

When your dreams have disappeared

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/26615446) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/26615446>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Avatar: The Last Airbender
Relationships:	Aang/Katara (Avatar) , Aang & Katara (Avatar) , Aang & Sokka (Avatar) , Aang & Zuko (Avatar) , Katara & Sokka (Avatar) , Katara & Zuko (Avatar) , Sokka & Zuko (Avatar) , Iroh & Zuko (Avatar) , Azula & Iroh (Avatar) , Azula & Zuko (Avatar) , Eventual Sokka/Zuko (Avatar) - Relationship
Characters:	Aang (Avatar) , Katara (Avatar) , Sokka (Avatar) , Suki (Avatar) , The Gaang (Avatar) , The Blue Spirit (Avatar) , Zuko (Avatar) , Azula (Avatar) , Iroh (Avatar) , Zhao (Avatar) , Yue (Avatar) , Hakoda (Avatar) , Kya (Avatar)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , Angst , Hurt/Comfort , zuko is an idiot , Zuko is an Awkward Turtleduck , Zuko (Avatar)-centric , at first anyway , bc the gaang's travels are mostly the same at first , except zuko isn't chasing them , Zuko Joins The Gaang Early (Avatar) , Near Death Experiences , Pirate Zuko (Avatar) , kinda sad that isn't a tag tbh , Autistic Zuko (Avatar) , Sokka (Avatar) Has ADHD , Hypothermia , cuddling for warmth , Snuggling for warmth , Content Warnings By Chapter
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Finding Zuko
Stats:	Published: 2020-09-23 Completed: 2022-08-16 Words: 154,271 Chapters: 35/35

When your dreams have disappeared

by [nvrlostword](#)

Summary

When the Avatar emerges from an iceberg, Sokka is reluctant to join him on a journey around the world. He finds himself wondering about an old childhood friend.

Zuko, having been banished at the age of thirteen and separated from his uncle at fourteen, decides to do what any logical teenager would do in his situation: don a mask and become a pirate. Under the name of Lee, Zuko finds himself with friends and a life he (surprisingly) enjoys. But how will he react when he hears the Avatar has returned?

Notes

Title is from the song Jinzou Enemy from the lovely Kagerou Project! Fic updates on Wednesday.

If you haven't read the previous work in this series, you probably should. Otherwise the whole premise of this fic will be kind of confusing tbh

@nvrlostword is my tumblr.

The boy in the iceberg

Chapter Notes

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

Sokka was not feeling the love. First he'd gotten soaked by Katara's stupid bending, their canoe had crashed, and then that weird kid and his fluffy snot monster came out of the iceberg. After he and Katara had been so kind as to bring him back to the village, the kid had proceeded to distract the children in the tribe, completely wreck Sokka's watchtower, and walk right into the Fire Nation shipwreck where no one was allowed to go and "accidentally" send up a signal flare. Sokka wanted the airbender gone, and the rest of the tribe agreed.

Except for Katara, apparently. "If Aang's banished, then I'm banished too," she shouted, taking the kid's hand and storming off.

Sokka felt a prickle of fear as he watched his sister walk towards the flying bison, ready to leave forever. "Wait, don't go! Katara, this is ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous?" Katara spun around, furious. "You did the exact same thing once! Or have you already forgotten?"

"Watch it," Sokka growled. Katara had hit a nerve, and she knew it.

"Um, guys," Aang mumbled.

"Don't you remember when you could make friends, Sokka? Wouldn't you have done anything for your friends?" Aang winced as Katara raised her voice.

"That was a long time ago, Katara! I'm older now, and smarter!"

"Guuuys," Aang repeated nervously. "You should really stop arguing--"

"You've become selfish and a jerk ever since you got your heart broken by Zu--" A loud, resounding crack interrupted Katara, followed by a rumbling noise. To her horror, Katara saw a moving wall of snow rushing towards her village.

"Katara, could you *please* stop causing natural disasters?!" Sokka, along with most of the other villagers, were running perpendicular to the avalanche's path, but he stopped when he noticed Katara and Aang. Katara was trying to pull Aang along with her, but the young airbender had closed his eyes and wasn't budging. Sokka was just about to tell Katara to leave him when the kid started *flying*.

Aang's arrow tattoos had started glowing and, when he opened his eyes, they were glowing too. "Katara," Sokka shouted, "is that a normal airbender thing?!"

"Why do you expect me to know?! I've never met an airbender before," she yelled back. All of a sudden, boulders started flying out of the snow, forming a protective wall in front of the village.

“Did... did he just *earthbend*? ” Before Sokka could get an answer to his question, the avalanche hit the rock wall. Snow was flying over the wall, and as Sokka watched, it melted into a big ring of water that circled Aang. As soon as there was no snow left tumbling down the mountain, Aang sent the ring of water splashing into the ocean.

“Whoa,” Katara whispered in the unnatural silence that followed. Aang landed lightly on the snow, but was looking down at his feet and fiddling with his hands.

“...You’re the Avatar.” Aang nodded uncomfortably. Sokka shook his head in disbelief. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because I never wanted to be,” Aang said, ashamed. Katara put a hand on his shoulder.

“But Aang,” she said, “the world’s been waiting for the Avatar to return and finally put an end to this war.”

“And how am I going to do that?”

Katara paused for a moment, thinking, then said, “According to legend, you need to first master water, then earth, then fire, right?”

With a nod, Aang said, “That’s what the monks told me.”

Katara smiled. “Well, if we go to the North Pole, you can master waterbending!”

For the first time since he’d revealed his identity, Aang smiled back. “We can learn it together!”

“And Sokka,” Katara said, turning to her brother, “I’m sure you’ll get to knock some firebender heads on the way.”

Sokka grinned. “I’d like that. I’d really like that.”

“Then you two will need to pack,” Kanna said. “You’ve got a long journey ahead of you. Your destinies are now intertwined with the young Avatar. Take care of each other.”

Sokka and Katara went to gather their belongings while Aang prepared Appa for flight. Katara decided to bring her essentials along with her mother’s necklace, the waterbending scrolls Zuko had left her, and some sewing supplies. Sokka brought a huge bag of seal jerky, his trusty boomerang and club, and fishing gear. His hands hovered over a pair of swords, which had hung unused on the wall for almost two years. Memories of a smiling, bright-eyed firebender danced through Sokka’s mind, and he closed his eyes. Sokka’s feelings towards his childhood friend were... complicated, and he didn’t have time to deal with them right now. But maybe if he went on this journey with his sister and the Avatar, he could finally get some answers.

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It wasn’t until they’d arrived at Kyoshi Island that Sokka had his first real conversation with Aang. After visiting the Southern Air Temple, Aang had needed some time on his own, so

Sokka and Katara gave him his space. But after meeting the Kyoshi warriors and getting settled in their village, Sokka was the one Aang sought out rather than Katara.

“Hey,” Aang said, nearly making Sokka drop his dual swords. Sokka was trying to get the hang of using them again, but it wasn’t going very well. Embarrassed, Sokka tossed the swords to the side.

“Hey,” Sokka replied, trying to act casual. “How are you?”

“Okay, I guess.” Aang sighed, plopping down next to Sokka. “None of this feels real, honestly. I know my people are gone, but it doesn’t *feel* like they are. Not when they’re so alive in my head.” Sokka didn’t know what to say. How were you supposed to console someone who just found out everyone they knew and loved was dead? Fortunately for Sokka, Aang kept talking. “Katara said you guys lost your mom,” he continued. With a tilt of his head, Aang asked, “Was it the Fire Nation, too?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it was.” Sokka closed his eyes and inhaled the fresh night air, remembering the day the Southern Raiders had returned. A few months after Zuko had left the South Pole, Sokka had seen the black smoke again and foolishly thought his friend had returned. He had run towards the ship, ready to pull Zuko into a huge hug, when he’d almost been trampled by Yon Rha’s forces.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Aang said simply. The monks had told him to say that to someone who was grieving. “I wasn’t raised by my parents, but it must be hard to have your mom die when you’re young.”

“What? Oh, no, they didn’t kill Mom. At least not there. As far as I know, she’s still in some top-secret prison in the Fire Nation,” Sokka explained. “Though, she might as well be dead.”

“Hey, don’t say that,” Aang said, suddenly getting to his feet. “I’m sure she’s okay. How long ago was this?”

“About four years ago.” Aang’s face fell, but he quickly perked back up again. Sokka found his unbridled optimism kind of annoying sometimes.

“Well I can help you find her! Appa and I can get you anywhere.”

Sokka scoffed. “Yeah, sure. Do you and Appa know where any maximum security Fire Nation prisons are? To even have a chance of finding her, we’d need to find someone who knows the Fire Nation inside and out.”

You already know someone like that, a little voice said in Sokka’s head. He tried to shake the thought away, but it stuck with him like a burr on the coat of a polar bear dog.

Aang started to say something, but Sokka held up a hand and said, “I know you’re just trying to help, but I need some time alone, okay?” Aang frowned, but left the room quietly, much to Sokka’s relief.

As Sokka retrieved his blades, his bare feet pressed into the wooden floor. Back home, Sokka would only take his shoes off when he went to bed or took a bath, but here he didn't have to worry about his toes freezing off. It was weird.

Moonlight glinted off of the swords as Sokka picked them up. The weight was familiar in his hands, but also completely foreign. There had been a time when Sokka had nearly mastered using these swords, but he stopped practicing after his father left for war. Somehow, using swords that the enemy had given him seemed wrong.

Sokka frowned and shook his head slightly. Zuko had never been the enemy- it had always been the Fire Nation, who Sokka saw as nameless, faceless people serving a cruel, inhuman master. But that master was Zuko's *father*. Zuko, Sokka's best friend, was so inextricably linked to the evil regime that had taken Sokka's mother and made his father go off to war.

Sokka found himself wondering about the Fire Nation prince for the first time in years. Did Zuko ever think about him? The few letters Sokka had gotten from him had been stiff, formal, and hadn't sounded like Zuko at all, and they had abruptly stopped just before the Southern Raiders returned. In his mind, Sokka knew that Zuko was probably sitting in the Fire Nation palace right now, laughing with a new group of friends. But in a stubborn part of Sokka's heart, a vision of Zuko frowning down at his feet in the middle of his friend group, thinking of his friend in the Southern Water Tribe, persisted despite Sokka's best efforts.

Once Sokka started thinking about Zuko, he was unable to stop. All night, Sokka lay awake, plagued by questions about the young prince. Did Zuko still have his little boomerang carving? Had he continued his training with swords, or had he switched entirely to firebending? Was Zuko still just as warm to the touch? Did Zuko's hair grow long enough to pull back into a ponytail, and did that little strand by his forehead still come loose?

Irritated by all the useless questions his mind came up with, Sokka was glad to finally see the first rays of morning light. He caught sight of the girl who'd interrogated them yesterday and, curious, decided to follow her into a building on the outskirts of the village.

"Hey, Suki," Sokka said, waiting at the doorway. "Can I come in?"

Suki startled at the sound of his voice, but gestured for him to come inside. After agreeing to train him, Suki had become a lot more friendly. "You're not in uniform," she teased, punching him in the arm. "Am I going to have to stop training you?"

"No, I- I'm not here for training," Sokka admitted.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"Yeah. I was thinking about... stuff."

"Me too," Suki said, staring at the ceiling. "I was thinking about my mother."

"Really?" Sokka winced at the sound of his voice. "I mean- that's one of the things I was thinking about. My mother, not yours. She was taken in a Fire Nation raid a few years back."

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Suki said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “My mother died during her second pregnancy when I was about a year old. I never knew her.”

“Sorry.”

“When I was a child, I believed Avatar Kyoshi was my mother. I started my training younger than most, under two older girls. My father did his best to raise me, of course, but he could only do so much. The warriors I trained under taught me everything I know, and I think of them as my sisters. I had everything I needed in my childhood, but I still find myself wondering what could have been.” Suki frowned, running her thumb across her index finger. “Is that wrong? To long for something I could never have, and didn’t really need?”

“No, I don’t think so. Every day, I think about how my life would’ve been different if my father hadn’t left for war, or if my mother wasn’t taken.” Now, Sokka wondered about if Zuko had never left. Annoyed, Sokka shook his head, sending the unwelcome thought away.

“Don’t get lost in it.” Sokka looked up.

“What?”

“Don’t let yourself get so lost in thoughts of what could have been that you lose sight of the present.” Suki was staring at Sokka with intense eyes. “For better or for worse, you’re here now. Make the most of it.” Suki stood and offered Sokka her hand. “Now come on, let’s train.”

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After a couple of weeks on Kyoshi Island (and Aang nearly getting eaten by the Unagi), the trio was getting ready to depart. While Katara and Aang packed the generous amount of supplies the islanders provided, Sokka went to have one last conversation with Suki. She was sitting on the beach with her eyes closed, leaning against a tree. It was the first time Sokka had seen her without her makeup on, and for a moment, he thought she was asleep.

“Hi, Sokka.” Sokka jumped. So she wasn’t asleep after all. Suki sat up and stretched, then patted the ground next to her, inviting Sokka to sit. “Are you guys leaving already? I thought you were still getting packed,” she said as Sokka settled next to her.

“No, they’re still getting Appa ready. Last I saw, Aang was doing a scaled-up version of his marble trick with some of the coconuts.” They shared a laugh, but Sokka quickly cut it off. In a more serious tone, he said, “I’d like to apologize for how I acted when I got here. I treated you like a girl when I should have treated you like a warrior.”

With an unreadable expression, Suki replied, “I am a warrior.” To Sokka’s surprise, Suki leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “But I’m a girl, too.” A slight blush spread across Sokka’s face as he touched where Suki had kissed.

“You could come with us, you know,” Sokka blurted out. At Suki’s hesitant smile, he added, “I mean it. We could use someone like you, and it’d be nice to have another nonbender around.”

“Traveling with the Avatar is a pretty tempting offer, but I’m not going to leave my other warriors behind.” Sokka knew this would be the answer, but he still felt let down. Sensing Sokka’s disappointment, Suki grinned and punched his arm. “Sorry, but you’re no pirate.”

“Huh?”

Suki blinked in surprise. “No one’s told you this story yet?”

“What story?”

“A few months ago, there was this Fire Nation Commander who tried to attack us. We fought back, of course, but there were just too many of them. Me and the other warriors were cornered and were about to surrender, but then it happened.”

“What happened?” Sokka was leaning forwards in anticipation.

“Out of nowhere, the pirates appeared and ambushed the Fire Nation soldiers. Their distraction helped us drive the soldiers off, and the Fire Nation hasn’t come back since. I went to go fight the Commander, but the pirates’ leader was already fighting him. All of them were skilled fighters, but this guy was something else. He was dancing circles around the Commander, who seemed to be a pretty powerful firebender but was no match for this guy.” Suki giggled. “At one point, he even cut off one of the Commander’s sideburns.”

Sokka sat up with a jolt. “No way,” he muttered, a grin crossing his face. “There’s no way.” At Suki’s confused stare, Sokka asked, “Was his name Zhao? Commander Zhao?”

“Yes, how’d you know?” Sokka burst into a full-on belly laugh, rendering him speechless for at least a minute.

“I met that guy once,” Sokka wheezed once he was able to talk. “He’s a real jerk, and he deserved to get his sideburn cut off.” Sokka’s sides shook with laughter as he thought of Zhao with only one sideburn. “Tui and La, I wish I’d been there.”

With a slight smirk, Suki said, “Yeah, he got what he deserved, and it was great. Anyway, we brought the pirates back to our village and thanked them for helping us. It seemed like they had some history with Zhao and were there to attack him rather than to help us. They explained that they had all been scorned by the Fire Nation one way or another, so their leader recruited them to help him loot and plunder Fire Nation ships.” Glancing at the sheathed swords on Sokka’s back, she added, “You know, their leader used dual swords too.”

“Really?!” Sokka’s voice came out as a squeal. He tried to cover it with a forced cough, but he wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Yeah. I talked to him a couple of times, he seemed cool, though he was pretty obsessed with honor and justice. Everyone was wondering what made him so against the Fire Nation, but then he took off his mask and had this huge burn scar on his face. When he and his crew left, the women who trained me went with him.”

Sokka found himself completely intrigued by this mysterious heroic pirate. This story sounded just like one of his dad's tall tales, but Sokka could tell Suki was being genuine. "So, does this guy have a name or what?" Suki nodded, then smiled.

"The Blue Spirit."

Chapter End Notes

i know you expected zukka but instead you get suki backstory

zuko cutting off one of zhao's sideburns in battle was too good a concept to resist

On the Blue Spirit's ship

Chapter Notes

BAM! Double update, baby!

Credit for the isopup species goes to @muffinlance! (If you haven't read *Salvage* by @muffinlance, what are you doing here? go read it!)

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

Far away from Kyoshi Island, the Blue Spirit was sitting on the deck of his ship, discussing various methods of combat with his crew.

“I’m telling you, a sharpened boomerang is the only weapon you need,” an older man said. If his dark skin and brown eyes didn’t give away his Water Tribe heritage, his mannerisms and way of speaking certainly did. He was a natural storyteller and spoke with a natural confidence and grace. With a familiar glimmer in his eyes, he said, “You know, I once took out an entire squad of firebenders with only my boomerang and a club.”

A couple of the newer crew members stared in wonder, but a dark-haired woman scoffed and rolled her icy blue eyes. “Come on, Iluak. We’ve heard that story a million times.” She was sitting on a barrel, sharpening a whale-tooth knife.

“Yeah! And you should be on my side, anyway,” a younger man pouted. Iluak shrugged.

“Just because I’m a waterbender doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the effectiveness of regular weapons. Besides, not all of us had masters who could teach us.”

“That’s no excuse! You’re learning from Master Nattiq now, and I say waterbending is the best way of fighting! You should respect your teacher’s opinions,” Nattiq insisted, setting the levitating bubble of water he’d been bending with in an open jar.

“I can respect that your opinions are wrong.” Face flushed, Nattiq crossed his arms and glared up at his troublesome pupil, who had fifteen years and at least four inches on Nattiq. Iluak grinned and, with a flick of his hand, splashed Nattiq with the water he’d been training with.

“Why, you-“ A pillar of water rose from the sea as Nattiq charged towards Iluak. Before he could reach Iluak, Nattiq was easily restrained by a green-eyed woman, who had been watching the exchange with a bemused expression. “Come on, Shizu, let me go! I can take him!” Shizu didn’t budge.

“Nattiq, you remember what happened last time you got into a fight on the ship,” the woman who had been sitting next to Shizu said, getting up to stare sternly at Nattiq. Despite being

younger than all of the waterbenders, she had a motherly way about her that made them listen to her. “If you sink us again, you’re going to spend the next month on laundry duty.”

“‘Again’? This ship has sunk before?” One of the newcomers nervously ran a hand through his hair.

Iluak’s deep, jolly laugh rang out through the air. “Don’t worry, kid,” he said, putting a calloused hand on the newcomer’s shoulder. “It’s nothing a couple of South Pole waterbenders can’t handle.” Iluak stuck his tongue out at Nattiq, who stormed off to the other side of the deck.

“Kesuk, you are now my favorite student,” Nattiq exclaimed, turning his back on Iluak. Kesuk shrugged, indifferent about her new status, and went back to sharpening her knife.

“Thank you for holding him back, dear.” Shizu smiled softly as her girlfriend kissed her cheek.

“So what about you, Mine?” Shizu’s girlfriend turned to Iluak at the sound of her name. “What’s better, boomerang or waterbending?”

“Depends,” Mine said after a moment of thought. Tapping her chin, she explained, “While bending is a powerful ability, I find that a good weapon can be just as effective. There aren’t many earthbenders on Kyoshi Island, but I could beat any of them in a fight. But I’ve never fought any waterbenders or used a boomerang before, so I’d say I’m not qualified to answer. What about you, love? Boomerang or waterbending?” Mine nudged Shizu, who opened her war fans in response. Mine laughed. “Fan, huh? I have to say I agree with you on that one.”

“How about you, Lee?” The newcomers hushed and muttered amongst themselves when they realized Iluak was addressing the Blue Spirit himself. Perfectly balanced on the edge of the ship, the Blue Spirit had been staring into the ocean with his unscarred side facing the group. His intense eyes were scanning the waves, making the newcomers wonder what he’d been thinking about. Was he thinking about whatever traumatic event gave him his scar, or could he be thinking about honor and justice? Maybe he was thinking about throwing one of them overboard?

In reality, Zuko was looking for his isopup, Nikko. She had gone out for a swim and disappeared under the surface a couple minutes ago, and Zuko was starting to get worried. He let out a quiet sigh of relief when he saw her fluffy head breach the water’s surface. It was only after Zuko was sure she was swimming back to the *Unagi* that he answered the question.

“Boomerang.” Iluak cackled, and Nattiq buried his face in his hands.

“Come on, Lee, you of all people should understand the importance of bending,” Nattiq protested.

With a shrug, Zuko said, “In my experience, boomerangs are more dangerous. People are more likely to underestimate nonbenders, which leaves them vulnerable.”

“Nobody understands me,” Nattiq sighed.

“I’d have to choose boomerang over fan, too. Sorry guys,” Zuko said to Mine and Shizu.

Mine scoffed. “Bold words from someone who’s never used either. Have you ever even held a boomerang before?”

One side of Zuko’s mouth quirked upwards, but before he could reply, Iluak decided that this was a good opportunity for a lesson. “Well,” Iluak said loudly, pulling out his own boomerang, “now is a perfect time to do so!” Iluak offered the boomerang to Zuko, who purposely grabbed it the wrong way. Zuko rather liked the friendly (though at times, a little overbearing) Water Tribe man, and thought that having his own student would make Iluak happy.

“Like this?”

“No no no, you’re holding the sharp end, son,” Iluak said, flipping the boomerang and putting it back in Zuko’s hands. “The boomerang is a rarely used and powerful weapon, only able to be wielded by someone with extreme skill, such as myself.” Zuko started to position himself to throw it, but Iluak stopped him. “Hey, I don’t want to lose that! A beginner like you would end up tossing it in the ocean.”

“This month alone, I’ve seen you drop it in the ocean four times,” Kesuk said without looking up from her knife. Nattiq noticeably perked up as he realized someone was finally on his side.

Scowling, Iluak replied, “That was different! I was playing fetch with Nikko.”

“Sure.”

“I was!”

“Lee, just throw the boomerang,” Kesuk said. “Your dog can always go get it, anyway. I don’t understand why Iluak is so concerned about losing an object that floats in water.”

Peering up at the mast, Zuko said, “And what if I catch it? What if I’m able to cut one of the sails free?”

“I know you’ve seen me do that trick before, and you’re very impressed,” Iluak said, puffing out his chest, “but you won’t be able to do that. The boomerang will end up in the ocean.”

“It’ll be funny to see him try, though,” Mine chimed in. “Don’t hurt anyone, Lee.”

“Trust me, I won’t.” Zuko smirked and threw the boomerang exactly the way he’d learned all those years ago. Though it had been a while since Zuko had practiced with a real boomerang, he used his fire boomerang technique often enough that the motion was still familiar to him. His smirk grew into a grin as the boomerang cut through both of the ropes holding the top sail in place, sending the sail tumbling down.

But Zuko wasn’t so used to the catching part (after all, who in their right mind would try to catch a boomerang made of fire?) and the boomerang went flying past him when he tried to catch it. Zuko swore as he tumbled into the deck, but a thrill of joy went through him when

he saw the boomerang lodged in one of the ship's walls. Still lying on the deck, Zuko pumped his arms in the air victoriously. "Not in the ocean!"

"Son of a- how did you do that?!" Shizu helped Zuko up while the rest of the crew stared incredulously.

With a shrug and a grin, Zuko said, "I told you once that I had a history with one of the Southern Water Tribes, Iluak." Memories of the happiest time in his life flooded Zuko, and he smiled, which was a rare sight from him. But Zuko's eyes became downcast and his expression quickly soured as he remembered what had happened when he came home. "I'm going to my cabin," Zuko said, all traces of his brief happiness gone.

"Great, now look what you did," Kesuk said with an accusing glare at Iluak. "You made him upset."

"How was I supposed to know that he was an expert on boomerangs?! A flytrap clam is more likely to open up than he is!" Still, Iluak felt bad. He'd obviously triggered something unpleasant in his young captain, and he wanted to make it right. In a softer tone, he said, "I'm going to go talk to him."

"Good idea. Nattiq, this is also partially your fault, so you're going to help me reef the sails." Nattiq groaned, but joined Kesuk as she climbed the mast.

Below deck, Iluak gently knocked on the captain's door. "Can I come in?" Upon hearing a noncommittal grunt from inside, Iluak entered the captain's quarters.

Most crew members decorated their rooms with either things from home or objects they picked up on their journey as a way of expressing themselves or making the *Unagi* feel more like home. Zuko did not. His walls were bare and he only had the default furniture that every crew member was provided. The only proof that this was his room was the isopup bed next to his own and the dual swords leaning against the wall.

Zuko himself was lying on his bed with Nikko, absentmindedly stroking her carapace with one hand. His eyes were fixed on a bone carving in his other hand. As Iluak approached him, he realized it was a boomerang.

"There was a time where I lived with one of the Southern Water Tribes," Zuko said, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I ended up in the South Pole completely by accident, through a series of coincidences and poorly planned decisions. But the chief's family took me in like I was one of their own." Iluak raised an eyebrow.

"Even though you're a firebender?" Only a few members of his crew knew that Zuko was a firebender, and he liked to keep that number as low as possible. Somehow, all of the crew trusted him enough to join him, despite Zuko's obvious Fire Nation heritage, but Zuko had reservations about revealing his bending abilities. All of these people had been hurt by the Fire Nation, particularly firebenders. Though Zuko's burn scar was the most visible, it was hardly the only one among the crew. If he revealed that he was a firebender in front of the wrong person, they would hate him.

“Yeah. I was just a kid at the time, I wasn’t really a threat. Actually, I ended up helping them a lot.” Zuko closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “But that doesn’t matter now. I betrayed them.”

Iluak didn’t speak for a moment, instead taking in the guilt etched into Zuko’s face, the way he squeezed the carved bone in his hand, the way his teeth dug into his lip. “Did you want to hurt them?”

Zuko sat up quickly, startling Nikko. “Of course not! I never meant to-“ Zuko broke off mid-sentence and slumped into the wall, looking more miserable than before. “It doesn’t matter,” Zuko said sullenly. “It’s still my fault.”

“But you didn’t want to cause them harm.” Iluak had expected as much. He grabbed the mirror sitting on the nearby desk and placed it in Zuko’s lap, then touched Zuko’s forehead. Zuko watched the mirror as his mark of the trusted appeared, then made a face at his reflection. “Lee,” Iluak slowly said, “all people of the Water Tribes are considered blessed by Tui and La, but it’s exceptionally rare for one of them to receive a spirit mark. As far as I know, an outsider had never been touched by the spirits until you. The spirits looked inside you and found you worthy of their blessing.”

“They made a mistake.”

“Nonsense. Tui and La are the past and future, forever linked by the present. When they judge you, they see who you were, who you are, and who you will become. They saw all of you, Lee, and they found you worthy.” Zuko still looked unconvinced. Iluak sighed and said, “No matter what anyone else thinks, you’ll always be welcome in my tribe, at least.”

“Thank you, Iluak.” Zuko didn’t smile, but Iluak could tell that he appreciated the sentiment.

“No problem, Blue.” Zuko’s face settled into its usual scowl at the nickname he hated, and Iluak felt a little bit of relief, knowing that Zuko would be okay. “We’ll be heading into port soon. You had a letter you wanted to send to someone, right? I can take it for you if you want.”

Zuko stiffened. His crew didn’t even know his real name, and he imagined that if Iluak found out he was carrying a letter to the Dragon of the West, he’d drop it as if it was a hot coal. No, Zuko would have to carry this letter himself. “I’ll be fine. I just need some time alone. Can you come by again when we’re docked?”

“Of course.” Iluak left, closing the door behind him, and Zuko sighed. He spent the next hour playing with Nikko, who always seemed to know how to cheer him up. She had been just a tiny pup when Zuko had received her almost three years ago, but now she was nearly full grown. Nikko had always been sweet, and was never more so than when Zuko was sad. Somehow, the isopup knew when Zuko was sad, and she would rest her soft chin on whatever part of Zuko was accessible to her until he petted her, indicating it was okay for her to jump up with him. Nikko would stay curled up with Zuko, occasionally licking his hands, until he felt better.

Zuko felt the boat's engine stop, and he knew it was time to get up. "Good girl," he whispered, scratching Nikko's chin. He picked the isopup up and gently set her down on her own bed on the floor, then closed the door behind him. As soon as Nikko heard his footsteps retreating, she jumped back up on Zuko's bed.

"Glad to see you're feeling better, Lee," Mine said as they walked off the ship.

"I dunno how you can tell," Kesuk said with a shrug. "He's always got such a sour expression." Zuko shot her a withering glare, but suppressed his urge to shoot sparks at her. They were in an Earth Kingdom port, and Zuko didn't want to call more attention to his group than he had to.

"Hey! You there, with the scar on your face!" So much for not drawing attention. Zuko let out a prolonged sigh and turned towards the shout, which had come from a group of three men who were now approaching him.

"You should try this moisturizing cream," one of them said, shoving a green vial in Zuko's face. "It's good for burn scars like yours. Tell me, you been in battle with a real firebender? What's it like?"

"Oh, we've fought hordes of firebenders," Iluak boasted. "Lemme tell you about the time I escaped from a Fire Nation prison with only a hairclip, a rope, and my own wits."

Iluak launched into one of his tales with the first man, while Mine and Shizu looked at one of the others' wares. The third man, however, squinted thoughtfully at Zuko. "Hey, doesn't this guy look kinda like that Fire Prince?"

Zuko crossed his arms as the other two men started to examine him. Two years ago, he would have frozen in place and panicked. Now, Zuko simply sighed and said, "I get that a lot, you know. But his scar is on the other side."

"Sure, sure. Whatever you say, not-Fire Prince." The man offered another vial up to him. "Want some hand lotion, Your Majesty?" Zuko clenched his fists, feeling his inner fire threatening to burst through his skin.

"I'm *not* the prince."

"Just ignore him, kid," one of the salesman's companions said. "He don't really think you're a prince. He thinks if he bothers you enough, you'll pay him to go away." The two of them started arguing, and soon enough the third joined in. Zuko stormed off, tugging his green hood further down over his face.

"Hey, slow down," Kesuk said, jogging next to him. Zuko hadn't realized how fast he was walking, and when he turned around, he saw five worried faces staring at him. He *hated* when people worried about him. It made him feel weak. (He already knew he was weak. He didn't need a reminder.)

"I'm fine," Zuko snapped, angrily looking away. "I just don't like being mistaken for that guy."

Nattiq scoffed, “What, do you know him or something?”

To Nattiq’s utter shock, Zuko muttered, “In a way.”

“ *Whaaat?!*”

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised,” Kesuk said. “Lee knows everything about the Fire Nation, whether it be a commander’s favorite type of tea or the location of top secret prisons. Why wouldn’t he have dirt on the Fire Prince?”

Shizu quickly signed something at Mine, who then said, “Shizu thinks you’ve got some history with this prince, Lee. Have you ever met him? What’s he like?”

“He’s a useless, spineless coward. A failure and an embarrassment.” Zuko’s eyes narrowed. “I hate him.”

Nattiq and Iluak tried to probe more, but it was clear the Blue Spirit was done talking about the Fire Prince. An oppressive silence hung over the group until they reached the messenger hawk posts. “I’ll meet you at the supply depot,” Zuko said, internally wincing at how icy his voice was. He didn’t *mean* to be so cold with his crew, but Zuko was always more irritable whenever bits of his old life crept into his present. Which had happened twice- *three times*, Zuko thought as he released the hawk carrying his weekly letter to Uncle- in one day. Instead of being Lee, the deadly, fearsome pirate who rebelled against the Fire Nation in the name of justice, he had to be Zuko. Zuko, the banished prince of the Fire Nation, sent on a fool’s mission by his father. Zuko, who was weak and scared and everything Lee was not.

Lee had started out as a simple alias for Zuko, a name for him to use so he wouldn’t be recognized. Now, Lee was everything Zuko wished he could be.

When Zuko arrived at the depot, Nattiq and Iluak had started bickering again, this time over who should carry which supply crates back to the ship. As usual, Mine and Kesuk acted as the voices of reason, while Shizu easily picked up three of the heaviest crates. Around them, he was no prince. He had no command over them, but they all looked up to him. His position was based on his merit, not on his birthright. For a reason Zuko couldn’t fathom, they *chose* to follow him. It was... strange, but not unwelcome. Living as Lee made Zuko feel strong, and brave enough to be himself. Zuko had seriously considered faking his own death, cutting his hair, and starting his life over as Lee, but he could never follow through with it.

(Zuko always told himself it was because he had Uncle and Azula to worry about, and not because he wasn’t brave enough to cut all ties with his former life. It certainly wasn’t because somewhere deep down, Zuko still desperately craved his father’s approval. Definitely not.)

In this way, he was able to live as both Zuko and Lee, and he had grown content with this state of being. Part of him wished it would stay this way forever, that things would never change. (His thirteen-year-old self would feel so betrayed.)

There was, however, one aspect of Lee’s life Zuko wanted to change. Though they were at sea most of the time, Zuko believed that an earthbender would be a valuable addition to his team. In his two years as the Blue Spirit, Zuko had never gotten an earthbender to join his

crew, not even for one mission. Everyone aboard the *Unagi* had joined the crew out of spite for the Fire Nation, but many of the people Zuko approached were too scared. Even the ones bold enough to come with him always left after a few raids, with the exception of the waterbenders and the two Kyoshi Warriors. They were afraid of what the Fire Nation would do to them if they were caught.

Nobody, it seemed, feared as much as the earthbenders did. Zuko understood, of course- if a town had a couple of rowdy earthbenders, the Fire Nation would at best take every last earthbender to prison and occupy the town, and at worst, would burn the town to the ground. Still, Zuko needed an earthbender in his crew for one main reason: catapults.

Zuko could handle fireballs, weapons intended to breach the hull, and most of what the Fire Navy could throw at him. Zuko could not handle twenty-ton boulders flying through the air at top speed. The best thing he could do was shoot a fireball at its side, changing its course just enough so that it would miss the ship. (Once, Zuko blew up a flaming boulder in midair. It took nearly two days and all the fresh water they had for Nattiq to heal everyone's shrapnel wounds.)

(Nattiq refused to use ocean water to heal anybody, ever. He claimed it was unsanitary. Kesuk had then proceeded to bend a huge wave to splash him.)

They had been lucky enough not to get hit so far, primarily because of the waterbenders. In a pinch, one of them could change the ship's course quickly and without having to depend on the steering. With a little grin, Zuko shook his head. He'd never imagined just *how* useful having waterbenders aboard would be. The trio could manipulate the currents, keep them afloat even with multiple breaches in the hull, and heal crew members near effortlessly, but it was the skills Zuko hadn't anticipated that he was most impressed by. Whenever they needed to travel without being seen, the waterbenders would shroud the ship in mist, inadvertently leading to rumors that the *Unagi* was a ghost ship. If they were running low on food, Iluak would pull big spheres of water out of the ocean, let them splash on the deck, then send the water back into the ocean, leaving any fish inside trapped on the boat.

Amazing as they were, the waterbenders couldn't do everything, and there had been too many close calls with the catapults. They needed an earthbender, permanently. Which was why Zuko had decided to orchestrate a prison break.

Chapter End Notes

i'm sure you have many questions, such as:

-how did zuko get two south pole and north pole waterbenders with him?

-what happened to the wani?

-where is uncle iroh?

-how did zuko get an isopup?

-what happened to kya?

and, most importantly: WHY in the world did Zuko not go back to the SWT when he

was banished???? it would make sense, right? right?????

fortunately, all of these questions will be answered eventually! but, for now, i'm going to leave you guessing. :>

thanks for reading! see you next wednesday!

Prison break

Chapter Notes

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

“A prison break?!” Nattiq had nearly fallen out of his chair when Zuko suggested it. “Are you out of your mind?!”

“We can’t just break into a maximum security Fire Nation prison,” Mine said, eyebrows knitted together.

“‘Maximum security’?” Zuko snickered and rolled his eyes. “It’s a tier three prison.” Five faces had stared blankly back at Zuko. “Oh. I’ve never explained the Fire Nation prison system to you guys, have you?”

“*Why* do you even *know* about that,” Nattiq groaned, putting his head in his hands.

“Shut up,” Kesuk said, punching her waterbending teacher’s arm. “It’s not every day that Lee willingly shares information with us.” Nattiq found himself unable to argue, and conceded.

With a scowl in Kesuk’s direction, Zuko said, “There’s a five tier ranking system for Fire Nation prisons based on funding. Tier five prisons get the least money, so they have less resources and guards.”

“So tier one prisons are the maximum security ones, then?” Zuko started to nod, but frowned.

“Wait, sorry. It’s technically a six tier system, but there’s only three prisons that are tier zero.” Zuko had stood up next to the big map on the wall, pointing to a spot near the Earth Kingdom’s coast. “Pohuai Stronghold. Not technically a prison, but people have been kept there before. Because of that, Zhao gets military funds and prison funds.”

(And yet, it had been too expensive for Father to provide Zuko with a new ship when the *Wani* sank.)

Next, Zuko’s finger moved to a spot in the middle of the ocean. “The Boiling Rock. I’m not sure exactly where it is, but it’s somewhere around here. This is for war prisoners, traitors, and anyone who’s considered to be a serious threat to the Fire Nation.”

“Why’s it called the Boiling Rock?”

“The prison is built on a rock in the middle of a boiling lake, that is on an island in the middle of the ocean. It’s inescapable.” Noticing the concern of his companions, Zuko quickly added, “Don’t worry, that’s not the earthbending prison we’re going to. That’s down here.” Zuko pointed much further south and east to a spot off the west coast of the Earth Kingdom.

“So, in theory, if we were arrested, we’d be sent to the Boiling Rock?” Iluak was frowning, which was an unusual sight. “Because we’re working with the Blue Spirit, an enemy of the Fire Nation, and we’ve already escaped from a waterbender prison.”

(Oh. So that's what they'd been worried about.)

"They wouldn't assume that you're waterbenders. Besides, our little operation is hardly enough to land us in a tier zero prison." At this, Kesuk had raised an eyebrow at Zuko.

"You seen your bounty lately, Blue?" Zuko was about to yell at her for calling him that, but his words died on his tongue when she pulled out a wanted poster for the Blue Spirit. His bounty *had* gotten extraordinarily high. (High enough to make him more valuable to the Fire Nation as Lee than Zuko.)

"When did that happen? And why? It's not like we've committed any serious crimes against the Fire Nation." Zuko had been careful enough not to break any major Fire Nation laws as the Blue Spirit, the kind of laws that would land you in a tier zero prison if you were caught.

"Isn't it obvious?" Zuko scowled at Mine. Clearly, it wasn't obvious to *him*. He wouldn't have asked if it was obvious. "You've been actively against the Fire Nation-" Zuko winced a little at her phrasing- "for almost two years and they haven't caught you yet. Every town we stop at, we find someone talking about the Blue Spirit. People know who you are."

Zuko scoffed. "What, so they want me because I'm famous?"

Mine stood, taking both of Zuko's hands in hers. "You give people hope, Lee. That's why the Fire Nation wants to get rid of you."

"... Right. Uh, anyway. The third prison." Zuko stiffly turned away from her and back to the map. He coughed awkwardly before saying, "There's a prison tower in the capital of the Fire Nation. That's, uh, that's where we'd go if we got caught. Well, that's where you'd go. Maybe I'd be sent to the Boiling Rock." Zuko shuddered. Of the three tier zero prisons, the Boiling Rock would be the hardest to escape, and was the cruelest to its prisoners. "Maybe not, though. If I got captured by Zhao, I'd be put in Pohuai." But getting captured by Zhao would be its own punishment. Zuko made a mental note never to get captured. "Anyway. This prison is a lot easier to break out of than any of those. Sure, it has tier three funding, but that's mainly for supplies, not for guards."

"Why do we have to get an earthbender from prison? Can't we just stop by a town and pick one up?"

At this, Iluak had punched Nattiq in the arm. "You're a terrible pirate," he said frankly, then looked to Zuko. "I'm in. And Mine, you're underestimating Lee's prisonbreaking skills. Don't you remember that Lee's the one who got all the waterbenders out of jail?"

"Really?" Both Shizu and Mine were staring at Zuko with wide eyes. Evidently, no one had told them the story.

"Yeah! He came in and busted everyone out. We were all a bit weary of him at first, but then we saw his spirit mark. He led us to the ocean and most of the waterbenders left for the North Pole- which Lee said was fairly close by- but we decided to stay with Lee." Iluak clapped a hand on Zuko's shoulder and said, "If anyone can break out of a prison, it's this guy. He did it for a tier one prison!"

“Tier two,” Zuko corrected. “It was tier one during Firelord Azulon’s reign.”

“Still! That’s pretty impressive!”

“That was different,” Nattiq protested. “Lee did that with experts-“

“Actually, it was just me.” The rest of the group stared at him, dumbfounded. Even Iluak looked shocked.

“You went into a tier two prison and freed everyone kept there *by yourself*? ”

To be fair, Zuko hadn’t been planning to set all the waterbenders free. He had only been looking for someone. But freeing the waterbenders hadn’t been a total accident, either.

Kesuk let out a low laugh. “Every time I find out more details about that night, I’m more amazed by the fact you actually pulled it off. I’m in, too.”

And so, the rest of the group had agreed, even Nattiq. (Begrudgingly.) Included in their usual supplies were four barrels of explosive jelly, which Mine and Kesuk had insisted on carrying. Zuko had offered to help them, but they quickly refused for some reason. Once the supplies had all been loaded, the *Unagi* set off for the prison.

~ ~ ~

Right away, Zuko knew something was wrong. There was no smoke coming from the rig, which meant there was no fire burning deep within, creating power.

“What now, Lee?” Zuko’s eyes narrowed as he stared at the rig.

“For now, keep the ship here in the mist,” he replied slowly. “Iluak, Mine, Shizu. Come with me. We’re going to scout.”

The four of them headed below deck and into a smaller boat (which Nikko insisted on sitting in, and refused to budge. Zuko had to carry her above deck where Kesuk started a game of fetch with her.) As they skimmed across the water, anxiety bubbled up inside of Zuko. If there was no power being produced, no prisoners were working, which meant they had all been moved, or-

(Zuko chose not to consider the alternative.)

But where would they be moved to? There weren’t any prisons capable of holding earthbenders nearby, and transporting prisoners was always a pain. Zuko shook his head, trying to expel the distracting thoughts from his mind. They were nearly at the prison rig and he needed to focus.

Zuko docked their small boat so it would be concealed by the warship in port (which was, again, weird. There should be several smaller ships in port, carrying supplies.) They split into pairs, with Shizu and Mine going to the left side of the rig while Zuko and Iluak examined the right.

“It’s too quiet,” Iluak whispered.

“Well, it is nighttime,” Zuko reasoned. “I know they guarded you more at night in the waterbending prison, but that’s because of your connection to the moon. Firebenders are connected to the sun, so we’re not as aware at night. The guards here probably dread the night shift.”

“Connected to the sun... Is that why you get up so freakishly early?”

“Yep. You rise with the moon, I rise with the sun.”

“Wait, but we pull off almost all of our heists at night.” Zuko stared at Iluak quizzically, not sure what he meant by the statement. “So all the fancy firebending you do- you’re doing it when you’re at your weakest?”

“A solar eclipse would be my weakest,” Zuko corrected. “And you can still waterbend during the daytime. It’s not that impressive that I can firebend at night.”

“But still! I’ve spent all this time thinking you’re a master firebender, and now you’re telling me I’ve never even seen you at your full strength?!” Zuko shushed him, not wanting to alert any of the guards. Though he hadn’t seen any around, Zuko realized.

“I’ve already told you, I’m no master.” Iluak rolled his eyes and scoffed. “I mean it! I wasn’t even good until a couple years ago. And that’s only because my uncle took me to meet two masters-“ Zuko stopped in his tracks, causing Iluak to bump right into him.

“Ow! What was that about?” In response, Zuko pointed to a gaping hole in one of the metal walls. Iluak and Zuko looked at each other, then drew their weapons and walked through.

It was a wide-open space surrounded by a fence, which Zuko supposed was to discourage prisoners from jumping into the sea a hundred feet below. (Based on how flimsy the wooden fence was, Zuko doubted that it discouraged anyone.) A few barracks were scattered around the prison yard, which Zuko started to inspect. To his surprise (and frustration), they were completely empty.

Something near the fence glimmered in the moonlight, catching Zuko’s eye. Cautiously, Zuko crept over to the edge of the rig and knelt down to pick it up. It was a dark blue ribbon supporting a carved pendant, which was mostly covered in dust. Zuko had the feeling he’d seen the necklace before, but he couldn’t place it. He reached out to wipe the surface, but as soon as Zuko’s hand touched the pendant, a brilliant blue glow washed over the area in front of Zuko. Startled, he dropped the necklace.

“Why’s your spirit mark glowing?” In an instant, Zuko was on his feet and pointing one of his swords at Iluak’s chest. “Eep!”

Zuko sighed, lowering his sword. “Agni, Iluak, don’t scare me like that.”

“Sorry, sorry. But I found something, and I thought you’d want to see.” Iluak gestured for Zuko to come with him, then disappeared behind one of the barracks. Placing the necklace in

his pouch, Zuko quickly followed. Iluak led him to a vent that was overflowing with coal. “I think the earthbenders might’ve escaped,” he whispered excitedly. “Somehow, they got this coal up here and used it to bust out!”

“Huh. That would explain a lot,” Zuko said with a frown. “If they escaped, they would have taken the other boats. And the guards wouldn’t be patrolling if all the prisoners were gone.”

“This is great! They probably heard of the Blue Spirit and thought if he could rebel against the Fire Nation, so could they! Lee, you might just be the figurehead of the revolution!” Zuko was suddenly very glad he was wearing his mask.

“Yeah,” Zuko wheezed, feeling like all the wind had been knocked out of him. “A revolution. Great.” Not noticing Zuko’s sudden awkwardness, Iluak continued to babble excitedly about overthrowing the Firelord, as if that was something Zuko would be okay with. Obviously, Zuko would never aid in any effort to overthrow his father, much less *lead* one. It was silly for anyone to think otherwise. And yet...

Zuko remembered how *angry* he had been the night he became the Blue Spirit. The Blue Spirit (and, by extent, Lee) had been borne of spite, betrayal, and sheer hatred for the Fire Nation. Ever since then, Zuko had been harboring bitterness towards his father and the Fire Nation. A little voice inside Zuko (which was becoming harder and harder to ignore) would whisper treasonous thoughts to him, encouraging him to do more harm to the Fire Nation. Not only had Zuko been careful about the laws he broke, he’d also made sure to abide by all the terms of his banishment- but the rebellious voice inside him always wanted to push the boundaries further.

Clenching his teeth, Zuko tried to clear his mind. He could feel himself spiraling, and he couldn’t afford to lose control of himself surrounded by this much coal. Zuko reminded himself that, unless the Avatar returned, he could keep living his double life in peace. He didn’t need to make a decision right now.

“You know, if this prison rig weren’t abandoned, you two would be dead right now.” Both Iluak and Zuko started as Mine and Shizu stepped out of the shadows. “I expected Iluak to be loud, but I didn’t think you’d start glowing, Lee. What’s that about?”

“Long story,” Zuko muttered. “You said the rig was abandoned?”

“Yep. We found a letter which said that all the guards and the warden were going back to the Fire Nation for questioning.” Zuko noticed the usually stoic Shizu rocking back and forth on her heels excitedly. Mine was grinning as she spoke. What exactly was going on here? “There was a prison break a few days ago, and all the prisoners escaped.”

Zuko supposed he should be happy for them, but right now, it meant he was still without an earthbender. “So we came here for nothing, then?”

“Nope,” Mine said, grin growing larger, “not nothing. Because guess who led the prison break?” Before she could answer her own question, Shizu made a couple of hand gestures. Now, Zuko had been learning sign language ever since Shizu joined their crew in an effort to

understand her better. He considered himself pretty good at it. But surely, he must have misunderstood this sign.

“Spit it out, Mine,” Iluak said, sounding more curious than annoyed.

“It was the Avatar! He’s returned!”

So Zuko hadn’t been mistaken, then. His mouth went completely dry. “The Avatar,” Zuko said.

“I know it sounds crazy, but we checked a couple other letters, and it seems like there’ve been multiple sightings of him! He was even on Kyoshi Island for a couple weeks!” Zuko felt like he was going to be sick.

“No way!” Iluak’s voice sounded like it was underwater. “You’re sure?”

“Yep! He’s an Air Nomad!” An Air Nomad. One of the very same Air Nomads that Firelord Sozin, Zuko’s *great-grandfather*, had wiped out. An Air Nomad who, unless he had an infinite capacity for forgiveness, would want revenge. Maybe Zuko would be spared because he was too weak to be seen as a threat, but what about Azula? What about Uncle?

“He survived after all these years?” Uncle was strong, but Zuko wasn’t sure even he could defeat the Avatar. “Wouldn’t he be super old by now?”

“Avatar Kyoshi was able to stop herself from aging, and lived to be well over two hundred years old.” Great, so the Avatar might not even be weakened by his old age. What if Mother had been alive all this time after all, but the Avatar found her and murdered her because of her marriage?

“Great! Maybe we can get him to join our crew, Lee!” Zuko was supposed to capture the Avatar. His father expected him to. But Zuko had given up, and now the Avatar was orchestrating prison breaks, and it was only a matter of time until he attacked the Fire Nation. “Uh, Lee?”

It was Zuko’s fault that the Avatar had gotten this far. If Zuko had actually been searching like he was supposed to, he could have stopped the Avatar. He could have brought him to the Fire Nation and be welcomed home.

“What’s wrong with him?!”

“Shit, this has happened once before- Lee! Lee, you need to get a grip!” If the Avatar reached the Fire Nation, it would be Zuko’s fault.

“Iluak, the coal-!” If the Avatar invaded the Royal Palace, it would be Zuko’s fault.

“Lee!” If his sister and uncle were killed, it would be Zuko’s fault.

As if it had been doused in oil, the whole rig went up in flames.

Chapter End Notes

i was talking to my friend about this fic the other day and realized that nattiq has the exact same energy as arnold from the magic school bus

instead of an earthbender, zuko gets existential dread and anxiety! (or should I say, aangxiety?) also, him immediately imagining the worst possible thing (in this case, the outer science scenario where zuko thinks he'll still be alive but his family will die) is kinda from personal experience. i know you might be yelling at your screen, saying that zuko isn't making any sense, but let me tell you! it makes sense in the moment.

already, we've got some answers to the questions in the previous chapter notes! but those answers should leave you with more questions lmao

please never give a firebender news that might upset him while you're standing in a huge pile of coal

btw, nikko means sunshine (according to the name website i used). zuko named his dog. sunshine. he's actually such a baby

thanks for reading!! <3

After the solstice

Chapter Notes

cw: child abuse

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

“You have to defeat the Firelord before the end of summer? That gives you, what, seven months to master all the elements?” Sokka was already putting a schedule together in his mind, and it was going to be *tight*. At least Aang already mastered airbending.

“Roku said the comet would come on the fifteenth day of the eighth month,” Aang said miserably.

“Hey, cheer up! That means you have almost eight months!”

“What does it matter?” Aang flopped down in Appa’s saddle. “It took me twelve years to become a master airbender, and that’s my natural element. I’ll never learn the other elements in time.”

“We should be in the Northern Water Tribe in less than a month,” Katara said, squeezing Aang’s shoulder. “We’ll learn waterbending together. Then we can go to the Earth Kingdom, and...and...” She shot a pointed glare at Sokka.

“And... we’ll go back to Omashu! King Bumi can teach you earthbending,” Sokka said quickly.

“Even if I can learn waterbending and earthbending in time, where am I going to find a firebender who wants to teach me?”

“Actually,” Katara said slowly, “there might be someone- ack!” Sokka had kicked her in the shin before she could finish her sentence. “What I was saying was- oof!” Again, Sokka kicked his sister, this time causing her to glare up at him. Sokka shook his head slightly, hoping Katara would take the hint.

“What was that, Katara?” Aang rolled over to face the siblings, while Sokka tried to put on an inconspicuous expression.

“...Nothing,” she said, eyes narrowed. Aang’s face fell, and he went to land Appa with an unusual quietness.

Before they could even make camp, Aang was already in a deep sleep. Normally, Sokka would have everyone help with setting up camp, but he figured that channeling the previous

Avatar's spirit and destroying a temple must be exhausting, so he let Aang rest (this time.) Besides, he had something more important to do.

"So," Katara said, dumping the firewood in front of Sokka and crossing her arms. "Want to tell me what that was about?"

"You were about to tell Aang about Zuko," Sokka said, accusingly pointing a tree branch at her. "What were you thinking?!"

"I was thinking that Aang needs a firebending teacher at some point, Sokka, and it's not like one will just drop out of a tree, announcing that they've betrayed the Fire Nation and they want to teach the Avatar firebending! If what Roku said about the comet is true, Aang needs as much time training as he can get."

"Maybe he does need a firebending teacher, but it's not gonna be Zuko! Zuko probably doesn't even remember who we are." Sokka crossed his arms and pouted until a jet of water splashed him in the face. "Hey!"

"You're letting your emotions get in the way of common sense! Zuko is the only firebender we know that won't try to kill us--"

"You don't know that! He's probably just like the rest of the Fire Nation by now!"

"You're lying to yourself and you know it!" Sometimes, Sokka hated that Katara knew him so well. "I know what you and Zuko had was special, but he was my friend too, Sokka," Katara said, softening. "I know that Zuko would never want to hurt me. I think he'd at least hear us out, and that's more than we can get from anyone else in the Fire Nation."

Glaring down at his feet, Sokka muttered, "I wasn't even thinking about my feelings towards Zuko."

"Sure you weren't."

"I wasn't," Sokka insisted. (So maybe he had been, a little bit. But what did it matter?) "I was thinking about Aang."

Taken aback, Katara said, "Aang? What about him?"

"You saw what he just did to that temple!"

"Do you really think Aang would do something like that to Zuko? Sokka, he wouldn't hurt a fly!"

"Normally, he wouldn't," Sokka explained, annoyed that Katara wasn't catching on, "but Aang can't control himself when he's in the Avatar state. He almost blew us off the top of the Southern Air Temple, remember?"

"Yes," Katara replied, "but that was an accident."

“Exactly. Aang was so upset when he found out his people were gone that he almost killed us by accident. Could you imagine if all that pain and anger were focused on someone? Like maybe the great-grandson of Firelord Shiba, the one responsible for all of this?”

Katara frowned. “‘Shiba’? I thought his name was Soda,” she said contemplatively.

“It doesn’t matter what his name was! What matters is, Zuko is related to him and seeing Zuko could trigger Aang’s Avatar state. It’s too dangerous, for both Aang and Zuko.”

“...Fine. I won’t tell Aang about him, for now. But that doesn’t change the fact that you’re still bottling up your feelings.”

“We’ve gotta save the world now, Kat,” Sokka groaned, flopping down on his sleeping bag. “It doesn’t matter how I feel.”

“It matters to me,” Katara said quietly. But her brother was already asleep.

~ ~ ~

“Prince Zuko’s control has improved greatly, but his technique is... unusual, to say the least.” Even when Zuko was getting better, his masters always found a problem with his firebending when his father asked about his progress. At least Azula wasn’t here for father to compare him to. “Instead of combatting an attack with his own fire, the prince pulls my fire out of the air and makes it into a ring around him. Perhaps his extended stay in the South Pole has affected his ability to create fire?”

“He returned six months ago,” Ozai said, waving his hand dismissively. “Any halfway decent firebender would have recovered fully by now. Zuko, make fire.”

Timidly, Zuko held out his hands and lit a small flame in each one. Ozai still didn’t look impressed, so Zuko made the flames bigger and bigger, hoping to earn his father’s approval.

“Enough,” Ozai commanded, evidently annoyed. Zuko’s face fell. “Clearly you can make fire. Why are you not using it?”

“W- well,” Zuko stammered, “it’s a move I picked up during my time with the Southern Water Tribe. I learned from my waterbender friend-”

“A waterbender?!” Ozai grabbed Zuko by his shirt, suddenly much too close. “Why did you not mention this sooner?!”

“I did,” Zuko squeaked, “I’ve talked about her a lot-”

“And yet you failed to mention that she was a waterbender, thus endangering the entire Fire Nation. Why would you keep secrets from your own father?”

“I didn’t mean to, I swear!” Zuko was crying now, not understanding the situation at hand. His teacher had left the room, leaving Zuko at Ozai’s mercy.

“Protecting criminals is treason. How can you call yourself a prince when you have betrayed your nation like this?!” Ozai shoved Zuko against a wall, slamming the back of Zuko’s head against the hard surface. He shook Zuko so roughly that Zuko could barely keep eye contact.

“I’m sorry,” Zuko wailed, “I’m sorry! I- I thought it was okay because she’s my friend- she wouldn’t hurt anyone- Uncle said it was okay-” Zuko had only been babbling, hoping that something he said would make it stop, stop please- when all of a sudden, Ozai was deathly still.

“Your uncle knew about this?” Ozai was still way, way too close to Zuko, but at least he wasn’t yelling anymore. Zuko nodded, desperately hoping that if he gave his father the answer he wanted, Ozai would let him go.

“He- he said that studying other types of b- bending would help me get stronger,” Zuko sniffled. For a moment, everything was still. Hardly daring to breathe, Zuko watched several different expressions cross his father’s face. He tried to understand them, but his father’s mind seemed to be moving a mile a minute, and Zuko just couldn’t keep up-

As quickly as his father’s anger had come, it vanished. Ozai straightened, brushed himself off, and quickly strode out of the room, leaving Zuko crying on the floor alone.

Zuko stirred and rubbed his eyes. He could feel Nikko’s head resting on his stomach and reached out to pet her.

“Good, you’re awake.” Zuko cracked open his good eye to see Mine, Iluak, and Nattiq staring at him worriedly.

“...Why are you in my room?” Zuko thought he’d made it clear that he didn’t want anyone in his room when he was asleep, unless it was some sort of emergency. He racked his brain, trying to remember what had happened last. Sitting up with a jolt, he shouted, “The fire!” Nikko growled at him, annoyed by the sudden movement. “Are you guys okay? Where’s Shizu? Did I hurt her?”

“No, no, everyone’s alright,” Mine said, resting her hand on Zuko’s forearm. “Iluak surrounded us with water just in time. No one was hurt.”

Relaxing a bit, Zuko groaned and put his head in his hands. “Sorry. I really should have better control.”

“It wasn’t all your fault. There was a lot more coal dust than any of us realized,” Iluak explained. “Even if it was just a spark, the whole rig would’ve gone up in flames anyway.”

From behind his hands, Zuko said, “Please tell me I didn’t just burn down a Fire Nation prison.”

“Hey, it’s not like anyone’s gonna be suspicious of you. Like I said, there was a lot of coal dust. People’ll be more likely to think it was an accident than to suspect a firebender. Besides, the fire’ll burn away any traces of us being there.” Iluak’s voice was

uncharacteristically gentle, and all three of them were still looking at him like he could break at any moment. Zuko crossed his arms and sighed.

“Look, I’m not going to combust again if you mention the Avatar.” Zuko hoped they didn’t pick up on his own uncertainty in his words. “I was surprised, that’s all.”

“Still, we were worried about you. We tried to talk to you, but it was like your mind was somewhere else, and then everything was on fire and you passed out. Nattiq checked you over, but he said nothing was wrong with you, but then you started talking in your sleep-”

Zuko stiffened. Could he have said something that gave away his identity?

“Don’t get like that, Lee. You didn’t say anything about your super secret identity,” Iluak said with a roll of his eyes. Zuko scowled in response. Was he really that easy to read?

“So what did I say, then?” Iluak’s irritated expression changed back to worried, and he avoided Zuko’s gaze.

“It was, uh-” Nattiq started, rubbing his hands anxiously. He cleared his throat, then tried again. “It was something about your father. You were pleading for him to stop-”

“It was just a dream,” Zuko said, quickly standing up. “I was dreaming. We all have weird dreams sometimes, don’t we? One time I had a dream that our boat could fly. Dreams are weird. They don’t make sense. It was just a dream.” Zuko knew he was rambling, so he rushed to the door and said, “I’m going to see if I have mail.”

Surprisingly enough, Zuko did have mail. Uncle Iroh had sent his weekly letter early, it seemed. Zuko skimmed through the letter idly, reading about tea leaves and how Azula was doing and how much Uncle wished he could see him. There was nothing out of the ordinary- that is, until Zuko reached the last paragraph.

Due to recent events, your father has decided that Commander Zhao will assist you in your search for the Avatar. I am needed in the Fire Nation, so I will not be with him, but I told him where your house in the Earth Kingdom is. It may take him a couple extra days to find it, as my description may not have been the best. Make sure you are there to greet him when he arrives.

With love,

Uncle Iroh

Chapter End Notes

a kagepro reference? in the second paragraph of MY chapter? it's more likely than you think

SORRY FOR THE LATE UPDATE i got slammed with midterms

ozai has had ONE scene in this so far and i already want to deck him
also hmmm i wonder if the dream scene had something to do with ozai's rise to power
hmmmmmmmmmmmm

okay so the reason katara and sokka don't remember sozin's name is that he isn't super relevant to them. they think of him as the firelord that started the hundred year war rather than by his name. anyway, not knowing sozin's name is going to be a running joke throughout the fic bc i hate him

"it matters to me" KATARAAAAA WHY DO YOU HAVE TO BREAK ME IN THIS WAY

btw iroh 100% knows that zuko is the blue spirit, but zuko doesn't realize this. iroh also 100% lied to zhao about where zuko's place so that zuko could have extra time to get back to his house (bc iroh knows he's not there)

thanks for reading! <3

Jet

Chapter Notes

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

“Where’s Momo?” Sokka looked around, realizing he hadn’t seen the little lemur for a while. Almost as soon as Aang asked the question, Momo’s loud cries echoed through the forest they landed in.

Following the sounds Momo made, they came across a trio of three suspended animal traps, one of which had a distinctive pair of long white ears sticking out of it. “Hang on, Momo,” Aang called, airbending his way up the trees. No matter how many times he saw Aang airbend, Sokka didn’t think he would ever get used to it. Quickly reaching the branch Momo’s trap was hanging on, Aang fiddled with the rope suspending the trap, gently sending Momo towards the ground. Sokka and Katara pulled the trap open and Momo leapt out. Aang landed next to them, then looked back up, where two more animals were trapped. “Alright, you too.”

“This is gonna take forever,” Sokka said. He pulled out his boomerang and threw it, easily cutting the ropes and releasing the animals. Frowning at the traps, Sokka knelt down to get a closer look. “These are Fire Nation traps,” he realized. “You can tell by the metalwork. We’d better pack up camp and get moving.”

As Sokka was tying up his sleeping bag, he noticed Aang and Katara climbing onto Appa. “Uh-uh, no flying this time,” he said, pulling Katara’s sleeping bag out of his hands.

“What? Why wouldn’t we fly?”

“Now that Zhao’s looking for us, we’ve got to be more careful. Appa’s too noticeable.”

“Who made you the boss? I bet you wouldn’t be so bossy if you kissed someone.”

“I’ve kissed someone!” Sokka said it more to prove her wrong than anything else, but suddenly he remembered he *had* kissed someone. The crown prince of the Fire Nation, as a matter of fact. Sokka’s face flushed as he remembered how warm Zuko’s soft lips had been, even in the bitter cold of the South Pole. “You just haven’t met hi- her.”

“Who? Gran-gran?” Katara gave Sokka a smug grin. “I’ve met Gran-gran.”

Sokka would rather die than endure the teasing that would certainly come if he admitted he kissed Zuko, so instead he changed the subject. “Look, my instincts tell me that we have a better chance of slipping through on foot, and a leader has to trust his instincts.”

Unfortunately, Sokka’s instincts led him right into a Fire Nation camp and, by extent, Jet. Sokka couldn’t decide which was worse. Sure, Jet and his gang had swooped in and saved the three of them, but he took out every soldier Sokka had been going for before he got the chance, then had started flirting with Katara.

Now, they were at Jet's hideout (which Sokka had to admit, was impressively engineered. He refused to believe that Jet had designed this place.) Sokka crossed his arms and stared down at the dinner spread in front of him. Jet was making some kind of speech, but Sokka couldn't focus on what he was saying. Sokka couldn't focus on anything, really, other than the gut feeling that something was wrong here. For a moment, he wished Suki was here.

"Hey, Jet," Katara said, scooting away from Sokka. "Nice speech."

"Thanks," Jet replied, taking a seat next to Sokka.

No, it wasn't Suki he wanted next to him. Suki would tease him just as much as Katara and Aang.

"By the way, I was really impressed with you and Aang. That was some great bending I saw out there today."

Was it his father that Sokka wanted? Sokka rested his hand on his chin, thinking for a moment.

"Well, he's great. He's the Avatar. I could use some more training."

There was always a part of Sokka that wanted his dad around, but in this situation, his dad would probably think Jet was an upstanding young man. He would listen to Sokka's concerns, but Sokka wasn't sure he would hear them.

"The Avatar, huh? Very nice. Careful who you say that to, though- wouldn't want that banished Fire Nation prince chasing after you."

So who was it that Sokka was missing, then? He hadn't befriended anyone else on their journey-

"Wait, *banished*?!" Jet's words had caught up with Sokka all of a sudden, and he found himself gaping at Jet. "What do you mean, banished?"

Jet raised a ridiculously shaped eyebrow at Sokka. "You mean you don't know?"

"We spent our entire lives in the South Pole up until a couple weeks ago," Katara chimed in, leaning closer to Jet. "News doesn't travel fast there."

"Ah, right. The Fire Prince- that one that faked his death or something a few years back- got himself banished two or three years ago."

Tilting his head, Aang asked, "But what does that have to do with me?"

"The Firelord said the Prince could only come home if he captured the Avatar," Jet said nonchalantly, as if he was discussing the weather. "He's probably given up by now, but I thought I should give you fair warning."

"B- but if that was three years ago," Sokka stammered, "then that was when the Avatar hadn't been seen for nearly a century. Why would his father-"

“Isn’t it obvious? The Firelord wanted to get rid of him, and sending him on a wild hog monkey chase was the easiest way to do it.” Sokka felt like he’d been punched in the gut. Jet turned back to Katara and Aang. “I think I know a way you two can help in our struggle.”

“Unfortunately, we have to leave tonight,” Sokka cut in, his voice unusually shaky.

He started to walk away, but Jet said, “Sokka, you’re kidding me! I needed you on an important mission tomorrow!”

Sokka stood still for a moment, trying to pick out a logical response from all the chaos in his mind. “Fine,” he said, “we’ll stay another day. I’m going to bed.”

Aang frowned at the sight of his friend’s quickly retreating back. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, don’t tell me he’s a Fire Nation sympathizer,” Jet said, narrowing his eyes.

“It’s nothing like that,” Katara said quickly. “Sokka and my dad are very close, so it’s probably upsetting for him to imagine a father not wanting his son.” The lie came easy enough, and neither Jet nor Aang seemed to doubt Katara. Although she felt guilty deceiving them, Katara was going to protect her brother, no matter what.

“They’re not like us, Katara,” Jet said darkly, staring down at the plate in his hand. “There’s not a scrap of good inside their hearts. You can’t trust anyone from the Fire Nation.” Jet’s face was twisted with bitterness, and, for a moment, Katara wondered if Sokka was right. But just as quickly as the moment came, it passed, and Jet was smiling again, handing her and Aang some red berries. Katara shook her head, convincing herself she’d imagined it.

Meanwhile, Sokka was back in the hut they’d been provided, head spinning. Zuko had been banished? *Why*? What could a thirteen-year-old prince have possibly done to deserve such a harsh sentence? Where was he now? Zuko wasn’t confined to the Fire Nation anymore, he could be anywhere. Zuko could even be in this small Earth Kingdom town, Sokka realized with a thrill of excitement. When Sokka finally fell asleep, he dreamt of a wonderful reunion with his childhood best friend.

The thought of Zuko was enough to get Sokka through the next day of Jet- that is, until Jet attacked an innocent old man, then claimed that the man was actually an assassin, which led to an argument between Sokka and Katara. Unsurprisingly, Aang had sided with Katara, and Sokka found himself once again wishing that Zuko was here. As Sokka settled in for the night, he couldn’t help but remember how warm Zuko had always been next to him.

It seemed like Sokka had only been asleep a few minutes, but when he woke, the sky was tinged with purple, a promise that dawn would be soon. Hearing some commotion outside, Sokka peeked out of the doorframe. His eyes narrowed when he saw Jet and a few others leading a cart away from camp.

Following the group to a ledge, Sokka’s eyes widened with horror when he realized what Jet’s plan was. He turned, intending to go warn Katara and Aang, but was grabbed from behind and shoved from his hiding spot in the bushes.

“Sokka,” Jet said with a smile, “I’m glad you decided to join us.”

Sokka was thrown on the ground in front of Jet. “I heard your plan to destroy the Earth Kingdom town,” he growled, sitting up and rubbing his arm.

“Our plan is to rid the valley of the Fire Nation.”

“There are people living there, Jet,” Sokka said, extending his arms to Jet. “Mothers and fathers and children.”

“We can’t win without making some sacrifices.”

Sokka tried to take a different angle. “You lied to Katara and Aang about the forest fire.”

“Because they don’t understand the demands of war. Not like you and I do.”

“I do understand.” Sokka did understand the demands of war, but this was extreme. Jet would be wiping out scores of innocent people- just like the Fire Nation would. How could he not see that? “I understand there’s nothing you won’t do to get what you want.”

“I was hoping you’d have an open mind. You’re just like Lee.” Smellerbee and Pipsqueak grabbed Sokka, forcibly holding his arms behind his back. “I can’t have you warning Katara and Aang. Take him for a walk- a long walk.”

“You can’t do this,” Sokka shouted as his arms were bound.

“Cheer up, Sokka. We’re going to win a great victory against the Fire Nation today.”

With that, Smellerbee and Pipsqueak shoved Sokka into the forest. They weren’t headed back to the hideout, and Sokka wasn’t sure he wanted to know where he was being taken. Sokka took a few minutes to collect himself and make a plan, then said, “So. Who’s Lee?”

“Ever heard of the Blue Spirit?” Sokka nodded at Smellerbee’s question. “That’s Lee.”

Sokka stopped in his tracks. “You know the Blue Spirit?!” Pipsqueak shoved him, *hard*, and Sokka winced. “Okay, okay, I’m walking. I was just surprised, that’s all.”

“Smellerbee, Jet, and Sneers were part of his crew for a month,” Pipsqueak said.

“Lee was a decent guy. Got burned on his face by the Fire Nation. But not willing to do what it takes to win.” Smellerbee didn’t elaborate. After a moment, she added, “Knew a lot about the Fire Nation, though. Told us about that Fire Prince.”

With all the insanity of the previous day, Sokka had forgotten about Zuko. What if Zuko really *was* in that town? Sure, the odds were next to impossible, but Zuko had a habit of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The idea of an entire town being wiped out was horrible enough, but having someone he *knew* down there made the threat far more real. Sokka could almost see Zuko standing in the streets of the town, staring in horror as an unstoppable wall of water raced towards him...

Sokka *had* to stop Jet.

“How can you stand by and do nothing while Jet wipes out a whole town?”

Pipsqueak let out an angry grunt. “Hey listen, Sokka, Jet’s a great leader. We follow what he says, and things always turn out okay.” Out of the corner of his eye, Sokka spotted perfect piles of red berries sitting atop a bed of fallen leaves. It was the perfect opportunity.

“If that’s how Jet leads, then he’s got a lot to learn!” Sokka broke away from the two of them, leading them through the field of traps. Both Pipsqueak and Smellerbee were quickly suspended in midair in metal cages. Sokka grinned, pulling his arms free from the too-loose knot they’d tied them in. “While you two are up there, you might want to practice your knotwork.”

Sokka started to run towards the reservoir, then hesitated. Something in him was telling him he should go to the town. He knew it was his instincts, but it felt like something more. If Sokka was a more spiritual man, he would have said some kind of energy was calling him to the town.

Trusting his instincts, Sokka ran as fast as he could to the town, quickly reaching the central building. “Hey! You need to evacuate this town immediately,” he panted, barely taking time to catch his breath. He scanned the faces nearby, not quite sure who he was searching for. “They’re going to blow the dam!”

A Fire Nation soldier frowned at him suspiciously. “Who is going to do what now?”

“The rebels! The ones who live in the forest, led by Jet! The guy with the crazy eyebrows,” Sokka explained frantically.

Another Fire Nation soldier asked, “How will they accomplish that?”

“They got blasting jelly from the Fire Nation camp in the woods, I was with them when they stole it!”

“He’s probably just a spy,” one of the soldiers said, grabbing Sokka by the shoulder.

“No, wait! They’re going to blow the whole dam valley off the map-“ In a less serious moment, Sokka would have grinned at his accidental pun- “and everyone here will die if we don’t evacuate!”

“Wait,” a voice called out. Sokka turned towards it hopefully.

It was the old man Jet had attacked yesterday. “It’s you,” Sokka said. “Sorry about yesterday.”

“When the rebels attacked me, this boy asked them to have mercy on me. I believe we should listen to him,” he said.

Apparently, the old man was an upstanding member of the community, because the people actually listened to him. After a few hours, the entire town was evacuated, safe on a nearby

hill. Sokka searched the faces of the crowd. “Is this everyone?”

“Yes,” the old man said, “we made sure of it.” Sokka felt slightly disappointed and looked down at his feet. It had been stupid to think Zuko would be here.

Just then, Sokka felt the same energy as earlier, stronger this time. He realized it hadn’t been calling him to the town at all, but somewhere beyond that way. Pointing southwest, Sokka asked, “What’s over that way?”

“Only a trading channel. Merchants from Ba Sing Se use it to get to the west coast of the Earth Kingdom,” the old man explained. “That’s probably where the reservoir water will end up if they blow the dam.” Sokka frowned. His instincts were telling him to go back to Jet’s hideout to find Katara and Aang, but the strange energy was rooting him in place. Sokka shook his head slightly, then retrieved the bison whistle he stole- er, borrowed- from Aang.

(If Sokka had stayed a few minutes longer, he would have seen the dam getting blown, and the huge wave that followed. He might have turned his head towards the channel, where an inconspicuous-looking ship had just become visible, and watched as the wave crashed over it. Unlike the Earth Kingdom citizens, Sokka would have noticed that the ship was not saved by a lucky coincidence, but rather by waterbending. He might have thought this interesting enough to warrant a detour.)

But instead, Sokka got on Appa’s back, ready to go confront Jet. After all, he trusted his instincts more than some weird energy.

Chapter End Notes

HA! IT'S STILL WEDNESDAY!

yes that ship was zuko's what're you gonna do about it lol

The art of sensing vibes

Chapter Notes

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

“You can stay in here with me, but you can’t make any noise, or distract me while I do it,” Zuko said. Nikko understood, and took her place in her bed. “Thanks, girl.”

Zuko closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. As his breathing settled into a slow, steady rhythm, Zuko began to sense the energy flowing around him. One by one, six golden strings appeared in Zuko’s mindscape, one for each of his core crewmates and Nikko. He could sense that Nattiq was nervous (more nervous than usual, anyway), but chose to ignore that, for now. He had more important things to do.

Extending himself, Zuko could faintly sense his uncle’s energy, quiet and peaceful. If Zuko focused on memories and thoughts of Uncle, he would be able to, in a general sense, feel his emotions and get a sense of his physical location. On occasion, if Zuko stayed like this for a long time and focused all of his energy, he could even sense Azula.

But this time, Zuko was looking for someone he liked far less than Uncle and Azula: Zhao. Zuko closed his eyes and started going through his memories. After Zuko’s return to the Fire Nation, Zhao had been stripped of his military rank and forced to become a common soldier. (Zuko had been surprised his punishment wasn’t more severe, since he attempted to abduct a member of the royal family. Mother had wanted him in jail for treason, but Father said that was too extreme.) The next time Zuko had seen him was at the Agni Kai (Zuko shivered at the thought of the duel), and had the displeasure of seeing him a few times during his banishment. He’d most recently seen Zhao a few months ago on Kyoshi Island, when Zuko had cut off one of his sideburns. Zuko couldn’t help but smile at the memory.

Remembering his most recent encounters with Zhao wasn’t working, so Zuko thought back to his childhood. Zuko shivered as he remembered being dragged through the snow in chains, hearing the sound of thunder, his kidnappers running away, Zhao’s hands grabbing him, being carried towards the Fire Nation ship, a loud *thwack*, Zhao crumpling to the ground with a boomerang lying next to him, a small figure in blue running towards him-

Someone, please come...

Zuko opened his eyes. He was still in his mindscape, surrounded by a field of stars and golden strings. So the voice hadn’t been in the physical world, then. Everything around him was the same, except a new string had appeared, far brighter than any of the others. Zuko watched curiously as it approached him.

Everybody always leaves, and I always end up alone.

Zuko frowned. That definitely wasn’t Zhao. He closed his eyes again, trying to ignore the new energy.

Even the people who are with me, they aren't listening to me. Sometimes, I feel more alone with them than by myself. I'm sick of it!

Zuko cracked open an eye, watching as the energy string swirled around him. He sighed. There was no way he would find Zhao like this.

When he opened his eyes next, Zuko was back in his cabin. "That was weird," Zuko said to Nikko, who bounded over to sit on his lap.

When he was barely fourteen, Zuko had spent two grueling months learning how to read energy in the hopes that it would help him find the Avatar. At first, Zuko had tried to read the energy around him, but was easily overwhelmed by the sheer volume of it. The Guru that Zuko learned from taught him to instead read the energy within himself to find what he was looking for, as his own energy was mixed with everyone he met. (Or was it everyone he cared about? Zuko couldn't quite remember.)

The energy he'd sensed just now seemed to be calling out to him, but it was nothing like the Guru or Uncle's energies, and they were the only ones Zuko knew who also knew the technique. Though the energy was strong, it seemed unfocused. Maybe there was a spirit nearby, messing with Zuko's energy? It was the easiest explanation.

And yet... something about the energy had been so achingly familiar. But who in the world would reach out to *Zuko*, of all people, when they were lonely?

Before he could think further on it, there was a knock on his door. "Hey," Kesuk said, letting herself in. "Can I sit?"

"I thought I said no disturbances," Zuko grumbled, but scooted to the side.

"I don't care." Kesuk and Zuko sat side by side in silence, until Nikko went to sit in Kesuk's lap. "I heard about your dream the other day."

Groaning, Zuko put his head in his hands. "I'm fine, I swear. Mine's already been bothering me enough about this, I'm not a fragile little--"

"I just had a dream of my own." Startled, Zuko turned to get a good look at her. Kesuk's long hair was tied back in a sloppy ponytail, and her signature eyeliner was missing. She had obviously just woken up, and Zuko immediately felt guilty for not noticing sooner.

"Oh, sorry," Zuko said in a softer tone. "...Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." She sighed. "It's stupid. I spent over eight years in a Fire Nation prison, but it's my life at home that I still have nightmares about."

"Not all trauma is created equal," Zuko said, not sure of what else to say. "That's what my uncle says, anyway." It was easier to use Uncle's words than come up with his own.

A small smile crossed Kesuk's lips. "Is he the one who's always writing to you?" Zuko nodded. "He sounds like a smart man. He looked out for you, didn't he?" Zuko nodded again,

and Kesuk looked up at the ceiling. “I had an aunt like that. She was a waterbender too, so she understood me, unlike my mother. My mother thought I was a freak.”

Zuko was taken aback. “Because you were a bender?” Kesuk nodded grimly. “That... that’s so *wrong*. Bending is a part of who you are.”

“For us in the South Pole, being a waterbender only meant trouble from the Fire Nation. Some people in my tribe began to think waterbending was a curse, so I had to hide my bending from a young age.”

“That’s awful,” Zuko said, shaking his head. “I can’t imagine having to hide your bending.”

Kesuk shrugged. “You get used to it.”

“No, what I mean is- that’s just so different from the way I was raised. My skills-“ *or lack thereof*, Zuko thought- “were always on display, always being tested. I was never good enough.”

“You?” It was Kesuk’s turn to be surprised. “You- who can propel yourself through the air effortlessly, who can accidentally blow up an entire prison rig, who can *breathe fire* - weren’t good enough?”

“That’s all stuff I’ve learned recently, and the breath of fire you saw me do isn’t really breathing fire, it’s just a way to keep warm. I haven’t had proper firebending training since I was... well, it was a long time ago. My little sister was always better than me, anyway- I’m sure she’s already learned everything I have and more.”

“You have a little sister?” Zuko froze.

“No.”

Kesuk smirked. “Mhm.”

“I mean it, I don’t!”

Laughing, Kesuk punched Zuko’s arm lightly. “Thanks, Lee.”

“For what?”

“Talking to me. Want to come swab the deck with me? You look like you could use some fresh air.” Resolving to try his energy reading again later, Zuko got up and followed Kesuk on deck.

~ ~ ~

Once the deck had been thoroughly cleaned and lunch had been eaten, Zuko returned to his room, ready to find Zhao. But as soon as he entered his mindscape, Zuko was annoyed to find the strand of energy, far brighter than before, swirling around him like a golden tornado.

I don’t wanna be alone anymore...

“You again?! I thought you were gone-“

Zuko!

It sounded like a million voices were screaming Zuko’s name at once. Zuko clapped his hands over his ears, trying to drown out at least a little of the devastating noise. Gritting his teeth, Zuko closed his eyes and concentrated on his own heartbeat and breathing, which served as his tether. The Guru had warned him not to get lost in the energy field, as his mind may never return to the physical world. He could feel it working, Zuko could feel himself coming back into his own body-

ZUKO!!!

Tendrils shot out of the vortex and wound themselves tightly around Zuko, effectively binding him. “Hey! Let me go!” Zuko’s shouts only made his bonds tighter.

stay stay zuko stay stay here stay with me don’t go don’t want to lose you too-

Zuko was flooded with emotion, as if he’d been hit by a tidal wave. He felt like it was the second night after he’d returned to the Fire Nation after the South Pole, his first time sleeping alone in months. Zuko had cried himself to sleep that night because of the harsh realization that Sokka wasn’t there with him, he was hundreds and hundreds of miles away, and Zuko didn’t know when he’d see Sokka again. Zuko remembered each day that he waited excitedly for a letter from Sokka, and the heartbreak when it never came. He remembered the one letter Sokka did send him, and how much it had stung the first time reading it. Zuko remembered painfully resigning himself to one inevitable fact: Sokka hated him. All the grief of losing his best friend came crashing down on Zuko, rendering him breathless.

zuko zuko want zuko want zuko here zuko good-

Zuko surfaced, gasping. Wildly, he looked around. He was floating alone in a dark, stormy ocean that stretched as far as he could see. He barely had time to process the change in scenery before he was underwater again. This time, it was as if it was the day after Zuko’s mother had disappeared. Zuko’s fingernails dug into the skin of his palm as all of his emotions welled up inside him. The pain grounded him, and Zuko opened his eyes. Breaking his arms free, Zuko swam upwards, taking a huge gulp of air when he reached the surface.

alone alone alone don’t want to be alone-

“I’m still in the energy field?! Hey, spirit or whatever you are, what the f-” Before Zuko could finish his sentence, he was tugged underwater again, but this time, he was prepared. Instead of being overwhelmed again (this time by his emotions surrounding his father banishing him), Zuko clenched his fists and curled up so he could see his feet in the dark water. Sure enough, a large golden tendril was still wrapped around his legs, pulling him down. Fighting the rising feelings of betrayal and abandonment, Zuko pulled one of his legs free and kicked as hard as he could, finally freeing himself. “Why are you showing me my own emotions?! I don’t need this right now,” Zuko shouted to the sky.

too scared too lonely want zuko i want zuko-

A huge wave broke over Zuko's head, sending him underwater again. Shame filled Zuko as he watched his little sister grow up too fast after their mother left, becoming like a mother herself-

Wait.

Not once in her life had Azula been anything near motherly. If anything, when mother left, she had become more childlike- constantly demanding attention, teasing Zuko and her own friends more, and picking fights when no one was looking. Zuko stayed underwater for a moment, allowing the rest of the feelings in. He was... afraid that his sister couldn't protect herself? That certainly wasn't right. All of a sudden, Zuko felt angry, angry that his sister would choose some boy she just met over him, angry and betrayed and-

Zuko swam to the surface. "These are... *your* emotions?"

zuko will understand, zuko's the only one who ever understands, i can be real with zuko-

"Lee!" The storm clouds parted slightly, and a rope was thrown from the sky. Desperately, Zuko swam forwards and grabbed it, holding on as tight as he could as he was pulled-

"Lee, wake up!" Zuko gasped, sitting bolt upright. He was sitting on the deck of the *Unagi* beneath a cloudless sky. Iluak was holding him by the shoulders and shaking him.

"I'm back," Zuko realized, then grinned. "I'm back! I'm alive!" He'd never been so happy to be on the deck of his ship, soaking wet- wait, soaking wet? "What happened?"

"You came up on deck, and I waved to you, but you didn't wave back. I figured you were just in one of your moods, so I didn't think much of it, but next thing I knew, you'd jumped overboard and you were swimming away. I got you back up on deck by grabbing the water around you, but then you tried to jump overboard again, and when I tried to stop you, you started fighting me, and that's when I noticed your eyes were all glassy, like you weren't even awake. Your firebending was still working perfectly, though." Zuko was suddenly glad he'd left most of his crew in the last Earth Kingdom town he'd stopped in with the half-hearted excuse that he needed to go on a secret mission.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, no. It was like you were sleepwalking, your attacks weren't focused." Iluak's eyes shifted to something behind Zuko, and his grip on Zuko's shoulders tightened. "Lee."

As Iluak stood, Zuko turned around to see a massive wave coming from the valley behind him. "Oh, sh--"

"Get Kesuk and Nattiq!" Iluak faced the oncoming wave, already bending the water around him as Zuko sprinted into the cabin. He scaled the ladder to the control room in record time, shocking Mine and Shizu, who were *supposed* to be steering the ship but were instead on the control room's futon, covered by a blanket. Ignoring them, Zuko bounded across the room, yanked the alarm switch down, then grabbed the microphone hanging on the wall.

Turning on coms, Zuko screeched, “Nattiq! Kesuk! Giant wave heading for the ship! On deck, now!” A few seconds passed, then Kesuk appeared, Nattiq hot on her heels. All three waterbenders started moving in sync, and when the wave reached the *Unagi*, it passed harmlessly over the top of the ship. “I’m going to see if they’re okay,” Zuko shouted to Mine and Shizu, then disappeared down the ladder.

Mine let out the breath she’d been holding. “That was close.” Shizu nodded in agreement.

Zuko exploded onto the deck, yelling, “Are you okay? Is anyone hurt?”

“Relax, Lee, we’re fine,” Kesuk replied. Still, Zuko felt the need to scan the waterbenders for any sign of injury. Iluak seemed fine, Kesuk just seemed annoyed, and Nattiq looked flustered but uninjured. Nattiq looked like he’d scrambled out of bed, as his hair was completely down and the scarf he usually wore was missing. With a frown, Zuko took a closer look at Nattiq’s neck.

“Is that my necklace?” Nattiq was wearing a tight blue pendant that looked suspiciously like the one Zuko found on the prison rig.

“*Your* necklace?! This isn’t *your* necklace, it was handmade by-” Nattiq stopped mid-sentence, his eyes darting between Zuko, Kesuk, and Iluak. “I mean- what necklace? I’m not wearing a necklace.” Nattiq chuckled nervously, putting his hand over the pendant. A confused look crossed over his face. “Wait, why would you have a betrothal necklace?”

“A what?” At Zuko’s question, the tips of Nattiq’s ears turned red.

“Never mind,” Nattiq said quickly, turning away. “Forget I said anything. And I’ve had this necklace before I even knew you.”

“Wait,” Zuko said, grabbing him by the shoulder. With a closer look at Nattiq’s necklace, Zuko could see it wasn’t the one he’d found. “I found a necklace a lot like that at the earthbending prison, and it made my spirit mark glow.” Nattiq’s eyes widened as he faced Zuko. “Please, just tell me what it is. If I know what it’s for, maybe I’ll be able to figure out what the spirits want me to do with it.”

Nattiq sighed, running a hand through his messy hair. “In the Northern Water Tribe, when a man wants to get married, he carves a necklace for his bri- partner,” Nattiq corrected himself. “If she- they, I mean- accepts, the engagement is official.”

“Hold up,” Iluak said, grinning, “does that mean you’ve got a girl back home? Our little Nattiq has himself a *girlfriend*?” A giant icy fist rose from the sea and punched Iluak in the stomach, sending him flying into the mainmast. Kesuk laughed. “Nattiq has a girlfriend~,” Iluak sang teasingly, causing Nattiq to growl in frustration. Grabbing Zuko’s arm, Nattiq led him below deck.

“Can I see the one you found? To make sure it really is a betrothal necklace,” Nattiq explained. Zuko led him to his quarters, retrieved the necklace from his bag, and tossed it to Nattiq. After a moment’s examination, Nattiq said, “Huh.”

Anxiously, Zuko asked, “Is it real?”

“Very. I’ve never seen one carved this way, actually. It looks like something Master Pakku would carve, but he never married.” Nattiq’s lip curled in disgust as he said the name. Clearly, there was some history between them. “What I mean is, it’s a very traditional design, probably carved by someone very old and with very little creativity. Like Master Pakku,” he muttered as an afterthought.

“How do you know it’s a betrothal necklace, then? Since it’s carved weirdly. Couldn’t it just be decorative?”

Nattiq shook his head. “This is cobalt spinel,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“So...?”

“It’s a rare gemstone, but there’s a big deposit in the North Pole. Legend says that each year when Tui and La would visit the mortal world on the winter solstice, they would dance for the whole night. Wherever their feet touched the ground, a patch of cobalt spinel appeared. At the end of the night, La would give Tui one of the stones as a token of his love for her, and then they would return to the spirit world until the next winter. That’s where the tradition of the betrothal necklace came from.”

Zuko closed his eyes, remembering the story Kya would tell him about Tui and La. “That was before they took their forms in the mortal world, then.” He frowned. “Maybe the spirits want me to go to the Northern Water Tribe?”

“No!” Nattiq slammed his hands down on Zuko’s table, making Zuko flinch. “I- I can’t go back there. Even coming this far north has been hard enough.”

So *that* was why Nattiq had been so nervous. “But you’re from there,” Zuko said nervously. “Don’t you want to go home?”

Nattiq crossed his arms, scowling at the floor. “You’re not the only one running from your past, Lee.”

“Oh.” Quietly, Zuko said, “I need to take care of my business in the Earth Kingdom before anything else. If I do end up going to the North Pole, you don’t have to come with me.” Zuko may not understand Nattiq’s situation, but he did understand needing to be away from your past.

