuko makes sure to be as close as possible, but Sokka still doesn’t seem to mind. Zuko could scream. How is he going to get through to him?

~

One week later, Zuko is nearing the edge of insanity. He has done nearly everything the list said, from the easy ones like invading Sokka's personal space, to ice fishing. Through all of it, Sokka says not one word of protest. One day Zuko even worked up the nerve to kiss him on the cheek as Sokka read him a book aloud. It was mortifying and awkward. He had waited for Sokka to get mad and storm out, but he only blushed.

Zuko's attitude has been prickly at best. Last night Sokka suggested that he have dinner around the communal fire with everyone else. That felt far too intimate and Zuko panicked and simply said,

“I am here because I need to be. I am not a tribesman. I will not pretend to be one.” Sokka took that as a cue to leave, which was just as well. Zuko’s heart ached with every harsh word that left his lips. He constantly reminded himself that it is all for the greater good.

With his abrasive personality along with following the letter of Katara's list, Zuko simply has no idea why Sokka even wants to be around him anymore, much less marry him.

Today Zuko has simply decided to ignore him altogether. Nothing is working. He needs a new plan, and fast. So before Sokka comes to call on him, he finds his way back to the tea shop with some blank parchment to gather his thoughts.

Zuko sits at a small table by the back window and orders a jasmine tea. He stares numbly at the blank pages, wracking his brain almost to the point of tears for *anything* that he can use to get back home.

Before any brilliant idea comes to mind, two young girls with face tattoos similar to Katara's sit beside him and begin chattering away. He rolls his eyes and tries to ignore them, but a familiar name catches his ear.

"...Prince Sokka..."

This pauses his hand as he is about to reach for his cup. Zuko leans slightly closer and is grateful that they are sitting on his right.

"Jet is so hot though,"

"Apparently he thought it wasn't worth it. I wonder what happened between them."

"I heard Jet did something terrible to the prince."

"Do you think he cheated?"

"I don't know, but I think it was worse than that. Hahn wouldn't give me details."

"La above. Do you think he'll be okay? Maybe we should ask Katara."

"No, we don't want to be rude. I mean, what if it was nothing? You know Hahn and Sokka have never really gotten along."

"That's true I suppose. At least he will only be here for today and tomorrow. Maybe I can distract him." The woman wiggles her eyebrows, "I mean, that *would* help the prince, right?"

"You are the worst!" Her friend laughs. "But I see your point," Zuko stops listening and notices his piece of writing charcoal is smoking. He drops it in his cup of tea and leaves the cafe without a word.

Who is Jet? Should he find him? Avoid him? If they truly had a falling out, should Zuko befriend him to annoy Sokka? That might do the trick and get him to call off the wedding.

After walking through town for a while he comes to a decision. He will befriend Jet, and find some way to get him to help in his plan. Preferably without letting him know that the plan exists in the first place. Easy enough.

Before he can reach his quarters he hears another unfamiliar voice speaking a familiar name.

“Sokka, please just talk to me,” the voice pleads.

“Get away from me, Jet. I have things to do.”

“Like what?” the man- Jet apparently- hisses, “Do you have someone new or something?”

“Or something.” Sokka says bitterly. Zuko follows the sound of their voices, coming around the side of an igloo to find Sokka with his back pressed against it and a man leaning over him. Blood rushes in his ears as he watches Sokka try to duck under his arm to no avail.

Despite the way his inner fire rages at the scene before him, Zuko calmly and casually struts up to Sokka's side, somehow still managing to look every inch the perfect poised heir-to-the-throne he was raised to be, despite the thick polar clothes hindering his movement.

Zuko wraps an arm around the slightly shorter man's waist and places a chaste kiss where buzz cut meets wolf tail. Not to annoy him. It simply feels like the right thing to do at the moment.

He has met Jet's type before. Loud, arrogant, entitled. He knows that the best way to get under their skin is to ignore them entirely. So that's what he does. He discreetly slips off a glove so that he may use a finger to turn Sokka's chin up towards him.

Zuko studies his expression and Sokka looks scared, but not of him. When he finally analyzes that icy blue that pierces his heart in a way that Zuko has deemed unnatural- he notices a distinct look of relief there.

It is strange that after all of this, after all of Zuko's rude comments and unpleasant activities, Sokka is still glad that he is here. Something warms in his chest, despite the polar temperatures.

“Are you alright?” Zuko asks. He doesn't know why. His plan is to befriend Jet and use him as a pawn. So he is not entirely sure why his instinctual priority is this. Sokka nods slightly, but doesn't speak.

“Who are you?” The slightly disheveled looking man growls, jaw clamped down on a piece of wheat that hangs out the side of his mouth. Zuko's poised neutrality is replaced by a sharp frown as his gaze snaps from Sokka to the man in front of them.

If looks could kill- Jet probably would burst into flame on the spot, and Zuko would surely try.

“I'm Sokka's husband. Who the fuck are you?” He doesn't mean to, but embers fly from his lips as he speaks. The shaggy-haired man steps back.

“Hey, it's cool man. We were just talking.” His anger burns just a little brighter. Between the conversation he overheard in the cafe, and what he had witnessed himself, Zuko thinks he has a fairly clear understanding of the situation. Jet's attempt to play it down does nothing to make him think different.

“Really?” Zuko drops the hand from Sokka's face and releases his waist, squaring his shoulders to Jet. “That isn't what it looked like to me.” Jet has the good sense to look scared. “Goodbye.” Zuko says with finality, and watches the man scurry away until he can no longer be seen. When his form finally disappears, Zuko lets out a quiet sigh of relief. He can't imagine that barbecuing someone would be seen as an act of good faith between nations.

“Husband, huh?” Sokka's tone is teasing, but Zuko internally winces at his poor choice of words.

“Yeah,” he says, pulling his glove back on. “It sounded more final than ‘fiance’ - if that's even what we are.” Zuko can't keep the slight bitterness from his tone. It surprises them both.

“What do you- oh,” Sokka touches his own bare neck. “Zuko if you want-”

“Forget it.” He cuts him off. “I'm just glad Jet didn't notice and call my bluff.” Zuko has no idea why the betrothal necklaces, or lack thereof, had been bothering him so much after over a month of being here. He supposes it is a good sign, a sign that his plan is working. Now though, somehow it hurts. He needs to get out of here.

“Zuko, please-”

“No.” He can't let Sokka speak. He is worried that if he lets himself get too deep into this, he will want to stay. He needs at least one day away from Sokka to clear his thoughts and come up with a new plan. “I have some things to do today. I will see you tomorrow.” he says, and leaves without waiting for a response.

~

The rest of Zuko's day goes badly. He pores over plans and maps and letters, but comes up empty. How can he protect his people from here? How can he stop this war?

Late into the night, Zuko decides that it is as good a time as any to take a walk. He had spotted a cliff face a little way outside of town when they went hunting. It seems a good place to be alone.

Sneaking past the few stragglers left by the embers of the communal fire gives Zuko a strange nostalgia for home. The cliff face high above the creaking ships weirdly does too. He thinks about his home, his palace. Using the roof to look out upon his own people as he now does the overnight dock hands.

This feels right. Someone to look after from high above. Invisible. Maybe he can convince Sokka to teach him how to sail. It would be hard to steal a ship, but the ends would justify the means. He would return it eventually.

A cold breeze blows and he breathes it deep into his lungs. It hurts, but it grounds him. He doesn't know how long he sits like that, watching the deck hands tend to their work, but it is

long enough that the moon works her way to her highest point. Eventually the familiar crunch of boots in the snow near catches his attention.

He whips his head to the side, and there is only one person it could be.

“Sokka,” he sighs, placing his chin back on his forearms where they are folded across his pulled in knees. “Go away.”

“No. I am *done* with this.”

“Done with what?” Zuko doesn’t bother to look at him, too wrapped up in his own mind.

“Done with you!” Zuko’s ears prick up. Did he do it? Is the wedding off? Is he going home? A confusing mix of both excitement and disappointment roils in his soul. “Done with this back and forth bi-polar shit!”

That confuses him, aside from a few quiet moments of solidarity by the fire, or by the altars, Zuko thinks he has been pretty consistent in his deliberate unpleasantness.

“What are you talking about?” He drops his knees and turns to face him, even though they can barely see each other in the low light coming from the torches below. Sokka scoffs.

“You can’t be serious.” Zuko says nothing to that. “That whole scene with Jet? The constant nights in your room by the fire? You practically refuse to leave my side half of the time and then the other half it’s like you want nothing to do with me!” Zuko stands. Too many old wounds are reopened by the harshness and volume of his words. “Just be honest!” Sokka finishes.

“*Honest?*” Zuko scoffs. “What about you? We have been doing all of the things you hate and yet you say nothing. Not one word even when I ask if you would rather be doing something else. So don’t lecture me about honesty!” It is definitely a mistake to reveal that he knew he was requesting things Sokka hates, but he had never quite mastered the art of holding his tongue. There is plenty proof of that.

“What are you talking about?” Zuko can’t take the lies anymore. He pulls the now crumpled parchment from his pocket and throws it at Sokka’s chest.

“Katara gave me this. I asked her for a list of all of the things you hate so that hopefully one of them would make you call off this stupid wedding.” Sokka squints at the page in the dark. Against his better judgment, Zuko makes a small fire in his palm for him.

After a few moments, realization and a smile dawns over Sokka’s face.

“What is it?” Zuko snaps, and Sokka's scowl returns.

“These,” He waves the paper to punctuate his point, “Are all of my favorite things.”

Zuko groans. Sokka hazards putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Sorry, I probably should have warned you- my sister is smarter than most. She probably saw right through your plan.” Zuko drops back into the snow bank in defeat, letting his flame flicker out. “Can I ask- why do you want me to call it off? Isn’t this supposed to be good for everyone?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” Zuko scoffs.

“Try me.”

Zuko just studies his face for a moment. Is Sokka someone he can truly trust? Surely the south doesn’t want war, but if he plays this wrong a lot of people could die. *His* people. People he is supposed to protect, even if most have probably forgotten him.