Nattiq excused himself to his own quarters, but before Zuko could get comfortable, Iluak’s loud knock sounded on his door. Zuko groaned, burying his face in his pillow. He needed to have a talk with his crew about disturbing him while he was in his room.

“Hey, Lee? Oh, were you trying to rest?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, I’ll make this quick, then. Who’s Sokka?”

Zuko's heart leapt into his throat. "Wh- what... how did you- what-"

Iluak raised his hands in a placating gesture, making Zuko realize that he'd been subconsciously reaching for his swords. "Easy," Iluak said nervously, "I was just curious. You don't have to tell me if you don't wanna. When you were sleepwalking earlier-"

"I wasn't sleepwalking!"

"Right," Iluak said, clearly unconvinced. "Anyway, you kept crying out for someone named Sokka."

"Did- did I say anything else?" Zuko gulped, worried that he might have revealed too much about himself.

"Nope. Your top-secret identity is safe," Iluak said with an eyeroll. "Seriously, why is everyone on this ship so private? Just forget I asked." Iluak left with an irritated huff.

Sokka. Sokka. Sokka. The name repeated in Zuko's mind over and over, in time with his heartbeat. Why Sokka? Why hadn't Zuko been calling out for his mother, or father, or Azula? He'd been thinking about them, too. Why hadn't he called for Uncle? What had even happened in the energy field?

As Zuko thought himself in circles, Iluak was on the deck with Mine and Shizu. "Everyone on this ship is so guarded," he ranted. "I make one comment about Nattiq having a girlfriend, and he tries to turn me into a pancake."

"Be patient with him," Shizu signed. "There's a lot you don't know about him."

"But I *would* know, if he would just tell me!"

"I know you're trying to help him," Mine said, patting Iluak on the shoulder, "but maybe he's not ready to be helped. Maybe he just needs time."

"He reminds me of my little brother." For a moment, Iluak's voice was uncharacteristically quiet, then came back to normal as he said, "And then there's Lee. Spirits, he acts so much like a teenager sometimes it's painful."

"His teenage years can't be that far behind him," Mine mused. "He's probably a couple years younger than me."

"What? No, he has to be older," Iluak argued. "You've seen his firebending, that kind of thing takes years to master. And I've never met a firebender who's bothered practicing with weapons other than their fire."

Shizu frowned, then signed, "What's your point?"

"Lee probably learned how to use those swords after he got kicked out of the Fire Nation, which had to be when he was at least eighteen. You can't just pick up weapons like that and use them the way he does. I can tell he's trained with those for years."

Shizu, Mine, and Iluak continued to speculate, while the subject of their discussion had reached a frustrating dead end. The only conclusion Zuko could come to was that Sokka had been the one reaching for Zuko, which was impossible. Even if Sokka had somehow become spiritual (impossible) or if he'd repressed his emotions so much that they could only manifest in his energy (possible, but very unlikely). Even if Sokka was nearby (extremely unlikely). Even if Sokka didn't hate Zuko (impossible) and still felt the grief caused by his departure from the South Pole (very unlikely). Even if Kya had disappeared (which Zuko refused to consider as a possibility) and Hakoda had abandoned Sokka in some way (impossible, Hakoda loved his children too much).

Zuko knew it couldn't be Sokka because of the feelings regarding his sister. Because Sokka wouldn't have seen his sister becoming motherly, and wouldn't have been angry about her and some boy.

Because when Zuko was barely eleven, the Southern Raiders had returned, declaring their success in capturing the last waterbender from the Southern Water Tribe. Yon Rha said he saw her waterbend right in front of him. And when Zuko was fourteen, he'd broken into the only prison in the Fire Nation that held waterbenders, looking for a little girl, only to find all the prisoners were adults. It didn't take a genius to figure it out.

Katara was dead, and it was Zuko's fault.

Chapter End Notes

ok i spent TOO LONG researching blue rocks for the betrothal necklaces and i'm still not even happy with my choice. you probably expected me to talk about more plot stuff in the chapter notes (and I will), but i NEED to talk about the rocks. i wanted to go with larimar bc that's more of the right color than cobalt spinel, but you can only find larimar in like. the caribbean. also, spinel is like an 8 on the mohs scale (read: hard to carve) while larimar is a 5 (read: much easier to carve, but still good for jewelry), but i wanted to go with a rock that was native to the arctic

(*looks back at the rock part* man, and i wonder why people don't read my chapter notes)

if anyone in the comments starts asking me if katara is really dead i'm going to punch you. SHE IS NOT DEAD, ZUKO ONLY THINKS THAT SHE'S DEAD

so, sokka was the one reaching out for zuko after all

there was supposed to be more zhao this chapter. there is not. this is because i hate him, and i have midterms in all of my classes this week, therefore i do not have the energy to write him. unfortunately, he will be in the next chapter

this week on buzzfeed unsolved, we ask: what were shizu and mine doing under the blanket

this mystery will remain: unsolved

i love me some waterbender backstory

thanks for reading! <3

The calm

Chapter Notes

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

When the *Unagi* arrived in the town nearest Zuko's permanent residence, Zuko was so relieved he could cry. There were no Fire Nation ships in sight, which meant Zhao hadn't arrived yet. Still, they could be here any minute, Zuko reminded himself. He had to move quickly.

He paced anxiously on the deck as the waterbenders guided the ship into a secret cave, hidden by a waterfall. "There's a port, like, ten minutes away," Nattiq groaned. "Can't we dock there?"

"Absolutely not," Zuko said, continuing to pace. "I told you, we need to take precautions as long as we're here."

"This seems kind of extreme, Lee," Iluak said.

Whirling around to face Iluak, Zuko snapped, "Are you questioning your captain?! If it weren't for me, you'd still be rotting in jail! All three of you would be! And you two," Zuko said, pointing accusingly at Shizu and Mine, "that girl you call your little sister, Suki? I found her and her group of Kyoshi Warriors surrounded by firebenders. If I'd gotten there a minute later, she would be *dead*. Now, does anyone else want to doubt me?" When nobody responded, Zuko said, "I thought so. I'm leaving now, and if you want to live, don't follow me. This is something I have to do alone."

Zuko stormed off to his quarters, where he gathered a small bag of his things. It was the same bag Zuko had brought with him to the South Pole, the bag he brought wherever he went. Removing his blue mask and broadswords from it, Zuko slung the bag over his shoulder and headed on his way, Nikko at his side. "Thanks for staying with me, girl," Zuko said, giving her a scratch between the ears. At least he wouldn't be completely alone with Zhao.

On deck, Iluak watched as Zuko and Nikko disappeared behind one of the cave walls. "Anyone else get the feeling Lee's not telling us something?"

"Lee, the one who thinks asking about your favorite color is a 'personal question'? I don't see why he'd be keeping something from us," Kesuk said sarcastically.

"Fair point," Iluak conceded, "but this seems different. I think we should go out to the town and get him something nice that'll cheer him up."

Nattiq frowned. "Isn't that exactly what he told us *not* to do? He made it very clear that we should stay with the boat."

"Maybe that's what he said," Iluak said, resting his hands on Nattiq's shoulders, "but what he meant was, don't go into town as part of the Blue Spirit's pirate crew and get caught."

“I’m not a pirate, I’m a *vigilante*,” Kesuk whined in a surprisingly accurate impression of Zuko’s voice. In her normal voice, she said, “Nattiq, you don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

“You’re going too?!”

Grinning at the anguish in Nattiq’s voice, Kesuk replied, “Someone has to keep Iluak in line.”

“Shizu wants to go into town, too,” Mine interjected.

Nattiq groaned. “All four of you?!”

Mine shook her head. “No, she’s pretty adamant that I stay here. I’ll keep you company, Nattiq.”

Shizu, Kesuk, and Iluak readied their disguises, and as soon as the sun rose, they headed into town. Meanwhile, Zuko watched the sun rise over the small town in the distance, then continued towards a large hill. As he walked, Zuko pulled his hair loose from his green ribbon and retied it with a red one.

After a few minutes, Zuko reached an abandoned army outpost. He climbed through a broken window of the commander’s quarters and shouted, “Yun! I’m home!”

Somewhere in the distance, there was a clattering noise, and a few moments later, an elderly man appeared before Zuko. “Prince Zuko,” Yun said with a small bow, “you’re back sooner than expected.”

“Apologies for not sending word ahead of me,” Zuko replied, setting his bag down on a table. “My uncle said Commander Zhao would be paying me a visit. You shouldn’t be here when he arrives.”

Yun nodded, then vanished to wherever he came from. While Zuko was away doing vigilante activities, he paid Yun to take care of his quarters and send important mail along to Zuko. Essentially, Yun made it seem like Zuko was living there permanently, which helped Zuko avoid suspicion from the Fire Nation. Uncle had told Zuko that Yun would take care of things for him after playing a game of pai sho with Yun, which Zuko found a little weird, but dismissed it as regular old man behavior. So far, Yun had been completely dependable, and he only spoke when necessary, which Zuko liked.

Once Zuko had gotten settled, he drew himself a bath. Determined to get every bit of Lee off of him, Zuko scrubbed himself over and over again until his skin was raw and red, as if a thorough cleaning could rid him of his wrongdoings. He pulled on his Fire Nation clothes, surprised at how tight they had become. Making a mental note to visit a tailor while he was here, Zuko buckled his armor on to make his ill-fitting clothes less obvious. When he looked in the mirror, the only person he saw was Zuko.

Satisfied with his own appearance, Zuko spent the rest of the morning making his living quarters appear lived in and rehearsing potential conversations with Zhao.

It was Shizu who first spotted the Fire Nation ships docking. She and Iluak were browsing weapons at the locally smithy when she happened to notice them through a shop window. Grabbing Iluak's arm, she pointed out the window.

"Ugh," Iluak grunted, "what do *they* want?" In a lower voice, he said, "They can't be here for us. Lee had us travel in mist all night and then hid the *Unagi* in that cave, remember?"

"Still," she signed back, "whatever they're here for, it can't be good." Though Iluak agreed, he had promised to keep a low profile, so he didn't go out to confront them. Instead, he approached the blacksmith, who was staring out the window.

"You guys get Fire Nation ships here often?"

"They stop by every now and again." With a shrug, the blacksmith added, "They usually don't bother us. Our town has a deal with the Fire Nation. They get to dock here and refuel safely, and in return--"

"In return, they don't burn us to the ground," another customer interrupted. He had been testing out a weapon that Iluak had been eyeing, a double-sided staff with detachable blades on the ends.

"They allow us to live in peace," the blacksmith finished.

"Living in fear isn't the same as living in peace," the other man said.

Undeterred, the blacksmith said, "Is there something specific you wanted?"

"Me? No, but my friend here," Iluak said, gesturing to Shizu, "wanted to see if you had war fans. She's been saving up for something special for her girlfriend- oof!" Shizu had suddenly socked Iluak in the gut, making him double over. Iluak briefly wondered what he did wrong, but Shizu's frantic signing quickly made him realize his mistake. "Ah. I mean, her friend. Her friend who happens to be a girl." In Iluak's tribe, nobody cared who you loved, but in the Earth Kingdom, not all people were accepting of girls who loved girls and boys who loved boys. He really hoped they wouldn't be kicked out of the shop because of his comment.

Instead of getting angry, the blacksmith smiled. "I understand," he said warmly. "A few years ago, I made a weapon for someone I love. It was a hunter's bow which could split into dual swords, and I believe it's my finest work yet. My husband carries it with him wherever he goes." At the word "husband", Shizu looked up suddenly. Hesitantly, she returned the blacksmith's smile.

"He even sleeps with it when we go on hunting trips," the other customer said, rolling his eyes. "Probably bathes with it, too."

"I'm certain he does," the blacksmith quipped, then turned to Shizu. "I've made war fans before, but not for some time. May I see yours for a moment?" Shizu handed over her fans, and the blacksmith's eyes widened. "Oh, wow. You're from Kyoshi Island, aren't you?" At Shizu's nod, he gushed, "One of my mentor's friends was from there. They have a unique

way of making their war fans that I've always wanted to try, but never had the opportunity to. Tell me exactly how you want your new fans, and I'll make them for you."

"She can't talk," Iluak interjected.

"Oh, that's no problem," the blacksmith said, waving a hand dismissively. "I have a friend who is deaf, so I know some sign language. You can write, yes?" At Shizu's nod, he added, "Good. What I don't understand from your signing can be written. Now, tell me everything." As Shizu and the blacksmith began to converse, Iluak began browsing the weapons again.

"You seen that we have company?" Iluak yelped in surprise, nearly dropping the dagger he was holding. Kesuk had materialized next to him, and merely raised an eyebrow at his shock.

"Spirits, Kesuk, don't sneak up on me like that! I could have chopped my toes off!" Iluak took a moment to catch his breath, then said, "Okay, what did you want?"

With a loud, drawn-out sigh, Kesuk said, "The Fire Nation is here. Did you not see them come in?"

"We spotted them a few minutes ago. They're not here for trouble, right?" Kesuk shook her head and Iluak sighed in relief.

"But it's the Commander that Lee shaved back on Kyoshi. As soon as they docked, he and a few of his guards ran off somewhere." She led Iluak outside to the docks, where the rest of the Fire Nation soldiers were loading goods onboard. "Then these guys started searching the ships in port, demanding to see their licenses. One of the captains didn't get his license renewed, so they're seizing all his cargo."

"You know, I think I understand why Lee doesn't like being called a pirate," Iluak muttered, narrowing his eyes. Pirates stole from vulnerable people trying to feed their families. Pirates who dared attack Fire Nation ships were few and far between, and Iluak doubted they had the same motives as Lee. Watching the Fire Nation soldiers commandeer the random ship's goods, Iluak realized who the true pirates were. "We're lucky that Lee was paranoid enough to have us dock in that cave," he said quietly.

Kesuk wasn't so sure that it was luck. Lee never took those kinds of precautions, and *never* went anywhere without his swords. She had a sneaking suspicion that all of this had something to do with Lee's past with the Fire Nation.

At Zuko's house, there was a knock on the door. Zuko took a deep breath and, forcing himself not to scowl, opened the door. "Commander Zhao," he greeted politely, "I've been expecting you. I hope you didn't have trouble finding my place."

"I did, thanks to your uncle," Zhao grumbled, stepping inside. Without even bothering to take his shoes off, he sat in Zuko's only chair, forcing Zuko to take the cushion he'd set on the ground earlier. With a disdainful look around, Zhao said, "So this is where you're living nowadays? Shameful, even for a banished prince."

Zuko did his best to keep his expression level. "It's not so bad when you get used to it."

“Still, wouldn’t you like to come home?” Zuko nodded instinctively, but as he processed the question, he started to wonder. He didn’t have long to think before Zhao said, “I have a proposition for you.”

“Oh?”

“The Avatar has been spotted, alive. I’ve seen him with my own two eyes- a young airbender.” Clearly, Zhao expected a big reaction from Zuko.

“I’ve heard,” Zuko said simply. Zhao blinked.

“And you haven’t gone looking for him? What, have you given up so easily?”

“No, I-” Just then, Nikko entered the room. She gave Zhao a wary stare before sitting next to Zuko.

“You still have that?”

Zuko took a deep breath before replying. “Yes, I do still have her. And my boat sank, remember?”

“Ah, yes. It was the work of the Blue Spirit, was it not?” Zuko nodded. Technically, it *had* been the Blue Spirit who decided to sink the *Wani*. “I’ve met him on the battlefield. Quite flighty, that one. You and I have many common enemies.”

Instead of yelling at Zhao to get to the point, Zuko said, “What was your proposition?”

“*Sir*, ” Zhao corrected, leaning over Zuko. Sensing Zuko’s irritation, Nikko gently nudged Zuko’s shoulder with her snout.

“What was your proposition, sir?” It took all of Zuko’s willpower not to spit the last word at Zhao.

“I want you to aid me in capturing the Avatar. He is traveling to the North Pole with two Southern tribesmen.” Briefly, Zuko wondered if the necklace he found had been dropped by one of the Avatar’s companions, but quickly dismissed the thought. Nattiq had said the betrothal necklaces were a Northern Water Tribe tradition, and Iluak and Kesuk hadn’t seemed to know about them. Also, Zuko didn’t remember any women from the Southern Water Tribe wearing necklaces except-

Wait.

Zuko *had* seen a betrothal-style necklace before- around Kya’s neck. *That* was why the necklace on the prison rig had looked so familiar. Zuko desperately wanted to retrieve the necklace from his bag to see if the pattern was the same. Could it really be Kya’s necklace he found? Was that why his spirit mark had appeared?

“Prince Zuko?” Zuko blinked, realizing he’d completely missed what Zhao just said.

“Er, sorry, what was that?” Zhao sighed impatiently.

“I said I want your help catching the Avatar, who’s traveling to the North Pole. He was last spotted in a forest near this area. He needs to be captured before he reaches the North Pole.”

Frowning, Zuko asked, “Wouldn’t you prefer to capture him while he’s there?”

Zhao narrowed his eyes, stood, then knelt down in front of Zuko. “You’re not trying to protect the savages the Avatar travels with, are you, Prince Zuko?” Zuko was surprised by this response. Everybody knew that Zhao wanted to invade the North Pole, he’d wanted to for years. If the Northern Water Tribe was housing the Avatar, it’d be a perfect excuse for an invasion.

“What? No, I wasn’t even thinking about them, I-”

“Have you been fraternizing with the Southern Tribe again? If I remember correctly, which I do, that’s against the terms of your banishment.”

“No, I haven’t. I burned that bridge a long time ago.” Guilt festered inside Zuko as he remembered little Katara, the happy waterbending girl who died before she even reached the age of ten. Zuko started to look away, but Zhao suddenly grabbed him by the chin, forcing Zuko to look at him. Nikko growled ferociously.

“Swear that you have no underlying ties to the Southern Water Tribe.” Zuko tried to struggle away from him, but Zhao had an iron grip. “Swear it!”

“My only loyalty is to my people. I serve the Fire Nation, and only the Fire Nation.” Zhao held Zuko for a moment longer, then smiled and let him go.

“Good,” he said, clapping a hand on Zuko’s shoulder. Zuko tried not to flinch. “Now, will you come with me?”

“No,” Zuko said, standing.

“What?!” Zhao leapt to his feet, grabbing Zuko by the shoulders. “But you need me- agh!” Nikko bit Zhao’s leg, making him let go of Zuko. Zhao moved into a suspiciously kata-like position, but before he could release any fire, Zuko grabbed him by the wrist.

“That’s enough,” Zuko said quietly, looking Zhao dead in the eye. Whenever Azula wanted to be intimidating, she spoke in a quieter voice. It always scared Zuko, so he decided to try it on Zhao. “I may be banished, but I’m still a prince. I order you to leave.”

“Of course,” Zhao said, uncharacteristically composed. With a small bow, he said, “I’ll do what the prince commands.” Zuko was too relieved his intimidation strategy actually worked to notice Zhao’s smirk, or the way he emphasized the word “prince”.

Once he was certain Zhao was gone, Zuko plopped down right on the floor, burying his face in Nikko’s soft tummy fur. “Thanks for always having my back, girl,” Zuko mumbled, closing his eyes.

“Hey, look, it’s that Commander,” Kesuk said, nudging Shizu’s shoulder. Shizu was too nervous to even pretend to look over at him.

“What if she doesn’t like them? What if she says no? What if it’s too soon and-” Kesuk grabbed Shizu’s hands, which were trembling as they signed the words.

“Look at me. You and Mine have been together for like, forever, right?” Shizu nodded anxiously. “This is a natural next step in your relationship. Whatever happens, she’s not going to love you any less. Everything will be okay,” Kesuk said reassuringly. She looked back at the Fire Nation Commander, who discreetly exchanged a bag of gold with a shady-looking character. “Everything will be okay,” she said, less certain this time.

Iluak, still at the smithy, didn’t notice the men in red armor carrying barrels of explosive jelly out of the town.

~ ~ ~

It was nighttime. It was nighttime, and Zhao’s stupid ships still hadn’t left the stupid port. Zuko could still see their lights on from outside the stupid broken window in his stupid Earth Kingdom home. It was stupid.

Zuko’s short interaction with his least favorite Fire Nation Commander had left him completely drained and unable to do anything else for the rest of the day except for petting Nikko and breathing exercises. Still, he had checked if the ships had left at least once an hour, and was disappointed each time. It had been three hours since the sun had set and the ships were still here, so Zuko begrudgingly accepted that he’d have to spend the night here.

Somehow, he managed to get to sleep on the ridiculously uncomfortable mattress, but it felt like he’d only been asleep for five minutes before Nikko started growling loudly at the window.

“Shut up,” Zuko groaned as she started barking. Nikko, of course, only started barking and growling louder.

There was scuttling, and then a thump, and the barking grew more distant. Zuko sat up a bit, squinting, to realize Nikko had climbed out of one of the windows.

“Oh, please don’t be like the Eastern Air temple,” Zuko groaned, pulling his robe tighter around him. All of a sudden, there was a loud yelp, and Nikko’s barks disappeared. Zuko heard shuffling outside which- okay, that was *definitely* not isopuppy paws, and Yun had stayed in town that night.

Entirely awake now, Zuko crept into the main room where his bag was, reaching for his swords- his swords, that he’d left on the boat. Zuko swore silently, and that’s when he smelled it.

A faint almond smell lingered in the air, which Zuko wouldn’t have normally been suspicious of. Except that his ship had smelled the same way just before the prison break, when they had been carrying several barrels of blasting jelly.

Zuko barely had time to bend a sphere of fire around him before the entire barracks exploded.

Chapter End Notes

zhao voice haha fire prince go boom

after last chapter, everyone's saying that zuko is stupid- which, he is- but i'd like to point out that he's drawing reasonable conclusions from the (limited) information he has. he's doing his best, guys

what's shizu so nervous about, anyway?

i'm so tired

thanks for reading

The storm

Chapter Notes

guys. GUYS. i am NOT going to kill the dog. i lost BOTH of my dogs earlier this year, and i'm not going to put zuko through that

...that being said, there's a bit of animal cruelty at the beginning of the chapter, regarding zhao, so be warned

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

{{Curious about what Zuko's crew looks like? I did a [drawing](#) of them here! Now, for the chapter!}}

Nikko's ears perked up at the noise outside Zuko's window. "Hurry up already," a gruff voice whispered. "I need to get back to my ship so I have an alibi." Recognizing the voice, Nikko growled at the window.

"Shut up," Zuko groaned from his bed, not moving. Nikko barked louder, hoping to warn him, but Zuko still wouldn't budge. Deciding to take matters into her own paws, Nikko climbed out of the window, following her nose to where Commander Zhao was.

Zhao narrowed his eyes when he saw the prince's dog in front of him. Growling and spitting, the dog started yowling at him. "Your master isn't here to protect you this time," Zhao hissed, readying his flames.

Before he could strike, Nikko lunged at Zhao, sending both of them tumbling into a thornbush. For a moment, Zhao grappled with the dog (which was surprisingly strong), until he managed to give it a hard kick in the underbelly. The dog yelped, and Zhao threw it off to the side, then shot a stream of fire at it as it fled. Zhao shot a glare at his lowlife companions, who were obviously trying not to laugh.

"The brat might be awake now," Zhao said, sparks coming from his mouth. "Make sure he hasn't left the building."

Meanwhile, Nikko had reached the top of the tallest hill nearby. After getting a running start, she curled up into a ball and rolled down the hill, quickly picking up speed. Unfortunately, the hill wasn't very tall, and there was a lot of flat land between her and the town. Usually, the fastest way an isodog could travel on land was by rolling, but Nikko had a secret advantage.

Most isodogs were incapable of running at high speeds on land due to their extra appendages, which would often drag on the ground and get caught in bushes or on rocks. Nikko, however, had the extraordinary luck of being a breed created only fifty years ago by some bored South Polers. One particular day, a man by the name of Two-Toed Amaruq, had the idea to breed local sledding dogs with domesticated isodogs. As most of his ideas involving animals had led to the loss of eight toes and damage to several other body parts, most people laughed off the idea as another one of his crazy schemes.

Oddly enough, Two-Toed Amaruq's idea worked, and a new breed of isodog was created. Unlike the traditional isodog, this breed had four wolf-like legs, as well as several pairs of shorter, isopod-like legs which could be tucked under the isodog's shell. Though unable to climb walls like the common breed, the new hybrid could still use its isopod legs to scuttle along in the water with its land legs tucked against its tummy. The breed quickly became popular among inland tribes, who loved that the dogs were useful on land or sea.

Thus, Nikko was able to sprint to the nearby Earth Kingdom town, reaching a top speed of nearly thirty-five miles per hour. Thousands of different smells floated in the air around her, but through it all, Nikko picked out the scent of Shizu's plum blossom perfume. She followed her nose to a brightly lit plaza in the middle of town, where Shizu, Iluak, and Kesuk were enjoying a late dinner outside.

"Today was great and all, but I wish I'd found something for Lee," Iluak was saying. "Still, we're going to be here for a little while, right? Shizu's fans won't be ready for another couple of days- huh?" Nikko walked up next to Iluak, nudging her forehead into his hand. "Oh, hello Nikko! Who's a good girl?" Iluak went to scratch her under the chin, but Nikko jerked her head away. "Hey, what's that in your mouth?" Nikko sat up on her hind legs and dropped a shredded piece of red fabric on the table.

"She's hurt," Kesuk realized, noticing scorch marks on one side of Nikko's carapace. She pulled the water out of her cup and pressed it against Nikko's side, and after a minute, the burns were completely gone. Nikko licked Kesuk's hand appreciatively. "It looks like it was a glancing blow, but still, it must have hurt. Who did that to you?"

"Kesuk," Iluak said in a strange tone. He had the fabric in his hands. "This is Fire Nation. High-quality Fire Nation. You don't think...?"

All three of them leapt up at the same time, realizing that Lee was in danger. Nikko barked, then started running back in the direction she came. Iluak and Kesuk were right behind her, followed by Shizu (who had stopped for a moment to leave a small pouch of coins at the table. The *Unagi* crew may be fugitives, but they weren't savages who didn't tip their waiters.)

The trio had just reached the edge of town when a blinding flash of light washed over them, followed by a loud boom.

"Oh no," Kesuk breathed, then shouted, "Lee!" She and Iluak started to charge forwards, but Shizu grabbed both of them by an arm and pulled them into a patch of bushes, then clamped a hand over each of their mouths. Three pairs of eyes watched as Commander Zhao strode past them, smiling.

As soon as he passed, they were following Nikko again, sprinting as fast as they could towards the site of the explosion. When they climbed the final hill, Kesuk felt like the wind had been knocked out of her.

The entire complex was on fire. She could tell that there had once been a few buildings here, but all that remained was rubble in a flaming crater. How much blasting jelly had it taken to make an explosion like this? “Spirits,” Iluak whispered next to her. On her other side, Shizu had started crying.

Nikko, however, had suddenly perked up. Barking, she ran towards the forest on the outside of the crater, ignoring the spreading flames around her.

Zuko blew on his dog whistle again and again, hoping desperately that his dog would come. After being blown out of his house, Zuko had been flung into the woods where he’d skidded across the rough ground until his head hit something hard, and everything had gone black. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been unconscious, but Zuko could see a fire slowly coming towards him. Zuko tried to get up, to crawl away, *anything*, but his entire body ached and black spots swam across his vision whenever he tried to move. It was all he could manage to reach into his bag. He’d been trying to find Sokka’s carving, but instead his fingers had brushed against the cool metal of the dog whistle.

Seconds later, Nikko appeared at his side, licking Zuko’s face, his hands, any part of him she could reach. Then, she planted herself next to him and started to howl. As Zuko stared helplessly at the encroaching fire, he almost wanted to laugh at the irony of the Fire Prince dying in a fire. He wanted to laugh, to cry, to scream, to do *something*, but Zuko was paralyzed.

“Lee!” Zuko blinked. Was someone calling for him? Nikko howled again, and Zuko heard rustling in the nearby bushes. Shocked, Zuko watched as Iluak, Shizu, and Kesuk tumbled out. Iluak saw him first, and his eyes widened in horror.

Rushing to his side, Iluak shouted, “Lee! Lee, are you okay?!”

“H- help,” Zuko croaked, weakly reaching out to him. “Can’t- move...”

“Oh, Tui and La,” Iluak said, throwing Zuko over his shoulder. “We have to get him to Nattiq!” He sounded far away, much farther away than he should be. Dizzy and confused, Zuko allowed his eyes to slide closed.

“NATTIQ!” Nattiq nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of his name being shouted. He stormed out of his room, about to give Iluak a piece of his mind, but froze in his tracks at the sight of Lee over Iluak’s shoulder.

“What happened?!” Mine, who had just been braiding Nattiq’s hair, jumped off of his bed. “Shizu, are you-”

“Fine,” Shizu signed, “only Lee hurt, explosion, Fire Nation-”

“Whoa, calm down,” Mine said, taking one of Shizu’s hands. “You can explain everything later. Nattiq will heal Lee, and everything will be fine.”

“I’ll do what I can, but it’s a new moon, remember? And from the looks of that head wound, he’s got a bad concussion.” As Nattiq gathered some fresh water into his hands, he frowned down at the still form below him. “Is my sign language wrong, or did Shizu say something about an explosion?”

“Wherever Lee was got blown up by a Fire Nation Commander,” Kesuk said.

“Did you heal him, then?” Kesuk shook her head, confused. Nattiq, equally confused, said, “Then why isn’t he burned?”

“...What?”

“He’s got the head wound, a few big cuts, and a lot of blunt trauma wounds, but there’s not a scorch mark on him,” Nattiq explained. He rolled his patient over onto his stomach, healing one of the larger slashes on his back. “His clothes aren’t burned. His *bag* isn’t burned. It looks more like he shot himself out of a cannon into the woods rather than survived a point blank explosion.”

“Firebending,” Shizu signed.

“Shizu’s right- he probably used his firebending to protect him,” Mine said, then hesitated. “Wait, Nattiq and I felt a huge earthquake a few minutes ago. We were afraid the cave was going to come down. Was that...?”

“The explosion,” Kesuk said with a nod. “It was a big one.”

“Lee’s a better firebender than he’s been leading us to believe, if he could protect himself from something like that.”

Iluak laughed. “Of course he is. You two haven’t seen him play with lightning yet, have you?” The two Kyoshi Warriors shook their heads. “I’m sure there’ll be a storm soon enough.”

Zuko sat up suddenly with a gasp. Immediately, he regretted sitting up so fast, as his vision blurred in and out of focus.

“Lay back down,” Nattiq said, attempting to make his voice sound soothing. “You’re going to be okay. You have a concussion, but I’m healing you.”

“Nikko,” Zuko said, failing to form a proper question. Fortunately, his crew understood.

“She’s okay too,” Iluak said, “but right now, you need to rest. We’re going to lay low for a few days-”

“No!” Zuko lurched forwards, alarming everyone in the room. “No. Zhao. Need to stop him.”

“You’re in no state to fight, Lee,” Mine said. “He just tried to blow you to bits, and it almost worked. We can go get revenge once you’re feeling better.”

“No, no, no,” Zuko said, shaking his head. “Avatar. Avatar. Stop Zhao.”

“Well, if the Avatar’s going to stop him, I don’t see why we have to,” Iluak said with a chuckle. Sometimes, Zuko considered growing his hair back out solely so that he could pull on it when he was frustrated.

“Wait,” Kesuk said, grabbing Iluak’s arm. “Give him a minute to get his thoughts together.” Zuko looked at her gratefully. Out of all his crew members, Kesuk had always been the most understanding of Zuko’s struggle to put words together. On a normal day, it took Zuko a moment to find the right words, but right now, his mind was so scrambled that it took a solid few minutes for him to finally say what he needed to.

“Zhao’s chasing after the Avatar,” Zuko said, after what felt like an eternity. “He’s- he’s going to catch him. With his resources, it’s only a matter of time. Somebody needs to stop him.”

“Lee’s right,” Mine said. “Someone needs to protect the Avatar.” Which wasn’t exactly why Zuko wanted to stop Zhao, but he wasn’t going to argue. It was a convenient excuse, after all.

“He’s trying to get him before he gets to the North Pole. If he does, he’s going to lock him up in Pohuai. Pohuai is inescapable.”

“So we have to stop him before then,” Shizu signed. Zuko nodded.

“Are you all forgetting that this Commander has five ships he’s traveling with? We won’t be able to take them on with just the six of us, especially with Lee like this,” Nattiq said.

“Tail him until he finds the Avatar,” Zuko suggested. “Stay hidden in mist. He’ll have to split his forces between us and the Avatar.”

Sighing, Nattiq said, “Am I the only one who thinks this is a bad idea?” Five sets of eyes glared back at Nattiq, and his shoulders slumped in defeat. “Fine. I’ll just stay here and heal Lee, then.”

~ ~ ~

Sokka sighed, wondering how bad his luck was going to get. Of *course* the old woman who’d listened to her joints had been right about a storm coming. But Sokka and the old man were already out at sea, and there was no turning back now. “So,” Sokka said, trying to lighten the mood, “you ever run into any Fire Nation guys out here?”

“Every once in a while, ya will,” the man replied. “Pirates are a bigger problem. They’ll snatch up all yer cargo if yer not careful. Except that Blue Spirit guy- he only takes from Fire Nations ships. Seemed a decent fellow, fer someone from the Fire Nation, anyway.”

Did *everybody* know the Blue Spirit? Everywhere Sokka went, someone seemed to know him, or know of him. Sokka was starting to wonder if multiple people were wearing the mask

when his mind processed the end of the man's sentence.

"The Blue Spirit was *Fire Nation*? " Sokka couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Ye. Gold eyes, black hair, the whole deal. He's Fire Nation through and through." Mentally, Sokka put together a list of what he knew about the Blue Spirit.

Blue Spirit facts:

1. The Blue Spirit wields dual swords.
2. He had visited Kyoshi Island, where he'd cut one of Zhao's sideburns off. (Potential grudge against Zhao?)
3. He was from the Fire Nation, but was against them now. (Could they have scorned him somehow?)
4. Smellerbee had said the Blue Spirit knew a lot about the banished Fire Prince.

Sokka stared out at the sea, thinking for a moment. A crazy, impossible idea occurred to him, and Sokka made a new list.

Zuko facts:

1. Zuko wields dual swords.
2. Zhao had tried to kill Zuko as a child, which was certainly reasonable bounds for a grudge.
3. Zuko was from the Fire Nation, but was scorned by them somehow. (Could he have turned against them?)
4. Zuko would know a lot about the banished Fire Prince.

"So," Sokka said, trying to sound casual despite his potentially groundbreaking revelation, "What else do you know about the Blue Spirit? Did you actually meet him?"

"Once, out at sea. In a bad storm. He helped us get home in that ship of his. She was a beauty, that ship- looked like any ol' Earth Kingdom trading ship, but she could cut through the water like nothing I've ever seen. Guess that's why they call her the *Unagi*. That's some beast in the south that the Blue Spirit tamed, and I heard he uses it to pull his ship along."

Sokka wanted to tell the old man that he didn't *care* about some dumb legend surrounding the Blue Spirit, but instead said, "Do you know anything about him and the Fire Prince?"

"Oh, the Blue Spirit *hates* that brat! Apparently they got some sort of history. Some people reckon the Blue Spirit got that burn scar from a run-in with the Fire Prince, and has hated him ever since."

Sokka cursed himself for forgetting that the Blue Spirit had a burn scar, something a master firebender like Zuko would never have. Disregarding his crazy, outlandish theory, Sokka settled on a more logical conclusion: the Blue Spirit and Zuko were bitter rivals. Surely, Zuko could take the guy in a fight, right? But what if he couldn't? *Why was Sokka so worried about this?*

A loud crack of thunder distracted Sokka from his thoughts, and his mind turned to the rough ocean ahead of them. Right now, Sokka had other things to worry about.

~ ~ ~

It wasn't the Avatar, but rather a storm which provided the perfect opportunity for the Blue Spirit to strike. Nattiq had managed to heal Zuko in only a day and a half, so he had been up and walking around the deck for a few hours before the storm hit. Using his own senses, Zuko wouldn't have been able to guess about the storm, but a flock of particularly noisy cranefish flying overhead had warned him.

Now, Zuko was engaged in battle with Zhao's ships. Two of them were already sinking due to both the storm's overwhelming swells and Mine's cannon fire. Using his waterbending, Iluak had propelled himself and Zuko onto the deck of Zhao's personal cruiser, the largest ship of the fleet. If they could just get below deck, they could do enough damage to force Zhao back to port, delaying him from the Avatar-

"Lee!" Zuko turned just in time to see a huge boulder be catapulted directly towards the *Unagi*. He saw the ship jerk to the side due to some impromptu waterbending, which saved it from a direct hit, but it wasn't enough. The boulder left a huge gash on the side of the ship, ripping right through the wooden siding and the metal hull beneath. Immediately, the hole was patched up by a layer of ice, but Zuko knew they had to head back to land if they wanted to survive.

All of a sudden, Zuko felt a tingling sensation. There was going to be a lightning strike, and Zuko could feel exactly where it was going to hit: the top of Zhao's cruiser. These newer ships were designed to be able to take lightning strikes at the top, and actually had a metal lightning rod to ensure the lightning would strike at the exact right spot. Looking at the other two ships, Zuko knew what he had to do.

"Get me up there," Zuko shouted, pointing to the lightning rod. A second later, he was being pushed up by a column of water. He rolled onto the roof, and took his position next to the lightning rod.

When the lightning struck, seconds later, Zuko was there to catch it. Wild, unbridled energy coursed into Zuko's hand, through his arm, and into his stomach, away from his heart. Narrowing his eyes, Zuko pointed his free hand at the side of one of Zhao's ships, right where the engine room should be. The electricity left Zuko's fingertips, ripping along the side of the first ship and tearing a hole in the second one.

Panting, Zuko stumbled to the side. Maybe redirecting lightning so soon after getting a concussion hadn't been such a good idea. Zuko signaled to Iluak, who had just disabled the ship's catapult, then jumped into the sea below. Catching both of them in the water, Iluak created a big wave that carried them over to the *Unagi*.

Before they had even fully emerged from the water, Zuko yelled, "Is everyone okay?!"

"Fine," Mine shouted back. Her dark hair was plastered against her head. "Nattiq and Kesuk are holding the ship together. Iluak, you need to get us out of this storm as soon as you can."

“Somebody needs to do mist,” Zuko shouted, “or else he’s going to keep following us!”

“Me and Nattiq are barely keeping it together as it is, Lee! Can’t you do your lightning trick again?”

“Not unless I want to fry my brains out,” Zuko replied. “How about the cannons?”

“There’s no ammo left!” Zuko screamed in frustration, short-lived bursts of flames shooting from his hands. Nikko scurried over to him, pressing her snout into his left hand once the fire had faded. She left something inside his palm- without having to look, Zuko knew what it was. The curved shape of Sokka’s boomerang carving, slightly worn down from how often Zuko handled it, was warm in Zuko’s closed fist.

“I’m going out there,” Zuko said, “in my personal ship.”

“What?!” Iluak momentarily was distracted from directing the currents. “Lee, you can’t do that, that’s suicide!”

“He’s only got one ship. He can’t chase both of us.”

“And how’s your tiny ship going to hold up in this storm?”

“It doesn’t have to. All I need to do is get to the eye.”

“And then what?” Zuko hated how much Kesuk sounded like his uncle. “You’ll get captured or killed! That guy tried to blow you up less than two days ago!”

“He wasn’t trying to kill Lee,” Zuko murmured, inaudible over the roar of the storm. Zuko hadn’t given much thought to it, but as he said it, Zuko was certain that Zhao didn’t know his secret. Louder, he said, “I’m a tempting target. He’ll chase me over you.”

“We’re not going to let you kill yourself! If we need to chain you to the mainmast, Lee-”

“My name isn’t Lee!” For a moment, there was silence; even the storm stilled at Zuko’s words. “Do you ever wonder *why* I know so much about the Fire Nation? The laws, the prisons, things that no civilian should know? Why I’m not good enough at firebending? Why I wear a mask when I raid Fire Nation ships?”

Drawing himself up to his full height and pulling off his mask, Zuko declared, “My name isn’t Lee. It’s Zuko. Son of Ursa and Firelord Ozai. Prince of the Fire Nation, and heir to the throne. You will let me board my boat, and you will take the *Unagi* back to safety. Iluak, come below deck with me.”

Zuko turned on his heel, unable to bear the stunned silence of his crewmates any longer. First he stopped at his room, where his belongings were already packed. Nikko followed him inside, and Zuko paused before giving her a kiss on the soft part of her forehead. “I’m sorry, girl. This mission... I have to complete it alone.”

Zuko closed the door and headed to the cargo bay, trying to ignore the loud barks from the room behind him.

Iluak was already standing next to Zuko's ship, looking hurt and confused and angry all at once. Ashamed, Zuko hid behind his mask. Mouth dry, Zuko said, "Take care of Nikko for me." Iluak gave him a slight nod. Zuko wanted to say more, to apologize, to thank him, to get angry with him, he didn't know- but instead got in his ship like the coward he was. The metal hatch on the side of the ship opened, and a big, waterbent wave pushed Zuko out of the hold.

And just like that, Zuko was alone. Noticing his hands were shaking, Zuko let out an angry noise and clenched his fists. He had to focus on the task at hand.

Peering through a telescope, Zuko could see inside of Zhao's command tower. He watched as one of Zhao's soldiers got their commander's attention and led him over to his ship's telescope. Perfect.

Zuko scrambled atop the cabin of his ship, climbing to the top of the smokestack. He stayed there for a moment, making sure he was as visible as possible, then removed his mask.

Metal screeched harshly as the big cruiser slowly started to turn towards Zuko's skiff, leaving the *Unagi* free to escape. Having successfully captured Zhao's attention, Zuko hurried inside the cabin, quickly steering towards the small break in the clouds.

To his complete surprise, Zuko made it to the eye in one piece, with Zhao still lagging behind him. Maybe... maybe he could still make it out of this.

Or so he thought, until a blue sphere of water came up from under his ship, flipping it upside down. He barely had time to see- was that a *sky bison*? - before he was underwater, struggling to swim out of the (now flooded) cabin. Finally managing to pry the door open, Zuko surfaced, gasping for air.

Within seconds, there was a net around him, and Zuko knew it was over. Still, that didn't stop him from struggling, yelling, and generally making it more difficult for Zhao to hoist him up onto the cruiser. Inevitably, Zuko was thrown onto the deck and, having been grabbed by his shirt, forced to look into Zhao's seething eyes.

"You," Zhao spat, "are a serious pain in the-"

"Wait, is that Prince Zuko?" It was one of the two soldiers with Zhao who recognized Zuko. "I thought he was-"

Without hesitation, Zhao pushed both the soldiers off the side of the ship. Zuko cried out in horror. "Wha- but- those are your own men! They're Fire Nation, they're *loyal* to you," Zuko sputtered.

"Accidents happen in a storm," Zhao said with a careless shrug, then leaned closer to Zuko. Close, too close- their noses were almost touching. "You're supposed to be *dead*. If you try anything, more accidents will happen. You will come to my hold, *quietly*."

Zuko wanted desperately to escape, but he didn't want anyone else getting hurt because of him. As he was led down the metal hallways, Zuko wondered where those two men would fall in the field of people he'd hurt. Would they land next to the first man Zuko had ever

intentionally killed, back during the waterbending prison break? Or would they lie near the young soldiers of the 41st division, slaughtered in battle because of Zuko's inability to stand up for them? Perhaps they would come to rest near little Katara, taken from this world far too soon, all because of Zuko.

Zuko was chained up and shoved into a closet, where he remained, like a coward. A cowardly traitor's fate for a cowardly traitor prince.

Chapter End Notes

zuko. please, for once in your life, think things through before you do them. i'm begging you

NIKKO IS MY FAVORITE!!! I LOVE HER SO MUCH THO

ZUKOOOOOOO NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO WHY DID YOU HAVE TO DO THIS?!?!
WHYYYYYY

well, look on the bright side. you know what episode is after the storm?
the blue spirit, where zuko frees aang from zhao's stronghold. :)
folks, we are not far from an epic reunion here

sokka, you were so close to the truth there dammit

anyway, here's an update to give my fellow americans (and anyone else who's worried about this) something other than the election to think about!

thanks for reading! <3

Pohuai Stronghold: The Blue Spirit

Chapter Notes

zuko drops one (1) f-bomb in this chapter, be warned

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

mood music you should listen to while reading this chapter

Aang was worried. Not because he'd been captured by a group of archers with face paint, brought to a giant military stronghold, and thrown in a dark cell, which was definitely cause for concern. No, Aang was worried because his friends were sick and needed him. So, for Sokka and Katara's sake, Aang struggled against his chains as much as he could, all alone in his dark cell. Or, so he thought.

"Would you quit making that noise," a raspy voice said irritably from Aang's left. Startled, Aang turned his head to see someone sitting in the shadows. "You really are the Avatar, huh? Just my luck."

"How'd you know it was me?"

There was a scoff. "How could I not? You dress like it's a hundred years ago, not to mention the tattoos. What's your name?"

"I'm Aang."

"That was an honest answer, wasn't it? Never tell someone your real name. Spirits, how did you even hide from the Fire Nation for so long?"

"I got frozen in an iceberg for a hundred years."

"...That's rough, buddy."

~ ~ ~

"So, what are you doing here, anyways?"

"Sitting."

~ ~ ~

"Can I tell you something?"

"No."

“...Okay.”

~ ~ ~

“ *Please* can I tell you something?”

“Would you stop asking that?! Just leave me alone already!”

Aang *had* asked the question no less than seven times, but in his defense, he was trapped in a prison cell and this person was the only one around. When Aang was anxious, he needed to talk. And this was a very anxiety-provoking situation. “You know what, I’m just going to talk anyway.”

“Gah- don’t!”

“Why not?”

“If I have information about you, that gives him an excuse to torture me.” Aang had only known his cellmate for a couple hours, but he didn’t want anyone getting hurt because of him. Neither of them spoke for a few minutes, but the silence was interrupted by a croak.

“What?” A grayish-brown frog squirmed its way out of Aang’s shirt, then hopped on the floor, quickly followed by another. “No, don’t leave, frogs! My friends are sick and they need you! Please go back to being frozen!”

“Wha- you- do you just keep frozen frogs in your shirt? Why do your friends need them?”

“They’re sick and they need to suck on the frogs!”

“What the *fuck*, ” Aang’s cellmate proclaimed.

“I know it’s weird, but a crazy lady living on a mountain told me that sucking on the frozen wood frogs would cure them!”

“And you *believed* her?” The cellmate sounded bewildered.

“I had to! Didn’t you hear, my friends are sick and I don’t know how else to help them!” Another frog hopped out of Aang’s shirt. “Hey, come back!”

“You really care about them, don’t you?” The cellmate’s voice was quieter now. Aang, sensing the change in the mood, nodded instead of speaking. “I know how that feels. I’d do anything to protect my friends- which is why I’m in here, actually.” The shadowy figure curled in on himself. “But they hate me now.”

“Why would they hate you?”

“I lied to them about who I was. They’re not going to forgive me.”

“Well, who are you, then?”

“Nobody, anymore.”

“Okay then. You said you got thrown in here because of your friends- did they betray you?”

“No! No,” Nobody exclaimed. “We were being chased by Zhao while we were at sea, and I took my skiff out and led Zhao away from the ship. They didn’t want me to leave at first. They- they cared about me,” he said, voice breaking. “I was the one who betrayed them by lying to them.”

“So you left them before they had time to process what you told them? If they’re really your friends, they’re not going to hate you just because of who you are. When I first met So-“ Remembering what Nobody had said about giving away information, Aang corrected- “Er, I mean, um, Wolf and, uh, June, I didn’t tell them that I was the Avatar. But when they found out, they weren’t mad at me, and they decided to travel the world with me.”

“Okay, but revealing my identity was like dropping a barrel of blasting jelly on them. I’m- I mean, I used to be pretty important.”

“I’m the Avatar. There’s not a much bigger barrel of blasting jelly you can drop than that,” Aang reasoned.

“Fair point,” Nobody conceded.

“And in a way, I betrayed them too. I betrayed the whole world by disappearing a hundred years ago. In a way, this whole war is my fault.” Aang had told Katara he’d stop dwelling on the past, but it was easier said than done.

“No, it’s not. It’s the Firelord’s fault. He wanted power, so he took it through whatever means necessary. Even if it meant killing innocent people.”

“I don’t understand how anyone could do that,” Aang whispered. “It’s hard enough just to fight someone else, knowing that they’ll get hurt. Even when I know they’ll hurt me and my friends if I don’t fight them.”

“You have the misfortune of being an Air Nomad Avatar in the middle of a war. You’re a pacifist, right?” At Aang’s nod, Nobody continued, “See, people in the Fire Nation don’t know that. Growing up, we were taught that the Air Nomads wanted to conquer the world, so the Fire Nation had to stop them. To us, everything the Firelord did was right.”

“Wait, you’re Fire Nation?”

Nobody let out an annoyed huff, and a lick of flame appeared from his mouth, lighting the torches on the posts securing Aang’s chains. With the new light in the room, Aang finally took a good look at his companion. He had a sizable burn scar on his face, which covered one of his gold eyes and stretched all the way back to his ear. His black hair was short and bristly, except for one long section on the top of his head. Aang frowned, wondering if this was a new Fire Nation hairstyle in the past hundred years.

“Obviously.”

“Sorry, Hotman.” Hotman scowled at his nickname, but in Aang’s opinion, it was a better name than Nobody. “What’s up with your hair?”

Hotman’s scowl deepened. “Normally, I shave it most of it, but as you can see,” he said, pointing his chin towards the specialized cuffs over his hands, “I’ve got other things to worry about.”

“Oh, cool! I always shave my head too! We can be bald buddies!” Hotman looked like he was going to vomit.

Before Hotman could reply, the huge metal door opened with a screech. “So this is the great Avatar,” someone said, stepping inside, “master of all the elements.” Aang recognized him as the Commander he’d encountered on the winter solstice- *Zhao*, he remembered. “I don’t know how you managed to elude the Fire Nation for a hundred years, but your little game of hide and seek is over. For you, too,” he said, turning to Hotman. “Honestly, I don’t know what you expected to gain from playing pirates.”

“I’ve never hidden from you,” Aang shouted defiantly. “Untie me and I’ll fight you right now!”

“Uh, no.” Zhao started to walk away, out of the cell.

“Hey, wait! This guy next to me, he wants-”

“ *Shut up,* ” Hotman hissed dangerously-

“He wants to cut the short parts of his hair,” Aang continued, undeterred. While he may have thought Hotman’s haircut was silly, Aang understood the cultural significance of a hairstyle. Aang was attempting to offer Hotman a way to stay connected to his homeland, even in prison, because even though Hotman was Fire Nation, he didn’t seem like a terrible person. The Fire Nation had him imprisoned, after all- that means he had to do something right, right?

Zhao glanced at Hotman, and the hint of a smile crossed his face. “Tell me, how does it feel to be the only airbender left? Do you miss your people?” Aang’s chest stung at the words. Of *course* he missed his people. He missed Gyatso, fruit pies, airball- he missed everything about his old life.

Aang’s answer must have shown on his face, because Zhao continued, “You must hate the Fire Nation for taking them away from you. And you must hate the Firelord the most.” With a gleeful grin, Zhao put his hand on Hotman’s shoulder, making Hotman flinch. “Well, did you know that your friend here-”

“The Avatar and I are *not* affiliated,” Hotman spat.

“He is the son of Firelord Ozai, a direct descendant of the man responsible for the death of your people.” Aang gave Hotman a wide-eyed stare, which he quickly looked away from, lowering his head in shame. “Yes, this is none other than Prince Zuko, the disgrace of the Fire Nation, tasked to hunt down and capture the Avatar!” Zhao’s voice was almost giddy.

“And look at how miserably you’ve failed,” Zhao said, grabbing Hotman- no, Zuko- by the chin. “I’ve captured the Avatar, and I’ll be the one to get all the glory, while you’re going to rot here for your treasonous acts.” With a glint in his eyes, Zhao added, “You know, maybe the Avatar is right. Prince Zuko does need a haircut.” There was the sound of a knife being drawn, the clank of metal chains, a gasp from the prince, then-

Then there were strands of black hair falling to the ground from the severed ponytail in Zhao’s fist. Zhao waved his hand and, in a short burst of fire, it was gone. As Aang watched the fire reflect in the prince’s eyes, anger bubbled up within him. He didn’t understand the full significance of the gesture, but he knew that (at least, a hundred years ago) something about that part of your hair was sacred in the Fire Nation.

Aang breathed in deeply, then exhaled a huge gust of wind that blew Zhao into the wall. Zhao crumpled, but quickly got up, seething.

“Blow all the wind you want,” Zhao fumed. “Your situation is futile. There is no escaping this fortress, and no one is coming to rescue you. As for you, *Zuko* - you brought this upon yourself.”

The metal door slammed shut, leaving Aang alone with the Fire Prince, who... didn’t look too good. He was staring blankly down at the floor, where a few long strands of hair still remained. Though he was quiet, his chest heaved with each breath, as if he was struggling for air. On occasion, his mouth would open and shut like he was trying to speak. The prince’s eyes glistened, but he shed not a single tear.

Zuko’s eyes closed for a minute, and he took a deep breath. He moved one of his legs so that the chain holding it was stretched as far as it could go, then, much to Aang’s surprise, released a blast of fire from his mouth. It was more stable than most firebenders’ flames, and Zuko sustained it for at least a minute until the chain had melted away, leaving a metal cuff on the prince’s left ankle. Aang, thinking he couldn’t be more impressed, proceeded to be more impressed as Zuko kicked through the rest of his chains- *metal* chains.

“Spirits, you’re strong,” Aang exclaimed. Zuko’s head snapped towards the sound, and he lunged towards the young Avatar. Aang tried to cry out, but Zuko clapped a hand over Aang’s mouth. There was a feral glint in Zuko’s gold eyes, and Aang felt like he was back in Hei Bai’s forest, staring into the eyes of the frenzied spirit.

“I could kill you right now,” Zuko whispered fervently. “I could kill you, and then Zhao wouldn’t get the reward. You’d be reborn in one of the Water Tribes. It’d be so *easy*. ” Aang wanted to struggle away from him, but he got the sense that any sudden movement would be met with a fireball to the face. “I could finally complete my great-grandfather’s mission. My nation would be out of danger. There’s a million reasons I should just end you, here and now. Why... why am I feeling so hesitant?”

Aang blew Zuko’s hand away from his face and said, “Because you’re a good person?”

Bitterly, Zuko laughed, “I’m certain that’s not it. No, it must be because I’m a coward. I- I have to stop being so afraid, and-”

The distinct sound of children's laughter came from behind Aang, startling both prisoners. Aang couldn't see behind him, but he could see Zuko's expression go from confusion to pure shock. He thought he could hear two or three distinct laughs, but Aang couldn't be sure.

A little boy's voice called out, "Zuko!" The Fire Prince's expression changed again, this time to something like longing.

"Hey, Zuko!" It was a young girl's voice this time. "Thanks for always taking care of us."

"But- but I didn't," Zuko sputtered, "I- I failed you-"

"No matter what, Zuko, we'll always be best friends." At these words from the boy's voice, Zuko's jaw dropped. He stepped back. Closed his eyes. Shook his head, as if that could get rid of whatever he was thinking. When he opened his eyes again, they were wide, but only for a moment before they narrowed in determination. Twin jets of fire appeared as he closed his fists.

Zuko took a deep breath, then slashed through the chains binding Aang's arms. Aang stared, wide-eyed, as Zuko's fire cut through the remaining chains. "What... are you doing? Who were those kids?" When Aang turned around, nothing was there except a small beam of moonlight, shining proudly through the tiny slotted window.

"They were friends of mine. One of them is gone now, because of me. I couldn't save her, but maybe I can save you. I think... I think that's what they would want," Zuko whispered.

"You're rescuing me?"

"Just this once, Avatar. For them."

Chapter End Notes

the ponytail is gone... but at what cost

ok so i was listening to the corridors theme on loop pretty much the ENTIRE time i was writing this chapter so. u should listen while you read it

aang trying to have a normal conversation vs zuko's inability to act like a normal human being

zuko: you know what i think i'm gonna kill the avatar
tui, seeing this and stepping in: ok here's why that's a bad idea
(tui is what happened at the end there, by the way. she was the one who made an illusion of sokka and katara to make zuko have even MORE of an existential crisis.)

IMPORTANT NOTE: zuko can believe that firelord sozin and azulon were wrong, due to his first existential crisis (which will be covered in more detail later) that eventually

led him to become the blue spirit. however, believing that his father is wrong, and he's doing evil, is a lot harder for zuko to wrap his head around because, well, that's his dad. the existential crisis he's having now starts zuko on the path of thinking "huh, maybe dad was wrong", but it'll take yet another existential crisis before he can really accept that.

zuko can cuss once. as a treat.

AANG IS SUCH A SWEETIE I LOVE HIM!!!!!! he's like a sweet little isopuppy

Pohuai Stronghold: Escape

Chapter Notes

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

[*mood music*](#)

“Shut up already, Avatar! I’m trying to get some sleep!”

“Well, I don’t like you, so I’m trying to annoy you!”

“Hey,” someone at the door yelled, “quiet in there!”

“Oh, you want me to shut up too? Come in here and make me!” After a moment, the Avatar’s voice half-heartedly added, “Ashmaker!”

The guard who had spoken blinked. Had the Avatar really just called him that? The other three guards looked equally as taken aback, and the first guard got angry. “Why, you little-“ He turned and opened the heavy door, expecting to face the Avatar.

Instead, the Avatar sprang out of the door, jumped over the guards, then blew them into the cell from behind. Zuko, who had been waiting inside, quickly knocked the surprised guard out and restrained them using their own armor. Satisfied with their bonds, Zuko took a couple of knives and a sword from them. He turned to find the Avatar staring at him. Self-consciously, Zuko said, “What? You got a problem with me stealing? There’s a reason I’m in prison.”

“Did I *really* have to call him a- you know,” the Avatar said, gesturing emphatically. Zuko sighed and rolled his eyes. Not this again.

“It got him angry enough to come in the cell, didn’t it? Stay close to me,” Zuko said, grabbing the Avatar’s arm. Early on in Zuko’s banishment, Zhao had given Zuko Pohuai Stronghold’s blueprints, boasting that it would be the safest place to keep the Avatar- that is, if Zuko actually found him. Zuko had taken the blueprints on his ship when he’d become the Blue Spirit, but they remained untouched in his deck- until a couple weeks ago, when Zuko and his crew had their discussion about maximum security Fire Nation prisons. Out of curiosity, Zuko had studied the blueprints, wondering if he’d ever need to break one of his comrades out of Pohuai. Little had he known.

Zuko led the Avatar into a hallway that had a stupidly large vent for a prison. “Unscrew that side,” Zuko whispered, pointing to the left. Fortunately enough, no guards passed by while they were working on the vent, and Zuko was able to pry it free with no trouble. Instead of taking the time to replace the screws, Zuko flash-welded the vent to the wall with a short burst of fire.

“Cool! Can you teach me how to do that?”

“No. Go that way.”

The Avatar crawled a few paces in front of Zuko while Zuko guided him through the ventilation system. After only two wrong turns, they reached their destination.

“Uh, there’s a big drop in front of me,” the Avatar whispered.

“That should be the main shaft. It goes all the way down to the basement, where there’s an exit. You can use your airbending to get down there safely, right?”

“Of course! I’ll go first, then I’ll call up to you when I’m ready to catch you.” The Avatar started to slide into the hole, but Zuko grabbed his shoulder.

“If you yell up, you’ll get us both caught. I’ll find my own way out.”

“What? No, you have to come with me!” Zuko quickly shushed the Avatar. In a lower voice, the Avatar said, “It’ll take you forever to get down there by yourself. That’s, what, ten stories?”

“Twelve, actually.”

“You’ve gotta come with me. Come on, it’s the least I can do for you. I wouldn’t have broken free without you.” Now the Avatar was the one grabbing Zuko’s arm.

“I only helped you get out because I didn’t want Zhao to have the satisfaction of turning you in.” It wasn’t a total lie, but Zuko still found himself hoping the Avatar didn’t push him on it.

The Avatar paused, then said, “Even if I go down there, I might not get out by myself. I don’t know where I’m going. I’ll probably get captured again.” Zuko sighed. As much as he hated to admit it, the Avatar had a point. “Instead of calling to you, I’ll send up three gusts of wind when I’m ready. Okay?”

“Fine.” The Avatar jumped down the shaft, then three puffs of air hit Zuko’s face. Zuko crawled into position, feet dangling over the huge drop beneath him. For a moment, Zuko wondered if the Avatar would really catch him, and hesitated. Zuko quickly concluded that falling to his death would be better than whatever Zhao had in store for him, and slid into the dark void, sending a prayer to Agni that his death would be quick.

A needless prayer, as it turned out. True to his word, the Avatar created a cushion of air to slow Zuko’s fall, and Zuko rolled into the basement unharmed. Zuko looked around, getting his bearings, then gestured for the Avatar to follow him down through a set of iron bars.

The duo jumped down into a pipe, which led them out of the stronghold. Zuko shuffled quietly along the pipe’s wall and the Avatar followed suit.

A sudden round of cheers came from above, making both of them jump. Zuko crept over to the center of the pipe, carefully peeking out of one of the slots in the roof. There was a large crowd gathered at the base of the stronghold, gazing up at a figure clad in red. Immediately, Zuko recognized him as Zhao, even from this distance.

“Oh, he’s making a speech?” The Avatar popped his head out in the slot next to Zuko. “Why? I thought everyone here already knew I was captured.”

“Probably to show people how great he is. You watch, the next time the crowd cheers, it’ll be because he mentioned something about Sozin’s comet,” Zuko whispered, rolling his eyes. “Come on.”

As Zuko and the Avatar crept over to Pohuai’s first wall, Zhao’s voice rang out loud and clear. “This is the year Sozin’s comet returns and grants us its power!” The crowd cheered, and Zuko smirked at the Avatar.

“Impressive,” the Avatar breathed. “What’s he gonna say next?”

“Either something about Ba Sing Se or the Northern Water Tribe. Can you get us up onto that wall?” The Avatar nodded, then grabbed a spear sitting nearby. He snapped the end off, spun it around, and Zuko felt himself being lifted off the ground. Zuko was flung up towards the wall, where he landed with a roll. He was soon followed by the Avatar, who was spinning his stick over his head.

“You were right,” the Avatar said when he landed. “Zhao mentioned Ba Sing Se.”

“Of course he did. Everything he does is so predictable.” With the exception of trying to blow him up last week, Zuko didn’t say. In fact, Zuko wasn’t even sure that had been Zhao, since Zhao hadn’t known Zuko was the Blue Spirit then. He’d expected Zhao to be angry after his rejection, sure, but Zuko was still the Fire Prince and the Firelord’s son. Trying to have him killed would still be treason.

“Zuko, look out!” The Avatar pushed Zuko aside and created a burst of air from his staff, sending the guard who’d been about to stab Zuko flying backwards. Zuko swore. The guard had approached him from his left, so he hadn’t noticed. He scrambled to his feet, turning towards the tower where the guard would have come from. Three other guards were there, and two of them were approaching Zuko and the Avatar. Zuko, however, knew the third was the more immediate danger.

Seeing the third guard reaching for a horn, Zuko said, “Oh no you don’t!” He unsheathed a knife retrieved from one of the cell guards and threw it, pinning the horn up against the watchtower’s wall. The guard took a stance that Zuko knew all too well, but before he could shoot fire at Zuko, Zuko swept the guard’s legs out from under him. He quickly knocked the guard out and turned to face the other two, but the Avatar had already taken care of them. Despite himself, Zuko found himself smiling. “Heh. Not bad, Avatar.”

The Avatar grinned back. “Not so bad yourself, hotman!”

Somewhere in the distance, a horn sounded. Zuko’s shoulders tensed and his smile disappeared. “Let’s go. We don’t have time.”

Zuko started down the stairs, but the Avatar yelled, “Wait!” He started spinning his staff and floating again. When he reached Zuko, the Avatar wrapped his legs around Zuko’s chest,

lifting him off the ground as well. The Avatar proceeded to fly off the edge of the wall with Zuko, who clung onto the Avatar's legs desperately.

After releasing a slew of curse words, Zuko screamed, "Are you insane?!" The Avatar only grunted in response, focusing his energy on keeping them afloat. Out of the corner of his eye, Zuko spotted a guard hoisting a spear at them. With one hand, Zuko drew his sword, slashing the spear out of the air before it could hit either of them, but it was still enough to make the Avatar careen wildly to the side.

The Avatar dropped Zuko onto the second wall before tumbling onto it himself. Zuko glanced at the space between the second and third wall. "There's no guards down there! Do your thing again!"

The Avatar looked sheepish as he said, "I, uh, I dropped my staff when I landed. Sorry."

Zuko screamed in frustration, unintentionally letting out fire from his hands and mouth. More guards were approaching them from the watchtowers to their left and right. "Well, figure something out, Avatar!" Zuko created a ring of fire around himself and the Avatar, making it hotter and hotter before pushing it outwards. It didn't burn through the guards' fireproof armor, but it did effectively knock them backwards.

The Avatar leapt up onto the inner edge of the wall as a couple of the guards charged at Zuko. Zuko slid between them, tripping one. He slammed the hilt of his sword into the downed guard's temple, then created a fire whip to attack the other. Something grabbed the back of Zuko's shirt and pulled, so Zuko turned and breathed fire onto it. There was a scream and the air suddenly smelled like burned flesh, making Zuko nauseous.

"Zuko!" Zuko whirled around at the Avatar's voice. The Avatar had three bamboo ladders in his arms, and Zuko understood. Zuko took one from him, raced to the outer edge of the wall, and planted the ladder into the ground below him. He started to swing forwards as the Avatar jumped on his back, clinging to him like a spider monkey.

The Avatar handed Zuko the second ladder, and then the third, and then Zuko realized they both weren't going to make it. The final wall was too far, and they were too heavy. Zuko pulled the Avatar off his back, waiting until the perfect moment. The Avatar was surprisingly light.

"Hey! What are you-" Just as the ladder dipped below the height of the wall, Zuko threw the Avatar as hard as he could. Zuko winced, bracing himself for a fall, but a cushion of air caught him. "Zuko!"

Thankfully, the voice had come from above him. Zuko looked up to see the Avatar safely perched on the outer wall, staring back down at him. "Zuko, why'd you do that? Don't you realize I can't get you back up here without using a staff!"

Zuko had realized that. He looked around, not seeing any guards on the ground with him. That would soon change. Looking back up at the Avatar, Zuko shouted, "You need to get out of here!"

“What?! No, I’m not leaving without you!”

“I’ll be fine! I’m the Fire Prince, remember? They can’t hurt me that bad,” Zuko said, a fake smile plastered on his face. He really didn’t like lying, but he needed the stupid Avatar to get out of here.

“But- but- you saved me!”

“And it’ll all be worth nothing if you get caught again! You need to get out of here and never come back,” Zuko said firmly.

“But- *why*? Why would you save me?”

“Because you’re the Avatar, and people need you!” Lying seemed to be getting him nowhere, so Zuko decided to tell the Avatar the truth. “That friend of mine who appeared earlier- she was killed by the Fire Nation, even though she was innocent. My great-grandfather and grandfather were ruthless, killing so many innocent people, and my father-” Zuko faltered. He knew his father was doing the same thing, but part of him wanted to believe his father was still good. “My father’s done nothing to stop that,” Zuko finally settled on. Looking back at the Avatar, Zuko said, “I can’t stop the Firelord, but you can. You can finally bring an end to this senseless slaughter.”

The Avatar paused, considering his words. Then he nodded solemnly at Zuko. The gates of the second wall opened, and a wave of guards surged towards Zuko. “Go! I’ll hold them as long as I can!”

Aang didn’t want to leave the prince behind, but he knew Zuko was right. He had to save the world. Aang leapt down from the wall, landing outside the grounds, and sprinted away.

He kept running until he reached the swamp where he’d found the frogs. As dawn broke, Aang gently pulled a few frozen frogs out of the water, carefully wiping the mud off of them.

Certain that he wasn’t being chased, Aang trudged back to the mountain temple where he’d left Katara and Sokka. Momo’s ears perked up as Aang walked inside, but Aang found himself unable to smile. “Suck on these,” Aang said, dejectedly putting a frog in Sokka’s mouth. As he went to Katara, he added, “It’ll make you feel better.”

Having taken care of his friends, Aang let out a loud sigh and plopped down on Appa’s tail. In the span of a few hours, Aang’s world had been turned upside down. The Fire Prince, the one who was supposedly hunting Aang, had just helped him break out of prison. The Fire Prince had saved him, and in return, Aang had left him. But surely the prince would be safe with his own people, right?

“Aang, how was your trip? Did you make any new friends?” Aang frowned at Sokka’s question, remembering what the prince had said in the vent. He sighed again. Aang was still confused by everything that had happened, but in the end, the prince was still Fire Nation. The Firelord’s son, even. Aang couldn’t just overlook that.

“No. I don’t think I did.”

~ ~ ~

Zuko fought for as long as he could. He fought, and he fought, but there were just too many of them. Now, he was kneeling restrained in front of Zhao, looking at the ground.

“I never expected this from you.”

Zuko didn’t respond.

“You’ve sunk so low, *Zuko* .” The last word was whispered so only Zuko could hear.

Zuko knew Zhao was trying to bait him, but he refused to bite. He heard Zhao growl in frustration, then felt a hand tilting his head up, forcing him to look up. Zuko met Zhao’s furious eyes with a glare of his own.

“Why?! Why did you do it? Why would you help the Avatar?”

Zuko took a deep breath in, and *laughed*. “What else would you expect from a traitor like me?” Zhao slapped Zuko hard, hard enough to make him fall over. Still, Zuko found himself laughing. “It doesn’t matter what you do to me. The Avatar escaped from you, and you’re going to have to chase him down now. You may as well start now. Good luck,” Zuko spat.

“No,” Zhao said softly, forcing Zuko to sit up. He grabbed Zuko by the chin and said, “I’m not going to chase the Avatar down just yet. Unlike you, I have resources. Allies. People who will find him for me. Until I get a lead on the Avatar, I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done. Then, when I leave to capture him, you’re going to die a slow, painful death. You’ll die alone, forgotten, and a failure. And personally, I cannot *wait* to watch.”

Chapter End Notes

NEXT CHAPTER HAS A HAPPIER ENDING I SWEAR (also next chapter is ~~~~the one~~~~)

Trails of fire

Chapter Notes

cw: torture, blood, dog pee (is that a cw?), zhao, forced hair cutting

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

[art for last chapter by me!](#)

The night that he was cured, Sokka dreamed.

Aang had insisted on leaving their hiding place as soon as possible, despite the fact that he was obviously tired. They flew on Appa until they reached an inconspicuous looking patch of forest, where they set up camp as dawn broke. Aang had fallen asleep nearly as soon as he hit the ground, and Katara was quick to follow. Sokka tried to stay awake, he really did, but his body was still tired from his sickness.

Just before he fell asleep, Sokka could have sworn he saw a golden thread, dancing behind his closed eyelids.

Six guards surrounded Sokka, forcing him to walk forwards. Commander Zhao was striding proudly in front of them, leading the way through a maze of hallways. He tried to move his hands, but they were cuffed behind his back, and something metal was clamped over his mouth.

As they marched him along, Sokka's thoughts drifted to the time in his childhood spent with Zuko. It was funny how, at a time like this, his mind went to his happiest memories, memories from before everything went wrong. Guilt festered up inside him as he thought of Katara.

They stopped at a huge metal door, which took four soldiers to open. A harsh white light washed over Sokka, and he squinted as he was pushed forwards. When Sokka's eyes adjusted, he took a look around the room and immediately wished he hadn't.

Racks filled with various torture devices lined one of the walls. The rest of the room was filled with steel machines, which reflected the painful light into Sokka's eyes. His stomach churned as he examined the machines, some of which he recognized from the war studies his father had forced him to do, but others that he didn't, and still others that he didn't even want to know what they did. With a sinking feeling, Sokka realized he was probably about to find out.

"What do you think?" Sokka took a second to steady himself before looking at Zhao. There was no way Sokka would give Zhao the satisfaction of seeing him afraid. "I always try to have the most current equipment, including lighting."

Zhao pointed. Sokka, squinting, gazed upwards. What he'd first assumed to be harsh sunlight was coming through glass panes on the ceiling. As Sokka considered it more, however, he realized there was a coldness to this light. It was as if someone had stolen Agni's rays from the sky, then twisted and distorted them so much they were nearly unrecognizable.

"It's electrical. Some fine scientists in the Fire Nation are harnessing the power created by burning coal and turning it into light. It's the future. And, as you may have noticed, it's not bendable." Zhao smiled, grabbing Sokka by the chin. "Get used to it. You're never going to see the light of day again."

Sokka sat bolt upright. Based on the position of the sun, he'd only been asleep for a few minutes, but he wasn't tired anymore. After that dream, Sokka wasn't sure he wanted to sleep. He shivered, wrapping his coat tighter around himself. *It was just a dream*, Sokka reminded himself. *It wasn't real. It wasn't real.*

~ ~ ~

The next time Sokka had a strangely vivid dream was the second night they spent in Makapu.

Sokka had always had trouble getting to sleep. On a good night, it would take him between half an hour and an hour of lying in bed to fall asleep. It wasn't that Sokka was purposely staying awake, but rather when he sat still, his thoughts would start bouncing around all over the place. Sokka had struggled with this all through his childhood, and then Zuko had come. Zuko was the first person Sokka had met who had a similar problem with getting to sleep. Some nights, Sokka would spend hours whispering to Zuko while Zuko would listen, wide-eyed. As they got to know each other better, Zuko would occasionally be the one talking while Sokka listened, telling Sokka about his favorite stories and plays. When Sokka would fall asleep, he felt happy, and at peace.

Then Zuko had gone, and Sokka was left with the same problem as before. It hadn't been terribly noticeable since he'd left the South Pole (since the excitement and activity of each day would leave Sokka too exhausted to do anything but sleep at night), but when they spent nights in towns with little mortal peril, Sokka often found himself lying awake, thinking.

When Sokka finally fell asleep, he had a dream about being on a flying boat with his father. It was nice, until the dream suddenly changed.

Sokka was in that awful bright room again, but this time, he was chained up in an incredibly uncomfortable position. His entire body ached, and he wondered how much more of this he could take.

"I still can't find him," Zhao exclaimed frustratedly. Each time Zhao received word that one of his people had failed to locate the Avatar, he grew more furious. Sokka, in as vulnerable a position as he was, bore the brunt of Zhao's fury.

Still, Sokka was amused by Zhao's anger. He thought back to the best time of his life and wondered what his best friend would say in this situation. Sokka smirked. "Maybe you should've spent more money on Avatar hunting than your stupid torture dungeon," he said in a raspy voice that wasn't his.

Zhao's face darkened, and he turned to Sokka with murder in his eyes. "Why, you little-" Zhao pulled a lever next to him, and searing pain shot through Sokka-

"Aah!" Sokka gasped, clenching at the sheets below him. Taking a few deep breaths, Sokka looked around, reassuring himself that he was in Mapaku and not locked up by Zhao. He shook his head and pressed a hand against his forehead. "What's wrong with me?"

Sokka was no stranger to nightmares, but usually his nightmares were about losing someone he loved. This kind of nightmare was uncharted territory, and it felt so *real*. He wondered briefly if it was some sort of spiritual thing, but Sokka quickly dismissed the thought. After all, things like that never happened to him.

~ ~ ~

"Do you know any remedies for bad dreams?" Aunt Wu looked up from her scrolls, probably surprised to see Sokka rather than his sister. Sokka crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. "I heard you've got a girlfriend who lives in the mountains that's a master herbalist, that's why I'm asking. She teach you anything about cures for bad dreams?"

"No," Aunt Wu said, "but tell me, what kind of dreams are you having?"

"In my dreams, I'm in a Fire Nation prison, being tortured. It feels so real. I feel scared and alone- when I'm having these dreams, I mean," Sokka clarified. He didn't want anyone, most of all Aunt Wu, to think he was feeling that way normally (even if it was, perhaps, the tiniest bit true).

"That would be a reasonable thing to have nightmares about," Aunt Wu said dismissively, turning back to her reading.

"But- but- when I have those dreams, it's almost like I'm in someone else's body!" This caught Aunt Wu's attention. Inhaling sharply, she turned to Sokka, who sheepishly scratched the back of his neck. "I know it's weird. But when I spoke, I had a different voice, and for some reason my left eye had blurry vision, and- I don't know, it's just different from any dream I've ever had."

"How long have you been having these dreams?"

"The first one was four nights ago, and I had another one last night." Aunt Wu placed her hand on Sokka's shoulder and looked him square in the eyes.

"Sokka," she said, voice serious. "Those are not mere dreams. Somebody is reaching out to you."

Sokka pushed her hand away and turned his back on her. He was annoyed, but then again, what did he expect? Of course she was going to spout off some spiritual nonsense. Walking away, he said, "Just forget I said anything."

~ ~ ~

“Good news, traitor.” Sokka didn’t even raise his head at Zhao’s voice. He was tired, so tired. The bright lights burned his eyes, illuminating red patches on the wall, the floor, the machines and devices surrounding him. Sokka knew it was his own blood, but it seemed like too much. Then again, Sokka always found himself surprised at how much blood could come from one human body. He supposed his own was no exception.

Zhao grabbed Sokka roughly, forcing him to sit up. When Sokka’s head lolled, Zhao laughed uproariously. “What,” Zhao taunted, “don’t tell me you’ve lost all your bite because I told you the truth about your father. You should’ve figured that out when he banished you on a fool’s quest.”

Sokka’s eyes closed as he tried not to cry. Sure, he’d suspected that his father didn’t care about him, but this-

“Anyways, I’ve located the Avatar. He’s been hiding in an Earth Kingdom village that’s about three hours from here by boat. It’s a cute little place at the base of a volcano.” Zhao pulled Sokka’s chin up so he was forced to meet his eyes. “Your little attempt to save him failed. I’m going to capture the Avatar, and you’re not getting in my way this time. But I think it’s time you had another haircut.”

All Sokka could do was sit meekly as Zhao started to slice through his hair, which was barely a half an inch long. The sharp blade dug into his scalp on more than one occasion, but Sokka hardly even flinched. As he stared at the short, black hair falling to the ground, Sokka thought back to the first time he’d encountered Zhao, back in the South pole. Longing ached deep within his bones. How he wished his best friend was here now.

“All done,” Zhao said happily, sheathing his blade. “Now, let’s get you to your tomb.”

~ ~ ~

They left Makapu that morning.

After what had happened with the volcano, they were planning to go anyway. They had spent ten days in Makapu, and it was time for them to move on. But just as they were leaving, Aunt Wu looked at Sokka and said, “Wait, young man.”

Sokka did not want to wait, but Katara grabbed him by the arm and spun him around. “Yes, Aunt Wu?”

“You’re going to have to make a choice soon between two people dear to you. Choose wisely.”

Whatever *that* was supposed to mean. By the time they stopped next, Sokka had forgotten all about it. Especially when Aang found a Water Tribe knife in a bush.

Sokka found evidence of a fight between Water Tribe warriors and firebenders, and followed the trail down to a beach, where a boat from his father’s fleet was moored. They waited there for a few hours, until Sokka heard rustling from some nearby bushes. Jumping to his feet, he shouted, “Who’s there?”

A tall figure emerged from the shadows. As soon as he stepped into the firelight, Sokka recognized him. “Sokka?”

“Bato?” Sokka grinned, but before he could do anything else, something else came crashing onto the beach. He jumped aside, barely avoiding being run over by a black and white blur, which sprinted around their little campsite at least ten times before coming to a stop.

“Whoa, dad left Qimmiq with you? C’mere, boy!” Instead of coming to Sokka, the isodog sniffed around, sat down, and promptly peed on the fire Sokka had been tending to. “Hey!”

“Sorry about that,” Bato said with a sigh. “He... can be a handful. But no, that is not Qimmiq.”

“Huh?” Sokka stared at the isodog, who was looking proudly at the extinguished fire. “But that looks just like him.”

“Her,” Bato corrected. “Qimmiq is a girl. We discovered this about three weeks after leaving the South Pole, when she gave birth to two pups. This is Ujarak.”

“Oh,” Sokka said, surprised. With a sideways glance at Bato, Sokka asked, “My dad really bought a pregnant isodog without knowing?”

Bato chuckled. “Yes, and then he named her ‘dog’. Your father is a real idiot sometimes,” Bato said fondly.

“Bato,” Katara exclaimed, and then the three of them were hugging. It looked like Bato had been badly burned, but Sokka didn’t care, he was just so happy to see him.

“You’ve grown so much,” Bato said, smiling down at Sokka.

“Hi. I’m Aang,” said Aang’s voice from behind them. Sokka barely heard it.

“Where’s Dad?”

“Is he here?”

“No, he and the other warriors should be in the Eastern Earth Kingdom by now.” Both Sokka and Katara’s shoulders slumped at this.

A chilly gust of wind hit all of them, and Sokka shivered. “This is no place for a reunion,” Bato said, putting an arm around both Sokka and Katara. “Let’s get inside.”

Bato led them into a small room in the abbey, which looked startlingly like home. There was a tent set up against one of the walls, Water Tribe weapons hanging on another, and there were cozy furs on the ground. Bato, Sokka, and Katara talked for hours, and when Sokka slept, there were no terrifyingly realistic dreams bothering him.

Unfortunately for him, the dreams came the next day, in the middle of his ice-dodging.

“Aang, helm to lee, helm to lee,” Sokka was yelling when he got the first flash.

He wouldn't last the night.

Sokka was certain of this. It had been hard enough to keep warm over the past two nights, and Sokka knew he couldn't do a third. He exhaled, letting out a small lick of flame. Too small. He had already tried escaping, blasting as much fire as he could at the door, but the most he'd managed was a couple dents and a few scratch marks on the metal. Then he'd curled in on himself, trying to preserve his body heat. The guards would have to retrieve his body at some point, right? Sokka figured he'd be able to keep himself warm until then. But if they didn't come soon...

"There's no way through!" Sokka blinked, and he was back on the boat. Had he just breathed fire? Despite himself, Sokka took a deep breath in, then exhaled, just like he had in the flash. Nothing happened.

Shaking his head, Sokka turned his attention to the world around him. Their boat was headed straight for a huge outcropping of rocks that a normal crew wouldn't be able to navigate. But as he looked at his sister, Sokka grinned, realizing this was no normal crew. "We can make it!"

"Sokka, you've already proven yourself," Bato said nervously, "Maybe we should--"

But Sokka wouldn't hear it. "Aang! I'm gonna need air in that sail! Katara, I want you to bend as much water as you can between us and those rocks!" Sokka waited a moment before signaling, "Now!"

Just as he said it, Sokka found himself in another dream.

Sokka was on the verge of tears now, but he refused to cry. He... he was scared. And alone. He needed someone there. He needed... he needed...

"SOKKA! SOKKA! SOKKA!" He screamed the name over and over again, as if it would change anything. As if crying out for his childhood friend would somehow summon him. He screamed until his voice gave out, punching and clawing at the unmoving wall of the cooler.

"Sokka," he whispered weakly, slumping forwards. He could feel his body shutting down, finally giving in to the unrelenting cold. As his eyes slid closed, he tried to remember the warmth of his friend's embrace.

"Woah! Trying to abandon ship, are we?" With another blink, Sokka was back on the deck of Bato's ship. Realizing he'd been about to jump off the side of the boat, Sokka quickly made his way back to his position, embarrassed. Bato smiled and said, "You did it, Sokka. I am so proud."

Sokka wanted to thank Bato, to be excited, but all he could do was frown at the horizon. There was no questioning who he was dreaming about anymore, but why now? Sokka shivered slightly, wishing these dreams would just end already.

~ ~ ~

“What will you do now, Aang?” Sokka really wished his sister would stop talking to the traitor. After the ice-dodging, Aang (who Sokka would only refer to as the traitor) had shown them the map, the map to Sokka’s *father*, and any thoughts Sokka had about Zuko disappeared. Now, a couple hours later, he and Katara were preparing to leave with Bato. He adjusted the supplies on his back, clearly indicating that he was ready to go. Katara glared back at him.

“Go to the North Pole, I guess.” The traitor’s voice sounded... less cheerful than usual. For a moment, Sokka felt bad for him. “Oh, wait!” Immediately, the traitor’s enthusiasm returned. “I’ll go find Zuko first!”

And with that, the whole world stopped.

Hearing his heart pounding in his ears, Sokka asked, “What... what did you just say?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you this, but when you guys were sick, I got captured by Zhao. Zuko’s the one who helped me break out of Zhao’s stronghold! He’s pretty cool for a firebender. I’m not sure why Zhao had him in prison, anyway.”

Every sentence sent a shockwave through Sokka’s entire body. Zuko, Sokka’s best friend, the banished prince of the Fire Nation, had been the one to rescue Aang? But hadn’t he been supposed to capture the Avatar? Why would he be in prison? Why would he betray the Fire Nation? Sokka felt like he was trying to stitch something together that had been torn to shreds in a storm. But he’d never been good at sewing.

One detail, though, was truly worrying. “Zhao,” Sokka said, climbing onto Appa with an unusual urgency. Aang’s eyes widened as Sokka grabbed him by the shoulders. “You said Zhao had him? Zhao has *Zuko*?” Aang nodded. “No no no no no,” Sokka muttered, clutching his head in his hands.

“I had to leave him behind, but Zuko said he’d be fine. He said they wouldn’t hurt him because he’s Fire Nation.” And oh, of course Zuko would say that. Zuko was a protector, even of people he’d just met. Zuko had stood between Sokka and Hakoda once, protecting Sokka with his fire, the night that they met, hadn’t he? Zuko would say that so Aang would escape, with no regards for his own well-being.

“Zuko? Prince Zuko?” Katara was asking Aang questions now, trying to explain their reaction to him, but Sokka felt himself slipping away. Zuko freed the Avatar from Zhao, whose mission was to capture him. Zhao, the man who’d been hunting them since the solstice. Zhao, who had come to the South Pole and demanded that the tribe hand over Zuko. Zhao, who put Zuko in chains and a muzzle and dragged him through the snow. Zhao, who would have killed them both if Zuko’s mother hadn’t saved them.

Nobody else was there. Nobody else had seen the murder in Zhao’s eyes as he’d stood over Sokka and Zuko, holding a ball of flame. Even though Zuko was ten years old, Zhao had thought he was a traitor and was ready to kill him. Now, Zuko *was* a traitor, and had probably humiliated Zhao by letting the Avatar escape.

Nobody else knew how much danger Zuko was in.

Nearly pushing Aang off the flying bison, Sokka grabbed the reins. For a moment, he hesitated. He looked down at Bato, who had understanding in his eyes.

“Take this in case you want to find us,” Bato said, handing Sokka the map. “I’ll leave a message at the rendezvous point. Your father will understand. He’s proud of you.”

“Thank you,” Sokka choked out. He wanted to say more, but couldn’t express the depth of his feelings properly. “Yip yip.”

“You should have told us,” Sokka said a few minutes after takeoff.

“You should have told me you knew the Fire Prince!”

“I meant you should have told us that you were imprisoned while we were sick! You should have told us right away, and told us it was Zuko who rescued you and that he stayed behind! The night you gave us the frogs, that was when you escaped, yes?” Aang nodded, and Sokka counted furiously. “That means he’s been there, alone, for twelve days, which is almost two weeks, which might as well be a month! Don’t you know how many horrible things Zhao’s probably done to Zuko by now?! By the time we find him, he might- he might already be-” Sokka remembered his dreams and started to cry.

“Sokka...?” Aang hesitantly placed a hand on Sokka, rubbing his back. That only made Sokka cry harder as he thought of how Zuko must be feeling with no one there to comfort him. *Hang on, Zuko. I’m coming.*

A few minutes later, Sokka collected himself enough to say, “I can’t lose him. It was hard enough when he left the South Pole, but I always thought I would see him again. I- I don’t know what I’ll do if that’s ripped away from me.” Katara squeezed Sokka’s hand.

“I understand,” Aang said quietly. “When I ran away from my home, I never imagined that by the time I returned, everyone I knew would be gone. Sokka, look at me.” Sokka did as he was told, finding himself meeting determined gray eyes. “We’re going to get him back.”

The flight to Pohuai was relatively short, but it felt like an eternity to Sokka. He tried to fill the time by coming up with escape plans, but his traitorous mind kept imagining what terrible things Zhao was doing to Zuko. Though, no matter what Zhao did, he would keep Zuko alive, right? Even if he was banished, Zuko was the Firelord’s son. Zhao wouldn’t kill him. Surely, Sokka’s dreams had been just that- dreams.

Still, Pohuai’s walls couldn’t appear fast enough. “That’s it,” Aang said, pointing to a looming fortress on the horizon. “What’s the plan, Sokka?”

“Get Zuko out.” Feeling two pairs of eyes on him, Sokka sighed in frustration and said, “Look, I don’t have a detailed plan, okay? I don’t know anything about this place. We’ll sneak in and steal some uniforms, find Zuko, and get out. You still have your bison whistle, right?” Aang pulled the whistle out of his pocket, proudly displaying it to Sokka. “Good, we’ll need that when we’re done. Now, uh, bend us a cloud or something for cover. It looks like there’s a balcony up top.”

The three of them landed on the balcony and Aang sent Appa away, still under the cover of the cloud. Fortunately, it didn't take them too long to find a closet full of armor, and they quickly donned their disguises. Aang took a moment to get his bearings, then led them back to the cell he had been kept in.

"This is it," Sokka breathed, hands trembling in anticipation. He quickly scanned the hallway, making sure no guards were coming. There were a couple guards in an open room nearby, but they seemed distracted. With a deep breath, Sokka opened the door. "Zuko! Zuko, it's Sokka! I'm here to--"

The room was empty.

(Was he too late? Was Zuko really-)

"Sokka!" Katara pulled the door shut and forced Sokka to turn around. She barely had time to put his faceplate on before two guards were approaching them.

"What are you three doing here?"

"We were told to guard Prince Zuko," Katara said with an even tone.

(Where was he? Why wasn't he here?)

One of the guards snorted. "Whoever said that was messing with you. That traitor is probably an ice cube by now. We've been going through his stuff--" Sokka took a step forward, but Aang grabbed his arm. The guard stared at him and shrugged. "What? It's not like he'll be using it anymore. Besides," he said, grinning, "I think it'd be cool to have a pair of broadswords."

This time, Aang couldn't hold Sokka back. Before he was fully aware of what he was doing, Sokka had knocked out the other guard and was kneeling above the first one, wielding one of his own dual swords. He pressed the tip of the sword into the man's neck. "Where. Is. Zuko," Sokka hissed.

The guard paled, and laughed nervously. "You wouldn't..."

Sokka dug the sword deeper into his neck, drawing some of the guard's blood. "Try me," he growled. "I can ask your friend when he wakes up. I don't need you alive."

"He's in the cooler--"

"*Where.*"

"Three floors down," the guard squeaked. "Two rights, then a left."

Sokka slammed the hilt of his sword into the guard's temple, then started dragging him into Zuko's former cell. "Help me," Sokka said, gesturing to the other guard. Aang and Katara were staring at him with wide eyes. Impatiently, he added, "We don't have all night!"

"R- right," Aang said, airbending the other guard inside.

Once the guards were taken care of, it took all of Sokka's willpower not to sprint to the cooler room. Inside, there was a steel door against one of the walls. Sokka yelped and drew his hand back when he felt how cold the handle was. Grabbing the handle again, Sokka tugged as hard as he could. The door didn't budge, so Sokka kept tugging.

"Sokka! Sokka, it's locked," Katara said, grabbing his arm. "You won't be able to open it that way." Sokka stared at her blankly.

"I stole some keys from one of the guards," Aang offered. Sokka snatched the keys as if he were a starving man being offered a scrap of food, then shoved the first one into the keyhole and twisted. Nothing happened.

(How long had Zuko been inside?)

Sokka tried the second key. The door didn't budge.

(How long could a firebender withstand this kind of cold? Merely holding the handle had been enough to send a shiver through Sokka's entire body. Or had those been his nerves?)

"Come on," Sokka grunted, trying the third key. Still, the door remained in place.

(How many keys were even on this stupid key ring? There had to be at least fifteen. Sokka didn't take the time to count- all he knew was that there were too many.)

"Come on, *work*," Sokka said, his voice growing hysterical as he tried the fourth key. This door, it seemed, existed solely to spite Sokka. "Work, you son of a--"

The door flew open, sending a blast of cold air into Sokka's face. Sokka jumped back in surprise, then squinted at the crumpled heap lying on the cooler's floor.

(That couldn't be him.) Zuko had always been strong, so strong that Sokka thought he was invincible, and so full of life, and passion, and he never gave up. The limp form in front of Sokka was bruised and broken and bald and- *defeated*. Zuko didn't have a scar covering half his face. Zuko had long, black hair that he'd wanted to grow out, as long hair was considered a sign of power in the Fire Nation. Zuko wouldn't have allowed himself to get hurt this badly. Though his mind was telling him that this wasn't Zuko, Sokka's trembling hand reached out to touch the other's forehead. Beneath Sokka's fingers, that familiar two-toned mark of the trusted glowed proudly.

"Oh, Tui and La," Sokka breathed. He pulled Zuko- *his* Zuko- out of the cooler, out of that cold, cramped, dark, oppressive chamber and into his arms, into safety. Zuko was colder than cold, colder than any firebender ever should be, Sokka thought. "You're okay," Sokka whispered, rubbing Zuko's back. "You're gonna be okay." Sokka looked at the door, tracing the claw marks on the inside. The claw marks that he himself had scratched out, in one of his flashes. Sokka's heart dropped to his stomach as the implications of this set in. "Oh, Zuko. Oh, no..."

Numbly, Sokka allowed himself to be led by Katara and Aang, all the while holding a too-still Zuko. He was vaguely aware of shouting and flying fireballs around him, but all Sokka

could focus on was the boy in his arms, too cold to even shiver. Somebody tried to pull Zuko away from him, but Sokka only held him tighter.

“Sokka!” Katara’s voice snapped him out of whatever trance he was in. Looking around, Sokka realized they’d escaped the fortress successfully and were now flying away on Appa. “Sokka, you need to let go of Zuko.”

What? No, Sokka couldn’t just let Zuko go. Not when he was like this. Couldn’t Katara see how defenseless Zuko was? Sokka needed to protect him. Sokka needed to be with him.

“We need to get him warmed up- look at his hands, Sokka.” Doing as he was told, Sokka paled when he noticed the tips of Zuko’s fingers turning blue. A long time ago, Sokka had asked Zuko if he could get frostbitten. Zuko had hesitated a moment before saying yes, but only if his inner fire was nearly out. If Zuko’s inner fire was going out, that meant he was- he was-

“He’s not breathing,” Sokka realized. Pleadingly, he looked at Katara. “He’s not-!”

With a surprising amount of strength, Aang had pushed Sokka aside, and now had Zuko’s head in his lap. Screaming, Sokka tried to get back to Zuko, but Katara held him back. Aang was doing some sort of bending thing- what was he *thinking*, now was no time for-

With a jolt, Sokka realized Aang was breathing *for* Zuko. Aang’s hands were a few inches above Zuko, moving from Zuko’s mouth to his stomach in time with the airbender’s own deep breaths. Sokka stopped struggling, and Katara released him, still keeping an arm around her brother’s shoulder.

“Please,” Sokka whimpered, not sure who he was talking to. *Please*, Sokka begged over and over again, *pleasepleaseplease*-

Above them, a red aurora flared to life, and Sokka sobbed and buried his head in his hands. Sokka had never believed them, but all his life, he’d heard stories about how the aurora were spirits of his ancestors. That when the aurora appeared, it was former chiefs welcoming a new spirit to their tribe in the heavens.

There was a loud gasp, followed by coughing. Sokka looked up, hardly daring to breathe.

“Wha- let go of me,” Zuko mumbled, squirming out of Aang’s lap. “I don’ wanna-”

“Zuko!” Sokka grabbed his best friend, forcing Zuko to look up at him. Zuko’s eyes widened.

“S- Sokka...?” Slowly, Zuko reached up towards Sokka’s face. His cold hand wiped away some of Sokka’s tears. Zuko’s face scrunched up in confusion, and his mouth opened and closed, as if he was thinking of different questions to ask Sokka. Finally, he looked back at Sokka and, with a voice that was little more than a broken whisper, asked, “Safe?”

That one tiny whisper broke Sokka. “Yep. Yep, you’re safe, buddy. You’re safe,” Sokka said with a nod. Seemingly content with this answer, Zuko leaned his head against Sokka. Katara

i'm having so many feelings but i can't articulate any of them

Avatar meet & greet

Chapter Notes

of all the speculation there was for this chapter, no one predicted THIS. enjoy.

cw: brief mention of insects (no actual insects)

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

[art i did for last chapter!!!](#)

Zuko didn't know where he was.

That should have been a problem, but Zuko couldn't think properly. His entire body felt *wrong* somehow. When he opened his eyes, his vision was blurry, but he could see that the sky was red. Had the sky always been red? Zuko couldn't remember.

Zuko tried to sit up, but was immediately arrested by something around his torso. "You're okay," a voice said from behind Zuko. He craned his neck to get a good look at whatever was behind him. When his vision finally cleared, Zuko's jaw dropped.

"Sokka?"

"Good, you recognize me," Sokka said with a soft smile. Closing his eyes, Zuko rested his scarred side against Sokka's chest and spent a moment listening to Sokka's heartbeat. A small smile played on Zuko's lips. Sokka's steady heartbeat was the best sound in the world.

"O- oh," Sokka breathed, causing Zuko to look up in confusion. Had he said that out loud? Sokka's blush certainly made it seem that way, but Zuko couldn't remember saying it. He couldn't remember much of anything, which was a bit concerning. But when he tried to stop and think, Zuko's head started spinning and he felt like he might float away if not for Sokka's arms around him.

Zuko tried to relax, but he couldn't get comfortable. He attempted to pull some of the blankets (since when had he been wrapped in blankets?) off of himself, but was once again halted by Sokka's arm. "'M hot," Zuko mumbled, weakly struggling against Sokka's grasp.

"I know that's how you feel, but you're actually very, very cold, Zuko." Was he? His inner fire did feel rather weak, but his body was telling him he was too hot. It was confusing. "You need to stay snuggled up in these warm, cozy blankets so you'll feel all better. Do you trust me?"

"Always," Zuko replied without hesitation. Sokka's eyes widened, then he gave Zuko one of his special smiles, the ones he would always reserve just for Zuko. Zuko's heart swelled with

pride, knowing he must have done something right to earn that precious smile. If it would make Sokka smile, Zuko would stay in these blankets until he melted.

Sokka's eyes shifted away from Zuko, and he said something Zuko didn't overhear. Zuko tried to see who it was Sokka was talking to, but Sokka's hand gently turned Zuko's head back into his chest.

"Zuko, can you do me a favor?" Before he even knew what Sokka would ask of him, Zuko was already nodding. Sokka smiled again, but it wasn't the same as before. He looked more concerned this time. "Can you eat this for me?"

Zuko looked down at the chipped bowl being offered to him. It seemed to be some kind of broth with noodles in it. It smelled and looked fine, so Zuko accepted it, hesitantly slurping. He didn't feel particularly hungry, but if Sokka wanted him to eat, Zuko would eat.

"Just like that, Zuko," Sokka said encouragingly after Zuko's first sip. "Can you do one more?"

They continued like this, with Zuko taking small sips and Sokka encouraging him, until the bowl was empty. When Zuko was finished, Sokka's eyes shone with pride. "Good, Zuko," he said, "you're so good."

It took Zuko two minutes to fall asleep, and it took even less time for him to forget the interaction entirely. Sokka sighed down at the boy in his arms, wishing he knew how to help him.

Zuko didn't know it, but that was the twenty-third time he'd woken up since he'd initially fallen asleep in Sokka's arms. After the first three times, Sokka realized that Zuko wasn't remembering the previous times he'd awoken. Sometimes, Zuko would recognize him, but sometimes Zuko would think Sokka was someone named Iluak.

(Iluak, which was obviously a Water Tribe name. Had Zuko been back to the South Pole? Had he made new friends there? Had he found someone to replace Sokka? Aang had told Sokka that there was no point worrying about it and that they could ask Zuko when he was feeling better, but Sokka couldn't help but worry.)

(Aang knew for a fact that Zuko had not found someone to replace Sokka. When he had seen them interact for the first time, when Zuko seemed to be most aware, Aang had realized the true nature of their feelings for one another.)

"Is he asleep?" Sokka nodded at the whispered question, and Aang and Katara stepped out from behind Appa. "Wow, Sokka," Aang said cheerfully, "I don't think I've ever seen you be so nice to someone."

"As much as he tries to hide it, my brother has a soft side," Katara teased. "Especially when it comes to Zuko."

"He needs it right now," Sokka murmured, not responding to the playful teasing of his companions. Aang and Katara shot each other a worried look. "He's still so cold. When we

were kids, something like this happened when he first came. He was in the snow for a few hours in just his Fire Nation clothes, and it took him a few days to get back to normal. There was also this one time he jumped in a frozen pond-”

“He *what*? Why would he do that? Especially in the South Pole,” Aang added, shivering at the mere thought.

“A girl was drowning,” Sokka said, gently cupping the right side of Zuko’s face. “He saved her, just like he saved you. He’s always been so brave.”

Raising his eyebrows, Aang glanced over at Katara, who merely shrugged. “That’s just how they are,” she whispered. As far as she was concerned, this was normal Sokka-Zuko behavior.

Zuko coughed, and Aang and Katara scurried back behind Appa. It had been decided, after around the tenth time Zuko woke up, that Sokka would be the first one to interact with Zuko. When Aang had tried to approach him, Zuko had sworn and threw his bowl of soup on Aang. Sokka had more or less expected a reaction like this from Zuko upon seeing the Avatar. What he had not expected was Zuko’s *abject horror* when he saw Katara (which they had tried the seventh time he woke up.) Zuko had cried out in a raw voice, then broken out of Sokka’s grip and quickly scrambled backwards- right out of Appa’s saddle. (By the eighth time Zuko woke up, they had landed and started setting up camp.)

“Hey, Zuko,” Sokka said softly. But Zuko’s glassy eyes were staring straight through him. Zuko flinched, then started twitching. “Zuko? Zuko!”

Katara and Aang watched helplessly as Zuko squirmed wildly in Sokka’s arms. “It- it hurts,” Zuko gasped. Sokka held him upright, forcing Zuko to meet his eyes.

“What hurts? Zuko, tell me where it hurts.” Sokka’s voice was shaking. This wasn’t the first time Zuko had woken up in serious pain, but that didn’t make it any easier.

For a moment, Zuko stopped struggling. “So- Sokka? I- I- aah!” Zuko’s face scrunched up in pain, and he would have collapsed forwards if Sokka hadn’t caught him. “Sokka, it hurts!”

“You’re okay, Zuko,” Sokka pleaded. “You’re okay-”

“There- there’s ants under my skin- Sokka! SOKKA!” Sokka continued to try to soothe Zuko, but he kept twitching uncontrollably and scratching at himself under his blankets. “Make it stop,” Zuko finally moaned. “Sokka, Sokka, make it stop, please make it stop, *please-*”

“Zuko! Zuko, I’m here. I’m here. Breathe, Zuko, breathe. Please breathe for me.” Sokka pulled Zuko against his chest and started rocking back and forth. Zuko’s pained cries slowly faded and, with a few final twitches, he was asleep again. Sokka waited until he was sure Zuko was asleep to start crying.

“Sokka,” Katara said, rushing over to her brother. “Sokka, listen to me. He’s going to be okay.”

“He’s getting worse,” Sokka choked out.

“I know, but he’s going to get better. We just got him to eat that whole bowl of noodles, remember? That’s going to warm him up on the inside, and it’ll help with dehydration and hunger. Zuko is strong. He’s going to make it through this.” Sokka looked at his sister miserably. She looked like she genuinely believed the hopelessly optimistic words she was saying- of course she did, that’s just who she was.

“How- how could anyone do this,” Aang muttered. He had turned his back on the scene, unable to watch his friends (and Zuko, who had made it clear that he did not want to be Aang’s friend) suffer any longer. “How could they do this?!”

At Aang’s yell, Katara looked up just in time to see the stripe on the back of Aang’s head glow before he was engulfed in a column of fire. Just as quickly as it had appeared, the fire faded, leaving a tall, bearded man in Aang’s place.

“Avatar Roku?” Sure enough, it was the same man who helped them escape from Zhao during the solstice. Roku looked mournfully down at Zuko, then knelt next to Sokka. Sokka squeezed Zuko tightly and shook his head.

“I will not hurt him,” Roku said gently. Roku reached out for Zuko, but Sokka scooted backwards, holding Zuko even closer. “Sokka. He is my family. I will not hurt him.”

Sokka hesitated. “You- you’re a firebender,” he said after a moment. “You know things about firebenders.” Roku nodded patiently, allowing Sokka time to think. “You can help him?” Roku nodded again, and Sokka allowed Roku to take Zuko from him.

Placing his hands over Zuko’s heart, Roku inhaled deeply. “He has been weakened significantly, yet his fire still burns. I can strengthen the fire within him.”

“What do you mean, he’s your family?” Roku smiled slightly at Katara’s question. “Is that a figurative thing among firebenders?”

“He is my great-grandson.”

“What?! I thought he was Firelord Sparkles’ great-grandson!”

Katara punched Sokka’s arm. “People can have more than one great-grandfather, dummy.”

“Oh, right.” Feeling silly, Sokka said, “So, I’m guessing you’re on his mom’s side then?”

“Precisely. I can feel her energy flowing through him. However,” Roku said, frowning, “I believe something is wrong with his chi.”

“His what?”

“Chi. It is the energy that flows within all of us. Something is keeping his inner fire from growing.”

“He did get thrown in a cooler for- a while,” Sokka offered, realizing he didn’t know how long Zuko had been inside. “It’s this small, dark, metal chamber that they pump all the heat out of. I think it’s colder than the South Pole.” Roku grimaced.

“That would explain his condition, then. Freezing to death... I cannot think of a more painful way for a firebender to die.” Roku squeezed Zuko’s shoulder and Sokka shivered. “I have done as much as I can. As long as the aurora lasts until morning, he will be alright.”

“The aurora? What does that have to do with anything?” Katara’s head was tilted to the side.

“Aurorae are powered by the sun and, as such, they can lend firebenders strength, even at night. However, it is difficult for a firebender to sleep through such a thing.”

As if on cue, Zuko started squirming in the blankets again. “Too hot,” he mumbled.

“Shhh, Zuko. You’re okay,” Sokka mumbled, leaning over Zuko.

“Iluak? Why’re you in my room?” Zuko’s eyes narrowed as he said, “You’d better not’ve given one of my swords to Nikko again. If she cuts someone’s leg off, that’s your own fault.” With that, Zuko promptly fell asleep again.

Sokka looked back to Roku. “So the reason he keeps waking up like this is because of the aurora?”

“Indeed.”

“You said he’d be fine if the aurora lasts until morning,” Katara said thoughtfully. “What if it doesn’t?”

With a grave expression, Roku said, “Then he will succumb to his injuries, and perish.”

“Perish?!” Grabbing Roku by the shoulders, Sokka pleaded, “Come on, man, there’s gotta be something else you can do for him!” Sokka’s actions reminded Roku of the feelings he and Sozin had shared when they were young. He would have smiled, if not for the tainted bitterness of these memories.

“I may not be able to help him,” Roku said after a moment, stroking his (rather impressive, in Sokka’s opinion) beard, “but perhaps a previous Avatar can.”

“Oh, like Avatar Kyoshi? She was the Avatar before you, right?”

Roku winced a bit, then said, “I believe this situation requires a- a gentler hand than Kyoshi’s. I know who to call upon.”

“Well, do it quick, before-“ A swirling column of air appeared, enveloping Roku before Sokka could finish his sentence. In Roku’s place, there was a woman in orange and yellow robes, with tattoos like Aang’s. She looked around, seeming confused. “Uh, hello?”

“Why have I been called here?” Sokka and Katara looked at each other, then back at her.

“Well,” Katara started, “our friend here, he’s-”

“I understand he is not well, so Roku manifested himself to assist the young Avatar. Was he unable to help?”

“Pretty much,” Sokka said. Katara elbowed him sharply in the side. “Ow!”

“What my brother means to say is, Avatar Roku helped as much as he could. He explained how the aurora affects firebenders and he heated Zuko up as much as he could, but Zuko still isn’t doing very well, and he may not make it through the night,” Katara explained.

“Is that so? Then you do not need my assistance. Roku may not have realized, but I already offered my services to Aang, when he was breathing for the Fire Prince.”

Sokka blinked. “That was you?”

“I did not manifest myself as such, but Aang called upon my knowledge. In order to earn your airbending master tattoos, one must complete all thirty-six tiers of airbending. Aang only completed thirty-five, but his invention of the air scooter led him to receive his tattoos before completing the last tier, in which you can learn to control the air in others’ bodies. It is extraordinarily difficult to do, as one small misstep can lead to devastating consequences.”

“Like what?”

The woman’s steely gray eyes met Sokka’s. “Like tearing a hole through the person’s lungs,” she said evenly.

“Oh,” Sokka said with a gulp. “Uh, thanks. For not doing that to Zuko. That would have been, uh, really bad. So thank you.”

Her eyes softened as she turned to Zuko. “I wish I could do more for him. Perhaps Kuruk could help.”

This time, Sokka knew to back up before the woman was enveloped in a column of water. In her place stood a baffled looking man.

“You must be Kuruk,” Katara said. “I’m Katara, and this is my brother Sokka. We-”

“I know who you are,” Kuruk interrupted, “but why am I here?”

“How can you *not* know? Zuko is sick and he needs some kind of help to survive until morning!” Sokka was getting rather irritated with these Avatars. The aurora could fade at any moment, which meant Zuko would- he would-

“All the past Avatars can watch over the current incarnation if they so choose, but mostly we spend our time in the spirit world. In fact, I was in the middle of hunting some buffalo yak when Yangchen called me. It takes a lot of energy to manifest, so clearly it must be important to Yangchen that your friend here is helped.”

“It’s *very* important,” Sokka exclaimed. “So can you *please* help him before he, you know, freezes to death?!”

“Actually, I’m not sure that is the problem,” Kuruk said, frowning and squatting next to Zuko. “Roku was here before Yangchen, yes?” At Katara’s nod, Kuruk continued, “Then he should have enough energy to last through the night, unless something else is draining it. Has he had any encounter with dark spirits?”

Before Sokka could scream with annoyance, Katara quickly said, “Not that we know of. Though, he did spend an extended period of time with a military commander who isn’t fond of him, so we’re not sure.”

“A military commander, huh? Then I doubt your problem is spiritual. Kyoshi can handle this better than I.”

A twister of dust surrounded him, and when it cleared, Sokka and Katara found themselves looking at the most beautiful woman they’d ever seen. She was tall and muscular, with long brown hair and green eyes. Her battle makeup accentuated the natural beauty of her face, as well as giving her a formidable appearance. Her posture was perfect, and every inch of her was intimidating.

“Avatar Kyoshi,” Sokka breathed, immediately developing a crush.

“It’s you,” Katara whispered, also immediately developing a crush.

Kyoshi’s piercing eyes swept over Sokka and Katara. She glanced down at Zuko, then looked back up at the siblings. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“The other Avatars didn’t help you at all, did they?” Still in awe of the raw power Avatar Kyoshi radiated, Sokka and Katara shook their heads. “Of course not.” Kyoshi reached down, grabbed Zuko by the wrist, and flung him up into the air. Zuko let out a loud grunt of pain and his body stiffened when his chest slammed into Kyoshi’s shoulder.

That snapped Sokka out of his trance. “Whoa, hey! Be careful with him,” Sokka said, jogging to keep up with Kyoshi, who had begun to walk towards a nearby river.

Kyoshi looked down at the boy struggling to keep up with her pace and smiled slightly. She had lived long enough to recognize *that* look in his eyes. Making sure to be more gentle, she set Zuko down on the bank of the river. “Where are his worst injuries?”

Katara blinked. “Uh, what?”

“I can heal him, but I will only heal his worst injuries.”

“What? Why can’t you just heal all of his injuries?” Sokka’s voice was growing more anxious by the minute. He fidgeted as he added, “He’s the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, so, you know, it’s pretty important that he gets healed up. Not just to us.”

Kyoshi raised an impeccable eyebrow. “Every minute I am here, I use more of your friend Aang’s energy. I could try to return the prince to his full health, but based on what I see,

Aang will not be able to support me for the amount of time I need. If Aang overextends himself in this way, he may need to rest for days. So, while you may need to tend to the prince, I believe that would be better than having to tend to both him and the Avatar, especially considering your circumstances.” Neither Sokka or Katara could find a flaw in Kyoshi’s logic, which was apparently as impeccable as her eyebrows. “Now, where are his worst injuries?”

“We, uh, haven’t checked,” Sokka said, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. “Normally I would’ve, but he was just so cold and his inner fire was going out, and that was my biggest concern, and-”

“I understand,” Kyoshi said in a slightly softer tone. “It is extremely difficult to keep our composure when the ones we care about are hurt.”

Sokka wondered if Kyoshi could read minds, because he had actually thought about checking Zuko for other injuries the nineteenth time he’d woken up, when Zuko had complained of a sharp pain in his stomach. He hadn’t, though, partially because he’d been distracted by Katara, but mostly because he didn’t *want* to know if Zuko had any more injuries. Sokka had noticed the dark red stains on Zuko’s light shirt, he would’ve been blind not to, but he couldn’t bring himself to peek at what was lying beneath.

Kyoshi could not, in fact, read minds, but she could read people. When she looked at Sokka fretting over an injured Zuko, she was reminded of herself and Rangi when they were teenagers. The thought made Kyoshi feel warm inside, but she forced herself to push it away. She needed to focus on the task at hand. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to feel the water flowing all through Zuko’s body.

“Spirits,” Kyoshi muttered, making Sokka jump.

“What? What’s wrong? He’s going to be okay, right? You can fix him, right? What’s wrong with him?”

“A couple broken ribs and a bad concussion, easy enough. There is some muscular decay here, and though I am not sure why, I can fix it. But this...” Kyoshi pulled Zuko’s shirt up, revealing large, infected-looking cuts on his stomach. Before he could see too much detail, Sokka looked away, feeling like he might throw up if he looked any longer. Katara, however, found herself unable to look away.

“His stitches are infected,” Katara said simply. Did those cuts have stitches? From the glimpse he’d gotten, Sokka hadn’t been able to tell. In the back of his mind, Sokka was amazed by his sister’s ability to stay calm as she said, “Do you need me to redo them?”

Katara had some experience with first aid. When they were children, Zuko had told Katara that some waterbenders had healing abilities. Katara had been eager to try, but she had never been able to heal someone with her waterbending. So instead of focusing on her shortcomings, Katara had learned from the tribe healer for the past few years. If she couldn’t use her waterbending to take care of others, she at least wanted to have some way to help them.

In her experience, it was best to remain calm in the kinds of situations like their current one. She was doing her best, but her hands were trembling, revealing her true feelings. (Sokka was too worried about Zuko to notice, but Kyoshi did.)

“No. I can heal the wound entirely. What I was surprised by was his internal organs. Some of them seem to have been... shifted, somehow-”

“*Stop*,” Sokka begged. His hands were cupped over his ears. “Please. Please, just- just heal him.”

For the next three hours, they sat in silence under the red aurora. Despite himself, Sokka prayed to the spirits to keep Zuko alive.

Finally, Kyoshi stood. Wiping sweat from her forehead, she said, “It’s done. He still needs to be taken care of for the hypothermia, but unless one of his wounds gets infected, he will not die from his injuries. Sokka, take him back to your camp.” It was a command, not a question.

Sokka scooped Zuko up in his arms, surprised at how heavy he was. Without pumping adrenaline or Aang’s airbending to assist him, Sokka was struggling a bit to carry Zuko.

“You’re allowed to be afraid,” Kyoshi said after he disappeared into the trees. Katara turned to look at her.

“What?”

“You were just as afraid as your brother, but you did not show it. He is always trying to protect you, but this time, you were protecting him. You hid your fear to keep him from spiraling out of control.”

“I did,” Katara said, not seeing a point in denying it.

“You feel responsible for him, and the rest of your friends. It is too much responsibility for one person to bear.” Kyoshi rested her hand gently on Katara’s shoulder, and Katara found herself blushing at the sudden contact. “You spend all your energy caring for your friends, but you deserve to be cared for too. You are surrounded by people who want to help you- let them.”

“But what if I fail them? I don’t know how to heal, and even though I’ve had some waterbending training, I’m nowhere near a master, and-” Katara’s lip quivered.

“No matter what, you cannot fail them. Even if you think you have failed them, I doubt they will see it the same way. And as for healing,” Kyoshi said with a smirk, standing back up, “you already have what you need within you. Give me a minute to talk with your brother, and then Aang will return.”

Kyoshi started along the path Sokka had followed, but Katara called out, “Avatar Kyoshi!” Kyoshi turned halfway around, and beneath the light of the aurora, Katara was again struck by how beautiful the Avatar was. She looked like a goddess, rather than a mere mortal. “Thank you.” Kyoshi gave Katara a lopsided grin, then disappeared into the forest.

Having successfully carried Zuko back to camp, Sokka had sat down near the fire with Zuko's head resting in his lap. At some point, Kyoshi had discarded Zuko's shirt (which was probably for the best, since nearly every inch of the fabric was charred or covered in bloodstains.) And, *wow*. In all the panic, Sokka hadn't realized how muscular Zuko had become. No wonder he had been so heavy earlier- Zuko was absolutely *shredded* (in comparison to Sokka.) In particular, Sokka found his eyes drawn to Zuko's (unfairly) toned abs (seriously, how did someone even *get* this buff-)

"So, this is the Crown Prince?" Sokka leapt up, nearly sending Zuko tumbling into the fire. Kyoshi was leaning against a tree with a bemused expression on her face.

"I- I- I- I'm really impressed with, uh, with the healing job you did! It's like nothing was ever there. No scar or anything. That's why I'm staring at him, I'm not a creep, I swear." Sokka didn't want to admit that he was jealous of Zuko's muscles (because that's what he was feeling, right? There was no other reason he would want to look at Zuko like that- was there?) "But yeah, um. Yeah. He's the Crown Prince. Thanks for, um, not leaving him to die."

"I always despised Fire Nation politics, and regretted getting involved. Are you certain you want to enter that realm?"

"We have to end the war," Sokka said firmly. "Too many people have suffered at the hands of the Firelord. I don't have a choice."

"I think you misunderstand me." Sokka cocked his head, waiting for Kyoshi to explain herself. "If you remove the current Firelord, the Crown Prince will take the throne. Because of your association with him, you will be thrust into the complicated world of Fire Nation politics. Is this the life you are willing to choose for yourself?"

Sokka frowned, gazing down at Zuko. Somewhere in his mind, he must have known that Zuko would become Firelord, but the concept was so strange to him. "We met when we were just children. Then one day, he had to go back to the Fire Nation, and he never returned to me. This is the first time I've seen him in almost six years." Sokka looked back at Kyoshi with a decided look in his eyes. "If the alternative would be to lose him again, I'd choose a life of Fire Nation politics a thousand times over." Sokka set his jaw and narrowed his eyes, as if daring Kyoshi to challenge him. (A challenge he would most definitely lose, but still, a challenge.)

Instead of arguing, Kyoshi smiled and held up her hands placatingly. "I simply want you to know what you are getting yourself into. Firebenders may be stubborn and prideful, but you will never find a better partner than a great firebender." Kyoshi smiled at Appa and patted his head. "Oh, and one more thing. Get some moisturizing cream for that scar on his face. Being in the cold for so long dried it out, and his skin there could crack." In the same way Aang always did, Kyoshi curled up against Appa and closed her eyes. "Take care of your firebender."

A sphere of dust wrapped around Kyoshi, and when it cleared, Aang was the one lying on Appa, fast asleep.

“S- Sokka?” Sokka turned so quickly that he nearly fell over. Zuko was lying on the ground, but his eyes were staring up at Sokka, and he was shaking- no, he was *shivering*. Sokka had never been so excited to see someone shiver in his entire life. That meant Zuko was getting better.

“Zuko!” Sokka gave him a quick hug, then started wrapping him in blankets. He didn’t get very far, however, before Zuko grabbed his arm. “Wha-”

“Stay.” Zuko opened up his blanket cocoon a little and gestured for Sokka to come closer to him. Realizing what Zuko wanted, Sokka couldn’t help but grin. He wrapped the remaining blankets around both of them and snuggled up to Zuko, squeezing him tightly at the little noise that escaped the firebender’s lips. “Warm,” Zuko whispered. His eyes still seemed clouded, but more aware than before, which was all Sokka needed. Sokka closed his eyes, easily falling asleep to the reassuring sound of his firebender’s breathing besides him.

Chapter End Notes

there's a lot of things i want to address here. i will try to be brief

what y'all expected: zuko reacting to sokka, katara, aang, etc
what y'all got: AVATAR KYOSHI PROPOGANDA

seriously tho you can tell how whipped author is for kyoshi. kyoshi best avatar

sokka is just straight up not having a good time for most of this chapter. also he is still convinced he is straight. i really hope this changes soon, but my sources tell me it may be a while yet before sokka realizes he's bi. if only he could have realized it as quickly as katara did. (bi katara rights!!!!)

i am EXCITED because i finally got to do a bit about katara's insecurities. queen don't worry you're on your way

once again, i would like to stress how amazing kyoshi is

me? hinting at a scene where sokka tenderly applies moisturizer to zuko's scar? it's likely

FIRELORD S P A R K L E S

every single avatar watching zuko and sokka interact: these bitches gay!! good for them

i feel kinda evil giving you guys a filler chapter right before i (potentially) skip an update but you know what? sometimes you just gotta be a little bit evil.

thanks for reading! <3

A tale of two Zukos

Chapter Notes

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

Zuko didn't know where he was. That was *definitely* a problem.

When he opened his eyes, Zuko found himself in a cave near a dying fire. There were a couple of tents set up outside, where day was beginning to break. Zuko shivered, suddenly painfully aware of how cold he was.

He felt something shift next to him and, to his horror, Zuko realized he was cuddling something that definitely was not Nikko. Something that was breathing and warm and was probably another person.

Mortified, Zuko squirmed out of the other person's grip, kicking them square in the chest. As the other person grunted in surprise, Zuko broke free of the blankets he'd been wrapped in and leapt to his feet, nearly collapsing as he did so. Each of his steps was more unsteady than the last, but he didn't care, he had to get out of here-

"Zuko!" Zuko turned towards the sound of his voice and released a column of flame in its direction.

Except he didn't.

Zuko stared down at his own hands, stunned. He knew he'd done the kata properly, it was one of the first ones he'd learned and he'd done it a million times. He'd done the kata properly and yet, no fire came out of him. Zuko tried it a couple more times, growing more frantic each time it didn't work. After his fifth failure, Zuko said in horror, "What have you done to me?!"

"You can't firebend," the voice from before said, sounding as if it was just realizing this. Zuko finally let his eyes meet the guard-

But it was no guard. There, standing before him, was Katara. She looked older, but she was unmistakably Katara. Maybe this was what she would have looked like today, had she lived.

"Y- you," Zuko stammered, "It's you- Katara." Katara smiled warmly and nodded, in an attempt to calm Zuko down.

"Yes, it's me, Zuko. It's nice to see you again."

"B- but that means, that means- if I- I can see you, that means I- I-" Katara reached out a hand to Zuko, but he shrunk back, terrified. "No- no, I can't be- I can't be dead!"

Both Katara and Sokka (who had just gotten off the ground and was now standing at the mouth of the cave) froze. In an incredulous tone, Katara repeated, "Dead?"

“The cooler- I was in the cooler, and now I’m here, and I- I don’t know how I got here, and you’re here- I’m dead,” Zuko said softly, his shoulders slumping. Katara tried reaching out for him again.

“Zuko, you’re not-”

“Get away from me!” Zuko jumped back, shrieking. “Your memory has haunted me every day since the Southern Raiders returned to the Fire Nation, must you haunt my afterlife as well?! I never *wanted* you to die! How was I supposed to know that telling my dad I had a waterbender friend would make him send the Southern Raiders back to finish what they started?!” Zuko reached up to pull at his hair, seemingly unbothered that he couldn’t find any. He laughed, a crazy, bitter sound that didn’t sound like Zuko’s laugh at all. “I know, I know. I’m making excuses again. No matter what, it’s still my fault. I might as well have been the one standing over you with a fireball in my hand. It’s my fault. It’s all my fault. It’s my fault, it’s my fault, it’s my-” Zuko had begun to shrink into himself, eyes clouding over.

“Zuko-”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!” Zuko sprang forwards, scratching Katara’s arm with overgrown nails, then sprinted off into the woods. (He made it about fifty feet before he passed out.)

Sokka and Katara gaped at each other, frozen in shock. Sokka was the first to recover, and raced to where Zuko had collapsed. He carried Zuko back into his tent, returning him to his blanket cocoon, then rejoined his sister, who was still rooted to the spot.

“Well, I guess we know why he was so freaked out by you,” Sokka said with a halfhearted smile. Like most of his jokes, it didn’t land.

“He thinks I’m *dead*, Sokka,” Katara whispered in horror. “When the Southern Raiders came back and took Mom, they were looking for *me*. She must have lied to protect me, she must have said she was a waterbender.” Sokka could almost see Katara’s mind working, moving faster than she could speak. So many things were becoming clear to her, simply from those few sentences from Zuko. Katara started to wonder what else she could find out from Zuko, but she began to feel sick as she remembered the end of his panic attack. “Sokka, he thinks I’m dead, and he blames himself.”

“So he’ll be really happy to see you alive?” Sokka couldn’t see why this was a problem.

“Sokka,” Katara said slowly, “this is the same person who was afraid to go penguin sledding because he didn’t want to hurt the otter penguins. If he’s spent the past five years thinking he was responsible for my death, what do you think that’s done to him?” If Sokka could have found his voice to answer, he’d say it would have broken Zuko. He looked back at the shivering mass of blankets and shuddered. “We need to be careful about how we do this. If we make one wrong move, Zuko could try and run away again, and he could really hurt himself,” Katara said, brow creased.

“Right,” Sokka replied, choosing only to focus on the last part of what she said for now. “You and Aang should move your tents to somewhere nearby. For now, it’s probably best if I’m the

only one who's with Zuko. Oh, before I forget to ask- can you go into the town nearby and get some moisturizing cream? Zuko needs it for his face."

As Katara and Aang packed up their tents, Sokka settled himself next to Zuko in the cave. Despite his overwhelming desire to snuggle up to Zuko (because Sokka wanted him to be warm, there was certainly no other reason Sokka would want to snuggle up to another boy), Sokka instead sat up near the fire, resting Zuko's head on his leg. That kick in the chest earlier had *hurt*, and Sokka wasn't eager to repeat the experience. (He also had seen how panicked Zuko had looked, and didn't want him to feel trapped.)

Absentmindedly, Sokka rubbed Zuko's back. Touching Zuko reminded Sokka that Zuko was here, Zuko was safe, that Zhao couldn't hurt Zuko now, yet Sokka still found himself thinking about what awful things Zhao must have done to Zuko.

Shaking his head, Sokka shifted his focus to something that had gotten caught on Zuko's jacket. Sokka glanced at it and tossed it aside. Then he processed what he saw, and he was pushing Zuko off of him and scrambling onto the floor where he had dropped it. When Sokka retrieved the object, he couldn't believe his eyes.

It was an arctic poppy. Sokka blinked, looked away, and then looked back again. It was definitely an arctic poppy. He ran to the spot where Zuko had fallen and, sure enough, several patches of the little white flowers were growing, tilting their heads towards the sun. Sokka knelt down, cupping one of the delicate buds in his hand. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Sokka knew that arctic poppies were originally from the North Pole, but seeing them here and now, especially with Zuko, was jarring.

Slowly, Sokka walked back to the cave. Sitting down next to Zuko, Sokka closed his eyes, remembering.

Sokka grinned, having successfully snuck up on Zuko and Katara. As he ran forwards to tackle Zuko, Katara spotted Sokka and shouted, "No, wait!"

But it was too late. Even if Sokka had listened to her, he wouldn't have been able to stop his forward momentum. Laughing with delight, Sokka tumbled into the snow with Zuko. But instead of wrestling like he usually would, Zuko pushed Sokka off, not even looking at him. Zuko was focused on the patch of ground he and Katara had been staring at.

"Oh no," Zuko breathed, rushing back over to the spot. Sokka recognized the hardy base of an arctic poppy plant, along with a few loose petals. When he looked down at himself, Sokka realized he had a couple petals on his jacket. "Sokka, you've killed them!"

"I wasn't the one who fell on top of them," Sokka said, pointing to Zuko. The front of Zuko's jacket was littered with snow, leaves, and small petals. At the sight of the carnage on his parka, Zuko burst into tears and ran away.

Slowly, Zuko blinked and looked around. He was in a cave somewhere, he didn't know how he got here-

“Zuko!” As Zuko scrambled to his feet, a pair of strong arms had grabbed him. His head was pounding and spots danced across his vision, but Zuko forced himself to focus on the figure in front of him. When Zuko’s vision finally cleared, he froze.

He knew that face. He would know that face anywhere. Sure, it was older and more tired, but it was still undeniable. “Sokka,” Zuko said quietly.

“Hey, Zuko,” Sokka breathed, looking like he was close to tears.

Zuko looked Sokka over, examining him from head to toe. Then he did it again, to be completely sure he’d seen everything. “Sokka,” he repeated. “How-?”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

Zuko frowned, trying to think. “I was in the cooler,” Zuko said suddenly. “The sun had set for the third time. I... how did I get here?”

“That doesn’t matter right now, Zuko,” Sokka said firmly. “What matters is you’re safe, and if everything goes well, you’ll never have to see Zhao again.”

But to Zuko, it mattered very much. For when Zuko had initially seen Sokka, a wild thrill of hope had run through him, but Zuko had quickly shut it down, knowing that this was too good to be true. He briefly considered the possibility of this being one of Zhao’s tricks, before settling on a more realistic conclusion. Zhao, unable to kill Zuko himself, had turned him over to the Southern Water Tribe, who would be more than happy to finish the job after how Zuko had betrayed them. Zuko’s eyes widened at the realization, and with as much strength as he could muster, shoved Sokka into the cave wall and ran.

(He only made it forty feet this time.)

Groaning, Sokka dragged Zuko back into the cave, glad that Aang and Katara had set their camp up elsewhere. Seriously, why had Zuko run away from *him*? Sokka had been reassuring Zuko when he’d freaked out all of a sudden. He thought back on what he said, then cringed. Zuko had panicked right after Sokka had said Zhao’s name.

(*Stupid!*) Of *course* hearing the name of the man who’d been torturing him would make Zuko flip out. Sokka should have known better than to mention him. Sokka kept this in mind for the next time Zuko woke up.

Which didn’t take too long. With a groan, Zuko sat up, rubbing his head. His eyes met Sokka’s, then widened, then before Sokka could even speak he was running away again.

This happened a total of five times before Sokka decided enough was enough. Though the furthest away Zuko ever made it was seventy-five feet, Sokka’s arms were getting sore from carrying Zuko back each time, so he was forced to tie Zuko’s hands to one of his tent’s posts. He was careful not to make the bonds too tight, as he didn’t want to hurt Zuko any more than he already was.

When Zuko woke up next, he struggled for a moment with his bonds, then scowled up at Sokka. In a voice that was far too hoarse for Sokka's liking, Zuko asked, "What do you want with me?"

"I want you to get better." Zuko scoffed, and Sokka indignantly added, "I do! Here, eat this." Sokka set a bowl of stew in front of him. Zuko simply glared back. "Come on, man, you have to eat."

"That would be difficult in my current position," Zuko said dryly, shifting his weight backwards. (Oh, right.) Sokka had forgotten he'd tied Zuko's hands behind his back. Quickly, he untied Zuko's bonds, and sat down next to Zuko as he reached for his stew- which Zuko promptly threw at Sokka, and ran away.

(He only made it twenty-five feet.)

The next time Zuko woke up (tied up again), he seemed more annoyed than angry. Which, of course, made Sokka furious.

"Don't look at me like that! You're the one who keeps trying to run away! And you don't even make it very far before you pass out, and then I have to drag you back here! Why are you being such a pain?! I'm trying to help you!" In response, Zuko bit down on Sokka's hand as hard as he could. Sokka yelped and jumped back, holding his bitten arm.

For a moment, Zuko's expression softened, and he looked remorseful. "Did I hurt you?" If Sokka had been thinking clearly, he would have recognized the opening and taken it. But in his own anger, Sokka lashed out at Zuko just when Zuko's guard was slightly down. It was poor timing and bad luck (which often seemed to be the case for these two).

"Yes! You just *bit* me! What are you, an animal?" Sokka was yelling now. Somewhere in the back of his mind, an alarm bell was going off, reminding him Zuko didn't like loud noises and liked it even less when he was yelled at, but Sokka was too angry to care. "Not to mention all the bruises I have from you kicking and shoving me around when you were trying to run off! You don't know how much that hurts!"

"Oh, sorry," Zuko snapped back, all traces of vulnerability gone. "I've just been tortured, but obviously you know *so* much more about pain than I do. Tell me how much those little bruises hurt, why don't you-" He broke into a long, dry cough, then slumped forwards, too tired to finish his sentence.

Sokka let out a frustrated noise, as it was hard to argue with someone who was sleeping. As angrily as he could, Sokka made Zuko's bonds tighter (still not to the point where they would hurt him) and stormed over to Aang and Katara's camp. As he walked, he remembered another argument he had with Zuko.

"Why are you still mad at me?! They're just some stupid flowers!" The morning after the flower incident, Zuko had refused to speak to Sokka. Sokka didn't think much of it, but when the afternoon came and Zuko wasn't there to play swords, Sokka decided to confront him.

“They were alive, just like you and me! They didn’t want to die,” Zuko shouted. “You made me kill them, but they were innocent!”

“They were just flowers!” Sokka couldn’t believe how stupid Zuko was being. “There’s another patch of them right there!”

Zuko quickly turned his head in the direction Sokka was pointing. The little green bush was hard to miss in the snow. He jumped between Sokka and the flowers protectively and declared, “I’m not going to let anything happen to these ones!”

“You’re so weird!”

“I don’t care!”

“Fine, then stay out here and freeze!” Sokka stormed back to his igloo, annoyed and confused.

Aang looked up from one of Katara’s waterbending scrolls when he heard Sokka approaching. “Oh hey, Sokka-”

“Zuko’s being a real pain,” Sokka groaned, plopping down on the log Aang and Katara were sitting on.

Worriedly, Katara asked, “You’ve told him that I’m not dead, right?”

“No, I haven’t been able to tell him anything. Every time he wakes up, he tries to run away, and before he even makes it to the river, he passes out, and I have to carry him back!”

“You were saying you needed a new arm workout the other day,” Katara said, hiding a smile behind her hand.

Shooting a murderous glare at his sister, Sokka continued, “He’s really heavy, and I don’t like dragging him because I don’t want him to get hurt- but then he goes and hurts himself! Like, why do I even bother trying to be careful with him? Spirits, I can’t stand him!” Aang and Katara looked at each other, both sensing that something else was going on here.

“What does he remember?”

“Everything up until we rescued him, of course,” Sokka scoffed, crossing his arms. “He said the last thing he remembered was the cooler. Yeah, he said that, and then he pushed me into the wall and ran.”

“He’s confused, Sokka. He’s dehydrated and hungry and cold- like he was when Mom and Dad found him. Zuko burned Dad’s arm, remember?” Now that Katara mentioned it, Sokka vaguely remembered his father having a bandage on his arm for that first week Zuko had stayed.

“You should tell him you’re not going to hurt him,” Aang said innocently.

“Why wouldn’t he know that already?” Sokka still hadn’t forgotten about Aang hiding the map to his father (though he had been willing to look past it, due to the circumstances). He was still slightly suspicious and annoyed by the Avatar. “Zuko trusts me.”

“Well, in a way, Zuko trusted Zhao too-”

“How could you even say that?! Zuko would never trust Zhao like he trusts me! Zhao is old and gross and-”

“But he’s loyal to the Firelord, Sokka,” Aang said, putting his hands up placatingly. “And when we were escaping, Zuko seemed convinced that Zhao wouldn’t hurt him because he’s the Firelord’s son, so in a way, Zhao broke Zuko’s trust. That’s all I’m saying.”

“You might be right,” Sokka conceded. He wasn’t convinced, but nothing he was trying was working. It certainly couldn’t hurt to reassure Zuko that he would keep him safe. “Okay, I’ll do that and see how it goes.”

“Oh, Sokka?” Sokka was about to leave, but stopped at the sound of his sister’s voice. “Here’s that cream you asked for,” she said, handing Sokka a vial. With a smile and a reassuring squeeze of Sokka’s shoulder, Katara added, “And remember, be gentle with him.”

Be gentle with him. The words reverberated in Sokka’s mind as he slowly made his way back to his own campsite.

“I just don’t get it,” Sokka sighed, gazing out the window of his room in the igloo. Zuko had been sitting by those flowers for hours, refusing to get up for supper, or to play, or even to go to the bathroom.

“Zuko is a gentle soul,” Sokka’s mother replied, not looking up from the bone she was carving. “He has a lot of empathy.”

Sokka tilted his head, not knowing what empathy meant. “I still don’t get it.”

Kya chuckled. “Of course you don’t. You don’t have a gentle bone in your body, my little warrior.” Sokka wasn’t sure if that was an insult or a compliment. “You’ve always been rather rough with people, Sokka. Sometimes they can get hurt if you’re rough with them.”

“I don’t mean to,” Sokka insisted, pouting.

“I know, sweetie, I know.” Kya set down her bone carving and patted Sokka on the head. “You know what’s great, though? You’re capable of learning how to be sensitive, and I think Zuko will be the perfect person to teach you. For now, though, just try to be gentle with him.”

“But what am I gonna do about the flowers?” Kya smiled.

“I think I may have an idea.”

Taking a deep breath, Sokka stepped back inside the cave. “Zuko,” Sokka said softly, noticing the prince was awake and struggling with his bonds. Zuko jumped at the sound of

his name, then scowled over at Sokka. Trying not to feel too hurt by Zuko's actions, Sokka settled in next to Zuko. "How are you feeling?"

"What do you care?" The question was spat back at Sokka, who blinked.

"What do you mean, what do I care? Of course I care, Zuko, I'm trying to help you."

"You really expect me to believe that?" Zuko narrowed his eyes, leaning forward. "How stupid do you think I am?"

"Pretty stupid, actually," Sokka replied, remembering all the stupid things they did together as kids. For a second, genuine hurt flashed across Zuko's face, then he scowled again, curling into himself. Sokka winced at his own callousness, then reached out to Zuko, saying, "Zuko, I-"

"Whatever. I don't care what you think of me," Zuko said coldly, turning away from Sokka.

For a few moments, the only sound was the crackling of their campfire. Sokka gazed at the tense form next to him, wishing he could magically make Zuko feel better. He reached out to touch Zuko's shoulder, but his hand stopped a couple inches away and, thinking better of it, returned his hand to his side. "Are you hungry?"

"No." A second later, Zuko's stomach growled loudly.

"Look, I really want to untie you so you can eat and drink, but you have to promise you won't run away." Zuko craned his neck to glare at Sokka.

"I will make no such promises," Zuko growled. Sighing, Sokka rubbed his temples.

"Zuko, you know I'm not going to hurt you, right?" Zuko scoffed, looking away. "Zuko, it's me. It's Sokka."

"I'm well aware of who you are."

"Then why would you think I want to hurt you?"

"I killed your sister." Zuko said it flatly, and to most people, the minute change in his expression would have been unnoticeable. Sokka, however, noticed the flicker in his eyes, that quick flash of guilt he tried to stifle.

"No, Zuko," Sokka said softly, "you didn't."

"Yes I did! The Southern Raiders said they'd captured the last waterbender, that she bent water right in front of them."

At this statement, Sokka remembered Zuko's tendency to take everything at face value. Zuko must have genuinely believed the Southern Raiders, instead of considering that they might have lied. Sokka had remembered, as he snuck up behind a couple firebenders, hearing one of them say, "If we do this right, we'll never have to come back to this miserable place again." Sokka wouldn't put it past their commander to exaggerate how certain he was that he

captured the last waterbender, whether it be to avoid *another* humiliation in the South Pole or so he would never have to go back there.

“And before you say something about her still being alive in prison, I know for a fact that she isn’t. There was only one prison in the Fire Nation equipped to hold waterbenders, and she wasn’t there.” Zuko was obviously trying to keep a straight face, but he looked miserable.

“Zuko, I know this is going to be hard for you to believe- wait, how would you know that?” It had taken Sokka a minute to process what Zuko had said, but now Sokka was leaning forwards, not noticing that Zuko was leaning away. “You’ve been to where they keep the waterbenders?”

“Once. The conditions there were terrible, so I could see how a little girl might not make it, but still, it was so cruel of the guards to- never mind,” Zuko interrupted himself. “It was a horrible place. There were no children there.”

“Why do you keep using past tense to describe the prison?” Zuko stiffened, then looked away. “Ooh, now you *have* to tell me what happened!”

“Why do you care?! I just told you your sister is *dead* !”

“No, you told me Katara wasn’t in that prison. Which, I would expect,” Sokka said, raising his eyebrows, “because she was in the South Pole, with me.” He gave Zuko a moment to process his words, then said, “Katara is alive and well.”

Zuko shook his head disbelievingly. His fists clenched, then unclenched, then clenched again, and he squeezed his eyes shut. All of a sudden, he violently pulled at the ropes binding him, leaning as far as he could towards Sokka with his teeth bared. Sokka, having been a victim of those same teeth less than an hour ago, had made sure to sit far enough away so Zuko couldn’t reach him, but the sudden movement still made him leap back.

“How can you expect me to trust you,” Zuko screamed furiously, “when you keep *lying to my face*?! ”

His outburst was cut short by a severe fit of coughing, which made him double over. Sokka tried to reach out to him. “Zuko, you’re-”

“Just stop it, Sokka! I don’t know what your intentions are with me, but if you really want me to believe you-”

“Katara really is alive, and I can prove it! Just give me a minute!” Zuko opened his mouth to argue, but Sokka ran out of the cave before he could say anything. Sokka rushed over to Aang and Katara’s camp, where Katara was sitting alone. “Katara, c’mere!”

“What’s the matter, Sokka?” Katara quickly stood as Sokka grabbed her arm, leading her back to the cave.

“I need to prove to Zuko that you’re alive!” With Katara in tow, Sokka burst back into the cave. “Zuko! I’m back!”

"I noticed," Zuko muttered, rolling his eyes. Then his eyes caught Katara's, and the prince was sitting up straight, attempting to get a better look.

"Hi, Zuko," Katara said softly. Zuko stared back at her.

"...It's really you, isn't it?" He said it so softly that it could barely be heard. With a lump in her throat, Katara nodded. As if she was approaching a wounded animal, she slowly walked towards Zuko, then rested a careful hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, it's really me. It's been too long." Her voice had a warmth to it that seemed to calm Zuko down, and Sokka couldn't help but feel a prickle of envy. Katara had never struggled with being gentle.

"I don't understand," Zuko whispered.

Katara squeezed Zuko's shoulder and said, "You don't have to right now. All you need to do is focus on getting better, and once you do, we'll have plenty of time to catch up."

"But if you've been alive all this time," Zuko said, then turned to face Sokka, "why did Sokka say all those terrible things?"

"I- huh?"

Before Sokka could ask what Zuko meant, there was a whooshing noise at the entrance of the cave. "Hey Katara, are you in here? Appa's hungry again and I don't know where those bushes are- oh." Aang had caught sight of Zuko, who had suddenly gone very, very still. With a cheery wave, Aang said, "Hey, Hotman. I didn't know you were awake."

Zuko took a deep breath in, and then there was fire coming out of his mouth. Sokka grabbed Katara by the hood and pulled her backwards, out of harm's way. He heard a cry of pain and looked to Aang, expecting the young airbender to at least be singed, but Aang was completely fine. Both thinking the other had been the one to cry out, Aang and Sokka stared at each other, confused, until the next cry of pain came- from *Zuko*.

This time, it was less of a cry and more of a moan- a long, low moan that reminded Sokka of the first time he'd gone caribou yak hunting. Sokka had thrown his spear, embedding it in the side of the caribou yak, but he'd aimed too high and the caribou yak had fled. He and his father had spent the next hour listening to the animal's dying moans. It had sent chills down Sokka's spine then, and it sent chills down Sokka's spine now, especially knowing that the noise was coming from Zuko.

Zuko had slumped against the post he was bound to, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. His eyes were unfocused, his breathing was ragged, and, to Sokka's horror, Zuko started to convulse.

Sokka was frozen, but Katara sprang to life, turning Zuko on his side and cushioning his head. Aang, at some point, had latched onto Sokka's arm and had shrunk behind him.

It only took a minute for Zuko to come back, but it was one of the longest minutes of Sokka's life. Almost as soon as Zuko's episode stopped, that bitter scowl came back to his face- but

there was more exhaustion behind it now. Looking past Sokka, Zuko snarled, "I can still see you, Avatar."

Aang poked his head out from behind Sokka and gave Zuko a (much more timid) wave. "Hi, Hotman. I get it if you're mad at me, but I really thought you'd be safe there because you're the prince. Sorry for not coming back sooner."

Zuko looked like his head might explode, so Sokka said, "Er, you two should probably leave. He's had a lot of information to take in for one day, especially for someone as sick as he is."

"I'm not sick," Zuko protested at the exact moment his nose started bleeding.

"Yeah, sure, buddy."

Katara frowned down at Zuko, then glared at Sokka. "You forgot to put the cream on his face, didn't you?"

Sokka groaned, tilting his head back. "I was getting to it, I didn't forget!"

"I can do it if you don't want to--"

"No," Zuko interrupted sharply. "If someone's going to touch my face, it's Sokka." At Katara and Sokka's questioning looks, Zuko added, "I'd much rather do it myself, but I'll run away if you untie me." Zuko was too tired to lie, and his scar was burning in that unpleasant way it did when it got too dry. He was still very confused about all of this and didn't know if he could trust any of them, but Zuko knew he was too weak to fight currently. Whatever their ulterior motives may be, this unlikely trio seemed to be trying to help him stay alive, and Zuko might as well use that to his advantage.

Sokka still looked unsure. Lowering his head, Zuko said, "If it's Sokka that does it, I promise I won't bite."

"Bite'?"

"Yeah, it's been a long day," Sokka muttered, rubbing his hand. Feeling guilty, Zuko looked away.

Katara and Aang quietly left, and Sokka was alone with Zuko again. Zuko, who was trembling slightly and looked like he was bracing himself for a hit. Not for the first time that day, Sokka felt his heart breaking for Zuko and wondered what exactly he'd been through.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Zuko," Sokka said, slowly scooting closer to Zuko.

Zuko said nothing.

Sokka understood that Zuko was telling him to get it over with, so he uncorked the vial, scooping some of the green lotion out with his fingers. "I'm going to touch you now. Please tell me if I'm hurting you."

Soon after Zuko had arrived at the South Pole, Sokka had realized he was something of a crybaby. Sokka had been surprised by this, considering the fact that Zuko was a firebender, used dual swords, and was the coolest kid Sokka had ever met. But as Sokka got to know Zuko better, he had realized that Zuko cried as a way of communicating. Zuko didn't cry when he would get hurt in training or when Sokka's dad would go off to the market, but would cry when there were too many people talking around him at once, or if too many people were close to him, or at loud noises. Zuko didn't often cry because he was sad- rather, it was his body's way of reacting to being overwhelmed.

When Zuko cried, Sokka learned to approach him with the gentleness his mother swore he'd been born without, the gentleness that Zuko had taught him. For Zuko was brave and strong and would make an excellent warrior, but Zuko was also exceedingly gentle. Sokka could see it in the way Zuko would always ask if he was okay after sparring when Sokka inevitably lost to Zuko, and in how he treated animals, and in how his hands would slowly, almost hesitantly wrap around Sokka at nighttime, careful not to hold him too tightly. In how Zuko had planted himself in front of that little patch of flowers, refusing to let anybody walk on them. Sokka may not have been born with gentleness, but for Zuko, he had learned it. And now, applying the salve to Zuko's scar, Sokka was as gentle as possible.

Looking at the scowling, shaven boy trying not to flinch under his hand, all Sokka could see was a trampled patch of arctic poppies, crushed beneath a cruel man's heel.

~ ~ ~

"Sokka, where are we going? My feet are tired!"

"Shhh, we're almost there. Do you trust me?"

"Yes." The way Zuko had said it, without any hesitation, made Sokka pause for a moment before remembering his task.

After an hour of trudging through the snow, Sokka finally led Zuko to a clearing. "We're here," Sokka said proudly, puffing out his chest when he heard Zuko's little gasp. Before them was a field of thousands of arctic poppy plants, each one having several of the little flowers in full bloom.

"I- they're amazing, Sokka," Zuko breathed, eyes alight with wonder.

"It's warm enough up here that the snow melts enough to let them grow in the summer." (Sokka did not know this personally, but was relying on the word of his mother.) "Every winter, they get buried under the snow, but they come back each summer. No matter what." Zuko smiled at Sokka, and Sokka knew that all had been forgiven.

Sokka hoped, for Zuko's sake, that flowers could bloom again.

when zuko's too tired to be a pain, you know something's wrong with him fr

anyone else miss nikko? i miss nikko. i want to go back to writing about nikko.

next chapter is pretty big, y'all. big as in a lot of important plot stuff happens, and we find out the truth about some things. it's the deserter episode! we get jeong jeong! and of course, at the end of the episode, everyone's least favorite mailman shows up! yay!

thanks for reading!

The deserter

Chapter Notes

cw: reference to torture, reference to child abuse, zhao, suffocation, almost drowning- there's a lot that happens in this chapter, folks

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

It took a couple days, but Zuko finally had recovered enough to where he could walk on his own for a decent distance without collapsing. Which was good, because Sokka knew they needed to leave soon.

“Hey, Zuko,” Sokka said cheerfully, plopping down next to the prince. Zuko gave him a glare in response. Did Sokka honestly think Zuko was stupid enough to buy into his act? Despite what Sokka kept insisting, Zuko knew he was being held prisoner. Why else would Sokka be caring for him while he was in such a weakened state? Sokka hated Zuko, Zuko knew this. He’d probably be happy to leave Zuko to die, but Zuko was the prince of the Fire Nation, after all.

It had taken him longer than it should have, but Zuko had finally figured out what kind of situation he was in. Sokka, Katara, and the Avatar were keeping him alive so they could turn him over to one of their allies, getting a hefty sum of money in return. Then, their ally would attempt to ransom Zuko off to his father. Zuko had to escape before he was handed over to someone with more resources than the Avatar’s little group, but he also needed to recover. So, for now, he was stuck with them. “What do you want?”

Sokka flinched at the harsh tone in Zuko’s voice. “Well, we’re getting ready to leave, and I need to pack up, so I need you to not be tied up to my tent. If I untie you completely, will you run away?”

“Yes.” Sokka groaned loudly. “What? You were the one who told me not to lie to you!”

“Zuko, we’ve been over this. You’re not our prisoner, you don’t have to try and escape.”

“If I’m not your prisoner, then just leave me here!” The fire in front of Zuko shot sparks. Zuko could augment fire with relative ease, but he hadn’t yet tried to produce his own after what happened last time.

“You’re not better yet! If you were, that fire would be up to the ceiling by now!” Zuko gritted his teeth. He hated to admit it, but Sokka had a point. “Like it or not, we’re going to take care of you, so quit being a baby and just cooperate.”

Zuko scowled, and Sokka smirked triumphantly. Just to irritate him, Zuko said, “You’re going to have to drag me. I’m not moving.”

Sokka made a series of incomprehensible noises accompanied by wild hand gestures, and now Zuko was the one smirking. If they would just admit that he was their prisoner, maybe Zuko would behave a bit (though, this was unlikely)- but since the Avatar's group didn't even respect him enough to be honest with him, Zuko was determined to be a royal pain in the behind.

Half an hour later, Sokka was carrying his belongings to Appa, griping and moaning about how much of a pain Zuko was. Sokka hoped his complaining would change Zuko's heart, but instead it gave the prince satisfaction and encouraged him to be more of a pain.

"Hey, Sokka- oh." Aang's cheerful greeting was cut short when he saw that Sokka was pulling a rope over his shoulder- a rope that was tied around the prince's arms and legs. "Does he really need to be tied up like that?"

"Yes, he does," Sokka said, clearly exasperated. "He does, because if he's not, then he'll try to run away. Not like he's ever successful," Sokka muttered with a smug glare at Zuko.

"I've been more successful at running away than you've been with taking care of me," Zuko shot back. Sokka growled and muttered curses under his breath.

"If he's annoying you so much, why don't you just ask him to be quiet?"

"Yeah, Sokka, why don't you?" Zuko's voice was taunting, and Katara almost regretted asking. "Why don't you just ask instead of trying to gag your patient who's been having trouble breathing?"

"*Sokka!*"

Flinching at his sister's voice, Sokka defensively said, "It was one time! And I didn't even manage to get it on him, because he *bites!*" Sokka pulled off one of his gloves, revealing several red marks on his hand. He glared down at Zuko, who had the gall to smirk back at him, as if he was proud of his work. That *jerk*.

"Well, you didn't have to *drag* him here, Sokka," Aang said, looking sympathetically at Zuko.

"He refused to move, and I couldn't carry him all the way!"

"Yeah, but I could've used airbending to lift him, or we could've had Appa come over to the cave." At this, Zuko cackled.

"Ha! You didn't even think of that, did you?!" Sokka felt his face going red because Zuko was right. "Seriously, how have you three evaded capture for this long? If I'd been chasing you, I'd have caught you at least five times by now."

Ignoring him, Aang said, "Zuko, this is Appa, my flying bison! I bet you haven't seen a flying bison before!"

"Actually, I've seen- wait a minute," Zuko muttered, eyes narrowing. He sat up and stared at Appa for a minute, then shouted, "You're the jerks who flipped my boat the other day!"

Throwing his hands in the air, Sokka said, “You’re really going to find a way to blame us for everything, aren’t you, Zuko?”

“Two or three weeks ago, I was sailing in a bad storm, being chased by Zhao. I had just reached the eye of the storm and thought I would be safe when, out of nowhere, a flying bison came up out of the water, flipping my boat and causing me to get captured by Zhao. A flying bison, might I add, that looked a lot like yours,” Zuko growled. “I don’t imagine there’s too many people who travel by sky bison these days.”

“How did you know it was a sky bison? You can’t know for sure,” Sokka said quickly, not wanting what Zuko said to be true. Sokka hadn’t forgotten that the only reason Aang and Katara had come out in that storm was because Sokka had gone out on the fishing boat, against their advice. If Zuko really had gotten captured because Appa had tipped his boat over... that would be on Sokka.

“It was a ten ton fluffy beast with an arrow on its head. It wasn’t exactly hard to identify,” Zuko said with a glare.

“Oh spirits, I’m sorry, Hotman,” Aang said, looking like he was about to cry. “I never meant for-”

“Whatever. Just get me on the bison.” Sniffing, Aang lifted Zuko onto Appa’s back with a burst of air. Zuko sat up and shouted, “Ha! You fools! Yip yip!”

Sokka sprinted towards Appa, but it was too late. Appa took off, leaving half of their stuff and Sokka, Katara, and Aang behind. “Aang, go after them!”

“My glider was already packed,” Aang said, shrugging apologetically. Sokka screamed in frustration. He swore dealing with Zuko was going to give him gray hair. “Oh, but I didn’t pack my bison whistle!”

Aang retrieved the whistle from his pocket and blew it as hard as he could, and Appa was back in less than a minute. Zuko sat up, clearly surprised that the bison was landing, then groaned when he spotted the three of them. Sokka crossed his arms and glared up at him.

“I should’ve just jumped off the bison when I had the chance,” Zuko muttered, infuriating Sokka even more. Fuming, Sokka climbed up on Appa’s back and grabbed Zuko by the collar of his jacket.

“Why are you being such a jerk?! We saved your life!” Zuko looked away, catching sight of Aang. His lip curled.

“You’ve *ruined* my life! At thirteen, I was banished, and my only way home would be to capture you, Avatar! Then, when I finally started to accept the fact that I could have a life outside of the Fire Nation, you decided to show up again after a hundred years! You got me captured by Zhao, and then I was stupid enough to save you! And *you*, ” Zuko snarled, whirling on Sokka, “I thought you hated me because I killed your sister, but she’s been alive this whole time! So you just hated me for no reason, then? Did you ever even *care* ? Was our friendship real to you, or did you hate me all along?!”

“I never hated you!” Zuko’s eyes widened for a moment, but a bitter expression crossed Zuko’s face as he looked away. Sokka had made it *very* clear how he felt about Zuko in the one letter he’d sent. If Sokka was going to continue lying to him, Zuko would continue to misbehave. “Well? Don’t you have anything you want to say to me?”

“No,” Zuko said simply, not realizing that Sokka wanted him to apologize.

“You’re unbearable,” Sokka groaned, sitting back and crossing his arms. With a huff, Zuko turned to the side, not understanding what he’d done wrong. A tense silence settled over them.

“...I think I’m going to go sit with Aang,” Katara said, awkwardly climbing out of the bison’s saddle.

They flew for an hour, then landed in a patch of forest near a small town. Aang was the one to finally break the silence. “Hey, Sokka, can you untie Zuko? We need to walk for a bit.” Sokka glared at Aang. Wincing under Sokka’s gaze, Aang jumped up into the saddle. “Hey, hotman. If I untie you, are you going to run away?”

“Nothing’s changed,” Zuko said with a scowl. “Why do you think my answer would change?”

“Well, the thing is, I thought we were even before. You saved me, I saved you.” Zuko nodded, like this was reasonable. This is what Aang was hoping for, even though he didn’t truly feel they were even- after all, Aang had left him behind, allowing Zuko to be tortured. “But now that I know I got you captured, I owe you. So if you let me and my friends-” Zuko bristled slightly at the Avatar calling Sokka and Katara *his* friends- “take care of you, then we’ll be even.”

“Then when I’m better, you’ll leave me at the nearest Earth Kingdom town?” Aang blinked, not having expected the question. Part of him felt hurt, because he’d been expecting Zuko to want to travel with them; still, Aang knew he shouldn’t try to force Zuko to change his mind and that this was his own choice.

“Sure. I mean, if that’s what you want,” Aang replied. Zuko was surprised by this- from what he knew of the Avatar, he was painfully genuine. For a moment, Zuko considered that the group did, in fact, want to help him.

“Obviously that’s not what he wants,” Sokka declared, rolling over to face Aang and Zuko. “He’s confused. He thinks that’s what he wants, but it’s best if he stays with us.”

Zuko’s face hardened again as he glared at Sokka. Of course Sokka wouldn’t tell the kid about his plan to turn Zuko in for money. He might be able to fool the Avatar, but Sokka couldn’t trick Zuko. Angrily, Zuko shouted, “How do you know what’s best for me?!”

“That’s my OPINION!”

“Sokka, if he wants to leave when he’s better, we should let him,” Aang insisted. Sokka, however, didn’t seem to be listening to him.

“So what, you just want us to leave you in an Earth Kingdom town so you can get captured again?”

“I can handle myself!”

“Clearly,” Sokka said sarcastically.

Zuko was steaming as he replied, “You think I can’t?! I’ve been doing fine on my own for two years, and I’ll be fine on my own again!”

“But Zhao is after you-”

“No, he’s after *you* ! Specifically, him,” Zuko said, jabbing his thumb towards Aang. “Zhao’s been after the Avatar this whole time, I just happened to get in his way. He’s going to keep chasing you, so if you really want me to be *safe* ,” Zuko spat, “then you’d want me to stay in some tiny town where I could disappear, and not with you! So what’s the *real* reason you want me to stay, Sokka?” Zuko said it tauntingly, expecting to expose Sokka’s lie.

Sokka’s eyes widened. He pointed angrily at Zuko, about to say something, but stopped. His expression went from mad to confused. “I- I don’t-”

“We can figure this out later,” Katara said, tired of unloading all of their belongings all by herself. “Zuko, it’s like Aang said. We just want you to get better. You can’t successfully run away until you’re better, right?”

She did have a point. Zuko let out a long sigh. “Fine. If you untie me, I promise I won’t try to run.” He hoped he wouldn’t regret this.

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True to his word, Zuko didn’t try to run as they walked to the town nearby. Sokka was livid.

Not only did Zuko seem to trust everyone *but* him- even though Katara and Aang had lied to Zuko by telling him he could leave once he got better!- but now Zuko seemed to think Sokka had some sort of secret motive. The way Zuko had looked at him so confidently when he’d asked why Sokka wanted him to stay so badly had made Sokka question himself for a moment. Only for a moment, though, because Sokka was certain that he only wanted the best for Zuko, that he only wanted to protect him. Sokka was so certain of this, that he definitely wasn’t thinking about it for the entire walk to the town.

“This should give us a good idea of what’s around here,” Katara said, snapping Sokka out of his thoughts (which were *definitely* not about what Zuko had said.) Sokka had been so lost in his thoughts (which were *not* about Zuko) that he hadn’t noticed they’d come up on a poster stand. He dug into his bag, reaching for food, only to find it empty.

“See if you can find a menu. I’m starving.”

“I bet we’ll find something to eat here- the Fire Days Festival!” Aang excitedly pointed to a large poster with a dragon on it. “Fire Nation cultural exhibits, jugglers, benders,

magicians... this would be a great place for me to study some real firebenders!” Zuko scoffed, crossing his arms. “Firebenders who didn’t recently get frozen, I mean.”

“Uh, you might want to rethink that,” Sokka said from the other side of the stand. “Look at this.”

Sokka’s side of the stand had several wanted posters, including a large one of the Avatar. “Hey, look! A poster of me!”

“Why are you so excited about a wanted poster?” Zuko scowled as the Avatar took down the poster of himself, fully revealing the Blue Spirit poster beneath it. Nobody had ever gotten the detail on Zuko’s mask completely correct, but this poster was just plain wrong. They might as well have colored the mask red, it was that unrecognizable.

“This is bad,” Sokka said. Zuko agreed, but he wasn’t going to let Sokka know that.

“I think we should keep moving,” Katara said.

“I have to learn firebending at some point, and this could be my only chance to watch some masters up close, unless...” The Avatar trailed off, and all three of them looked at Zuko. Backing up, Zuko defensively crossed his arms, not liking the way they were staring at him.

“What?”

“Never mind that,” Katara said, shaking her head. “Aang, I guess we could go check it out.” Aang cheered excitedly.

“What?!” Sokka stepped forwards, gesturing with his hands. Something in Zuko’s heart warmed upon seeing that, but he forced it down. Zuko couldn’t afford to get distracted by emotions. “You want to walk into a Fire Nation town where they’re all fired up with their- you know- fire?”

“You got a problem with fire?” Zuko raised an eyebrow and smirked at Sokka. “Personally, I think this is a *great* idea.” When Sokka glared at him, Zuko stuck his tongue out.

“We’ll wear disguises,” Katara said, not noticing the boys’ interaction. “And if it looks like trouble, we’ll leave.”

“Yeah, because we always leave before we get into trouble,” Sokka muttered, storming away from the stand. Before Zuko left, he snatched the Blue Spirit poster, just to be safe.

“Speaking of disguises,” Zuko said, walking next to Katara, “don’t use my real name- it’s too recognizable. Call me Lee.”

As they walked to the town, Katara stopped suddenly, causing Sokka to bump into her. “Oh, Zu- Lee! I forgot!” Katara climbed up onto the sky bison and reached into one of its saddle’s pockets, retrieving a familiar looking scabbard and bag. She jumped down, landing triumphantly in front of Zuko, who was staring wide-eyed.

Incredulously, Zuko asked, “You found my stuff?”

“Yep. Some guys were going through it, but most of your things should still be here,” Katara said, handing Zuko his belongings. The familiar weight of his dao and bag was comforting to Zuko, and he gave Katara the slightest of smiles.

“Thank you,” Zuko said softly. Sokka scowled and looked away, wishing he had been the one to give Zuko his possessions.

“Hey, we’re here,” the Avatar announced excitedly. Zuko wondered if the kid was really this excited about some festival or if he was this energetic all the time. Judging by Sokka’s expression, it was the latter. Great. “You guys stay out of sight here while we go to the festival,” the Avatar said to his bison, then turned to Sokka and Katara. “Ready disguises!”

Sokka and Katara flipped their hoods up, while the Avatar pulled the collar of his shirt over his head. “It’s like you’re a whole different person,” Sokka muttered while Katara laughed.

“The hoods are great and all, but where are your masks?” Three blank faces stared back at Zuko. “You know, the thing you wear to cover your face? Like this,” Zuko said, pulling his blue mask from his bag.

“Woah, is that a Blue Spirit mask?!” Sokka reached out to grab it, but in one fluid motion, Zuko shifted the mask into one hand and grabbed Sokka’s arm, twisting it behind his back. Before Sokka could even cry out, Zuko had kicked him onto the ground.

“Do *not* ,” Zuko snarled, “touch my stuff.”

“Oookay,” Aang said awkwardly, helping Sokka up. Sokka gave Zuko a scathing glare, and Zuko clutched the mask closer to him.

“It’s not a Blue Spirit mask,” Zuko said defensively. Softer, he added, “It was my mother’s.”

“I understand,” Katara said quietly. There was a sadness in her eyes that Zuko didn’t quite understand. “I lost something of my mother’s recently, when we were on a prison rig.”

“Oh,” Zuko murmured. “Oh. OH!” He fumbled around in his bag for a minute, making a mental note to organize his bag later. Thankfully, the little necklace was still tucked inside, and Zuko handed it to Katara. “I found this on a prison rig. I was looking for an earthbender, but this was there. I thought it looked familiar somehow.”

“I-” Tears welled up in Katara’s eyes. “I can’t believe you found this! Thank you so much,” she said, putting Kya’s necklace back around her neck, where it should be. “Can I hug you?”

“Briefly.” Katara gave Zuko a tight squeeze, then went to stand next to Aang (who was feeling a little jealous.) “I’ll go into town to get us masks.”

Sokka fidgeted as he watched Zuko walk down the hill and through the town gates. “D’you think he’ll be okay? Maybe I should go down there and make sure he’s okay.”

“Sokka, it’s only been a minute. He’s fine.”

“Look, there he is now!” Aang pointed at the gate and, sure enough, Zuko was headed back towards them. Zuko jogged up towards them, holding three more masks.

“Three genuine Fire Festival masks, just for you,” Zuko said, tossing each of them a mask.

“Why is mine crying?”

“The smiling mask doesn’t exactly suit your character, Sokka. And I didn’t think you’d want the girl mask.”

“How about we trade? You cry all the time,” Sokka said smugly.

With a scoff, Zuko said, “Maybe when I was a little kid. The last time I cried was...” Zuko paused for a moment, then said, “Huh. I don’t really remember.” He looked up, and his eyes narrowed at the treeline. “Let’s keep moving.”

Zuko started towards the town at a brisk pace, forcing Sokka to jog to keep up with him.

“What do you mean you can’t remember the last time you cried? Are you trying to tell me you didn’t cry at all when you were with- you know,” Sokka said, putting his hands on the sides of his face to mimic sideburns. Zuko was glad he had his mask on because it covered his brief smile at the imitation.

“I didn’t cry then. You can imagine that made him very mad.” Sokka shivered. He reached out to touch Zuko, but Zuko slapped his hand away. “Anyway, my father discouraged the behavior, so I learned not to cry pretty quickly when I returned to the Fire Nation.”

“Wh- but you have to cry, you can’t just bottle up all your emotions like that,” Sokka said. He knew he was being hypocritical, but he didn’t care. “I know you feel things really intensely, more intensely than most people do. Bottling all that up has got to be hurting you.”

Zuko shrugged indifferently. “You get used to it,” he said. The careless way Zuko said it, as if his emotions were meaningless, broke Sokka’s heart.

“Hey, there’s some food,” Aang said, having passed in front of Zuko and Sokka with Katara.

“Finally,” Sokka exclaimed, rushing to the stand. “What do you have?”

“Flaming Fire Flakes. Best in town.” Sokka looked to Zuko, who took a bag and ate a handful of the flakes at once. Encouraged, Sokka took his own bag, unsuspectingly shoveling quite a few of the flakes into his mouth.

Immediately, Sokka regretted this. The flakes were so hot that it felt like they were burning holes in Sokka’s tongue. “Hot! Hot!” Sokka lifted his mask, scraping the stupid flakes off of his tongue.

“Flaming Fire Flakes, hot. What do you know,” Katara said, crossing her arms.

“Oh, sorry, Sokka,” Zuko said in a tone that wasn’t sorry at all, “if I’d known you had a sensitive little baby tongue, I wouldn’t have let you eat them.” Sokka really wanted to punch him.

“Hey, look at this,” Aang shouted, leading the group over to a puppet show. The red curtain opened to reveal a puppet of the Firelord, making Zuko groan.

“I can see the family resemblance,” Sokka whispered, elbowing Zuko in the side.

“Do you want your tongue to actually be on fire?” Zuko sounded annoyed, much to Sokka’s satisfaction.

“Don’t worry, loyal citizens,” the puppet said, “no one can surprise the Firelord!” An earthbender puppet rose up behind the Firelord puppet, holding a rock. The Firelord puppet rounded on the earthbender puppet, breathing fire onto its face. Beneath his mask, Zuko flinched slightly.

The Firelord puppet bowed to the cheers of the audience, but suddenly, the fire jumped from the earthbender puppet to the Firelord puppet. To most of the audience, it looked natural, but Sokka, Aang, and Katara had seen the slight movement of Zuko’s hand.

“Was that you?” Aang nudged Zuko gently.

“Are you accusing me of anti-Fire Nation sentiment? I would never commit such an act,” Zuko said, turning away from the puppet stage. For the first time since they had rescued Zuko, Sokka found himself grinning.

“That was totally you,” Sokka said eagerly, nudging Zuko less gently.

“Lies and slander.”

“Oh, look over here!” Aang started to run off again, this time towards a real stage.

“Aang, hold on,” Katara protested. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know, but there’s a big crowd, so it must be good.”

“Knowing the Fire Nation, it’s probably an execution,” Sokka said, expecting to get a reaction from Zuko. Instead, Zuko was tensing up, pausing at the edge of the crowd. “Hey, you okay?”

“...It’s nothing.” Zuko shook his head slightly, then followed Aang into the- *oh*. Zuko hated crowds.

“It’s the crowd, isn’t it? You don’t have to go through here if you don’t want to-”

“I told you, it’s nothing,” Zuko said irritably, brushing Sokka off. As if to prove his point, Zuko barreled his way through the crowd to the very front, bumping into several people on the way there.

On stage, there was a magician dressed in red and white. He shot three fireballs around himself, making it look like they were dancing around him. When he made them all come together, the fireballs disappeared, and four doves flew from where the fire had been.

Aang tipped his mask back, staring at the doves with wide eyes. “I gotta learn that trick!”

Zuko scoffed, crossing his arms. “You’re impressed by anything, huh? I could’ve done that at three years old.”

“For my next trick, I need a volunteer from the audience,” the magician announced. Aang bounced up and down, wildly waving his hand.

Grabbing Aang’s lowered arm, Sokka whispered, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I want to get a closer look,” Aang replied.

“It’s better that we don’t attract any attention to ourselves,” Katara reasoned, leaning down to Aang’s height.

Just then, the magician pointed directly at Katara. “How about you, little lady?” Katara backed up and shook her head, but the magician was insistent. “Aw, she’s shy. Let’s give her some encouragement, folks!” The crowd cheered, and someone pushed Katara towards the stage. She looked back at Aang, Zuko, and Sokka as she was hoisted onstage.

“Aw, that could’ve been me,” Aang pouted.

“This next trick is called ‘taming the dragon’! You will be my captured princess,” the magician said, tying a red cloth around Katara. He created a stream of fire that resembled a dragon.

“That looks nothing like a *real* dragon,” Zuko said, crossing his arms. “That’s just a ribbon with a face on the end of it.”

“Uh-huh. And how many dragons have you seen?” Sokka’s question made Zuko stiffen next to him.

“What- I- No, I- I haven’t seen any dragons,” Zuko sputtered.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Sokka said, assuming that Zuko had gotten flustered because he hadn’t been expecting to be questioned. He turned back toward the stage, not noticing Zuko’s sigh of relief.

The magician had put a fiery lasso around the dragon’s neck, but he shouted, “It’s too strong! I can’t hold it!”

Stepping forwards, Aang exclaimed, “We gotta help her!”

Holding Aang back, Sokka said, “No, we don’t want to make a scene!”

“He can’t be *that* bad of a firebender, kid,” Zuko said. “These people have training. He wouldn’t be doing this trick if he didn’t know he could pull it off.”

“The rope- it’s breaking!” The lasso around the dragon’s neck vanished, and the dragon rushed straight towards Katara. Katara cried out and turned away, causing Aang to spring into

action. He leapt between Katara and the dragon, summoning a vortex of air to disperse the dragon's flames. Confetti flew from the dragon's body as it faded away. Annoyed, the magician whispered, "Hey, you trying to upstage me, kid?"

Aang looked down at his hands, then out at the audience, who booed. On instinct, Aang started to dance while Sokka untied Katara.

"Hey! That kid's the Avatar!" Aang's eyes widened. [Zuko was pointing directly at Aang as he said, "I saw him on a wanted poster!"](#) Grinning smugly, Zuko lifted his mask long enough to give Sokka a wink, then took off in another direction.

"You *jerk* !" Sokka shook his fist at Zuko, but there was no time to chase after him. Three Fire Nation soldiers were running towards them, spears in hand.

"Follow me! I can get you out of here," a voice said from behind the three of them. Normally, Sokka didn't trust masked, hooded figures, but he didn't have much of a choice. The three of them followed him through the streets, hoping to lose the guards, but they ended up stuck in a dead end alleyway- an alleyway that was already occupied by Prince Zuko.

"What are you doing here?" Zuko pushed back his mask and scowled.

"Hey, get out of here! This is my alleyway, I found it first!"

"You're such a pain!"

There was a growling noise above them, and Aang called, "Appa! Down here!" The bison landed in front of the five people, then sent the soldiers flying with a swish of his tail. All of them climbed on his back except Zuko.

"Come on," Sokka said impatiently, offering Zuko his hand. Zuko looked between the bison and the soldiers, who were quickly recovering, and decided to take his chances with the Avatar's group. Once Zuko was on Appa's back, Appa took off, and the cloaked man sent a bomb flying into a cart of fireworks. Zuko winced, covering his ears. Still mad at him, Sokka chose to ignore it.

"Nice touch setting off the fireworks," Aang said.

"Yeah, you really know your explosives."

"I'm familiar," the man said, turning around. Getting a good look at the man's face, Sokka gasped.

"You're a Fire Nation soldier!"

Zuko crossed his arms. "You're really surprised that the guy that's been following you this whole time is a Fire Nation soldier?"

"*Was*. My name's Chey. And how long did you know I was following you?"

"Since we were at the poster stand." Chey seemed impressed, but Sokka scowled.

“When were you going to tell us this?”

“I wasn’t,” Zuko said with a shrug. “When I went to go get the masks, I was testing to see if he would follow me. He didn’t, so he wasn’t my problem.”

“You’re unbearable,” Sokka complained.

“So I’ve been told.”

Appa landed, and the group made camp in the forest. Once Sokka had gotten a fire going (because Zuko had refused to help), everyone gathered around, waiting for Chey to share his story.

“I serve a man- more than a man, really, he’s a myth- but he’s real, he’s a living legend- Jeong Jeong the deserter. He was a Fire Nation general- or wait, was he an admiral?”

“General,” Zuko supplied. “Jeong Jeong was in the army. Generals are for the army, admirals are for the navy.”

“Thanks. Anyway, he couldn’t take the madness anymore. He’s the first person ever to leave the army and live.” At this, Sokka turned to Zuko, tilting his head questioningly. “I’m the second, but you don’t get to be a legend for that. It’s okay though.

“Jeong Jeong is a firebending genius. Some say he’s mad, but he’s not. He’s enlightened.”

“You mean there’s a firebender out here who’s not with the Firelord? We’ve gotta go see him! He can train me,” Aang exclaimed, getting to his feet.

“We’re not gonna go find some crazy firebender,” Sokka interjected.

“He’s not crazy,” Chey shouted. “He’s a genius!”

“Yeah, Sokka,” Zuko said, “weren’t you listening?” Sokka wanted to punch him.

“He’s the perfect person to teach the Avatar,” Chey insisted. “That’s why I followed you into the festival.”

“Look, thanks for your help, but we’re leaving for the North Pole in the morning,” Sokka said, brushing himself off and standing. Aang looked at him pleadingly.

“Sokka, this could be my only chance to meet a firebending master-” Zuko started at this- “who would actually be willing to teach me,” Aang finished. Zuko settled down.

“It can’t hurt just to talk to him,” Katara said.

“Yeah, Sokka, it’s a great idea,” Zuko said. Having gotten over Aang’s potential insult, Zuko was now smirking at Sokka again.

“That’s what you said about going to the festival! Why does no one ever listen to me?”

Sokka started to turn around, but Zuko shouted, “Sokka, look out!” Zuko leapt in front of Sokka, jumping between him and the pointed edge of a spear. The spear embedded itself in Zuko’s shoulder, making him wince slightly in pain. Sokka cried out loudly, and Zuko, with the tip of the spear still in his shoulder, turned to face him. “Are you hurt?!”

“No, no, I- your shoulder!”

“Oh, that? It’s nothing,” Zuko said dismissively. He swept Sokka behind him as more men with spears surrounded them.

“What do you mean, ‘it’s nothing’? You were *stabbed* !”

“Don’t move,” the man who had speared Zuko said.

“I’ll move if I want to,” Zuko spat.

“Please don’t, Lee,” Katara said. Sokka was confused for a minute, not knowing who Lee was, until he remembered the fake name Zuko had told them to use. “What do you want with us?”

“Come,” the man said.

“Oh? Didn’t you *just* tell us not to move?” There was a challenge in Zuko’s voice.

“Shut up, *Lee* ,” Sokka whispered, grabbing Zuko’s uninjured shoulder. “Let’s just do what they say, alright?”

“ *Fine* ,” Zuko muttered, rolling his eyes. Then he turned to the man who stabbed him and, without flinching, pulled the spear out of his shoulder. “Don’t do that again,” Zuko said threateningly, snapping the spear in half over his knee.

They were led through the woods by the men, and only then did Sokka process what had just happened. “Hey,” Sokka said quietly, keeping pace with Zuko, “back there, were you... protecting me?”

“No, I just like getting stabbed for fun,” Zuko said sarcastically. He wouldn’t meet Sokka’s eyes.

“Well... thanks,” Sokka murmured. He honestly hadn’t been expecting that from Zuko.

“Jeong Jeong told you not to look for Avatar,” the man who stabbed Zuko said irritably, pushing Chey.

“Hold on,” Sokka said, “you know these guys?”

“Oh yeah,” Chey said, stopping and smiling back at the man. “Lin Ye’s an old buddy! Right, Lin Ye?”

Evidently, Lin Ye was in no mood for this, as he pushed Chey forwards again. “Shut up. Keep moving.”

Eventually, they reached a small clearing by a river, where several small huts were set up. “Go on,” Lin Ye said to Chey. “He sees you only.”

“Oh, that’s okay. We can chat later.”

“Is that where Jeong Jeong is? I need to talk to him right away,” Aang butted in. He started to walk forwards, but Lin Ye blocked Aang’s path with his arm.

“No. You wait there.” To Chey, he said, “Go, now!”

“Don’t worry,” Chey said to Aang as he was pushed forwards, “everything will be fine. He’s a great man, a great man!”

Chey disappeared into Jeong Jeong’s hut, and Lin Ye led the rest of them into an empty hut where a fire was already lit. But when Zuko tried to go inside, Lin Ye blocked the way. “You, with me.”

“He’s not going anywhere with you,” Sokka said. He tried to walk through the door, but two other men stopped him. “Please, he’s hurt.”

“We take care of him.”

Sokka started to protest, but Zuko raised his hand and said, “Stop. I’ll go with them.”

“Are you sure?” Sokka looked at Zuko with uncertain eyes. Zuko nodded.

“Be back soon,” Lin Ye said, leading Zuko to another hut. The two other men remained at the door of the guest hut, leaving Zuko alone with Lin Ye. Even though he was injured, Zuko thought he could still take Lin Ye in a fight if need be. “Your name, Lee.”

“Yes,” Zuko replied.

“I heard stories of a Lee. Has burn on his face, fights with dual swords.” Lin Ye eyed the swords strapped to Zuko’s back. “You... the Blue Spirit?”

“Yes,” Zuko replied quietly, “but you can’t tell anyone, not even the people I’m traveling with.”

“Secret dies with me,” Lin Ye said firmly. “Sorry for stabbing.”

“Nah, that was my own fault for getting in front of you,” Zuko said, shrugging. Lin Ye still looked guilty, so Zuko said, “Seriously, it’s fine. Happens all the time, actually. Doesn’t even look like I need stitches, actually.” There was surprisingly little bleeding, which was nice.