“If I tell you, you have to understand something first.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Remember how I told you that I had an accident? And that it’s why I haven’t been outside the palace since I was thirteen?” Sokka nods. Zuko takes a breath to steady himself. “Well, if an accident could happen to me for simply speaking out of turn, what will happen to my people if I say the wrong thing? If you turn out to be someone I can’t trust- people will die. *My* people will die.”

“Zuko,” Sokka takes his hand gently. Zuko lets him. “I swear I will protect your people as if they were my own. Soon they will be, after all.” Zuko scans his eyes for any trace of malice, and wishes that he had Azula's talent for reading people.

“Alright,” He says after a long moment, and tells him everything. Not about how he got his scar, it is still a memory too painful to fully explain out loud. He tells him about overhearing his father’s conversation, about his uncle, about his sister, about the Blue Spirit being the only way for him to truly help his people. Most importantly, he tells Sokka about the kind of man his father truly is.

“Zuko... I had no idea.” Sokka says when he finally finishes speaking.

“How could you?”

“I know I just mean- we have to tell my father. He can help.” Zuko begins to panic, but Sokka sees it and grabs his hands, holding him in place. “Zuko, please trust me. He is a good man. He has been chief for a long time. He can handle this much better than either of us could.”

Once again, Zuko studies his face for any small twinge of insincerity. He even goes as far as lighting his palm to see his fiance fully. Two months of keeping this secret has him on edge and unwilling. Who can care for his people as he does? Can he trust Hakoda to keep them safe? But then... it’s not really about Hakoda. Is it?

“Okay,” Zuko says in a heavy breath. “I trust you.”

Sokka smiles gently. “Thank you.”

~

They do tell Hakoda, but not together. Sokka tells Zuko that he will go in first and give him the broad strokes of what he needs to know. It is the middle of the night after all. Then Zuko himself can fill in the details.

Zuko paces nervously in the hallway as the two men speak, more on edge than he has ever been, thinking that this was a mistake.

After far too long by Zuko's count, they emerge and Hakoda smiles at him gently. The sun is beginning to rise, gently lighting the hall around them through his bedroom window.

“Son, walk with me.” Hakoda says, voice deep and rough with sleep. Zuko is surprised to find that it is him who is being addressed. His own father has never called him ‘son’, only ever ‘Zuko’. He bows his head before following the chief out of their home.

“Have I done something wrong, sir?” He asks nervously. Hakoda smiles again and shakes his head.

“On the contrary. I think you are incredibly brave. And please, call me Hakoda.” Zuko nods, but is stunned by the compliment. “This is a nearly impossible situation that you have been presented with.”

“Yes,” Zuko says. It’s all he can manage.

“But I believe I can help.” Zuko’s heart nearly stops with those six words. Is he being serious? Zuko can’t believe it.

“How?”

“I don’t know if you know this, but my sailors are some of the best in the world. The waters in this ocean are the most treacherous in the world. They bring me news. I know of your uncle. I have even been given word of where he is.” Zuko thinks this is a strange thing to get reports on, but at the moment he could not be more grateful.

“Do you think you could find him?”

“Oh surely not my boy, but I do think that *we* could find him.” Zuko's heart flutters in a strange way. He doesn’t know how to navigate this. “What do you say?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Prince Zuko,” Hakoda’s tone softens almost imperceptibly. “I do not know the life you have endured, but trust that you are safe here. If I have a hand in it, no harm will come to you.”

With those words, at twenty years old, Zuko feels like a child again. Just a boy standing before a father. The type of father a young boy deserves. One who protects him from the fake monsters, not one who becomes the monster.

Hakoda has been a father for many years, and has seen many terrible things. So, instead of speaking another word, he simply pulls Zuko into his embrace and lets him stay there, protected, for as long as he needs. Despite his height, Zuko feels small in his arms.

The dawn of a new day washes them in orange light. It is the day that they will set a course for the Earth Kingdom.

Throw Away the Plan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Are you ready for this?” Sokka asks Zuko as they stand outside a run down tea shop in the lower ring of Ba Sing Se. Zuko can’t help but think that this is no place for the former Fire Lord to be. Simply making their way here had given him the chills. He wonders if any of his people have come to grief in ways such as this.

He can’t think about that now. Bigger octopus-fish to fry.

“It has been over a year since I have seen him. What if he doesn’t want to see me?”

“He’ll see you, Zuko. You’re family.”

“I get the feeling that that word means far more in your home than it does in mine.”

“Maybe.” Sokka takes his hand gently, and there is a wariness to it. “But my home is yours now, and that word can mean whatever you want it to mean.”

In reality, Sokka's words don't mean much. They don't actually change the reality of the situation placed before him, but somehow they still manage to give Zuko the strength to walk through the door.

The smell of more spices than he can name assaults Zuko’s senses the moment he crosses the threshold. The strongest of them, ginseng– Uncle’s favorite.