Lin Ye applied a salve to Zuko’s wound and bandaged it, then shyly pushed a piece of paper towards Zuko. With a jolt, Zuko realized it was a wanted poster for the Blue Spirit, with a far more accurate drawing of his mask. “You sign my poster?”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Zuko said, taking the pen Lin Ye was offering him. He quickly inked a few characters on the poster, then handed it back to Lin Ye with an awkward smile. “I’m going to

go back now, if that's okay." Lin Ye nodded, and Zuko stepped outside.

"You're back!" Sokka sat up as Zuko walked back inside. "Did they hurt you?"

"No, no," Zuko said, waving his hand dismissively. Looking around, he realized someone was missing from their group. "Wait, where's the Avatar?"

"He went to go see Jeong Jeong."

"I'm sure that'll go well."

To Zuko's (and everyone's) surprise, it went well enough that Jeong Jeong agreed to teach the Avatar firebending, and they were all up with the sun the next day to watch him train. As the day went on and nothing exciting happened, all except Zuko turned to other activities. Zuko, however, was content to continue watching, hurling insults at the young Avatar whenever he messed something up. After a round of insults that left Aang looking particularly discouraged, Sokka decided to step in.

"Hey, can we talk?" Zuko looked up, frowning when he saw who was speaking to him.

"Can I say no?" Rolling his eyes, Sokka grabbed Zuko's arm and led him behind one of the huts.

"Okay, what is your problem with him?" Zuko raised his eyebrow.

"You mean the Avatar, the person I was tasked with finding and capturing as my only way of returning home? The Avatar, who flipped my boat over and got me captured by Zhao, left me to get tortured by him, and is now holding me prisoner? I wonder what I could *possibly* have a problem with," Zuko said, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Okay, but we came back for you, and if it weren't for Aang, I never would've seen you again. You never would have known that Katara was still alive."

"You're right about Katara," Zuko conceded, "but don't pretend that you wanted to see me. I know how you really feel- you made that perfectly clear in your letter."

Ever the wordsmith, Sokka replied, "Huh?"

"Your letter. The only letter you ever bothered to send me after I went back to the Fire Nation." At Sokka's confused look, Zuko huffed, "You seriously don't remember? Here, allow me." Zuko retrieved a waterproof scroll holder from his bag and tipped the contents into Sokka's hand.

"To Zuko," Zuko said as Sokka opened the letter. "I wish you had never been born. You and your ashmaker family have brought us nothing but trouble and pain. You betrayed us by sending the Southern Raiders back to complete their mission. I hate you and never want to see you again. Everyone in the tribe feels the same way. We are not friends. We are enemies. If I ever see you again, I will hurt you. You ruined everything, and I will never forgive you. I- in all capital letters- HATE you. From, Sokka." Zuko had his arms crossed and his expression made it look like he'd just eaten a lemon. He had recited the letter perfectly

without so much as a glance, and Sokka wondered how many times Zuko had read it. Sokka could imagine Zuko lying in bed, eyes scanning those hateful words over and over again- words that Sokka hadn't even written.

"Zuko," Sokka said carefully, "I didn't write this letter. I wrote lots of others, but-"

"No," Zuko breathed, shaking his head. "No no no no no-" Sokka could tell he was losing Zuko, so he grasped Zuko's hands.

"Zuko." Sokka said it quietly, but firmly. "I didn't say those things to you."

"Stop it," Zuko pleaded, in a very non-Zuko like way. He pulled his hands away and stepped back. "No, stop, don't do this to me."

"What, you mean tell you the truth? I'm not going to lie-"

"Stop giving me false hope! Is this a game to you?! Are you just toying with me now, is that what this is?" Zuko started pulling at the short, stubby hair that was just starting to grow back.

Sokka started to reach for Zuko, saying, "No, Zuko, that's not it at all-"

"Enough!" Zuko slapped Sokka's arm away. His hand was hot enough to sting Sokka, forcing him to draw his arm back. Zuko stormed back to the side of the river, not noticing the fireball in Aang's hands. He felt like his vision was tunneling, blacking out around the edges so he could only see what was directly in front of him. That, and the fact that Aang was on his left, meant that Zuko didn't see the fire coming towards him.

Sokka heard Katara scream, and rushed to her side. Katara was crouching by the river with Aang by her side. "Katara, what's wrong?!" Sokka knelt next to her, noticing her burned hands. With a glare at Aang, he asked, "What did you do?!"

There was a wordless yelp when Sokka raised his voice, and Sokka turned to see Zuko, curled up and trembling. If the circumstances were different, Sokka would have immediately asked Zuko if he was okay, but right now, the sight of Zuko like that filled him with anger.

"You burned my sister," Sokka shouted at Aang. Then, rounding on Zuko, he yelled, "And you didn't protect her! What kind of a firebender are you?!" Zuko looked up at Sokka, and Sokka immediately regretted yelling at him.

Zuko had an expression Sokka had never seen on him before. Zuko's eyes were wide and unfocused, his lips were slightly parted, and his arms were protecting his body. He was breathing heavily and sweating, and Sokka realized that Zuko was *afraid*. Sure, Sokka had seen Zuko nervous or panicked before, but never had he seen a look of such pure fear on his face. It didn't suit him at all.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Zuko whispered frantically. Sokka took one step towards Zuko, but he scrambled backwards into a tree trunk. "I- I only had the Fire Nation's best interests at heart-" Zuko was tumbling over his words now, making Sokka feel sick to his

stomach- “I’m sorry I spoke out of turn- I promise I’ll be better, I promise- I meant you no disrespect- I thought it was okay because she was my friend- I’m sorry, *Father*- ”

That word, *father* , made Sokka’s blood boil. Zuko had mentioned some of the things his father had done, back when they were in the South Pole, and they had made nine-year-old Sokka’s skin crawl. Now, seeing Zuko curled into a protective ball, begging for mercy (which Sokka knew Zuko wouldn’t receive from the Firelord), Sokka wondered what other awful things Zuko’s father had done to him.

“Zuko-” Sokka reached out for the prince, but he bolted into the woods. A second later, Katara bolted into the woods in a different direction. Sokka was torn between wanting to pursue his sister and Zuko, but quickly decided to go after Zuko. Katara, he knew, would come back eventually- with Zuko, however, Sokka wasn’t sure.

It was easy enough to follow Zuko’s trail through the forest- it looked like he had just barreled through anything in his way, including a couple of thornbushes, in his desperation to escape. Sokka was more careful, choosing to go around the thornbushes rather than through them, but was so focused on what he was doing that two Fire Nation soldiers managed to grab him without a fight. As soon as Sokka realized who they were, he started to struggle, but one of them put a knife to his neck and said, “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll stop that.”

And just like that, Sokka was caught. He was led to the river, where an unfortunate sight awaited him.

“Well, this must be my lucky day,” Zhao drawled, holding a tied-up Zuko next to him. Zuko’s eyes widened when he saw Sokka, then narrowed. He looked away, scowling.

At least Zuko has recovered, Sokka thought, slightly annoyed. The guards tightly tied Sokka’s hands behind his back, and one of them asked, “What should we do with him?”

The other guard asked, “This is one of the kids that travels with the Avatar, right?”

“Yes. If he’s here, the Avatar can’t be far away. Today is the day I will recapture the Avatar, and I’m so glad the prince decided to join us.” Zhao put an arm around Zuko’s waist, then pulled Zuko closer to him so that their sides were touching. Zuko was a couple inches taller than Sokka (a fact that Sokka was still trying to process), but next to Zhao, he looked *tiny*.

“Why are you treating him like this? And you,” Sokka said, addressing the guards, “why are none of you trying to help Zuko? He’s your prince, he’s the Firelord’s son!”

“Oh, *Zuko* , you haven’t told your new friends yet?” Zhao elbowed Zuko in the ribs, making him flinch. To Sokka, Zhao said, “Firelord Ozai is the one who wanted him dead in the first place.” Zhao paused for a moment, letting his words sink in, then laughed at the shock and horror on Sokka’s face. “Of course, the Firelord wouldn’t trust just anyone to get rid of his failure of a son. He tasked me with getting rid of him discreetly, in a way that made it look like an accident.”

“And you’ve done such a good job,” Zuko cut in. “Look at how dead I am.”

Sokka appreciated Zuko's biting sarcasm a lot more when it wasn't directed at him.

Zhao, however, didn't appreciate Zuko's comment, and furiously rounded on Zuko, grabbing him by the neck and squeezing tightly. Zuko gasped, then started to cough and choke, and suddenly all Sokka could see was that tough little arctic poppy plant being pulled roughly out of the ground.

"No- No!! Stop, please!" Both Zuko and Zhao, equally surprised, turned to face the source of the yelling. Sokka was struggling against the guards, trying to reach Zuko. Zhao stopped strangling Zuko, but kept his hands around Zuko's neck. "Please, I'll do anything, I- I'll take you to the Avatar's camp," Sokka wailed as he started to cry, "just don't hurt him, don't hurt Zuko!"

Realization filled Zhao's eyes as he looked at Sokka. Carelessly dropping Zuko, Zhao said, "You're that Southern Water Tribe boy from all those years ago, aren't you? The one who was with Zuko when I came."

"You're just now realizing that? You're even dumber than I thought," Zuko said, making Zhao turn angrily back to him.

"Don't," Sokka cried out, voice cracking. Zhao paused, then took a deep breath.

Addressing the soldiers holding Sokka, Zhao said, "You'll lead him along the coastline in whatever direction he tells you. We'll follow along on the boats, where I'll be keeping the traitor prince. And you, Water Tribe boy, if you try anything, I won't hesitate to hurt your dear Zuko in ways you can't even imagine." Sokka gulped, but he nodded.

Zhao started to lead Zuko on the boat, but Zuko said, "Wait." His voice was quiet, but so commanding that all of the soldiers and even Zhao listened to him. "Sokka." At the sound of his name, Sokka quickly turned to look at Zuko. Even with his hands bound, hair cut, and new bruises forming around his neck, Zuko still looked so regal in the afternoon sunlight. "If what you say is true, then... I'm sorry." Zuko closed his eyes and added, "For everything." Without another glance at Sokka, Zuko walked onto the boat on his own, not needing the soldiers to force him onboard.

Once aboard, Zuko allowed himself to be led below deck and cuffed to a wall. Zhao pulled up a chair, sitting in front of Zuko with a smug expression. Zuko got the feeling he was going to be subject to one of Zhao's long monologues.

x x x

"So, why does Zhao hate Zuko so much, anyway?" While he was trying to think of an escape plan, Sokka thought he might as well try to get some information. The soldier who had held the knife to Sokka's neck seemed to be particularly chatty, so maybe Sokka could get something helpful out of him. "Because- at least to me- that seems like a personal grudge."

"You're very perceptive for someone from the Water Tribe," the chatty soldier said. "See, it all started about six or seven years ago, when Prince Zuko returned home from the South Pole. The Admiral was tried in court because allegedly, he'd tried to kill Prince Zuko, not

knowing who he really was. Usually, that kind of crime would get a death sentence, but the Firelord stripped the Admiral of his military rank, forcing him to seek employment in the mail system.”

X X X

“You were a mailman?” Zuko had to fight back a laugh at this. Sure, he’d known that Zhao had gotten demoted, but hearing that he’d become a mailman was even better.

“All because of *you*,” Zhao snarled, jabbing a finger at Zuko. “And I was never a mailman! I was a postal worker. I never walked around carrying letters to give to people.”

“So what, did you clean up after the messenger hawks?” Zuko couldn’t help but laugh at the image of Zhao cleaning up bird poop.

“Laugh all you want,” Zhao said angrily, “you’re the one in chains.”

X X X

“Okay, I’m sorry for laughing, but the image of Zhao as a mailman is *really* funny,” Sokka wheezed.

“But you see,” Chatty explained, “the Admiral worked his way up the ranks- just like he did in the navy- and soon enough, he was the royal postman. He was handling the royal family’s mail- including Prince Zuko’s. You see, Firelord Ozai didn’t want his son associating with Water Tribe scum, so he ordered the Admiral to burn all the letters to and from the South Pole- which, apparently, was quite a lot.”

X X X

“You burned my letters?! You horrible, good-for-nothing, son of a-” Zuko was cut off by a rag being forced into his mouth. He tried to spit it out so he could curse Zhao out, but Zuko was quickly gagged. He stared at Zhao with hatred in his eyes.

“While I do love the conversations we have, you’re getting quite annoying. And I wouldn’t have put the towel in your mouth, but I had to, on the off chance that you can still firebend. Try to breathe fire now, and you’ll burn up the inside of your throat. That doesn’t sound pleasant, does it, my Prince?” Unable to do anything else, Zuko continued to glare.

X X X

“But- but I got a couple of letters from Zuko,” Sokka stammered, still in disbelief.

“Oh, right. Before her disappearance, I think the Fire Lady convinced Firelord Ozai to have updates sent to the South Pole. It had something to do with her feeling like the royal family owed the Water Tribe a great debt for taking care of their son or whatever. Of course, that stopped as soon as she was gone.”

The letters from “Zuko” had stopped after the Southern Raiders had come. If they had stopped when Zuko’s mother had disappeared (which was in and of itself something Sokka

needed time to process), that meant Zuko had lost her around the time Sokka had lost his own mother.

“Anyway,” Chatty continued, “the Admiral said one time that Firelord Ozai did order a couple of the Water Tribe boy’s- or, I guess, your- letters to be kept.”

x x x

Zuko lowered his head at this. Of course, father must have kept the letter where Sokka was most angry with him.

“Don’t act like that,” Zhao said condescendingly. “It’s not like the boy ever said anything cruel to you. He was sad, mostly, sad that you had gone away and weren’t writing back to him. But of course, we both know you were writing back- and that was a problem, a problem that your father wanted to be solved.”

x x x

“The Firelord had a handwriting expert brought in to look at your letters. Apparently, they made some fake letter where you said really mean things to the prince, and he believed it was real! Prince Zuko never wrote to you again, according to the Admiral,” Chatty said. Sokka felt like he was going to throw up.

x x x

“You believed it until just now, didn’t you?” Zuko squeezed his eyes shut and curled in on himself. “You really are dumb.”

“Sir,” a soldier shouted, rushing through the wooden door, “the deserter has been spotted onshore, along with a Water Tribe girl!”

“Then I supposed I should take care of them,” Zhao said, standing and cracking his knuckles. Before exiting, he gave one last smile to Zuko. “I’ll leave you alone with your thoughts.”

Jeong Jeong and Katara had been sitting by the river, having a pleasant conversation about the destructive nature of fire, when the first fireball had come. Jeong Jeong deflected it, and shouted for Katara to flee.

Chatty heard Jeong Jeong’s shout and nudged Sokka. “Hey, is that one of your friends? Because-”

Before Chatty could finish his sentence, he was knocked out cold. Above him stood the other Fire Nation soldier, sword in hand. With one slash, she cut through the ropes binding Sokka’s hands.

“Sorry that took so long,” she said. “I had to wait until we were out of sight of the riverboats. Now, knock me out.”

“I- I don’t understand,” Sokka said. Sighing, the soldier grabbed Sokka’s shoulders.

“Look, I haven’t been in the navy for that long. They only recently started taking female nonbenders. I wanted to bring glory to my country, but this- this is wrong. You, and Prince Zuko, and the Avatar- you’re just kids! Fighting and torturing kids isn’t what I signed up for.” With a squeeze of Sokka’s shoulder, she continued, “It’s not like I can just leave the navy, so you’re going to knock me out, so when Admiral Zhao finds us, I can say one of your friends showed up to save you. So please, just knock me out already, and get you and your friends out of here.”

“I’m sorry,” Sokka said, then hit her in the temple with the hilt of his hunting knife. She crumpled, and Sokka ran away, back to camp.

While Sokka was running away from Zhao’s forces, Aang was running towards them. Upon spotting the former general, Aang called out, “Jeong Jeong!”

Jeong Jeong was surrounded by Fire Nation soldiers, but he turned to Aang and gave him a wink. He summoned a sphere of fire, then he was gone.

“It’s a trick,” Aang heard Zhao shout. “He’s run off into the woods. Find him! And as for you,” Zhao said, turning to Aang, “let’s find out what my old master has taught you.”

Taken aback, Aang asked, “*You* were Jeong Jeong’s student?”

“Until I got bored.” Zhao shot fireball after fireball at Aang, who dodged all of them.

“He has no self control,” Aang realized, then looked at the riverboats. Aang grinned.

“Stand and fight, Avatar!”

“Oh, were we fighting? I thought you were just getting warmed up,” Aang taunted.

“I was!” Aang continued to taunt Zhao, getting him angrier and angrier, but nothing Aang said was making him mad enough. Before he tried to get Zhao to burn his own boats, Aang wanted to be absolutely sure Zhao would be too angry to know what he was doing.

“I don’t know why,” Aang shouted from a tree, “but I thought you’d be better than Zuko!” The flames around them rose higher, and Aang knew he had him. Jumping on the first boat, Aang said, “Even with hypothermia, Zuko’s a better firebender than you are!” Zhao jumped aboard, chasing Aang around the deck while shooting fire. When the first boat was damaged enough for Aang, he leapt to the second.

“You know, he could have broken out of that prison at any time. He melted those metal chains like they were nothing. I bet you can’t even melt a snowball!” A jet of fire came towards Aang, scorching the second boat. Aang jumped to the third.

“I bet you just gave him hypothermia because he’s so much better than you. Because you were so insecure about your own bending!” Again, Zhao chased Aang around the deck, shooting fireballs left and right. Just when Zhao thought he had Aang cornered, Aang backflipped over him. “You’ve lost this battle,” Aang said confidently.

“Are you crazy? You haven’t thrown a single blow!”

“No, but you have,” Aang said, and gestured to the flaming boats. Zhao looked around, seemingly just realizing what he had done. With a shrug, Aang said, “Jeong Jeong said you had no restraint.” Seeing Appa out of the corner of his eye, Aang jumped off the boat, yelling, “Have a nice walk home!”

“Aang, how did you do that?” Katara seemed amazed by the flaming boats, while Sokka was staring at them in horror.

“I used his own energy against him,” Aang said happily, “just like waterbending!” Sokka screamed wordlessly and leapt off Appa, sprinting towards the second boat at full speed. Aang, who could easily catch up to him by running with airbending, grabbed Sokka’s arm. “Hey, where are you going?!”

Pointing to the boat, Sokka cried, “Zuko!” Shocked, Aang let go of Sokka, who immediately kept running to the boat. Sokka spotted Zhao on the next boat over, and with a quick throw of his boomerang, knocked the Admiral unconscious.

Below deck, Zuko was panicking. He’d started to panic when the first fireball had crashed through the ceiling above him, ripping a hole in the boat. Now that the entire boat was on fire and Zuko was treading water, Zuko was *really* panicking. He knew that the chain attaching him to the boat’s wall wasn’t very long, and the boat was filling with water quickly, and if Zuko didn’t get himself out of this soon he would drown, or suffocate on the smoke, or get hit by a burning piece of wood and die. Frantically, Zuko tugged at his chains, trying desperately to pull himself free.

“Zuko!” At first, Zuko thought he imagined the shout, and continued tugging. But then the shout was louder, and closer, and when Zuko turned to look, Sokka was there. Sokka’s hair had fallen loose from its wolf tail, and there was ash smeared on his face, but it was definitely Sokka. Then Sokka was swimming over to Zuko, untying his gag, holding him-

“Sokka, what are you doing here?” Zuko could tell his chain had reached its limit, and it wouldn’t be long before he couldn’t keep his head above water.

“Getting you out of here,” Sokka said before diving beneath the surface. Within seconds, he resurfaced, saying, “I’m going to try and cut you loose.” Before Zuko could reply, Sokka was underwater again.

“I can’t get it,” Sokka said when he resurfaced again. “You need to pull as hard as you can!”

“Sokka, I-” But Sokka was underwater again, leaving Zuko to swallow his frustrated comment. The water was up to Zuko’s neck now. His chains would only allow him to float that much, but Sokka still had time. Sokka could still escape, he could make it out of here alive, but still, he was being stupid, still uselessly trying to cut the chain holding Zuko to the ship’s wall. Sokka came up to take a quick breath, and Zuko shouted, “Sokka, just go! It’s not working-”

Sokka dove under the water again, hacking away at the chain with his boomerang. Zuko didn’t have to look to know it wouldn’t work. When Sokka surfaced again, Zuko pleaded, “This isn’t worth your life, Sokka. Just let me-”

“Don’t you get it, Zuko?! I’m *not* going to leave you! I’m *never* going to!” Zuko stilled, finally meeting Sokka’s eyes. They were reflecting the fire surrounding the two of them, but they had their own fire inside of them. “I know you think it’d be easier if you were gone or something- and maybe it would be, but I don’t *care*! I want you around, and I *won’t* let you disappear!”

“Sokka...” Tears pricked at Zuko’s eyes. “Sokka, you don’t have to-”

“I promised you once that nothing bad would happen while we were together. So I- I’m staying with you. No matter what.” Sokka hugged Zuko tightly, finally causing the prince to shed a tear.

“I- I want to live,” Zuko gasped. “I want to live. Sokka, I want to live, and I never- I never really wanted to run away from you, I just- I thought you were going to hurt me- so many other people have- Sokka, I want you to stay.” Zuko hated himself for being so selfish, but he truly wanted Sokka to stay, even if it meant they both went down here. Zuko didn’t want to be alone, not again.

Sokka cupped Zuko’s cheek, and Zuko leaned into the touch. He hated how much he needed Sokka’s hand. “Always,” Sokka whispered. The boat shifted again, making the water level jump once more. Zuko turned his face upwards towards the boards of the ship’s floor above him, trying to get air-

“Wait, that’s it!” The water covered his face, but Sokka pulled Zuko upwards. Not far, since his chains were already at their limit, but just enough to get his mouth out of the water.

“What? What is it?”

“Sokka, the board. The board the chain is attached to.” Zuko could tell he was sinking, so he took a deep breath before his face was submerged again, hoping that Sokka understood his vague comment.

Immediately, Sokka swam down behind Zuko, and Zuko felt his lips curl upwards. Of course Sokka had understood- Sokka and Zuko had always been able to understand each other, in ways other people couldn’t. Zuko craned his neck backwards, watching as Sokka drew his hunting knife and carved through the wood of the hull, which was far softer than the metal holding Zuko. Seconds later, Sokka was pulling the board free from the side of the ship, and they both surfaced again, gasping for air.

“You’re out,” Sokka said, staring at Zuko with wide eyes. A huge grin spread across his face as he and Zuko continued to tread water with plenty of space between them and the ceiling. “I did it.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you did,” Zuko said, also grinning stupidly. They floated there like that, grinning at each other like idiots, until a flaming wooden beam fell between them. “Let’s get out of here,” Zuko said quickly.

“Agreed.” Sokka guided Zuko to the stairs, which were thankfully still intact.

Up above, Aang and Katara were struggling to keep the flaming boat afloat. They were trying their best to bend the river away from the boat, but it was still filling faster and faster. Finally, Katara spotted Zuko and Sokka on deck and cried out in relief, helping the two of them into Appa's saddle. Once on Appa's back, Sokka was able to use the supplies in his bag to pick the locks on Zuko's handcuffs.

For a moment, they were all quiet, trying to process what had just happened. Katara was the first to speak.

"Aang, you're burned! Let me help you," she said, bending some water out of her pouch. Taking a deep breath, she bent the water around Aang's arm, healing the burn.

"Wow, that's some good water," Aang exclaimed.

"When did you learn to do that?"

"I guess I always knew," Katara said, smiling.

"Oh, well, then, thanks for all the first aid over the years- like the time I fell into the greaseberry bramble, or the time I had three fishhooks in my thumb!" Sokka held out his thumb for emphasis.

"Three?"

"He tried to get the first one out with another fishhook," Katara said with a laugh. "Then he went crying to Zuko about it, and guess what Zuko did?" At the sound of his name, the prince hid his face in his hands.

"He tried to use a third fishhook to get the first two out?" Katara winked. Katara, Aang, and Sokka laughed, but Sokka's laughs quickly turned to sobs.

Grabbing Sokka's arm, Zuko said, "Sokka, are you hurt? I- huh?" Before Zuko could finish his thought, Sokka had buried his face in Zuko's chest. Sokka wrapped his arms around Zuko, and his hands were bunching up Zuko's clothes, pressing against his back. "Um," Zuko said, looking to Aang and Katara for help. Katara gave Zuko a smile and nodded. Zuko looked back down at Sokka before finally, *finally* hugging him back. "It'll be okay, Sokka. I'm here, Zuko's here. I've got you."

Chapter End Notes

next chapter is just the characters talking about what happened in this one because wow. that's a lot.

10.9K WORDS?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?! WHAT?!?!?!?

zuko's words at the end of the chapter mirror sokka's at the end of chapter 11

wow, i'm kinda exhausted from writing this chapter tbh

Where do we go from here

Chapter Notes

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

[art dump for last chapter! \(INCLUDING THE HUG\)](#)

“I know a place,” Zuko said quietly. Sokka was still attached to him, sobbing softly. “It’s on the way to the Northern Air Temple, in the mountains. It’s a village with some really nice hot springs- and you’re going to want to stop by the Northern Air Temple if you’re going to the North Pole. It’s a good jumping off point. Anyway, the villagers will be happy to see me, after what I did for them. They’ll welcome us. And I- I’ll be safe there. If I stay.”

“*No*,” Sokka growled, holding Zuko even tighter.

“I think it’s best if you stay with us, Zuko,” Katara said, touching Zuko’s arm.

Incredulously, Zuko asked, “You still want me to travel with you? But I was a real jerk, and now you know that my father was the one who wanted me dead- I’m a liability.”

“I think the Firelord wants all of us dead,” Aang said. “You’re no more of a liability than the rest of us.”

Zuko opened his mouth to argue, but the Avatar had a good point. Zuko sighed. “Do you have a map? I can show you where the village is.” With Sokka still not letting go, Zuko scooted towards Aang, pointing to a spot on the map. Sokka gazed up at Zuko, and Zuko’s neutral expression nearly sent Sokka into tears again.

“How are you so calm about this?”

“Hm?” Zuko glanced down at Sokka with a puzzled look on his face. “Calm about what?”

“You almost *died*, Zuko. And here we are, a little over an hour later, and you’re not shaken up or anything.”

With a forced smile and a shrug, Zuko said, “In my line of work, almost dying is common.”

“Your line of- what are you talking about?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Zuko looked genuinely surprised. “I thought you figured it out, with the comment you made about the mask- I’m the Blue Spirit, Sokka.”

“You WHAT?!”

“But isn’t the Blue Spirit a pirate who sabotages Fire Nation ships?”

“I’m not a pirate, I’m a vigilante,” Zuko corrected Aang. “Pirates steal from the people they think are weak, and they don’t pick fights they don’t know they can win. They prey on the

vulnerable, whereas I only attack people in wrongful positions of power. Which, more often than not, ends up being high-ranking Fire Nation officers.” Sokka was looking at Zuko with a doopy expression on his face. Irritably, Zuko asked, “What?”

“You don’t even know how amazing you are,” Sokka said dreamily. Zuko’s face, neck, and the tips of his ears went red at the compliment.

“I- uh, not really- I mean, I’m nothing special,” Zuko stammered. “Really, I’m not. It’s not like I’m making any meaningful difference-”

“Are you kidding?! You’re taking on the whole Fire Nation navy,” Aang shouted, waving his hands around excitedly.

“Not all at once,” Zuko protested.

“You should give yourself some more credit, Zuko,” Katara said. “Not a lot of the people we’ve met were willing to take on anyone from the Fire Nation, much less high-ranking officers. That’s pretty brave.”

“It’s not-”

“Just shut up and take the compliment, idiot,” Sokka said, giving Zuko a squeeze. “Though I have to ask, what made you turn against the Fire Nation?”

“*I’m not against the Fire Nation!!*” Zuko said it so forcefully that it made everyone jump back. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to yell,” Zuko said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s just- I’m not against the Fire Nation. I disagree with a lot of my father’s policies, but I would never intentionally hurt the innocent people of my nation.”

“I think what Sokka was trying to ask was, what made you change your mind about your father? Because when we knew you as a kid, you never questioned anything your father did or told you,” Katara said.

“It didn’t all happen at once,” Zuko admitted. “Honestly, it started with my time in the Southern Water Tribe. When I got home, my tutors tried to tell me all these horrible things about the Water Tribes that I knew weren’t true, which made me wonder how much they really knew about other subjects.

“Then, when I was banished, I saw how Fire Nation soldiers treated Earth Kingdom colonials. All my life, I was told that the colonies were the Fire Nation’s way of spreading our prosperity to the rest of the world, that we were being *generous* by colonizing the Earth Kingdom.” Zuko’s lip curled at the word ‘generous’. “I tried to stand up for the Earth Kingdom citizens, but they hated me because I was the Fire Prince, and the Fire Nation soldiers hated me because I was standing up to them. It didn’t take me long to realize that I couldn’t do anything as Zuko.”

“But you could as the Blue Spirit,” Aang said. Zuko nodded.

“Still, it took me a while after that to become the Blue Spirit. That started with my experience at the Eastern Air Temple.” Katara, Aang, and Sokka sat up and leaned in, expecting a lengthy tale from Zuko. Instead, he said, “It’s getting dark. We should land and make camp. We’re still a few hours from the village, and I don’t want to arrive in the middle of the night.”

“Then will you tell us the story?” Zuko seemed confused by Aang’s eager question.

“No, I’m going to be setting up camp,” was Zuko’s reply.

“I meant after we get all settled.”

“It’s been a long day,” Sokka cut in, noticing the dark circle under Zuko’s good eye. “Let’s make camp, eat, and just go to bed. If Zuko’s feeling up to it, he can tell us the story tomorrow.” Aang conceded, and Zuko looked at Sokka gratefully.

On the ride there, Aang and Katara had brought the rest of them up to speed (with Aang profusely apologizing to Zuko for setting the boats on fire), so as they ate, Sokka told them of his exploits during the day. He told the group about mailman Zhao, the forged letter, and how one of the Fire Nation soldiers had let him escape.

“Seriously, though, you guys should have seen the way Zuko talked to Zhao,” Sokka said through a mouthful. “He was as sarcastic as me, and he wasn’t even scared!”

“What? Of course I was scared, Sokka,” Zuko said, as if it was obvious.

“You could’ve fooled me, with the way you were taunting him like that,” Sokka said, grinning.

“I was protecting you.”

Sokka felt like he had all the wind knocked out of him with a swift punch to the gut. Smile gone, he asked, “What did you just say?”

“I was making fun of Zhao to protect you. I knew if I baited him, he’d pay attention to me over you. It was like when I jumped in front of the spear for you- oh, speaking of that,” Zuko said, turning to Katara, “Would you mind doing something about this?” He gestured to his bandaged shoulder.

“I can try,” Katara replied, standing. “There’s a little creek nearby, let’s go there.”

“The only place I’m going is to bed,” Aang said, yawning. “Good night, everyone.” Aang curled up on Appa’s tail and was asleep within minutes. Zuko and Katara disappeared into the woods, and Sokka was left alone, still holding a forkful of meat. *I was protecting you* repeated over and over in Sokka’s mind.

“You know, Avatar Kyoshi was right about healing,” Katara said excitedly. “She told me everything I needed was already inside me- and she was right!” She pulled some of the creek water into her hands, and it started to glow.

Baffled, Zuko asked, “You met Avatar Kyoshi?”

“Yeah, she manifested herself from Aang’s body,” Katara said, as if that was completely normal. She put the water against Zuko’s shoulder and he winced slightly. “Anyway, I didn’t expect what she said to be so literal. She was talking about the water inside of me, and inside of everyone else. See, your body would naturally patch itself up over time, but by using this water, I can speed up the process.” After a moment, she said, “It does take a lot of effort, though. It was a lot easier to heal my and Aang’s burns than this cut.”

A few more minutes of intense concentration from Katara passed, then she pulled her hand away, smiling. Not so much as a scratch was left on Zuko’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“I’ll work on the rest of your wounds tomorrow.” When Zuko tried to protest, Katara said, “I don’t want you to be in pain. Besides, it’ll be good practice for me.”

As they walked back, Katara said, “It’s really good to have you back, Zuko. Not just for my sake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sokka was... different, after you left. He became more closed off, more defensive. As time went on, and it seemed like you didn’t write back, it became worse. Even through our journey with Aang, Sokka has felt like he has no one he can talk to- not even me.” Katara looked hurt by this, but she continued with a steady voice. “The two of you have always had something special. He trusts you in a way he doesn’t trust anyone else. I think that by having you around again, Sokka will finally let himself feel again.”

“How can you be so sure?” After all, Zuko had been so mean to Sokka these past couple of days. He wasn’t sure if Sokka would trust him again so easily.

“Because he already has,” Katara said with a small smile. “I’ve seen him cry more in the past four days than in the past four years.”

Zuko frowned. “So... I make him cry?”

“You make him *feel*, Zuko. He may be feeling sadness right now, but that’s better than nothing. And I know if you stay with us, soon enough he’ll be feeling happiness again.” They had reached their campsite, and Zuko walked Katara to her tent. “Good night, Zuko.”

“Good night, Katara. Thank you.” She smiled, then disappeared inside the tent. Zuko walked over to Sokka’s tent, then lost his nerve and sat by the dying fire instead.

It didn’t take long for Sokka to come out of his tent, seeking Zuko. “Hey, aren’t you coming?” Anxiously, Sokka asked, “You’re not avoiding me, are you?”

“No! No, that’s not it at all,” Zuko said quickly. “I just- I don’t know if I’ll be able to get to sleep.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Sokka said, sitting next to him. “But you- you have to be exhausted. The only time I’ve seen you sleep was when you would pass out.”

“I was afraid to go to sleep,” Zuko admitted, looking at the sky. “I thought you might do something terrible to me while I slept, or I’d wake up in a cell somewhere, having been handed over to an Earth Kingdom general.”

“Zuko...”

“I know now that wasn’t ever going to happen, and I’m sorry that I doubted you,” Zuko said, rubbing Sokka’s back. He and Sokka scooted closer to each other so their sides were almost touching. “But now it’s more like I’m afraid to wake up. The past couple of days, especially today, it all feels too good to be true. These kinds of good things, these miracles- they don’t happen to me, Sokka. My father says that my sister was born lucky, and I was lucky to be born.”

“Your father is a terrible person,” Sokka said softly, leaning his head against Zuko’s shoulder.

“He’s not a terrible person,” Zuko said defensively.

“Zuko, he wanted to have you *killed*. And he ordered *Zhao*, of all people, to do it. Not to mention the burned letters, or the things you used to tell me about, or everything he’s done as the Firelord-”

“Okay, okay, maybe he’s a little bit of a terrible person,” Zuko said, raising his hands in surrender. “But he had a point, with me not being lucky. I’m just worried that if I go to sleep now, I’ll wake up and I’ll be back in the cell, or the torture room, or the- the cooler.” At Zuko’s voice crack, Sokka wrapped an arm around him.

“I’m not going to let that happen to you. You have to sleep, Zuko- can you try to sleep, for me?” Zuko looked hesitant, so Sokka said, “How about this- let’s just lay down together. I can talk to you, or you can talk to me, or neither of us can talk if that’s what you want. Sound good?”

“Okay,” Zuko whispered. He allowed Sokka to take his hand and lead him back to his tent, where a large sleeping bag was waiting. Sokka had always slept in sleeping bags way too big for him because he hated feeling trapped by the bag at night, so his sleeping bag was plenty big enough for the two of them. Once Zuko had gotten comfortable, Sokka slid in next to him.

They laid there quietly on their sides for a few minutes, facing each other but not meeting each other’s eyes. Sokka found himself more at peace than he’d been in years, listening to the soft sound of Zuko’s breathing next to him. “Spirits, I missed you, Zuko.”

“I missed you too,” Zuko murmured. Shyly, he asked, “Can I... can I lean up against you?” Sokka nodded, smiling, and Zuko curled up against Sokka, leaning his head into Sokka’s chest. He smelled like ash and smoke and sweat, but most of all, he smelled like Sokka, and that helped reassure Zuko that he was safe.

Safe. The word rolled around in Zuko’s mind like a loose marble on the deck of the *Unagi*. *Safe, safe, safe*. How long had it been since Zuko had felt safe? Sure, he’d felt relatively safe with his crew, but there was always the possibility of being captured, or having his identity

discovered by the crew. Before that came the early months of his banishment, the time he spent with Uncle. Logically, Zuko knew he was safe with Uncle, that Uncle would never hurt him, that Uncle would protect him.

But Uncle had been there at the Agni Kai, and had done nothing to stop Father from hurting him. He hadn't protected Zuko then, and when Father had called Uncle back to the Fire Nation, Uncle had gone. Of course, Zuko knew it would be treason to ignore a command from the Firelord, but that stupid, selfish part of him- the same part of him that wanted Uncle to step in at the Agni Kai- wished that Uncle had stayed with him.

Unlike Uncle, Zuko knew Sokka would stay with him, no matter what, even if it meant going down in flames. Sokka had no allegiance to the Firelord, and was one of the very few people who knew Zuko as both Zuko and Lee. Most people who knew Lee despised Zuko, and those who knew Zuko would want Lee dead, and yet here was Sokka, knowing that Zuko and Lee were two sides of the same coin, and appreciating Zuko even more for being Lee as well.

"Zuko," Sokka said, pulling the prince from his thoughts, "is it okay if I hold you?"

"*Please*," Zuko whispered, embarrassingly quick. He blushed, but Sokka either didn't notice or didn't care, tenderly wrapping an arm around Zuko. Sokka started to rub circles into Zuko's back and, before he realized what he was doing, Zuko was leaning into the touch. He let out a soft whimper, then clapped his hand over his mouth, mortified. "I'm sorry," Zuko said quickly, tensing up, "I don't know what came over me-"

Sokka was tense now, too. "I didn't mean to- did I hurt you?" He pulled away, and Zuko had to resist the urge to chase his warmth. "Sorry, I should have known better than to touch you."

"Huh? No, what you were doing was fine. I- I really liked it," Zuko said, looking down and rubbing the back of his neck.

"But I must have done something wrong," Sokka insisted. "The way you got all tense- did I remind you of him?"

Confused, Zuko repeated, "Him?"

"You know. Zhao," Sokka whispered.

"Wha- no, not at all! Zhao's touches were rough, and they left marks- I wasn't thinking about him at all, Sokka," Zuko said, squeezing Sokka's hand. "It's just- the way you touched me. I haven't been touched that way in- well, a long time, and I wasn't used to it, and I got all needy and made that annoying noise- hey, don't laugh at me!" Zuko crossed his arms, offended by Sokka's sudden laughter.

"I'm not laughing at you," Sokka wheezed, "it's just- after we got you out of the cooler, when you woke up the first time, you touched my face and I started bawling. I started bawling the first time you touched me, and you're seriously embarrassed because you leaned into a hug?"

"It's embarrassing," Zuko insisted. Sokka snorted.

“You know, I’m not going to judge you, Zuko.” Zuko started to mutter something under his breath, but Sokka said, “Hey, I’m being serious. You can just relax while you’re around me, okay?”

“I don’t want to be weak,” Zuko admitted, ashamed. “I’ve already been so weak around you and the Avatar, and I know you think I can’t take care of myself-”

“Are you joking?” One look at Zuko’s face told Sokka that he wasn’t. In a more serious tone, Sokka said, “Zuko, you’re the strongest person I’ve ever met.” Zuko scoffed, and Sokka grabbed his shoulder. “Hey. I mean it. You survived Zhao, and three years of banishment alone, and whatever did that to your face.” Sokka gestured to Zuko’s scar, but didn’t touch it. “And you didn’t just survive- you became the most famous pirate ever. You know how many times I’ve heard about the Blue Spirit while traveling with Aang?”

“But I’m weak right now, and I’ve been weak the past couple of days.”

“Because you were tortured, Zuko! No one expects you to just bounce back from that immediately, especially that cooler thing. That was the coldest thing I’ve ever felt by far- and I’ve lived through fourteen South Pole winters! How you survived for- was it three?- days in there, I don’t know. Spirits, you were in short sleeves! Only a seriously strong firebender could survive that.”

Leaning back into Sokka, Zuko said, “I don’t feel strong.”

“You are. We all need to depend on other people sometimes, Zuko, and it doesn’t make us weak.” Sokka’s mother had told him that, but he didn’t quite believe it until now.

“But I’ve been so *scared* today. I was terrified when Zhao caught me, but then when his soldiers came out of the woods with you- I’ve never felt fear like that before. I was so scared he was going to hurt you like he hurt me.”

“And that’s why you taunted him,” Sokka murmured. Zuko nodded. “Spirits, that’s the bravest thing I’ve ever seen. The fact that you were so scared, but you still acted that way just to protect me- Tui and La, you’re so brave and you don’t even realize it.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so. I know so because I know what that fear feels like, Zuko.”

Zuko looked up at Sokka. “You do?”

“Yeah. I felt it two days ago, when I found you close to dead in that cooler, and again today in the boat. I almost lost you,” Sokka murmured, stroking Zuko’s short hair. “I almost lost you twice.” Zuko wanted to apologize, to tell Sokka he didn’t mean to make him worry, but he could tell Sokka had more to say. He waited patiently as Sokka gathered his thoughts.

“It was hard enough the first time,” Sokka finally managed to say. “I thought I was too late. You were so, so cold, and you had these horrible wounds all over you, and at one point, you even stopped breathing. I’d never imagined that you’d be taken from me like that, I always

thought I'd see you again, that we'd get to have at least one more conversation. Then today, when you almost drowned, I thought I'd never get to make things right with you. I didn't know that Zhao had told you about the letters, and I didn't think you'd believe me if I told you what the guards said, so all I could do was stay with you. Stay with you until the end, because I wasn't going to lose you again."

"Even though I was so mean to you," Zuko murmured. "Sokka, you're such a good person."

"Hey, I was mean to you too. I should've known there was a reason for the way you were acting. I should've asked you why, and then you would've shown me the letter, and things could've resolved themselves much sooner."

"I wouldn't have believed you if you said you didn't write it," Zuko said. "You know how stubborn I am. I think this was the quickest way things could have worked out, given the circumstances. And no one got badly hurt."

"You almost died."

"So did you, but neither of us actually did." Zuko cupped Sokka's face in his hands. "We're both alive, and we're together. We know the truth now. For once, everything worked out well."

Sokka reached up and clasped one of Zuko's hands, keeping it pressed against his cheek. "You were right, you know."

"About what?"

"You said I had an ulterior motive for wanting to keep you with us, a motive that wasn't to protect you. You were right. I didn't want you to leave again, not like before. I don't want you to disappear with me not knowing when I'm going to see you again- I can't do another six years without you, Zuko. Nobody knows what that's like."

"I do, Sokka." Zuko said it so quietly that Sokka almost didn't hear him, but it was enough. Enough for Sokka to understand that, though their paths had differed greatly when they parted, they still needed each other the same way they used to.

For a darkness had settled over Sokka's life after Zuko left, a dark uncertainty that swallowed up the people he loved. First it had taken Zuko, then Sokka's mother, then his father, leaving Sokka desperately clinging to his remaining connections, not knowing when or if his loved ones would return. Sokka constantly felt as if he was wandering lost in a blizzard at night, chasing but never finding information about the ones he'd lost.

Sokka had found it unbearably lonely in his darkness, but Zuko had been just as isolated in the light. Zuko had lived his life in the light- but not the warm, nurturing light of the sun. It was a harsh, scrutinizing light- not dissimilar to the electric lighting at Pohuai- under which all of Zuko's flaws were exposed. Even when he was banished, Zuko had still been unable to escape the prying eyes of his father and his country, so he had created Lee. As Lee, however, Zuko had found himself under the same pressure, this time with the eyes of the rebels on him, begging him not to fail. But with Sokka, Zuko found a safe place, tucked away in a pocket of

shadow where he could exist without fear of punishment or judgement. Similarly, Sokka found a light to guide him through that dark, lonely blizzard in Zuko, a soft, gentle light that would keep him safe.

They understood this of themselves and each other without needing to use words. Words would only get in their way.

“How about we forget about these past couple of days,” Sokka whispered. Zuko nodded in agreement. “You were mean to me, I was mean to you. We both had our reasons, which were based on faulty information that we had at the time. It wasn’t your fault, or mine- it was the situation we were in.”

“So you really never hated me,” Zuko breathed.

“Never. I tried to a couple times, thinking it would make you being gone easier, but it never was, and I could never bring myself to hate you.” Sokka looked at Zuko, suddenly worried he might take offense to the confession.

“Don’t look like that, I did the same thing. My father wanted me to hate you, but I never could.” Sokka let out a sigh of relief, and Zuko added, “I suppose he thought it worked when he had that letter made.”

“Speaking of that,” Sokka said, sitting up, “don’t you think it’s time we got rid of it?”

“...Huh?”

“It’s not like you need that letter anymore. Sounds like you memorized it, anyway- but that’s not the point,” Sokka added quickly. “Point is, you’ve been holding onto all of those terrible things that I didn’t even say for years. Wouldn’t it be nice to let go of that?”

“Yeah,” Zuko said, blinking slowly. “Yeah, it would.”

Sokka grinned. “You feeling good enough to start a fire?” A ball of flame appeared in Zuko’s left hand, and Sokka’s grin grew even wider. “Awesome.” He reached into his boomerang case, where he had shoved the letter away in a hurry, and handed it to Zuko.

Zuko took a deep breath in, and the flame in his hand shot upwards, reaching the edge of the letter. They watched in silence as the parchment burned away, leaving nothing but ash. As soon as it was done, Sokka blew the remaining ash out of Zuko’s hand, letting it float out the flap of the tent and away from Zuko.

“How do you feel?”

“Weird,” Zuko replied, “but not in a bad way. I feel... lighter. More free. I feel like... I might be able to go to sleep now.”

“That’s a relief,” Sokka said, plopping back down on his sleeping bag. Zuko curled up next to him again, pressed against Sokka’s chest.

“You’ll stay with me, right?”

Sokka smiled, stroking Zuko's hair. "Always."

Chapter End Notes

shut up shUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP I'M SO SOFFFFTTTTT DON'T LOOK AT ME

i just- i- jkajhsfjafhjfahjkkldlkjklfdaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

finally we got the long anticipated blue spirit reveal

i'm having so many feelings about this chapter. it also probably doesn't help that i've been sleeping about as much as zuko these past couple of days. hahaha i'm tired.

these boys are so IN LOVE and they don't even REALIZE

Zuko's lost days: the eastern air temple

Chapter Summary

still getting all the details hammered out, but there will be 5-7 zuko's lost days chapters, which will cover the period after zuko's banishment and before chapter 1 of this book! chronologically, this is the second of the zuko's lost days chapters. enjoy!

Chapter Notes

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

When Zuko woke up, he was still tucked safely inside Sokka's sleeping bag. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up and stretched.

"Hey, you're up," Sokka said. He had gotten up, but he stayed in the tent and organized his things, as he didn't want Zuko to wake up alone. "How are you feeling?"

"A lot better than before. Are we leaving soon?"

"Yeah, Aang and Katara are already packed. I didn't want to wake you up before I had to." Sokka tossed Zuko his bag and said, "Can you help me with this tent?" Zuko and Sokka quickly took down the tent and packed it and, within the hour, they were flying away from their former campsite.

Nudging Zuko, the Avatar said, "Can you tell us about what happened to you at the Eastern Air Temple?"

"Oh, that? I thought you were just asking to be polite," Zuko said, then shrugged. "Sure."

"I'll start working on healing the cuts on your face," Katara said, bending some of her pouch water into her hands. "You can tell the story while I do it, so you're not so focused on my hands being close to your face." Katara wasn't as much of a Zuko expert as her brother, but she knew Zuko didn't like things near his head. Zuko nodded, then began his tale.

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Finally, after a few months of banishment, Zuko had recovered enough to where Iroh was comfortable leaving him on his own. Zuko was in serious need of some alone time, and his uncle had generously allowed him to explore the Eastern Air Temple on his own, provided that he stay with Nikko the entire time.

Of all the air temples, Zuko had to admit he liked the Eastern Air Temple the best. The main complex was set up across three different mountains with bridges linking all of them together. The Southern and Northern Air Temples were similar, but were built on top of lone, very

steep mountain peaks. The air had been so thin that Zuko had struggled to firebend (more than usual, anyway.)

Zuko's least favorite, by far, was the Western Air Temple. It was huge and sprawling, with many different buildings and very few bridges. It was also the first Air Temple Zuko had visited after his banishment, so he had to learn the technique of jet propulsion there, resulting in an even longer stay. Though his uncle insisted that he rest and heal, Zuko wanted to search the temple as soon as possible. He soon found out that an Air Temple was a less than ideal environment for adjusting to the partial blindness on his left, and would have died ten times over if not for Iroh.

But so far, the Eastern Air Temple was proving much better than the others. Zuko spent his entire first day exploring the easternmost building, then climbed down the mountain to make camp for the night. The Eastern Air Temple seemed to be at the lowest altitude of all the air temples, so it was easy for Zuko to descend into the forest below. Getting to sleep after what he saw inside the temple, however, was a different matter entirely.

Zuko knew that he would see human remains. He'd seen them at all the other Air Temples. But Uncle had always been with him, guiding him away from the skeletons, placing himself between Zuko and the dead airbenders. "This is not your fault, Prince Zuko," Uncle would always say, his eyes growing misty.

"I know," Zuko would reply simply.

This time, Uncle wasn't here, and Zuko found himself staring. In one room, Zuko found six human skeletons forming a protective circle around three small sky bison skeletons. Zuko knew from his readings that most of the tamed sky bison had been bred at the Eastern Air Temple, so the bison were very important to the airbenders here. He found several skeletons in the hallway leading to the bison stables, and wondered if they had been trying to escape or free the bison. There were skeletons at tables, in beds, in bathrooms, everywhere Zuko turned, there were more- and yet, Zuko could count on one hand how many skeletons he'd seen wearing Fire Nation armor. Many of these people appeared to have been simply going about their day when the Fire Nation attacked. In one room, there was a child's skeleton sandwiched between a wall and an adult's skeleton, who had clearly been trying to protect the child. Zuko's stomach churned as he thought of his mother.

Staring up at the burgundy canvas of his tent, Zuko sighed, absentmindedly petting Nikko. His tutors had always told him that wiping out the Air Nomads had been necessary to protect the Fire Nation and spread its prosperity, but here in the shadow of the Eastern Air Temple, Zuko began to wonder. Uncle's scrolls had said the Air Nomads were pacifists and valued all life- a far cry from the militant savages Zuko's tutors had painted them as. Zuko had refused to believe that his tutors (and by extent, the entire Fire Nation school system) had been lying to him about the Air Nomads.

Nikko stuck her snout in Zuko's bag, digging around for a moment before placing something on Zuko's chest. Zuko was shocked to discover that Nikko had retrieved the little boomerang carving Sokka had given him what seemed like a lifetime ago. Zuko ran his thumb across the smooth surface, trying to ignore the guilt welling up inside of him.

“I’m not going back to the South Pole, Nikko. It’s one of the terms of my banishment.” Of course, Father had only included that to keep Zuko safe.

~ ~ ~

“That’s what I thought at the time, anyway,” Zuko explained, noticing how Katara and Sokka’s expressions had changed. Gesturing to Katara, he said, “I thought you were dead and that everyone else in your tribe wanted to kill me.” Zuko shivered, not entirely from the cold water on his face.

“Katara, he’s freezing!” Of course Sokka had noticed his little shiver. Zuko wanted to pinch the bridge of his nose in frustration, but opted to stay still so as not to mess with Katara’s healing. “You can finish treating him later, when he’s warmed up a bit.” Sokka had been reluctant to let Zuko go, and was now all too eager to get Zuko back in his arms.

“Don’t baby me,” Zuko growled as Sokka wrapped him back up in his coat. Ignoring him completely, Sokka leaned Zuko against his chest and wrapped his arms around the too-cold firebender.

“Sokka’s right,” the Avatar said cheerfully. “Firebenders need to be kept warm. Katara can finish healing you later, hotman.”

“For the love of- would you *stop* calling me that!” A few sparks shot out of Zuko’s hand.

“Be careful, Zuko!” Sokka fiddled with the fur on the coat Zuko was wearing, the way he always used to when he was nervous. “I know you want to be firebending again, but you’re still cold and I don’t want you to overexert yourself.”

Zuko sighed loudly and crossed his arms. “If anything, you should call me coldman,” Zuko huffed.

For a moment, the only sound was wind whipping by as Appa flew. Then Katara groaned and buried her face in a hand, the Avatar laughed and said, “Oh, I get it,” and Sokka-

“*A joke?!* ” Zuko winced at Sokka’s screamed words. “He- you just- Zuko just made a joke!” Zuko glared up at Sokka with the intention of yelling at him, but upon seeing Sokka’s face, his breath caught in his throat. Sokka was positively beaming, looking back and forth between his sister and the Avatar while excitedly gesturing to Zuko. When Sokka finally looked down at Zuko, his expression warmed Zuko more than a thousand suns could. “I missed you, you know,” Sokka said, keeping that warm gaze fixed on Zuko.

“Yeah,” Zuko managed. “I missed you too.”

“So,” the Avatar said, “what happened next?”

~ ~ ~

Nikko looked at Zuko with big puppy dog eyes. “I said no. Why are you still looking at me like that?” Zuko rolled over and closed his eyes, then realized something. Sitting up, he said, “Oh, I get it. You’re from there, aren’t you?”

He knew isodogs were common in the South Pole, but he had never made the connection between that fact and Nikko. Zuko had always assumed Nikko was from the abbey where he was taken after the Agni Kai with his father. Zuko remembered Nikko, who had been a tiny pup at the time, curled up on his stomach or by his side as he fought the infection brought on by the burn. The only other memory Zuko had from that time was of a familiar, warm presence, which he had assumed to be his Uncle. Later, though, he'd found out Uncle had gone back to the Fire Nation to make sure Azula was alright, but only after leaving Zuko with people he was certain would keep Zuko safe. Zuko had asked a few times about who it was that looked after him, but Uncle would always give the same answer: people who he knew would keep Zuko safe.

Zuko had started to get lost in his thoughts, but was interrupted by a sudden bark from Nikko. She was staring out of the tent flap, ears perked up. Before Zuko could do anything, she sprinted out of the tent, charging into the woods outside.

“Nikko! Come back!” With a string of curses he had recently learned from his crew (much to the dismay of his uncle), Zuko tumbled out of his sleeping bag and stumbled after Nikko. He slashed through as much foliage as he could with his swords in an attempt to keep it away from himself, but Zuko still knew he was going to have no less than five different skin rashes from the plants brushing up against him.

Through a gap in the bushes in front of him, Zuko could see Nikko rolling around in the grass. He sighed, sheathing his swords, and reached out to brush a large plant aside. “Nikko, you’d better have a good reason for...” Zuko trailed off, stunned by what he was seeing.

There, lying in the grass next to Nikko, was a sky bison.

~ ~ ~

In unison, Sokka, Katara, and Aang said, “A sky bison?!”

“Yes. It was shocking to see one still alive.”

“But if there was a sky bison that survived,” Aang said excitedly, “maybe some of my people did too!”

In his telling of the story, Zuko had left out some details, including the part about all of the human remains he'd found. Trying to keep a neutral expression, Zuko said, “I wouldn't get your hopes up. I spent two and a half months at the Eastern Air Temple, and I only met one person who lived there, and he wasn't a bender.”

“There was someone there?”

“Yes, I'm getting to that. Can I continue?”

~ ~ ~

Zuko blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked away and back several times, but each time, the sky bison was still there. The bison wasn't very big, as it wasn't even as tall as Zuko, and

when Zuko stepped out of the bushes, the bison didn't fly away. Instead, it froze, staring at Zuko with wide, fearful eyes. It started to retreat, so Zuko stopped advancing.

"Woah," he said, holding up his hands, "I'm not going to hurt you." Nikko ran over to Zuko, and he gave her a scratch under the chin. As she licked Zuko's hand, he said, "See? I'm friendly." Zuko sat down on the ground, allowing the bison to approach him at its own pace. The bison slowly walked towards Zuko, who held his hand out for the bison to touch. It waited a moment, then butted its head against Zuko's hand. Nikko barked happily and ran in circles as Zuko petted the bison's head.

"There we are," Zuko said softly. "I won't hurt you. You're alone too, right? So are me and Nikko. You can stay with us for now, if you'd like. Though, I'm not sure how my uncle would feel about you," Zuko said, frowning. He yawned and rubbed his eyes, realizing how tired he was. "Well, that seems like a problem for tomorrow. Let's go back to my camp. It's over this way... or wait, was it that way?" Zuko looked around, not sure which way he had come from.

Nikko sniffed the ground for a moment, then started to walk away into the forest. Zuko and the sky bison followed close behind. "You know," Zuko said as he walked, "you should probably have a name. How about..." Zuko looked around, getting a clear view of the valley below. "...Takane? Yeah, I think I'll call you Takane."

It only took a few minutes to get back to Zuko's campsite with his new friend. The little bison walked around in a circle, flattening the grass beneath it, then laid down in the newly made bed of grass. Zuko retrieved a blanket from his tent and draped it over the bison, even though the blanket was much too small. "Good night, Takane," Zuko said, giving the bison a pat. He curled up in his sleeping bag next to Nikko and fell into a quick, easy sleep.

The next morning, Zuko awoke to a big, wet nose snuffling around in his face. "What the-hey!" Zuko scooted back, and Takane tilted her head at him. Zuko stared at her for a moment, baffled, until the events of the previous night came back to him. "Oh, it's you," he breathed. "So it wasn't a dream, then. You're really here." A thrill of hope ran through Zuko at the sight of the sky bison sniffing around in his tent. If a sky bison had survived here, then maybe, just maybe, the Avatar could have survived, too.

Zuko would have to worry about the Avatar another time, however, as the sky bison was starting to chew a hole in his tent. "Hey! That isn't food!" Zuko pulled the edge of the tent away from Takane, who huffed at him angrily. "If you're hungry, we can go find you something. Please don't eat my stuff." Zuko frowned, then said, "Uh... what do sky bison eat?"

The next couple hours consisted of Zuko trying to find several foods that a young sky bison might like, all of which Takane spat out indignantly. "Well, if you're so hungry, why won't you eat anything?!" Takane let out a high pitched whine, and Zuko realized, "Wait, you can't eat solid food, can you? You need your mother, don't you?" Takane whined again and gently headbutted Zuko's legs. "Oh spirits, how am I going to find your mother?"

As if she understood Zuko's question, Nikko barked and started to sniff at the ground. Zuko and Takane looked at each other, then followed Nikko, who had her nose pressed to the forest

floor. After a long walk through the forest (and a scare where Nikko had been so focused on her sniffing that she would have fallen off a cliff if not for Zuko), the unlikely trio entered a clearing that made Zuko's breath catch in his throat.

There was a little pond, which Takane ran to and happily started to drink from. She didn't seem to notice the shaggy clumps of sky bison fur lying around, or the scorch marks on the trees nearby. The ground had been flattened, trampled by the feet of large, heavy animals that had clearly been in a hurry to get away from something. Feeling queasy, Zuko pressed a hand against one of the scorched trees. It was still warm.

"Oh, Agni," Zuko breathed, horrified. Had his crew gotten here and found more sky bison? But Uncle had said the rest of the crew was going to be on the island next to the Eastern Air Temple's island, which was allegedly where a rare plant grew that made excellent tea. They couldn't have gotten here that fast- but why else would there be firebenders here?

Zuko didn't have much time to think it over, as Takane and Nikko's ears had suddenly perked up. "Please don't," Zuko groaned as they charged off into the forest. Once again, Zuko found himself chasing after them, without a clue as to where he was going.

"Seriously," Zuko wheezed when he finally caught up with them, "you guys have got to stop running off... like that..." Zuko trailed off, staring.

Nikko and Takane were sitting at the feet of an old man holding a bison-shaped whistle. The man's eyes widened as he saw Zuko. "Hello there," he said. Zuko gaped and pointed, unable to form a complete sentence. "I was expecting a couple bison calves, but when this little isopup came by, I wondered if she had a companion. What brings you to the Eastern Air Temple?" Zuko stared at the man, whose beard was white with age and who had obviously been living here a long time, and he couldn't believe his luck.

With a wordless yell, Zuko charged at the man with fire in his hands. Takane let out a squeal of terror and ran off again, and for a moment Zuko hesitated, extinguishing his fire. Deciding the Avatar was more important than the bison, Zuko turned back to the old man, who had leapt backwards. Reigniting his flame, Zuko said, "My name is Prince Zuko-" Zuko's voice cracked, so he tried again- "My name is Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation, and-" Zuko's voice cracked again, and his fire jumped up at his frustration.

"Take as much time as you need," the old man said calmly.

"Shut up!" In the past few weeks, Zuko's voice had started to crack more often. Uncle said it was natural and to be expected of a boy his age, but it was still embarrassing and always seemed to happen at the worst possible times. "You've evaded capture for long enough, but now-" Zuko tried to disguise his voice crack as a cough this time, but it didn't work.

"Would you like some water? Or how about some of this?" The old man retrieved a bowl of suspicious-looking banana-colored juice from behind him. Annoyed, Zuko slapped it out of the man's hand.

"What I'd like is my honor back, and the only way for me to get that is for me to bring you back to the Fire Nation!" Zuko's voice was still cracking, but he decided to ignore the

humiliating breaks in his voice so he could just finish what he was saying. “It’s my destiny to capture the Avatar, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do! You’re coming with me, whether you like it or not!” The man sat down in the lotus position and Zuko squeaked, “What, you’re just going to sit there?!”

“I am not the Avatar,” the old man said simply. “I am the only one who has lived here for the past hundred years. Your Avatar is in another Temple.”

“What?! That’s impossible, I’ve searched all the other temples! You have to be the Avatar,” Zuko said desperately, grabbing the man by his robe.

“Sorry,” the man said cheerfully. “If you would like, you can wait with me. I have been waiting here for the Avatar for nearly a hundred years.”

“I can’t believe this,” Zuko groaned. “You’ve been waiting for the Avatar here for a *hundred years?*”

“I am to be his spiritual mentor- though, I will teach anyone who is willing to learn from me.”

“Unless you can teach me how to find the Avatar, I’m not interested,” Zuko muttered, rolling his eyes. He started to walk back into the forest where Takane had disappeared. Nikko, who didn’t startle at the sight of fire, had stayed with Zuko and panted happily by his side.

“Actually, there may be a way I can help you.” Zuko turned around so quickly he almost tripped. He scurried back over to the old man, who smiled. “It seems I have neglected to introduce myself. I am Guru Pathik.”

“That’s nice. How can I find the Avatar?”

Pathik laughed. “Patience, young prince. Tell me, what do you know of chi?”

“Chi?” The Guru nodded, and Zuko sat. Looking down at his lap, Zuko said, “It’s the stuff that makes you able to bend, right?” Guru Pathik nodded encouragingly, and Zuko continued, “If you get your chi blocked, you can’t bend for a little bit. My mother knew how to chi block, but I never got the chance to learn from her. Um, and I know there’s certain poisons that target your chi.”

“Good,” Guru Pathik said. “Chi is indeed the source of bending, but it is so much more than that. It is the energy within all living things, and the energy of the universe itself. The ‘inner fire’ that all firebenders have is nothing more than your chi.”

“Oh. So if I control my inner fire, I’m actually controlling my chi?”

“Exactly. Firebenders seem to take to this technique easier than others, due to their relationship with their own chi.”

“Okay, so how do I use my chi to find the Avatar?”

“While you can only control your own chi, you can read the chi around you. Anybody can learn how to, but few do. If you will allow me to, I can read your energy.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Zuko said, sitting up straight. “Do I need to do anything?”

“Relax, and sit still. I am going to touch your forehead now.” Zuko braced himself, and Guru Pathik lightly placed a hand on his forehead. A soft blue glow came to life, and the Guru pulled his hand back. “Oh my. You did not mention that you were marked by the moon and the ocean spirits,” Guru Pathik said excitedly.

“Oh, well, I was. To be honest, I wasn’t sure the mark was still there,” Zuko admitted.

With a smile, the Guru said, “These things do not fade away with time. Now, for your reading.” Pathik pressed his hand against Zuko’s forehead again, then closed his eyes. “You are troubled. You worry you will never please your father, even if you return to the Fire Nation with the Avatar.”

Zuko swallowed hard, then nodded. There was no point in lying about it. “What else?”

“Your mind works differently than most other people. You do not see the world in the same way as most. But you have a friend who is like you, yes?”

“Mai,” Zuko said fondly, nodding.

“Though, she is different in a few ways. She does not express her feelings often, and may not feel as much as others do. You, however, feel so much to the point where you are overwhelmed by your feelings. I had a friend who was like you that way. His name was Gyatso.”

~ ~ ~

“That Guru guy knew Gyatso?!” Zuko flinched at the Avatar’s sudden shout. “I knew Gyatso too!”

“Oh. That’s nice,” Zuko said awkwardly.

“Can you teach me how to do that energy reading stuff sometime? That sounds super useful!” Aang was bouncing up and down in the saddle as he stared at Zuko.

“Uh, sure,” Zuko said reluctantly, “but I’m not really that good at it. The last time I really concentrated and tried to do it, I almost ended up jumping off my boat. That did end up alerting my crew to this big wave coming from inland, though, so I guess it ended up being good.”

“Hey, we caused a big wave a few weeks ago! We didn’t mean to, it was actually a guy named Jet-” Zuko looked up at the name- “but Sokka went down to the town below and saved everyone!”

“I was near Jet’s forest when the tidal wave struck, actually,” Zuko said slowly, narrowing his eyes. “One of my crewmates said I was calling Sokka’s name when I tried to jump off.” All

eyes turned to Sokka, who shrugged sheepishly.

"I was feeling lonely and I wanted Zuko. Why are you all looking at me like that? It's not like *I* made Zuko jump."

"You were calling to me," Zuko said, "whether you realized it or not. I could feel your emotions, about me, your mom and dad, and about Katara--"

"Anyways," Sokka said, shifting uncomfortably, "what happened next?"

Zuko shot Sokka a look that told him this conversation wasn't over, but said, "Guru Pathik showed me how to read energy, or at least the basics of it. But he had me try to find Takane through it, and that's when I realized she was in trouble."

Katara leaned forward and asked, "What kind of trouble?"

~ ~ ~

"She's been kidnapped!" Zuko leapt to his feet suddenly, startling both Nikko and Guru Pathik. "Firebenders! They want to make her a part of their circus!" Scrambling to grab his belongings, Zuko shouted, "I have to stop them!"

"Wait! Do you know where you are going?"

"Yes! They're headed to the port I was docked at a couple days ago! You, keep Nikko here!" With that, Zuko started to sprint down the mountain.

By the time he reached the dock, night had fallen. Zuko spotted quite a few bison, adults and calves, in heavy wooden cages being loaded onto a boat. It was easy to spot Takane among the group, as she was the only bison without stripes along the stem of her arrow. Anger welled up within Zuko, and he went to confront the circus.

~ ~ ~

"That went about as well as you might imagine," Zuko said with a wince. "They threw me in the cage with Takane, not realizing that I was a firebender."

"So you burned your way out?" Appa grunted, but Aang shushed him.

"Not exactly."

~ ~ ~

Zuko was trying to burn through the wood, but every time he got a fire going, Takane and the other bison around him started to freak out, bellowing and stamping their feet. "Would you all stop that?! I'm trying to help you!"

"Trying to help who?" Someone walked over to Zuko's cage on their hands, but fell over and gasped when they saw Zuko's face. The slim figure straightened up in front of him and said, "Zuko?"

“That’s ‘Prince Zuko’ to you-” Zuko stopped abruptly, recognizing who was before him. “Ty Lee?” Sure enough, it was Azula’s acrobatic friend staring back at him. He blinked, shocked, then asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I ran away to join the circus,” she replied. “What are you doing here? Why do they have you in a cage?”

“They don’t recognize me. I’m trying to protect these bison.”

Ty Lee tilted her head, making her braid swing to the side. “Why not just reveal yourself as the prince? They’ll listen to you then, won’t they?”

“You’d be surprised at how few people listen to me,” Zuko muttered, shaking his head. “Besides, I can’t let my father hear that I’m trying to protect the sky bison. It’ll make him think that I’m weak, or the message might get mixed up on the way to him and he might think I’m trying to protect the Avatar. Knowing my luck, it will.” Grabbing the bars in front of him, Zuko said, “Ty Lee, you have to help me get the bison out of here.”

“What? I can’t do that,” Ty Lee said, stepping backwards. “These people were the only ones who would hire me and take me out of the Fire Nation. If I betray them, they’ll make me go back.”

“You know they’re not going to treat these bison well.” Ty Lee looked down at her feet and scratched her arm. When Zuko was young, Ty Lee would sit and feed the turtleducks with him sometimes. Out of Azula’s friend group, Ty Lee was the most sympathetic, especially towards animals.

“Zuko, I-” Distantly, Zuko heard the sound of footsteps approaching.

“Hide! They’re coming,” he hissed. Ty Lee’s eyes widened, but she did as Zuko said. Nimble, she leapt up on a crate and jumped out of sight. Zuko turned to glare at the men approaching him, hoping to keep their attention away from the crates Ty Lee was behind.

“Well, well, well,” the ringmaster said, dragging a cane along the bars of the cage, “I expected to find a couple of wind buffalo, but not some colony trash guarding them.”

Gritting his teeth, Zuko said, “What are you going to do to them?”

“Sell most of them for parts, probably.” There was a gasp from behind the crates.

One of the men started to turn towards the crates, but Zuko asked, “What do you mean, ‘most’ of them?” Of course, Zuko’s voice cracked at the end of the sentence.

“Why, we’re going to keep a couple for ourselves, of course. A sky bison attraction will make us the most famous circus in the Fire Nation- no, in the world! Of course, they’ll need to be trained first,” the ringmaster said, creating a fire whip in his hand, “as will you!”

Zuko raised his hand to protect his face, but that familiar burn never came. By the time Zuko lowered his hand, all three men were lying on the ground with Ty Lee standing over them.

“You know, there’s always other circuses I could join,” Ty Lee said, brushing herself off.
“These guys have a lot of negative energy.”

“Thanks,” Zuko said with a slight smile.

“You hold tight, I’m going to go find the keys.” Ty Lee ran off somewhere, and Zuko turned to Takane.

“You’re afraid of fire,” he whispered. “You’ve been hurt by fire before, haven’t you?” Takane was staring at Zuko intensely. “So have I.” Takane sniffed at Zuko’s scar and whined. Zuko pressed his hand against Takane’s forehead, the same way Guru Pathik had done with him.

All at once, Zuko felt Takane’s energy flowing through him. He knew she was a couple weeks old, and she was the only calf in her herd that was still unable to fly. When the circus people had come after the herd, many of the bison had tried to fly away, but Takane had run into the forest and ended up finding Zuko.

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“You got all of that from one energy reading? Wow,” Aang said, “I really need to learn how to do that.”

“It is a very useful skill,” Zuko replied. “I ended up using it to call Takane’s mother to the ship. She and the other grown bison came and knocked the boat over, and Ty Lee and I rode back to the Eastern Air Temple on the bison. When the *Wani* arrived, the crew took Ty Lee to the colonies so she could join another circus. My uncle and I stayed at the Air Temple and learned energy reading. I led the herd further inland and, as far as I know, no one has found them. After that...” Zuko trailed off, looking down at his hands.

Sokka nudged him. “After that?”

“I... I can’t tell you that yet. When it’s time for the Avatar to learn firebending, I’ll tell you,” Zuko said decisively. “Besides, we’re almost there. See that?” Zuko pointed off into the distance, where steam was coming from one of the mountain peaks. “That’s Yukumo village. We’re here.”

Chapter End Notes

zuko @ the western air temple: wow what a dump

vOicE CRacKs

god zuko really is such a teenager

have i mentioned that i miss nikko? no? i miss nikko

we will get to see nikko and the rest of the crew very soon, though! i'm v excited

guru pathik really said your princess is in another castle

thanks for reading!

Yukumo village

Chapter Notes

cw: description of injuries

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

[art for last chapter!](#)

[I GOT FANART?!?!?!???!?!!!!!!!?!?!??](#)

[yukumo village theme, just for fun](#)

“Now remember,” Zuko said as Appa descended into the town, “to these people, I’m Lee. You can’t call me Zuko around them.”

“Got it, Lee,” Katara said with a smile. Zuko gave her a slight nod in return.

People had already begun to gather in the center of town at the sight of the sky bison circling overhead, but they cleared out of the square as Appa landed. Eagerly, Aang jumped down, waving to the townspeople. “Hi everyone! I’m the Avatar!”

A small crowd gathered around Aang, and Sokka rolled his eyes. Katara slid down Appa’s side to stand next to Aang, but Sokka noticed Zuko’s hesitance. “Something wrong?”

“No, I-” Zuko sighed, running a hand through his short hair. “It’s nothing. I’m just bracing myself.” With a deep breath, he jumped down from Appa’s saddle.

For what, Sokka didn’t get the chance to ask. He didn’t need to. When Zuko’s feet touched the ground, the reaction was near immediate. People gaped and pointed, rushing to surround Zuko in awe. Within seconds, Sokka lost sight of Zuko, who had been swept away by the crowd. Aang, suddenly receiving no attention, sulked and climbed back on Appa with Katara.

Zuko managed to get the crowd to leave him alone after a few minutes, and he walked up some stairs in front of a tall building Sokka assumed was the town hall. All eyes were on Zuko, and even from his perch on Appa’s back, Sokka could see how uncomfortable he was. With some annoyance, Sokka noticed a group of girls at the front of the crowd, completely fixated on Zuko. It annoyed Sokka enough to make him dismount Appa and push through the crowd so he could stand next to Zuko. Zuko shot Sokka a grateful look, then cleared his throat.

“Excuse me, but is the village chief around?”

“I am,” said a voice from behind Zuko and Sokka. Sokka turned to see a woman in fancy pink and gold robes in the doorway of the building behind them. She smiled warmly at the sight of Zuko. “Lee! What a pleasant surprise. What brings you here?”

“Yeah, and where’s Iluak? Is he with you?” There were murmurs among the crowd, and Zuko lowered his head.

“My crew and I were separated,” Zuko said. “We were attacking a Fire Nation Admiral. There was a bad storm, and our ship got damaged. I took a smaller boat out to lure the Fire Nation ships away from our ship, but I was captured.” There was a collective gasp among the crowd. “But I was able to escape with the help of the Avatar.” Zuko gestured to Aang, and the crowd’s eyes followed. Aang waved and smiled.

“That’s me!”

“I’ve been traveling with the Avatar and his friends since I escaped. I have no idea where my crew is,” Zuko finished.

“Stay here and rest,” the village chief said, standing next to Zuko. “You and your friends will be safe here. We will send messages to our allies and we will locate your crew.”

“Yes! You should stay a while, Lee,” one of the girls up front said. Irritated, Sokka grabbed Zuko’s arm.

“Sorry, but we have to get to the North Pole as soon as possible,” Sokka said, straightening up as he talked to the village chief. “Aang only has until the end of the summer to master waterbending, earthbending, and firebending. We need to give him as much time as we can to master all four elements.”

“Ah, yes. The Great Comet will return at summer’s end,” the village chief mused. “Very well, you will leave soon. There will be a festival tomorrow night, and you will leave the next morning, if you wish. In the meantime, allow us to give you a tour of our village.”

Brushing Sokka aside, a couple of girls linked arms with Zuko and started to lead the way through the streets of the town. Sokka couldn’t quite put his finger on why, but he was bothered by the attention every single girl seemed to be giving Zuko (even girls who were, in Sokka’s opinion, much too old for Zuko). He figured he must be jealous that the girls were paying attention to Zuko and not him, but that didn’t feel quite right.

“Lee, look over here!” The group was led to a central plaza where a white marble pedestal was. “We’re going to put a statue up of you over here!”

“A statue? You really don’t have to do that,” Zuko said, visibly uncomfortable. “If someone from the Fire Nation comes by, they’ll know exactly what I look like.”

“Oh, relax,” one of the girls said, wrapping an arm around Zuko. Sokka crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at the girl, even though she couldn’t see him. “They’ll do it with your

mask on, if you're really that paranoid."

Before Sokka could give her a piece of his mind, Aang pushed his way forwards and said, "Hey, what's this?" He pointed to a bronze plaque embedded in the pedestal. "'The Avatar may not be here, but we are,'" Aang read.

"That's from a speech Lee made when he was freeing our town from the Fire Nation," one of the girls said excitedly.

"Yeah, at first when he came, a lot of us were afraid to fight," another girl interrupted. "We thought there was no way we could stand against the Fire Nation because we're just a small town."

"Then someone said there's no hope without the Avatar, and Lee said that," the girl who had her arm around Zuko finished. "It was awfully brave, and it inspired all of us."

"And we've kept fighting ever since. Most of our men are off at war, helping to free other nearby towns." A girl popped up from behind Sokka, making him jump. As she walked to Zuko, she said, "We've helped the people of Pokke and Kokoto overthrow their colonial governments." Zuko perked up at this.

"Really? That's great!" A few of the girls swooned at Zuko's excitement, and Sokka couldn't take it anymore.

"So, where are we staying?" Sokka pushed one of the girls aside rudely and planted himself next to Zuko.

"There's an empty house by the hot springs- it's the same house you stayed in last time, Lee."

Zuko frowned and said, "Huh. I guess we'll have an extra room." Aang was the only one who heard his comment, and wondered why these people had an extra five-bedroom home conveniently empty.

Meanwhile, Zuko was thinking of the nice four-bedroom house he had stayed in with Kesuk, Iluak, and Nattiq nearly two years ago. He remembered how Nattiq and Iluak had bickered over who would get what room, and how Kesuk had simply plopped down on one of the beds, claiming it as her own. This was before they even had a ship, before they even had a plan, an idea of where to go from here. Before they had anything, they had each other.

The memory filled Zuko with warmth, but also loneliness. He wouldn't trade being with Sokka for the world, but he did miss his crew.

Sokka started to unload their things from Appa's back, but someone stopped him. "We'll take care of that, handsome," the girl who had her arm around Zuko earlier said with a wink. It gave Sokka some relief to be flirted with, but he was still unsettled by all the attention Zuko was getting. "The four of you should go get changed. We'll get your stuff all unpacked while you enjoy the hot springs."

Despite his unsettled feeling, Sokka couldn't say no to a nice soak in some hot springs. Besides, some time in the warm water could help Zuko's temperature back up. The previous night, Sokka had noticed that Zuko was still chillier than he should be, and he wanted to get Zuko back to normal as soon as possible.

"Er, I don't have any swimming clothes," Zuko said sheepishly. "Usually I do, but then again, usually I'm with my crew on my boat."

"Oh, me neither," Sokka interrupted, remembering the hole Momo had chewed in the swim trunks the Kyoshi Warriors had given him. "Do you people have any extras?"

"Of course! Come right this way." Aang and Katara headed inside the house while Zuko and Sokka were led to a building nearby. "Fabric is our specialty, aside from the hot springs. The climate here is good for both silk and cotton, so we make a few different fabrics to trade with nearby villages."

"That's why the Fire Nation colonized them," Zuko said to Sokka. There were women's and men's swimsuits hanging up on wooden racks nearby, and the boys started to look through them.

"What, just because of some fabric?" Immediately, Sokka found a pair of light purple trunks that he liked.

"Pretty much. They were sick of paying premium for expensive fabric like this." Zuko frowned, holding up a red swimsuit with one hand. "Well, this is just underwear. No thanks."

"Well that's just stupid, and also pretty selfish of them. How about this one?" Sokka could tell Zuko was struggling with having so many options, so he pointed to a plain black pair of trunks.

"Thanks," Zuko said, pulling the black trunks off their hanger. "And you're right, it is selfish and stupid of them. The more you see of it, the more you realize colonization is just rich people trying to get richer at the expense of the local population. Honestly, it's sickening."

"You know a lot about this," Sokka said, giving Zuko a sideways glance.

Zuko shrugged. "I've been banished for three years, and a pirate for two. I've been around. But I hardly know all of it. There's so much cruelty, going on where I can't see, too. When that happens, and I'm trying to help people, it's best to listen to them rather than rely on what I see or hear." To the shopkeeper, he said, "Are there changing rooms?"

Sokka quickly got changed into his swimming gear, amazed at how well it fit. He made muscles at himself in the mirror before stepping out, drawing the eyes of a couple of the girls who'd been waiting. Sokka gave them a sideways smile and a wink, which made them giggle.

The attention was short-lived, though, as it was that moment that Zuko walked out of the room next to Sokka's. Sokka nearly choked when he saw Zuko. "O- Oh! That's, uh-"

“I know they look tight, but they’re not.” Sokka, as a matter of fact, hadn’t even noticed the swimsuit, as his eyes were immediately drawn to Zuko’s ab muscles. “It’s the kind of fabric that clings to you, and I prefer that when I’m swimming. One time I was swimming with Nikko and an eel urchin swam up my shorts, and I haven’t worn loose swim trunks since then... Sokka?”

Sokka blinked, shook his head once, and swallowed hard. “Your, uh, clothes. Don’t forget your clothes.”

“Oh, right.” Zuko turned around, and Sokka nearly passed out. Zuko had *really* nice hips for a guy. Or maybe not- Sokka didn’t often find himself staring at other men’s hips the way he was staring at Zuko’s. Sokka was certain they were nicer than his own, at least.

It was this, Sokka’s desperate attempt to look anywhere but Zuko’s hips, that made him finally notice. Notice that, despite how Zuko was acting and carrying himself, he was still seriously hurt. His back was bruised, slashed, and Sokka was shocked he didn’t notice sooner. Sure, most of the cuts were scabbed over and the bruises were yellowing, but they still had to hurt. Guilt bubbled up in Sokka as he remembered how tightly he’d held Zuko to him the night before.

“Hey,” Sokka said softly, “you’re hurt.”

“It’s not so bad,” Zuko replied, making Sokka roll his eyes. Sokka went to grab Zuko’s wrist, but realized that was bruised, too.

“No, you’re really hurt- can you give us a minute?” Sokka shooed the girls around them away and led Zuko back into his changing room. Closing the door behind them, Sokka whispered, “Zuko. How bad is it?”

“Not bad, I promise. It looks worse than it is,” Zuko said. Light was filtering in through orange paper over a slit window above them, making it look like they were illuminated by a sunset.

“Let me look at you.” Zuko’s eyes were hesitant, but he nodded.

Sokka’s eyes ran over Zuko, taking stock of each of his injuries. He started at Zuko’s feet, which had been burnt and had blistered. It was only the bottoms of his feet, though- only where it would hurt him when he walked, or if he tried to run away. Sokka was both amazed and horrified that Zuko had been able to walk and run yesterday and the day before.

Next, Sokka moved to Zuko’s ankles, which were bruised and had small, mostly healed cuts. Sokka could tell these injuries were from thick steel cuffs that had dug into Zuko’s skin when he strained against them. As Sokka’s eyes traveled up Zuko’s legs, he was relieved to find them without notable injuries except a line of cuts along Zuko’s inner thigh.

Having assessed Zuko’s lower body, it was time to look above Zuko’s pant line. Sokka’s breath hitched as he caught sight of a large, hand-shaped burn on Zuko’s waist. Wordlessly, Sokka pointed at it and Zuko explained, “That’s from yesterday. You were there when this happened, actually- remember when he grabbed me?” Sokka’s eyes darted to Zuko’s neck,

where dark purple bruises had formed in the shape of large hands. Noticing where Sokka's eyes went, Zuko shook his head and said, "No, before that."

He supposed Zhao must have grabbed Zuko before then, but Sokka couldn't remember it. He remembered the beginning of the day and last night just fine, but the afternoon he only remembered in pieces. Sokka continued to look over Zuko, seeing similar wounds around his wrists as his ankles, more burnt handprints and slashes on his back, and, of course, the bruises on his neck. "Tui and La, Zuko," Sokka breathed.

"I promise, it's not all as bad as it looks. Besides, nothing could hurt worse than..." Zuko trailed off, and Sokka let his hand hover near Zuko's scar. "Yeah. That."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Zuko quickly shook his head no. "Not because I don't trust you, it's just- I'm not ready to relive that."

"That's okay," Sokka said, dropping his hand to Zuko's shoulder. "If you ever want to talk, I'm here." Sokka heard something shuffling around outside and said, "For now, at least, let's get you to Katara." Helping Zuko up, Sokka opened the door and allowed Zuko to lead him to the hot springs.

"Sokka! Lee! Over here," Katara called, waving at them from in the water. "The water's great!"

"Good, because you really need to work on healing him," Sokka said, putting a foot in the water. Sokka had to climb in slowly and get adjusted to the water, while Zuko went right in, unbothered by the heat. "Start with his feet."

"Okay, bossy," Katara muttered, shooting a glare at her brother. Zuko shrugged and apologized sheepishly as he rested his feet on a rock just above the surface of the water. As Katara gathered water in her hands, she said, "At least your feet don't stink like Sokka's do."

Indignantly, Sokka shouted, "My feet do *not* stink!"

"Maybe if you actually did your own laundry sometime, you'd find out just how much they stink!" As Katara and Sokka continued to bicker, Zuko let himself relax and closed his eyes. Soon enough, he was asleep.

Aang was the first to notice. "Hey, guys, be quiet. He's asleep," Aang whispered loudly.

Katara, who had just finished healing Zuko's feet, looked up in surprise. "So he is," she said. "You didn't keep him up all last night, did you, Sokka?"

"No! Why do you always blame me?!"

"I'm your sister. That's my job." Katara smiled, playfully nudging Sokka. "Now can you help me move him? I need to get his back."

Sokka carefully slid Zuko's legs off the rock and floated him over to a rocky bench in the water. As Sokka caught sight of Zuko's back again, he winced.

"I see he is injured," a voice said from behind Sokka. He turned to see the village chief approaching the edge of the pool.

"Yeah, he is. I didn't realize it was that bad, though," Aang said, rubbing the back of his head.

"None of us did," Sokka added, scooting a little closer to Zuko. "He was pretty good at hiding it."

"Lee is tough, and does not often ask for help. When he was here the first time, he tried to take on the Fire Nation officers all on his own. If not for his friends, he would have been defeated," the village chief said.

"You know, that actually doesn't surprise me," Sokka said, looking sideways at Zuko.

The village chief chuckled and said, "He certainly is brave. Foolishly so, in cases. Many of the women in town are quite taken with him because of this."

"Seriously, we couldn't walk five feet without some girl getting oogie-eyed over him," Sokka complained, crossing his arms.

"They are trying to get his attention so he will dance with them at the festival tomorrow night." The village chief slipped her shoes off and lifted her robes so she could soak her legs in the warm water. Sokka supposed she had nice legs, but they weren't as nice as Zuko's.

"Oh, there's going to be dancing at the festival? I love dancing," Aang chirped cheerfully.

Smiling at Aang, the village chief replied, "Yes, there will be dancing. Our celebration of the new solar year lasts for two weeks, then culminates in this festival. It is said that the first person you share a dance with during the festival will be an important part of your life in the upcoming year."

"Oh, really? In that case," Aang said, turning around, "Katara, will you share the first dance with me?"

Katara, who had been focusing on healing Zuko, looked up and said, "Hm? Oh, sure." Aang pumped his fists in the air, and Sokka sighed. With all the ladies so focused on Zuko, who would Sokka be able to dance with? He would have to figure that out later. For now, he wanted to get out of the hot springs and go check out their house.

"Sokka, where are you going?" Aang popped his head out of the water as Sokka stepped out of it.

"To the house. My skin is getting all prune, see?" Sokka held out his fingers, which were significantly wrinkled.

“The girls put all your stuff in the spare room, so you might want to move it,” Katara said. Sokka nodded and walked away, but Aang was confused. He’d taken the same house tour that Katara had, and he’d only seen four bedrooms. Was there a fifth bedroom he’d missed?

As Sokka walked back, he spotted a couple of girls sitting on a bench. They giggled and waved to him, so he put on his best-looking smile and approached them. “Hey, ladies,” Sokka said in a low, flirtatious voice, “what’re girls as pretty as you doing alone the day before the festival?”

“We’re waiting for Lee,” one of them replied. “You’re his friend, right?”

“Yeah, we’re pretty close. But Lee can’t give that first dance to both of you, you know,” Sokka said with a wink. “Wouldn’t you want to reserve that for the Avatar’s attractive companion?”

The other girl scoffed. “Is that really all you are? ‘The Avatar’s attractive companion’?”

“What? No,” Sokka said quickly. “I’m the warrior of the group.” But was he really? Back at Pohuai Stronghold, Katara and Aang had somehow fought their way out without Sokka’s help. On Kyoshi Island, Sokka had failed to protect Katara and Aang from the Kyoshi Warriors- who turned out to be friendly, but what if they hadn’t been? Sokka hadn’t even been able to protect them on the solstice, when Zhao had captured them at Avatar Roku’s temple. The more Sokka thought about it, the less he felt like the warrior of the group- but if he wasn’t the warrior, then what was he?

“I’ll keep you in mind, warrior,” the first girl said, giving Sokka a kiss on the cheek before departing with her friend. Sokka barely felt it.

What was he? The question remained on Sokka’s mind for the rest of the day, nagging at him no matter how he tried to distract himself. Even during dinner, after the sun had set, Zuko, Katara, and Aang could all tell something was wrong with Sokka, especially when he retired after hardly touching his food.

“I’ll be in the spare bedroom, if you need me,” Sokka said before disappearing down the hallway. Zuko, Katara, and Aang quietly listened as Sokka’s feet dragged along the stairs, then trudged through the upstairs hallway until a door shut with a depressing clunk.

“I’ll go talk to him,” Zuko said with a sigh, pushing his chair back. His footsteps were far quieter than Sokka as he made his way upstairs.

Aang couldn’t take it anymore. “What spare bedroom?!”

Surprised by his sudden outburst, Katara leaned back and said, “Huh?”

“All of you have said something about a spare bedroom, but there’s only four bedrooms! I’ve been all over this house five times, and there’s no fifth bedroom!”

“There’s a bedroom for each of us,” Katara said, suddenly understanding Aang’s confusion, “but Sokka and Zuko are going to sleep together.”

Aang blinked, then said, "They told you that?"

"Well, no, but I just assumed. They sleep better when they're together."

As Katara and Aang discussed Sokka and Zuko's sleeping habits, Zuko knocked lightly on the door to the spare room. "Sokka? It's me," Zuko said softly.

"Give me a few minutes, will you?"

Zuko nodded. Then, remembering that Sokka couldn't see him, Zuko coughed awkwardly and said, "Yeah, of course. I'll be in our room whenever you're ready."

Zuko went back to the first bedroom, the bedroom he knew from his previous stay in Yukumo. Plopping down on the bed with a huge sigh, Zuko remembered how, after they had driven the Fire Nation from the town, Zuko had plopped down on this same bed in a similar way. Except Zuko hadn't been alone that time- Nikko had quickly jumped up with him, then Kesuk sat at the end of the bed, and Nattiq had gotten settled, and finally Iluak jumped headfirst into the mattress. This was where Iluak had come up with the crazy idea that the four of them could sail the world, freeing Earth Kingdom towns from the Fire Nation, and where Nattiq had told him they didn't even have a boat, but Zuko realized he knew where to get one. This bed was where the idea of the Blue Spirit was born.

The memory made Zuko's heart ache, so he decided to turn his focus elsewhere. Zuko made a small fire in his hand, the same size as the one he'd made to burn the letter the previous night. Maintaining such a tiny flame wasn't hurting him, so Zuko gradually made it larger.

But when the flame reached the size of his hand, a sharp, sudden pain shot through Zuko. Zuko gasped and the fire went out, taking most of the pain with it. The remaining pain pooled and throbbed in his hand and wrist, and Zuko stared down at his hand, horrified. Zuko lit a finger flame in his other hand, hoping what he was seeing was a trick of the light.

It wasn't. The veins in Zuko's hand and wrist had gone completely gray. When Zuko tried to firebend with that hand, he couldn't.

"Hey," Sokka said from the door, making Zuko jump. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No, not at all." Zuko adjusted the blankets beside him, beckoning for Sokka to lie next to him. "I was just trying to firebend. I managed to get a flame about the size of my fist, but-"

"That's great!" At the sight of Sokka's brilliant smile, the remaining words died in Zuko's throat. Sokka looked so relieved, without a trace of worry, that Zuko couldn't bring himself to tell Sokka about his hand.

"Yeah," Zuko said, hiding his arm beneath a blanket. "So, what's up?" Sokka's smile faded. He leaned back against the headboard and let out a slow sigh.

"It's been hard, traveling with the Avatar and my sister," Sokka began. "We all get along really well, but I feel like they don't listen to me."

“I noticed that,” Zuko replied. “First with the festival two days ago, then again when they wanted to talk to Jeong Jeong. Is it always like that?”

“More often than not.”

Bumping shoulders with Sokka, Zuko said, “Hey, now that I’m here, they won’t outnumber you anymore. They’ll have to listen to you.”

“But do they? I mean, what merit do I hold over them? Sure, I’m Katara’s older brother, but she’s a waterbender and now a healer, and Aang is the Avatar, for Tui’s sake. I act like I’m the leader of the group, but what am I really? I’m not some powerful bender, and I’m not even that good of a warrior.” Maybe Sokka would have been, but he had no one to practice with after his father and the other men left. “You and Katara and Aang are all so powerful, but me? I’m just a guy with a boomerang.”

Zuko was quiet for a minute. “Do you remember what that plaque said earlier?”

Sokka blinked. Out of all the things Zuko could have said, why would he say that? ““The Avatar may not be here, but we are’?”

“Yeah, that. You know, a lot of these people were scared to push out the Fire Nation, even though they were suffering from the effects of colonization. They were waiting for something to change, for a sign to come for them to revolt. They thought that if the Avatar wasn’t here to protect the world, it wasn’t worth revolting, because they’d just be taken over again. When I heard that, it made me pretty angry. I climbed up on top of the city hall and made an impassioned speech, and that inspired them.”

“There’s nothing more inspiring than an angry firebender on top of a building,” Sokka muttered.

“But that’s just it, Sokka- I wasn’t a firebender, or Prince Zuko, or even the Blue Spirit yet. To them, I was just an ordinary guy with a pair of dual swords. They weren’t inspired by me because I was some sort of chosen one- they were inspired by me because I was like them.” Zuko looked at Sokka earnestly, and Sokka looked away.

“But you aren’t like them at all. You’re a prince, you’re the Firelord’s son,” Sokka explained.

“Maybe I’m not like them, but they were inspired by who they believed to be an ordinary Earth Kingdom citizen. And then they went and inspired other people, and those people have been freed from the Fire Nation, too.” Holding Sokka’s hands in his own, Zuko said, “I truly believe there is nothing more powerful than ordinary people- but you, Sokka, are far from ordinary.”

As Sokka looked into Zuko’s moonlit eyes, his heart fluttered in his chest. He hoped the darkness of the night would hide his blush. “You, uh, you think so?”

“I know so. You’re like no one I’ve ever met, Sokka. You’re the smartest person I know, you’re funny, you’re kind, and you have this way of making people around you happy.”

“I’m not so sure about that last one,” Sokka mumbled.

With a squeeze of Sokka’s hands, Zuko said, “At the very least, you make *me* happy.”

Somehow, that made Sokka feel even better than the original compliment. A warm feeling bubbled up inside of him, and Sokka almost giggled.

“So. About that energy reading stuff from earlier.” Sokka groaned, pulling his hands away to cover his eyes.

“Why do you always have to ruin the moment?”

“Somebody has to. Now hold still.” Zuko closed his eyes and ran his thumb across Sokka’s forehead. “So it was you, after all.” Sokka crossed his arms and looked away. “That’s kind of a relief, actually. I thought it might be some spirit trying to drag me away.”

“Nope. Just me and my emotions,” Sokka muttered. “I guess that is better than a spirit trying to take you away, though. So what, do you know everything I’m feeling?”

Zuko shook his head. “I only got a very general sense. I felt your despair after losing me, your grief after losing your mother, your feelings of abandonment from your father- I genuinely thought they were my own emotions. It seems that we have a lot in common.”

“Yeah, when it comes to grief,” Sokka huffed.

“...I don’t mean to pry, but your mother- how did you lose her?”

“She was taken prisoner by the Southern Raiders the second time they came.”

Zuko’s brow furrowed. “Hm.”

“What?”

“When I broke all the South Pole waterbenders out of prison-”

“You did WHAT?!” Zuko flinched at Sokka’s yell. “Sorry, sorry,” Sokka said quickly, “I just- you broke all the imprisoned waterbenders out? Wait, are they your pirate crew? Is that who Iluak is?”

“I’m not a pi- wait, how do you know Iluak’s name?” Zuko tilted his head at Sokka as he asked the question.

“When you were sick, you woke up a few times,” Sokka said, anxiously fidgeting with the sleeve of his tunic. “You were confused. Sometimes you recognized me, but sometimes you would think I was someone named Iluak.”

“Huh. You two do have the same hairstyle,” Zuko said, making Sokka fidget with his tunic even more. “And he even uses a boomerang like you do.”

Feeling his anxiety coming to a head, Sokka cried, “You haven’t replaced me, have you?!”

Zuko looked blankly at Sokka for a minute, then threw his head back and laughed. It was the first time Sokka had heard Zuko really laugh since they'd reunited, and the sound made Sokka feel all warm and bubbly inside again.

Once Zuko had stopped laughing (too soon, in Sokka's opinion), he said, "Sokka, Iluak is in his forties."

"Oh." Embarrassed, Sokka changed the subject. "What were you saying about waterbender jail?"

"Ah, right. Well, when we escaped, I brought them to the North Pole because that was closest to the prison. On the way, my friend Nattiq- who's almost thirty, don't worry- was tending to some people's injuries. There was one woman who was injured really badly," Zuko said, frowning at the memory. "Nattiq managed to get her in stable condition eventually, but she would cry out in her sleep- about how she needed to protect Katara."

Sokka's heart skipped a beat.

"At the time, I thought that was more proof that Katara was dead," Zuko continued. "I thought maybe she had bonded with Katara while she was in prison, and had failed to protect Katara from the guards. But now... I wonder."

"Mom," Sokka said, voice breaking. "You're saying Mom might be alive? And out of prison?"

Zuko met Sokka's eyes. "If she is, we'll know when we reach the North Pole. One way or another, we're going to find out the truth about Kya."

Chapter End Notes

KYYYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

sokka really checked out zuko's butt and said "damn look at that juicy peach"

in a rare turn of events for a fanfiction, they actually do have enough beds for everyone, the characters just choose not to use all of the beds

sokka. the feeling you are experiencing is LOVE. it's LOVE.

never thought i'd wonder about posting a chapter before the government collapsed but hey, here we are. and i did it before midnight, too!

ended up having to split this chapter, i guess i'll have to save the dance and the kiss for next week.

i should mention, though

the kiss is NOT between who you think it'll be between

The festival

Chapter Summary

aka the GAYEST CHAPTER YET

Chapter Notes

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

[the gaang in their swimsuits!!](#)

[the song i imagine the dance is set to](#)

Despite the exciting revelation about his mother, Sokka was able to sleep well. When he woke, the bed next to him was still warm, but instead of Zuko there was a note.

“Gone out,” it said in Zuko’s handwriting. “May be gone for a couple of hours. Don’t go looking for me, Sokka.” It was signed as the Blue Spirit, a name Sokka could tell Zuko had signed many times.

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, Sokka stood and stretched. He was a little disappointed he’d missed Zuko, but he was certain he’d see his friend later. Besides, it might be easier for Sokka to get a date without Zuko around.

To his annoyance, Sokka quickly found that wasn’t the case. All the girls he encountered would ask him about where Lee was, could they see Lee, could Sokka ask Lee if he would dance with them. The best Sokka could get was a promise to dance with him first if Lee said no to a girl, leaving Sokka as their second choice.

Sokka found himself wishing that Suki was here, for he was certain she would pick him as her first choice. Then again, maybe she wouldn’t- after all, the Blue Spirit had saved Kyoshi Island, too. Sokka frowned, wondering if he would ever be able to hold a candle to Zuko’s achievements.

“Excuse me,” a girl in yellow said to Sokka, “you are Lee’s friend, right?”

“Yes, I am. No, I don’t know where he is, and yes, I will ask him if he’ll consider you for the first dance tonight,” Sokka answered, crossing his arms. Every girl who approached him today had the same questions.

“What? I think you misunderstand why I am here,” she said. “I am one of the tailor’s assistants. She has a festival robe ready for you, and would like to make sure it fits you

properly.”

“Oh,” Sokka said. With an embarrassed smile, he stood, allowing the young woman to lead him to the tailor’s shop, the same building where he’d found his swimwear the day earlier. Inside, Katara and Aang were already getting fitted in front of a wall of mirrors.

Waving cheerfully, Aang shouted, “Sokka!” Sokka waved back as the assistant escorted him to the changing room.

Sokka quickly changed into a light blue robe with dark trim. It was a bit too long on him, but otherwise Sokka thought it fit well. He stepped out of the changing room confidently, but as he caught the workers’ attention, they gaped at him. By the time Sokka had joined Katara and Aang in front of the mirrors, an uncomfortable silence had fallen over the shop.

Noticing the sudden change in mood of the woman who was helping her, Katara followed her gaze to Sokka. She looked him over for a minute, wondering what he had done to cause this, until she realized, “Oh, Sokka, your yukata is on the wrong way!” Katara jumped off the pedestal she was standing on and rushed to her brother. Taking him by the arm, she turned him around and escorted him back to the changing room. “You’re not supposed to wear it that way,” Katara whispered, fingers digging into Sokka’s arm. “It’s left over right, not right over left. Right over left is for funerals.”

Untying the sash over his waist, Sokka whispered, “Well how was I supposed to know that?”

Katara’s brows furrowed. “The woman who brought you here didn’t tell you that?”

“No!” Sokka rapidly switched which side of the yukata was on top, then fumbled with the sash.

“Sorry about that, everyone,” Katara called back to the workers. “My brother struggles sometimes with telling his right from his left. He didn’t mean anything by it.” Sokka opened his mouth to protest, but Katara shushed him and said, “The tailor isn’t exactly the nicest person, okay? She almost fired a girl for accidentally pricking me with a needle. I don’t want anyone to lose their job because of us.”

Sokka sighed and relented. “Sorry about that,” he said, facing the staff with his corrected yukata. A short old woman crossed her arms and made a loud huffing noise.

“Come here, boy,” the woman said, gesturing with a bony finger for Sokka to come. Sokka swallowed hard, then went to stand on the pedestal next to her. She examined him with critical eyes.

“It’s, um, a little long,” Sokka said, trying to be helpful. The woman scowled at him, making the lines on her face even deeper.

“Don’t try to do my job for me! It’s only too long if I tell you it’s too long, you hear?!”

“This is the tailor, Sokka,” Aang said cheerfully. Immediately, Sokka could see what Katara had meant.

“It’s too long,” the tailor concluded. To the girl in yellow, she said, “Hem it, but don’t bother making it pretty. We have more important things to work on.”

The yukata’s edge was raised, and Sokka was shooed out of the tailor’s shop with orders to find Lee. A minute later, the girl in yellow joined him out on the street. “You get kicked out too?”

“The tailor really needs to find Lee,” the assistant said. “A traditional armor set, usually reserved for our most honorable warriors, will be given to him to wear at the festival.”

“Oh, so that’s what the tailor meant when she said she had more important things to work on,” Sokka muttered. Bitterly, he added, “She had to work on it for some *one* more important.”

“Please, do not take offense at her behavior,” the assistant said, holding Sokka’s arm.

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s not just her.” Sokka shook her hand off of him and crossed his arms. “Everyone thinks Z- Lee is more important than me.”

“No, I do not believe that is true,” the assistant exclaimed, blocking Sokka’s path. “Our village owes Lee a great debt, so we are eager to pay it back by being so welcoming to him. However, all our guests are welcome, and I am sorry we have made you feel you are less valuable than Lee.”

“That’s okay,” Sokka said. *It’s probably true*, Sokka didn’t say. With a half-smile, Sokka added, “You know, if you really want me to feel as valuable as him, you could give me that first dance tonight.” The assistant shook her head, and Sokka sighed. It was worth a shot.

“This is not because of Lee,” she quickly reassured Sokka. “My first dance will be with my wife.” Sokka made an understanding noise, and the assistant frowned. “Though, are you familiar with the traditional dance of Yukumo village?” When Sokka shook his head, she smiled. “Perhaps I can teach you, then.”

Sokka spent the next couple of hours learning how to dance with the assistant, who was named Ayaka. Just as Sokka was learning the final steps of the dance, Aang and Katara burst into the studio where he was practicing.

“Sokka!” Aang burst inside, blowing the door open.

Irritated, Sokka said, “You ever heard of knocking? What’s going on?”

Katara scanned the room and frowned. “Huh, so Lee isn’t with you after all.”

“We’ve been looking all over for him, but nobody’s seen him,” Aang explained. “We thought he might be with you.”

“No, we have not seen him,” Ayaka said, immediately growing concerned because she had forgotten she was supposed to look for him.

Dancing forgotten, Sokka stepped forwards, brows knitting together in concern. “He left me a note this morning saying he’d be gone for a couple hours, and not to come looking for him.” Glancing outside, Sokka noticed the sun already starting to dip behind the mountains. “What’s taking him so long?”

Instantly, Sokka’s mind jumped to the worst possible conclusion: Zuko had been captured again. As soon as the thought came, Sokka tried to push it out of his mind, knowing that it was impossible, but it still nagged at him as he left the studio and looked around with Katara and Aang.

They walked past an old, seemingly abandoned building on the outskirts of town, but Sokka stopped in his tracks when he saw it. Aang, who had been walking behind Sokka, bumped into him and fell backwards. “Ow! Hey, why’d you stop?”

“Look,” Sokka said, pointing to the sky. A thin column of smoke was coming from the building’s chimney.

The three of them looked at each other, then crept inside. Light was coming from beneath a heavy wooden door, which Sokka pressed his ear up against. He heard muttering coming from inside, then a sharp “Ow!” in Zuko’s voice. Sokka pulled away from the door, frantically gesturing to Aang.

“Z- Lee!” Aang blew down the door and the three of them burst inside, ready to fight off any attackers. “Lee, are you-” Sokka abruptly stopped, stunned by the scene before him. They were in a kitchen, based on the blazing ovens that lined one of the walls. There were pots and pans lying around along with neat bundles of fruits and vegetables, and the whole place smelled amazing. And there, in the center of the kitchen at a table littered with cakes, was Zuko. He initially had his back turned, but at the sound of Sokka’s voice, he whipped around suddenly, brandishing a whisk. Zuko let out a little growl of annoyance when he saw the trio and shook his whisk (which he had set on fire in his surprise.)

“I *told* you not to come looking for me,” Zuko said, crossing his arms.

“You said you’d only be gone a couple hours. Sunset’ll be in a hour.” Zuko blinked, clearly surprised by this. “I thought you got captured again!”

“Sokka, I told you I’d be fine,” Zuko huffed, irritated. “Now leave me alone. I’m busy.”

“What have you been so busy with that it’s taken you nine hours?!”

Zuko’s eyes met Aang’s and he sighed, knowing he’d been caught. Shoulders slumping, Zuko said, “I felt bad for what I said about your firebending the other day, and about all the other grief I’ve caused you, Avatar. So I... I tried to make you something. There’s this recipe I found at the Southern Air Temple a while ago for fruit cakes. I’ve tried making them a few times before, but I could never get the center to rise properly.” Zuko crossed his arms and glared at the cake besides him as if it had wronged him.

Aang stood there wide-eyed for a moment, then smiled and stepped forwards. “That’s because you’re supposed to use airbending,” Aang said, picking up the cake. He lifted his

hand above the center of the cake, causing it to rise in a swirly shape.

“Oh,” Zuko said, feeling stupid. Nervously, he watched as Aang took a bite out of the cake.

Aang’s eyes widened. Chewing slowly, he carefully set the cake back on the countertop. When Aang finally swallowed the bite, tears burst from his eyes.

“Is it really that ba- aaAAAAA?!” To everyone’s surprise, Aang ran to Zuko, hugged him tightly, and kissed him on the cheek. Instinctively, Zuko shoved the airbender away from himself, accidentally sending Aang flying into a wall. “What in Agni’s name was that for?!”

Katara immediately rushed over to make sure Aang was okay, while Sokka just laughed. “Sorry, sorry,” Zuko said immediately, realizing what he’d done. “I- I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Thank you,” Aang said, wiping tears from his eyes.

“For... pushing you into a wall?”

“For the fruit cake. It- it tasted like home.” Aang beamed at Zuko, and Zuko hesitantly smiled back. Sokka, however, frowned, thinking of something Zuko said.

“Wait, you said you tried to make these cakes before? Why?”

“...No reason. I was just curious, I guess.” Zuko’s hesitance told Sokka everything he needed to know.

Smirking, Sokka leaned up against Zuko and said, “This wouldn’t have anything to do with your fondness for sweet foods, would it?” Zuko’s face went red, and Sokka knew he’d caught him.

Aang tilted his head and asked, “What are you talking about, Sokka?”

“Oh, you don’t know? Our friend Zuko here has a major sweet tooth, and I’d bet money he made that cake because he loves sweets.” Zuko hid his face in his hands, and Sokka’s smirk grew into a grin.

Katara asked, “Why didn’t you just say that, Zuko?”

“Because he was embarrassed,” Sokka cooed teasingly, poking Zuko’s cheek. Zuko groaned.

“It’s not just that,” Zuko said quickly. “I didn’t want to offend you, Avatar.”

“You can just call me Aang,” Aang said. When he saw the look on Zuko’s face, he added, “Or not. Whatever makes you comfortable. But why would I be offended?”

“It’s my people- not even that, it’s my *family*, for Agni’s sake- who are responsible for the death of your people, and I used to make fruit cakes just because I wanted sweets. I stopped doing it when I realized it might be wrong, but that doesn’t change the fact that, at one time, I was using part of your culture for my own wants.”

“Oh, I didn’t think about it that way,” Aang admitted. He was quiet for a moment, then said, “Maybe some other people would be offended by that, but I’m not. Fruit cakes aren’t exactly a sacred part of my culture, and if you hadn’t made them before, I wouldn’t have been able to taste them again now. The only thing that would upset me is if you tried to profit off of the fruit cakes in some way, or pass them off as Fire Nation.”

“Which I would never do,” Zuko said quickly. “So, it’s really okay that I made those cakes?” At the ridiculous sounding question, Sokka struggled to suppress a laugh. Katara elbowed Sokka sharply.

“Yeah, it’s fine by me, but if you want to do something related to Air Nomad culture in the future, ask me about it first, okay? But I’m fine with you making the cakes, so long as I get to eat some,” Aang said with a playful smile. “Oh, you should really get to the tailor’s shop. She made us all awesome festival outfits, but she wants to make sure yours fits.”

As they walked back to the shop, Sokka noticed that the festival was already starting. A few people were lined up at booths already, playing games. Zuko, following Sokka’s gaze, said, “You guys go ahead. Once I get my outfit, I’ll catch up with you.”

Though Sokka didn’t want Zuko to go, he was excited to explore the festival. All day the townspeople had been hanging red paper lanterns, and now that the sun was setting they were finally lighting them. The lanterns gave the entire town a warm orange glow, and Sokka couldn’t help but smile. In a way, it reminded him of Zuko’s fire- soft, warm, and illuminating.

“Hey, Sokka, look!” Aang pointed excitedly at a game booth, which had a large yellow hat with red tassels hanging off the front. “That’s a really cool hat! Do you think I can win that game?”

“We can try it,” Katara said, approaching the vendor. “Excuse me, but how do we play?”

“Knock down as many bottles as you can with seven balls,” the vendor said, gesturing to empty bottles on three separate tables behind him. “Knock down fifteen and you’ll get a small prize, thirty’ll get you a medium prize, and forty-five wins the top prize.”

“Is that hat the top prize?” The vendor nodded. With a determined glint in his eye, Aang said, “Alright, let’s play!”

Aang tried twice, but he only managed to win a small prize. Katara managed to knock down twenty-two on her first try, but she was down to two balls on her second try and still had bottles on all three tables. Sokka had been observing the whole time, and had noticed something strange in Aang’s second attempt. “Kat, can I try something?”

Surprised, Katara said, “Be my guest.” She handed the two remaining balls to Sokka and stepped back.

Sokka had always had good aim, whether it be with a boomerang or a snowball, so Katara wasn’t surprised when her brother managed to hit the table on the left on his first try, knocking a couple more bottles off. She was surprised, however, when Sokka threw a

curveball with the last ball, sending it flying into the side of the table on the left. Katara, Aang, and the vendor watched in disbelief as the table on the left toppled over, directly into the table in the middle which, in turn, knocked the table on the right down. Sokka grinned. "I believe all those bottles are knocked over now."

After a moment of stunned silence, the vendor said, "I should probably be mad, but honestly I'm just impressed. That hat is yours, kid." Sokka jumped up to retrieve the hat and handed it to Aang, and the trio walked away from the booth.

"How'd you know to do that, Sokka?" Aang was looking at Sokka from beneath his hat with impressed eyes.

"When you were throwing, I noticed that table was wobbly, then when it was Katara's turn, it wobbled again. I realized that table was loose from its base, and if I hit it just the right way, I'd be able to send it into the other tables. That first shot I took was just to make sure I was seeing right- which, of course, I was."

"My brother can be a genius, every once in a while," Katara admitted, smiling.

Before Sokka could make a scathing remark in return, a voice called, "Sokka!" Sokka turned, and there was Zuko, coming towards them. He wore loose-fitting pants with a brown belt around his waist, but Sokka's eyes were immediately drawn to the tight black tank top Zuko was wearing. It was so tight that Sokka could see the shape of Zuko's abs beneath it, not to mention the unobstructed view it gave of Zuko's arms. Zuko was panting slightly and sweating, which made Sokka feel a certain sort of way (but for the life of him, Sokka couldn't identify the feeling.) Zuko looked at Aang and surprise flashed across his face. "Oh. Same hat."

Aang blinked. "Huh?"

"Same hat," Zuko said again. He detached something from a strap on his back which was, in fact, the same hat Sokka had just won for Aang. Zuko leaned up against the wall, and Sokka realized how pale he looked.

"Hey buddy, you okay?"

"I'm fine," Zuko said, waving his hand dismissively. He let out a small cough before saying, "I've just been on my feet all day."

"Then let's sit down for a minute," Sokka suggested, leading Zuko over to a nearby bench. To Aang and Katara, he said, "Can you guys get some food and water for him?"

"Of course," Katara said. "Is there anything you want in particular, Lee?"

"Can you get me some of those mochi?" Katara nodded, and she and Aang set off on their mission. Sokka snorted, making Zuko look over at him. "What?"

"You do still have a sweet tooth."

With a loud groan, Zuko said, "Are you really going to keep making fun of me for that?"

“Always.” Sokka stuck his tongue out at Zuko, who sighed and looked up at the lanterns. In their light, Zuko’s eyes looked like molten gold. “It’s nice, though.”

Zuko’s eyes flicked over to Sokka. “What is?”

“To see that, no matter how much has changed, some things stay the same.” Zuko sat up slightly, recognizing the change in Sokka’s tone. “You’re not the same kid who left the South Pole. I was upset when I found that out after we rescued you, and I think that’s part of why I lashed out at you. I was mad at you for not being the same- but then I realized I’m not the same kid you left behind. We’ve both changed so much,” Sokka murmured.

“I used to think that, too- that the little firebender at the South Pole was dead and gone. But since I’ve been with you, I’ve realized that kid isn’t gone. Maybe I’m not the same kid you knew, but he’s a part of me- a part of me that’ll never go away. And even though you’ve changed, and I’ve changed, and the whole world has changed, my feelings about you haven’t. You still understand me in a way that no one else can, and I still trust you in a way I don’t trust anyone else.” Sokka and Zuko were facing each other now, and Zuko put his hand on Sokka’s shoulder. Zuko gave Sokka a small, hesitant smile. It wasn’t quite enough for Sokka to consider it a real smile, but it did make the skin around Zuko’s eyes crinkle.

“I really hate it when things change,” Sokka whispered, barely audible over the noise of the crowd.

“As do I. But know this, Sokka- the bond we share, the trust we have for each other- that will never change.” Sokka met Zuko’s eyes.

“You promise?”

“I promise,” Zuko said with a firm nod. Something caught his eye, and he looked away from Sokka. Aang and Katara were approaching them with a few bags of small mochi cakes.

“That’s a lot of mochi,” Sokka said, standing. “Why’d you buy so much?”

“We didn’t,” Katara said, handing a bag to Zuko. “We only bought a couple, but when I mentioned that they were for Lee, the lady insisted on us taking all of these. She didn’t even make us pay.” Zuko took a small bite out of one of the cakes, then made a contented noise that warmed Sokka’s heart.

In the distance, a bell rang, causing Aang to perk up. “Oh! That means it’s time for the dance! Come on guys, we gotta go to the town hall!”

Sokka’s good mood soured as he was reminded of the dance, which he *still* didn’t have a partner for. As Sokka trudged along behind Aang and Katara, Zuko said, “Wait, what dance?”

“What do you mean, ‘what dance’?! It’s all everyone’s been talking about today,” Sokka answered.

“I spent the entire day making fruit pies. I didn’t talk to anyone.”

Sokka started to ask Zuko how he didn't find out yesterday when the village chief told them, but quickly remembered Zuko had been asleep then. "Oh. Well, that's the reason all these girls have been ogling at you the whole time we've been here."

Baffled, Zuko asked, "They've been ogling at me?"

Before Sokka could give his exasperated reply, another bell rang, and the crowd grew silent. The village chief had stepped onto the stairs in front of the town hall and was starting to speak.

"Another year has come and gone," the chief said. "We are certain this year will be more prosperous than the last. For this new year, we celebrate with the Avatar and Lee!" There was a round of cheering, then the chief said, "Lee, you will join me up here." Zuko's eyes widened in surprise, but he did as he was told. "We have bestowed a set of Yukumo armor to Lee. Our ancestors wore it to battle the Mizutsune, and now Lee wears it to battle the Fire Nation!"

There were more cheers, and Zuko gave a forced smile. He waved awkwardly at the crowd.

Once the cheers died out, the village chief said, "Surely, you are all wondering who Lee will choose to share the first dance with. Lee, you will tell us who you have chosen."

Nervously scratching at his wrist, Zuko said, "Well, the thing is, I didn't really know there was going to be a dance tonight." Zuko felt everyone's eyes boring into him, and he started to sweat. "So, uh... could you tell me what kind of dance this is?"

"It is a dance to celebrate a new beginning. It is said that your fate will be entwined with the partner you choose on this night for the rest of the year. You should choose to dance with someone who you want to be an important part of your life this year."

"Someone who I want to be an important part of my life this year...?" Zuko paused for a moment, considering the notion. He was stone-faced as he pondered with his hand on his chin. Then, all at once, his eyes and face lit up, and he turned towards his friends.

"Sokka," Zuko said, holding out his hand. "Will you dance with me?"

Sokka's brain short-circuited. "I- hu- what?"

Zuko smiled at Sokka, and Sokka realized this was the first time he'd seen Zuko *really* smile since they were kids. This wasn't the smug, sarcastic smile Sokka had seen during the Fire Days Festival, or the half-delirious smile of someone who'd just escaped certain death by drowning, or even the tiny, restrained smiles Zuko had so hesitantly given the previous day or earlier today. No, this was a genuine, happy smile, one that made the dimple on the right side of Zuko's face appear, that was so contagious that Sokka found joy and some other unknown warm feeling bubbling up in him as he smiled, too, that somehow outshone all the paper lanterns and even the moonlight illuminating the night.

"Will you dance with me," Zuko repeated.

With a huge grin, Sokka took Zuko's hand. "Of course."

Sokka could feel every eye from the shocked crowd on him, but he found himself unaffected by their stares. All that mattered was the boy in front of him, who was smiling at Sokka as if Sokka was the light of his life. Zuko led Sokka onto the raised wooden platform, then asked, "Are you ready?"

"You sure it's okay for me to dance with you?"

"I don't see why I can't dance with my best friend," Zuko said loudly, as if he was challenging anyone to oppose him. Quieter, he said, "I know people see this as a romantic thing, but it doesn't have to be that way, right? You're the one who I want most to be a part of my life this year. I wouldn't want to give this dance to just anyone." Again, warmth bubbled up inside of Sokka, and he beamed.

"Alright, let's dance."

And so, Zuko and Sokka danced. Zuko was clumsy, having not danced in a while, and Sokka didn't even know part of the dance, but they enjoyed every minute of the first dance. There were a few dances after the first, dances which none of the gang knew (but somehow Aang was able to master.) Through it all, Zuko and Sokka kept stealing away to be with each other.

Once the dancing was done, there was a dazzling fireworks display. At least, Katara said it was dazzling- Sokka was too focused on Zuko, who was leaning his head on Sokka's shoulder, to notice. Zuko was more relaxed than Sokka had seen him, and Sokka might even go so far as to say Zuko was happy. Zuko looked up at Sokka and gave him a soft smile, and Sokka smiled back.

Maybe flowers could bloom again, after all.

Chapter End Notes

ok while zuko trying to make a traditional air nomad cake for aang is really soft, there's a point i made in the text about cultural appropriation that is important enough for me to repeat here: IF YOU'RE NOT SURE IF SOMETHING IS CULTURAL APPROPRIATION, ASK SOMEONE FROM THAT CULTURE BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING!!! and if they say it is appropriation, DON'T DO IT!!!!!! as a white person, that's really all i'm qualified to say- LISTEN to what poc have to say about their own cultures! now that i've covered that, back to your regularly scheduled chapter notes:

-

AA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

-gotta admit, i've been waiting to use that last line for a few chapters now

- every time aang blows down a door, all star by smash mouth starts playing
- zuko loving sweet foods is a headcanon you can pry from my cold, dead hands
- sokka beating that festival game is proof that he is a genius
- nobody guessed who the kiss would be between. y'all thought it would be a romantic kiss, when really it was just bc aang was so overwhelmed by happy memories of home when he tasted the cake (which he never thought he'd taste again) that the only way he could express the extent of his joy was by giving zuko a lil peck on the cheek
- on the other hand, we ALL knew who that first dance was gonna be between
- huh. wonder what's wrong with zuko?
- i told you it was the gayest chapter yet

The Northern Air Temple: Arrival

Chapter Notes

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

Zuko was sick.

When asked, Zuko would say he was fine, but Sokka knew better. Zuko had a cough ever since they found him, but knowing Zuko's luck, Sokka would bet money it was no common cold. There were other little things that made Sokka suspicious- how Zuko had been sweating a lot, even in the cold, how Zuko was still not as warm as he should be and barely able to bend, and how tired Zuko was, no matter how much sleep he got- all these things and more led Sokka to believe there was something bigger going on with Zuko.

Sokka had wanted to ask Zuko about it on the flight from Yukumo, but Zuko had fallen asleep nearly as soon as they had left the village. Setting down the wood carving he was working on, Sokka carefully adjusted Zuko so his head was resting against Sokka's thigh. As he continued carving, Sokka had gone back and forth on telling the others about his concerns. If he told them, Aang and Katara could help remind Zuko to take it easy and Katara might even be able to heal him. Ultimately, though, Sokka decided to keep his worries to himself, and instead told Katara and Aang the revelation about Kya.

"See? I knew you shouldn't give up on her," Aang said to Sokka cheerfully. "And Zuko's the one who freed the waterbenders? That's amazing!"

"I can't believe it," Katara whispered, tears pooling in her eyes. "Mom... she's okay!"

"She *might* be okay," Sokka corrected. "Remember, this was two years ago Zuko saw her, and he wasn't even sure it was Mom. I just thought you guys should know, on the off chance she actually is at the North Pole- but don't go getting your hopes up." Sokka sighed, knowing Aang and Katara were doing just that. Maybe he shouldn't have told them after all. "I know you want to believe she's okay- I do too, but-"

"Look!" Rudely, Katara interrupted Sokka and pointed past him. "Are those- airbenders?!"

Aang turned around so quickly he nearly fell off of Appa's head. He stared for a moment, hoping beyond all hope that some of his people survived- but he quickly realized these people weren't airbenders. "No they're not," Aang said, crossing his arms.

"What do you mean they're not? Those guys are flying," Sokka shouted, leaning forwards excitedly. His sudden movement made Zuko stir in his sleep.

"Five more minutes," the prince groaned.

"Zuko, wake up," Sokka said, shaking Zuko awake. "Hey, you said you'd been to all the Air Temples, right?"

“Mhm,” Zuko grumbled. “What’s it to you?”

“Why didn’t you tell us there were still airbenders at the Northern Air Temple?”

“Huh?!” Zuko sat up quickly, rubbing his eyes.

“They’re not airbenders,” Aang insisted. “You can tell by the way they move that they’re not airbending. Maybe they’re gliding, but they’re not flying. Those people have no spirit.”

“Yeah, when I was here, there weren’t any-” Zuko broke off in the middle of his sentence, ducking and swearing as one of the gliders came careening over them. “Hey! Watch it!” Zuko shook his fist at the kid, who only laughed.

“I don’t know, Aang. That kid seemed pretty spirited,” Katara said, grinning. The kid flew a couple circles around Appa, then took off in front of them. Aang smirked and grabbed his glider, leaping off of Appa.

“What are you thinking, you f-” Appa reared his head back, sending Katara flying into Zuko.

“Ow!”

“We’d better find solid ground before it finds us,” Sokka said, looking around at the gliders surrounding them. Appa landed on a platform in front of the temple, where a large group of people were waiting. Zuko groaned, covering his eyes with a hand. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Nothing I love more than being woken up, having Katara thrown into me, and then having to go into a crowd of people,” Zuko muttered. He slid off of Appa’s back, stumbling as he landed. This surprised him a bit, as Zuko was used to landing properly from high places, but he was too annoyed by the people around him to really notice.

Aware of Zuko’s grouchiness, Sokka quickly said, “Who are you people? We were under the impression this temple was uninhabited.”

“We’re Earth Kingdom refugees,” a woman explained, stepping forward. “Who might you be?”

Zuko scanned the crowd, looking for any obvious threats, but he couldn’t find any. All of these people looked like Earth Kingdom refugees, and he knew there had been groups of them roaming around in this area for a while. “My name is Lee, and these two are Sokka and Katara. We’re traveling with the Avatar. May we spend the night here?”

“The Avatar? Where?” People started murmuring and looking around, but Zuko merely pointed to the sky. Aang and the kid who’d almost flown into Appa were flying in sync, circling each other as they wove through the air. Zuko supposed it was impressive, but all he wanted to do was go back to sleep. He rubbed his eyes and sighed, knowing he would be expected to be awake for the next few hours.

“Hey, look,” Sokka said, nudging Zuko and pointing. Zuko followed Sokka’s finger to see a large smoke drawing of an uncharacteristically grumpy-looking Aang in the sky.

“Huh. Not bad,” Zuko said. As Aang gracefully landed next to Zuko, the other kid came in for a hard landing. Zuko winced and covered his ears at the loud scraping noise.

“That was some fancy flying,” the kid said as he maneuvered his chair over to the group. As he got a closer look at Aang, his eyes widened. “Hey, you’re a real airbender- you must be the Avatar!” The kid’s excitement was starting to get on Zuko’s nerves. “That’s amazing! I’ve heard stories about you!”

“Thanks,” Aang said with a small smile.

“This glider chair is amazing,” Sokka said excitedly, and Zuko had to suppress a groan. Normally Sokka’s excitement would make Zuko happy, but Zuko was still irritated from being woken up suddenly, and he felt... off, somehow. He wasn’t quite sure how else to explain it, because he knew he wasn’t sick or injured anymore, but something in his body felt *wrong* in a way he couldn’t explain.

“If you think this is good, you should see some of the other stuff my dad designed,” the kid said, blissfully unaware of Zuko’s bad mood. “I’m Teo, by the way. Follow me.”

Zuko barely held back another groan as he realized he was about to be taken on a tour of the Northern Air Temple. But as they walked through the temple’s entryway, Zuko was shocked at how much the temple had been modified in just three years.

“This place is unbelievable,” Aang said, with an expression that matched Zuko’s thoughts.

“I know,” Teo said, “isn’t it great?”

“No. Just unbelievable.” Aang walked forward and Teo tilted his head, confused.

Approaching Teo’s chair, Katara said, “Aang used to come here a long time ago. He’s probably shocked it’s so- ah, different.”

“So better,” Sokka exclaimed, making Zuko punch him in the arm. “Ow, hey! What was that for?”

“It’s not better,” Zuko hissed. “Can’t you see they’re destroying the history of the Air Nomads?”

“But look at all these amazing inventions!” Zuko sighed, realizing he was going to have to take another approach to make Sokka understand how Aang was feeling. While Sokka had many strengths, sensitivity was not one of them.

“Think of it like this,” Zuko said after a moment of thought. “Imagine that, when you return to the South Pole, there are other people living in your village who aren’t a part of the Southern Water Tribe. They’re living in the homes that your people built, getting food from the same water your people did, but they aren’t treating the land with the same respect that you treat it. Maybe they’re using fishing nets that are polluting the water, or maybe they tore down your family’s igloo for their own purposes. How would that make you feel?”

Sokka frowned. “Annoyed, and angry. I’d want those people gone.”

“That’s essentially what Aang is witnessing now,” Zuko explained. Sokka’s brow furrowed.

“Huh. I didn’t think of it like that,” Sokka muttered, immediately feeling like a bad friend.

Noticing the shift in Sokka’s mood, Zuko said, “Don’t be mad at yourself for that. It took me a while to think that way, too. Mainly because I had Fire Nation propaganda pumped into my bloodstream since I was old enough to walk,” Zuko said dryly, then shook his head. “That’s no excuse, though. I should have known.”

“You were a kid,” Sokka said. “Kids’ll believe anything you say- especially you. You were the most gullible kid I ever met.” Sokka hid a laugh behind his hand, and Zuko rolled his eyes.

“Well, I’m not a kid anymore,” Zuko grumbled. “I was trying to make you feel better, but if you’re just going to tease me, I won’t bother.” Zuko picked up his pace so he was walking ahead of Sokka.

“You’re just mad ‘cause I’m right,” Sokka called. Zuko didn’t even look back at him, but continued to storm ahead. Spirits, he really *was* in a mood. Sokka wondered if all of this was just from being woken up, or if Zuko’s mysterious sickness was making him irritable.

Zuko was, in fact, irritable because his whole body was bothering him and he didn’t know why. He *should* be feeling great after spending time in the hot springs, resting, and generally doing things that would improve his health, but every day he was feeling worse. His whole body ached, his mind was working too slowly, and he felt... *wrong*. Zuko wished he had a better way to describe it, but that was all he could come up with.

An extended tour of the Northern Air Temple was doing nothing to help Zuko’s aching body and his bad mood. Zuko had stopped talking a while ago, even to Sokka, and was instead focusing all his energy on not snapping at someone.

As they walked across a bridge, Teo said, “I think this place hasn’t been touched by anyone. You guys can spend the night over here.”

Finally, Zuko thought. His pace quickened a bit at the thought of a bed to lie on.

Teo led them into a circular courtyard in the center of a building which Zuko recognized to be the monks’ sleeping quarters. Normally, Zuko would feel guilty lying in the bed of someone who his great-grandfather had killed (which was why, when he was exploring the Air Temples a couple years ago, he had insisted on sleeping in a tent outside the temple), but he was hurting so much that he didn’t care.

“It’s nice to see at least one part of the temple that isn’t ruined,” Aang said. Zuko murmured in agreement, drifting towards one of the closed doors. All he could think about was lying down, sleeping-

“LOOK OUT!” A jarring shout snapped Zuko out of his trance, and Zuko barely had time to jump out of the way as pieces of a rock wall came flying towards him. Zuko’s muscles cried out in pain at the sudden movement, and for a moment, all Zuko could do was lie there. He

watched, immobilized, as a few men walked out from the new crater in the wall. “What the doodle?! Don’t you kids know to stay away from construction sites? We have to make room for the bathhouse!”

Gripping his staff so hard that his knuckles were white, Aang shouted, “Do you know what you did?! You just destroyed something sacred- for a stupid bathhouse!”

Groaning slightly, Zuko sat up. One of his gloves had nearly been pushed off when he’d fallen, revealing gray veins on the inside of his wrist. Quickly, Zuko pulled the glove back into place, hoping that no one had seen.

Fortunately, everyone else seemed to be focused on Aang, who yelled, “This whole place stinks!” Aang proceeded to blow some construction equipment off the side of the mountain, then said, “This is a sacred temple. You can’t treat it this way.”

Seeing the young Avatar, who so rarely got angry, in such a state made Zuko furious. Ignoring the pain radiating through him, Zuko stood and drew his swords. “My name’s Lee, and my companion here is the Avatar. Normally I’d give you five minutes to explain what you’re doing here, but since I’m in a mood today, you have one. And you’d better make it good, or else I’m going to do something with these swords that’ll help my mood.” Zuko leveled his sword at the man who had been talking’s neck.

“Whoa! Hey,” Sokka exclaimed.

“That’s my dad,” Teo shouted at the same time.

“Lee,” Katara said, resting a hand on Zuko’s shoulder, “we can’t just go around threatening people because we’re in a bad mood.”

Refusing to look at her, Zuko said, “Forty-five seconds.”

“Lee, you remember that conversation we had yesterday about respecting Air Nomad culture?” Zuko’s gaze went to Aang for a second, and the man tried to dive out of the way.

“Oh no you don’t,” Zuko snarled, quickly raising his other sword to block the man’s motion. His swords made an x-shape with the man’s neck barely an inch away from each blade. Once the man was trapped, Zuko said, “Yes, I do, Aang.”

“Well, above all else, we were pacifists. Even if there were wars going on, people from any nation could come to the Air Temples and put all of that aside. Violence isn’t allowed here, and if you hurt this man here, on this sacred ground, you’d be disrespecting me and my entire culture,” Aang explained carefully.

“But aren’t you mad at him?! He’s destroying this temple!” The man flinched at Zuko’s outburst.

“Yes, I am upset, but this- this isn’t the answer. This isn’t how my people would solve this problem. So please, put your swords down, and let’s just talk about this.”

“Fine,” Zuko muttered. He lowered his swords but didn’t put them away. “But I’m watching you.”

As the man launched into an explanation about how he had come to live here, Zuko leaned up against a wall, wiping sweat from his brow. For someone wearing a tank top in the middle of winter in the north, Zuko was sweating an awful lot. It annoyed Zuko greatly, especially since he didn’t have a particular reason to be sweating so much.

“Lee, are you coming?” Zuko blinked, then looked up at Sokka, who was waiting expectantly for an answer. “Teo’s dad is going to show me some more of his inventions.”

“No, I- I’m going to rest for a little bit,” Zuko replied. Sokka’s brows knitted together in concern.

To Teo’s dad, Sokka said, “Can you give me a minute? I need to talk to him.” Teo’s dad nodded and stepped back, eager to increase the distance between himself and Zuko.

“I’m fine,” Zuko muttered, anticipating Sokka’s question.

“No you’re not, I can tell. Seriously, what’s wrong?” Zuko could tell from Sokka’s eyes that he wasn’t going to leave until he got an answer.

With a sigh, Zuko replied, “I don’t know. Really, I don’t, so stop looking at me like that. I’m sore and tired and- I don’t know.”

Sokka took Zuko’s hand in his own and his frown deepened. Zuko was still so cold, even colder than Sokka. Could Zuko have gotten some sickness from one of the towns they stayed in? It was certainly possible with how much they’d been traveling, and it was the only explanation that made sense to Sokka. After all, Roku had warmed Zuko up after Zhao’s, and Kyoshi had healed all his other life-threatening conditions. Sokka shivered at the thought of that night, remembering how fragile and helpless Zuko had been, and how fragile and useless he himself had felt.

“I’ll be okay,” Zuko said, squeezing Sokka’s hand reassuringly, “I promise. If I really am sick, the waterbenders at the North Pole should be able to figure out what’s wrong. They have really good healers up there.”

“Okay,” Sokka said. He nodded. “Okay, yeah, you’re right. We won’t stay here long. Just- get some rest for now, okay?”

Yawning, Zuko said, “That won’t be hard. You be careful.”

“I always am,” Sokka said with a wink, then ran off to follow Teo’s father. Rubbing his eyes, Zuko retreated into one of the rooms.

Relieved that the boy with the scar was gone, Teo turned to Aang and said, “Hey, I want to show you something.” Aang started to walk with him, but stopped when he realized Katara wasn’t following.

“Are you coming?”

“No, I think I’m going to take Appa and go practice my waterbending,” Katara responded. As they had gotten closer to the North Pole, Katara had gotten more nervous about her own abilities. She really wanted to learn from one of the masters at the North Pole, but she worried her basic abilities wouldn’t be good enough for the masters’ standards and they would refuse to teach her.

“Okay. Have fun,” Aang said with a wave, walking away with Teo.

Katara flew Appa down the mountain and into the forest below, then found a nice river to practice in. She got in a good hour or so of practice, but in the middle of practicing her octopus formation, she heard voices coming from nearby. As quickly as she could, Katara got out of the river and hid behind some bushes.

“We’ve been walking for hours,” a man’s voice complained. “Are you sure we’re not lost?”

“Come on, it hasn’t been that long,” a woman’s voice replied. “And we have to do it. This guy, the Machinist-”

“I thought he was called the Marxist?”

There was a pause, then the woman said, “Oh, you’re right, dear. It’s the Mechanist.” Katara peeked through the bushes, catching a glimpse of three people. Two of them were dressed in Earth Kingdom clothes, but one of them was wearing Water Tribe blues. The man in blue grunted in frustration.

“It doesn’t matter what his name is! We’ve got to get to him as soon as possible!” As Katara watched, the man pulled some water from a nearby stream and sent tiny ice spikes shooting at a nearby tree.

Katara gasped. “You’re a waterbender,” she said, standing. At her sudden appearance from the bushes, the trio drew their weapons- a boomerang and two sets of war fans. “And you two are Kyoshi Warriors!”

“Oh, you’re just a kid,” the man said, putting his boomerang away. “Why were you hiding in the bushes?”

“I didn’t know if I could trust you or not,” Katara replied, “but now I do!”

“You shouldn’t trust people you randomly run in to in the woods,” the woman who had been speaking said. She had short black hair styled in a similar fashion to Suki.

“Okay, but- but- I’m a waterbender too!” Katara eagerly ran over to the river, forming a sphere of ice in her hands. She proudly showed it off to the trio, then melted it and sent the water back into the stream.

“So you are,” the man said in awe. “What are you doing down south?”

“Huh?” Katara was confused for a moment until she realized the man must believe she was from the North Pole. “Oh, no, I’m from the South pole.”

“For real?” Katara nodded, and the man grinned. “I am too.”

The black-haired girl frowned. “If you’re from the South Pole, how did you get all the way up here?”

“I’ve been traveling with the Avatar. We’re headed to the North Pole to learn waterbending together, but we stopped at the Northern Air Temple for a bit.”

“The Northern Air temple, huh? That’s where we’re trying to go, actually,” the man said, scratching his beard. “See, the thing is, there’s a guy there we need to fix our boat. We actually stole it from him-”

Katara gasped. “Hey, it isn’t good to steal!”

The man simply shrugged. “The ship was gonna go to the Fire Nation if we hadn’t taken it. Anyway, we need it fixed. Well, we got it fixed at the port we went to, but it was a really shabby repair. We heard rumors that this Mechanist guy was living at the Northern Air Temple these days, and figured if anyone could fix it well, it’d be him.”

“Oh. I don’t agree with you stealing, but I can take you to the Northern Air Temple. Just give me a moment.” Katara fished the bison whistle out of her pocket and gave it a puff. Within a minute, Appa had landed across the river in a small clearing.

“I’ve got this,” the man said, walking to the edge of the river. He cracked his knuckles, then made a few motions with his hands. A bridge of thick ice formed across the river. The man stepped back, then gave an exaggerated bow and gestured to the bridge. “My lady.”

Katara laughed, then stepped onto the bridge. She was followed by the Kyoshi Warriors, who were far slower and far less used to walking on ice than Katara. The man followed behind them, laughing when one of the warriors tripped.

“Oh come on, Shizu, don’t tell me you-” Losing his focus on the ground, the man’s foot slipped and he fell on his butt. The two Kyoshi Warriors burst into laughter as the man grumbled and got to his feet. “Shut up,” he groaned as the taller girl punched his arm.

As Katara and the three strangers climbed onto Appa, Aang and Teo arrived at the sealed door. “You ready?” Teo nodded, and Aang got into position to open the door. Spiraling columns of air shot from Aang’s hands, travelling through the lock’s intricate tubes and forcing the door open. Aang took a deep breath, hoping to see some surviving relics from his people.

Instead, in a cruel twist of fate, the first thing Aang saw was a giant piece of red fabric with a giant Fire Nation emblem sewn into it. The more Aang looked, the worse it got- spears were leaning against the wall, there was a table with a collection of strangely shaped knives, and a giant spiked speartip was hanging from a pulley system.

“This is a nightmare,” Aang murmured.

At this moment, Zuko had just left his room with his stomach rumbling. “Hey,” he said to the first person he found, “you know where I can get some food?”

The man Zuko found squeaked, then stammered, “Y- yes. Just down this hallway, take a right-”

“Wait, you’re scared of me? Why?”

“Y- you tried to kill the Mechanist earlier,” the man replied, wringing his hands.

Rubbing his temple, Zuko replied, “Yeah, sorry about that. I was confused and- wait. Wait, did you say the Mechanist?!”

“Eek! Y- yes, that’s what we call T- teo’s father-” Forgetting entirely about his empty stomach, Zuko charged down the hallway, cursing himself for leaving his swords in his room. He didn’t have time to go back and get them- not now, not when he knew Sokka was there with the Mechanist. Zuko had to find Sokka as fast as he could.

In front of the newly unlocked door, a wide-eyed Teo said, “This- this has to be a mistake. This can’t be- I’m going to go get my father.” With trembling hands, Teo turned his chair around and headed away from the horrible room and towards his father’s office.

Unbeknownst to Teo, his father was already on his way to the room with Sokka in tow. He had just figured out a solution to the gas leak problem when his alarm bell went off, signaling that the room was being opened. Sokka and the Mechanist took the stairs to reach the room, which was much faster than the route Teo was using.

“Hey, slow down,” Sokka wheezed as the Mechanist sprinted down the stairs. “What’s the big emergency, anyway?”

The Mechanist didn’t answer, so Sokka was forced to follow him. They ended up in front of a big open doorway in which Aang was standing. Sokka recoiled at the sight of Fire Nation reds in the room, and immediately turned to the Mechanist. “You’re working for the Fire Nation?!”

“You don’t understand,” the Mechanist started, but Aang whirled around, angrier than Sokka had ever seen him.

“You’re not just working for the Fire Nation, you’re making weapons for them! And you have the audacity to live here?! You, who provides weapons for the Fire Nation- you live and keep the weapons here, where my people- who were pacifists!- were slaughtered by the very nation you’re making weapons for?!” Aang’s eyes narrowed and started to glow, along with his tattoos.

Of course, this was the exact moment that Katara walked by with the trio of wanderers. The waterbender man was the first to spot the Avatar, and gawked at him. “Holy sh-”

“Aang!” Katara gasped and ran towards her friend. The wind was starting to pick up around the young Avatar, encircling him, but Katara ran to him anyway. “Aang, I’m here,” Katara

shouted, hoping her words would reach him.

Aang's eyes widened, and the wind around him grew still. Katara slowly walked over to Aang, then wrapped him in a hug. "Hey, I'm here. I'm here." Aang closed his eyes, and his tattoos stopped glowing. He leaned against Katara and started to cry.

"She wasn't kidding about the whole Avatar thing," the waterbender man muttered to his companions. He and the rest of his group walked into the formerly sealed room, looking around at all the Fire Nation goods. Katara and Aang came inside afterwards, followed by Sokka and the Mechanist.

"Nice haircut," Sokka said, noticing the Water Tribe man's wolf tail.

The waterbender shot a grin back at Sokka. "Nice boomerang." To the Mechanist, he said, "You're the guy who works for the Fire Nation, right?"

"Yeah, you'd better have a good explanation for this," Sokka said, crossing his arms and giving the Mechanist his best intimidating glare.

"I do! See, the thing is--"

"You get away from them!" Before the Mechanist could finish, Zuko burst into the room, narrowed eyes focused on the Mechanist. "I know who you are now- you're the Mechanist, you work for the Fire Nation!"

Lowering his staff, Aang asked, "How'd you figure that out?"

"A couple years ago, I stole a boat from a guy who lived near here called the Mechanist. He made it for... for..." Zuko trailed off, eyes widening as he caught sight of all the weaponry in the room. He paled and his breath hitched as his eyes traveled over some objects leaning against a wooden post. Slowly, Zuko walked over to them.

"Hey, that's funny, these people stole a boat from them too," Katara said, gesturing to the other waterbender and the Kyoshi Warriors (who had strange expressions now.) Zuko didn't hear her. He knelt down to examine what had caught his eye- a couple metal wheels with spikes on them. They were small, and could easily be mistaken for gears, but no gears would be sharpened like that. Next, Zuko moved to the set of oddly shaped knives, which Zuko knew were made not to kill but to hurt as much as possible. Finally, Zuko stopped in front of a table with a small circuit on it. He hit the switch, and something clicked in Sokka's mind as a small, electric-powered bulb lit.

"You haven't just been making weapons," Sokka whispered. His heart was in his throat. "You've been making torture devices."

"I have to make whatever they tell me to," the Mechanist started to explain, but he was interrupted by a laugh. It was a dark, humorless laugh that was a twisted perversion of the sound Sokka had tried so hard to hear earlier. A chill ran down Sokka's spine as he looked back over at Zuko, who still hadn't turned to face them.

“They work,” Zuko said, in a tone that was almost happy.

The Mechanist blinked, wondering if he had misheard. “Excuse me?”

Zuko spun around, and Sokka’s heart dropped from his throat to the pit of his stomach. Zuko was- for lack of a better word- *smiling*. He was smiling in the sense that his lips were upturned, yes, but it was nothing like any of the different smiles Sokka had come to know and enjoy. On the surface, Zuko’s smile looked sadistic and almost cruel, but there was something so *broken* in Zuko’s eyes that Sokka didn’t feel fear when looking at him, but rather pity.

“Your machines work,” Zuko said, taking a step forward. A strangled noise came from one of the Kyoshi warriors, but Zuko didn’t even turn to look in their direction. His eyes, which had a feral glint to them, were locked on the Mechanist. He took another step forwards, and the Mechanist took a step back. “I would know. I’ve had the- ah, *privilege* of testing them, and I can assure you, some of them are *indescribably* painful.”

The Mechanist took another step back, and Zuko let out another sickening laugh. “What’s the matter? You should be happy your inventions work, and that they’re being used on rotten traitors like me. Long live the Fire Nation, right?” The Mechanist stepped backwards, bumping into Sokka.

A near fatal mistake, as it turned out. The instant the Mechanist came into contact with Sokka, the smile melted off Zuko’s face. Zuko’s lip curled as he screamed, “Don’t touch him!” Every flammable object within a twenty foot radius of Zuko spontaneously caught on fire. Zuko lunged forwards, eyes blazing with rage, and the flames around him swirled and rose until they burned white-hot.

Just as quickly as he lunged, though, Zuko fell. It was as if a hand had grabbed him and plucked him out of the air. With a shudder and a cry of pain, Zuko collapsed at the Mechanist’s feet.

Sokka gasped and rushed to Zuko’s side. Zuko wasn’t twitching or convulsing per se, but his body was jerking as if he was trying to avoid invisible assailants. He was sweating and shaking and- “Your veins,” Sokka breathed. He grabbed Zuko’s wrist and extended Zuko’s arm, revealing the grey lines running along it. “Oh Tui and La, your veins.”

As she knelt down next to Sokka, Katara shouted, “Does anyone have water?!” She quickly scooted aside, surprised by the odd trio she’d found joining Zuko by his side.

“Lee,” the Kyoshi warrior with the short black hair said, “It’s me, it’s Mine. What’s wrong with you?”

Through a red haze of pain, Zuko saw Iluak, Mine, and Shizu above him. “H- how-?” Zuko forced himself to sit up, sending him into a fit of coughing. When the coughing finally stopped, Zuko felt something wet on his face and wiped it with the back of his hand. He was surprised to see his hand come away red.

“Tui and La,” Iluak groaned. “Whose idea was it to leave both of our healers on the boat?!”

Shizu raised an eyebrow and pointed to Iluak- because, after all, it had been his own idea. Zuko, however, missed this exchange entirely, as another wave of pain had run through him and he started to cry.

Sokka immediately took Zuko into his arms, leaning Zuko's head against his chest. He'd seen Zuko cry many times, but never from pain. Once, back when they were young, Sokka and Zuko had been playing and Zuko fell on his hand. Zuko had gotten up, laughing, and continued to play as if everything was fine, but when Sokka and Zuko came home and took their mittens off, two of Zuko's fingers were bent out of place and another was twisted. Surprised by the sight of his mangled hand, Zuko had started to cry. It turned out Zuko had dislocated one of his fingers, broken another, and, in a twist of fate, broken and dislocated a third finger. Sokka remembered watching the tribe's healer pop Zuko's fingers back into place, amazed by how the prince only slightly flinched each time. For Zuko to be crying now, he must have been in terrible pain.

Zuko didn't notice his own tears. He was trying to force his mind to work through the pain to figure out why his crew was here. However, as soon as the possibility that the Mechanist could have hurt them occurred to Zuko, an all-consuming rage burned inside Zuko, leaving him unable to think.

The flames, which had become orange and dim when Zuko had fallen, soared back to life, burning higher and hotter until they became blue. Zuko pushed Sokka aside and stood, creating a ring of blue fire around himself and the Mechanist. He stepped forward- and stumbled, falling to his knees with a scream, pulling at his short hair. Even though the flames were flickering out, Sokka could see more grey lines appearing on Zuko's arms and the back of his neck, making it almost look like they were cracks in Zuko's skin.

Everyone in the room was frozen in horror by the scene that was unfolding (even the Mechanist, who found himself too scared to even run away), but none more so than Sokka. Even still, Sokka was the only one able to find his voice. "Zuko, stop," he pleaded, "look at yourself! You're going to burn yourself out!"

At Sokka's voice, Zuko stood again and the flames regained their uncanny blue color. "I don't- care," Zuko panted, straining to create a blue fireball in his hand. Sokka knew Zuko was charging up, preparing to deal the final blow, but there was nothing Sokka could do. With a deep, rattling breath, Zuko cried, "It doesn't matter what happens to me- I won't let him hurt anyone else, especially not my friends!" Zuko started to release the fireball, but it died in his hand. He collapsed again, but this time, the fires went out completely, leaving the room illuminated only by the tiny electric light and a few rays of daylight creeping in through small windows.

Sokka didn't realize he had started moving until he was at Zuko's side, trying to shake him awake. "Zuko? Zuko! Zuko, wake up!"

Iluak was the first to recover. With a swift punch to the head, he knocked the Mechanist out. He grabbed some rope lying on a table (which had somehow managed to escape Zuko's flames) and shoved it into Shizu's hands. "Tie him up," Iluak said, voice shaking, then turned to Katara. "You need to take me back down to my boat." When Katara didn't reply, Iluak snapped his fingers in front of her face, making her flinch a bit. "Hey, kid. We have to go to

the boat.” Katara nodded, eyes still fixed on Zuko. Iluak grabbed her arm and started leading her down the hallway. He didn’t mean to be rough, but he could tell Lee- no, Zuko- wouldn’t last long without help.

Coming back to herself, Katara started to walk faster. “What’s on the boat?”

“The best healer in the world,” Iluak said as they reached Appa. He climbed into Appa’s saddle as fast as he could. “If anyone can help L- Zuko, it’s him.”

A couple minutes later, there was a loud thunk on deck, followed by a shouted “NATTIQ!” When nobody came to the deck within thirty seconds, Iluak decided to resort to drastic measures. “You, come with me. If one of them freezes me, you gotta unfreeze me,” he said as he led Katara into the kitchen. Grabbing a couple of pans, he added, “You may want to cover your ears.” Katara did as she was told, then followed Iluak as he banged the pans together, repeatedly shouting Nattiq’s name.

It didn’t take long for a blast of water to knock Iluak over, freezing him to the floor. Two people and an isopuppy came out of a room nearby, groaning and grumbling. “Do that again and I’ll kill you,” a girl with freckles and eyeliner said. Noticing Katara, she said, “Who are you supposed to be?”

Before Katara could answer, the other person shouted and sent water flying towards Katara. Quickly, Katara deflected it, freezing it to the wall next to her.

“You’re a waterbender,” the boy who had attacked Katara said, amazed.

“Yes, I am. Are you Nattiq?” The boy nodded. “Okay, good. I’ve heard you’re a really good healer, and my friend needs you.”

“I’m a healer too,” the girl said. “I’m pretty good, but I’m still learning. I can probably help your friend out- it’d be good practice for me.”

Katara started to object, but Nattiq said, “Don’t worry, I’ll come with you guys too. If it’s too serious for Kesuk to handle, I’ll take care of it.” Nattiq walked forward and promptly tripped over Iluak.

“Oh, right! I should unfreeze you,” Katara remembered. She started to melt the water encasing Iluak, but before she could finish he was up on his feet and running to the deck.

Noticing how fast Iluak had gotten up, Kesuk picked up her own pace. “That bad, huh?”

“It’s pretty bad,” Katara replied. “My friend, he- he just collapsed, and his veins-”

“What in Tui’s name is that?!” Nattiq was gawking at Appa, who grunted back at him. Nikko’s tail wagged happily at the sight of a sky bison, and she barked and started running in circles around Appa.

“This is Appa, our flying bison,” Katara said, climbing onto Appa’s head. “He’ll take us to my friend.”

“There is *no* way I’m riding that thing,” Nattiq said, crossing his arms. “I’ll walk, or-”

“There’s no time for this!” Iluak had been wringing his hands, anxiously waiting in Appa’s saddle for the others to climb aboard, but now he stood angrily. “It’s *Lee*! I mean Zuko- gah, you know who I’m talking about!” Nattiq and even Kesuk (who had been keeping the same bored expression the whole time Katara had seen her) adopted expressions of shock, which quickly morphed to horror as they hurried over to Appa.

Nattiq tried to ask, “Are you sure? What’s wrong with him?” However, Appa took off as he was speaking, so what Nattiq really ended up saying was, “Are you sure?
WhaaAAAAAAAAAAaAAAAAAAAA!!!!”

As Nattiq continued to scream and cling to the side of the saddle, Kesuk said, “I think my friend was trying to ask what happened to him, or maybe what’s wrong with Lee- Zuko.”

“You guys know him?” Katara thought for a second, then her eyes lit up. “Oh! You’re his crew, aren’t you?!”

“At your service,” Kesuk replied. “So, what happened to him?”

“The Fire Nation got him,” Iluak said softly, “right?” Katara nodded, and even Nattiq fell silent (though, he did cling to the saddle even tighter). Kesuk swore and looked off into the distance, but Nattiq was still silent.

“No,” he finally said. “No, that can’t be- he got away, remember? I saw him make it into the eye of the storm.”

“He did, but his boat flipped over,” Katara remembered. “They pulled him out of the water.”

“No, he had to have gotten away,” Nattiq insisted. Tears were forming in his eyes. “He had to. The ship would’ve come after us if he’d been caught-”

“Nattiq,” Iluak murmured. Nattiq was starting to cry.

“He can’t have been captured, they would’ve done horrible, unspeakable things to him-”

“Nattiq.” Iluak’s voice was firm as he touched Nattiq’s shoulder. “I know how you feel, but you have to keep it together. L- Zuko needs you.”

“Okay,” Nattiq whispered, trying to keep his voice steady. “You’re right.”

In the temple, Sokka had already come to the same realization as his sister. Zuko was still gasping for air, and the gray was pooling under the skin beneath his eyes, which couldn’t be good, but at least Zuko was breathing and his eyes were open. (Though, there was still a rattle in Zuko’s chest when he breathed, and he was coughing a lot, and he’d coughed up blood a couple more times, and Zuko had almost slipped out of consciousness and Sokka was forced to yank Zuko’s hair to keep him awake, which he hated to do, he hated to hurt Zuko, but Sokka *needed* him to stay awake, to stay with him-)

“Did you-” Zuko coughed, then tried again. “Did you guys g- get captured after we split up?”

“No,” the girl with short black hair said, running her hand along Zuko’s arm. “But you did, didn’t you?” Zuko nodded and coughed again. “And they did this to you.”

“Not sure,” Zuko replied. “This- this is new.”

“Are you in pain?” Sokka stiffened at the girl’s question.

“No, not really. I- I can’t really feel anything anymore.” Zuko coughed, then swallowed hard. Tears pooled in his eyes again. “Am- am I gonna die?”

“No,” Sokka said, clutching Zuko even tighter. “No, you’re staying right here with me.”

“I don’t understand this at all,” Zuko whispered. “I was getting better. You rescued me, took care of me, and I was- I was getting better.” He let out a low, miserable laugh. “I guess I should’ve known it was too good to last.”

“Hey, Zuko, don’t talk like that,” Sokka said, shaking Zuko slightly. “I’m still right here, okay? I’m not leaving.” Sokka cupped Zuko’s cheek in his hand, and Shizu and Mine exchanged a glance. It became apparent to them how Sokka felt about Zuko.

“I know,” Zuko replied softly, leaning into Sokka’s hand. Shizu and Mine shared another look. Evidently, Zuko felt the same way. “Sokka, thank you.”

Sokka gulped. “For what?”

“For saving me,” Zuko said with a harsh cough. “Now, and back then.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean when we first met. You were the first friend I ever had, and I’ve never had another friendship like yours. All this stuff that I’ve done- breaking the waterbenders out of prison, becoming the Blue Spirit, even saving the Avatar when we were at Pohuai- I don’t think I would have done it if it wasn’t for you.” Zuko sighed, reaching up to hold Sokka’s hand against his cheek. “What I’m trying to say is, you changed my life. Thank you.”

“Zuko, you really need to stop talking like that,” Sokka said, hearing his voice rise in pitch. “You’re talking like- like you’re going somewhere. You’re not going anywhere.”

“I don’t know about that, Socks.” Zuko smiled a bit as he uttered the nickname. “I’m getting awful lightheaded.”

“You’re gonna be okay, L- Zuko. Iluak went to go get Nattiq, and he’ll heal you up,” the black haired girl said.

“That’s the thing,” Zuko said, but was interrupted by another fit of coughing. “I’ve already cheated death once. When Sokka rescued me, he- he said I stopped breathing. I should have died, but I didn’t. I- I think the spirits took pity on me. Before I died, I think- I think they wanted me to know that there were still people who cared about me, that you guys don’t hate me- you don’t, right?”

“We never did,” Mine said. Next to her, Shizu nodded.

“Maybe- maybe the spirits wanted me to know that, so they gave me a few more days. But now- now it’s time for me to-”

“Stop it,” Sokka interrupted, pulling Zuko’s hair again. “Stop. Just stop. There’s got to be a logical reason that this is happening to you. Maybe, uh, when we were in that cave, you got bit by a rat-viper, and it took five days for the venom to set in? No, that doesn’t make sense- maybe you ate something and there’s a parasite in you? No, we’ve been eating the same food-”

“Sokka.” Zuko was calm, far too calm for someone in his situation. “Sokka, it’s okay. Whatever happens next, I- I’m ready.” Zuko smiled softly up at Sokka, who finally started to cry.

“Well, I’m not!” Zuko tried to say something, but Sokka wouldn’t let him. “And I really don’t care if the spirits want you or whatever, because I want you here more! Come on, Zuko, you’re the most stubborn person I know. You can’t give up now.” Wiping his own tears off of Zuko’s face, Sokka whispered, “You’re real special to me, you know that? It’s like- I feel a certain way about you, but I don’t quite know what it is... it’s almost like-”

Before Sokka could figure out what the feeling was, four people charged into the chamber and surrounded him.

“Oh spirits, kid, you look even worse,” Iluak said at the sight of Zuko lying in Sokka’s arms. Nattiq and Kesuk knelt next to Zuko, while Katara hung back with Aang and Teo.

“I still can’t believe my dad would do this,” Teo sniffled. “Working for the Fire Nation- that’s evil!”

“I’m sure he had a reason,” Katara said uncertainly, looking down at the Mechanist’s unconscious, tied up form. “We’ll just ask him when he wakes up, okay?”

Kesuk frowned as she pushed water back and forth over Zuko’s chest. “There’s something seriously weird going on here, but I can’t tell what it is. Nattiq, can you try?” Nattiq nodded, and Kesuk handed the water over to him. Nearly as soon as the water in Nattiq’s hands started glowing, he gasped. “What? What is it?”

With wide eyes, Nattiq exclaimed, “He’s been poisoned!”

Chapter End Notes

i've actually been dropping hints that zuko's been poisoned since chapter 12

i was always surprised that aang didn't go in to the avatar state in this episode tbh

THE CREW IS BAAAACCCKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
AND NEXT CHAPTER WE GET A NIKKO-ZUKO REUNION!!!!!!!

yeah ok so sokka hasn't really seen this side of zuko before. wonder how he's gonna process that

thanks for reading! <3

The Northern Air Temple: Worlds collide

Chapter Notes

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

In unison, everyone (except Nattiq and the Mechanist, who was unconscious) exclaimed, “Poisoned?!”

“I haven’t been poisoned,” Zuko coughed weakly. Nattiq raised an eyebrow, then held his hands over Zuko’s chest and jerked them upwards towards Zuko’s head. Zuko started to cough again, but this time a small silver orb surrounded by water came out of his mouth. “Huh,” Zuko mumbled, “maybe- maybe I was poisoned. But- but I didn’t drink it?”

“Poisoned,” Sokka whispered, horrified. “Poisoned- wait, what do you mean you didn’t drink it? When were- you were offered poison?”

“With Zhao,” Zuko murmured, eyes half-lidded. Though he hated to do it, Sokka pulled on Zuko’s hair again. “Ow- ow! I’m awake, I’m awake. When I was with Zhao, he- he offered me poison. Of course I refused, but before he could force me to drink it, he g- got called out of my cell by one of his men. Out of s- spite, I kicked the bowl over, and by the t- time he got back, it had all evaporated and he thought I drank it. But I- I didn’t.”

“Spirits,” Nattiq muttered, “that’s why. You should have just drank it.”

Sokka gasped, “Hey!” He pulled Zuko back into his arms and shot a vicious glare at Nattiq.

“No, wait, I didn’t mean it like that,” Nattiq sputtered. “It’s just- the vapor, it’s absorbed a lot quicker-”

Iluak interrupted, “So you know what’s wrong with him?”

“Yeah, it’s-”

“I couldn’t find my dad,” Teo said, wheeling his chair into the room. He froze at the scene before him. “Uh, what’s-”

“Here, we’ll tell you what happened,” Katara said quickly, grabbing Aang’s arm and leading him out of the room. Teo followed her.

“So can you fix him?” Kesuk had never seen Zuko in such a state and wanted Nattiq to heal him as soon as possible.

“Yeah, but-”

“You’re letting the guy who just told him to drink poison heal him?! No way,” Sokka said, pulling Zuko into his chest.

Nattiq let out a huff of frustration. “I didn’t mean-”

“What’d you mean by saying that anyway, Nattiq?” Mine frowned down at him (which was a rare occurrence, as Mine was so short.) “That was-”

“Would everyone just *shut up?!* ” Nattiq’s exasperated shout silenced everyone in the room. “Finally. Okay everyone, listen but don’t talk. I’m only going to say this once. Lee- Zuko, I mean- has mercury poisoning. He has the worst case of it I’ve ever seen- he’s practically dripping with the stuff. The thing about mercury is, it gets absorbed a lot easier by your respiratory system than by your digestive system. So, L- Zuko, if you had drank the poison, I’d have a lot less of it to remove. That’s all I meant by the comment, kid, so could you please let go of him?”

Nattiq was looking expectantly at Sokka who, after a moment of hesitation, cautiously allowed Nattiq to take Zuko away from him. Resting Zuko’s head on his lap, Nattiq angrily pointed a finger in Zuko’s face. “As for you- you’d better not get any stupid ideas about drinking poison. You should *never* drink something that’s potentially harmful.”

“But- but you said-” Zuko couldn’t even finish his sentence before breaking into a harsh fit of coughing. When the coughs stopped racking his body, Zuko slumped limply against Nattiq, fresh spots of blood on his lips. “Ugh...”

Swallowing hard, Nattiq said, “Right. Talk later, heal now.” To the group surrounding him, Nattiq said, “I need as much fresh water as you can bring me, as well as some sort of sealable container to put the poison in. I don’t want it evaporating and getting back in his body. With those things and a few hours, I should be able to heal him.”

Katara, who had been listening from outside the room, came in and offered Nattiq her pouch of water. “If the four of us waterbenders go down to the river, we should be able to bring more than enough water back.”

Iluak raised an eyebrow. “Four of us?” Katara pointed to Aang, and Iluak nodded. “Ah, right. You’re the Avatar. Well, come on, then- no time to lose.”

“Wait,” Teo called. He still looked shell-shocked by the news that his father was working for the Fire Nation, but a bit of color was starting to return to his face. “There- there’s some barrels in our storage area. I’ll show you where they are.”

“I suppose we should move him somewhere else, then,” Mine said, looking at the Mechanist.

“Please don’t hurt him,” Teo said quickly. “I mean- even if he works for the Fire Nation, he’s still my dad.”

Shizu smiled empathetically and nodded, then made a few hand signs. “She’s saying don’t worry,” Mine interpreted. “We just want to figure out what’s going on here. We’re not going to hurt anyone unless we have to.”

Seemingly comforted by this, Teo nodded and headed off with the waterbenders. Shizu nudged Mine and signed, “We *aren’t* going to hurt anyone unless we have to.”

“I know, I know,” Mine replied. “But if he did hurt Lee, I might just have to hurt this guy.” Mine picked the Mechanist up under his arms and not-so-carefully dragged him out of the room with Shizu.

“Poisoned,” Sokka repeated again, still in shock. “You’ve been poisoned this whole time, Zuko. How did I not realize?”

“Well, when you f- found me, there were a lot of other things w- wrong with me,” Zuko coughed. “I d- don’t blame you for not noticing I- I was poisoned.”

“What do you mean there were other things wrong with you?” Nattiq’s voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. “I mean, it’s not like he could be much worse than this. He’s got enough poison in him to kill ten elephant rhinos.”

(Okay, maybe Nattiq was exaggerating, as it was only enough to kill five elephant rhinos, but it was still an insane amount of poison. There was no way Zuko would be able to survive getting seriously injured *and* being poisoned this badly, right?)

“He was a lot worse when I found him,” Sokka said quietly, shivering slightly at the memory. “He had severe hypothermia, and his injuries... they were really, really bad. We- we almost couldn’t save him.” Nattiq’s stomach twisted into a knot at the thought of his captain even more helpless than he was currently.

Noticing Sokka’s discomfort, Zuko squeezed his best friend’s hand tightly. “But- but that should make you feel better now. You’ve already s- seen me survive a lot worse th- than this,” he explained.

“But you shouldn’t’ve had to survive worse than this!” Sokka’s sudden exclamation made Zuko wince, so Sokka quickly lowered his voice. “You shouldn’t’ve been forced to suffer like this. You don’t deserve this, Zuko, not at all.”

Before Zuko could protest, Teo came back into the room holding a glass bottle. “Here,” he said, handing the bottle to Nattiq, “will this work to keep the poison in?”

“It’s perfect,” Nattiq replied, uncorking the bottle and setting it down next to him. He deposited the drop of mercury he’d already removed from Zuko inside the bottle, then gathered more of Katara’s water in his hands. “Now could you two leave, please?”

“No way,” Sokka said, scooting even closer to Zuko. “I’m staying with him.”

“Sokka,” Zuko started, but broke into another cough.

As Zuko coughed, Nattiq explained, “This is really sensitive stuff, and I need to focus completely on removing the poison or I could end up hurting him. I can tell you care about him-” a lot more than someone who had just met him normally would, Nattiq didn’t say- “and the best thing you can do for him right now is give us some space.”

“But-”

“Fresh water delivery, coming right up!” Iluak strode into the room with a barrel over his shoulder, followed by Kesuk, Katara, and Aang. At the sight of the four barrels carried by each of the waterbenders, Nattiq’s shoulders became (slightly) less tense. “How’s this?”

“That should be plenty,” Nattiq said with a stressed smile. “Really, it should be,” he added after noticing the way Kesuk was looking at him. “I’m just- well, there’s a lot of work to do, and I should really get started.”

“Alright, everyone, that means get out,” Kesuk said, rolling her barrel next to Nattiq and putting a hand on Aang and Katara’s shoulders. As she guided them outside, her piercing eyes glared back at Sokka and she said, “That means you too, kid.” Sokka shook his head, refusing to move. Crossing her arms and narrowing his eyes, Kesuk started towards him, but Iluak grabbed her shoulder. Kesuk conceded, and Iluak walked over to Sokka.

“Hey,” Iluak said gently, “how about you come and guard the door with me?”

Sokka blinked up at him. “Th- the door?”

“Yeah. Nattiq really needs to focus on healing L- Zuko, and he can’t do that if a ton of people keep barging in here. That’s why we need to guard the door.” Sokka looked back down at Zuko. “And if anything happens, we’ll be the first to know about it. Other than Nattiq, of course.”

There was a long pause, then Sokka finally said, “Okay.” He stood up, hesitated, then took off his jacket, placing it next to Zuko. “He- he might get cold.”

“Thank you,” Nattiq said, addressing both Sokka and Iluak.

As Sokka closed one side of the door, he hesitated. From across the room, Zuko’s eyes met his. Zuko was still deathly pale with gray veins and blood on his lips, but he was still aware enough to give Sokka a soft smile. *It’s okay*, Zuko’s expression said. *You can leave. Everything will be okay.* As if Sokka was the one who needed reassuring.

Sokka closed the door without smiling back.

Noticing Sokka’s mood, Iluak nudged Kesuk and whispered, “You mind bringing Nikko up here? I think this kid needs her.”

Kesuk nodded and went to find Katara. She passed the room Shizu, Mine, Teo, and Aang were in, where the Mechanist was just waking up.

“What the doodle happened,” the Mechanist groaned, rubbing his head. He had been untied at Teo’s insistence, but Shizu and Mine were blocking the room’s only exit. Aang narrowed his eyes down at the Mechanist.

“We found out you’ve been working for the Fire Nation,” he said, crossing his arms.

“Explain all this, now!” Teo had tears in his eyes as he shouted. The Mechanist lowered his head.

“It was about a year after our home was destroyed. Fire Nation soldiers found our settlement- you were too young to remember, Teo. I begged them to spare us, and they asked what I had to offer. I offered my services. Then a couple years ago, I tried to escape them by moving our settlement here, but they found us again. As my punishment, I had to make anything they asked of me, not just weapons.”

“Including torture devices,” Mine said. The Mechanist gave a nod in response, then turned to his son.

“You must understand, I did this for you.” Teo closed his eyes, turning his head away. He left the room without speaking another word to his father. Aang started to leave too, but the Mechanist called, “Wait. There’s something else you should know.”

Back outside of the room where Zuko and Nattiq were, Sokka was anxiously sharpening his boomerang. “Do you really think we should have left them in there? With all the weapons and torture stuff,” Sokka blurted out.

“It’s not like we could move him in that state,” Iluak replied, making sure to keep his voice calm and level. He could tell this kid was a ball of nerves and he didn’t want to do anything to set him off. “You said your name’s Sokka, right? You know, L- Zuko mentioned someone named Sokka a couple weeks back.”

“He did?!” Sokka’s eyes bulged out and he gaped at Iluak. “What’d he say, what’d he say?!”

“Whoa, chill out,” Iluak said, raising his hands. Clearly, this kid had a little crush on the Blue Spirit. “He was calling out for someone named Sokka as he was sleepwalking off the boat.”

Sokka seemed to deflate a little. “Oh, he told me about that. Did he ever say anything else about me?”

“No, he didn’t, but don’t take that to heart. If someone asked what his favorite color was, he’d get all guarded and snap back something like, ‘it’s none of your business,’ or ‘that’s a personal question,’” Iluak replied, mimicking Zuko’s voice as well as he could. He wasn’t quite as good at it as Kesuk, but Iluak’s Zuko voice was passable. Sokka gave a halfhearted laugh, then looked back at the doorway and sighed.

“I still can’t believe he was poisoned this whole time,” Sokka murmured. “He was doing so well, he was recovering so quickly, and then- and then-” Sokka shook his head and swallowed hard. For once, Sokka had been optimistic, believing that Zuko’s sickness wasn’t too urgent, that it could be cured when they reached the North Pole. When he had seen how quickly Zuko had recovered from the hypothermia and his injuries, Sokka had let his guard down. He had been so excited to see the flower finally bloom that he hadn’t noticed it wilting away before his very eyes.

“Hey, he’ll be okay. You won’t find a better healer in the world than Nattiq, and you won’t find anyone tougher than Lee, either. Sorry, I meant Zuko.” Iluak scratched at his beard. “You know, he really doesn’t look like a Zuko- but I guess he doesn’t look like a Lee, either.”

“Iluak, we’ve got a problem,” Mine said, approaching the two Water Tribe warriors with Shizu and Aang by her side.

“Please tell me it’s that we’ve run out of Nattiq’s favorite kind of sea prunes and not something to do with the Fire Nation,” Iluak replied. At the stony expressions of his companions and the Avatar, Iluak groaned. “When are they coming?”

“Tomorrow.” Iluak groaned again.

“Guess that means we’ll have to move the boat,” Iluak grumbled, standing up. As he said it, Kesuk walked in, holding a squirming isopuppy in her arms. “Hey, Kesuk, seems like we’re gonna have company- bad company. We’re gonna have to move the boat.”

“Ugh, are you serious?! You could’ve told me before I went down to get Nikko,” she said with an eyeroll. As soon as she set the isopuppy down, it ran straight to the door, sniffing and whining. “She must smell him in there. You, mini-Iluak, you make sure she doesn’t get inside and bother Nattiq.”

Sokka was left to assume that “mini-Iluak” was himself, as Kesuk didn’t bother to elaborate before turning right back around to get back on Appa with the other waterbenders and the two Kyoshi Warriors. Even if she had asked Sokka to come with her, Sokka didn’t think he would have.

“Hey, puppy,” Sokka said, reaching out and petting one of the isopuppy’s soft, pointy ears. “You want to see him too? Spirits, you look a lot like my dad’s isodog- or maybe not, I haven’t seen him- er, her, in a while. You look a whole lot like Bato’s isopuppy, though.” The isopuppy whined and looked at Sokka with big blue eyes, then sat down next to him and rested her head against his shoulder. “So you’re going to wait with me, then? Thanks.”

Sokka looked out the window, where the sky was just starting to turn orange as the sun set. “I’ll wait all night, if I have to.”

~ ~ ~

Sokka jumped slightly as the Mechanist’s special candle gave off four loud pops. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up and stretched. Beside him, Nikko shifted in her sleep.

It had been about five hours (if the candle was correct) since the crew had returned from moving the boat. They had discussed the situation at hand, but no decision had been reached on what they should do- fight or run. Sokka wanted to fight, but he didn’t want to risk the lives of innocent people at the temple. There was also Zuko to worry about. If found, would he be recognized as the Fire Prince or as the Blue Spirit? Either way, it seemed, would be bad, and would lead to Zuko being taken away from Sokka again.

Sokka sighed and started toying with the mini war balloon again. He’d been playing with the design to pass the time as he waited, but nothing he seemed to be doing was working.

The door creaked behind him, and Sokka leapt to his feet. An exhausted-looking Nattiq stood behind the door.

Wringing his hands, Sokka asked, "How is he?"

"Fine, 's fine. 'M going to bed," he mumbled, stumbling out of the door. Nikko stirred, then rolled over in her sleep.

"I'll show you where the beds are in a minute," Sokka said, taking a deep breath before peeking through the door.

Zuko was perched on a chair with his legs crossed. He was leaning back, looking up at a glass bottle in his hand with a contemplative look. Sokka's breath caught in his throat as Zuko swirled the bottle, making the liquid inside shine in the moonlight filtering in through the small windows. Even in the dim moonlight, Sokka was struck by how much healthier Zuko looked.

"Zuko," Sokka whispered. The prince started, then his eyes traveled to Sokka.

"Sokka," Zuko said, face relaxing into a smile. He stood up and easily walked over to Sokka—a far cry from his condition earlier, when he couldn't even stand.

"So... you're all better?" Zuko nodded, and the knot of stress in Sokka's chest started to loosen. But he knew Zuko too well to stop worrying completely. "Prove it."

A little mischief crept into Zuko's expression, and he said, "You remember the first time we went penguin sledding?"

"Uh, I remember you almost drowned," Sokka replied, not knowing where Zuko was headed with this.

"You wanted me to prove that I was okay then, too. And I did this." Zuko lit a small ball of flame in his hand, then shot it up in the air and made it burst apart. He did it a few more times, creating the illusion of a fireworks display in the temple room. Sokka grinned, remembering how his igloo had been lit up in a similar way back then.

He pulled Zuko into a hug— and Zuko was *warm*. Warm, like a person and a firebender should be. Warm, like the little flame inside him was burning brightly once more. Warm, like Sokka remembered him to be.

Zuko returned Sokka's hug, and the knot in Sokka's chest dissolved completely. "Don't scare me like that, okay? If you ever do anything like that again—"

"Not planning on it, Socks," Zuko murmured, rubbing circles into Sokka's back. They stayed like that, pressed against each other, until a loud whine came from the door. Sokka and Zuko split apart to see Nikko, ears perked and tail wagging, standing in the doorway.

"Nikko!" Zuko grinned as the isopuppy charged towards him, laughing even as she knocked him to the ground. It was the same kind of grin Zuko had given Sokka as they danced, and Sokka was elated to see it again so soon. The entire back half of Nikko's body was wagging along with her tail as she clambered all over Zuko, licking every part of him her tongue could reach. Even though Zuko was petting her vigorously with both hands, Nikko would still

whine softly at him, as if to say *never, never, never do that again, never leave again*. “I missed you, girl.”

“If you don’ come out here,” Nattiq grumbled, lumbering into the doorway, “ ‘M gonna fall asleep rig’ here.”

“Oh, right,” Sokka said quickly, feeling sheepish. “I told Nattiq I’d show him where the bedrooms are. Zuko, do you want to-?”

Zuko was already getting up, carrying Nikko in his strong arms. “Yeah. I’m tired, too, and I’m sure you are. Let’s get some rest.”

They strolled through the temple, with Zuko carrying Nikko and Sokka guiding Nattiq. It was surprisingly peaceful, Sokka thought, and maybe he should do this again with Zuko sometime. Sokka frowned as he remembered that the temple wouldn’t be so peaceful tomorrow.

“There’s something we need to talk about.” Sokka said it to Zuko, but Nattiq was the one who answered.

“In the morning,” Nattiq mumbled.

“I’m with Nattiq on this one,” Zuko said. Nikko whined and started licking Zuko’s face, so he gave her a scratch between the ears. “We’ll both be refreshed in the morning. I’m already feeling a lot better, but some time in the sun will do wonders for me.”

They deposited Nattiq in one of the temple’s bedrooms, then went to their shared room. The two small beds were already pushed together, and Sokka and Zuko climbed in without even changing clothes. Just as they got comfortable, Nikko jumped up on the bed, sticking her nose in Zuko’s face and whining for his attention.

“Sorry,” Zuko groaned, rolling over to face Nikko. “Are you okay if I sleep like this?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Sokka scooted closer to Zuko until his chest was pressed against Zuko’s back and wrapped an arm around him. Though Sokka tended to toss and turn before falling asleep, testing each different position to find which was most comfortable, Zuko always took the same position- facing Sokka with his arms wrapped around his Water Tribe friend. It was weird at first to have Zuko facing away from him, but Sokka quickly realized he liked sleeping this way.

When Zuko slept facing away from Sokka (or without him, but Sokka hoped that wouldn’t be the case for a long time), he would curl up partially, so even though he was physically bigger than Sokka he seemed so much smaller. With Zuko curled up in his arms like this, breathing deeply and radiating heat, Sokka knew that Zuko was safe, at least for tonight. That thought, more than anything else, helped Sokka sleep easily.

He’s safe, Sokka thought, lightly running a hand through Zuko’s short hair. *He’s safe, he’s safe, thank Tui and La, he’s safe.*

Chapter End Notes

chapter is alternatively titled: Sokka and Zuko discover spooning

ok i know i didn't really go into a ton of detail with the mercury poisoning this chapter but that's mainly bc 1) the main focus this chapter was getting the poison out and 2) nattiq was too tired to explain anything at the end of the chapter BUT i am planning on explaining a lot more about it. i've done too much research NOT to explain more about it, tbh. and if i don't have enough space in my fic to explain clearly, i'm already planning on making a meta post about the poisoning on my tumblr (@nvrlostword) so i'll explain it there

NIKKO!!!!!!!!!!!!!! NIKKO NIKKO NIKKO NIKKO NIKKO NIKKO NIKKO
NIKKO NIKKO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

disclaimer: do not drink hazardous fluids. please. i'm begging you don't do it

The Northern Air Temple: Battle

Chapter Notes

cw: mentions of past transphobia (??? i'm not sure if it's transphobia or just ignorance, but i'm tagging it just to be safe- it's at the end of the chapter)

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

“So, that’s all of it?” Sokka gave a sideways glance to Zuko, who nodded. “Tui and La, that *is* a lot of poison.” Zuko and Sokka were sitting on a bench in one of the courtyards in the temple, sharing some of the Yukumo mochi for breakfast. “And you’re keeping it... why?”