He hears his uncle before he sees him. That deep belly laugh he would know anywhere sends something rattling in his chest that the prince can’t quite decipher as excitement or fear. Before figuring it out, Zuko simply decides to turn and run. He takes a singular step back but finds himself blocked. He whips around only to see Sokka smiling up at him gently, as patient with him as ever.

“Are you alright, Zuko?” His name on the lips of the Southern prince sends his chest rattling again, but with something entirely different. Zuko takes a deep breath and just barely nods. He suddenly feels uncomfortable and awkward in the heavy Earth Kingdom textiles.

He misses the comfortable light silks he was raised in. Surprisingly, he had never longed for those when Sokka had given him climate-appropriate clothing back in the south. Although whether that comfort came from the softness of the fabric, or from knowing who that fabric belongs to, is anybody's guess.

“Okay, good,” The back of their hands brush. “I’m going to be sitting just there in the corner. I won’t eavesdrop, but I’m here if you need me.” With that, Zuko’s next thought is simply *I love you*. It startles him so thoroughly that for a moment he considers the merit of pushing past his friend and making a run for it.

No, unfortunately it is not just his own sorry fate he is responsible for. So he holds his feet and tongue as steady as he can bear. Zuko offers the barest hint of a smile in lieu of words. Just the ghost of an expression as always. Sokka has become a master at recognising them over the weeks they've been by each other's side. Zuko still can't quite decide if he finds it endearing or unnerving, being seen. He has been invisible for so long.

Sokka says nothing else. He simply sits in the small corner table he gestured to previously. He pulls out a book and makes a show of covering his eyes. Zuko has to bite the inside of his cheek to suppress a smile.

Zuko rolls his own eyes before taking a steadying breath and turning back toward the front of the tea shop, if it can even be called that—more of a shack with scattered tables and a kettle, really. It looks like some patrons even bring their own cups.

Uncle is speaking to a middle aged woman. Both are wearing bright smiles as she pays her tab and giggles as he tells her that the “secret ingredient” is *love*. Zuko resists the urge to roll his eyes again.

Every bone in his body is telling him to turn and run. To figure it out himself. Uncle got away from the palace and cutthroat politics. Who is a banished prince to drag him back in?

Before he can make a final decision, Uncle makes it for him.

Their eyes lock. Something inside Zuko that has been freezing since the day his uncle left thaws at the familiar warmth. He doesn't think he has ever seen his uncle move so fast as he does now. He swings around the counter and makes a straight line for him.

Zuko nearly topples over at the force of his uncle's embrace. He has the sudden urge to fall to his knees before him and beg for forgiveness for what he is about to ask of him.

“Oh, my Prince Zuko. It is so good to see you. Why have you come?” His uncle releases him just enough so that he can get a good look at him and Zuko decides. No. He can't do this to the man who practically raised him.

“I just missed you. I wanted to see you.” It is the only excuse his useless brain can provide on such short notice. Unfortunately his uncle is neither blind nor senile. He sees directly through the lie. Zuko worries that he is about to be scolded, but his uncle smiles knowingly.

“Is it about that young man who is pretending he isn't watching us?”

“What?” Zuko takes half a step back out of reflex and knows that his face is likely as red as a fire lily. “No! Of course not. That's my fia-” He clears his throat, “I mean, that's Sokka.”

“Then why don't you introduce us?” Uncle links their arms and Zuko curses his keen observation as he is all but dragged over to Sokka's table.

Sokka closes his book, looking a bit startled. He stands abruptly and bows, nearly flipping the rickety wooden table in the process.

“Oh please, my boy. Not here.” Iroh swivels his head, but none of the patrons seem to be paying them any mind. “I quite enjoy my life here. To keep it, I must also keep a certain degree of anonymity. You understand.” Zuko can tell by the slight quirk of his left eyebrow that he doesn’t, but Sokka nods anyway.

“So, uhm,” Sokka sits back down awkwardly on the creaky stool. “What should I call you then?”

“You can call me Uncle, most people around here do.” Surprisingly, Sokka seems more than comfortable with that arrangement. Zuko is puzzled for a moment until he remembers a conversation they had a couple of weeks ago aboard their ship.

Zuko had noticed that Sokka called all of the older men on the ship “uncle”. When Zuko had asked him why, Sokka had simply told him that it was a sign of respect, but assured him that Zuko did not have to do the same. He was grateful. He can’t imagine calling someone other than Iroh “uncle”. Apparently the Earth Kingdom and Water Tribes share that particular custom.

Soon enough, the three men are settled around the table barely big enough for their cups and Sokka’s book.

“So, tell me why you have truly come. An old man would never squander the presence of family. Old or new.” He meets the eyes of Sokka, who blushes and focuses on his tea. “But I can’t help but feel there is something more to this visit.”

Zuko wants to tell him. Really, he does, but his hands are shaking so violently that he doesn’t know if he will be able to utter a single coherent sentence.

Luckily, as has been true far more than Zuko will ever admit to himself, Sokka comes to his rescue.

“Uncle, we need your help.” The old man looks a bit startled at the outright admission. He meets Zuko’s eyes which are no doubt filled with urgency and anxiety. Zuko was never one to ask for help on anything. He knows that the simple fact that he has come all this way is alarming to his uncle, much less to ask for assistance.

“Anything at all,” He places a sun-spotted hand over Zuko’s own, and makes no comment about how it shakes slightly. “If it is within my power.”

Sokka takes a moment to compose his thoughts, then tells his story starting with the day Zuko arrived in the Southern Water Tribe. He explains how Zuko’s father sent him as a way to remove him from the playing field, and how Zuko did everything in his power to return as fast as possible. When Iroh questions Ozai’s motivations for this, Sokka falters which gives Zuko the strength to take over.

“I don’t know if this is the exact reason, but it’s the only one I have.” Uncle nods with understanding and bids Zuko to continue.

Zuko recounts the conversation he overheard, how he barely had time to form any plan to stop it before he was sent away. He drops his gaze to the floor in shame as he explains how he was too afraid communication would be intercepted if he tried to contact anyone who could help.

Iroh gives Zuko's hand a reassuring squeeze and stands with purpose. He waves the two young men to follow without word, the urgency in his expression has them following without protest. They are out of the tea shop and walking down the cracked cobblestone street before Zuko dares speak again.

"Uncle...?" Zuko asks as they make their way through the slums. He doesn't know what he means to ask, but he needs some reassurance that he didn't doom their country by waiting so long to get help.

"Hush nephew, lead us back to your ship. We must leave immediately."

"Don't you need your things?" he can't help but ask.

"Not a moment to lose, and no royal blood has ever been tainted by something so simple as clothing. I feel closer to the world like this than I ever did with a crown upon my head."

Zuko says nothing to this. He knows the feeling too well. Something Sokka said when Zuko told him stories about the "Blue Spirit" on a night when neither of them could sleep comes to mind.

"How can one rule a people, if one does not know the people?"

~

A week into their final stretch from the Earth Kingdom to the Fire nation, Hakoda and Iroh are getting on famously, as if they had known each other all their lives. Zuko finds a weight that he didn't realize he had been carrying has been lifted from his shoulders at the sight.

"Well, they're just two cubs in a pouch, aren't they?" Sokka says, coming up behind him. Zuko gives him a weird look.

"What?" Sokka shakes his head with a smile.

"Nevermind. Want to go up in the eagle-crow's nest with me?"

"The what?"

"I think you would call it a watchtower." Sokka clarifies, and points up one of the main masts to what looks to be little more than a platform with a few ropes for balance.

“How do we get up there?” It’s not exactly a ‘yes’, but Sokka takes it as one.

“You’re right, you might not be able to,” Sokka eyes him with a mischievous grin. The same grin that got them caught trying to sneak into the wine cellar of the ship. Zuko nearly threw himself overboard, but Hakoda only gave them a light scolding and sent them back to bed. “Bet you the Blue Spirit could though.” Sokka’s eyebrows wiggle.

“You did *not* just play that piece.”

“I absolutely did.” Something sparks in those ice blue eyes that sets Zuko’s chest fluttering in that uncomfortable way it always seems to when Sokka is around. “In fact, I think I could beat him there.” Zuko scoffs. “Oh, you don’t think I could? That sounded like a challenge.”

“Sokka no. I did not-”

“Too late!” Before Zuko can utter another word, he is watching Sokka sprint towards the rigging. He follows after casually, stopping near the end of the rope, grateful to be back in soft black pants and a sleeveless top. He had felt awkward and exposed at first, but Hakoda was right. Robes were no good for sailing, and it didn’t take long for the leathers and furs of the south to become far too hot to bear.

“I’m not following you!” Zuko cups one hand on the side of his mouth to amplify his voice, the other firmly fixed in his pocket.

“Come on! I have a surprise for you!” Sokka stops clambering half way up the rope to shout back down.

“You can give it to me down here!” Zuko laughs at how ridiculous Sokka looks. Like a baby spider monkey.

“But the view up here is-” Sokka cuts himself off with a shout. He loses his balance and barely manages to catch himself with one hand. Fear grips Zuko’s chest, and before he even fully processes his next move he is sprinting up the rope with all the agility that seven years of practice on rooftops and window ledges allows.

He reaches Sokka in what is likely only a few seconds, but to Zuko it feels like a lifetime watching him dangle high above the deck.

When he gets close enough, Zuko lowers himself and grabs Sokka's legs one at a time, helping him secure them back around the rope so that he doesn’t fall.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” Zuko tries to make his words sound harsh, but there is a shake of worry in his tone that he is unable to hide. He reaches for Sokka's waist to help him flip upright on the rope, but before he gets the chance, Sokka does it himself.

Zuko looks at him dumbfounded for a moment, but Sokka just grins.

“Gotcha.”

It takes every inch of the tenuous hold Zuko has on his temper not to push him right back off and let him fall.

“Yeah yeah, hate me later. Right now though- come see the view.” The last thing Zuko wants to do is give Sokka what he wants, but then those blue eyes flash with laughter and he is powerless to deny him.

“Whatever,” He grumbles to himself as he follows after.