“I’m not sure, really,” Zuko said, frowning down at the bottle. “Because if I have it on display, it’d be kind of cool? Like, I could say ‘hey, someone tried to poison me with this ridiculous amount of mercury but I still didn’t die. Do you really want me as your enemy?’” Zuko sighed and shook his head. “I know that’s not the main reason I’m keeping it, but I’m not really sure what that reason is right now.”

“That’s okay,” Sokka said. He petted Nikko, who was sitting on Zuko’s feet. “As long as it’s in there and not in here.” As he said the last word, Sokka poked Zuko’s chest.

“Yeah, as long as it’s got the lid on, it’s harmless. So, what was it you wanted to talk to me about last night?” Sokka sighed and closed his eyes, wishing he could talk to Zuko about something more pleasant.

“People from the Fire Nation are on their way here now, as we speak. The Mechanist is supposed to give them the plans for a few weapons- there’s some kind of drill, a war balloon-”

“Who is it?” Zuko tried to keep his voice level, but Sokka could hear the anxiety behind it.

“It’s not him,” Sokka said, resting a hand on Zuko’s forearm. Zuko visibly relaxed. “It’s some war minister who the Mechanist’s been working for since he started with the Fire Nation.”

“Probably Qin, then,” Zuko muttered bitterly. Sokka raised an eyebrow.

“You have a history with him?” Zuko shook his head.

“He’s not terrible, and I’m sure I could take him in a fight. It’s just- the last time I saw him was... he was there when...” Zuko got a faraway look in his eyes and subconsciously reached for his scar. Sokka understood immediately. Frowning, Sokka took a closer look at it.

It was an old burn scar that had long since healed, Sokka could tell that much. Zuko must have still been a kid when he got it. The darkest part of it was around his eye, but various

shades of red and pink were spread around his cheek and all the way back to his ear. There was a specific shape to the scar, but Sokka couldn't quite place it. Sokka had simply accepted it as part of Zuko when he found him in the cooler, but the scar had to have come from somewhere, and Sokka started to wonder.

(Had this been before or after Zuko had become the Blue Spirit? Could it have something to do with Zuko's banishment?)

As Zuko gazed off into the distance, Sokka realized his scarred eye was narrowed. He supposed it had always been narrowed, but Sokka felt like he was noticing it for the first time.

(Did Zuko's eyelid work properly? Did Zuko's *eye* work properly?)

Zuko sighed, closing his eyes and leaning back against the bench. "Never mind. It's nothing."

(A scar like that *had* to have hurt, even for a firebender. How much pain did Zuko experience in that moment when he got the scar? How much had he screamed?)

Sokka shook his head slightly, trying to shake away the thoughts that were suddenly swarming him. Wrapping an arm around Zuko's shoulders, Sokka said, "Hey, nothing's gonna happen to you, okay? I'm not gonna let anything happen to you."

"Yeah, I know." Slightly annoyed, Zuko added, "Usually I can take care of myself. What you've seen this past week is the exception, not the norm. Now come on," Zuko said, popping one last mochi in his mouth, "let's go talk to the others about this. Do they know yet?" Zuko's honey colored eyes met Sokka's, and Sokka's breath caught in his throat. Zuko frowned and crossed his arms. "What, got something to say?"

Sokka wanted to tell Zuko that he wouldn't have to take care of himself, that he *wanted* to take care of Zuko. That Zuko shouldn't have to take care of himself all on his own, and that Zuko deserved to have someone take care of him.

Instead, Sokka said, "They know already."

"Good. Now hurry up." Zuko led Sokka through the temple, gathering his crewmates. Once they were all together and seated in one of the temple's rooms, Zuko said, "So, I assume you all know that the Fire Nation is coming here this afternoon?"

"WHAT?!" Evidently, nobody had told Nattiq.

As Iluak filled Nattiq in, Shizu signed, "What's the plan?"

With a frown, Zuko said, "I don't think we should fight them." Zuko huffed in annoyance as Sokka gaped at him. "Sokka, I'm not as stupid as I was when I was a kid."

Sokka was about to say that Zuko still had done some pretty stupid things in the time they'd been together since Pohuai, but Iluak interrupted, "Wait, you two knew each other before?"

“Yeah, for a few months when we were kids,” Zuko said dismissively, as if this wasn’t the most juicy bit of his past that he’d ever shared with his crew. “And Sokka, I’d like to fight them- we’d probably win, since we’ve got my crew and the Avatar on our side- but there are civilians here and there’s no time to evacuate.”

“So what, we just let them take the plans and use them to murder people?” Sokka crossed his arms.

“For today, we let them take the plans,” Zuko said neutrally, “but tonight, who knows? They might just get a visit from the Blue Spirit.”

Immediately, Sokka perked up. “Oooh, you guys are gonna do pirate stuff?! Can I come?”

Before Sokka had even finished his question, Zuko said, “No, it’s too dangerous.”

“‘Too dangerous’?! I broke into Pohuai Stronghold to save you!”

“Yeah, I’ve gotta agree with him on this one,” Iluak said, looking at Sokka sympathetically. “Sorry, kid. You’re just too young.” At this, Zuko grinned and stuck his tongue out at Sokka.

“Wha- But- he’s only ten months older than me!!” Sokka’s sputtered response made the crew turn on Zuko, making him squirm slightly under their intense gazes.

“Zuko,” Kesuk said, “how old are you?”

“You know I don’t like personal ques-”

“He’s sixteen,” Sokka cut in, knowing it could be hours before Zuko admitted defeat and told them his age. Zuko gave Sokka a scathing glare, but Sokka continued, “His birthday’s in the ninth month, so he hasn’t been sixteen for long.

The crew members were deafeningly silent as they continued to stare at Zuko. “Don’t expect me to start answering personal questions now,” Zuko said, stepping back. “The less you know about me, the better it is for you. People might interrogate you for information about me, and-”

“You’re just a kid,” Mine said softly. “This whole time- you’ve just been a kid this whole time? Spirits, you’re younger than Su-”

“Wait, but you said you were banished,” Nattiq interrupted, wringing his hands. “When you rescued us from prison, you said you had been banished. But that means that back then, you would’ve only been fourteen- what in the world could a fourteen year old have done-”

“You broke into a *maximum security* prison *by yourself* when you were *fourteen*?! What in Tui’s name were you thinking?!”

Zuko started to back up slowly, holding up his hands and stammering out half-formed responses as the crew pounded him with questions. Sokka supposed Zuko deserved it for withholding such information from them, but still, he hated to see Zuko getting overwhelmed like this.

“Hey,” Sokka said, stepping between Zuko and his crew, “I know you guys have a lot of questions, but you have to remember, it was only yesterday that he had a ton of poison in him. He’s tired, and there’s been a lot that’s happened to him- stuff that he might not be ready to talk about.”

“All of that is irrelevant right now, anyways. What we need to do is start heading down the mountain so we can reach the boat by nightfall,” Zuko said.

“No, for now, you should stay hidden,” Sokka said, making Zuko glare at him once more. “You guys can just take Appa later, okay? Why use all your energy walking down the mountain?”

“Hm. Good thinking, Sokka.” Zuko’s gaze softened, and Sokka let out a small sigh of relief. He knew Zuko would never hurt him, but spirits, those eyes could be *intense*. “Let’s get somewhere private- where the minister won’t stumble upon us.”

~ ~ ~

Hiding and waiting for nightfall to attack the Fire Nation ships was a good plan. Maybe it would have worked, too, if any of them had remembered to tell Aang about the plan.

Aang had walked in on the group while Sokka was in the middle of telling the crew about his and Katara’s travels with Aang. Sokka swore he saw Zuko go through all five stages of grief as Aang described his and Teo’s confrontation with the war minister.

“This is why I never plan anything,” Zuko groaned, banging his head on the table he was sitting at.

“Hey- no, plans are good,” Sokka reassured Zuko (who didn’t look convinced). “This just means we have to make a new plan.”

“Aang, what are we gonna do? How can we possibly keep them all away?” Katara fidgeted with her fur collar.

“I’ll tell you how,” Aang said confidently. “We have something they don’t- air power. We control the sky.”

“The Fire Nation wouldn’t be expecting an attack from the air,” Zuko admitted. His hand was on his chin, the way it always was when he was thinking. Zuko had picked the gesture up from his uncle, but rarely realized he was doing it. “It’d be a hassle to drag catapults all the way up here, so the only weapons we’ll be looking at are fireballs and simple spears.

“And Shizu says their firebending will be weakened,” Mine said after Shizu made a few hand signs. “Because of the altitude and the temperature. Is that right, L- Zuko?”

“Yeah, but don’t call me that.” Sokka snorted.

“What, your name?”

Zuko gave Sokka a withering stare, then said, “Just call me Lee. It’s easier that way, and it will help me avoid getting found out.”

“I want to help,” a voice said, making Zuko jump and draw his swords. The Mechanist was standing at the edge of the bridge they were on, hands held up in surrender.

“Good. We’ll need it,” Aang said, slowly pushing one of Zuko’s swords downwards. Zuko scoffed, but he put his swords away. Sokka frowned, suddenly remembering something Zuko had said earlier. *As long as it’s got the lid on...*

“Hey, that’s it!” Sokka’s sudden exclamation made Zuko draw his swords all over again. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you, put your swords away- I think I’ve got an idea for the war balloon!”

~ ~ ~

Sokka and the Mechanist were nearly done with the war balloon when Iluak burst into the room. “Are you guys done yet? They’re only a few minutes away,” he panted.

“Almost,” Sokka replied. He was staring intensely at the balloon with his tongue stuck out as he attached the lid.

“How much ‘almost’? Because if we don’t start moving that balloon now, they’ll be here before we can get it up and running.” Sokka gritted his teeth in frustration.

“We’ll have to come out late, then,” the Mechanist said. “Better to wait and have a working balloon than for it to come crashing down.”

“Okay, I’ll tell them we’re starting without you. Lee, you coming?” Zuko had been sharpening his blades, but looked up at the sound of his fake name. Though he hadn’t been much help with the balloon, he insisted on staying with the Mechanist and Sokka as they worked on it (because he still didn’t trust the Mechanist, and especially didn’t trust him enough to be alone with Sokka.) But Zuko knew he had no choice but to leave now, as they needed him in the battle.

“Yeah,” Zuko said, standing. With a menacing glare at the Mechanist, Zuko snarled, “If you try anything-”

“Eep! Wouldn’t dream of it,” the Mechanist squeaked. With that, Zuko started to walk out of the room with Iluak, but a hand around his arm stopped him.

“Wait,” Sokka said. Zuko was surprised that Sokka’s concentration on the war balloon had been broken (and by himself, nonetheless). Sokka’s bright blue eyes were filled with concern. “Are you sure it’s safe for you to go out there as the Blue Spirit?”

Zuko tilted his head slightly. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“What if that’s why your dad tried to kill you? If he knows you’re the Blue Spirit, and word reaches him that the Blue Spirit was spotted at the Northern Air Temple...” Sokka trailed off, but he didn’t need to finish his sentence. Zuko squeezed Sokka’s shoulder.

“Your *dad* tried to kill you? I thought it was that Zhao guy,” Iluak said, squinting at Zuko.

“Well, it was, but my father was the one who ordered him to,” Zuko said matter-of-factly.

“Oh. Right. Your father, the Firelord.” Iluak shook his head. Spirits, he would never get used to this.

“And my father doesn’t know, I’m certain of that. Zhao told me that my father wanted me dead because, now that the Avatar has returned, there was a chance that I could have returned home. Zhao was even stupid enough to show me the letter where my father had said it,” Zuko boasted, as if he hadn’t just said the most horrible thing the others in the room had ever heard.

“Your- your own father- he would rather you, his son, be killed than returned home?” The Mechanist’s voice was shaky as he thought of his beloved Teo. In order to spare his son, the Mechanist had created weapons for the Fire Nation, which was led by a man who *wanted* his own son dead. The Mechanist’s resolve hardened, and he silently vowed never to work for the Fire Nation again.

Zuko blinked and looked around, not realizing why everyone around him was staring at him in horror. “Yeah, he did. It’s not all that surprising.” Zuko shook his head and added, “That’s not the point, though. The only one who knows I’m the Blue Spirit is Zhao- and actually, me making an appearance as the Blue Spirit here will force him to keep his mouth shut.”

“Oh?” Sokka’s voice was weak, and he still felt faint from what Zuko had said about his father.

“See, if there are reports of the Blue Spirit here,” Zuko continued, not at all fazed, “then Zhao can’t tell my father that I’m the Blue Spirit, because then he’ll know that Zhao didn’t actually kill me. And we want my father to think I’m dead, or he’ll send other people to kill me and label me as a traitor- that’s why I want to keep going by Lee. So I should really head out there and make sure that as many people as possible see the Blue Spirit.”

Before he could stop himself, Sokka pulled Zuko into a tight hug. “Just- stay safe, okay?” Zuko was finally warm again, and Sokka hated to send him into battle, where that warmth could disappear forever. The image of Zuko lying helplessly in the cooler flashed before Sokka’s eyes, and he squeezed Zuko tightly.

“Yeah. You too.” Still keeping his arms around Zuko, Sokka pulled away slightly, then pressed his forehead against Zuko’s. The last time Sokka had been this close to Zuko... Sokka’s face heated up at the memory of Zuko’s last day in the South Pole. Zuko’s lips had been so soft and warm- Sokka wondered, were they still the same?

Zuko’s cheeks were starting to turn pink as he remembered the same day. He remembered saying goodbye to Sokka on the glacier, exchanging gifts with him, and, of course, he remembered the kiss. Zuko knew from his tutors that sometimes a kiss could be a sign of a close friendship between two boys, but nothing more. That there couldn’t *be* anything more between two boys. But when Zuko had kissed Sokka, he’d felt something inside that he couldn’t forget if he tried.

He probably doesn't remember; Zuko and Sokka thought at the same time, pulling away.

Iluak and the Mechanist, who had been watching the whole scene with disbelief, snapped to attention. "Let's not keep them waiting," Zuko said, gesturing to Iluak. Iluak blinked, then followed Zuko, trying to process everything he'd just seen and heard.

Zuko and Iluak sprinted outside, where Kesuk and Nattiq were. Kesuk spotted them first.

"Good, you're here. We've got a pro--"

"They're climbing up the walls and we're out of bombs!" Zuko looked over to where Nattiq was pointing, noticing grappling chains attached to the side of the mountain. The four of them started to run over there, but Zuko stopped suddenly, causing Nattiq to come crashing into him. "Ow! What's your problem?!"

"Do you guys remember Whale Tail Island?"

"I remember how awful the food was there," Kesuk muttered. "They couldn't even stew sea prunes right."

Nattiq's eyes lit up. "Oh," he said, looking at the heaping piles of snow covering the mountain. "You want us to-?" Zuko nodded, sliding his mask into place.

Kesuk and Iluak looked at each other, then grinned. The four of them split up into a diamond formation with Zuko at the front, walking towards the chains on the edge of the mountain. There weren't any tanks or soldiers on the mountain yet, but Zuko knew it was only a matter of seconds. Zuko glanced back to find his waterbenders had disappeared from sight, and smirked under his mask.

Having run out of bombs, the residents of the Northern Air Temple could only watch as Zuko stood on the mountain, swords drawn. Rubbing his goggles, Teo asked, "What's he doing?" Aang and Katara shrugged in response.

Sokka was just loading the final bomb onto the war balloon when the Mechanist said, "Hey, isn't that your friend?" He turned, shocked to see Zuko standing alone in the snow.

As the tanks reached the top of the wall, they stopped at the sight of the figure in black. Uneasy voices arose from the tanks, calling back and forth to each other about the Blue Spirit. Zuko allowed this to go on for a minute before using his swords to make a loud noise.

"I am the Blue Spirit," Zuko yelled, loud enough that even Sokka could hear him clearly from the war balloon's dock, "and this temple is under my protection! Leave, now!" For a moment, Zuko thought it might actually work. Unbeknownst to him, Zuko's voice was so commanding that even some of the temple's residents started to step backwards and retreat before collecting themselves.

But, of course, Zuko wasn't that lucky. Three fireballs rushed towards him, and Zuko actually *sighed* before jumping. Zuko jumped straight up- and was lifted upwards by a pillar of water until he was looming above the tanks.

Teo gasped. “He’s waterbending?!”

“No,” Katara said, pointing, “Look!” From their vantage point, the people at the temple could see Kesuk crouching behind a snowdrift. Some distance away, Nattiq was behind a boulder, making swirling motions with his hands. “He’s not waterbending, they are!”

From up above, Sokka could see the waterbenders and immediately knew what was going on. Sokka grinned. “You know, you can actually be pretty smart sometimes,” he whispered.

Zuko held his swords out at his sides, then slowly brought his arms together in front of him. A wall of ice formed following his movements, and when Zuko lowered his hands, the column of water slowly faded. Once he was behind the ice wall, Zuko dropped his swords and pumped his fists in the air. Sokka couldn’t help but laugh at the sight. *What a dork*, he thought fondly.

Zuko’s triumph was short-lived, however, as it was only moments later when the tanks busted through the wall of ice. He swore and quickly picked up his swords, scampering to cover. Zuko may not have much common sense, but he knew enough not to take on at least twenty Fire Nation tanks and many more foot soldiers with just his swords. A fireball rushed towards him and he flinched, raising his arms to protect his face, but the burning sensation never came. Zuko opened his eyes to find the fireball had been put out by a big wall of snow. The snow swirled around Zuko, grabbing him and pulling him behind a boulder.

“I’ve got you, Blue,” Iluak said with a smile. Spirits, Zuko had missed his crew.

“Thanks,” Zuko panted. “What should we do now? Looks like their shock has worn off.”

Iluak’s eyes caught something behind Zuko, and he cried, “Look!” Zuko turned to see the bright red war balloon lifting off, carrying a few slings full of slime beneath it.

Iluak and Zuko cheered as the Fire Nation soldiers got slimed, but the victory was short-lived. “They’re out of bombs,” Zuko realized. As soon as Zuko spoke, however, something large and black was thrown out of the balloon.

Iluak squinted. “Is that the engine?”

Zuko’s eyes widened as he realized what Sokka was doing. Sheathing his swords, Zuko screamed, “Get up to the temple, now!”

As Iluak created a column of water to propel himself and Zuko over to the temple, Zuko saw two other columns of water shooting from where Nattiq and Kesuk had been hiding. For a split second Zuko was overcome by relief that they had heard him, and then the explosion hit.

Zuko’s hands flew to his ears and he bit down hard on his lip, trying not to cry out. He doubted anyone would have heard him over the deafening blast, but still, it was a matter of principle that Zuko didn’t want to seem weak. Zuko and Iluak tumbled onto the temple’s balcony, landing roughly but safely. “Ugh,” Zuko groaned, rubbing his head.

“Look, they’re retreating!” Aang’s triumphant shout caused a round of cheers to come up from the temple’s residents, and Zuko groaned again. Today had already been a really loud day, and Zuko was starting to get overwhelmed.

“We’re going down!” At Sokka’s shout, Zuko shot to his feet. Fear welled up inside him as he saw the red war balloon rapidly sinking and, before he could even think about what he was doing, Zuko leapt off the edge of the balcony. Using his firebending to propel himself, Zuko landed in the balloon’s basket, startling the Mechanist so badly he nearly fell out of the balloon.

Incredulously, Sokka asked, “Zuko?” Then Sokka’s eyes widened, and he said, “Be the engine!”

“Pardon?” The Mechanist was confused, but Zuko instantly knew what Sokka meant. Taking a deep breath, Zuko raised his hands above his head. A plume of fire burst from Zuko’s hands, causing the balloon to shoot upwards. Sokka started to cheer, but his breath caught in his throat.

Logically, Sokka knew Zuko was making fire, but it looked like an aurora was contained in Zuko’s hands. It spun and danced in several different colors like it was alive- purple, white, and red threads ducked and weaved through the fire, accompanied by greens and blues. To describe it as beautiful would be an understatement, Sokka thought.

Though Sokka could look at it for hours, the fire only lasted a few seconds. Zuko lowered his hands, looking down at them with wide eyes. “H- how...?”

Sokka didn’t even notice they were falling again until Aang flew next to them with his glider. Tossing them a rope, Aang shouted, “Hang on!” Zuko and Sokka each put one hand on the rope and one hand around each other, while the Mechanist leapt on the back of Teo’s chair. The five of them flew to safety and watched as the war balloon disappeared into the forest below.

“Zuko,” Sokka said softly, “how-”

“I- I don’t know,” Zuko said, looking down at his hands again. He made two small flames in each hand, but they were nothing like before. “I’ve only ever seen fire like that once before, I didn’t think humans could-”

“Lee, if you ever do something as stupid as that again,” Mine said, storming over to Zuko, “I’ll kill you myself!”

“Sorry,” Zuko murmured, still looking dazed.

“Who cares if he did something stupid?! We won,” Aang exclaimed cheerfully, “and we’re all alive! We should celebrate that!”

~ ~ ~

A few hours later, the *Unagi* was headed out to sea with five new crew members- three people, a lemur, and a flying bison. Even though the *Unagi* still wasn't fully repaired, the Mechanist had happily handed over the plans for the ship so a more professional repair could be done at a later time. The Mechanist had also promised Aang not to destroy any more of the temple, and that any new projects would be constructed outside of the temple's grounds. (The Mechanist had been reluctant to agree to the off-site construction, but Aang had simply shrugged and said, "If you don't agree to my terms, you'll have to leave the temple. And if you don't do that, I might have to ask Zuko to help me enforce that." At that comment, the Mechanist was more than happy to accept Aang's offer.) Now, on the deck of the *Unagi*, the group of nine were sharing a hearty dinner.

"Thanks again for giving us a ride to the North Pole," Aang said. "Flying all that way would be hard for Appa, especially if we got lost."

"It's no problem," Iluak replied breezily. "We were going there anyway. Say, that's where Nattiq's from- you excited to be going home, Nattiq?" Nattiq didn't respond, instead looking off into the distance. An uneasy silence fell over the group.

"There's something you should know before we get there," Nattiq said. He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth. Mine, who knew what Nattiq was about to say, squeezed his hand encouragingly. "My tribe... they think I'm a girl."

"What? Why would they-" Zuko abruptly stopped speaking as Mine shot him a death glare.

"Because... well... I have the body of one. I, uh... I have female organs," Nattiq said, awkwardly gesturing down to his pants. "But I always knew I was a guy. Well, no, actually I mean-" Nattiq sighed, smoothing his hair back. "Can I start over?"

"Take as much time as you need," Mine said softly. Nattiq gave her a small, forced smile.

"Okay, so, I was born in the Northern Water Tribe as a female, but ever since I remember, I just... I felt like that was wrong- my gender, I mean. I told my parents a couple of times, but they just told me I was confused and I didn't know what I was talking about. There's been a handful of people in my tribe's history like that- who've felt the same way I did about my gender, I mean, but they were always really sure of themselves, and I- well, I wasn't.

"I know it's hard to imagine, but I was even more neurotic back then than I am now," Nattiq said with a nervous giggle. "I doubted myself a lot. I thought my parents knew everything, and that they were right and I was wrong. So I tried my best to be a girl, but I was never really happy. Then my best friend, who I've been in love with since we were kids, proposed to me. That should be the happiest day of my life, right? But I found myself dreading the wedding more with each passing day. I didn't know what was wrong with me- I mean, I was getting married to the love of my life, and there I was, completely miserable.

"Then one night, about a week out from the wedding, my fiance looked at me and, with the happiest expression on his face, he said, 'I can't wait for you to be my wife.' Of course, he didn't know better," Nattiq said quickly, defensively, "I never told him about any of this. He's a great person, really, and he didn't mean to upset me or anything, but... that comment just broke something inside of me, I think. He said he was getting tired, so I told him to go back

home and go to bed, that I'd be there soon. He gave me a kiss goodnight, said he loved me, and as soon as he was out of sight, I went to the dock, stole a boat, and got as far away from the North Pole as I could."

"And that's when you got captured and imprisoned with us," Kesuk said. Nattiq swallowed hard, then nodded.

"I was only in prison for a few weeks before Lee broke us out. The whole time we were heading to the North Pole, I was terrified that I'd have to go back, but then you two- Iluak and Kesuk, I mean- you approached me. You were impressed that I was such a good healer, and you asked me if I wanted to stick with you guys and Lee instead of going to the North Pole. I asked why me, and Iluak smiled and said, 'It'd be great to have another Water Tribe man with us.' And- when you said that, I just *knew*. It felt so right, when you called me a man- it felt like I wasn't pretending to be someone I wasn't anymore. So I decided to go with you, and, well... you know the rest," Nattiq finished, shifting uncomfortably.

Iluak stood, expression unreadable. Then he burst into tears and pulled Nattiq into a giant hug. "Thanks for trusting us enough to tell us that," Iluak blubbered. "You're no less of a man in my eyes. You've always reminded me of my little brother, and- and I could tell there was something bothering you that you weren't talking about, and I'm so happy you finally did tell me." Nattiq's eyes widened, then closed. He squeezed Iluak tightly, burying his head in Iluak's shoulder.

Zuko, who had never heard of anything like this and was still thoroughly confused, said, "I... uh, I don't really understand this, but I'm still going to support you, and so will the Avatar's group." Zuko gave Katara, Sokka, and Aang a hard stare, but they were all already nodding in agreement. "Spirits, Nattiq, you've saved my life so many times, the least I can do for you is recognize you as a man."

Shizu, Mine, and (briefly) Kesuk joined the hug, and Nattiq felt warmth bubbling up inside of him. He'd been meaning to tell the group this for a while, but always lost his nerve before he could. But now, knowing that he had their support, Nattiq felt like he could conquer anything, even returning home.

They settled back down into the meal, and their lively conversations continued. Sokka, though, found himself unable to focus on the conversation, instead thinking about something else.

"Everything okay?" Of course it was Zuko who noticed something was off with Sokka.

"I'm fine, I just- what's the whole story behind this waterbender prison break, anyway?"

Having overheard Sokka, Iluak interjected, "It's quite the story, really." He was about to start on a long tale when he stopped, frowning. "You know, Lee, I've never heard your side of it."

Everyone was looking at Zuko expectantly now. Normally, Zuko wouldn't cave to them, but Sokka was looking at him with such earnest eyes that Zuko sighed and said, "Fine. I'll tell you. But really, my side's not really as interesting as you might think."

Chapter End Notes

THE CREW SAYS TRANS RIGHTS

sokka: plans are good

zuko: sounds fake but okay

blue fire and rainbow fire, within three chapters??? what is going on here?????????

(maybe it has to do with why zuko is firebending at those points in time.....?)

the mechanist and iluak, watching sokka and zuko's almost kiss: bro are you seeing this shit?

AYYYYYY WE'RE FINALLY GETTING THE STORY OF THE PRISON BREAK
NEXT CHAPTER!!!!!!

Zuko's lost days: prisonbreak

Chapter Notes

cw: implied suicidal ideation (it's a couple lines near the end of the chapter, blink and you'll miss it), violence and blood

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

Zuko had made up his mind. He had sailed the *Wani* to the big island near the Western Air Temple, where he knew the waterbenders were being held. Zuko had set up the lie that pirates had stolen the *Wani*, and that he was stuck in the Earth Kingdom for the time being. He had snuck inland by clinging to the bottom of a wagon of supplies that was being brought to the prison, and was changing into a guard's uniform. Zuko took a deep breath as he slid the helmet on. There was no turning back now.

Zuko stepped out of the armory and strode confidently into the prison. Zuko had learned that if you walked with confidence, people were less likely to question you, and he really didn't want to be questioned tonight. He only had one mission: find Katara and get her out.

Lighting a small fire in his hand, Zuko approached the prison's door, which was guarded by four men. "Finally," one of the guards grumbled at the sight of Zuko. "You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago."

"I was... in the bathroom," Zuko said unconvincingly. The guard shrugged and opened the door, letting Zuko in.

"Next time you oversleep, just admit to it," the guard muttered as Zuko walked past him.

(There was, in fact, a firebending guard who was supposed to be on the night shift that night who overslept. He had been just starting to wake as Zuko was let into the prison, but Tui intervened. Under her spell, the guard slept through the entire night. Nobody except for Tui herself knew this, however.)

The air inside the prison was so dry that Zuko's scar was itching already. Illuminated by the full moon's light, Zuko could see that the waterbenders were being held in cages suspended above the ground. Zuko started to pace across the bridges spanning the area between the cage, checking each cage for a young girl. He checked all the cages once, but didn't find anyone who looked like how he remembered Katara. Zuko paused, thinking for a moment, then realized that Katara had aged a few years since he'd last seen her. He checked every cage again, but Zuko still didn't see any girls Katara's age. He... he must have missed something. Katara *had* to be here.

Kesuk had seen this guard checking the cages twice, and the third time he walked by, she said, "You looking for someone?"

Zuko nearly jumped out of his skin. Instinctively, he drew his swords and pointed them at where the voice had been coming from. When he saw that it had been a waterbender in a cage talking to him, he lowered his swords, feeling guilty.

“You’re an anxious one, aren’t you?” Kesuk frowned at the guard. His helmet hid his face, but he seemed young based on his size and demeanor. And the way he had tensed up, as if he’d been caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to... Kesuk groaned. She thought it must be another one of those new guards having an identity crisis. Kesuk hated those guards in particular because they always ended up being the meanest, as if they had something to prove.

“Hey,” another guard yelled, coming up to Kesuk’s cage, “no talking.” The man banged on the bars of the cage, making Zuko flinch and cover his ears. Looking at Zuko disdainfully, the guard said, “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

“Uh...”

The guard sighed. “I swear, you full moon guards get dumber and dumber. You don’t talk to the prisoners, and they don’t talk to you. Now move along.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Zuko said before the guard could walk away. With an exaggerated sigh, the guard turned back around to look at Zuko. “Aren’t there... aren’t there kids here? Where are they?”

“What do you want with kids, you creep?” Zuko was taken aback by Kesuk’s comment, and the other guard banged on her cage again.

“I said no talking! And as for you, stupid,” the guard said to Zuko, “we got rid of them.”

Zuko blinked. He didn’t understand. “Got rid of them?”

From the cage to Kesuk’s left, Iluak burst out, “Your friends killed them, you fool, they killed them!”

“NO TALKING!” The guard took a stance that Zuko knew all too well- a firebending kata. Before the man could let out his fireball, though, Zuko had grabbed him by the wrist. “What in Agni’s name are you-”

“You killed them,” Zuko said quietly. “Why?”

“Why do you ca- agh!” Zuko twisted the man’s wrist until it made a popping noise, then kicked him to the ground. Iluak and Kesuk looked at each other, then back at the scene currently unfolding.

“Why,” Zuko repeated.

“It was the Firelord’s orders, okay?! He said they were too young to be the Avatar, and that’s the only reason we’re keeping any of these waterbenders alive, anyway. Besides, do you know how much of a pain it was to keep those kids? They were real annoying, always crying so loudly-”

There was a flash of Zuko's swords, and the man fell silent.

~ ~ ~

"Wait, you killed a man?!" Zuko nodded solemnly. "But- but- Zuko, you used to cry when flowers died," Sokka said, not quite believing what he was hearing.

"He was upset about it for a while," Iluak said, "and that makes a lot more sense now, if that was the first time you killed someone. I guess I assumed that someone as skilled with swords as you were had killed at least one person before. And spirits, you were just fourteen, right?"

"Yeah. But it doesn't bother me now." Zuko's face hardened. "The truth is, it wasn't a man that I killed that night. Anyone who can see people being treated the way the waterbenders were and not help them, and who can see kids be killed... that's a monster, not a man. Those people gave up their humanity, and they deserved what happened to them that night."

The table fell silent for a moment until Zuko continued his story.

~ ~ ~

Zuko took a step back, shaking. Before he knew it, six other guards had surrounded him.

"Hey, I know you're new here, but you can't just do that," one of them said. "Fights between guards are- oh Agni, did you *kill* him?"

"You killed her," Zuko said in a hollow voice. "You killed her."

"Drop your weapons," another guard said. "You're surrounded."

"You *killed* her!" Zuko's red-soaked blades clattered against the ground as twin jets of blue fire erupted from his hands. He spun the fire into a disc around himself, then sent it shooting away from him in all directions. All of the guards were either pushed by the fire or jumped off the bridge system, tumbling to the ground below.

Zuko stood there for a moment, panting, before falling to his knees. He... he was too late. Katara was gone, because of him. Zuko thought back to the letter he'd left in his bag on the *Wani*, the only letter he'd ever gotten from his dear friend Sokka. Zuko had thought that maybe, if he saved Katara and brought her back to the South Pole, Sokka would forgive him. That maybe Zuko could have faked his death and lived the rest of his life in the South Pole, never to return home (but in a way, wasn't the South Pole his home? It felt far more like home than the Fire Nation did, especially when Zuko's mother had gone.) But Zuko had hesitated, not knowing if his decision to go against his father and his nation on this had been the right one, and by the time he decided, Katara was already gone, and there was nothing he could do.

No, a small voice inside Zuko said, *there's still something you can do. Maybe not for her, but these people...*

"Hey, Blue," Iluak called out to the kneeling form on the bridge, "what was that all about? You're..." Zuko looked up at him, and Iluak trailed off. There, shining brightly over Zuko's

mask, was his two-toned spirit mark. Noticing the sudden glow, Zuko took off his mask and looked at his reflection in the faceplate.

“I’m... still worthy?” Zuko blinked, staring wide-eyed at his reflection. Then he set his jaw, his eyes narrowed, and he looked up at Iluak. It was too late for Katara, but not for these people. “I’m getting you out of here. All of you,” Zuko added, looking around at the other people in cages.

“What, so we can just get captured again? No thanks,” Kesuk said, rolling her eyes. “I’m not risking that kind of punishment.”

“I- I have a boat,” Zuko said, causing Kesuk and several other waterbenders to sit up. “It’s an old Fire Nation warship. It’ll be big enough to carry all of-”

“Look out, Blue!” At Iluak’s cry, Zuko ducked, narrowly missing a fireball flying towards him. Zuko whipped around to face the guard who’d attacked him. The guard had two more fireballs ready in his hands, but when Zuko turned to look at him, the fireballs faded and the guard’s eyes widened in recognition.

“Prin-” Zuko’s swords flashed again, and the guard fell to the ground, dead. With slightly trembling hands, Zuko picked up the faceplate he’d dropped and hurriedly slid it back into place. He scanned the waterbenders’ faces, but they showed no signs of recognizing him. If Zuko was found out, and word reached his father that he was here...

“Hey, Blue, are you listening?” Zuko blinked, then turned to Iluak again.

“Huh?”

Iluak sighed. “I said you should break those pipes,” he repeated, pointing up at a system of metal tubes above him. “They use those to pump water out of the air. If we can waterbend ourselves out, it’d take a lot less time than you unlocking each cage one by one.”

“Oh, right.” With a deep breath in, Zuko extended his arms towards the pipes, shooting two jets of blue fire at them. Under the intense heat of the blue flames, the metal melted far quicker than Zuko expected, and in no time steam was bursting out of the pipes. As Zuko watched, the steam coiled itself around Iluak’s arms and turned to water, which Iluak used to slice through the metal bars of his cage.

Having noticed how Zuko froze up each time he took out one of the guards, Iluak said, “You focus on bursting the pipes and getting people out. I’ll cover you.”

It was difficult at first, but as more waterbenders were freed and more water released from the pipes, the waterbenders overwhelmed the few unlucky guards on duty that night. Feeling as if he were in a dream, Zuko led the waterbenders to the *Wani*.

The next thing Zuko knew, he was sitting on the deck of the *Wani*, feet dangling over the moonlit ocean. He knew he must have gotten onboard and told someone to sail them north (for Zuko could tell they were headed north, based on the constellations in front of him), but

he had no recollection of doing so. He supposed he should have been worried about that, but Zuko found that he didn't care.

Zuko had failed. He'd gone to save Katara, but he failed. He failed, just like he did at everything in his stupid, miserable life. He looked down at the ocean beneath his feet, thinking...

~ ~ ~

"Then Iluak came over and told me what he and the others had been discussing, and the four of us decided to take my personal skiff and ended up at Yukumo," Zuko said with a shrug. "The other waterbenders took the other skiffs to the North Pole, which wasn't too far away at that point. They sank the *Wani*, I became the Blue Spirit, and no one suspected a thing."

Zuko intentionally didn't say what he'd been thinking about that night, but from the way Sokka stiffened and grabbed Zuko's hand under the table, Zuko knew Sokka had guessed. Shame burned inside Zuko and he found himself unable to meet Sokka's eyes.

"Wow," Aang said with a yawn, "that's really cool that you saved all those people."

"You're giving me too much credit. I only went there for Katara--"

"It doesn't matter who you came there for," Kesuk said. "You ended up saving all of our lives."

Zuko frowned, looking thoughtfully down at his food. "I guess I did- save your lives, I mean. After all, the only reason the waterbenders were being kept alive was because one of them might be the Avatar. As soon as my father found out Aang was alive, he would've had all of you executed."

"What?! But they didn't do anything wrong," Katara sputtered.

"You really think my father cares about that? If he released them, it'd be a sign of weakness, and to keep them locked up would be an unnecessary expense," Zuko said flatly.

"That's horrible," Mine said. She was disgusted, but she couldn't say she was surprised.

"That's just how he is. It doesn't matter who you are- if you're not useful to my father, he'll throw you away without a second thought." There was silence around the table as everyone looked at Zuko, a boy who at age thirteen had been banished by his father, then at sixteen had been ordered to be killed by his father.

If the Firelord could do that to his own son, they wondered, what other atrocities was he capable of?

he was in the bathroom

Nightmare

Chapter Summary

hey! i decided to separate this section from the voyage chapter because, well, it's a lot darker than the rest of the chapter. this chapter isn't necessary to understand the plot, but i think it helps explain the state of sokka and zuko's minds a bit. so if you need to skip this chapter because of the content, you won't really be missing any plot

cw: minor character death, multiple semi-graphic depictions of major character death (IN A DREAM DON'T WORRY), mentions of suicidal thoughts, implied suicidal ideation

Chapter Notes

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

Sokka was alone in the South Pole. It was after a big blizzard, and seven-year old Sokka wanted to be the first one out in the snow. He wanted to impress his father with his igloo building skills, so he'd woken up early to get a head start on construction.

Sokka knew this dream well, and was aware he was dreaming. This was the day his Gramp-Gramp had died. He had been sick for a while and his mind just wasn't what it used to be, so Gramp-Gramp had decided to take a walk in that blizzard in the middle of the night. Sokka, having been the first one to go out in the morning, had been the one to discover the body. Ever since then, Sokka had nightmares about that day (though it had been a while since Sokka had had this particular dream.)

Usually, as soon as Sokka found his Gramp-Gramp, he would wake up, so Sokka began to scan the snow for anything that stuck out. He quickly noticed a lump of snow and, gritting his teeth, he started to dig.

As Sokka excavated, however, he realized something was wrong. It was indeed a person buried in the snow, but the blue, frostbitten hand Sokka uncovered first was too pale to be his Gramp-Gramp, and didn't have the whalebone ring his Gran-Gran had carved for him. There were bruises and cuts on the bare wrist- which was also wrong, because Gramp-Gramp had enough sense to put on his coat before leaving. Confused, Sokka stared down at the swollen blue hand. He realized that it was holding something, so Sokka pried the fingers open to take a look.

Resting in the palm of that hand was a familiar bone carving of a boomerang.

Sokka shrieked, then desperately wiped more snow away and pulled the body out of the snow. Instead of his Gramp-Gramp, it was a scarred, shaven, severely injured boy lying in the snow, looking just like Sokka had found him in the cooler.

“Zuko,” Sokka cried, shaking his friend’s body by the shoulders. “Zuko, Zuko! No, Zuko, please no- Zuko, you have to wake up! WAKE UP!” Zuko’s eyes looked the same way Gramp-Gramps’ had- glassy and blank and like the fire inside him had gone out.

“Zuko...” Sokka buried his face in Zuko’s chest, where there was no heartbeat to reassure him. “I... I was too late. Oh, Zuko,” Sokka sobbed, squeezing Zuko’s unresponsive body as hard as he could, “I’m so sorry...”

Sokka woke up in the Northern Air Temple, sitting in front of the door to the weapons room. He didn’t remember dozing off, but he must have. It looked like it was still the dead of the night, so Sokka sighed and started messing with the war balloon again.

Almost as soon as he started tinkering with the balloon, Nattiq stepped out from behind the door with a grave expression. Scrambling to his feet, Sokka asked, “How is he?”

Nattiq shook his head. “I did everything I could, but... it was too late. He... he’s gone.”

“No,” Sokka breathed, pushing past Nattiq to get into the room. Zuko was lying completely still on the ground, curled on his side. Sokka’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of the dark gray veins visible all over Zuko’s body. Gently, Sokka turned Zuko over so he was lying on his back. Zuko didn’t look like he was in pain, but there were still tears that hadn’t dried on his face.

“No,” Sokka repeated, “no- this isn’t how this happened.” With tear-filled eyes, Sokka looked around, puzzled. “Isn’t- isn’t Nikko supposed to be here?”

All of a sudden, Nikko appeared at Zuko’s side, whining and licking his face. “I’m still dreaming,” Sokka realized, then squeezed his eyes shut. “Wake up, wake up, wake-”

Sokka opened his eyes and immediately groaned in pain. There was a throbbing pain in his head, but when Sokka reached up to touch it, he found his arms were being held behind his back. “Wha-”

“Oh, Zuko, you haven’t told your new friends yet?” Sokka blinked and looked up just in time to see Zhao elbow Zuko in the ribs. He was on the riverbank where he and Zuko had been captured- yes, that’s right, they were captured, Sokka realized. Aang had accidentally burned Katara, Sokka had yelled at Zuko, Zuko had ran away, Sokka had chased him, and Sokka had gotten captured. He must have been knocked out, based on the pain in his head.

“And you’ve done such a good job,” Zuko said, pulling Sokka’s attention back to the conversation in front of him. “Look at how dead I am.”

In an instant, Zhao’s hands were around Zuko’s neck, squeezing and strangling him. Sokka watched in horror as Zhao lifted Zuko off the ground, pinning Zuko to the side of the boat by his neck.

“No- no!! Stop, please! Please, I’ll do anything, I- I’ll take you to the Avatar’s camp, just don’t hurt him, don’t hurt Zuko!” But Sokka’s pleas fell on deaf ears, it seemed. Zuko weakly

tried to claw at the hands on his neck and Sokka cried, "Please, stop! You're killing him! You're- please, hurt me instead! Please- Zuko, Zuko!!"

Zuko went limp, and Zhao carelessly dropped him. Sokka let out a tiny whimper as Zuko's body hit the ground. Zhao was still for a moment, clearly enjoying the horror on Sokka's face, then kicked poor, helpless Zuko into the river. Sokka screamed and, suddenly free to move, jumped in after him.

Sokka tried to swim down to reach Zuko, but all of a sudden, the world around him changed. He was in the burning boat with Zuko in front of him, chained to the wall.

"I want you to stay," Zuko whispered. He was in tears. Then he was underwater, unable to resurface, and Sokka swam down and wrapped his arms around Zuko. Please, let this all just be a dream, Sokka prayed as his lungs started to burn. He closed his eyes and pulled Zuko closer. Please, please just be a dream...

"Hey, stupid, did you fall asleep?" A finger poked Sokka's arm and he gasped. Opening his eyes, Sokka found himself sitting around a fire with Aang, Katara, and Chey. Poking him again, Zuko smirked. "We've all decided we're going to meet Jeong Jeong. I think it's a great idea."

"That's what you said about going to the festival! Why does no one ever listen to me?" Sokka huffed and started to turn away from the group, but Zuko's eyes flashed with fear.

"Sokka, look out!" Zuko leapt in front of Sokka, jumping between him and the pointed edge of a spear. Sokka cried out loudly, and Zuko, with the spear still in him, turned to face him. "Are you hurt?!" Sokka tried to speak, but no sound came out. He probably looked like a fish out of water with the way his mouth was moving, but he couldn't bring himself to care about how he looked.

Because the spear had gone too low, and was in Zuko's chest instead of his shoulder. Silently, Sokka pointed at Zuko's chest. Zuko looked down slowly. "Oh?" Zuko pulled the spear out of his chest, but no blood came out. Instead, liquid mercury poured from the wound and pooled around Zuko's feet. As more of it spilled into the puddle, the mercury started to wrap around Zuko's legs and pull him downwards.

"No!" Sokka sprang forward and grabbed Zuko's hand before he could be sucked under. Zuko's eyes were wide and desperate as he clung to Sokka's hand.

"Don't- let- go," Zuko cried, nails digging into Sokka's arm. Sokka tried to grab Zuko with his other arm as well, but before he could, Zuko's hand slipped out of Sokka's. In the blink of an eye, Zuko disappeared under the surface.

Shouting, Sokka tried to jump in after him, but it was as if the ground had closed in around Zuko. When Sokka stood in the mercury, he was standing in a puddle that wasn't even deep enough to get his feet wet. Kneeling, Sokka started to dig at the ground below him-

But all of a sudden the ground beneath Sokka had turned to ice- ice which he could see a young Zuko through. Somehow, Sokka knew it was the day when he and Katara had taken

Zuko penguin sledding for the first time, but instead of melting through the ice with his hands, Zuko looked mournfully up at Sokka as he started to sink into the dark depths. Sokka pounded on the ice with his hands, desperately trying to break it as Zuko sank deeper-

There was a wet nose snuffling in Sokka's face, and something was licking his cheeks. In a frenzied panic, Sokka pushed the thing off of him.

Nikko (who was the thing in Sokka's face) was used to being pushed away by a panicked Zuko in the middle of a nightmare, but was also used to there being more room on the bed, as there was normally only one person sleeping there. Thus, she curled up, positioning herself so that her carapace would hit the ground when she fell off the bed- but she did not, in fact, fall off the bed. Instead, she was pushed into Zuko, who grunted in surprise and fell to the ground with a loud thump.

Groaning, Zuko sat up and rubbed his eyes. Crossing his arms, he squinted at the bed and grumbled, "What was that for?"

Sokka let out a wail and stumbled over to Zuko. He held Zuko tightly in his arms, wide eyes fearfully scanning the room for whatever horror was going to take Zuko from him next. Maybe if he held Zuko close enough, he could save him, could protect him-

"Sokka." Zuko pulled away from Sokka and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Did you see something? What was it?" Zuko lit a small fire in his hand, using it to do a quick scan off the room. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, so Zuko stood and looked out the porthole. As far as Zuko could see, the sea was calm and the sky was clear. "It doesn't look like-" Zuko turned back to Sokka, who had burst into tears. Taken aback, Zuko again looked around for what could possibly be upsetting Sokka. Noticing Nikko on his bed, Zuko frowned. Zuko had trained her only to get up on the bed when he had nightmares, but he couldn't even remember what he'd been dreaming about-

Oh. Carefully, Zuko knelt next to Sokka, who once again clung to him as if he was the only thing Sokka had left. "You had a nightmare," Zuko said. Zuko felt Sokka nod against his shoulder. He could also feel Sokka quivering as he rubbed Zuko's back. Wrapping his arms around Sokka, Zuko whispered, "Hey, you're safe."

But this just seemed to agitate Sokka, as he shook his head and started to cry harder. Zuko tried again. "You're free, Sokka."

Again, Zuko's words seemed to upset Sokka more. Sokka squirmed out of Zuko's arms and slightly away from him. He tried to say something, but Zuko couldn't understand Sokka through his sobs. Zuko frowned, thinking for a moment before he spoke next.

"It's okay, Sokka, you're okay. I'll protect you-" At this, Sokka clenched his fists and groaned, still crying just as hard. Frustrated (and still a little grumpy from being pushed off the bed and woken up), Zuko exclaimed, "Well what do you *want* me to say?!" Sokka buried his face in his hands, and Zuko immediately felt bad. He wished he could somehow know what was going on in Sokka's head so that he could at least help a little bit-

“Sokka,” Zuko said, taking Sokka’s hands in his own and pulling them away from Sokka’s face, “I’ve got an idea.” Zuko waited for Sokka to meet his eyes before continuing, “I can use my energy reading to see what your dream was about. I’m not going to do it without your permission, but it’d help me to make you feel better. I want to comfort you, but I keep saying the wrong things, I think. And I can’t really understand what you’re saying right now, so this is the quickest way I can help you. So can I...?” Sokka didn’t respond at first, but eventually nodded, sniffing. Zuko gave Sokka a tiny smile, then gently rested his hand on Sokka’s forehead.

Sokka watched as Zuko’s eyes closed, scrunching up in concentration, then opened wide. “Oh,” Zuko whispered, nearly sending Sokka into another fit of tears. Zuko pulled his hand away and looked over at Sokka in shock. “You were dreaming... about me.”

Sokka let out a thin, pitiful wail. Unable to hold Zuko’s gaze, Sokka buried his face in his hands again as his body was wracked with sobs.

Still dazed from seeing images of himself dying over and over, Zuko scooped Sokka up and set him down in the bed. “Nikko, can you guard the door?” At Zuko’s question, Nikko stood and jumped off the bed, planting herself by the door. Some nights, Zuko needed to hold her to be able to go back to sleep, but sometimes he needed someone watching the door after a nightmare. Usually, Nikko could tell which kind of night it was for Zuko, but she wasn’t familiar with Sokka and so she trusted Zuko’s command. If she needed to, Nikko would guard the door all night.

Zuko started to slide into bed next to Sokka, but when he realized that Sokka was covered in sweat and his crying wasn’t slowing down at all, Zuko grabbed the canteen of water he kept on the shelf before sitting on the bed with Sokka.

“Sit up,” Zuko murmured, pulling Sokka into a sitting position. “Drink.”

Sokka took a few small sips, suddenly aware of how his head was pounding. He was more awake now, and was aware enough to know he was truly awake, but his dreams were still vivid in his mind. Part of Sokka still wanted to grab onto Zuko and hold him close so that no one would hurt him. Zuko was touching him- running his fingers along Sokka’s knuckles as he drank, pressing his knee against Sokka’s, steadying Sokka’s hand on the canteen- but it just wasn’t enough.

Sokka handed the canteen to Zuko, who carefully tightened the lid and set it down besides him. Zuko laid on his back, gesturing for Sokka to lie next to him. Sokka didn’t need to be told twice.

As Sokka was laying down, Zuko’s hands guided him to move. Sokka found himself lying on his side with his head on Zuko’s chest and his hand on Zuko’s stomach. “You were worried about not hearing my heart beating, right? Or, you were, at least in one of your dreams- anyway, if we’re laying like this, you can hear it.” Sokka nodded, weakly sobbing into Zuko’s shirt. With his ear pressed up against Zuko’s chest, Sokka *could* hear Zuko’s beating heart. The steady thumping noise soothed Sokka, and a bit of the tension left his muscles.

Encouraged by Sokka's slight relaxation, Zuko added, "And with your hand where it is, you can feel when I'm breathing." To prove his point, Zuko took an exaggeratedly deep breath, making sure he could see his own stomach rise and fall. "See?" Sokka was still crying, but his breaths weren't coming as fast now and his body seemed more relaxed. "I'm okay, Sokka. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Touch my hair." Sokka said it so quickly and clearly that Zuko snorted. Sokka knew he should be embarrassed or mad at Zuko for laughing at him, but the sound of Zuko's laugh and the feeling of Zuko's tummy bouncing up and down under Sokka's hand melted away any negative feelings Sokka had.

"You'd better not talk like that to my crew, or else they might start thinking you're the captain," Zuko said with a laugh. Zuko's fingers carefully took Sokka's hair out of its wolftail and started gently moving up and down Sokka's scalp. He could tell that Sokka had something to say, but Zuko wasn't going to rush him.

"I'll never forget how you looked when I found you," Sokka finally murmured. "You were just lying there on the floor of the cooler- you were so *broken*, Zuko, I've never seen you like that. I didn't even think it was possible for you to be hurt like that- which I guess is stupid of me, huh? You can get hurt just like any other person, I don't know why it took me seeing you like that for me to realize that. And the truth is, I didn't even see the whole of it. You really needed medical attention, but I was too scared of what I'd find to look you over. If it hadn't been for Katara and Kyoshi, you would've been gone." Sokka sighed, running his thumb across Zuko's abs. Remembering the gashes that had been there, Zuko shuddered slightly. Noticing Zuko's tiny movement, Sokka sat up suddenly and said, "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Zuko lied, "I'm just cold. You mind grabbing the blanket?"

If Sokka hadn't been so wrapped up in his own thoughts, he would have noticed that Zuko was lying and called him on it, but right now he just nodded and pulled the blanket over the two of them. "And I thought that was the worst of it, right? I thought I wouldn't ever see you anywhere near that close to dying again." Sokka let out a pained laugh, and Zuko placed his hand on Sokka's.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," Zuko murmured.

"It's not like you wanted to..." Sokka trailed off, then looked up at Zuko. "You didn't want to, right? At least, not then?"

It took Zuko a moment to realize that Sokka wasn't talking about making him worried. "Oh, no, no- if I wanted to, then I wouldn't be here right now. It was really, *really* hard to stay alive in that cooler- I should've died on that first night, honestly. I don't know how I made it through one night, let alone two and a half. But I kept fighting because..." Zuko trailed off, frowning.

"What?"

“You’re not going to like my answer.” Sitting up, Sokka propped his elbows up on Zuko’s chest and rested his chin in his hands.

“Tell me anyway,” Sokka said, looking down at Zuko.

“The truth is, I was feeling a lot like I did the night of the prisonbreak- useless, weak, like there was no one left who cared about me, nothing left for me to do... the only reason I kept fighting to stay alive was because I didn’t want Zhao to have the satisfaction of killing me, especially like that.” Sighing, Sokka laid down on his back a few inches away from Zuko. He stared up at the ceiling in silence for a few moments.

“You know what, that’s okay. It kept you alive then, didn’t it? And now you know how much I care about you, so you won’t have that feeling anymore.”

“Mhm,” Zuko mumbled, nodding uncertainly. He tried to bury that nasty voice inside of him (which sounded an awful lot like his father) that insisted Sokka didn’t care about him, no one did, and no one ever would.

Sokka sat up again, staring at Zuko in disbelief. “What, you don’t believe me? Come on, you saw those nightmares I was having. You did see them, right? That’s what the energy reading was?” Zuko nodded again, and Sokka continued, “Okay, so you know how important you are to me. I mean, I can tell you how important you are to me all day long, but spirits, Zuko, if I’m having nightmares about you dying, that should tell you all you need to know. That little fire inside you is the most precious thing in the world to me, and the fact that you might want it to stop burning-”

“Sokka.” Zuko couldn’t stand the hysteria rising in Sokka’s voice any longer. Raising his hands in a placating gesture, Zuko said, “I do understand how much you care because I feel the same way about you. And I’m not planning on going anywhere, okay? I seem to be pretty hard to kill.”

Sokka sighed and leaned up against Zuko in the same position as before. “I can’t lose you,” he murmured, stroking Zuko’s hair with a hand, “I just can’t.” With Zuko’s warmth surrounding him like a blanket, Sokka quickly fell asleep, but his companion remained awake for a while longer.

Zuko stared out the porthole at the sea, absentmindedly stroking Sokka’s hair. Zuko knew Sokka and the others cared for him dearly, and truly, Zuko did want to live, but the thoughts and voices in his head wouldn’t just magically go away if Sokka told him he cared about him. No, they were always there in the back of his mind, even on good days, telling him he wasn’t enough, calling him a failure, insisting that his friends were lying to him when they said they cared about him. Zuko could usually fight these thoughts off, but it was exhausting work, and he didn’t know if he could do it forever.

Looking down at Sokka, Zuko briefly considered telling him, but thought better of it. After all, telling Sokka would only make him worry about Zuko more, and Zuko wasn’t sure that Sokka would understand him. So Zuko remained quiet and gazed at the calm, peaceful sea, silently resolving to keep his struggles locked away inside where they wouldn’t burden anyone else

Chapter End Notes

idk about you guys, but i have dreams/nightmares all the time where i'm trying to wake up/i think i wake up, but i'm still asleep and keep dreaming anyway. it's especially not fun when it's a nightmare

Voyage to the north: part 1

Chapter Notes

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

“See, the problem is you think firebending can only be destructive,” Zuko shouted, barely audible over the storm. “When it’s time for you to truly learn firebending, there are two masters I can take you to who’ll explain it better than I can. For now, though, I can show you this.” Aang watched, baffled, as Zuko strode out into the rain and started climbing the mast. Aang had been in the ship’s kitchen looking for sweets when Zuko had approached him and asked if he wanted a firebending demonstration. Aang, confused, had agreed, and now he and Iluak were watching Zuko fight the wind and try to climb the mast.

Once Zuko was in the crow’s nest, Aang turned to Iluak. “Uh, are you sure this is a good idea? I’m not-”

A bright flash of light and ear-shattering boom interrupted Aang, making him jump and flinch away from the source. Aang looked back to the mast, certain it would be a smoking pile of ash, but to his surprise, it was still completely intact. Aang blinked, then asked, “What just happened?”

“You didn’t see it?” Aang shook his head and Iluak groaned. He gestured to Zuko, who had already slid down the ladder to the deck. “No, you’ve gotta do it again,” Iluak said as Zuko removed his earmuffs, “he didn’t see it.”

Even though Zuko hadn’t yet removed the earplugs he had underneath the earmuffs, he could tell what had happened from Iluak and Aang’s expressions. “Don’t look away this time, Avatar,” Zuko called as he started climbing the ladder again.

Of course, as soon as Zuko was in position, Sokka happened to walk by. “Hey, do you guys know where Zuko is? I wanted to ask him about-”

“Nope, haven’t seen him,” Iluak said quickly.

“Avatar, are you looking?” Zuko’s voice rang out clear as a bell through the storm. Sokka’s eyes widened at the sound, and Iluak groaned internally. Sokka stepped forwards, squeezing between Iluak and Aang, and looked up just in time to see Zuko get struck by lightning.

Before Sokka could even cry out, though, Zuko had shifted his stance and the lightning shot right back out of his fingertips. Dumbfounded, Sokka gaped at Zuko as he slid down the ladder like nothing had happened.

“That’s a technique called lightning redirection,” Zuko shouted. Then, noticing Sokka, Zuko froze. “Oh. Uh, hi, Sokka. You, um, you weren’t supposed to see that.”

“That was amazing,” Aang cheered as he pulled Zuko inside. “I didn’t know you could firebend like that- I didn’t know firebending like that even existed!”

“Yeah, it does,” Zuko said, shooting an icy glare at Iluak. Iluak shrugged apologetically.

“Sorry, but he came up at the last minute,” Iluak said. “I told him I didn’t know where you were, but then you called out to Aang. Why’d you not want Sokka to know, anyway?”

“Yeah, why didn’t you want me to know?” Sokka crossed his arms and glowered at Zuko.

“I didn’t want you to worry-”

“You not telling me things is what has me worried!”

“Sokka.” Zuko grabbed Sokka by the shoulders, meeting his eyes. “It’s not some big secret. I didn’t want you to see it because I didn’t want you to have bad dreams.”

It was a reasonable enough explanation to Iluak and Aang, but Sokka was able to see the comment for what it truly was. For Zuko knew about Sokka’s nightmares, and Sokka knew that Zuko knew. “Oh,” Sokka said simply. Then he added, “Zuko, you don’t have to worry about me like that.”

“You don’t get exclusive worrying rights,” Zuko said, poking Sokka in the chest.

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“Hey, can you teach me how to heal?” Nattiq jumped slightly at the question, not realizing the Avatar had snuck up next to him. He put his betrothal necklace (which he had been polishing) back on his neck and eyed the Avatar carefully.

“I’m not sure,” Nattiq admitted. “Healing is... a delicate thing.” *Which kids with boundless energy usually aren’t suited for*, he didn’t say. “You might be too old to learn.”

“But Katara’s older than me, and she just learned how to heal,” Aang protested.

“That’s true, but- well, first I’ll have to see if you’re even capable of healing.” Nattiq motioned for Aang to lie down on a bench next to him.

As Aang was lying down, he asked, “What do you mean by that? I thought any waterbender could learn how to heal.”

“It’s not that simple,” Nattiq said, reaching into a barrel of water beside him. “You have to have certain chi paths open. I can check and see if you have these chi paths, but if you don’t, there’s nothing I can do for you.”

“But I thought everyone had chi paths, even nonbenders,” Aang said. Nattiq pulled his hand out of the barrel, carrying some water with him. “How can you tell which chi paths are healing paths?”

“There’s a certain pattern to it,” Nattiq said, resting his hand on Aang’s chest. He closed his eyes, then said, “Oh, wow. You really are the Avatar, huh? I mean- I didn’t doubt you, what with being an airbender and all, but- it’s weird seeing it.” Nattiq frowned, then said, “You’ve learned firebending already? Why’d you do that before learning earthbending?”

“I haven’t really learned firebending, but I did it once before.” Aang closed his eyes and saw Katara getting burnt by the flame he produced. Shaking his head to clear away the memory, Aang asked, “How can you tell?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Nattiq sighed. “See, there’s these seven areas in your body where all your energy kind of swirls around. In the North, we call them **akpik**- which is a type of berry- because each of these areas is about the size of one of the berries. They’re all along your back- actually, in your case, they all align with your main arrow. There’s one right at the point of your arrow here,” Nattiq said, pointing to Aang’s forehead, “then one in your throat, and another one at the top of your head. To be honest, I’m not really sure what those are for, but they’re there. But the other four **akpik** are associated with the elements. I’ve never seen someone with chi paths like yours around the **akpik** in your heart, so I’m assuming that’s the air one.”

“Do my chi paths really look that weird?”

“No, it’s just- well, benders’ chi paths look different anyway. Generally they have more connections and wider chi paths- and better benders have even more connections and even wider chi paths. Though sometimes your chi paths can get blocked up if you get out of practice, or...”

Aang tilted his head at Nattiq’s sudden silence. “Or what?”

“Or if you’re poisoned,” Nattiq replied quietly. “Like Lee- I mean Zuko- no wait, he said to call him Lee, right? But yeah, like him. The poison- a lot of it was stuck in his chi paths. Which, I guess in a sense was good for him, because that meant less of the poison was attacking his organs. Still, it was really bad.” Nattiq shuddered, then said, “But anyway, about how I can tell. The chi paths around your heart, stomach, and sacrum- which are air, fire, and water- all look like a bender’s chi paths, but the one at the base of your spine looks like a nonbender’s, and that’s the earth **akpik**. Can you roll over onto your stomach for me?”

“Sure,” Aang said, doing as he was told. “That’s really amazing that you can see all of that.”

“It takes a lot of practice,” Nattiq said, putting a hand on Aang’s back. He closed his eyes and was quiet for a minute, then pulled away his hand, frowning. “Yeah, sorry, you’re not going to be able to heal. Your chi paths just aren’t structured that way.”

“Aww, monkey feathers,” Aang groaned. Sitting up and looking at Nattiq, he asked, “Is there any way I can change that?”

“Nope. Your chi paths are usually pretty flexible until you get to be about six years old, then they tend to be set. In the North Pole, people who are born female and are waterbenders get put in healing training pretty early so that when their chi paths are fully developed, they’ll be able to heal. But some people’s chi paths set up like that naturally- like your friend Katara, probably.”

“Well, thanks for telling me,” Aang said, giving Nattiq a smile.

“Anytime,” Nattiq replied.

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“So, how did a Fire Nation prince like yourself learn to sail, anyway?” Zuko peered down at Sokka from the mast, eyeing him curiously. Sokka squinted back up at him, even though the midday sun was so bright that it hurt his eyes.

“You know the Fire Nation is made up of islands, right? People from the Fire Nation do know how to sail, Sokka.”

“Yeah, but did you learn how to sail in the Fire Nation?”

Zuko sighed. “No.” He slid down the ladder, ignoring the rungs completely, and landed next to Sokka with a thump. “I only learned when I was banished. I should have listened to Lieutenant Jee more- he’s a Fire Nation sailor I travelled with before becoming the Blue Spirit- but anyway, I don’t do most of the sailing. I haven’t since the waterbenders joined me.”

“You’re not answering my question,” Sokka said.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I’m just curious.” The truth was, Sokka felt like his ice dodging ceremony had been so overshadowed by Aang revealing that he’d hidden the map to Hakoda’s location- and then, of course, telling them about Zuko- that Sokka hadn’t truly gotten to enjoy it. But as he was falling asleep the previous night, Sokka had realized that Aang had interrupted Bato before he could say the post-voyage blessing, so his ice dodging had never truly been completed. This probably would have annoyed Sokka greatly if he hadn’t realized the universe had handed him a golden opportunity: now, he could go ice dodging *with Zuko*. After all, there was no one Sokka trusted more than Zuko.

“...You’ll laugh at me.”

“No I won’t. Really, I won’t,” Sokka insisted at Zuko’s doubtful gaze.

Finally, Zuko said, “I learned from a book-”

“A *book*?!” Sokka tried to disguise his cackle as a cough, but he could tell from Zuko’s glare that it hadn’t worked. “I mean- Zuko, you can’t learn sailing just from a book.”

“I looked at what the people around me were doing,” Zuko said defensively. “And it’s really well written. I’ll show you.” Zuko grabbed Sokka by the wrist and led him to his room, where he started to dig around in his desk drawers. Sokka settled himself on the bed with his arms crossed and a smug expression.

“It’s so well written that you keep it crammed in one of your drawers?”

“See for yourself,” Zuko replied, tossing Sokka a sealskin-bound journal. Sokka was a bit surprised to see a Water Tribe style journal, but when he opened to the first page and started to read, Sokka’s surprise gave way to pure shock.

“Zuko,” Sokka stammered. “This- this is my dad’s handwriting.”

“Oh? I didn’t know your dad was a scribe as well as chief,” Zuko said, not at all fazed. Sokka blinked.

“What?”

“A scribe. You know, a person who copies down books and manuscripts and things like that,” Zuko said, sitting down next to Sokka on the bed. He frowned. “Why are you making that face?”

“Zuko, we- we don’t have scribes.” Sokka traced over his father’s handwriting with a finger, then started rummaging around in his own bag.

“Oh, that’s right. You guys have more of an oral tradition, right? You told me once that you and Katara only know how to read because your father thought it was important for the chief’s kids to be literate.” Zuko’s brow furrowed. “Wait, then why would my book be in Hakoda’s handwriting? Are you sure it’s his writing?” Having anticipated Zuko’s question, Sokka retrieved a letter from his bag. With slightly trembling hands, Sokka gave the letter to Zuko.

“That’s a letter my dad left me before he went off to war,” Sokka explained quickly. “See? The writing looks the same.”

“I guess it does,” Zuko admitted, peering carefully between his book and Sokka’s letter. “But that doesn’t make sense. The only people I’ve seen from the South Pole are the waterbenders I freed. I was too ashamed to dare go too near the South Pole, so how-” Zuko stopped abruptly, looking up at something. Sokka followed his gaze to Nikko, who was curled up peacefully in her dog bed.

“Zuko?”

“There was a time,” Zuko murmured. “Just after...” He reached up to touch his scar, and Sokka understood.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Sokka said, squeezing Zuko’s arm.

Shooting him a grateful look, Zuko continued, “I was too sick to move for a few days. The infection was really bad, and I don’t really remember much from then, except...”

“Except what?”

“There was a voice,” Zuko murmured softly. “It told me that I was safe, being cared for, that I was... loved. And there was a smile, too. It was warm, and familiar, and reassuring... I thought it was my uncle because the next thing I remember was my uncle making me tea. But when I asked him about it, my uncle had said he’d gone back to make sure my sister was okay before joining me in banishment. He said he left me with someone he knew would take care of me, someone he trusted with my life...”

“...My dad?” Sokka and Zuko stared at each other in disbelief. “Zuko, how long ago was this?”

“Close to three years ago now.” Zuko stared at the floor for a moment, then turned back to Sokka. “Do you really think-”

“Well, how else would you have gotten this book? My dad doesn’t write unless he really feels like he needs to.”

“But how-”

“He left for war just over three years ago. Zuko, it has to be-”

“I didn’t just wake up with the book, though,” Zuko said, looking back to the sleeping isopuppy. “I woke up with Nikko. She was so tiny, she was just a baby.”

Sokka gazed over at the isopuppy- the isopuppy that looked *so much* like Bato’s isopuppy, Ujarak- and whispered, “You know, my dad bought a pregnant isodog, just before he left the South Pole.”

“Did he now?” Zuko’s voice was faint.

“They didn’t know she was pregnant until they were too far out at sea to come back. Bato said the dog gave birth to two puppies. He had one of them.”

“And the other...” Zuko and Sokka stared at Nikko, who yawned and rolled over in her sleep.

“Yeah, I think so,” Sokka breathed.

Zuko leaned back, eyes wide with disbelief. “Well, shit.”

Chapter End Notes

Y'ALL KAGEROU PROJECT IS GETTING A 10TH ANNIVERSARY REBOOT!!!!
I'M SO EXCITED!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

ok so yeah hakoda did take care of zuko after he got the burn. i'll be doing a short story about that, which will probably be posted as a one-shot

oh also i'm almost at 100k hits for the series!!! i've been hovering at 99k for the past couple days, but posting this chapter is for sure gonna get me to 100k. so uh. wow! i never really expected that tbh.

also my ask box on tumblr is open anyway so if you wanna just pop in with an ask, go ahead

Voyage to the North: part 2

Chapter Summary

cw: reference to torture

Chapter Notes

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

Sokka sighed, adjusting his position for what had to be the hundredth time that night.

“Sokka,” Zuko grumbled, and Sokka immediately felt bad. He wasn’t quite used to sleeping with someone still, as it had only been a couple of weeks since the group had rescued Zuko.

“Shh. Go back to sleep,” Sokka whispered, rubbing Zuko’s back.

“No. You’ve been tossing and turning all night. What’s the matter?” Zuko sat up next to him, and Sokka groaned. Zuko’s brow furrowed as he asked, “You’re not having more nightmares, are you?”

“No no no, nothing like that,” Sokka said quickly. “It’s just-” He sighed. “It’s stupid, really.”

“Tell me anyway.”

Sokka could tell by the determined tone of Zuko’s voice that he wasn’t getting out of this one easily, so he conceded. “Well, the thing is, I need to wear socks to sleep.”

“Yeah, I know,” Zuko said. “Don’t you remember why I started calling you Socks?”

“Wasn’t it because you couldn’t pronounce my name at first?”

“What? No, you really don’t remember?” Sokka shrugged, and Zuko let out a little huff of annoyance. “It was because you couldn’t sleep without these ridiculously fluffy socks at night. Then one day you lost them and you couldn’t sleep all night. You even made me heat myself up with firebending and you put your feet up against my stomach, then when your feet wouldn’t get warm enough, you insisted that it was my fault. From then on, whenever I wanted to make fun of you, I’d call you Socks.” Now that Zuko mentioned it, Sokka vaguely remembered the events he was describing.

“Oh, that’s right.” Sokka frowned, wondering how much else of the past he’d forgotten. How many of those days that were so dear to him had vanished from his memory entirely? The idea that the past could just slip away from him like that made Sokka uneasy.

“Sokka?” Blinking, Sokka stared up at Zuko. “I asked why you mentioned the socks.”

“Oh, um... my socks from home have a hole in them. Like, a big one. Big enough that I can pretty much put my whole foot through.”

“That’s a shame,” Zuko murmured, gazing out the porthole. A moment later, his eyes lit up and he looked back at Sokka. “Oh!”

As Zuko scrambled out of bed, Sokka asked, “What? What is it?”

“Well, it was a while ago,” Zuko replied, rummaging through a drawer. With a frown and a shake of his head, Zuko closed the drawer and moved to another one. “It was while I was still traveling with my uncle- oh no, did I leave them on the *Wani*? No, I don’t think I did- are they in here?”

“Zuko, what are you talking about?”

“I was at this trading port, trying to keep my uncle from using up all our budget- he’s a real shopaholic, you know.” Sokka didn’t know, but he nodded as if he did. “He told me I should go buy something for myself. I complained about it, but eventually I went off and looked for something, and that’s when I found- these,” Zuko said, retrieving a small bundle from a bag. “Catch,” he said, tossing the bundle to Sokka.

“They’re... socks?” In each hand, Sokka held up one long, fluffy sock. They were made of soft blue fabric, and when Sokka peeked inside one of the socks, he could see it was lined with fluffy white fur.

“Yep,” Zuko said, settling back in next to Sokka. “The Earth Kingdom trader I got them from said they were made in the South Pole. Oh, and you don’t have to worry about them being dirty- I never wore them.”

Sokka gave Zuko a sideways glance. “You bought socks and you never wore them?”

Even in the dim light of the lamp Zuko had just lit (for the purpose of finding the socks), Sokka could see a slight blush on Zuko’s cheeks as Zuko looked away. “Well, I, uh... I bought them for you.”

Sokka blinked. “For me? But weren’t you convinced I hated your guts?”

“Yeah, well... they reminded me of you. And of all the good times we had. And I thought maybe someday, if you ever forgave me and we were friends again, I could give them to you. I mean, I never expected you to actually forgive me... but part of me always hoped you might.”

“Zuko.” The prince crossed his arms, curling in on himself slightly. “That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

Zuko flinched slightly as Sokka suddenly wrapped him in a hug. He... hadn’t been expecting that reaction. He was certain that Sokka would tease him, or be mad at him, or have some sort of negative reaction. Upon realizing that Sokka was pleased (and pleased with him, even), Zuko allowed himself to relax and hug Sokka back.

After hugging Zuko for an extended period of time, Sokka excitedly slipped the socks on. “Ohhh, they’re so soft! They’re like the ones from home, but even better! Thank you so much, Zuko!”

“It’s nothing,” Zuko said with a shrug and a yawn. “Think you’ll be able to get to sleep now?” Sokka nodded, and Zuko extinguished the lamp and rolled over. “Good night.”

“Yeah, good night,” Sokka replied.

It didn’t take Zuko long to fall back to sleep, but Sokka, having never been asleep in the first place, took a little bit longer. Not much longer, because he was finally comfortable, but long enough that Sokka got the chance to gaze upon Zuko’s sleeping face, illuminated by the moonlight. He looked so relaxed and at peace, and Sokka’s heart warmed at the sight. As he drifted off to sleep, Sokka thought that maybe it wasn’t so bad that he was forgetting the past, because now he could make new memories with Zuko in the future.

~ ~ ~

It had been a perfect day. After his second night of sleeping with his new socks, Sokka had woken up refreshed and well rested. He’d eaten a breakfast of fish, talked to Iluak for a couple of hours about weapons, wrestling, and life in the South Pole, then sparred with Zuko for a little bit. He’d even managed to knock one of the dummy swords out of Zuko’s hand in a match (which he still lost, but it was progress at least.)

It had been a perfect day until a massive sea serpent appeared and wrapped itself around the *Unagi*.

Sokka yelped and reached for his real swords, but dropped them as Zuko commandingly yelled, “STOP!” Sokka looked over to Zuko, only to find Zuko facing the sea serpent, who was just about to bring its tail crashing down on the middle of the ship. The serpent’s spiked tail hovered just a few feet over the mast. “Why are you attacking us?” Shocked, Sokka stared at Zuko. Evidently, the serpent was just as surprised, as its big yellow eyes were staring right at Zuko, who repeated, “Why are you attacking us?”

At this exact moment, Mine, Iluak, and Aang sprinted onto the deck. Gawking at the giant serpent, Iluak shouted, “Oh spirits-”

“Don’t!” Before any of them could do anything, Zuko held his hand up in their direction, not taking his eyes off the serpent. “I’m handling this.”

“Zuko, are you sure this-”

“Trust me, Sokka.” Then, in a louder voice, Zuko said, “Well?”

The serpent made a low growling noise and bared its teeth at Zuko.

“You and I both know it’s not that,” Zuko said, putting his hands on his hips. The four others on deck looked at each other, then back at Zuko in disbelief. “The only thing a serpent your

size will get out of eating this boat is a mouthful of splinters. And actually, you'll probably break a few teeth, because our ship is made of metal, too."

The serpent let out a huff of air from its nostrils, knocking Aang off his feet. It turned its giant head away from Zuko. If it wasn't a giant sea serpent, Sokka would have sworn the creature looked almost... bashful.

There was a loud screech from the doorway leading to the deck. Without looking away from the serpent, Zuko said, "Mine, Iluak, take care of the others. Don't let them interrupt me."

"Uh, okay," Mine said, blinking. She grabbed Iluak's arm and started towards the doorway.

"Sure thing, boss," Iluak said a second later.

"Hey, you can tell me," Zuko said reassuringly to the serpent, as if he hadn't been interrupted. "I might be able to help you somehow."

The serpent looked away again, let out a huge sigh, then looked back to Zuko. If the serpent had shoulders, Sokka thought they would be slumping. It let out a series of low whines and clicking noises, and, to Sokka's amazement, Zuko nodded.

"Zuko, are you- are you talking to that thing?" Zuko nodded again, seemingly unaware of the rest of the crew gawking at him.

The serpent made a few more noises, then let out a final groan.

"Well, if that's the case, have you tried traveling south? It's quite a journey, but I think you'll find what you're looking for there. If you'll lower your head down so I can touch it, I can show you. Oh- be careful of the boat, though."

The sea serpent carefully lowered its massive head, allowing Zuko to place a hand between its eyes. Zuko's hand wasn't big enough to cover even one of its scales.

"See? Nice warm waters, a lot of space, and someone to share it with. Oh, and there's a lot of elephant koi there, too, which will keep even someone your size well fed for a while." Zuko continued to explain how to travel south while Aang and Sokka gaped at each other.

"Has he always been able to do this?" Sokka shook his head at Aang's question. If Zuko could talk to sea serpents before, Sokka was certain he would have mentioned it. Then again, Zuko didn't always know what was important information to communicate.

Uncoiling itself from the ship, the serpent started to swim away, but looked back at Zuko and stopped, letting out a low whine.

Zuko tilted his head and thought for a moment before answering, "I can't promise she won't reject you, but isn't it better to go find out than to stay here, wondering what could have been?"

The serpent seemed to accept this answer, and with a flick of its tail, it disappeared into the ocean. Zuko let out a big sigh of relief, then picked up his and Sokka's discarded dummy

swords. “Do you want to go for another round, or should we break for lunch?” Sokka stood there staring for a moment, not realizing that the question was addressed to him.

“Hey, Lee. Buddy. You wanna tell us what in Kyoshi’s name we just witnessed?” Mine crossed her arms, raising her eyebrows at Zuko.

“Oh, that? Well, the serpent was just attacking us because he was lonely, and he thought that by attacking our ship, he’d impress whatever female serpents are nearby. Then I showed him Kyoshi island and the unagi because I thought he’d like it there, and he might be able to live with the unagi,” Zuko explained.

“Yeah, what Mine meant to ask was how the f-” Sokka gasped and clapped his hands over Aang’s ears- “-did you do that,” Iluak said.

Zuko tilted his head. “Oh, you mean talking to the sea serpent? Well, there’s this trick I picked up at the Eastern Air Temple called energy reading. I’m not really good at using it the way I’m supposed to, but I’ve found that I can use it to talk with animals. Why do you think I talk to Nikko all the time?”

“You mean you can understand Nikko, too?” Zuko nodded at Sokka’s question, but before he could give a verbal response, Aang had grabbed him by the arm and was pulling him over to Appa.

“C’mon, you gotta do it on Appa! Tell me what he’s saying!” Practically bouncing up and down, Aang put Zuko’s hand on Appa’s forehead. Appa let out a low groan.

“Uh, he’s hungry,” Zuko stammered.

Aang pouted, clearly wanting more than that, so Sokka said, “Give him a minute, Aang.”

Zuko shot Sokka a grateful look, then closed his eyes. “Okay, Appa,” he said, “I know you can usually understand people, but now, I can understand you, and tell the others what you want to say. Is there anything you’ve been dying to tell the world?” Appa bellowed, and Zuko sighed. “Yes, I can really understand you.”

Appa sniffed at Zuko for a moment, then turned his gaze towards Aang and let out a soft noise.

“Oh,” Zuko said, blinking and putting his hand on his chest. “That’s-”

“What’d he say, what’d he say?!” Aang was bouncing around Zuko so quickly that all Sokka could make of him was a blur of red and yellow.

“He said-” Aang stopped suddenly, leaning in close to Zuko. “He said he loves you.”

Aang’s eyes widened, and he was still for a moment (which was rare for him). Then a huge grin spread across his face and he ran over to Appa. With a big leap, he landed on Appa’s forehead and snuggled up against the bison. “I love you too, buddy. I love you too.”

“So, how much longer do you think it’ll be?” Sokka had been lying on Zuko’s bed, reading the sailing guide his father had left Zuko. Seeing that familiar handwriting was comforting to Sokka, so he had read through the guide multiple times. He had just been in the middle of his sixteenth re-read when Zuko had stepped into the room.

“Nattiq says we’ll be at the North Pole before sundown tomorrow,” Zuko said, closing the door and tossing his shirt off. “Can you hand me my robe?”

“Yeah,” Sokka said quickly, happy to have an excuse to look somewhere other than Zuko’s half-naked form. He tossed Zuko the robe from his bed, and Zuko mumbled his thanks. He curled up in bed next to Sokka, who wanted to finish reading before he fell asleep.

Just as Sokka thought Zuko was asleep, though, he sat up suddenly. “Something’s happening,” Zuko mumbled vaguely.

“Oh?” Sokka was mildly concerned about Zuko’s statement, but didn’t really know what to make of it.

“Yeah. I... it feels like it’s daytime, but I know the sun just went down a couple hours ago.”

“Oh, right, you firebenders can feel the motion of the sun or whatever. Well, turn the light out and we can look outside.”

Zuko extinguished the lamp’s fire with a swift hand motion, and the room was flooded with red light coming in from the porthole. Sokka and Zuko looked at each other, then scooted over to the small porthole, pressing their faces against the glass.

“Huh,” Sokka said, gazing up at the sky. “Funny how it’s always red when you’re around.”

“I- what? You know what’s happening?” Zuko sounded really, really worried, and Sokka turned to face him.

“You don’t?” When Zuko shook his head, Sokka scoffed. “It’s an aurora, Zuko. Didn’t you see one when... oh.”

“What?”

“You were in the South Pole during the summer months,” Sokka said, frowning. “I guess you wouldn’t have gotten a chance to see them then. Oh, and the first aurora of the year was on the day you left. I remember that because it was red, like this one. But what about the one two weeks ago? Don’t you remember that?”

“Two weeks ago?” Sokka nodded, and Zuko raised an eyebrow. “Two weeks ago, when I was almost dead?”

“Oh.” Somehow, Sokka had forgotten that critical detail. He shuddered, remembering that agonizing night. “Yeah, then.” After a moment of silence, Sokka gave Zuko a sideways glance. “Do you remember anything from that night?”

“Bits and pieces,” Zuko said, scratching the back of his head. “The sound of running water. Drinking some sort of broth. Red light. Blankets. You.” Zuko’s eyes lingered on Sokka for a moment, then turned back to the sky. “So this was happening that night, too?”

“It’s what kept you alive,” Sokka murmured. “If the aurora hadn’t been there that night, or if we’d been too far south...”

“Hey.” Zuko turned his body so he was facing Sokka and took both of Sokka’s hands in his own. “Everything worked out for us. There’s no use thinking about what could have been.”

“But you were just so *close*, Zuko,” Sokka said frantically. “You were so, so close. If we’d gotten there a minute later, or if Aang didn’t remember the layout, or if the guards managed to stop us, even for a moment- if any one of a million things that went right would have gone wrong, you’d be *dead*, Zuko. You would have died thinking I hated you, and that Katara was dead, and that no one was coming to save you, and-”

“Sokka,” Zuko said, voice soothing, “there’s nothing more you could have done-”

“Yes there was,” Sokka said suddenly. “Yes there was. I was having dreams about you. You were doing your energy reading thing to communicate with me, in that time you were with him.”

“What? No, that’s impossible,” Zuko replied uncertainly. “I was trying my hardest not to do anything like that.” After almost drowning in Sokka’s emotions and until he found out the truth about that encounter, Zuko had been actively avoiding connecting to the energy field, but never moreso than when he was with Zhao. During that time in particular, Zuko hadn’t wanted his uncle to find out what was happening to him, so he tried to completely disconnect himself.

“No, it’s true,” Sokka insisted. He racked his brain, trying to remember the details of the dreams. “There was one time Zhao said something to you about electric lighting, in the first dream I think. You thought it was harsh sunlight, and he said something about how it wasn’t bendable. Then there was another time where he was mad he couldn’t find Aang-”

“Stop,” Zuko breathed. Sokka didn’t hear him.

“-and you said something like he should have spent less on his torture dungeon if he wanted to find the Avatar, and another one where he cut your hair-”

“Stop,” Zuko repeated, louder. This time, Sokka did hear him, but continued anyway.

“-and then there was one in the cooler-”

“Sokka, STOP!” At Zuko’s sudden outburst, Sokka paused. Even in the red light filtering into the room, Zuko looked pale. His breathing had become heavy, he had started to sweat and, with a jolt, Sokka realized Zuko’s hands were shaking. Guilt rushed through Sokka as he realized he’d been so caught up in proving his own point that he hadn’t considered he was making Zuko relive some of his worst memories.

“Zuko, I-”

“Don’t.” Zuko closed his eyes, unable to stand the pitying look in Sokka’s eyes. Zuko didn’t want or need pity, nor did he deserve it. In an effort to focus on anything but the memories of that time, Zuko said, “So maybe I did reach out to you subconsciously. You were nearby at the time, yes?”

“Yeah,” Sokka answered, squeezing Zuko’s hand. “Zuko-”

“There was no way you could have known those dreams were anything more than dreams. I don’t blame you for not coming to recuse me, based on dreams alone.” Zuko almost added *is that what you wanted to hear*, but restrained himself at the last minute. Instead, he stood up and said, “I’m going to watch the aurora. I doubt I’ll be able to sleep anytime soon, with that going on.” *And because of what you said* lingered in the air, unspoken.

“Zuko, wait-” Sokka grabbed Zuko’s wrist and, for a moment, Zuko wasn’t in his room on the *Unagi*, but in his cell at Pohuai, struggling against the shackles on his wrists. He let out a shriek and pulled himself free, grabbing his wrist as if Sokka’s touch had burned him. “Zuko-”

Zuko spun around, fire in his hands, ready to face whoever was going to attack him. Sokka flinched, scooting backwards on the bed, then stared at Zuko wide-eyed.

The sight of a startled Sokka reminded Zuko where he was. Ashamed, he quickly shook the fire in his hands out and repeated, “I’m going to watch the aurora.” He opened the door, then paused for a minute and added, “Try to go to sleep. I might not be back for a while.” With that, he closed the door, leaving Sokka alone with his thoughts.

Chapter End Notes

och that bit at the end hurt

next time, they get to the north pole! yay!

Arrival

Chapter Summary

cw: torture (BIG cw for this one. it's the part in italics. zuko has a flashback. it was... pretty hard to write ngl.), panic attack, death mention, vomiting (not really described but y'know still in there)

didn't expect to be back so soon with another update, but hey, here we are! no promises for an update next week, tho

Chapter Notes

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

i keep forgetting to link this but here's [another fic inspired by this one!!](#)

Zuko all but sprinted up to the deck. He needed to be outside, where no walls or ceilings or doors would trap him. He needed to be reminded that he was free, that he was safe, that he had lived to see the sky again.

Bursting onto the deck, Zuko nearly ran into Nattiq, who had been just about to go belowdecks looking for Zuko. “Ah, Lee! Good timing. We’ve got a problem.”

“H- huh?” Zuko blinked and looked around, and Nattiq realized just how shaky he looked.

“Are you okay? You didn’t get hurt somehow, did you?” Nattiq reached out to Zuko, who yelped and jumped back.

“...No, no. I’m fine,” Zuko said, trying to steady his voice. He buried his head in his hands for a brief moment, then looked back at Nattiq. “I’m fine. What’s the problem?”

“This,” Iluak said from the mast’s ladder, pointing to the sky. As he climbed down, he continued, “Nattiq’s people see blood auroras as bad omens.”

“Aurorae,” Nattiq corrected, “but, um, you get his point. Since this is happening right before we’re going to arrive, they’ll think we are bringing bad luck. Or that we’re attacking. Or that we’re the head of some big invasion force-”

Zuko gasped, and his expression morphed to one of horror. “Invasion,” he repeated in a whisper. Maybe it was because he was already thinking about his time as Zhao’s prisoner, or because Nattiq said the word, or both, but all of a sudden, a memory stirred. “There’s going to be an invasion.”

Nattiq shouted, "What?!"

Iluak asked, "Are you sure?"

"An invasion?" Sokka stepped out from the doorway leading to belowdecks, staring at Zuko with wide eyes. He had just come up to check on Zuko when he'd heard Zuko's statement.

"You mean the North Pole's gonna be invaded? When?"

"How do you know?"

"Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

"Enough!" Zuko held up his hands in an effort to stop the inevitable barrage of questions. He sighed, rubbing his temple, and said, "I'll just show you. Put one of your hands out, all of you."

Iluak and Sokka each extended a hand, but Nattiq hesitated. "Does it matter which-?"

"No," Zuko interrupted with an irritated hiss. Nattiq offered his left hand, and Zuko arranged them so they were all touching with their palms facing upwards. Spreading his fingers, Zuko placed his hand on top of theirs in such a way that at least one of his fingers was touching each of their palms. With a deep, shuddering breath, Zuko braced himself for what he was about to experience. He really didn't want to do this, but it was the easiest way to explain everything...

Zuko winced as his freshly-shaven head hit another stair. He vaguely remembered from the blueprints that the cooler room was a few stories above the torture area, but couldn't recall exactly how many. Then again, Zuko could hardly form a coherent thought after all of Zhao's torture, so he supposed that was to be expected.

Instead of offering Zuko any sort of human dignity, Zhao had decided to bind Zuko's arms and legs, muzzle him, and drag him by his feet up to the cooler room. Each time Zuko was dragged up another stair, hard, unforgiving stone would slam into his head and scrape against the numerous wounds on his back. He was almost thankful for the muzzle's presence, as it silenced his cries of pain.

"Oh, your Highness," Zhao said cheerfully, and Zuko groaned internally. Every couple of minutes, Zhao would start talking to Zuko as they made their way upstairs. "I forgot to tell you that, since I am an Admiral now, I can launch an invasion of the North Pole. Wonderful news, right?" Zhao pulled Zuko up another stair, and Zuko bit down on his tongue. "What a shame you won't live to see it. I almost want to invade when the Avatar is there, so I can wipe out the Northern Water Tribe and capture the Avatar in one fell swoop. What do you think about that, Prince Zuko?" Every time Zhao finished a sentence, he would drag Zuko up another stair, relishing the pain in his eyes. "Ah, no. That won't do. It would be a wasted opportunity to let the Avatar leave that little Earth Kingdom village."

Zuko squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying not to cry. There was just so much pain, too much to bear, and it was all pointless now since Zhao was going to capture the Avatar again. Zuko's death, just like his life, would be meaningless.

“You know, part of me hopes you survive until I return. That way, the last thing you will see is your failure.” Finally, they were up the stairs, but Zuko knew what was coming would be even worse- a cold, slow death in a tiny, dark room. A pit of dread grew in Zuko’s stomach as Zhao dragged him closer and closer to the cooler.

Zuko struggled to lift his head as he watched Zhao unlock the cooler. With the turn of a key, Zhao opened the heavy metal door, sending a blast of cold air towards Zuko. As Zhao reached down to grab him, Zuko weakly struggled and shook his head. “Oh? Have something to say, your Highness?” Zhao freed Zuko from his bonds, then unclamped the metal muzzle from his mouth.

Swallowing the taste of metal and his pride, Zuko whimpered, “Please, no.” He wished he had the strength to flee, or attack, or do anything useful, but all Zuko could do was beg. “Please, please, don’t do this. I- I don’t want to die.” His lip quivered and tears threatened to spill from his eyes. “Please...”

Grabbing Zuko by the back of his neck, Zhao shoved him inside the cooler. Zuko screamed in pain as his side (the side on which Zhao had broken at least one of Zuko’s ribs) slammed against the cooler wall. When the red haze of pain cleared from his vision, Zuko found Zhao staring down at him with narrowed eyes. “You brought this upon yourself.” The door started to slide back into place.

“No, no, wait-!”

With a final-sounding clang, the door slammed shut, plunging Zuko into darkness.

Zuko gasped, yanking his hand away from the others, severing their connection. He was pale and sweaty and shaky, and he was- he was-

“I’m going to be sick,” Zuko groaned. He sprinted to the side of the boat and keeled over, emptying the contents of his stomach into the ocean.

The three Water Tribe men, all feeling sick in their own right, watched as the trembling figure remained leaning over the side of the deck for a few minutes, then sat up, rubbing his mouth on a conveniently placed towel, then curled in on himself with his back to them.

Sokka was the first to move. Slowly, he approached Zuko, gently placing a hand on his shoulder.

Zuko yelped and leaped away from him, as if Sokka had just poured acid on his shoulder. Zuko’s eyes widened briefly, then narrowed to slits. “Don’t sneak up on me like that! What in Agni’s name were you thinking?!” Zuko stormed a few paces away and sat down with his back to the deck wall, where no one could surprise him. He took the same position as before, with his knees up and his legs crossed at the ankle. Crossing his arms and resting them on his knees, Zuko stared at nothing. Zuko wanted to yell at the others to stop staring, that he could *feel* their eyes on him, but if he spoke now, Zuko thought he might burst into tears. So instead of yelling, Zuko closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing, all while keeping his ears perked for any sign of movement towards him.

“I’m sorry,” Zuko said after a few minutes. “I shouldn’t- huh?” Zuko did a double take at the sight of all three Water Tribe men crying.

“That was just some sort of weird vision you showed us, right?” Nattiq was wringing his hands and staring at Zuko pleadingly. “That’s- that’s something that could have been. A possibility, not a reality. He wasn’t really that cruel to you, right? Right?”

“Sixteen,” Iluak was whispering, “only sixteen. Just a kid. Not even marrying age.” His expression was a horrified kind of acceptance.

“Zuko.” And then there was Sokka, whose eyes were filled with all the sadness in the world. Carefully, as if he was approaching a wounded animal, Sokka crept towards Zuko. Slowly, Sokka sat down next to Zuko.

“I’m sorry.” Zuko’s voice was a hollow whisper.

“Not your fault,” Sokka murmured. “Can I touch you?”

Zuko hesitated, then raised his hand in Sokka’s direction with his fingers extended. Sokka immediately understood the familiar gesture and slowly raised his own hand, pressing the pads of his fingers against Zuko’s.

The way Zuko flinched at the slight contact, even though it was just their fingertips, even though it was Sokka touching him, made Sokka’s heart twist in his chest. Every muscle in Sokka’s body was screaming to pull Zuko close, press Zuko against him, and never let him go, but Sokka knew that wasn’t what was best for Zuko. Right now, Zuko was the one who needed to initiate contact between them, because anything else would be seen as an attack.

“Zuko,” Sokka said when the prince laced their fingers together, “whenever you’re ready, can you try to tell us what you showed us?” Iluak and Nattiq had both sat down in an attempt to appear less threatening, and had left a clearly visible escape route for Zuko. They looked at Zuko in anticipation at Sokka’s question, but Zuko gave no sign of hearing Sokka except for a slight nod.

Sokka waited a few more minutes, but Zuko didn’t look like he was going to start talking on his own. “How about this,” Sokka said as Zuko leaned his head on his shoulder. “I’ll ask you some yes or no questions. If a question is too complicated for you to answer right now or it makes you uncomfortable, you say skip. Does that sound okay?”

Zuko’s head bobbed up and down against Sokka’s shoulder.

“Alright, first question. Can I put my arm around you?”

“...Yes.” Sokka delicately wrapped an arm around Zuko’s waist.

“Next question. Is what you showed us something that really happened to you?”

“Yes.” Nattiq inhaled sharply, and Iluak reached out to squeeze his shoulder.

“Was it the aurora that let you show us that?” Zuko seemed confused by the question, so Sokka started to repeat, “Was it the aurora-”

“No.”

Sokka thought for a moment, then said, “Oh, was it your energy reading thing?”

“Yes. Quickest way.”

Encouraged that Zuko gave more than a one-word answer, Sokka continued, “I see. So if you showed us that memory- it was a memory, yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“If you showed us that memory, then you would have to do less talking, yes or no?”

“Yes. Not so much things- gone. Missed. Lost in translation.”

“I get it,” Sokka replied. “If you had to say things in words, you might forget something, or someone else might get confused. Showing us that memory was the quickest way to give us all the information we needed without any misunderstandings.”

“Yes.”

Sokka smiled softly. “That was very smart of-”

“But. But.” Zuko stirred against him, agitated.

“I’m sorry. You weren’t finished talking, were you?”

“No.”

“Okay, take as long as you need.” Zuko was quiet for a moment, trying to put his words together the right way (which was hard enough for him on a normal day, but in this state was near impossible to do in a timely manner).

“There’s a... coin.”

Sokka blinked. “A coin?”

Zuko shook his head. “No. Starts with c. Money. Price. Buy,” Zuko said, getting more frustrated with each word.

Iluak suggested, “A cost?”

“Yes!” Zuko sounded relieved. “A cost.”

“Okay, so there’s a cost to you sharing the memory with us,” Sokka said. “Can you tell us what that cost is?”

Zuko took a deep breath. Now for the hard part. “Memory for you- like Love Amongst the Dragons.”

“Huh?” Zuko didn’t need to see Sokka’s quizzical look to know that what he just said made no sense.

“Performance,” Zuko said. “Stage. Memory like- play. Like a play.”

Suddenly, Nattiq exclaimed, “Oh! You’re talking about how we experienced your memory?”

“Yes.”

“For me, it was kind of like a dream,” Sokka said. “Like, I saw what was happening, but I don’t think I was really... there.”

“That’s how it was for me, too,” Nattiq chimed in. “I was sort of... floating? I really didn’t have a sense of my body.”

“Yeah, and then when they moved in the memory, you guys kind of moved along with them without really trying or meaning to, right? That’s what happened to me,” Iluak said.

“Okay,” Sokka said, turning his attention back to Zuko, “So why do you bring that up?”

“... Different. Something already happened, for you. Memory is a memory. In the past. Over. Done. For me, not the same.”

“You experience it differently? How?”

“Yes. Current. Present. There. Alive... no. Life? No... live. Relive. I relive.” Sokka’s hand, which had been rubbing circles into Zuko’s back, froze suddenly, and Zuko knew he’d gotten his point across.

“Relieve? Like, relieve yourself?” Iluak sounded confused. Nattiq looked at him and shrugged.

“I don’t know about you guys, but it seemed pretty current to me. Like it was happening right in front of me,” the healer said.

“No,” Sokka whispered to Zuko, “no. Please tell me I’m wrong.”

“Like I’m there,” Zuko responded. “I relive it.”

“*Zuko,*” Sokka breathed. “Zuko, why would you do that to yourself?”

“Hey, Sokka, you figure something out?” Iluak was looking at Sokka now, Sokka could tell, but all Sokka could look at was Zuko. Carefully, Sokka pulled Zuko onto his lap, making sure that Zuko was okay with each and every move he made.

Zuko was slowly coming out of his panicked state, and he was aware enough now to know that Sokka wouldn’t hurt him. In fact, Zuko was grateful for Sokka’s touch, which was warm,

soft, gentle, kind- Sokka was everything that Zhao wasn't. In a way Zuko couldn't quite understand, Sokka's presence grounded him. Zuko knew what was coming next, too- Sokka would explain what Zuko had meant, Nattiq and Iluak would look at him with pity in their eyes, they would ask Zuko more questions- and honestly, Zuko wished he could just disappear. Instead, Zuko did the next best thing; he curled up, buried his face in Sokka's chest, and covered his exposed, unscarred ear.

"What Zuko means is... he experiences it just like he did the first time," Sokka explained. "He's in his own body. He feels everything he felt in that moment. It's like it's happening to him all over again."

All Zuko could hear was Sokka's breathing, the creaking of the *Unagi*, and the waves breaking against its hull. He squeezed Sokka tighter, glad he couldn't see the others' faces.

"I think the reason he did it was... you were all talked out, weren't you?" Zuko nodded against Sokka's chest, and Sokka continued, "That happens to him sometimes." Based on the confusion on Iluak and Nattiq's faces, Sokka would have to explain a little bit more. "If he has too many conversations in a day, or at once without resting, he'll get to a point where he can't really talk anymore. You can tell because he starts to avoid eye contact and he'll start to give one word answers- oh, and he'll need you to repeat things more. Sometimes when he gets like this, he'll do anything to avoid conversations, even if it has other consequences..."

"He'd even do something like *that*?" Sokka nodded, and Iluak's brow furrowed. "But *why*? Why wouldn't he just tell us to ask him another time?"

"When he's too far gone, I don't think he has the energy to even say that- huh?" Zuko was shaking his head, and shifted so he was looking up at Sokka.

"Shameful," Zuko whispered.

Sokka took a second to process this, then said, "Oh, he gets embarrassed by it, I guess. Says it's shameful. He probably thinks it makes him look weak-"

"I *am* weak," Zuko said, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

"What? No, you aren't weak," Nattiq said, slowly scooting closer to Sokka and Zuko. Zuko's good eye tracked his every move, but otherwise, Zuko seemed okay with his approach. Noticing this, Iluak gradually started to move closer as well.

"Yeah, you're one of the strongest people I know," Iluak agreed. "No one else has ever even come close to beating Mine at arm wrestling, but you can." Nattiq sighed loudly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "What? You gonna tell me I'm wrong? I've never seen you even try to arm wrestle Mine!"

"We're not talking about *that* kind of strength, you oaf," Nattiq grumbled. "He means mentally weak."

"Oh? Well, Lee, I think your mind is your most powerful muscle!"

Nattiq buried his face in his hands with a moan. “Why do I even bother,” he lamented.

Zuko nudged Sokka, giving him a look. As Nattiq and Iluak bickered, Sokka murmured, “You want them to leave?” Zuko nodded once. “Okay. Do you want me to leave?” At that question, Zuko shook his head. “Good, ‘cause I don’t really want to leave you either. Should we stay here or go somewhere else?” Zuko’s eyes traveled up the mast to the crow’s nest. Following his gaze, Sokka said, “I got you. You sure you’re feeling up to climbing right now, though?” Zuko nodded once more and started to shift in Sokka’s arms.

“Does that mean if I think more, there’ll be more muscle in my brain? I don’t want it to be fat,” Iluak was saying.

Nattiq threw up his hands, fuming. “Your brain is *supposed* to be fat! Fat is what your brain is *made of!*”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Sokka said, “but Zuko and I are going up to the crow’s nest. If you need anything, just call up to us.”

Zuko was about to start up the ladder, but hesitated. Turning to his crewmates, Zuko quietly said, “...Thank you.”

“Yeah,” Nattiq said awkwardly, “no problem.”

“Anytime,” Iluak said with a nod. “You let us know if you need anything, okay? We’ll be down here.”

“I will,” Sokka replied as Zuko started up the ladder ahead of him. “Thanks, guys.”

Iluak and Nattiq watched as the two boys climbed the ladder, then looked at each other. “So what are we gonna do about all of this?”

Nattiq sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Well, there’s no way we can’t go to the North Pole now. That Admiral has had time to get his fleet together-”

“It’s only been a couple of weeks, yeah?”

“Yes, but we don’t know how long it takes the Fire Nation navy to mobilize,” Nattiq argued. “They could be just days behind us. We need to give my people as much warning as possible.” With another big sigh, he added, “I do feel better about going in now, though. Since we’re bringing bad news, they’ll see that as the reason for the red aurora rather than, well, us.”

Doubtfully, Iluak raised an eyebrow. “You really think they’ll see us as trouble? We’ve got the Avatar with us, for Tui’s sake.”

“And the Fire Prince,” Nattiq pointed out.

“But he’s also the Blue Spirit-”

“Who dumped a hundred extra mouths to feed on their shores without even bothering to show up and explain himself,” Nattiq interrupted.

“Well, it’s a good thing then that we have you, a Northern Water Tribe guy, to explain everything to them,” Iluak exclaimed, clapping Nattiq on the back. Nattiq winced, but not from the sudden contact.

“Ah. Uh, about that,” Nattiq mumbled, looking up at the sky.

Baffled, Iluak said, “What? Are you gonna tell me you’re not from the Northern Water Tribe or something?”

“Huh? No, it’s nothing like that,” Nattiq said, quickly shaking his head. “It’s just... they might not be so happy to see me.”

“Why wouldn’t they be? Oh, is this because of the whole gender thing?”

“That’s part of it,” Nattiq said, fidgeting. “There’s also a pretty strict no-leaving-the-North-Pole policy. I, uh, I broke that. When I, you know, left.”

Iluak broke the following silence by saying, “Okay, and...?” He could tell there was something Nattiq wasn’t saying.

“Well, I, uh, I left my betrothed behind. The tribe- they, uh probably won’t like me very much for that.”

“Why? Was he really well-liked or something?”

“Yeah, you could say that.” Nattiq’s shoulders slumped. With a sigh of defeat, he finally admitted, “He’s the chief’s nephew.”

“He’s WHAT?!” Iluak gawked at Nattiq.

At the sudden shout, Sokka glanced down from the crow’s nest. “Everything okay down there?”

“Yes, everything’s fine.” Satisfied by Nattiq’s reply, Sokka turned back to Zuko, who was lying next to him. Zuko looked at him questioningly, and Sokka shrugged.

The crow’s nest wasn’t meant for two people to be lying down in, so Sokka and Zuko had to lie on their backs with their knees up in order to fit. Someone had left a blanket on the wooden floor, which Sokka draped over Zuko and himself. “Beautiful night, huh? I’m glad I grabbed my parka before I came out here, though.” Zuko hummed and nodded, but Sokka could tell he wasn’t really listening.

“He won’t be happy to see me here, at the North Pole,” Zuko murmured. Sokka gave him a sideways glance, waiting for Zuko to clarify his statement. “Though he won’t be surprised because of what happened when we were with General- I mean, the Deserter. He knows I’m traveling with you.”

“Who, Jeong Jeong?”

Zuko shook his head. “Zhao,” he said shortly.

“Oh.” Sokka gazed at the reflection of the red aurora in Zuko’s eyes. Sokka had never been one to stop and stare at aurorae, but spirits, they really were beautiful. “What makes you think he’ll be there to see you? Don’t the high-ranking guys sit back in their boats and let the foot soldiers do all the work?”

“He’ll be there. He’s wanted this for a long time.” After a beat of silence, Zuko closed his eyes and added, “I might not see him on the battlefield. But the soldiers, they’ll be able to tell that I’m not from the Water Tribe. They would take me in for questioning, and then...”

“No,” Sokka said, giving Zuko’s hand a tight squeeze. He’d realized what Zuko was worried about and, well, he couldn’t blame him. “You’re not going to get captured again.”

“But let’s say I did.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“You can’t guarantee-”

“Zuko.” Sokka sat up and grabbed Zuko by the shoulders. “I’ll die before I let him hurt you again.” The mere thought of Zuko being in Zhao’s hands once more was enough to make Sokka’s skin crawl, stomach churn, and heart twist up in a knot. If Zuko was taken again... Sokka wasn’t sure he could live with himself if that happened.

Zuko wanted to say it wouldn’t come to that, that he could take care of himself. Instead, Zuko whispered, “Promise?”

“I promise, Zuko. I promise.”

Back on the deck, Iluak was groaning, “I still can’t believe you ghosted the chief’s nephew.”

“I did not ‘ghost’ him! What does that even mean?!” Nattiq let out a huff of frustration. “That’s not the point- point is, they’re not going to be super friendly towards me just because I’m from there. We’re going to have to be very careful with how we go about this.”

~ ~ ~

Apparently, Iluak thought that crashing the boat into the Northern Water Tribe’s outer gate was being careful. Nattiq stared in disbelief at the sizable dent in the ice wall, wondering how he was going to explain this one. “What in Tui’s name are you thinking?!”

With a shrug, Iluak replied, “You said it opens by itself.”

“It *usually* opens by itself,” Nattiq hissed, clenching his fists, “because there’s *waterbenders* there. Do you see *anybody* up there?!”

“You’d better not have broken the boat,” Zuko shouted, sliding down the ladder. After lighting up the sky for a while, the aurora had just faded an hour ago, and Zuko had been about to get to sleep when the crash had jolted him awake.

“Are we here? Is this the North Pole?” Sokka followed Zuko down to the deck, though he elected to climb down the ladder instead. “Oh, that’s a nice wall. Or,” Sokka added with a smug grin, “I guess you could say it’s an *ice* wall.” Iluak grinned at Sokka, Zuko groaned and banged his head against the mast, and Nattiq looked like he was about to burst a blood vessel.

Within minutes, everyone else was on the deck. Still with his head against the mast, Zuko wished he had stayed up in the crow’s nest. Zuko was so focused on how tired he was and how he wished he wasn’t there that he didn’t notice the waterbenders until they were already on deck.

Katara and Aang gasped as four pillars of water shot up out of the ocean, each placing a waterbender on deck. In all the confusion and arguing on the *Unagi*, nobody but Momo had noticed the waterbenders’ boat approach.

Stepping towards the group, one of the waterbenders said, “Who are you and why have you come here?”

“Hi! I’m the Avatar,” Aang chirped. How Aang managed to keep his cheerful attitude all the time, even in the middle of the night, would forever be a mystery to Zuko.

The four waterbenders exchanged glances, clearly skeptical of Aang’s claim. Sokka nudged him and said, “Aang, show them some airbending or something.”

“Oh! Okay!” Since Aang had left his marbles in his room, he proudly showed off his air scooter instead of doing his marble trick. “See, I’m an airbender! And look,” he exclaimed, bending some of the water off the deck, “I’m a waterbender too!” Aang made the water dance in a stream around himself, then sent it back to the ocean with the flick of his hand.

“So the rumors are true,” one of the other waterbenders murmured, “but why now, on the night of a bad omen?”

“We come bearing bad news,” Iluak said, earning him confused glances from both the Northern Water Tribe members and his own crewmates. “We need to speak to your chief-”

“Council,” Nattiq corrected, half hiding behind Kesuk.

“Er, your council,” Iluak said. “We need to speak with them as soon as possible. It’s pretty urgent.”

After exchanging a few hushed whispers amongst themselves, the waterbenders nodded, and three of them made a hole in the gate that was big enough for the *Unagi* to travel through.

“You will need to leave your boat in one of the locks,” the last waterbender said. “We will take one of our canoes to where our council is meeting.”

“I’ll stay on the boat,” Nattiq said in an unusually low-pitched voice. “I mean, someone should, right? So I will.”

Mine, who could tell Nattiq was trying to avoid the inevitable, said, “No, Shizu and I will stay.” Nattiq shot her a glare, but Mine smiled back at him and said, “The two of us are tired right now, and there will be plenty of time for us to explore later.”

“Yeah, and we need you, Nattiq,” Iluak whispered, nudging the healer. “I mean, just looking at these gates and stuff, this place seems really fancy.”

“You’re the only one who knows what to do here,” Kesuk whispered from Nattiq’s other side.

Nattiq groaned and pulled his parka hood up. “Fine,” he muttered.

The group of seven piled onto a canoe which the Northern Water Tribe waterbenders began to steer through a series of canals. Everybody (except Nattiq, who seemed to sink further into his parka with each passing minute) gazed at the moonlit ice structures in awe. Even Zuko, who was rarely seen without a scowl (by everyone except Sokka, of course), seemed impressed.

They were led to a large building with a massive set of ice doors, which Sokka frowned at. Sure, the doors were grand and imposing, but they were pretty impractical if you weren’t a waterbender. As two of the waterbenders bent the door open, Sokka wondered how many nonbenders it would take to make the door even budge.

“Our council is having its weekly meeting,” one of the waterbenders said, making Nattiq raise an eyebrow. As far as he knew, their council didn’t have weekly meetings.

“Well, it’s a little more complicated than that,” another said as he gestured for the group to walk through the door. “Our council does not meet unless they are called. Generally, the rule is that one person can only call the council once per week. And, well, ever since this one woman arrived-”

“That’s BULLSHIT!” The building trembled slightly at the exclamation from the room in front of them.

With a wince, the waterbender who had been talking said, “Well, that would be her.”

Not noticing the waterbender’s offhanded comment, Katara and Sokka looked at each other the second they heard the woman’s voice. It was familiar to both of them.

Zuko, who also found the voice familiar (but not as much so as Sokka and Katara did), turned to the two siblings. “Hey,” he whispered uncertainly, “is it just me, or does that sound like-”

The group stepped forwards into a large chamber illuminated by the moon. There was a group of people seated in front of them, looking down at a woman standing on the floor below them. The woman was leaning forwards slightly with one hand on her hip and the other gesturing wildly, reminiscent of how Sokka stood when he was angry.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand, Master Pakku, but Chief Arnook- you’re a father. Right now, my children are in the South Pole, growing up without a mother. The last time I saw them, they were children, but now, my son is getting close to marrying age and my daughter is only a year younger. Imagine if you were stuck on the other side of the world, knowing that Princess Yue was coming of age without a father to guide her. Would you not do everything in your power to get to her?”

With a heavy sigh, a man in a heavy necklace said, “I understand, Kya, but-”

Katara let out a yelp and, with tears in her eyes, sprinted towards the woman. The woman turned, wide-eyed, and watched as Katara buried her face in her parka. Her blue eyes scanned the group, but froze when they landed on Sokka. “Sokka...?”

Sokka stepped forwards, clearing his throat. “Hi, Mom.”

Chapter End Notes

KYA!!!! KYA KYA KYA KYA KYA KYA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

that's quite a promise to make there, sokka. wonder if that'll come into play later

zuko :(

zuko c'mere i want to give you a hug zuko pls i'm so sorry

you can really tell sokka's an engineer and not an architect by the way he talks about that door though

nattiq: be careful

iluak: ok *rams the boat into the north pole's wall*

the funny thing is, nattiq's bf is the exact same way

ok but the way sokka interacts with zuko during the panic attack is how i would want to be interacted with during a panic attack. also idk if this is an autistic thing or a me thing but sometime i lose speech when i have a bad panic attack, thus why zuko does

sokka's puns strike again

thanks for reading!!!

Reunions

Chapter Notes

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

For the past hour or so, Kya, Katara, and Sokka had been a tangle of limbs as they sobbed and embraced each other. Zuko wasn't eager to interrupt them, but they showed no sign of moving and Zuko really needed to tell the council about the invasion.

Carefully stepping around the hugging family, Zuko addressed the council. "Hello. The Blue Spirit here."

Seven blank faces stared back at Zuko.

"Oh, right, you probably don't know me by that name. I'm the one who broke the South Pole waterbenders out of the Fire Nation prison. I usually go by Lee, but my real name is Zuko. As in Zuko of the Fire Nation. The, uh, the Firelord's son."

The white-haired girl leapt to her feet, immediately followed by the man with the necklace, who put a protective arm in front of her. The room around them trembled and shook, making everyone but the white-haired girl fall to their feet.

Iluak shouted, "The roof!" Zuko craned his neck upwards to see that chunks of the ice roof were cracking and falling. He ran to find cover, but quickly found himself in an icy sphere with Kesuk.

"Why'd you tell them that, numbskull?!" Kesuk flicked the side of Zuko's head.

"Ow!" The ice around them melted as Zuko said, "I don't want to lie to them! How are we supposed to establish trust with them if I start out lying?!"

"Kaskae!" Nattiq screamed as he sprinted over to one of the council members, who had collapsed during the cave-in. He knelt by the fallen council member's side, where even from a distance Zuko could see a large pool of blood forming. Zuko started to run towards him, but was quickly imprisoned in large shards of ice.

"Hey!"

"Stay right where you are, ashmaker Prince," an old waterbender hissed, narrowing his eyes at Zuko.

"Kaskae, Kaskae," Nattiq murmured, turning the council member's face towards him, "can you hear me?"

"He's losing too much blood," Chief Arnook said, looking worriedly down at his bleeding nephew. "We need to get him to the healers-"

“Father, look!” Yue, who had been watching the scene unfolding with horror, pointed at her cousin. To the council’s amazement, the blood started to flow *back* into the young man’s body under the direction of the stranger kneeling at his side. They watched as the stranger melted a chunk of ice and used the pure glacier water to heal the rest of the wound.

“...You are quite an exquisite healer,” Pakku said, having turned his attention from Zuko to the stranger.

Nattiq jumped at the sound of Pakku’s voice. “Ah! Well, uh, I’ve had some experience,” he mumbled, making sure his hood was pulled up around his face.

Iluak, who had just finished helping Kesuk unfreeze Zuko, sighed and put his hands on his hips. “You know, this is gonna be a lot better for you if you don’t drag it out,” he said. Nattiq, still buried in his hood, shot him a glare. “Seriously. You could take a lesson from our local idiot teenager here-”

“‘Idiot teenager’?! Why, you-” Zuko started towards Iluak, but Pakku trapped him again, this time in a solid sphere of ice. Zuko stood there for a minute, crossing his arms and tapping his foot, waiting for someone to let him out. He soon realized, however, that no one was paying attention to him. Kesuk, Iluak, and the council were all focused on Nattiq and the formerly injured councilman, and Aang appeared to have been pulled into the family hug between Katara, Kya, and Sokka. Zuko groaned loudly and let out a few curses before starting to work on melting the ice himself (which, without the light of the sun, was going to take him a while).

Meanwhile, Nattiq was about to tell Iluak to shut up when a hand grabbed his betrothal necklace. The young councilman (who was now perfectly healthy) gazed up at Nattiq in shock. “It’s you,” he breathed. “Isn’t it?” Despite Nattiq’s objections, he sat up and pulled Nattiq’s hood back, leading to a collective gasp from the council. “Nattiq.”

Nattiq flashed a nervous smile. “Hi, Kaskae.”

For a moment, the room was filled with an unbearable silence, then-

“Nattiq!” Kaskae wrapped Nattiq up in a huge bear hug, sobbing into his childhood friend’s parka. Nattiq stiffened for a moment before hugging Kaskae back and shedding a few tears of his own.

“I missed you, you know,” Nattiq murmured, closing his eyes.

“Why’d you leave? Did- did I hurt you somehow? I’m sorry I waited so long to propose to you, you were just so focused on your healing studies and I didn’t want to take you away from-”

“That’s not it, Kaskae. The thing is, I- I ran away because I was scared and confused and- I needed to find myself. And I did, in these past three years. I still love you the same, but there’s something you need to know.” Pulling himself away from Kaskae, Nattiq took a deep breath and said, “I’m a boy. I- even as a kid, I thought I might be, but this whole journey

made me realize that without a doubt. I'm just- I'm so much happier this way, and I feel like I'm finally, truly myself, I- I hope you're okay with that."

"Are you kidding?" Nattiq closed his eyes, bracing himself for the worst.

Instead, Kaskae hugged him tight and said, "I don't care what gender you are- you're alive, that's all that matters. You're alive, and you're still you. And if being a boy makes you happy, then who am I to object?"

Nattiq blinked. "You- you really don't mind?"

"Of course not. I may not understand it totally, but I'll support you, no matter what. Didn't we promise we'd always have each other's backs?"

"Kaskae," Nattiq sniffled, "Kaskae!"

As the two lovers embraced each other and sobbed, Kesuk crossed her arms and looked at the chief. "So, what was that attack all about?"

"My apologies," Chief Arnook said, "but when my daughter gets upset, she loses control of her waterbending abilities." Iluak and Kesuk exchanged a glance, both thinking the same thing: for her to nearly bring down an entire building without meaning to, the chief's daughter must be one powerful waterbender.

"Well, uh, I hate to say this, but we've come bringing bad news. We do have some good news, though-

"You've captured the Fire Prince?"

"We're traveling with the Avatar," Iluak finished. Then, processing what Pakku had just said, Iluak frowned and added, "What? No, he's our friend."

"I know it may seem strange," Kesuk said quickly, noticing the council's expressions, "but he's proven himself to be an ally time and time again. He's brave, and strong- he's the one who broke all the South Pole Waterbenders out of jail. I trust him wholeheartedly- oh, and he has a spirit mark." Kesuk rushed over to the sphere and melted it, then grabbed Zuko by the arm and touched his forehead. The council gasped as the mark of the trusted shone proudly in the moonlight.

Irritated, Zuko asked, "Will you stop trying to kill me now?"

"The ocean and moon spirits chose to mark... you?" Zuko inhaled sharply and bit back a scathing reply. He closed his eyes and reminded himself that these people had suffered a lot because of the Fire Nation, and that's why they were being hostile towards him. (Still, Zuko couldn't help but think of his father at the chief's incredulous tone.)

"Yes," Zuko replied, trying to keep his voice level. "I spent some time in the Southern Water Tribe as a child-

“You’re *still* a child,” Iluak muttered, making Kesuk snort. Zuko gave him a long glare before continuing.

“It changed the course of my life. I was banished by my father at the age of thirteen, and since then I’ve seen how the Fire Nation terrorizes the rest of the world, and the horrible things they’re capable of. And now, I... I think I can help you.”

“You expect us to believe you’ve changed your mind, just like that?” Pakku scoffed, crossing his arms. “And what kind of father would banish his thirteen-year-old son, who also happens to be the heir to the throne? This is preposterous!”

“What, you don’t believe me?! How can you not know that I’m banished, the whole *world* knows!”

“Lee,” Nattiq said, standing up, “Up here, we’re not really connected to the rest of the world. The Northern Water Tribe doesn’t trade with anyone, and we don’t usually welcome visitors, so it’d make sense that no one here knows about that.”

Zuko took a deep breath, then his shoulders slumped. “I... I can tell you how it happened.” His eyes traveled around the room, catching on Sokka’s family and Aang, who seemed oblivious to the world around them. “Someone should probably take them outside.”

“Yue,” Arnook said, “escort them to Kya’s house.”

“But Father,” Yue pleaded, “this is important! I should be here for this meeting-”

“Yue-”

“I won’t have another outburst,” Yue insisted. “He just surprised me, that’s all. I can handle this-”

“Yue,” Arnook placed his hands on Yue’s shoulders, and she sighed. “You know I’m only sending you out because-”

“Because it’s safer that way,” Yue muttered.

“Because I love you, and I don’t want you or anyone else to get hurt,” Arnook finished. “It’s excellent that you’re so eager to prepare for your future as the Chieftess, but you need to have better control of your emotions before you can sit in on tense council meetings like this.”

Lowering her head, Yue said, “I understand, father. I will do as you say.” Sadness filled Arnook’s eyes as he watched his heartbroken daughter walk towards the family.

“Excuse me,” a voice said from above Sokka. He looked up to find the most beautiful person he’d ever seen staring down at him. If Sokka believed in spiritual stuff, he would have thought she were a spirit, with her ethereal white hair and clear blue eyes. Gaping at the perfection in front of him, Sokka realized how much of a mess he was.

Quickly wiping his eyes and smoothing his hair back, Sokka leapt up and said, “Um, hi. I’m Sokka. Southern Water Tribe.”

“My name is Princess Yue,” the girl replied. “Come, let me lead you to your mother’s home.”

Sokka frowned and looked behind him, where Zuko was standing in front of the council. Zuko gave him a reassuring smile and, with the way the moonlight glinted off his short hair, Sokka had to reconsider his first thought about Yue. She was certainly the most beautiful *girl* Sokka had ever seen, but Zuko had to be the most beautiful person.

“Go on,” Zuko said. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

As Yue led the four of them outside, Aang said, “So you’re really Sokka and Katara’s mom?” At some point, Aang had joined in their hug, crying (though Sokka wasn’t exactly sure why.) “You look just like Sokka. Well, except for the hair. Also you smell better.”

Kya giggled, and Aang blinked, shocked by how much it sounded like Katara’s laugh. “I should hope so,” Kya said. “What’s your name?”

“Mom, this is Aang,” Katara said, nudging Kya excitedly. “He’s the Avatar!”

“Oh?” Kya looked over Aang and said, “But you’re so young. And are you an airbender? I thought the next Avatar would be from the Southern Water Tribe.” *That’s why the Fire Nation was taking us waterbenders prisoner*, she didn’t say.

As they walked, Aang explained how he’d gotten frozen in an iceberg and how Sokka and Katara had found him and welcomed him to the South Pole. Kya nodded along as he explained, but one detail was bugging her.

“And where was your father during all of this?”

“Huh? Oh, that’s right,” Katara said, “he left after you were imprisoned.”

Taken aback, Kya asked, “I’m sorry, he *left*?”

“He went off to war with all the other men,” Sokka said, then hesitated. “Well, the other men who were fit to fight, at least. I wasn’t old enough yet.”

“So he left you, just after you lost your mother, to go play soldier? Hm, I’ll have to chat with him about that next time I see him.” Kya’s eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms, just like Katara always did when she was angry. Aang was struck by how similar the two looked- Kya’s nose even scrunched up the exact same way Katara’s did.

The group arrived at a small igloo, similar to the ones in the South Pole. Kya beckoned them inside and led them to a small table. “Sorry,” Kya said, waterbending herself an ice stool, “usually I don’t have this much company.”

Sokka and Katara gasped. “Mom, you can waterbend?”

Slightly hurt, Katara asked, “Why did you never tell me?”

“Coincidentally, I only found out I could waterbend on the day I was taken,” Kya said, sitting. “I can tell you about that later- right now, I want to hear all about how you kids got

here.”

~ ~ ~

“Sokka, you let your sister get arrested by the Fire Nation?!”

“You don’t understand, Mom,” Sokka whined, “she insisted on it. You know how she gets all stubborn when she wants to do something.”

Kya shrugged. “She takes after her mother, I suppose,” she said, ruffling Katara’s hair. “So how did you escape?”

~ ~ ~

“And so I was right about Jet all along,” Sokka said, puffing out his chest. His grin widened when he noticed Yue looking at him in awe.

“Yeah, then you flew Appa the wrong way for an hour,” Katara said, poking her brother. Sokka huffed in frustration and Katara stuck out her tongue.

~ ~ ~

“You saw the Great Divide? How was it?”

“It wasn’t much,” Sokka said with a shrug.

~ ~ ~

“Wait, so you went *back* to the active volcano?”

“No, Mom, this was a different volcano. We were in the Earth Kingdom this time,” Katara explained.

“You went to *two* active volcanoes?!”

“We didn’t know it was a volcano at the time,” Aang said.

Kya, starting to feel a headache coming on, said, “That doesn’t mean- okay. It’s in the past, everyone was fine, and there’s nothing we can do about that now. Just- no more volcanoes, okay?”

“I’ll do my best to keep them away from volcanoes! That’s an Avatar promise,” Aang said with a smile. Kya suppressed a groan.

~ ~ ~

“And we were about to go with Bato, but then...” Katara trailed off, looking at her shoes.

Sensing the change of mood, Kya said, “Then what?” So far, the kids hadn’t been hesitant to tell her anything- so what was making them clam up now?

“You remember how when Katara and Sokka got sick after the storm, I got captured?” Kya and Yue nodded, not quite sure where Aang was heading with this. “Well... someone helped me escape. He was already imprisoned when I got there, and, like I said, he helped me escape... but he didn’t make it out himself. He stayed behind...” Both Aang and Katara were looking to Sokka now, who sighed.

“It was Zuko,” he said.

Taken aback, Kya asked, “Zuko? *Our* Zuko?”

With a tilt of her head, Yue asked, “Why would the Fire Prince be locked away in a Fire Nation prison?”

“The Firelord wanted Zuko dead, and he ordered this guy, Zhao, to do it. But Zhao found out Zuko was the Blue Spirit, and-”

“The Blue Spirit?” Both Yue and Kya looked at Sokka questioningly. Kya’s brow furrowed, and she added, “But the Firelord is his father...”

“The Blue Spirit is a pirate who only attacks Fire Nation ships. He’s pretty infamous because the Fire Nation can’t capture him- or, well, they couldn’t. He’s the only one who was brave enough to stand up to the Fire Nation, and tons of people have been inspired by him-”

Bewildered, Yue asked, “But why would he betray his father?”

“Because he knew it was the right thing to do,” Sokka said softly. “He saw all the evil his father was doing in the world, and Zuko knew he had to do something to stop it. So he took on the identity of the Blue Spirit, two whole years before the Avatar returned to the world.”

“That’s very... brave of him,” Yue murmured. She wasn’t sure how anyone could betray their father, even if they were evil. However, Yue had lived a very sheltered life, kept far away from the war and the Fire Nation, and as she was right now, she could not comprehend the kind of atrocities the Firelord had committed.

“Zuko is the bravest person I know,” Sokka said firmly. He was quiet for a moment, then sighed and slumped over. “Anyways, Zhao, he- he caught Zuko, but he didn’t kill him right away. Which in the end was a good thing, because that means I got to see him again-”

“Sokka,” Kya said quietly, “what happened to Zuko?”

“He was tortured, Mom.” Sokka’s voice was small. It reminded Kya of a time when Sokka had been very young and had accidentally hurt his baby sister by playing too rough. On that day too, Sokka’s shaky voice held so much sadness and guilt, far too much for someone his age. “When we found him, he was in really bad shape. If we had gotten there even a few minutes later... he would have died. It’s really only by a series of coincidences that he’s still alive.”

Sokka described the rest of their journey to the North Pole with occasional interruptions from Katara and Aang. By the time he finished, Sokka was surprised to see the sun setting.

“Hey, didn’t the sun just rise a little while ago?”

“Yes, but in the winter, our days are very short,” Yue explained. “On the solstice, we rarely get more than an hour of daylight.”

“The seasons here are the opposite of ours at home,” Kya said. “Isn’t that weird?” She could tell that the kids, particularly Sokka, were in a glum mood after reliving that last part of their tale, so Kya tried to keep an upbeat attitude.

“Well, we are on the opposite side of the world,” Aang replied.

“What were you doing in the council room so early?” Katara was looking at Kya with curious eyes.

“To be completely honest... I was trying to get back to you and your brother.” Sokka looked up at this. “Ever since I was well enough to understand that I had been freed and was in the North Pole, I have been trying to come home. Every week, I’ve called a council meeting as soon as I was able- excuse me, do you need something?” Kya frowned at a dark-haired stranger in her doorway.

“The council said I might find you here,” he replied. At the familiar voice, Sokka grinned.

“Zuko! Come and sit down,” he said eagerly, getting out of his seat.

“Zuko? Is that really you?” Kya also stood up, but Zuko shrunk further back into the shadowy entryway.

“Ah... Princess Yue. Your father wants to see you. Would you like me to escort you back?” Kya tried to step forwards to get a better view of Zuko, but he turned away, only showing her one side of his face.

“That won’t be necessary,” Yue said as she approached the doorway. “My apologies for the incident earlier. I was surprised and I thought you might be here to hurt us, but after hearing your friends tell their story, I believe you can be trusted. Truly, I am sorry for what happened earlier, it was a mistake.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone tried to kill me,” Zuko said with an awkward chuckle. His eyes darted over to Kya for a second, then he stiffened and looked away. “Are you sure you don’t want me to walk you home?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. I appreciate your concern, though,” Yue said before leaving.

“Zuko,” Kya said, making Zuko turn his back to her. “Zuko,” she repeated, trying to sidestep towards him. No matter how she moved, Zuko kept turning away from Kya. Finally, Kya asked, “Zuko, why won’t you look at me? Have I done something to upset you?”

“Huh? No, it’s just-” Zuko sighed, and his shoulders curled inwards. “You’re not going to like what you see.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Aang said cheerfully. “I told her that I took her kids to two active volcanoes, and she still likes me!”

“Zuko,” Kya said slowly, carefully approaching the firebender, “what do you mean, ‘I won’t like what I...’”

With a deep breath, Zuko turned to face Kya and stepped into the igloo. Illuminated by the igloo’s lanterns, he said, “Hi, Kya.”

Kya gasped, and her hand flew to her mouth in horror. Immediately, Sokka was on his feet, rushing to Zuko’s side. “What? What’s wrong with him?” He scanned Zuko for any obvious signs of injury. Finding none, he looked back to his mom, who was reaching out towards Zuko’s face- *oh*.

“I guess we forgot to mention Zuko has a scar,” Aang said sheepishly.

“Don’t touch it, Mom,” Sokka said, grabbing Kya’s arm. Her fingers hovered an inch away from Zuko’s face.

“Oh, *Zuko*,” Kya whispered, tears filling her eyes. “H- how-?” She looked at her hand, then back at the shape branded into Zuko’s skin, and the rest of her question died before it could reach her lips. Pulling free from Sokka’s grip, Kya covered her mouth with her hand and started to sob.

Zuko stood there awkwardly as Sokka helped his mother back into her seat and hugged her, along with Aang and Katara. He was already exhausted from the long council meeting (which had been very productive, but *long* and *taxing*) and he’d been hoping to rest a bit before the feast the chief had planned for the evening, but it looked like that wasn’t going to happen.

After a few minutes, Kya wiped her eyes and cleared her throat. Voice wavering, she asked, “That man, Zhao- did he do this to you?”

Sokka started. “Mom-”

“No. No, he didn’t,” Zuko interrupted.

“Then who...” Kya faltered. Her eyes widened in shock and realization at the thought of who could have possibly gotten away with hurting the Fire Prince so badly.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Zuko declared, crossing his arms. “Besides, we have more important matters to discuss. There’s going to be a feast tonight, and the chief wants us all there.”

Aang perked up. “A feast? Is it for us?”

“Kind of. The chief was planning on having a feast anyway because it’s Princess Yue’s sixteenth birthday.”

Beneath the table, Sokka pumped his fist. “At least I’ve got a chance,” he whispered to himself.

Zuko turned towards him sharply, and Sokka suppressed a groan. Of course Zuko had heard him- Zuko had always had superhuman hearing. “What?”

“Nothing,” Sokka replied, hoping he wasn’t visibly blushing. The last thing he wanted to do was admit he’d been thinking about his love life in front of everyone.

“Anyways,” Zuko continued, clearly annoyed that he’d been interrupted, “at the feast, they’re going to introduce us all. I’ll be introduced as Lee, the Avatar’s firebending teacher, so don’t call me Zuko. You saw how Princess Yue reacted when she found out who I was- these people might not be too pleased to find out that the Firelord’s son is in their home.”

“I’d better go back to the boat and clean up before the feast, then,” Katara said, glancing down at the snotty mess on her parka. Kya and Sokka murmured in agreement, both with similarly messy clothes.

After a long goodbye hug (which Zuko couldn’t help but roll his eyes at- they were going to see each other in less than an hour at the feast), Sokka and Katara set off for the *Unagi* alongside Aang and Zuko. As they walked, Zuko nudged Sokka, and Sokka slowed to let Katara and Aang get ahead of them. “What’s up?”

“Don’t say anything about the invasion,” Zuko whispered. “Chief Arnook wants tonight just to be a night of celebration.”

(Oh, right.) Sokka had almost forgotten about the invasion. Anxiety bubbled up inside of him at the thought of not only having to protect Katara, but now his mom as well- they had *just* found her, Sokka couldn’t let anything rip them apart again-

“Stop it,” Zuko said, nudging him again.

“What?”

“You’re worrying.” Zuko’s hand brushed against Sokka’s as he said, “I understand why, but just for tonight, try to have fun. Enjoy the time you have with your mother.”

Zuko’s eyes filled with sadness, and Sokka was about to ask him if something had happened when Katara called, “Come on, you two! You’d better not make us late!”

“Try to relax, Sokka. For me.” Sokka sighed loudly.

“I’ll do my best,” Sokka said. “Relaxing when I know a huge Fire Nation attack is coming? Piece of cake.”

Chapter End Notes

oh? what's this? yue character development? it's more likely than you think

yeah nattiq is a bloodbender but he doesn't call it that- bending the blood back into someone's body is just a really advanced healing move in the north pole. now, does this mean nattiq will use his skills like the other bloodbenders we know? who knows!

kya is a star i love her (more kya lore coming up soon)

the virgin pakku vs the chad kaskae

thanks for reading!

The feast

Chapter Notes

cw: mentions of minor character death & parental abuse

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

Sokka and Zuko arrived in the grand dining hall just as the ceremonial drums started beating. Zuko's heart sank as he saw all the rest of his crew, Kya, Katara, and the Avatar already seated.

"Oh Agni, Sokka, you made us late," Zuko hissed as they scrambled to the front of the room.

"Hey! I had to make sure my outfit was appropriate for a feast," Sokka said once they reached the table. As Sokka sat down, Zuko let out an exasperated sigh.

"You're wearing a parka! Nobody's even going to see your outfit!" At this, the whole table had to suppress their giggles- except for Katara, who laughed openly.

"Don't worry, you're perfectly on time," Katara said to Zuko as he sat next to Sokka. With a twinkle in her eye, she added, "And you know there's nothing more important than Sokka's outfit." Sokka shot her a glare and opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment the chief stood, forcing Sokka to bite back his scathing reply.

"Tonight, we celebrate the arrival of many guests, and the return of one of our own." Nattiq stood and waved awkwardly, and the crowd cheered. "The spirits have truly blessed us by bringing our best healer home. We also welcome our brothers and sisters from the Southern Tribe, as well as two of the mighty Kyoshi Warriors. Now, they have brought with them someone very special- someone who many of us believed disappeared from the world until now: the Avatar."

The crowd cheered again, even louder this time, and Zuko covered his ears. He was already starting to regret not resting between the meeting and the feast.

"The Avatar has been escorted here," the chief continued once the cheers died down, "by someone who may be familiar to those of you from the Southern Tribe. This is Lee, the Avatar's firebending teacher."

Chief Arnook gestured to Zuko, and instead of cheers, the crowd was engulfed by hushed whispers. Zuko's expression didn't change, but Sokka noticed his shoulders slump slightly, and his heart twisted up in his chest.

"Wooo!" Zuko jolted at Sokka's shout, then stared at him with wide eyes. "Yeah," Sokka shouted, applauding, "give it up for Lee!" He knew he was obliterating the possibility of

making any friends here (and probably giving up any chance he had of hitting it off with Princess Yue), but Sokka found he didn't care about any of that. Sokka didn't mind humiliating himself for Zuko's sake.

A few seconds later, Katara joined in, then Iluak, then the whole guest table was applauding for Zuko. Some of the North Polers joined in, but Sokka was disheartened by how few of them did.

Zuko truly was touched by the sentiment behind Sokka's gesture, but he really could have done without the loud, sudden noise so close to him. He was glad when the chief quieted the group down.

"Now, I understand your hesitance to welcome a firebender into our home," Arnook said. "Believe me, I felt the same way. But the great moon and ocean spirits have bestowed upon him the Mark of the Trusted. Additionally, this boy is none other than the hero who freed our waterbending brothers and sisters from the Southern Tribe from their imprisonment in the Fire Nation."

Kya started at this. Nudging Aang, she asked, "Is that true?"

Brightly, Aang replied, "Yeah! He told us that was the first time he really betrayed the Fire Nation! He's pretty great, huh?"

"He sure is," Kya murmured, looking over at Zuko.

"We also celebrate my daughter's sixteenth birthday," Arnook said, waving his hand towards her as she walked forwards. "Princess Yue is now of marrying age!"

"Thank you, father," Yue said with a smile. Then, to the crowd, she added, "May the great ocean and moon spirits watch over us in these troubled times."

"Now, Master Pakku and his students will perform!" The guests watched with various levels of enthusiasm as the grumpy old man from the council got on stage with a few younger men and started to perform. Aang and Katara were both watching eagerly, while Zuko, Kya, and Nattiq secretly hoped Pakku would mess up and embarrass himself in front of the tribe. Mine was impressed by their waterbending skills while Shizu nervously rubbed the war fans in her bag, wondering if now was the time. Kaskae wasn't watching the performance at all and was instead staring at Nattiq with a lovestruck expression, while Iluak was squinting at Kya. Kesuk and Sokka were both watching with mild interest until Princess Yue decided to sit next to Zuko, who was right next to Sokka.

Quickly swallowing the food in his mouth, Sokka leaned an arm against the table and said, "Hi there. Sokka, Southern Water Tribe."

"Very nice to officially meet you," Yue said with a little bow.

After an awkward pause where Yue and Sokka both looked around, thinking of something to say, Sokka said, "So, uh... you're a princess, huh? You know, back in my tribe, I'm kinda like a prince myself." Beside him, Katara scoffed.

“Prince of what?!”

“A lot of things,” Sokka shot back with a glare at his sister. “Do you mind? I’m trying to have a conversation here.”

“My apologies, Prince Sokka,” Katara said with a mock bow.

Noticing Sokka’s irritation, Zuko cut in. “You two are Prince and Princess in the sense that you’re the chief’s kids,” he said. “Because you’re the chief’s daughter, right, Yue?” At her nod, Zuko added, “So you, Sokka, and Katara would all be considered nobility.”

“Really? Is that why you were so stiff at first when you started staying with us?”

Zuko pouted. “I wasn’t stiff!”

With a giggle, Katara said, “You called my parents ‘sir’ and ‘ma’am’!”

“That’s just common courtesy!”

With Zuko and Katara focused on each other, Sokka decided to make another move on Yue. “So, it looks like we might be in town for a while. I’m thinking maybe we could... do an activity together?”

“Do an activity?” Yue was excited by the prospect, but Sokka took the eagerness in her tone as mocking. Stiffly, he turned back to his plate and stuffed some octopus in his mouth.

Once again trying to come to Sokka’s aid, Zuko said, “Yeah, an activity. Uh... Sokka and I can show you around my boat! Have you ever seen an Earth Kingdom trading ship?”

“I haven’t, actually,” Yue said, eyes lighting up. She really wanted to learn about the rest of the world, and seeing an outsider’s ship seemed like a good place to start- however, she had been hoping Sokka had meant just the two of them would do an activity.

Sokka had, in fact, meant just him and Yue, but clearly Zuko hadn’t realized that. “Yeah,” Sokka said, trying not to sound disappointed. “That sounds great.”

Zuko frowned. He could tell Sokka was upset but didn’t understand why. Hadn’t Zuko helped Sokka get what he wanted?

On the other side of the table, Iluak frowned. “This may be an odd question,” he said, tapping Kya’s shoulder, “but can you show me your right arm?”

Kya looked at Iluak questioningly, but rolled up her parka sleeve, revealing a few burn scars, tattooed lines, and three pink, faded scar lines across her bicep.

“No way,” Iluak breathed. “Are you... Kya?” Kya nodded, still looking at Iluak uncertainly. “No way,” he repeated, “no way! Kya, the twelve-time champion of the Annual South Pole Ice Wrestling Competition!”

Kya’s face broke into a grin. “You recognize me? But that was so long ago!”

“Are you kidding, of course I recognize you! I even got to wrestle you once- you won, of course- during the seventh year of your nine-year winning streak! Spirits, I had the biggest crush on you when I was young,” Iluak admitted with a hearty laugh. “I was heartbroken when you said you were going to give up wrestling to start a family.”

“Eh, twelve wins was enough for me to prove I was the best,” Kya said with a shrug. “It was time for me to settle down. And I really would have, if not for the polar bear dog incident.”

Mine, who had been listening, asked, “The polar bear dog incident?”

Kesuk scoffed. “You haven’t heard about that?”

Mine frowned. “I’m not from the South Pole.”

“Oh, true. I guess I’ll have to give you a pass this time,” Kesuk said, shrugging.

Excitedly, Iluak said, “So imagine this: you’re a young woman who just had a baby in a cold, South Pole winter. You and your husband are getting some much-needed sleep, but all of a sudden, your mom instincts tell you something’s wrong. You get up, you go check on the baby- but the baby isn’t there. Instead, you find every new parent’s worst fears: polar bear dog prints!”

“What? I don’t remember anything like that happening,” Sokka said through a mouthful of cooked fish. “Neither me or Katara were taken by polar bear dogs, right Mom? Uh, Mom?”

Sheepishly, Kya scratched the back of her head. “Well... it was a long time ago, and you were very young, Sokka. It was before Katara was born-”

“What?!” Standing up suddenly, Sokka exclaimed, “You mean I was taken by polar bear dogs as a kid?!” Zuko was relieved to see that Sokka was back to his normal, expressive self since Yue had left to sit with her father some time ago.

“Now, Sokka,” Iluak continued, “if you had anyone else for a mom, you would’ve been a goner. But you were lucky enough to be Kya’s son, and Kya wasn’t about to let some polar bear dog eat her kid. So Kya chased after the polar bear dog- which was full grown!- and wrestled it to the ground to protect you. It was an epic match, and Kya didn’t leave unscathed, as you can see from her arm- but it ended with her crushing its skull beneath her elbow!”

“Actually, I just pinned it to the ground,” Kya corrected. “I managed to keep it down and away from Sokka until my husband got his spear and... took care of things.”

“Still, you took on a polar bear dog and won! That’s amazing!” Kya simply shrugged, and Iluak crossed his arms. “What, are you gonna say that’s normal or something?”

“It’s what any parent would do for their child,” she replied.

“Uh, not any parent,” Zuko interjected. “My father would probably feed me to the polar bear dog.” Kesuk snorted, but everyone else at the table stared at Zuko with varying degrees of

horror. “I was joking,” he clarified, then thought for a minute. “Well, actually, he probably *would* do that... Sorry, bad joke.”

After a very long pause (in which Zuko tried not to sweat upon feeling every eye at the table on him), Iluak finally said, “I can’t believe the Fire Nation actually managed to capture you, Kya. They must’ve played dirty.”

“Not really. Because of the situation I was in, I went with them willingly.” Kya sighed, and Sokka noticed how tired she looked. He realized she had new wrinkles on her face and her hair was graying, and sadness welled up inside him. “You see, they came looking for the last waterbender in the South Pole: my daughter. I knew there were Fire Nation soldiers fighting our warriors and that they wouldn’t leave without a waterbender, so I said it was me. I said I was the waterbender.”

“Mom,” Katara said, getting up so she could hug her mother, “you didn’t have to do that-”

“Nonsense. It’s a mother’s job to protect her children.” Zuko, who Sokka had noticed tensing up as Kya talked, jolted at this. “So I told the man who had broken into my house that I was the waterbender, but he didn’t believe me. He said he was expecting someone younger. So he went to leave, and I knew I had to stop him, so I reached out... and I waterbent for the first time. That desperation must have awoken something within me, just like when I protected Sokka.”

“It’s not impossible for people to develop bending skills later in life,” Nattiq said thoughtfully, “especially when they’re under extreme stress like that. A lot of people think stress and anxiety is all in your head, but there’s a lot of physical effects, too. On occasion, stress can cause your chi paths to shift.”

“You’re quite knowledgeable about this, young man,” Kya said, impressed.

Happiness bubbled up in Nattiq at being called a young man. Bashfully, he said, “Thank you. Uh, for saying I’m knowledgeable, I mean. A lot of my studying has been centered around chi paths and how they work and develop.”

The conversation drifted to different kinds of bending, which Sokka found utterly boring. At some point, Aang and Katara left to go see the waterbending master, and Sokka took advantage of the lull in the conversation after their departure. “So, Mom, what happened after you waterbent at that Fire Nation guy?”

“Hm?” Kya looked up from her food, confused. “Oh. I told the man that I was the one he was looking for, and he believed me this time, but he said they weren’t taking any prisoners that day. He tried to kill me but... he couldn’t.”

Sokka tilted his head quizzically. “What do you mean, he couldn’t?”

“Yeah, Yon Rha and his men aren’t exactly known to hold back,” Zuko said, frowning. “I mean, he challenged a ten-year-old to an Agni Kai. He shouldn’t have had a problem killing you.”

“Actually, I think it’s because of that Agni Kai that made him unable to do the deed. Do you remember what happened, Zu- Lee?”

“I fought him,” Zuko started.

“Wait, hold up- *you* were the ten year old this soldier guy challenged to an Agni Kai?!” Mine was gaping at Zuko.

“Don’t worry, I won,” Zuko replied with a nonchalant shrug.

“That’s not- never mind,” she said, burying her head in her hands.

“The soldier broke the rules of the duel, and in doing so, disrespected the sun spirit, Agni,” Kya continued. “Agni punished the wrongdoers, scaring them away using Zuko’s body- and he made it so that the terms of the duel could never be broken.”

Sokka’s eyes widened, and she turned to Zuko. “Wait, but that would mean...”

“One of the terms Zuko- Lee- made them agree to was that nobody from the Southern Water Tribe would be killed at the hands of that soldier or his men,” Kya said, staring straight at Zuko. Once again, everyone at the table was looking at him, and Zuko had to fight the urge to squirm.

The table was dead quiet until Sokka, with a lump in his throat, said, “Zuko. You- you saved my mom’s life- *twice*. ”

“No-”

“Oh, come on, Lee, even you can’t argue with that,” Kesuk said with a huff. “Because of the Agni whatever, the Fire Nation soldiers didn’t kill her, then you rescued her from prison. Just take the credit for once.”

Shaking his head, Zuko said, “No, no- I’m the reason you were taken in the first place. I- I told my father that I met a waterbender in the South Pole. My father, he sent the Southern Raiders back because of me. It’s my-”

“No,” Kya interrupted, staring at Zuko sternly. “You don’t get to blame yourself for this.”

“But- But- Okay, even if I *did* save you- from a situation *I* put you in!- I took away four years of your time in the South Pole with your family, your kids-”

“Hey.” Sokka put a hand on Zuko’s shoulder, making him flinch. “You can’t change the past. There’s no need for you to punish yourself for a mistake you made years ago.”

“...You’re right.” Zuko slumped forwards, sadness etched into his face. “I’ve already paid the price.”

At this precise moment, Kaskae, who had gotten up from the table, returned with a huge grin. “Guess what, guys! I got us some of the best caribou yak cuts!”

“Dear, could you get some sauce to go with the meat? You know how I hate dry food,” Nattiq said without missing a beat. Kaskae quickly turned around again, completely oblivious to the gloomy mood hanging over the table, and went to fetch Nattiq’s favorite sauce. Once he was out of earshot, Nattiq said, “Lee, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“That night, my uncle and my grandfather got in a big argument. Azula said Father was really happy about it, but when I saw him go to Mom, he didn’t seem so happy. He and Mom got into an argument too. I went to bed, but at some point my mom woke me up. She said everything she ever did was to protect me, then gave me a hug and left. I went back to sleep. The next morning, my grandfather was dead and my father took the throne. My mom was gone and my father wouldn’t say what happened to her.” Zuko’s throat was dry as he said, “That’s what I mean when I say I paid the price. I took my friends’ mom away, so I lost my own mom in return.”

Soon after sharing that, Zuko excused himself for the night, but Sokka stayed at the table. He tried to participate in some of the lighthearted banter between Iluak and Kaskae, tried to talk to his mom, tried to hold any sort of conversation, but his heart wasn’t in it. Sokka could see how crushed Zuko was about losing his mom, even years later, and it made Sokka hurt. But it wasn’t a sudden pain that just went away after a few minutes- this was the kind of hurt that burrowed its way into Sokka’s heart and pulsed through him with every heartbeat.

Even though Sokka left the feast exhausted, he remained awake for a while afterwards. After aimlessly roaming the *Unagi* for some time, Sokka finally went to his and Zuko’s room and got settled for the night, but still couldn’t fall asleep.

Gazing at the sleeping boy next to him, Sokka murmured, “You’ve done so much for me, Zuko, and I didn’t even know all of it. You saved my mom’s life twice, even though you say it was your fault she was taken. But if it weren’t for you protecting our village the day of the Agni Kai,” he whispered, starting to stroke Zuko’s hair, “who knows what would have happened? She could have been taken or killed then. The way I see it, you’re the one who saved my mom and brought us back together.” Zuko’s shape started to become misty, and Sokka wiped his eyes. “I’m going to be forever indebted to you for this. And truly, I wish from the bottom of my heart I could repay you by giving you what you gave to me, but I can’t. I’m so, so sorry Zuko, but I can’t.” Sighing, Sokka pulled Zuko so that the firebender was leaning up against his chest. “You deserve so much better than what I can give you- and what this world has given you. You don’t deserve all the bad things that have happened to you, Zuko. Not at all.”

Chapter End Notes

ohohoh. sokka. oh sokka. it sure IS a shame that you can't do what zuko did for you.
SUCH a shame that you CAN'T. (unless...?)

zuko is real fun at parties

The waterbending master

Chapter Summary

hi! ok, so this update took me 3 weeks, sorry about that. i COULD have updated last week, but then i would have had to split this chapter, and i wanted all of pakku's nastiness contained.

that being said, BIG cw for transphobia and misogyny (i think i spelled that right...?). however, transphobes DO get beat up, so there's that

Chapter Notes

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

“Aang, wake up!” Katara had hardly slept the night before in her eagerness to learn waterbending from a real master. Excitedly, she shook her friend awake, saying, “It’s almost sunrise! We have to be there on time for waterbending practice!”

Aang leapt out of bed, grinning from ear to ear. “You’re right! I can’t wait!”

The duo sprinted to the training grounds, where Aang quickly spotted the waterbending master among his students. At the top of his lungs, Aang hollered, “Good morning, Master Pakku!” Pakku muttered something Aang and Katara couldn’t hear, then turned to face them. At his icy grin, some of Aang’s cheerfulness melted away. Quieter, he said, “Uh, this is my friend, Katara- the one I told you about.” With an unimpressed frown, Pakku’s eyes shifted to Katara.

“I’m sorry,” Pakku said, forming a stool of ice and sitting, “I think there’s been a misunderstanding. You didn’t tell me your friend was a girl.” Katara and Aang looked at each other, then back at Pakku. “In our tribe, it is forbidden for women to learn waterbending.”

~ ~ ~

“It’s true,” Kya said with a shrug. After being kicked out of the training grounds, Katara had stormed off to her mother’s igloo to find some answers.

“But that’s so stupid!” Katara crossed her arms and kicked the ground in frustration. “So what, you’ve just been learning to heal the whole time you’ve been here?! Don’t tell me you don’t want to know how to fight!”

“Sweetie, I would love to learn waterbending,” Kya said, resting a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, “but the people here were kind enough to take us Southern waterbenders in when we escaped. They healed us, fed us, and gave us a home- none of which they owed to us.”

“But you’re all waterbenders. Wouldn’t they be honored to take you in?”

Kya frowned. “Though we generally get along with our sister tribe, there have been times of conflict in the past. Besides, they haven’t tried to help our tribe through any of the raids, or sent any sort of aid over the years, or bothered to respond to the countless letters your father tried to send them-”

“You’re irritated with them too!” At Katara’s accusation, Kya sighed and looked off to the side. “Why are you following their rules?!”

“Because it was the only way to get back to you!” Katara’s eyes widened. “Sweetie,” Kya said after a pause, “everything I’ve done since I’ve been here- no, since I got on that Fire Nation boat in chains, has been to return home to you and your brother. In prison, there were times where I could have tried to escape, but I didn’t. Maybe I could have made it out of the prison, but then what would I have done? I would have still been stranded in an unfamiliar land with no way to escape.

“When I got to the North Pole, things were better, but I was still just as trapped. Even if I tried to steal a boat, these constellations are completely different from the ones we use to navigate back home. The only chance I had of making it home was if the Northerners helped me, and if I wanted their help, I had to follow their rules.”

“So why do you still have to obey them? You can just come with us whenever we leave.”

“That’s true, but in the time I’ve been up here, I’ve learned that the Northern Water Tribe are very... traditional people. They aren’t very willing to change their minds, and they don’t like new ideas.” With a shrug, Kya said, “You can try to change Pakku’s mind, but he’s so old and stuck in his ways that I doubt he’ll teach you anything.”

“But Mom,” Katara protested, “I’ve traveled across the whole world to learn waterbending. There’s got to be someone else who can teach me.”

Kya shook her head sadly. “All the Northerners are too afraid of Pakku to go against him, and none of the other Southerners want to be seen as ungrateful by going against the North’s traditions.” Pained by how miserable her daughter looked, Kya added, “Still, you can learn healing, and I’m sure that’ll be useful on your journey. Spirits forbid it, but if one of you got hurt and I wasn’t there...”

At this, Katara remembered the night she, Aang, and Sokka had rescued Zuko, and she shuddered. Though Sokka had been the one most obviously affected by the events of that night, Katara and Aang both still carried the weight of it with them. Katara remembered how helpless she felt, unable to provide Zuko anything but basic first aid until she discovered her healing abilities. Even after learning she could heal, it had taken Katara a while to heal even Zuko’s most basic injuries, and then there was the whole poison disaster. The fact that something had been killing Zuko from the inside, and Katara hadn’t even realized it was there...

“That’s not a bad idea,” Katara admitted. “Alright, I’ll go check it out.”

Before Katara left, Kya gave her a hug and a kiss on the forehead. “You’re going to do great, sweetie,” Kya said encouragingly. “And I promise, I’ll figure out some way for you to learn waterbending.”

~ ~ ~

Katara left the healing lesson feeling even worse than before. The lesson was informative, sure, but all her other classmates were little kids. She had also learned that her Gran Gran had been born in the North Pole, which led her to be even more confused. Why had Gran Gran left the North Pole? Did Gran Gran know they didn’t teach women waterbending? If she did, why had she let Katara go to the North Pole without knowing? Why hadn’t she told Katara about this at all?

Evidently, she hadn’t told Kya either. Kya was just as shocked as Katara had been when Katara told her. “Kanna has always been a private woman,” Kya murmured thoughtfully. “I knew she came to our tribe from somewhere else when I was little, but I always thought it was another fragment of the Southern Water Tribe.”

At that moment, Aang trudged in, looking exhausted. “Hi, Katara, hi, Kya,” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. “You have any food? I’m starvin’...”

Kya started to reach for some fish jerky, but Katara stopped her. “He doesn’t eat meat, Mom. Do you have anything plant based?”

Kya frowned. There wasn’t much plant life in the North Pole, so most of the Northern Water Tribe’s diet was meat and fish. “I know a woman who makes delicious seaweed wraps,” she said after a moment of thought. “Usually, you wrap the seaweed around some sort of fish, but I’m sure you can just ask for the seaweed. I can go get some for you.”

No sooner than Kya said that, Sokka stormed into the igloo, stomping past the others. All three of them heard a loud sigh as Sokka noisily plopped down on his sleeping bag.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Kya muttered, “Or not. Katara, can you take Aang out to get him some food? It sounds like your brother needs someone to talk to.”

“Sure,” Katara said, “but where do I go?”

With a wave of her hand, Kya said, “Just tell someone you’re looking for Meriwa, they’ll know where to take you.” She handed Katara a few coins, then went back to the guest room where Sokka had put some of his things. Kya stood in the room’s doorway for a moment before saying, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Today has been the *worst*,” Sokka groaned, burying his head in a pillow. Almost immediately, though, Sokka lifted the pillow so he could talk again. “So yesterday at the feast, I asked Yue if we could do something together. She seemed interested, but then Zuko came butting in and told Yue that he and I could show her around his boat. So then this morning, we did show her around- and I have to say, I’m pretty sure she’s into me.”

At this, Sokka looked to Kya, seeking approval. "I'm sure you're right, honey," Kya said with a nod. "I may not know exactly what happened, but I know your judgement is good." At the feast, Kya had almost immediately noticed how infatuated Sokka had been with the princess, and was relieved to see that Yue seemed just as interested in Sokka.

Seemingly satisfied with Kya's answer, Sokka continued, "So after a couple hours, Yue and I finally got off the boat and I got to be alone with her. She told me to meet her on a bridge tonight," Sokka said with a scoff, crossing his arms. "I'll get to that in a minute. So I went to warrior training all happy, but then none of the other guys would talk to me. And there was one time where we paired up for sparring, but no one wanted to be my partner."

"Well, honey, you are new," Kya pointed out. "They all know each other, and they're probably used to how they usually partner up."

"I know, but Zuko was supposed to be there! He could have been my partner, but he didn't show up!" Maybe it was better that Zuko hadn't shown up, because he certainly would have beat Sokka pretty bad in front of the other warriors. However, Sokka chose not to say this to his mom, instead saying, "He blew training off for some council meeting, and so I was all alone. Then when I get back, he's on the ship and he's all excited. Instead of taking warrior classes, he's gonna be *teaching* one. It's like, he's always got to rub it in, you know?"

"Rub what in?" Kya had the feeling she knew what Sokka's answer would be, but she wanted him to say it.

But instead of answering Kya's question, Sokka let out a sigh of frustration. "Anyway, he started getting all nervous when he realized I wasn't as excited as he was. He asked me what was wrong, and I told him nothing, but I had to go. He said he would come with me, and I snapped at him and said I didn't want him with me."

Sternly, Kya said, "Sokka-"

"I know, I know, I shouldn't have yelled, but he was really getting on my nerves. So as I'm walking to the bridge, I'm thinking that it sucks that I made Zuko upset, but at least I have Yue to look forward to, right?" Sokka let out a bitter laugh. "I get to the bridge and she's there, and then she tells me that it was a mistake to ask me to come there and runs away."

"Honey, I don't think that's because of you." Sokka looked at Kya doubtfully, so she explained, "As far as I know, Yue hasn't ever been in a relationship before. She's a cautious, reserved girl, and she probably wants to take things slow with you."

As Kya reassured Sokka, Katara and Aang were led to Meriwa's house. Once inside, they were surprised to spot a familiar face.

Katara called, "Nattiq?" Sure enough, the waterbender was seated on the floor, tossing and catching a stream of water with a much younger waterbender. The little boy was around the same age as the kids in Katara's healing class (which she frowned at the memory of.)

Without turning around, Nattiq said, "Unless it's a medical emergency, you'll have to wait. I'm already booked for the next three weeks, so if you need a healing appointment sooner, go

ask someone else.”

“Huh? No, Nattiq, it’s us,” Aang said, stepping in front of him and waving. Nattiq blinked and rubbed his eyes, and the little boy took the opportunity to send the water flying into Nattiq’s face.

“Hey! You little rascal,” Nattiq said, grabbing the boy and mussing up his hair.

Katara asked, “Do you know Meriwa?”

“She’s my cousin,” Nattiq said, then hesitated. “Well, not really. My mom and her mom have a set of grandparents- no, sorry, great-grandparents- in common. Even though we’re pretty distant relatives, we were friends growing up, so we consider each other cousins. This little guy is her son.” The kid had started yanking on Nattiq’s arm, so Nattiq ruffled his hair again until he seemed happy. Once the boy was content, Nattiq looked back up at Katara and Aang and asked, “Do you need her for something?”

“We heard she has really good seaweed, and since Aang doesn’t eat meat-”

“Nattiq, play,” the little boy demanded, pouting.

“Actually, I think it’s your bedtime,” Nattiq said.

“Nooo!!”

“Yes. Your mommy will be mad if you stay up any later. You don’t want your mommy to be mad, do you?”

The boy puffed out his cheeks as he sighed. “No...”

“Okay, then let’s get you in bed.” To Aang and Katara, Nattiq said, “I’ll help you as soon as I’ve taken care of him.”

At that, the boy stopped in his tracks and turned. He glared at Aang and Katara with a surprising amount of malice in his eyes, especially for someone so young. Unnerved, both Aang and Katara looked away.

Unable to see the boy’s face, Nattiq tugged his arm gently. “Come on, Yakone. To bed.” Yakone turned again, allowing Nattiq to lead him to the bedroom, but Aang and Katara still felt those eyes burning into them.

“Sorry about that,” Nattiq said a few minutes later, returning from the back of the house with a large green bundle in his hand. “He’s a good kid, but he can be really territorial. He also needs a lot of attention... sometimes when he’s too much for Meriwa to handle, I watch over him. He likes me a lot, and he’s totally fine with me being a boy.” Nattiq glowered as he muttered, “I wish the rest of the tribe felt the same way.”

“People are giving you trouble for being a boy?” With more than a hint of bitterness, Katara added, “But they like boys so much more than girls.”

Nattiq sighed and shook his head. “Everyone I’ve told seems to be fine with it, but they all just assume I’m a girl. Which, I mean, I can’t blame them, because they all thought I was a girl when I left, but I could really do without all the funny looks and the ‘are you sure’s.”

Something occurred to Katara and she stopped in her tracks. “Wait, but if everyone thought you were a girl, how did you learn waterbending?”

Nattiq took a quick look around before quietly replying, “Don’t tell anyone, but I used to sneak in and watch Pakku’s lessons when I was a kid. I only did it a few times before I got too scared to continue, though, so I’m mostly self-taught.” Giving Katara a sympathetic look, he asked, “You wanted to learn waterbending from him, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but Master Poophead won’t teach her just because she’s a girl,” Aang muttered. Nattiq quickly lifted a hand to his mouth at the offensive nickname, trying to hide a laugh.

“I can teach you what I know,” Nattiq said.

Starry-eyed, Katara turned to Nattiq. “Really?!”

“After we leave the North Pole,” Nattiq finished. Katara’s shoulders slumped, and Aang wracked his brain for something he could do for her. “While we’re here, you can learn to be a better healer-”

“What if I just teach you?!” Aang’s eyes lit up as he spoke.

Immediately, Katara brightened. “Why didn’t I think of that?! At night, you can teach me whatever moves you learn from Master Pakku. That way, you have someone to practice with, and-”

“Hey, hold on a minute,” Nattiq said, brows knitting together. “I don’t think this is such a good idea.” But before Nattiq even finished his sentence, Katara and Aang were running off together towards a canal. Biting the nails of his free hand, Nattiq looked back and forth between the road to Kya’s igloo and the canal. With a heavy sigh, Nattiq decided to follow the kids, not wanting them to get in trouble.

As Nattiq walked up, Aang was saying, “Master Pakku says this move is all about sinking and floating.” He then passed the water to Katara, who started to replicate the move.

Biting his nails again, Nattiq murmured, “Guys-”

“I got it!” Katara’s triumph was short-lived, however, as the water went flying out of her hands and up above her- where Master Pakku was glaring down at the trio.

“I- I was just showing Katara a few moves,” Aang stammered. Pakku’s icy glare was unchanged.

“You have disrespected me, my teachings, and my entire culture. You are no longer welcome as my student. And you,” Pakku said, turning his gaze to Nattiq, “allowed them to do this.”

Nattiq’s shoulders jumped up. “Uh, well, actually-”

“You may think you are a boy, but you’re wrong. You cannot change who you are.” Nattiq recoiled as if he’d been slapped. With a final *hmpf!*, Pakku turned on his heel and stormed away, leaving the three waterbenders reeling.

~ ~ ~

Early the next morning, Aang and Katara dragged Sokka along to the council room, but all three of them were surprised to see someone had beat them there.

“Zuko?” Sure enough, it was the young firebender who turned around at the sound of Sokka’s voice. Zuko’s eyes swept over the group and a confused look crossed his face.

“What are you three doing here?”

“We really need to talk to the council,” Katara said, pushing forwards. “It’s very important.”

“Oh, okay,” Zuko said, stepping to the side.

In her urgency, Katara hadn’t realized that Zuko had been in the middle of talking to the council himself. Sokka, however, did, and as Aang and Katara addressed the council, he asked Zuko, “Why were you meeting with them?”

“Well...” Avoiding Sokka’s gaze, Zuko rubbed the back of his neck. With a deep breath, he finally said, “I’m not going to be teaching that ‘defense against firebenders’ class I told you about.”

“...Then who is?” Sokka had a hard time believing the Northerners had found someone better than Zuko, an actual firebender, to teach the class.

With a quick shake of his head, Zuko replied, “Nobody. It was my idea, and without me, there’s no class.”

Sokka blinked. “You changed your mind? Why?”

Zuko briefly met Sokka’s eyes, then looked away skittishly. “After... our conversation yesterday, I thought some more about it and realized it might not be as good of an idea as I thought it was. I don’t know if the Northern Water tribespeople will even be open to me teaching them, Zhao could have completely different tactics than I’m used to- there’s too many unknowns, but ultimately, I’m not going to go through with something you disapprove of so strongly.”

Before Sokka could reply, the room shook. Sokka and Zuko jumped, then looked at the source of the rumbling. “No way am I apologizing to a sour old man like you!” Katara was visibly fuming as she glared up at Pakku. “I’ll be outside if you’re man enough to fight me,” she proclaimed, then turned on her heel and stalked out of the hall.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean that,” Aang said, sheepishly shrugging at the council.

“Yeah, I think she did,” Sokka said. Beside him, Zuko nodded.

“She definitely did.”

The three boys ran after Katara, and as he caught up to her, Sokka said, “Are you crazy, Katara?! You know you’re not gonna win this fight!”

“I know,” Katara said, taking off her parka and throwing it at Sokka. “I don’t care.”

“You don’t have to do this for me,” Aang pleaded. “I can find another teacher.”

“I’m not doing it for you. Someone needs to slap some sense into that guy.” They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Katara whipped around. Spotting Pakku, she taunted, “So, you decided to show up?” But instead of engaging her, Pakku simply walked right past Katara. “Wha- aren’t you going to fight?!”

Without stopping, Pakku said, “Go back to the healing huts with the other women where you belong.”

Katara clenched her fists, then summoned a water whip and lashed the back of Pakku’s head. Finally, the waterbender stopped in his tracks.

“Fine. You want to learn to fight so bad?” Pakku turned to face Katara and, with a smirk, said, “Study closely!”

Katara held her own for an impressive amount of time, but in the end, Pakku defeated her. Just as Pakku was about to trap her within blades of ice, someone yelled, “Stop!”

Pakku, intending to teach Katara a lesson, did not stop, but the ice shards melted before he could imprison her. Irritated, he spun around to face the meddling waterbender.

“Oh. It’s *you*.” The disgust in Pakku’s voice was evident as he looked at Nattiq, who was panting from running all the way from his house to where the fight was taking place.

“Master Pakku,” Aang said, “there’s been a mistake. I know you think Nattiq was with us last night, but he was actually trying to stop me and Katara from waterbending together.”

Chief Arnook, who had come out of the council hall alongside Yue and Kaskae, looked to Nattiq and asked, “Is this true?”

“I don’t care,” Pakku exclaimed. “You disrespected the wishes of our tribe when you ran away, and you continue to disrespect them by pretending to be something you’re not. You’re not a boy, and you never will be a boy!”

“That’s enough,” Kaskae said sharply, stepping between Nattiq and Pakku. He gave Pakku a stern glare, then his gaze softened as he turned to Nattiq. “Come on, dear, let’s go home.”

“No.” Nattiq said it so quietly that only Kaskae heard him.

“That’s right,” Pakku sneered, “take your betrothed home and talk some sense into her, Kaskae.”

Without looking up, Nattiq raised his hand. A ball of water floated up behind Pakku. With a few motions of Nattiq's hand, the water splashed Pakku's back.

Pakku jeered, "What, you want me to teach you a lesson too?" Pakku assumed an attack stance, not realizing that Nattiq's water was soaking through his skin. "Then allow me to--"

All of a sudden, Master Pakku froze. He stood up straight, shoulders tensed. Nattiq lowered his hand, and Pakku fell to his knees. Slowly, like a cat about to pounce on its prey, Nattiq approached Pakku.

"What- is--"

"You were right about one thing," Nattiq said calmly. "I'm not a boy. Unlike you, I'm a *man*." Nattiq slowly raised his hand, and Pakku rose along with it until his eyes were at the same level as Nattiq's. "And as a man, I'm not running away from my problems anymore."

"You- little-" Pakku reached out, trying to attack Nattiq, but with a few quick motions of Nattiq's fingers, Pakku's arm was twisted behind his back.

"I'm not scared of you anymore," Nattiq said, his eyes narrowing. "You're nothing but a bully. You use your status as the tribe's waterbending master to do whatever you want instead of what's best for the tribe. Look at all these people watching- was even *one* of them rooting for you?" As Nattiq scanned the crowd, his eyes fell on Zuko. A crazy idea started to form in Nattiq's mind at the sight of the boy who, less than two weeks ago, was writhing on the ground, dying from mercury poisoning. It had been fairly easy to unblock Zuko's chi paths, as Nattiq had plenty of experience working with chi paths. As Nattiq turned back to Pakku, he wondered if he could reverse the process...

Pakku spluttered, "How dare you?!"

"No, how dare *you*?!" The entire crowd jumped as Nattiq raised his voice. "You use your bending to inspire fear in your own people, and you're the sole authority deciding who can or cannot learn to waterbend! By treating me the way you do, you keep other people who might be different living in fear of being themselves! And you know what? I was willing to accept all of that, because you've been that way since I was a kid!" As Nattiq was talking, he was forcing Pakku to sink to his knees. Fully shouting now, Nattiq said, "But then I find out that you're fighting with a girl from the South Pole who traveled all the way across the world in hopes of learning from you!"

"Now, you- you listen-" Pakku slammed into the ground before he could finish his sentence.

"No, now *you* will listen to *me*! You have a remarkable lack of respect for other human beings, especially those who are different from you! And you say I've disrespected our tribe?! You, a master waterbender, decided to attack an untrained girl from our sister tribe! You've misrepresented our people, but what's more, you've shown a remarkable display of cowardice and cruelty!" Nattiq was red in the face as he screamed, "How *dare* you call yourself a man!"

"You- you don't- understand--"

“What else is there to understand?! *How can you possibly justify a duel with a child?! No honorable man would do what you’ve just done!*”

In the pause that followed, Sokka noticed Zuko’s look of discomfort. Sokka wondered if Zuko was thinking about the Agni Kai he’d fought with Yon Rha.

(Zuko was, in fact, thinking of a different Agni Kai.)

Nattiq took a deep breath. His eyes narrowed, but when he spoke again, his voice was level. “You don’t deserve to be a waterbender.”

The onlookers watched with a mix of amazement, horror, and awe, as Nattiq put his hand on Pakku’s forehead. For a moment, nothing seemed to happen, then Pakku collapsed to the ground. With a growl, Pakku swayed his arms in a basic waterbending motion, but nothing happened. “What... what did you do...!”

Katara gasped. “He... can’t bend anymore?”

“It isn’t permanent,” Nattiq said, stepping back. “I could make it that way if I wanted to, but I won’t.” (Now, this was a bluff. What Nattiq had done was simply block some of Pakku’s chi paths using the water in Pakku’s body, particularly the chi paths that Nattiq knew were for waterbending. He wasn’t quite sure how long it would last, but he knew the blocking would wear off soon. However, Pakku knew none of this, and Nattiq knew he could only earn Pakku’s respect through fear. So, he bluffed. Even if Nattiq knew how to make it permanent, though, he wouldn’t.)

With suspicious eyes, Pakku asked, “Why?”

“Because I’m not like you. I won’t let my emotions get in the way of my reasoning. With what we know is coming ahead, our tribe can’t afford to lose one of our most powerful benders.”

Pakku growled, “What do you want?”

“Every one of our benders should at least learn basic waterbending,” Nattiq said, looking to Chief Arnook. “Nonbenders who aren’t warriors should also know how to defend themselves. Most of our male waterbenders probably won’t be able to heal, but they should at least know some first-aid, how to treat the wounded until a healer reaches them.”

“I agree with Nattiq,” Kaskae said, stepping towards his boyfriend. “I know this doesn’t go along with our traditions, but maybe our traditions need to change.”

“Now remember, I’m not saying this because I’m against our traditions,” Nattiq said quickly, “I just want us to be as prepared as we can be for an invasion, if it comes.”

The day after the feast, Arnook had announced to the tribe that the visitors believed there might be an invasion. To the tribe, he made it sound like an invasion may or may not happen, but the *Unagi* crew and the council knew it was a matter of when instead of if the invasion would happen.

Now, Arnook looked around at the scattered council members and said, “Does anyone take issue with these suggestions?” Pakku glared at the ground and muttered to himself, but nobody made a clear statement of disagreement. “Alright, if that’s settled... Nattiq, you and your two waterbending companions from the South Pole will take over some of Master Pakku’s classes.” Nattiq gasped and Pakku started to complain, but Arnook held up his hands and said, “With every waterbender now learning, there will be far too many students for Master Pakku to handle. Nattiq, would you say you are the best waterbender of your trio?”

“Well, I mean, it depends on what you mean. Iluak probably has the most raw power of us three, but he, well... lacks finesse. Kesuk is better with that, but she’s still learning, and I’m not really sure she’d be a great teacher. I’m the one who taught them a lot of waterbending, but-”

“You taught them?” Nattiq gulped, then nodded. “Then you’ll be in charge of intermediate classes, while the other two will teach basic level waterbending. Pakku will continue to teach advanced waterbending.” At this, Pakku smiled. So he wouldn’t have to teach any women, after all- because what woman would be skilled enough to take the advanced level class? “Pakku, you will also teach Nattiq.”

Pakku’s smile disappeared. “What?”

“You will teach Nattiq, and Nattiq will teach you. Clearly, Nattiq has developed new waterbending techniques on her- *his* journey,” Arnook corrected himself. “My apologies, Nattiq. I have known you for so long as a girl, it may take time for me to get used to referring to you as your true gender.”

“Oh.” Nattiq blinked, not expecting the chief to refer to him properly, much less for him to apologize for using the wrong pronouns. “Wait, so, you’re okay with me being a man?”

“Despite what *some* people believe,” Arnook said with a not-so-subtle glance at Pakku, “there are stories of our ancestors who were like you, so you are certainly not going against tradition by being a man, Nattiq. In fact, some believe that people like you are closer to the spirits than the rest of us, since many spirits present themselves as different genders in different stories. Now, I am not sure if I believe that, but if it is true, then people like you are not to be disrespected.”

“Yeah,” Kaskae said with a frown, “it’s like- Tui is a girl, but Tui is the moon. It’s not like the moon has, er- female body parts. I’m pretty sure the moon doesn’t have *any* body parts, actually, and I know for sure that the ocean doesn’t, but La is a boy usually.”

“What Kaskae’s trying to say is that gender isn’t always dependent on what your body looks like,” Nattiq said, making Kaskae’s face light up.

“Yeah, exactly! You always know exactly what I wanna say,” Kaskae grinned. “But yeah, who would know Nattiq’s gender better than Nattiq? Nattiq is the smartest *guy* I know.” Kaskae drew out the word ‘guy’ and nudged Nattiq as he said it, making Nattiq roll his eyes. He appreciated the support, but Kaskae did always have a knack for embarrassing Nattiq.

Arnook cleared his throat and said, “Nattiq, from today onwards, I officially regard you as a man, and I expect the rest of the tribe to do the same.” Next, Arnook turned to Zuko and said, “Lee, you will have to teach more sections of your firebender defense class, or have more students in the two classes you already have.”

“Huh?” Zuko hadn’t been expecting to hear his name. He almost asked Arnook to repeat himself, but he processed the words after a couple seconds and instead replied, “Well, as a matter of fact, I called you to meet this morning because I’m not going to do that class anymore.”

“What?!” Arnook seemed genuinely surprised as he asked, “Why not?”

“The person I trust most in the world thought it was a bad idea,” Zuko said with a shrug. “If he doesn’t want me to do it-”

Grabbing Zuko’s arm, Sokka said, “Hey. Can the two of us talk for a minute?” Zuko looked confused, but he nodded, and Sokka led him a little ways up the stairs, away from the crowd. Once they were out of earshot of the crowd, Sokka turned around and stared at Zuko with his hands on his hips. “What in the world are you thinking, Zuko?”

Zuko blinked. “What?”

“You have to teach that class, Zuko! You know things about the Fire Nation that no one else here does. Teaching this class will save lives, you have to know that.”

Looking even more confused, Zuko asked, “So... you like the idea? You think it’s good?”

“Of course I do,” Sokka huffed.

“But yesterday, you got so upset when I mentioned it...”

Something clicked in Sokka’s head. “Wait, you think that I snapped at you because I thought your class was a bad idea, and you don’t want to teach it because of that?” Zuko nodded, and Sokka sighed, burying his face in his mittens. “It’s a great idea, Zuko, really. I was just upset because you said you’d go to warrior training with me and you didn’t.”

“Oh,” Zuko said simply. “I’m sorry about that, I just didn’t want to forget that idea, so I called the council meeting as soon as I could. So, you think the class is a good idea for sure?” Sokka nodded, and it was Zuko’s turn to sigh. “I guess I should tell the chief I’m back on, then.”

“Yeah, you should.”

Zuko looked down to where the crowd was, but made no sign of moving towards them. “So... I might not be at warrior training tomorrow, either. Because I’ll be teaching.”

“Yeah, I get it.” Sokka stared at the horizon, where the sun was already setting. When his gaze drifted back to the crowd, Sokka noticed Princess Yue coming towards them. “You should go tell the chief now. Better to get everything planned out early, right? Yeah, go talk to him,” Sokka said quickly, starting to push Zuko down the stairs.

“Okay, okay,” Zuko said, shaking free of Sokka’s grasp, “I’m going. See you later.”

Yue and Zuko waved to each other, but Sokka was relieved that neither of them stopped for conversation. His heart caught in his throat as Yue stopped in front of him, staring at him with mournful eyes. “Hey,” Sokka said gruffly.

“You confuse me,” Yue blurted out.

“I could say the same thing about you,” Sokka replied. “First you want to go on a date with me, then you say I was a mistake-”

“I’m engaged, Sokka.”

Oh. Yue adjusted the collar of her parka so Sokka could see the fancy betrothal necklace she was wearing, then lowered her hands to her side. The ice below them trembled slightly. “I’m sorry,” she said, then walked away.

Of *course* she was engaged. She was a princess who had just turned of age, why wouldn’t she be engaged? Maybe she’d been engaged for months. Sokka felt stupid for not realizing sooner.

After all, he should have known he would never be anyone’s first choice.