Any annoyance still dancing along his skin vanishes when Zuko finally rights himself by Sokka’s side. “Woah.”

“Told you,” Sokka folds his arms triumphantly. It looks weirdly out of place against the setting sun over the waves. Zuko can’t help but think that if this was one of the plays his mom loved so much, Sokka would be casually leaning against the mast, watching his profile while Zuko watched the endless ocean.

This isn’t a play though, and Sokka’s grin is far too pleased to be considered romantic in any way. Even if it is aimed at Zuko.

“Come sit with me,” Sokka pulls him out of his thoughts. Zuko hadn’t even noticed that Sokka is now sitting on the edge of the creaking platform. He resists the urge to tie a rope around their legs in case it gives way beneath them. Sokka doesn’t look even the slightest bit worried.

They sit beside each other like that for a long while, just watching the light reflect off of the water, and feeling the gentle rock of their ship. Agni is nearly completely swallowed by the waves before either of them speaks again. It’s Sokka.

“So, we should be in the Fire Nation by morning if these winds hold steady.”

“Yeah,” Zuko says tightly. He doesn’t know how he should feel returning home after all this time. Not only that, he is returning to usurp his father. His mind is a mess of contradictions that he has been trying very hard not to think about this past week.

“How are you feeling about it?” Sokka knows how he’s feeling about it. Their hammocks below deck are right beside each other, and he would have to be deaf or dumb to not notice Zuko’s increasing nightmares. Zuko considers it no small mercy that he doesn’t ask. Sokka has simply taken to reaching out to clasp his hand, and rubbing soothing circles until Zuko falls back asleep.

“Honestly, I don’t know. Even with Uncle this is going to be hard. He did legally renounce his title. The people love him. So it won’t be hard for him to win them back over, but my father’s advisors are another matter entirely, and my sister is a wild card.”

“Oh, is that all?” Zuko knows it is probably meant as a joke, but the task ahead of him is nothing short of daunting. Still, there is something bitter in Sokka’s tone that he can’t place. One that prompts him to answer the joke with honesty.

“What else is there?” Sokka pulls his eyes from the horizon and meets his own. Whatever he is searching for, he doesn’t seem to find. Zuko would give it to him if he knew what it was.

“No, I guess not.” They slip into silence again, but it feels awkward and heavy. Not at all like the comfortable one Zuko has gotten so used to over these past months, the one that makes him feel like he could say anything and it would be okay.

“So,” Zuko tries, wanting anything except this awkward air that has settled between them, “What was that surprise you wanted to give me?” Sokka cracks a small smile. Good.

“I just had something to tell you, really.”

“So, tell me. I’m right here.”

“I know that we’ll be in the Fire Nation soon, and I have no idea what that will change. Hopefully it will all be for the better, but there’s no way to know.”

“Sokka-” Zuko interjects, he doesn’t really know why. There is just a deep feeling in his gut that tells him he won’t like where this conversation ends. Sokka places a heavy hand on his own.

“Zuko please. Just let me finish.” Zuko nods. “Anyway, I told myself that I would make the best of this thing we’ve both been forced into, and I think I have, but that’s something that I know is bound to change once we reach your shores. I understand that this- that *I* am a punishment for you.” Zuko wants to interrupt again, but holds his tongue. A survival skill he has come to be quite good at.

“But I want you to know that you are not a punishment for me. Not once. Even when you went blind from stubbornness, even when you were doing everything in your power to get rid of me, I never saw you as a burden. Not once.” Zuko can’t help himself, he feels like he’s choking on Sokka's words.

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying I think you’re wonderful and will make an amazing prince and heir. Your people are so lucky to have you. You are kind, and thoughtful, and resourceful, and you care more deeply than anyone I’ve ever known. About everyone you meet. I’m saying... I think you’re beautiful, Zuko.”

Despite himself, and despite Sokka’s heartfelt words, Zuko scoffs. “I don’t think that is a word that has ever been used to describe me.” To his surprise, Sokka takes his face gently in both hands and forces them to lock eyes. Zuko shivers a little at the feeling of Sokka’s calloused fingertips on his neck. He hopes he hid it well.

“It is the only word they should ever use.” His voice is quiet but firm, and leaves no room for argument. Zuko swallows and blushes. Although, he isn’t sure if it’s because of Sokka’s words or their proximity.

Sokka continues. “Tomorrow, everything is going to change whether we like it or not. I just can’t let that happen without telling you everything.”

“I’m listening,” Zuko says softly, reverently. He is hanging on to the Southern prince’s every word.

For a moment, Sokka does look like he’s going to continue. His mouth opens slightly, then closes. Before Zuko can ask what’s wrong, Sokka is pulling him in.

They connect, and it feels like the answer to a question Zuko has been asking his whole life. His lips are slightly cold, as if the deep of the ocean refuses to leave him, but he tastes like tea and smells like leather. Zuko can’t help but melt into it.

Too soon, it ends. Before Zuko has regained enough sense to open his eyes, Sokka is gone. He catches a glimpse of him as he slides down the rigging back onto the deck now illuminated by torches.

Zuko feels weak in all his bones. He doesn’t know if it’s from the lack of sun - now gone beyond the horizon- or Sokka, who he feels he has been blind to until just this moment. Blind in a way that has nothing to do with his scar.

~

Zuko is pacing back and forth in his room, the door open. Father and Uncle have been locked in the throne room with the advisors and members of government for what feels to Zuko like a lifetime.

“Hey, you’ve gotta relax. You’re going to make yourself sick.” Sokka takes his shoulder and gently lowers him onto the edge of the bed. “There’s nothing you can do right now. If they need you, your uncle will call.” Zuko knows he’s right, but it doesn’t help.

Sokka’s hand tightens slightly, causing Zuko to lift his head and follow his gaze. Azula is leaning against his doorframe with her typical bored expression.

“Since when do you leave your door open?” She mocks lightly.

“Sokka, could you give us a minute?” Sokka nods and bows to Azula as he passes her on his way out.

Azula shuts the door behind him and immediately makes her way into the room. Zuko stands and holds his arms open for her. She just stops and folds her own.

“Is everything okay, ‘Zula?”

“Oh, you mean besides the fact that you disappear to the other side of the world for months, then come back and throw me in the middle of this without any warning? Yeah Zuko, other

than that I'm just great."

Zuko winces because she's right. He has been so caught up in all of this that he hadn't even bothered to send her a letter. He couldn't have outright warned her, but he should have found a way.

"I'm sorry, I just didn't know how you would feel."

"Feel?" she scoffs. "What are you talking about?"

"With all this— Uncle, Father's plans, my coming back. I didn't know what..." He trails off, not knowing how to finish the sentence without setting her off. It happens anyway.

"What side I'd be on, you mean." Zuko casts his gaze to the carpet. "Agni, you really are an idiot." He snaps back up at that, meeting her blazing eyes. " *You* aren't the only one who grew up in this house, Zuko."

"I know that."

"Do you? Because you don't act like it. Father may not have turned *my* face into something out of a horror novel, but that doesn't mean I was exempt from his wrath, and it doesn't mean that I would have agreed to start a *war*."

"I didn't—"

"Of course you didn't. I didn't expect you to. You took the brunt of Father's abuses for me and I will never forget that. For that, I never asked anything of you, never pushed where you didn't want me to. Never asked questions. For *years* I let you keep all our family's pain balled up inside yourself because you wanted it, and because I was too scared to face it. But you *left*, Zuko. You ran off to get married and I didn't know how to handle it. You never taught me!" She was getting more and more agitated with every word.

Zuko hazards a step closer, she doesn't back away.

"I never taught you, because I never planned on leaving."

"But you did!"

"I didn't have a choice."

"You could have tried!"

"And likely died in the process. Then you'd be alone anyway. This way, I could come back." His final words seem to break the dam. Her face crumples at the same moment her body does. She tucks into him and cries. Zuko just strokes her hair gently and holds her tight. "It's okay 'Zula. I came back to make everything right. I'll never make you face this alone again. I'm so sorry." His voice cracks in his final words. He can't help it.

He didn't think that Azula would see his arranged marriage as him abandoning her, but she does. It probably hurt worse because their mother left in much the same way. Just vanished

into the dark of the night. Except this time he wasn't there to hold her through it.

After a while, the tears stop flowing and Azula dries her eyes. She glances out the window at the sun beginning to make its descent.

"They should be done soon."

"Should we go?"

"Not now. I need to fix my face. I look like some deformed baby dragon." Zuko has to laugh a little to himself. Her pale skin is splotchy and her eyes are all puffy. Still, she is still his little sister, and he will always think she is beautiful.

"Go on then, come get me when you're done."

Sokka comes back shortly after she leaves, with a soft rap at his door before coming in to sit on the edge of his bed. Zuko is sprawled across it dramatically. Still fully dressed. Wondering about all the life decisions that brought him into this endless chaos.

"Doing alright there, Oh Fire Prince?" Zuko reaches up and throws a pillow at Sokka's face.

"Perfect."

"Good to hear." Sokka lies across his pillows so the two men make a weird sort of "T" shape across Zuko's bed. It almost makes Zuko feel like a child again.

"I'm so afraid of failing her." Zuko breathes into the silence. There's a hiss of cotton on silk, then Sokka's face is hovering above him, wolf tail forsaken. The strands of his dark hair obscure his face slightly and glow in the sun. Zuko resists the urge to smile.

"Failing who?"

"My sister."

"I worry about that too. With my sister, I mean." Sokka reaches down and brushes a strand of hair out of Zuko's face, he closes his eyes at the touch. "But It'll be okay. You are literally in the middle of trying to fix your whole nation for her. That's pretty big on the scale of big brother duties."

Zuko does crack a smile at that. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. I'm smarter than you." Zuko hits him with the pillow again. Sokka laughs and attempts to dodge, but fails. "And if you ever need me, I'm only a messenger hawk away. Promise."

Zuko opens his eyes, and finally dares to meet Sokka's. He doesn't know why today looking into them feels painful. Something in him is screaming that he shouldn't indulge, because this will only end in tears. Then again, Sokka kissed *him*. That has to mean something, right?

Maybe it will be okay if Zuko pulls him down to be in this moment with him. Sokka had been right, he always seems to be. Everything is changing today. The world is going to look very different for both of them in just a little while. Just maybe, Zuko could hold on to this moment for a little longer.

Unfortunately, the decision is made for him. Azula's knock raps at the door.



“Once more, I welcome your Fire Lord- Iroh!” The Fire Sage declares. Iroh's re-coronation is a small affair. Just the members of the government and the royal family. Along with Sokka, Hakoda, and his crew of course.

Sokka is very grateful for it. He was never a fan of large gatherings, and he felt even better knowing that loser-lord Ozai was incarcerated in the palace dungeon for his crimes against the nation as well as attempted ones against the Earth Kingdom.

Sokka hadn't been there for the proceedings, but the documents were made public almost as soon as they ended. Things move fast in the Fire Nation and it seemed that even Zuko and Azula were as surprised as him when they sat and read the documents together.

Now though, it is all over. One day in the Fire Nation is all Hakoda will allow. He is right, of course. They have been away from home far too long, and Sokka is sure that Katara will rip their heads off about it the second they dock. He is not looking forward to that.

The celebration is wonderful, all flickering lights and intricate decorations. Sokka has never seen anything like it. He knows he should get some rest- he has long weeks of sailing ahead of him. A full night's sleep in a real bed would do him some good.

However, he abandons logic to try every food presented to him and dance with anyone who will allow him their company. The women are all wonderful, the men are a bit shy, but Sokka doesn't care either way.

Sokka dances until he feels like his feet will fall off, and he has no idea what time it is, but he decides to call it a night. The Water Tribe prince pulls off his shoes as he somewhat waddles down the long hallway towards the guest rooms. He is fully prepared to collapse on the large bed until his father drags him onto the ship tomorrow morning.

He is surprised though when he finds his door slightly ajar, and Zuko sitting on his bed, fiddling with the edge of his robe.

“Zuko?” Zuko jumps to standing as if he hadn't heard him enter. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes! Fine! I just, uhm. Wanted to return this.” He pulls out the sun goggles Sokka had given him. Sokka frowns.

“Those are yours. They were a gift.” With those words, Zuko closes his fingers around the cool bone. One last souvenir from his trip to Sokka’s shores.

“Right,” Zuko’s cheeks flush. “Well, goodnight then. Sorry to have kept you up.”

“Zuko,” Sokka grabs his arm as he tries to brush by him. “What is this really about?”

Zuko’s face twists like he wants to pull away, or run, or maybe both, but he stays put. Something warms in Sokka’s chest at that.

“Nothing, I guess I just wanted to see you one more time. I’m glad all this is over.” Sokka drops his hand, and can’t help but feel hurt.

“Right,” He grips his own bicep across his chest. “So... I guess this means you’re free. The wedding is off. Congratulations.” These are the thoughts Sokka has been avoiding all night. The more he danced and got to know these people, the more he thought that being married to Zuko might not have been so bad. That is all over now though. It hurts deeper than he thought it would.

Somewhere in all their wanderings. Sokka had noticed that this- Zuko- might actually be what he wanted. Sure, it is a tad unconventional, but the normal stuff rarely makes history. He has to stop thinking about it, though. It’s over.

Sokka takes a moment to wonder if it had always been. Was it over the moment Zuko docked his ship that day? And more importantly- is it over now?

“Actually, I believe brokering peace between our people is still important. My father’s motivations were wrong, but there was some truth in the lie he told to execute his plan” This stops Sokka’s mind in its tracks. Is he seriously trying to propose right now? Sokka truly doesn’t know what he will say if he does.

“What are you saying?” It’s been months of this back and forth, Sokka is done playing games with him. But then, Zuko says the most wonderful thing.

“Sokka, you are the smartest person I know. Study at our universities. Help me bring a golden age of innovation to every nation.” Sokka’s stomach does cartwheels at the thought. He knows the Fire Nation has some of the best universities in the world. He never dreamed of going to any of them. Still something about his offer feels wrong. Is he just trying to keep him close to toy with him? Did he think he could send Sokka off to study so he would be obligated to be at his beck and call? No. Sokka would rather go back home than be some glorified pet.

“I don’t understand.” Sokka snaps, “Whatever you’re trying to ask, Zuko just ask.”

Zuko takes a deep breath that seems to steady him, Sokka doesn’t miss the light puff of smoke that comes with it, barely noticeable. “Will you stay with me?”

Sokka's face breaks into a wide grin. He throws himself into Zuko's arms and places a deep kiss on his lips, something he never thought he'd be able to do again. He takes a moment to admire the Fire Prince's face, scar and all. It's still the most perfect face he's ever seen. He could spend a lifetime memorizing the lines of it.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading and coming along this journey with me. This is the first time I have ever been part of any type of event and I sincerely hope that you enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it. Fair winds and calm seas to you all.

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