Chapter End Notes

y'all nattiq is my favorite. you may think the title refers to pakku, but you'd be wrong. the waterbending master is NATTIQ

kya is also my favorite!! hopefully her bit at the beginning of the chapter gives y'all some more insight into why she stayed in the north pole all this time. it was a really hard choice for her to make, as her first instinct is to go to her kids, but logically she knew she couldn't make it to the south pole on her own, and she didn't want to die without seeing her kids again

poor sokka, he's really goin through it
but also sokka you FOOL. you ARE someone's first choice can't you see

so nattiq's little cousin is named yakone, huh? isn't that name familiar? don't i know that name from somewhere?

uh oh, sokka and zuko are arguing. hope this doesn't lead to anything bigger

god pakku really is the absolute worst

you all KNOW wtf zuko was thinking about when nattiq was talking about dueling with a child

ok so since i'm probably going to get this question: nattiq isn't TECHNICALLY bloodbending pakku. nattiq is moving the water he put in pakku's body around to control pakku. could nattiq bloodbend him? probably. nattiq just didn't think to use the water already inside pakku's body to puppet him. the only time nattiq was truly bloodbending pakku was when he blocked his chi paths. which, hey doesn't that sound familiar? don't i know that technique from somewhere? doesn't that sound kind of like what am-

The Spirit Oasis

Chapter Notes

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

“Hey, Nattiq?”

“Hm?” Nattiq glanced up from the scrolls Pakku had given him to study to find Zuko at his doorway with Nikko right behind him. “It’s getting awfully late, you know. You should get to bed. Don’t you start teaching your class tomorrow?”

Zuko raised his eyebrows. “Don’t you?” Nattiq didn’t reply, so Zuko said, “You should be more careful what you say, or else you might offend someone.”

Nattiq blinked a couple times, then squinted at Zuko. “I said something to offend you earlier? Was it when I was fighting Pakku?”

“Well, no- yes- I mean-” Zuko sighed, closed his eyes, and started over. “You didn’t offend me, but someone I know would have been offended. And yes, it was during your duel with Pakku.” When Nattiq showed no signs of recognition, Zuko continued, “You said that anyone who would duel a child is a coward.”

Nattiq scoffed. “How in the world would that offend any-” His eyes widened. “Oh. Ohhh. Oh... you’re talking about your father, aren’t you?”

Zuko nodded and stared pointedly at Nattiq.

With a sigh, Nattiq said, “What, you want me to apologize? Well, you’re out of luck. I stand by what I said: any adult who duels a child is a coward.”

“But what if the kid deserved it?” The question hit Nattiq like a sucker punch to the gut. Noticing Nattiq’s reaction, Zuko hurried to say, “Remember, I spoke out of turn at a war meeting. I humiliated my father in front of all his top generals-”

“Nothing you could have done deserved that punishment.”

Zuko crossed his arms and looked off to the side.

Nattiq knew there was no point in arguing with Zuko. He let out a frustrated sigh and crossed his arms as well.

Remembering something Sokka had told him, Nattiq sat up and said, “Speaking of that... how’s your vision on that side?”

“What?” Zuko scowled and glared at Nattiq defensively, effectively answering Nattiq’s question.

“So not good, then,” Nattiq mused. “You’re lucky I remembered it tonight, because tonight’ll be the best chance I have to heal it- at least until the next full moon.”

Zuko blinked. “What?” His tone was softer this time, and sounded more surprised than angry. “But I thought- you told me a long time ago you couldn’t do anything about my face.”

“I never thought we’d be back here,” Nattiq muttered, then shook his head. “I don’t want to get your hopes up for nothing, but I think there’s a good chance that I can help you. I can’t guarantee anything though- the spirits can be fickle-“

““The spirits’? Nattiq, what are you planning?”

“Nothing dangerous, I promise.” At this, Zuko’s frown deepened.

“I want to believe you, but I’ve come too close to dying far more often than I would have liked to lately. I don’t think you’d hurt me intentionally, but-“

There was a knock at the door, and both Nattiq and Zuko jumped. From behind the closed door, Sokka’s voice said, “Nattiq, have you seen Zuko?”

“I’m in here,” Zuko called. “Need something?”

“No, it’s okay,” Sokka replied, “I was just wondering if you were coming to bed soon.”

“Actually,” Nattiq interjected, opening the door, “we were just about to go out, Sokka. Care to come with us?”

“Oh, uh, sure.” Sokka looked surprised, but nodded. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a place called the Spirit Oasis,” Nattiq said as they walked off the *Unagi*. “It’s where the purest water in the world is. If anything can fix your vision, it’s this stuff, Lee.”

“So you *are* having trouble with your eye! I knew it!” Blissfully ignorant of the look on Zuko’s face, Sokka turned to Nattiq excitedly. “See, I told you he couldn’t see well out of that eye!”

“You *what?!?*” Zuko’s expression was akin to a gathering thunderstorm, and Sokka physically took a step back when he saw it.

“I- I noticed you, um, were startled when I came up to you on that side, and a few other things made me realize you probably couldn’t see on that side. So I, uh, I talked to Nattiq about it.”

Zuko’s eyes bored into Sokka. “So you don’t think I’m capable of talking to Nattiq myself?”

“No, not at all,” Sokka backpedaled. “I mean- I know you’re capable, but I didn’t think you would actually talk to him, even if something like that was bothering you.” Crossing his arms and jutting his chin out, Sokka said, “You’re bad about telling people important things like that, you know. You should be more open with the people you trust.”

Frustrated, Zuko hissed, “What you just did is exactly *why* I’m not more open with people! You figured out a weakness of mine, and then what do you do, before even talking to me? You run off and tell someone!”

“Okay, but- but- Nattiq isn’t just anyone,” Sokka sputtered, “he’s a really good healer! I only told him because I thought he could help you, because I wanted to help you!”

“I can help myself,” Zuko replied coldly.

“Oh, wow, I didn’t realize you were a healer now,” Sokka jabbed sarcastically. “Is that another secret you’re keeping?”

“A weakness isn’t a secret, Sokka,” Zuko groaned, “it’s something you’re supposed to keep to yourself, in case it’s used against you. You’re a warrior, Sokka- you of all people should understand that.”

Sokka let out a *hmpf* and glared off to the side, not wanting to give Zuko the satisfaction of a response. He could see where Zuko was coming from, but it still hurt that Zuko wasn’t telling him everything like he used to.

“Oh look, we’re here,” Nattiq said loudly, cutting into the awkward silence that had fallen over the trio.

Zuko frowned down at the tiny wooden door set into the side of a glacier. “This is the Spirit Oasis?”

“It’s bigger on the inside,” Nattiq explained as he opened the door, crouching as he walked through. Sokka looked at Zuko, who shrugged and followed Nattiq inside.

The moment Sokka stepped through the little door, his breath was taken away. In the middle of what from the outside seemed to be just another glacier, there was a huge waterfall, which pooled around a lush island. It was almost as if a giant had grabbed a huge boulder from the Earth Kingdom and dumped it in the North Pole. “What is this place?”

“It’s the most spiritual place in the North Pole,” Nattiq replied.

“Great,” Sokka muttered under his breath, rolling his eyes. He should have known something as abnormal as this would immediately be written off as the work of the spirits, when surely there was a logical explanation. Maybe there was a natural hot spot beneath the island, or the sunlight was amplified by the surrounding ice in this area- or something that wasn’t related to spirits that was causing this. Unlike when he was a child, Sokka couldn’t deny that spirits exist anymore- he had seen far too many things while traveling with Aang to just write spirits off as myth. However, Sokka was still a skeptic when it came to spiritual matters, and preferred to consider natural causes for the phenomena he observed before jumping to conclusions about spirits.

“The water here is blessed by the ocean and moon spirits, and has special properties,” Nattiq continued, oblivious to Sokka’s doubt. “If the healer is skilled enough and the spirits are willing, this water can heal anything- illnesses, mortal wounds, scars-”

“Wait,” Zuko interrupted, stepping backwards, “you’re not- you won’t remove my scar, right?”

Nattiq, who seemed confused, asked, “I thought you wanted me to?”

“No, no, I just want you to fix my vision. Without my scar, I...” Zuko trailed off, frowning. Then he shook his head and said, “It’s nothing. Do whatever you need to do.”

“I’m not going to heal something you don’t want healed,” Nattiq replied. “But the last time we talked about this, you were more worried about the scar than your sight.”

“I’ve changed since then. My scar is no longer a mark of shame to me- it’s part of my identity now, as the Blue Spirit. And besides, I’d look too much like my father without it...”

Though Sokka was still mad at Zuko, he couldn’t help but feel sympathetic for his friend. He couldn’t imagine how hard it must be for Zuko to see the man who banished him and left him for dead every time he looked in a mirror. “If that’s how you feel, then Nattiq, you shouldn’t try to heal his scar,” Sokka said firmly.

“I won’t. I’d never do anything you don’t want me to, Lee- just make sure that I know what you want, alright?” Zuko nodded, then sat down in front of a spring where two koi fish were circling each other.

“Okay,” he breathed, “I’m ready.”

Chapter End Notes

i got a nintendo switch on the last day of june and i've already logged 50 hours in pokemon sword

This is fine

Chapter Notes

i bet you thought you'd seen the last of me

i was going to wait until wednesday to post this because that's my usual update day for this fic but... we've waited long enough, haven't we?

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

In the end, Nattiq couldn't fix Zuko's vision. Zuko was disappointed, certainly, but he couldn't say he was surprised.

"Well, at least he stopped it from getting any worse, right?" Zuko gave Sokka a withering gaze, before promptly falling into a snowdrift. After a flurry of curses, Zuko noticed Sokka extending his hand to him, offering to help Zuko up.

"I can get up on my own," Zuko growled, doing just that. "What's with you being so positive for once?"

Sokka sighed. Not for the first time, he wished Zuko wasn't so defensive. Part of him knew it must come from the traumatic past Zuko guarded like a dragon, but it still stung when Zuko would bristle at Sokka. It stung when it felt like Zuko didn't trust him.

"I'm just trying to be there for you, Zuko. Won't you let me do that, at least?"

"You don't have to do that for me."

"Yes I do. I'm your friend, remember?"

Zuko frowned. "That's not what friends are supposed to do."

"And how many friends have you had, Zuko?" Sokka knew it was harsh, but he wanted to make his point. "Other than me and Katara. *Real* friends, that you trust enough to tell the truth to."

"I- that's-" Under the light of the moon, Sokka could see the tip of Zuko's good ear turning red.

"I have more experience with this 'friend' stuff, so you've gotta trust me on this. Friends are supposed to be able to rely on each other- like how I relied on you to protect the village back when we were kids, and then when you brought us to Yumeko, and then again at the Northern Air Temple-"

“Yeah, yeah,” Zuko cut in, “but that’s how things should be- you relying on me, not the other way around.”

“And why not?”

“Well, because I’m older. More experienced in combat. I’m a better swordsman, too. And I’m a firebender, though I’m not the best-”

“So what, you think I’m weak?!”

Taken aback, Zuko stopped in his tracks. “That’s not-”

“Do I really need to remind you who saved you from Pohuai? Or who ran into a burning boat to save you again? Oh, and who was it who chunked the engine off the war balloon at the Northern Air Temple to cover you?” Sokka was yelling now, but he and Zuko were far enough away from any houses to be overheard. “If it weren’t for me, you’d be dead!”

At this, Zuko felt his heart drop to the pit of his stomach. His worst fear, he realized, had become a reality; Sokka had realized just how useless he really was. Without another word, Zuko turned on his heel and stiffly walked to the *Unagi*.

Before he ran away, Sokka had seen how pale Zuko had gotten and briefly wondered if he went too far. But with a shake of his head, Sokka dismissed the notion. He was, after all, doing this for Zuko’s own good- if Zuko didn’t learn to rely on people, he would get himself killed! Why couldn’t Zuko see that?

Fuming, Sokka walked around for a bit before he got too cold and headed back to the *Unagi*. When he entered their bedroom, Zuko was lying on his side with his back facing Sokka and Nikko in his arms. Sokka knew Zuko was only pretending to be asleep, but Sokka didn’t feel much like talking to him, so he laid down as far as he could from Zuko on the bed, falling asleep with his back to him.

~ ~ ~

“Something happened between them,” Iluak mused a couple of days later.

Mine stared at him, trying not to say anything rude. She was, after all, visiting him during his lunch break, which he insisted on taking with his students to get to know them better. Humiliating him in front of his students would just be mean.

“You’re just now figuring that out?” Mine couldn’t help but flinch at Kesuk’s harsh tone. So much for her efforts to keep Iluak’s pride intact. “I thought even you were bright enough to see that right away.”

“It’s not like they said anything,” Mine defended halfheartedly. It was true, Sokka and Zuko *hadn’t* said anything, but they didn’t need to. Every time the two of them were in a room together, there was a tension in the air that smothered everything else.

“Well, they’d better get whatever it is figured out soon. If their stupid attitudes ruin Nattiq’s wedding, I’ll be pissed.” Kesuk had never been a fan of weddings or other romantic affairs

(as she didn't experience romantic attraction herself), but she knew Nattiq had been looking forward to this for a long time and wanted to support him.

"You don't think Nattiq's wedding could be ruined by... you know... the invasion?" Mine whispered the last two words as if everyone didn't already know about it.

"Nah. Nattiq's getting married on the next full moon. What kind of idiot would attack a bunch of waterbenders in the winter during the full moon?"

Mine blinked. "You mean three weeks from now? That's, um... interesting, in terms of timing."

"Yeah, Nattiq wasn't too keen on it when I suggested it at first, but Kaskae was on my wavelength right away," Iluak said. "See, if there's something like a big wedding to prepare for, people'll have something else to focus on than impending doom. It'll help keep everyone's spirits up- give them something to look forward to, you know?"

"That's actually pretty smart," Kesuk replied, surprised. "Maybe there's something in that head of yours after all." She flicked Iluak's forehead for emphasis, and he complained loudly. "I feel kinda bad for Nattiq, though. He's so busy that he barely has any time to help plan for his own wedding, and you know how neurotic he can be."

It was true- between teaching intermediate waterbending and healing, learning advanced waterbending, and the overwhelming amount of healing appointments he'd taken on, Nattiq hardly had time to eat and sleep, much less plan a whole wedding. But the tribespeople had been happy to step in and help prepare, which is what Iluak had been hoping for. He hadn't wanted to add yet another thing to Nattiq's plate, and this gave the whole tribe something to do other than prepare for the invasion. It was a win-win situation for everyone!

(Except Shizu. After she learned of the invasion, she had wanted to propose to Mine as soon as she could, but news of the wedding stopped her. She didn't want to take any attention away from Nattiq in his special moment, so her proposal would have to wait.)

As the days went on, though, it was clear that Nattiq was only the second busiest person in the Northern Water Tribe. As the tribe's only firebender and its best source of information on the Fire Nation, Zuko was constantly in demand. He had to teach two different curricula- one designed for waterbenders, the other for nonbenders- about how to face Fire Nation soldiers, whether they were firebenders or not. When he wasn't busy with one of his own classes, Zuko insisted on attending Pakku's in an effort to incorporate some waterbending moves into his own bending. He was hoping he wouldn't have to firebend during the invasion, but in an emergency, he would hopefully be able to bend fire in a way that was unrecognizable to others. If he didn't use any of the typical katas, Zuko hoped the soldiers would think he was untrained and therefore not recognize him as the former Crown Prince. As if that wasn't enough, he was also teaching Aang the basics of energy reading, practicing his bending and swordsmanship, and overseeing repairs on the *Unagi*.

Yes, Zuko was busier than he'd ever been, but not too busy to notice Sokka and Yue's budding relationship. It took him a few days to notice, but once he did, Zuko didn't realize how he hadn't seen it before- Sokka liked Yue, and Yue liked him back. Zuko hadn't

interacted much with the princess outside of council meetings, but it was clear that she was charming, bright, and a good person inside and out. She was perfect, and she would be perfect for Sokka, too. He couldn't even bring himself to feel any ill will towards Yue, even though she was essentially replacing him in Sokka's eyes- it was his own fault for not being good enough, after all. So before Sokka could deal the blow, Zuko did.

"I think we should sleep separately." Sokka blinked, then looked over at Zuko, wondering if he'd heard him correctly. It had been a week since the incident at the Spirit Oasis, but he and Zuko hadn't had a chance to really talk since then. Sokka had been hoping to talk to him sometime when they were alone in their room, but Zuko was busy all through the day and came back so exhausted that he couldn't do anything but pass out, then he'd wake up at some ungodly hour in the morning and do it all again. He was burning himself out at an alarming rate all for the sake of trying to prove something, but Sokka didn't know what. Zuko had finally sat down for a meal, and Sokka had been hoping to use this opportunity to ask when Zuko had dropped that bomb on him.

"Huh?"

"Because you've slept in igloos all your life, you'd probably be more comfortable on land. Katara and Aang are rooming in Kya's home- you should, too. I don't want to keep you from spending time with your mother."

It was normal for Zuko not to make eye contact for a whole conversation, but Zuko was refusing to even look in Sokka's direction. It was really getting on Sokka's nerves. A lot of the things Zuko did were getting on Sokka's nerves lately. "If you're going to kick me out," he said, crossing his arms, "you should at least respect me enough to tell me the truth."

Zuko jolted. "That's- it's not a respect thing, I-" Zuko sighed and ran a hand through his short hair. "I'm doing this all wrong."

"No kidding." Sokka ignored the way Zuko flinched at his words.

When Zuko spoke again, his voice was cold. "We can't sleep together forever, Sokka. Someday you're going to get married and you'll have to sleep next to someone else. It's better that we get used to not sleeping with each other sooner rather than later."

Sokka knew that cryptic comment was all he would get out of Zuko without prying- but you know what? Sokka was sick of prying. He was sick of having to practically beg Zuko for mere scraps of information. Maybe it would be good to get some distance from Zuko- maybe then, he'd finally realize how much he needed Sokka and would swallow his pride and admit it. "Fine. I'll move my stuff this afternoon."

Sokka walked away, not seeing the shocked look on Zuko's face. Zuko had expected a lot more resistance from Sokka. This proved that Zuko had been right, then- Sokka was replacing him.

Having lost his appetite, Zuko left his half-eaten fish at the *Unagi*'s big table, where Nikko found and finished it a little later.

That night, Sokka showed up at Kya's igloo without an explanation, but Kya knew something was wrong. Still, Sokka insisted that it was nothing, and kept insisting it was nothing all through the night, even when he was only talking to himself as he tried to fall asleep.

~ ~ ~

"Chief Arnook! Princess Yue!" Surprised at the sudden call, Yue turned to see Zuko and Katara hurrying towards her and her father, who had been taking an afternoon stroll together.

"Lee, Katara," Arnook greeted the pair, "is there something you need?"

Excitedly, Katara said, "Lee had the greatest idea just now-"

"It wasn't all my idea," Zuko interrupted.

"But it was mostly your idea."

Not wanting to wait as the kids went in circles trying to give each other credit, Arnook asked, "What is this grand idea?"

Katara and Zuko looked at each other, then Zuko turned to Yue and said, "Well, I know you struggle to control her bending sometimes. I had the same problem as a kid, but over the years, I've gotten better." Zuko paused for a minute, wondering if he should mention that he still wasn't perfect at it, but decided it was better not to say that in front of the chief. "So I was thinking I could teach you some of the things that have helped me. Oh, and we can do it in an isolated place, so that if you do lose control, no one will get hurt."

"I'll go with them," Katara said quickly, noticing the chief's worried frown when Zuko mentioned he would be alone with his daughter. "I've become a pretty good waterbender myself."

"Hey, give yourself more credit," Zuko said, nudging Katara's shoulder. "You got put in Pakku's advanced class after only a week of training."

"That's because you helped me with the basics when I was younger, though," Katara argued. "And I was learning from Nattiq, Kesuk, and Iluak on the voyage up here. I don't think I would have progressed that fast if I hadn't had you guys."

"Okay then," Zuko said, rolling his eyes, "maybe it would have taken you two weeks. Still, you're an amazing waterbender, and if anything happens out there, I have complete faith that you can get us out of danger."

Still eyeing Zuko, Arnook said, "So, Katara, you will act as my daughter's... bodyguard?"

Finally, something clicked in Zuko's head. "Oh. You don't trust me with Princess Yue." Arnook started to make noises of protest, but Zuko shook his head. "No, I understand why. It's because I'm a firebender and a foreigner, right?"

And because you're an attractive young man who's my daughter's age, Arnook thought, but stayed silent.

“We can go after the sun sets,” Zuko said. Upon seeing Arnook stiffen even more at that, Zuko added, “Because that’s when firebenders are at their weakest, and waterbenders are at their strongest. If I were to try anything, Katara could easily take me in a fight.” Arnook still didn’t look convinced. Zuko sighed. “If you still don’t feel comfortable, you can come with us, but-”

“No!” Three pairs of surprised eyes stared at Yue, who quickly covered her mouth and coughed. Lowering her hand, she said, “Excuse me. Father, I... I think this is an excellent idea, and I trust Katara and Lee.” Though Yue was still skeptical about the Fire Prince, she wanted nothing more than to be able to control her bending. Every time Yue felt her father was starting to treat her like an adult, she would have some bending accident and lose all her father’s respect. Arnook was a loving, kind father, but he was very protective, sometimes to the point where he would smother Yue. If she ever were to be chief, Yue knew she would have to get her bending under control.

“Darling, are you sure?” Arnook gazed at Yue with worry etched into his face. “If you don’t want me with you, we can send a few of our warriors. I’m sure Hahn would be willing-”

“That’s alright, Father,” Yue said, tensing up at the name of her fiancé. “I have faith in Katara and Lee.” Arnook didn’t look reassured in the slightest, so Yue took his hand and whispered, “If I do this, I won’t be as much of a danger to our people.”

Arnook’s heart twisted in his chest at that sentence. He had never intended for Yue to think of herself as a danger to others, but he supposed his reactions to her bending accidents did give that impression. Despite what Yue thought, Arnook was never thinking about anyone’s safety but his daughter’s during one of her incidents. In those moments, Arnook wasn’t trying to protect anyone from Yue, but trying to protect her from herself. He had tried to help Yue control her emotions in order to prevent any bending outbursts, but Arnook feared that he instead taught Yue to lock up all her emotions inside, never to be shared.

His gaze traveled to the other two skilled benders- no, warriors- no, *teenagers*. Though Katara showed no signs of physical distress, there was a sadness in her eyes that Arnook had never seen in someone so young. Arnook knew Katara’s mother had been taken from her at a young age, and it sounded like her father left the South Pole soon after, leaving Katara without parents. He could tell from Katara’s demeanor that she had been the one who stepped up and became the caretaker of her family. When he looked at Katara, Arnook saw everything he had been trying to protect Yue from. Arnook was so strict about people leaving the North Pole because he didn’t want Yue to experience the war like Katara had. When Yue’s mother had died, Arnook had quickly arranged a marriage with his current wife despite his own grief because he didn’t want Yue to grow up without a mother like Katara had. And when Arnook treated Yue like a child, it was only because he didn’t want Yue’s childhood to be ripped away from her prematurely like Katara’s had been.

Arnook’s gaze shifted to the young firebender, and he couldn’t help but shudder at the sight of the boy’s scar. Even two weeks later, the story of how he got his scar was no less haunting, but what truly troubled Arnook was the short exchange he had with Zuko afterwards.

Pakku, of course, hadn’t believed Zuko’s story, despite the visible discomfort the boy had while talking. He made some comment about how Zuko must think the Northern Water Tribe

to be stupid for the council to believe that kind of story, to which one of the waterbenders with the Fire Prince had responded with some nasty insult (that, if Arnook was honest with himself, Pakku probably deserved.)

In an effort to smooth things over, Arnook had said, “I think all our council finds it... hard to believe that the Firelord would do such a thing to his own child.”

The young prince had looked at Arnook, then said, “Would you not do the same to your daughter?”

Arnook’s immediate reaction had been to take offense to the comment, but one look at the boy’s eyes had made Arnook’s sharp reply die on his tongue. He realized that Zuko hadn’t meant to imply that Arnook was cruel to his daughter. It chilled Arnook to the bone when he realized that Zuko came from an environment where such punishments were common enough to where Zuko would think Arnook would inflict something similar on his daughter.

Since then, Arnook had kept his distance from the Fire Prince. From what he heard, though, Zuko was hardworking, honest, and genuinely wanted to help the Northern Water Tribe survive the oncoming invasion. While Zuko’s peers seemed to dislike him, the tribe elders loved him (or at least the hot water he provided).

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt,” Arnook relented, and thus began Zuko and Yue’s unexpected friendship.

After the trio had flown Appa a considerable distance away from the Northern Water Tribe, they landed on a small island of solid land surrounded by glaciers. Zuko and Katara hopped down first, then helped Yue off of Appa. “So,” Yue said excitedly once on the ground, “what are we going to do first? Are you going to teach me how to make an ice wall? Or a giant wave? Or-”

“Actually, we’re going to start with control,” Zuko said, and Yue’s shoulders slumped.

“Oh,” she replied, unable to keep the disappointment out of her voice. She’d been working on that her whole life, it seemed, and she hadn’t gotten any better. “...I guess I can see why.”

“Hey, don’t look like that. I struggled with control for a long time, too.”

Katara nodded in agreement at Zuko’s statement. “Yeah, me too. That’s how Sokka and I found Aang- because I lost control and accidentally shattered the iceberg he was in.”

“I wish I could do something useful like that with my bending,” Yue sighed. “All I have done is cause destruction.”

“I think I know what your problem is,” Zuko said, and Yue looked up.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s the same problem I had, I think. You’re trying to impress your father and make him respect you, right? So you’re bottling up all your emotions to try and prove you’re mature enough to be in council meetings and do other things for the tribe. But the thing is,

since you're such a powerful bender, if you don't find some other way to express yourself, your bending will end up coming out in ways you don't want it to."

"So my bending reflects my emotions?" It made sense, but Yue had never thought of it that way.

"In a way," Zuko said. "It's like... since you're not expressing yourself physically or verbally, all that emotion bunches up your chi and makes your bending come out in ways you don't want it to. My uncle told me that, but I never really believed him until he went back to the Fire Nation. So today, I think we should have you say what you're feeling without having to worry about any consequences. Katara and I won't say anything to anyone about what you say here, promise."

"Your secrets are safe with me," Katara said firmly, looking Yue in the eye. "And Lee's not going to tell anyone, either."

After a moment of hesitation, Yue said, "Okay. Let's do this."

"Alright. How do you feel when your father tells you to leave a council meeting?"

Yue started, not expecting such a direct question from the Fire Prince. "I... understand it," she said slowly. "He sends me away because he loves me and he doesn't want anyone getting hurt. Because I am not in control of my bending, and because he hates to see me upset."

Katara rested a hand on Yue's shoulder, then asked, "But how does it make you *feel*?"

"I feel... disappointed. With myself, I mean. I feel like I should be able to control my bending, but I'm frustrated when I cannot. But..." Yue trailed off and shook her head. "Never mind."

"No, say it," Zuko insisted. "If you're feeling it, it's important to say."

Yue sighed and looked at Zuko and Katara. She was still feeling unsure, but the two of them were looking at her expectantly. "It feels wrong to say this," she said finally, "but... I am somewhat frustrated with my father. Is that wrong? I love him very much and I know he's doing his best, but..."

"That's not wrong at all," Katara chimed in. "I'm angry with my father for leaving me and Sokka behind to go to war, but that doesn't mean I love him any less. It's perfectly normal to feel annoyed, frustrated, or even angry with people you love. After all, they're human too-they're not perfect."

Zuko wouldn't go so far as to say the people he loved, such as his father and sister, weren't perfect, but he genuinely wanted to help Yue and agreed with most of Katara's statement, so he nodded along anyway. "Yeah, Katara's right. Just say what's on your mind, Princess Yue-Katara and I are not here to judge you, and we already promised not to tell anyone what you say here."

Taking a deep breath, Yue said, “Alright. I feel... frustrated because my father knows my bending is an issue, but he never takes any steps to fix it. I have previously asked him if perhaps Master Pakku or even Yagoda could teach me how to control it, but my father has refused every time. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised- it’s not like Father listens to any of my ideas.” Yue blinked, surprised by the bitterness in her own voice.

“You feel like your father doesn’t value your input,” Zuko said. It was a feeling he knew all too well. “Yet you have important things to say. You want to help your people and one day become a worthy leader for them, but you can’t make any progress towards that goal when your father still treats you like a child.” Yue’s jaw dropped as she looked at the young prince. He was the last person she thought she’d have anything in common with, but never before had Yue felt so understood, so *seen*. “It’s infuriating, isn’t it?”

“...Yes. Yes, it is.” Yue clenched her fists. “I... I hate it!” Yue stomped her foot, and a giant piece of one of the nearby glaciers fell into the water. Yue jumped, startled, and Katara braced herself for some emergency waterbending, but by the time the wave reached their island, it lapped harmlessly at the shore.

“Keep going,” Zuko said after a glance at Yue’s face. “You don’t need to be afraid of hurting anyone- it’s only the three of us and Appa out here.”

“I- but I’ve done worse than that before,” Yue said, looking worriedly at the glaciers around them. “When I found out my mother died, I unintentionally created a fissure running through the entire city. It ran from the palace to the tribe’s outer ice wall, and was deeper than the palace is tall in a couple places. Thankfully, nobody perished, but people were hurt and it took months to repair everything.”

Katara stared at Yue in shock. Pakku had been impressed at the amount of raw power Katara possessed, but she couldn’t even dream of doing such an impressive feat of bending. Sure, she had cracked open the glacier Aang was in, but that had been smaller than the chunk of ice Yue had dislocated just now. For Yue to possess such mythical power, but no training... it was a disaster waiting to happen, Katara realized. It was in the Northern Water Tribe’s best interests to train Yue in waterbending, but it looked like the stupid patricarchy got in the way. Katara looked up at the moon, which was a thin crescent in the sky, and silently vowed to help Yue control her waterbending abilities as best as she could.

“You lost your mother?” Yue nodded and Zuko said, “I’m sorry. I did, too.”

It was quiet for a moment before a popping noise came from Appa’s back. Before they had left, Katara had lit one of the special time-telling candle the Mechanist had given them to make sure she would know when to come back for waterbending class. “Looks like it’s time to go back already,” she said, then turned to Yue. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Yue admitted after a slight pause. “Can we do this tomorrow as well?”

“Sure,” Zuko replied after climbing onto Appa. He extended his hand to Yue, helping her into the saddle. “I should be able to do it at the same time tomorrow. And we’ll actually have more time out here because we won’t have to look for a good spot, like we spent most of our time today doing.”

The timing also worked for Katara, and the trio decided to make the meeting a daily event. What Zuko didn't tell the girls, though, was that the meeting took two more hours out of his already packed day, which only left him with three hours for sleep each night. It was fine, though. It's not like Zuko was getting three full hours of sleep a night, anyway.

If anyone had stopped to look closely, they would have realized there was something very, very wrong with Zuko. He was hardly sleeping, he was working himself to the bone, and yet he had *more* energy than usual. At first, Zuko had been spurred on by a need to prove himself useful to Sokka, but as the days went on, all his thoughts had turned to the invasion. Zhao was coming here to attack these people, and Zuko was powerless to stop it. It was his responsibility to prepare them properly for the oncoming invasion. If they weren't prepared, the Northern Water Tribe would collapse and it would be all Zuko's fault. Nothing mattered more than preparing for the invasion- not his deteriorating mental health, not his aching body, not even his relationship with Sokka.

It was a couple days after his first time going to the glacier with Katara and Yue when Zuko's fire started to burn white instead of orange. Zuko's only thought upon seeing it was that it would be better to fight Zhao with than normal fire.

In a way, it was almost freeing when, the day before Nattiq's wedding was supposed to be, black soot fell from the sky, staining the snow below and making the Northern Water Tribe's beautiful clear fountains run black.

Chapter End Notes

first things first: shoutout to AO3 user @fingergundiaz for leaving my favorite comment i have ever received on the last chapter. i was going to delete the last chapter once i updated again, but now i can't. reading that comment sent me into a writing frenzy and made me pump out like 80% of this chapter in the past couple of days.

in fact, all of you who commented on the last chapter were really nice, and i really appreciate that. seeing all of your kind words is what inspired me to come back to this fic.

anyway, moral of the story i guess, please do comment on fics if you really enjoy them. most writers really love getting comments and it might even inspire a writer you like to come back to a story earlier than they planned to.

...on that note, hiatus isn't officially over because finals season is almost upon us, but at least i've figured out how i want to finish this part of the series. now, back to our normal chapter notes:

WHAT IS UP MY DUDES I MISSED YOU

the boys are fightingggg!!! and wow!! they r dumb. love them though

adds "Crashed Nattiq's wedding" to zhao's list of crimes

i just think a zuko-yue friendship would be neat. (sokka does not think it would be neat)

oh yeah i'm pretty sure i've hinted at it before but yeah kesuk is aro-ace
(AKSHKDGJKHJDJH WHEN I WAS TYPING THAT KESUK AUTOCORRECTED
TO JESUS????? HELP)

because of the moon spirit living in her, yue is capable of avatar-level feats of
waterbending

what zuko is experiencing is a manic episode. now, when i say this, you might be
thinking "oh?? BPD zuko???" but manic episodes can sometimes be brought about by
extreme stress (which zuko is feeling right now) in people without BPD. in this fic at
least, i'm of the view that zuko does not have BPD. you, the reader, can think whatever
the hell you want of course, but i try to be very careful about the rep i put into this fic (if
it's something i haven't experienced myself, i do a fair amount of research before
including something) and i just. haven't done that for BPD for this fic. again, as the
reader you can have any interpretation of this fic that you want, but i don't want anyone
giving me rep credit (rep credit? is that a thing?) where it isn't due

THANKS FOR READING <3 <3 <3

The Siege of the North: Part 1

Chapter Notes

cw: violence, zuko gets called an avatar-verse slur, zuko experiences PTSD, more violence, and a graphic bloodbending scene near the end of the chapter

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

Zuko was less worried about the invasion force's arrival than the fact that both Sokka and Yue were missing. At the sight of the black soot falling from the sky, a couple of the Northern Water Tribe members had begun to beat a loud drum that echoed through the entire city. Everyone was here and accounted for, except for Sokka and Yue.

Just as Zuko was about to go out and look for them, Yue ran through the double doors and was soon followed by Sokka. Zuko breathed a sigh of relief and beckoned Sokka over to sit with him and his crew, but Sokka instead chose to sit with Aang, Katara, and Kya. Sokka looked really upset, but as Yue sat down at the front of the gathering hall, Arnook stood and Zuko knew he wouldn't have time to talk to him before the battle.

"The day we have feared for so long has arrived," Arnook said. Zuko was impressed by how his voice could carry so well in such a large room. "The Fire Nation is on our doorstep. It is with great sadness that I call my family here before me, knowing well that some of these faces are about to vanish from our tribe... but they will never vanish from our hearts." Zuko tried to imagine Zhao giving such a heartfelt speech to his men, but couldn't.

"Now, as we approach the battle for our existence, I call upon the great spirits- spirit of the ocean, spirit of the moon, be with us!" As Arnook said a prayer to Tui and La, Zuko sent a silent plea to Agni.

Please protect these people, he thought. I know they're not yours, but your sister watches over them, and I know you love your sister. I guess it's weird for me to be praying that you'd turn against the Fire Nation... but then again, you did that back when they attacked the South Pole, so it's not outside the realm of possibility, at least. Zuko shook his head slightly. But I don't want my people to get hurt either... I guess what I'm asking is for you to guide the Northern Water Tribe to victory, but keep the people of the Fire Nation safe? Er... I just want as few people to die as possible, okay? So, um, if you could help with that, I would really appreciate it.

Iluak nudged Zuko, and he realized his whole crew was standing up. "Chief says he needs people for a dangerous mission," Iluak said, and Zuko stood without further explanation.

As people in the gathering hall scrambled around in an effort to prepare for the oncoming invasion, Aang stepped outside, looking down at the still city below him. It was quiet, and

there was no sign of any invasion force on the horizon. There was no soot in the sky now, either, but Aang knew better than to hope that the Fire Nation had given up and gone home.

“The stillness before battle is unbearable.” Aang didn’t look back as Chief Arnook approached him and stood on his right. “Such a quiet dread.”

“I wasn’t there when the Fire Nation attacked my people.” Aang’s eyes narrowed in determination as he resolved, “I’m gonna make a difference this time.”

A little under an hour later, Kya was standing on the Northern Water Tribe’s sea gate next to her four kids. She was extremely hesitant to send them into battle, but she had seen how in just a few weeks Katara had become one of the best waterbenders in the North Pole. With Katara being a master waterbender, Sokka being an excellent strategist and warrior, Zuko being... well, Zuko, and Aang being the Avatar, Kya knew that taking any one of them out of the fight could be a serious disadvantage for the Northern Water Tribe. That didn’t make it any easier, though, as she stood on the sea gate with them, waiting for the Fire Nation’s attack.

Kya heard Aang gasp from her left, and she followed his gaze to see a massive fireball flying through the sky, heading directly for the sea gate. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Zuko move to protect Sokka, so Kya flung herself towards Katara, bracing for the impact.

There was a deafening crash, and Aang clung tightly to Appa as the fireball shook the sea gate violently. He watched in horror as a second fireball hurled over the gate into one of the city’s canals. By the time the third fireball crashed into the gate, Aang’s initial shock had turned to fury. “Yip yip, Appa! Let’s take out that catapult!”

On the ground, Sokka shook his head, trying to clear the ringing from his ears. Something groaned beneath him, and Sokka realized he had fallen on top of Zuko, pinning him to the ground. Zuko was blinking slowly, obviously dazed from the impact. Spirits, it had been a while since Sokka had been this close to Zuko and could see his eyes so well, they really were beautiful-

“...Sokka, you okay?” Sokka blinked, realizing the position they were in, and scrambled to sit back up.

“Uh, yeah. Are you?” As Sokka took his hand and helped him to his feet, Zuko winced.

“Yeah, fine. My back will be sore for a bit, but it’s nothing serious.”

“Are you sure? If you need to, you could see Nattiq-”

“Sokka, I’m fine.” The boys watched as an unconscious waterbender was carried past them. “Nattiq has bigger issues he needs to take care-” Zuko yelped and covered his ears as another fireball crashed into some buildings. “Agni, I hate those things!”

“You were right, though,” Kya said, appearing next to them with Katara by her side. “You said that’s how they’d attack us first.” She whistled loudly, then yelled, “Waterbenders! Into

anti-projectile positions!” Katara, Kya, and the other waterbenders ran back up to the top of the sea gate while Sokka and Zuko gaped at each other.

“Did she just use her mom voice on them?”

“Yes she did,” Zuko replied, “and it *worked* .”

“Hey, you two!” Zuko and Sokka looked over to see Mine rushing towards them. “Chief Arnook wants everyone on the infiltration mission to meet up in the armory. Come on!” She led them to the underground armory, where several Water Tribe warriors, Shizu, and Chief Arnook were already waiting.

At the sight of the Chief, Zuko asked, “Did everyone make it to the shelters safely?”

Arnook nodded, and both Zuko and Sokka breathed a sigh of relief. “Yue led all the people who are not in combat or healers to the shelters before the first strike.” With a hint of a smile, Arnook said, “Some of the children were quite scared, but Yue promised them they could play with your isopuppy if they went to the shelters. Your puppy is remarkably well trained, Lee.”

“Yeah, she’s a good girl,” Zuko said fondly. The loving look on Zuko’s face was doing things to Sokka’s stomach, so he forced himself to look away. Sokka wondered if it was some firebending thing that Zuko was doing to him, because heat also began to rise in his face. *Stupid firebenders and their stupid tricks*, Sokka thought to himself.

Arnook cleared his throat, then said to the rest of the group, “Attention, everybody! You will be infiltrating the Fire Nation Navy. That means you’ll all need one of these uniforms.” Arnook gestured to his side, where an attractive young man Sokka had seen around a few times walked through the door wearing a uniform with ridiculous shoulder pads.

Sokka and Zuko looked at each other, and Sokka burst out laughing. The man wearing the armor glared at him and said, “What’s your problem?”

“Fire Navy uniforms don’t look like that.”

“Of course they do! These are real uniforms captured from actual Fire Navy soldiers,” the man scoffed.

“Sokka’s right,” Zuko cut in, holding back a laugh of his own. “Those kinds of shoulder pads have been out of fashion for nearly seventy years.”

The armored man crossed his arms and said, “Of course the *ashmaker* would know that.”

Zuko had heard the insult so many times either whispered near him or directed at him that the insult didn’t faze him anymore. He figured he deserved it because of what his family had done.

Sokka wanted to stick up for Zuko, he really did, but he didn’t want to risk looking uncool in front of the other warriors. For the first time in his life, Sokka had started to make friends with other Water Tribe boys his age, and he didn’t want to lose those connections.

Before Sokka could decide what to do, Mine had jumped out in front of the man in armor and was brandishing her fans threateningly. “You say that again and I’ll knock your teeth out. All Lee has done since he got here is try to help you guys prepare for the Fire Nation’s invasion, and this is how you treat him in return? We wouldn’t have known they were coming without him!”

“Mine, really, it’s fine-” Zuko grabbed her wrist but she jerked it away.

“How can you say that?!”

“Yes, it’s offensive,” Zuko said, sounding exasperated, “but we have more important things to worry about now.” Looking around the room, he said, “All of us are under attack right now, and like it or not, we’re going to need to work together to survive. So for now, let’s put our differences aside and focus on the danger at hand, alright?”

Arnook watched as both Mine and Hahn muttered to themselves, but ultimately backed down. If this boy was the future of the Fire Nation, Arnook thought, perhaps there was indeed hope for an end to the war. “Hahn,” Arnook said sternly, “as my future son-in-law, you must learn how to be diplomatic with outsiders if you are to be chief one day.”

Sokka’s jaw dropped. He looked at Hahn in disbelief and said, “*You’re* the one Princess Yue is marrying?”

“Yeah,” Hahn said with an obnoxious flip of his hair. “What of it?”

“...Nothing. Congratulations.” Sokka turned away, examining some spears on the armory wall, and Zuko felt a pang of... some feeling he couldn’t quite identify. Zuko shook his head, attempting to shake away the weird feeling.

“We should try to capture one of their ships,” Zuko suggested. “If we do, we can take the uniforms from the ship- and the weapons, too. They won’t be like the weapons you’re familiar with, but all of you are skilled warriors and I’m sure you’ll be able to adapt. We should also try to figure out why Zhao chose now of all times to start the siege.”

“Probably ‘cause he’s stupider than a turtle seal,” Sokka joked, getting a few laughs from the other Water Tribe warriors.

“Not even Zhao would be foolish enough to attack a ton of waterbenders so close to a full moon,” Zuko said darkly. “He’s planning something. I can feel it.”

~ ~ ~

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the firing stopped. Zuko, Yue, and Katara had been standing by the palace with a clear view of the horizon when Aang and Appa came flying back. Katara and Yue rushed to greet him, but Zuko stayed where he was, narrowing his eyes at the Fire Navy boats. Something wasn’t right.

It was almost a relief when Zuko heard Sokka was taken off the infiltration mission. Zuko still had the rest of his crew and the other Water Tribe warriors to worry about, but at least he

could be assured (sort of) that nothing would happen to Sokka, in theory. With that thought on his mind, Zuko set out with the others to the Fire Nation boat that the waterbenders had trapped in ice earlier.

Soon, though, Zuko found himself selfishly wishing that Sokka was by his side. After all of the Water Tribe warriors had changed into uniforms from the captured ship's armory, they split up amongst several different battleships. Zuko was headed to Zhao's personal cruiser alongside Iluak, Hahn, and a young warrior named Toklo. Shrouded in mist, they climbed through one of the cruiser's high windows using one Iluak's waterbending.

Hahn and Toklo quickly left to establish themselves among the other soldiers, but Zuko had to take a few deep breaths to steady himself first. Noticing this, Iluak stayed behind, and once the other two were gone, he asked, "You good?"

"Fine," Zuko said shortly, then looked away. "It's just... the last time I was on this ship, it didn't end too well for me." Absentmindedly, Zuko rubbed his wrists together as if he was trying to loosen something around them.

"This was the boat we were chasing in that storm," Iluak realized. Zuko gave a quick nod of confirmation, and Iluak gently put a hand on the young prince's shoulder. Zuko struggled to hide his flinch at the touch. "Hey, I'm not gonna let anything happen to you. I'll stay right by your side while we're here. If you need to leave, just give me a signal and we'll be on our way."

"That's-" Zuko started to protest, but his shoulders slumped slightly and he sighed. "That's... great. Thank you."

As Zuko and Iluak headed towards the cruiser's mess hall together, Yue led Aang and Katara to a tiny door behind the palace. Aang approached the door curiously and said, "So is this the way to the Spirit World?"

Yue giggled and replied, "No, you'll have to get there on your own. But I *can* take you to the most spiritual place in the entire North Pole." She opened the door, revealing an oasis of green grass and lush bamboo in the middle of a glacier. Aang grinned and leapt over the bridges, happily landing on the green island.

"I never thought I'd miss grass this much!" Momo seemed to agree, chittering away as he dug through the grass and flew around the small bamboo forest.

"It's so warm here," Katara exclaimed. "How is that possible?"

"It's the center of all spiritual energy in our land," Yue explained, then frowned at Momo as he reached into the pond at the center of the island.

"You're right, Yue. I can feel... something." Aang looked around and added, "It's so... tranquil."

Meanwhile, Sokka was fuming alone in the armory. Or, at least he thought he was alone until Chief Arnook's voice said, "Is something wrong, Sokka?"

“Oh, no,” Sokka replied sarcastically, “Lee’s out there on the top-secret mission while I’m here sharpening my boomerang. Everything’s fine.”

“Listen to me. I took you off the mission for selfish reasons- I have a special task in mind for you.”

Sokka rolled his eyes before turning to look at Arnook. “What, you want me to scrub the barracks?”

“I want you to guard my daughter.”

At this, Sokka straightened up suddenly. “Oh, sure,” he said, all the sarcasm gone from his voice. “That... shouldn’t be too hard.” Sokka gave the Chief an awkward smile as he walked away, then frowned. *Guard her from what?*

Sokka soon realized that the answer was probably *herself*. He went to the shelters to look for Yue, but couldn’t find her anywhere. He asked around for her only to find out she’d left the shelter hours ago to look for Katara.

Just as Sokka left the shelter, something shook the ice beneath his feet. He looked up to see the sun rising and the first sea gate being breached by Fire Nation ships. “Oh heck!”

(There were other words Sokka knew that could have better expressed his feelings at that point, especially after spending some time with Zuko and the rest of his pirate crew, but Sokka had become so used to making his language Aang-friendly that saying swear words went against his instincts.)

Sokka wanted to help the other warriors, but instead ran through their ranks, yelling, “Has anyone seen Princess Yue?!” Finally, someone told him to check in the oasis behind the palace. He groaned at the thought of having to run all the way back up there- but then spotted Appa in the stables a short distance away. With a grin, Sokka sprinted over and climbed up on Appa’s back. “Hey, buddy, think you can give me a ride?” Appa bellowed in response, and Sokka said, “Great. Yip yip!”

In the Spirit Oasis, Yue was saying to Katara, “Are you sure we shouldn’t get some help?”

“He’s my friend. I’m perfectly capable of protecting him from whatever comes our way,” Katara insisted. Seconds later, she and Yue were knocked flat on their backs by Appa landing. Katara saw Sokka slide off of Appa’s back and was immediately filled with rage. “Hey!! Watch where you’re landing!”

“Sorry, Princess Yue,” Sokka said, immediately going to help the Princess up while completely ignoring his sister. “Are you alright?”

“I’m okay,” Yue replied, then gave Sokka a confused look. “I thought you were going to be on the infiltration mission?”

“I was, but Arnook gave me a more important mission- to protect... Aang.” Sokka wasn’t quite sure how Yue would react to her father assigning her a bodyguard, so he decided to lie

about his true mission. He glanced down at Aang, who appeared to be in the Avatar State but wasn't completely losing control of himself- rather, he was completely still. "Uh... is he good?"

"He's fine," Katara explained, "but he's in the Spirit World right now. We need to make sure his body doesn't get moved- that's his way back. Which I don't think should be that hard- after all, the Fire Nation isn't attacking us right this second."

"Actually," Sokka said with a wince, "they kinda are."

In unison, Katara and Yue cried, "What?!" As Sokka explained the situation, Yue looked horrified, but Katara got a faraway look in her eye that Sokka understood.

Taking both of Katara's hands in his, Sokka said to her, "Go."

Katara looked at the small door to the Spirit Oasis, then at Sokka, then finally at Aang. "I can't just leave him, but..."

"But you want to help Mom," Sokka finished for her.

"I can make a difference this time," Katara whispered, looking back to the door. "I'm not the helpless little girl I was when the Southern Raiders came back."

"No, you're not," Sokka agreed. "Katara, you've grown so much since we first met Aang. You're braver and stronger than I ever thought you could be, and you have so much passion in everything you do. I've watched you change the hearts and minds of people from all walks of life, and I think if the world had more people like you, it'd be a much better place." Katara's eyes welled up with tears. "You're the best sister a guy could ever have, Kat."

"It's my job as your older brother to worry about you, but I know you can take care of yourself out there." With a grin, Sokka added, "Really, I should be more worried about your enemies. They don't stand a chance against the best waterbender in the world."

Katara sniffled, then laughed. "You're just saying that because you're my brother."

Sokka elbowed her, then ruffled her hair. "When have I ever been nice to you just because I'm your brother? You should go, Katara. Aang will understand."

Katara hesitated for a moment longer before wrapping Sokka in a tight hug. "I love you, Sokka."

"I love you too, Katara." Sokka smiled and hugged his sister back, patting her on the back. "Now go kick some firebender butt!"

At that, Katara broke the hug, gave Sokka a quick nod, then ran through the oasis door. She headed towards the sea gate as the sun dipped below the horizon, but quickly realized she was being followed. She turned to find Nattiq's little cousin trailing behind her.

"You! What are you doing here?! You need to get back to the shelters!"

Yakone pouted and glared at Katara. "I'm a waterbender too! I can help!"

"No, no, you stay with your parents where you'll be safe," Katara said.

"You can't make me!" With that, Yakone sprinted away. Katara chased after him, but quickly lost track of the child in the rubble-filled streets. So instead of heading straight towards the fighting, Katara first stopped at the healing grounds. "Nattiq," Katara called out, making the young man look up. "Your cousin's out wandering around! He says he wants to help with the fighting- he's going to get himself killed!"

Immediately, Nattiq was on his feet. He let out a few choice swear words, then said, "Can you take over for me here, Katara? I've got to find Yakone before he gets hurt or worse."

As Nattiq ran to find Yakone, Zuko stared at the battered sea gate from the soldiers' room he and Iluak were currently sharing. Just a couple hours after it had risen, the sun had set, but Zhao hadn't called his troops back for the night even though it was a full moon. Zuko knew something was wrong, but he couldn't prove it until he saw the boat.

"Look!" Zuko pointed out the window, where he could see a small group of Fire Nation soldiers on a boat. Iluak handed Zuko a telescope, which Zuko scrambled to put up to his eye. "He's on that boat," Zuko said, narrowing his good eye as he spotted Zhao's silhouette. "See, I knew he was up to something! But I still don't know what..."

There was a knock at the door, and if it weren't for Zuko's quick reflexes, he would have dropped the telescope into the ocean below. Iluak was the one who answered the door, and he was surprised to be greeted by a small, stocky man. "Oh, hello, sir." This guy had to be one of the commanding officers, right? He certainly didn't look like he could be a soldier, at least in Iluak's opinion. "Is there something you needed?"

"I need your help." This time, Zuko did drop the telescope into the sea. The lanterns in the room burned a bright white, and Iluak turned to see that his companion had completely stiffened up. "White fire is viewed as a sign of strength by some," the old man said, staring at the lanterns. "It is true that only the strongest of firebenders can create such a flame, but they only do so under great duress. You have been pushing yourself past the breaking point, Prince Zuko."

Iluak gaped at the man, but Zuko responded before he had a chance to. "And so what if I have? It's not like I had a choice. Zhao was- *you* were invading- I couldn't just sit by and do nothing as you attacked the North Pole."

"I did not become Zhao's military advisor because I wanted to besiege the Northern Water Tribe."

Zuko was on his feet, glaring at the other Fire Nation man. "So you did it because my father told you to, then?"

"I did it because I wanted to see you again." Zuko crossed his arms and looked out the window, something Iluak had seen many times. The lanterns were still burning bright white,

making it look like daylight in the small room. The older man sighed and said, “We have quite a bit of catching up to do, but right now, we need to stop Zhao.”

Iluak was completely lost at this point. “So you two know each other... how?”

Zuko let out an irritated huff and said, “He’s my uncle.”

“He WHAT?!” Iluak looked back and forth between the pair of firebenders, baffled. There was a trace of resemblance between the two, but not much.

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Zuko’s uncle said, extending his hand to Iluak, who awkwardly shook it. “And who might you be?”

“My name’s Iluak. I’m a waterbender.”

“You are from the Southern Tribe, yes? I can tell from the way you carry yourself. You know, Zuko spent some time there as a little boy-”

“*Uncle*,” Zuko interrupted, clearly exasperated, “what were you saying about Zhao?” He wasn’t quite sure how he felt about his uncle right now, but Zuko didn’t think Iroh would lie to him.

“Ah! Right.” Iroh’s expression turned grave as he said, “Zhao is planning to destroy the moon.”

Iluak blinked. “Excuse me?”

“It seems that he discovered a scroll years ago revealing the mortal identities of Tui and La, and he has deluded himself into believing his destiny is to destroy the moon. He is on his way right now to kill the moon spirit.”

A thrill of fear ran through Zuko. “We have to stop him!”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Iluak said, holding his hands up. Sure, this man might be Zuko’s family, but Iluak knew what Zuko’s father had done to him and wasn’t sure how this uncle fit into all of that. “I know this guy’s a hothead, but surely he’s not stupid enough to try and kill the moon. Doesn’t he realize that’d hurt the Fire Nation as well?”

“He kidnapped me and made everyone think I was dead. Was that what was best for the Fire Nation?” Iluak had to admit that Zuko had a good point.

“He did what?” The uncle had a genuine look of fear and concern on his face, and Iluak decided that he was trustworthy- for now, at least.

“It doesn’t matter,” Zuko said with a dismissive shake of his head. “Iluak, you have one of the signal candles, right?” At Iluak’s nod, he continued, “Leave it burning in the windowsill. Uncle, you go down to the loading bay and prepare a ship. Iluak and I came with two companions- we’ll find them and meet you down below.”

“One of them was killed,” Iroh said suddenly, making Zuko look up in surprise. “A young man with shoulder length dark hair.”

“Sounds like Hahn.” Zuko had never been particularly fond of Hahn, but that didn’t mean he wanted him to die.

“He charged at Admiral Zhao, even though he was surrounded by Fire Nation soldiers. What exactly he was trying to accomplish, I am not sure.”

“That was definitely Hahn,” Iluak said. “Lee, why don’t you go down to the bay with your uncle. I’ll go find Toklo and break the news to him.” Before he left the room, Iluak made sure to give Zuko’s uncle a threatening look, as if to say *If you hurt him, there will be consequences.*

As Zuko and his uncle were left alone, Nattiq was running through the streets and canals of the North Pole, desperately looking for his cousin. Finally, Nattiq spotted him crouching in an alleyway- but unfortunately, Yakone wasn’t alone.

There was a Fire Nation soldier standing over Yakone, brandishing a spear.

Now, Nattiq was still relatively new to large scale waterbending. Moving large amounts of water exhausted him, and he was already exhausted from doing so much healing today and the day previous. If Nattiq did some big feat of waterbending, he could risk hurting Yakone- but how could Nattiq save Yakone?

The answer came to Nattiq simply and clearly. He would just use precise waterbending on a small scale, just as he had been doing all day.

The soldier raised his spear and Yakone flinched, but when he looked up, he found the soldier couldn’t lower it. “Wh- what?!” The soldier’s arm jerked, and the spear was tossed off to the side. “My- ungh- body-”

“You can’t move, right?” Yakone’s ears perked up at the sound of his cousin’s voice. Whimpering, he scrambled up and clung to Nattiq’s side, tightly grabbing the hem of Nattiq’s coat. Yakone was still scared, but he knew Nattiq would protect him, and he watched as the soldier’s body spun around to face the two of them. Yakone watched Nattiq’s fingers, then looked back at the soldier as he walked jerkily towards them.

“What- kind of witchcraft is-” The soldier was cut off as his body fell to the ground, then was lifted into the air. Nattiq was looking at the soldier with murder in his eyes.

“You would kill a child? An innocent child, who’s done nothing wrong?” A small part of Nattiq relished in the fear in the soldier’s eyes.

“Nattiq?” It sounded like most of the fear was gone from his cousin’s voice, but Nattiq didn’t want to lose concentration and chose not to look down at Yakone. “How... how are you doing that?”

“Well, Yakone,” Nattiq said, narrowing his eyes at the soldier, “the human body is made up of a lot of stuff, but it’s mostly water. I’ve spent years and years learning how to move healing water around in people’s bodies, but you know what? That water isn’t so special. I can use my bending to move the very blood inside someone.” The soldier looked like he was about to wet his pants. “I can tell that he’s trying to move his body, but I can stop it by waterbending. All it comes down to is my will against his- and I’m *not* going to let him hurt you.”

Nattiq set the soldier back on his feet, then lowered his hands. The soldier panted for air, then looked back at Nattiq with a mixture of terror and confusion. “You- you’re letting me go?”

“Go tell your friends what we waterbenders are capable of. Tell them this invasion is hopeless, and to get out while they still can. And if I ever see you again-” Nattiq raised his hand, extended two of his fingers, then sharply moved his hand downwards. As he expected, a small stream of blood came out of the soldier’s nose. The soldier gasped, then fled, nearly tripping over himself in his haste to retreat.

“Nattiq,” Yakone said once the soldier was gone. Nattiq looked down to find his cousin staring up at him in awe. “That was amazing. I wanna learn how to do that.”

“I- er- that’s the kind of skill you only use in emergencies, okay?” Nattiq picked his little cousin up, slightly concerned by how amazed Yakone seemed. “I’m going to get you back to the shelters, alright? And you don’t have to worry about helping anyone out here. We can all take care of ourselves, see?” Yakone seemed satisfied by this answer, and didn’t struggle as Nattiq carried him back to the shelter, where Yakone’s parents were anxiously waiting for him.

After Katara had left them, Yue and Sokka sat in an awkward silence for some time. Sokka could tell Yue had something to say, but he didn’t want to rush her.

“You know, I’m glad you were taken off the mission,” Yue finally said. “I know this is selfish, but I’m glad you’re here with me. I always feel so safe and comfortable when you are around.”

“Do you feel the same about Hahn?”

“I-” Yue sighed and her shoulders slumped. “No, I do not. But Hahn would be an excellent Chief.”

Would he? Sokka wasn’t convinced.

“That’s what many of my people think. Hahn is a strong warrior with a commanding voice, and my father says he can become a great leader once he matures more. I trust my father’s judgment. To question my engagement with Hahn, I would be questioning my father’s decision-making skills.” Yue looked at Sokka with sad eyes as she said, “You said yesterday that I’m not marrying my people. You were right- I am not marrying my people, but I am marrying for their sake. It’s... complicated.”

“But that isn’t fair to you, Yue.” Sokka took her hand and looked directly at her as he said, “You deserve to be happy. You shouldn’t be expected to sacrifice your own happiness for everyone else. And I’m not just saying that because I like you. If it was what made you happy, I would tell you to stay with Hahn.”

Yue looked at Sokka with tears in her eyes. “Why?”

“Because I genuinely care about you, and that means I want what’s best for you.”

“Well, isn’t that sweet.” Sokka jumped to his feet, but it was too late. He and Yue were surrounded. Admiral Zhao jumped off of his mount, giving Sokka and Yue both a disdainful stare. “What a pity it is to interrupt these two lovebirds, but it’s time for me to fulfill my destiny.”

Chapter End Notes

happy holidays! my gift to you is a cliffhanger.

there's probably not a lot of you who are reading my pokemon fic, but i mentioned there what's been happening in my life lately- i accidentally spent a week off my antidepressants, which are notorious for side effects if you miss even a day, causing me to have one of the worst weeks in my life. this happened to be just after i posted the last chapter. also, my longtime cat and close companion died recently. i had her since she was a baby, and since i was a baby, really- i was only four when we got her, and i can't remember a life without her. i realize now how much of my daily happiness depended on seeing her, being with her, even just knowing she was around somewhere in the house with me. it's been really rough for me. yesterday was the one-month anniversary. also, my house got painted very soon after my cat died, so i spent a lot of time getting the house prepped for that, and then i had finals! so yeah, this past month has been a whirlwind, to say the least. but i'd like to give a big thank you to those of you who have been leaving sweet comments. with my cat gone, i lost a lot of my daily sense of purpose, but you guys are reminding me why i'm here, so thanks for that- your comments are what got me through some of my roughest days.

and now, for our regular chapter notes:

nattiq acquired skill: bloodbending. what will he do with it

shoutout to sokka in the last half of the chapter being the goat and uplifting the women in his life

zuko-iroh reunion! wish it was under better circumstances...

thanks for reading and happy holidays!

The Siege of the North: Part 2

Chapter Summary

cw: reference to torture, child abuse flashback, PTSD, graphic character death (stabbing), severe burns, suicidal ideation (???? i'm not sure what to really call this, but i'm referring to how willing yue was to sacrifice herself to become the moon spirit), a character drops the f-bomb (probably one of the last characters you'd ever expect to), there's one line that can be read as implying something sexual but if you blink you'll miss it, hallucinations

now that all the content warnings are out of the way... man, i can't remember the last time i put my heart, soul, and ass into a chapter like i did with this one. hope y'all enjoy it

Chapter Notes

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

To say that the boat ride back to the Northern Water Tribe was the most awkward experience Iluak could remember would be an understatement.

Toklo was silent, trying to process the news of Hahn's death. He was obviously trying not to cry, but it wasn't working. Every once in a while, a small sniffle would come from the bench he was sitting on, and Iluak would politely ignore it.

Zuko's uncle, on the other hand, was making attempts at small talk with his nephew, who would either answer him shortly or not at all.

Finally, the uncle gave up on the small talk and said, "Do you know where the moon and ocean spirits reside?"

"No," Zuko said, bristling. "Why would I? I'm a firebender. The Northern Water Tribe has already been generous just by letting me stay. Why would they tell me their most well-kept secrets?"

"Easy," Iluak said, resting a hand on Zuko's arm. Iluak had hoped his touch would be comforting, but instead Zuko gave him a full body flinch and pulled away with a scowl.

"Don't tell me you're on his side now," Zuko spat. His voice was angry, but his posture was defensive and his hands were shaking. He was afraid, and everyone on the little boat knew it.

"Lee, right now we're all on the same side," Iluak explained, "the side that doesn't want the world to end. We can go back to being enemies later."

“He’s not my enemy!” Zuko stood upon his sudden outburst, but quickly sat down and sighed. “It’s... complicated.” It wasn’t much, but it was the best phrasing Zuko could come up with. It was great to see his uncle again- Zuko was relieved to see him healthy and acting like his usual self. Uncle brought with him a sense of familiarity that warmed Zuko’s heart and made it ache at the same time. He wanted desperately to ask about Azula, but Zuko couldn’t afford to distract himself from the task at hand. Which, Zuko found, was exactly what Uncle was doing by existing near him. Much to his annoyance, Zuko found himself being lulled into a sense of complacency, thinking that now that Uncle was here, he would take care of everything.

Zuko shook his head in frustration, trying to shake away the calm feeling. Just because Uncle’s here doesn’t mean everything will be okay. Was everything okay after the war meeting? No! And what about when he left you and went back to the Fire Nation? Zuko took a deep breath and looked out the window to his right. Just because Uncle’s here doesn’t mean you can let your guard down.

With a loud sigh, Zuko looked out the window. His heart skipped a beat when he saw another boat trailing them. “We’re being followed!”

Iluak jumped up and rushed over to the window, quickly spotting a small black boat under the light of the full moon. Zuko’s fists were clenched and the oil lanterns on their boat were blazing white, but Iluak narrowed his eyes at the other boat and said, “Wait.”

“What, for them to attack us?!”

“No. Look at how the boat’s moving.” Zuko took a moment to examine the other boat’s motion, and slowly the lanterns returned to their normal color. “You see how the water itself is moving around the boat? What’s that mean?”

“That the person in the boat is using waterbending to move it.” Zuko exhaled slowly, and the lantern flames flickered naturally again.

“Exactly. So whoever’s in that boat is with us.”

“Right,” Zuko breathed, “you’re right.”

Spotting a small island up ahead, Iluak said, “Let’s dock there and tell them what the situation is.”

The lantern flames shot up again as Zuko started, “We don’t have time to-”

At the same time, Zuko’s uncle stood and said, “In this situation, Pri-”

Zuko’s uncle touched the prince’s arm, and the lanterns burned white for a moment before exploding from the intense heat inside of them. “Don’t touch me!!”

The boat was dark and quiet for what felt like an eternity. It was Toklo who finally broke the silence with an awkward, “Uh, I’ll go steer us to the island and signal the others.” Iroh heard the young man shuffle around in the dark for a minute, then the sound of a door opening and

shutting. He lit a small flame in his hand, illuminating his nephew sitting with his back against the wall and his knees and arms protectively tucked in.

“Prince Zuko,” Iroh said softly, kneeling in front of his nephew, “I’m not going to harm you.”

“His name’s Lee,” Iluak said shortly. A streak of anger rose up in him as he stared at his captain, trembling and afraid on the floor. “If you call him Zuko, you’ll just be putting him in danger. Do you really think we introduced him to the Northern Water Tribe as the Fire Prince? He’d’ve been dead in minutes.”

Zuko’s uncle raised an eyebrow at Iluak. “And yet you know his identity.”

“I’m not from the Northern Tribe,” Iluak hissed. “People on our side don’t trust Lee just because he’s a firebender. Can you imagine what would happen to him if they found out that he’s actually the Fire Prince? They’d think he’s a traitor!”

“I am a traitor,” Zuko murmured, making both Iluak and Iroh look at him in surprise. “I lied to them about who I am.”

“You did that so you could stay alive,” Iluak said in a much softer tone. “And because you wanted to help them. That doesn’t make you a traitor.”

“Hahn’s dead,” Zuko said, looking up suddenly. “I’m sure there are others, too. It’s my fault- I should have kept Hahn under control, I should have helped everyone prepare more- I should have done more.”

Zuko’s shoulders slumped, and Iluak took a moment to truly look at the kid. Because that’s just what he was, a kid- and he had never looked more like one than in this moment. He looked somewhat thinner than normal, and there were dark circles under his tired eyes. The way he was sitting, with his shoulders slumped and his head down, made it look like he was being crushed by an unbearable weight. Iluak wondered if he and the others had placed too much on Zuko’s shoulders.

“Lee,” Zuko’s uncle said, “how much have you been sleeping?”

Zuko looked off to the side and muttered, “About four hours a night since I’ve been here.”

“What?! You’ve only-” The uncle held up a finger to shush Iluak, then stared at Zuko with raised eyebrows.

“Okay,” Zuko blurted out after a minute under his uncle’s intense gaze, “so maybe it’s been closer to two, but can you blame me? I’m the only firebender here, and I’m the only one who could teach them how to fight against the Fire Nation!”

“You cannot give others your best if you are not your best self,” Iroh said, making Zuko scoff.

“I don’t need your proverbs, Uncle,” he replied bitterly. “Besides... it’s better that I don’t sleep.”

Before Iroh or Iluak could ask Zuko to elaborate, all three of them felt the ship run aground. Zuko opened the hatch on the side of the ship and they all stepped out onto the island, where Toklo was already signaling the other ship. A couple of tribesmen exited the other boat and, to Zuko's relief, so did Shizu and Mine.

Zuko saw Toklo exit the ship and immediately run to the other tribesmen, sending a pang of guilt through him. He knew Hahn's death could have been avoided, if only he'd kept a closer eye on him, or if only he'd properly communicated the danger of the mission, or if only...

As Zuko cycled through all the ways he could have helped the Northern Water Tribe better, Iroh was staring at him in concern. Something had changed about Zuko, but Iroh couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. So when there was a break in the conversation between Iluak, the Northerners, and the Kyoshi Warriors, Iroh took the opportunity to pull Iluak aside.

Iluak noticed the genuine concern on Zuko's uncle's face and wondered if he was worried about how long they were taking on the island. It took him by complete surprise when the man asked, "Did something happen to my nephew?"

"Uh, what?"

"I understand that this invasion has created much anxiety for him, but... there is something he is not telling me." Iroh's brow furrowed as he looked at Zuko, who was wringing his hands as he stared back at the invasion force. "He has always been inclined to shoulder the blame for things he is not responsible for, but this is extreme. And of course he has always been sensitive to touch, but after what happened earlier..."

"Oh, that's because of what happened with Zhao," Iluak said. Iroh gave Iluak a confused look, which surprised him. "You don't know? I thought everyone in the Fire Nation did."

"We were told that the Prince was killed in an explosion set by Earth Kingdom pirates," Iroh explained. His eyes narrowed as he added, "Though I thought it quite suspicious that Zhao was the one who reported it, since he has had a... rocky history with the Prince. I already knew Zhao was lying because I could sense that Zuko was alive, but I did not tell anybody in the Fire Nation what I knew."

"That's good, because it was his dad who ordered the hit." Even though Iroh had suspected this, it hurt worse than a dagger to the gut to hear his suspicions confirmed.

"How my brother could treat his own son this way..." Iroh sighed and shook his head. "I will never understand him. I assume the Prince knows this?"

"Yeah, he does- wait, did you say Lee's dad is your brother?" Iluak wasn't sure why, but he'd been picturing this man as someone on Zuko's mom's side of the family. But if this man was Firelord Ozai's brother, that meant- "You're General Iroh?!"

"Keep your voice down, would you?" Zuko had walked over to them with his arms crossed. "They're distracted and don't have good hearing like me, but we don't need to take any chances."

“But he’s-” Zuko glared at Iluak, who took the hint to shut up. “Right. Sorry.” Iluak took a deep breath in, trying to convince himself that standing next to the Dragon of the West was no big deal. Sure, finding out about Zuko’s true identity had been shocking, but Prince Zuko had no real reputation, not the way General Iroh did. Here before him was the man who had attempted to besiege Ba Sing Se, and had been successful until his sudden retreat about a month into the siege.

In all honesty, he was a lot shorter than Iluak thought he would be, and not very intimidating. He was acting like a normal uncle fussing over his nephew, not like a General.

“Lee, I am very worried about you,” Iroh said, gazing at Zuko in concern. “In the time since I saw you last, you have... changed.”

“It’s been two years, Uncle. I’ve seen and done a lot without you.” It was normal for Zuko to avoid direct eye contact with people, but Zuko was refusing to even look in Iroh’s direction. Iroh knew something had happened, and Zuko knew it. After a moment of tense silence between them, Zuko asked, “In the Fire Nation, what did they say happened to Prince Zuko?”

“He was assassinated by Earth Kingdom pirates in the area,” Iroh explained. “Some thought it might be the Blue Spirit.”

“There are rumors that he survived,” Zuko said with feigned nonchalance. “They say he escaped, but that soon after, he was... taken. Abducted by the same Admiral that’s besieging the North Pole right now. Rumor has it he was kept in Pohuai Stronghold.”

Something in Iroh changed at those words, and it took a conscious effort for Iluak not to shrink away from him. Iroh cleared his throat, drawing the attention of everyone on the small island.

“Here is what we will do,” Iroh said in a commanding tone. “Those of you from the Northern Water Tribe will travel back to the battlefield in one of the boats and warn your people to fall back. Lee, you will go with them. Find the Avatar and see if he can find a way to connect with the moon and ocean spirits.”

Zuko nodded, then blinked. “Wait, how’d you know that I-”

“Your destiny has always been linked with the Avatar’s,” Iroh said vaguely, then continued, “Iluak and I will take the other boat and follow Admiral Zhao.”

Shizu stepped forward, quickly followed by Mine. “We’re going with you,” Mine declared.

Before Iroh could protest, Iluak said, “Yeah, that’s a good idea. We don’t know how many guys Zhao has with him.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Zuko said with a shrug, then looked at his uncle. “He’ll be able to take all of them by himself. I’ve seen him do it before.”

Not wanting to tell Zuko that it was an issue of trusting this man rather than how well he could fight, Mine said, “Still, it’s better to be safe than sorry. Anything could happen, you

know.”

Reluctantly, Zuko agreed, and he said a quick farewell to his uncle and crew before boarding the boat with the others, leaving Shizu, Mine, Iluak, and Iroh alone on the island. As they boarded their own boat, Mine said to Iroh, “Look, I don’t know who you are or why you’re deciding to betray the Fire Nation, but if you make one wrong move I’ll end you. Lee seems to trust you for some reason, but-”

“Hey,” Iluak said, holding up his hands as he stepped between Iroh and Mine, “it’s fine. He’s Lee’s uncle.” Iluak wasn’t entirely sure if they could trust General Iroh, but he was starting to lean more towards trusting the man. He did seem to care a great deal for his nephew, and Zuko trusted him, which had to count for something.

Shizu’s eyes widened and she made a few hand signs. Iluak sighed, sheepishly rubbing the back of his head. “Yeah, that uncle. The Dragon of the West.”

Iroh looked at Iluak in surprise. “They know?”

“Yeah, these two know who Lee really is- huh?!” Out of nowhere, Iroh had grabbed Iluak by the shoulders and was giving him an intense stare.

“How many people know?!”

“That’s enough!” Mine pulled Iluak away and glared directly into General Iroh’s eyes. For once, she had found somebody she could glare at without having to look up at them. “You can’t just push people around because you’re a General. That may work in the Fire Nation, but not here. I don’t trust you a bit, and don’t expect that to change because you’re Lee’s uncle. I know exactly who gave him that scar on his face, and I saw the aftermath of what Zhao did to him on his father’s orders.”

Near desperate, Iroh asked, “What did Zhao do to my nephew?”

Mine’s voice rose as she yelled, “What any one of you Fire Nation officers would do to a traitor!” Shizu grabbed Mine’s arm, and Mine forced herself to look away from the General. Shizu shook her head, then gently held one of Mine’s hands. Mine reminded herself that General Iroh was at least trying to appear like he was on their side, and angering him could provoke him into attacking not only her, but possibly Shizu and Iluak as well.

After a few deep breaths, Mine said, “He was tortured. Brutally.” She was quiet for a moment before adding, “We didn’t even see the worst of it. The Avatar’s group rescued him and traveled around with him for a bit before we found him again. But when we found him, he... he was dying. Lee said Zhao had given him poison to block his firebending, but he gave him way too much...” Mine trailed off as Iroh wordlessly headed to the helm of the ship. “...General Iroh?”

Iroh turned, and the other three on the boat tried to stop themselves from flinching (with varying degrees of success). There was a burning fury in the old General’s tear-filled eyes that was terrifying, even though Shizu, Mine, and Iluak knew it wasn’t directed at them.

In a too-calm voice, General Iroh said, "Let's go end this motherfucker's life."

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Just a couple of nights ago, Sokka had been wishing for some time with Princess Yue while Katara, Aang, and Zuko were occupied elsewhere. Sokka supposed he was getting his wish, but in Sokka's ideal scenario, he and Yue weren't surrounded by Fire Nation soldiers, and Zhao was far, far away. If it was a really ideal scenario, Zhao would be dead somewhere.

But instead, he and Yue were surrounded by Fire Nation soldiers, and of course Zhao was with them. Sokka made a mental note to be more specific when he wished for things in the future.

With a sigh, Sokka said, "You're really just going to sit here until he wakes up?"

"I want him to watch it happen," Zhao said, narrowing his eyes at Aang's body. His eyes and arrows were still glowing, which Sokka had come to recognize as a sign that Aang was in the Avatar state. Usually when this happened, Aang would unleash some absurd amount of power, but right now he was just... sitting there. Katara had said Aang was in the Spirit World, but Sokka wasn't quite sure how the Avatar state gave Aang access to it. Before, he'd thought of the Avatar state as a kind of massive power boost, but maybe it was something entirely different.

"Watch what happen?" Yue's voice shook.

"You'll find out soon enough."

Sokka sighed again and tried to get comfortable, which was hard to do in his current position. He was on his knees with his hands tied behind his back, and the rope binding his hands was tied to a sturdy bamboo stalk behind him. It occurred to him that this was the same way he'd kept Zuko tied up right after they found him.

Once again, Sokka sighed loudly. He wished Zuko was here. Specifically, he wished Zuko was here instead of Yue. It was painfully obvious that Yue had never been in a situation like this before. She was shaking, whimpering slightly, and visibly terrified. The Fire Nation soldiers were relishing in her fear, and Sokka wished she'd just keep quiet and stop drawing attention to herself, especially because Sokka was starting to get very uncomfortable with how some of the soldiers were starting to look at her.

To get their eyes away from her, Sokka said, "You might be waiting a while, then. Or no time at all. He could wake up in a few seconds and blow you all away." Zhao didn't respond, but thankfully his men gazed warily at Aang, too worried by being caught off guard by an attack to think about Yue anymore.

In the silence that followed, Sokka tried to think of an escape plan, but kept reaching the frustrating dead end of Yue. Even if Sokka managed to get her out, she wouldn't know how to defend herself. Sokka would have to worry about protecting her, keeping Aang safe, and his own escape, all while he would most likely be carrying Aang. There also was the issue of Yue's unpredictable bending, which Sokka was honestly surprised that she'd kept under

control thus far. If something made Yue upset enough, she could bring the entire glacier down on them. Which would be great for getting rid of Zhao, but not so great for their own survival.

Again, Sokka found himself wishing that Zuko was here. It wasn't like Sokka had to worry about Zuko having some sort of bending accident- in fact, Sokka doubted he'd have to worry about Zuko at all. Sokka would bet money that Zuko was a better firebender than all of Zhao's crew combined, and on top of that he was a master swordsman. If Zuko were here, he wouldn't be on the list of things Sokka had to worry about for an escape- rather, he'd be on the list of assets Sokka had available.

Zuko worked extremely well under pressure, too- something that even Sokka wasn't always able to do. Sokka thought of the way Zuko had taken command when the Northern Air Temple was being attacked, of how when the Unagi was attacked by a sea monster, Zuko had simply talked to it. If he closed his eyes, Sokka could still see Zuko's silhouette on the mast of the Unagi as lightning raced towards him, and how Zuko had simply plucked the lightning out of the air and sent it back in the direction it came from. Zuko had always been this way, Sokka realized as a memory surfaced of a boy bravely facing down the commander of the Southern Raiders.

Something orange flickered in the corner of Sokka's eye. Holding his breath, Sokka glanced over at it hopefully.

It was Zhao. The Admiral was sitting on the lush green grass of the Spirit Oasis, examining the plants below him with a bored expression. As Sokka watched, he ripped a fragile white flower bud out of the ground, then burned it between his fingers.

Maybe it was better that Zuko wasn't here after all.

Suddenly, Sokka heard a cheerful voice shout, "It's the koi fish!" His heart sank to the pit of his stomach. Sokka turned his head just in time to see Aang's triumphant expression fade into a horrified one. A knife was pressed against Sokka's throat, and he winced.

"Indeed it is, Avatar," Zhao said, standing. "I assume I don't need to tell you what'll happen to your friends here if you try something."

Aang looked over at Sokka and Yue, gulped, then looked back at Zhao. "What do you want from me?"

"You see, that's the thing, Avatar," Zhao said, and Sokka suppressed a groan. He could tell that Zhao was going to launch into one of his endless monologues. Well, at least that gave Zuko more time to come and rescue him.

Or Katara, Sokka thought to himself, annoyed. Or mom, or Iluak, or Arnook, or literally anybody else. He was irritated with himself for thinking of Zuko first.

Unbeknownst to Sokka, Katara was already on her way to him. She had been fighting off a couple of firebenders when she spotted Iluak, Shizu, and Mine with an oddly familiar figure

out of the corner of her eye. She quickly trapped the firebenders in thick spheres of ice before heading over to the group.

“You four look awfully worried,” Katara said, sliding down an ice walkway she had created to come over to the group. “But we’re handling ourselves just fine... General Iroh?” Katara had just realized why the other man had looked familiar. Her brows knitted together in concern. “What’s wrong?”

As Iluak explained the general situation to her, Katara did a good job of staying calm. When he was finished, Katara nodded and said, “I think I know where he might have gone. Follow me.”

Unaware of Sokka’s inner turmoil at wanting to be rescued by Zuko, Zhao continued, “I never wanted anything from you. You were always somebody else’s prize. And... well, you know what became of him. He got the fate he deserved- a slow death by poison, as you know.”

Aang and Sokka looked at each other in surprise. Did Zhao really think his poison had killed Zuko? Aang opened his mouth to reply, but Sokka quickly shook his head. The less Zhao knew about Zuko, the better.

“Tell me, Avatar, did it hurt to watch him die? Surely you must have felt indebted to him after what he did for you at Pohuai Stronghold.” Aang cast his gaze downwards and off to the side, effectively looking guilty. For a kid who had been raised by monks, Sokka thought Aang could lie awfully well. “You should know, he would have survived if you hadn’t brought him north with you.”

“What?”

Zhao turned to Sokka, then smirked. “You really don’t know? I figured if the traitor would tell anyone, it would be his childhood best friend.” Zhao must have seen the surprise on Sokka’s face, because he laughed and said, “What, you think I forgot who you were? It’s only been a month and a half since we’ve seen each other last.”

“What are you talking about?” The logical part of Sokka asked this because he wanted Zhao to keep talking to him and not to focus on Aang or Yue. He knew that if he kept Zhao talking, that gave more time for Zuko- no, anybody, Sokka thought to himself irritably- to arrive and help them. But a small part of Sokka wanted to know what Zhao was talking about, if Zuko was keeping yet another thing from him.

“Firebenders draw their power from the sun, and the heat around them. When you put them in a cold environment like a cooler, the firebender has no heat to draw from and cannot bend. Now can you imagine what being here in the North Pole in the winter, when it’s freezing cold and the sun is only up for a couple hours a day, would do to a weak firebender like him?”

“The man you brought here, the one our healers couldn’t save... he was a firebender?” Sokka looked over at Yue in surprise. There was a cold determination in her eyes, and she gave Sokka a slight nod as he looked at her. Yue was telling him that even if she didn’t understand

what he was doing, she would follow his lead. It was reassuring, but it would be more reassuring if Sokka knew what he was doing.

Sokka didn't answer Yue, instead choosing to glare at Zhao. "He was a better firebender than you'll ever be."

Zhao stepped towards Sokka threateningly, but before he could do anything, Aang said, "But that means you're weakened too, right?"

"I'm still stronger than you," Zhao growled.

"Still, you're not in your prime. But you're choosing to take on these waterbenders in winter and on the night of a full moon... why?" Aang shook his head. "It just doesn't make any sense."

"I wanted the Northern Water Tribe to think they had a chance at defeating the Fire Nation before I destroy them once and for all. But how will I do that, you ask?"

"Actually, none of us asked that," Sokka muttered. It was probably for the better that Zhao didn't hear him.

To Aang's horror, Zhao reached into the koi pond, pulling the silver koi out of her dance and placing her in a bag. "NO!"

Some distance away, Zuko froze as the sky turned red above him. Zuko had assumed that Aang or Katara or Sokka would be on the front lines, but he couldn't find any of them. He had been warning as many waterbenders as he could to fall back, but as the moon went red above him, Zuko feared it was too late.

But something was calling him- a silvery, wispy presence that was as strange as it was familiar. It was Tui, he knew somehow, and she needed his help. So without hesitation, Zuko ran to where Tui was calling him.

Surprised, Sokka looked up to the sky as it turned red. He hadn't known there would be a lunar eclipse tonight, and he doubted that the Northerners did.

From his first day in the Northern Water Tribe, Sokka could tell the Northerners were very spiritual people, far more than the Southerners were. If the North Pole had been attacked by the Fire Nation like the South Pole had been, Sokka wondered if the Northern Water Tribe would have fractured like the Southern Tribe did.

The Northerners' spiritualism did a good job of holding their community together, but Sokka had noticed a few ways that such strict spiritualism held the tribe back. For example, the Northern Water Tribe relied entirely on their waterbenders for healing, believing that the spirits would never let them be without waterbenders who could heal. Sokka had been told that even before the Fire Nation raids had begun, some of the best healers in the South Pole were nonbenders who had an acute understanding of both medicinal herbs and the human body.

Another area the Northern Water Tribe lacked knowledge in was astronomy, which had surprised Sokka since they held the moon spirit in such high regard. A few of the tribe's elders (including Pakku) still believed the Earth was flat, even though the Southern Water Tribe had proven the Earth was a sphere many times over the past few generations. Thankfully, the majority of the tribe along with Arnook and Yue didn't share that particular belief, but they did believe that the Earth orbited the moon, which was just weird in Sokka's opinion.

"So you planned your attack on the night of a lunar eclipse," Sokka said, somewhat impressed. It was an uncharacteristically smart move for Zhao.

Zhao looked at Sokka, confused. "What?" He shook his head, then said, "No, the moon is red because the moon spirit is in danger. From me." Zhao shook the bag in his hand indicatively. Sokka looked at Zhao, then at the bag, then back at Zhao, trying to figure out if he was being serious or not. "The moon spirit I just captured," Zhao said impatiently.

"...That's a fish," Sokka finally said.

"No, this is Tui, the spirit of the moon."

"It's a *fish*."

Aang started to say, "Sokka--"

But Sokka was in no mood for this spiritual stuff. "Lunar eclipses are a perfectly natural phenomena, they're not connected to the spirits. They only happen on full moons because--" Sokka heard Yue sigh next to him and stopped abruptly. The last time Sokka had tried to explain astronomy to her, it hadn't ended well. Yue hadn't been openly rude to him, but Sokka could tell she was tuning him out. So instead, Sokka said, "That doesn't matter. My point is, it's a weird coincidence that the lunar eclipse started when you picked up the fish, but that's all it is- a coincidence."

Zhao frowned, then released the fish back into the water. Immediately the sky went back to normal. When he recaptured the white koi, the sky turned red again.

"Huh," Sokka murmured. "You usually don't see that with lunar eclipses."

Zhao clenched his fists, then repeated the same process with the fish over again. Once again, the sky changed based on the status of the fish.

"Alright, alright," Sokka admitted, "I guess it does have something to do with that fish. But you can't keep holding it forever, right?"

"No," Zhao said, eyes narrowing, "which is why I intend to kill it. My destiny is to destroy the moon- and the Water Tribe."

At the same time, Yue and Sokka shouted, "What?!"

Before Sokka could start ranting about how that was scientifically impossible, Yue pleaded, "You can't destroy the moon, the whole world will end!"

“She’s right,” Aang said, finally dropping his staff and holding up his hands. “Destroying the moon wouldn’t just hurt the Water Tribe. All of us depend on the moon- even you, Zhao. The moon creates the tides which make it possible for you to sail across the ocean. If you do this... you’ll throw everything out of balance.”

“You should listen to him, Zhao,” a voice said, surprising everyone in the Spirit Oasis. Several pairs of eyes turned to see General Iroh, flanked by Shizu and Mine on one side and Katara and Iluak on the other. Despite the grave situation they were in, Aang couldn’t help but smile when he saw that Katara was alright.

“General Iroh,” Zhao said, voice full of disdain, “why am I not surprised to discover your treachery?”

“I’m no traitor, Zhao,” Iroh said, “you are. I know what you did to Prince Zuko.”

Zhao’s eyebrows briefly raised in surprise, then settled into indifference. “He was a traitor who got what he deserved. Just like I did with him, I’ll bring this spirit to its end.”

“Whatever you do to that spirit, Zhao, I’ll release on you tenfold! Let it go, now!” Iroh’s eyes were brimming with barely contained fury. Zhao may be prideful, but even he wasn’t foolish enough to believe he would be a match for the old General.

So Zhao did as Iroh commanded and released the moon spirit back into the pond. But as he watched the two spirit koi circle each other in a peaceful dance, his rage grew until it became unbearable, so with a yell, he raised his hand and made the final blow.

Except he didn’t.

Just as Zhao’s fire was about to hit the moon spirit, something knocked him to the side, making his fatal blow only land a glancing hit on the moon spirit. The moon did fade from the sky, as Tui had been dangerously wounded, but she was not dead, thanks to whoever had pushed Zhao aside. To the rest of the world, she appeared dead, but she was not.

Sokka glared up at the sky in disbelief. “So the moon’s *gone* now because the fish died?! That’s total bullish-“

Iroh let out a shout of anger and started to shoot hot white bursts of fire at the Fire Nation soldiers, who were quickly overwhelmed. As Iroh fought them, Zhao turned to flee, but found a pair of swords pointed at him. Blue flames burned on the swords’ edges, illuminating the blue mask of Zhao’s assailant.

From behind his mask, Zuko asked, “Miss me?”

Zuko relished in the horrified shock on Zhao’s face. “B- but- but you’re supposed to be-“

“Dead? Sorry to disappoint,” Zuko said, slowly backing away from Zhao. He could see the shock on his face quickly changing to anger.

“Then I suppose I’ll just have to kill you again,” Zhao snarled, orange fire blazing in his hands.

As Iroh finished tying the last knocked out Fire Nation soldier up, he turned to see Zhao confronting who he immediately recognized as Zuko. Iroh desperately tried to summon some lightning to strike down Zhao, but he was still so shocked from the apparent death of the moon spirit and so angry about what Zhao had done to Zuko that the lightning blew up in Iroh's face, sending him flying backwards.

Zuko heard the loud boom from Iroh's failed attempt at lightning but didn't look over, not wanting to take his eyes off of Zhao. Once again, he heard the silvery whisper, but it was far weaker than before, and it only said, *Take him away from here*.

So Zuko smirked under his mask and said, "You'll have to catch me first."

Recognizing that voice, Sokka looked up just in time to see Zuko bolt for the door to the Spirit Oasis, narrowly dodging one of Zhao's fireballs. Zuko made it through the door safely, but Zhao was hot on his heels.

Immediately, Sokka leapt to his feet. He intended to follow them, but hesitated, looking back at Aang and Yue. His eyes met Katara's, and he realized even she was vulnerable, as she could no longer waterbend. The three of them could be well protected, considering that Iluak, Shizu, Mine, and Iroh were here, but if something happened to any one of them and Sokka wasn't there... Sokka wasn't sure he could live with himself. Especially because Zuko would be able to take care of himself with or without Sokka, right?

Sokka's eyes met Iroh's. Iroh was clearly still in pain from his botched lightningbending, but there was genuine fear in his eyes.

"Go after him," Iroh pleaded. "I know who you are- you're Sokka. Go after him, please. He needs you."

Sokka didn't need to be told twice.

As her brother ran out of the Spirit Oasis, Katara rushed to Iroh's side. "Are you alright?"

"I will be fine," Iroh said, sitting upright. "It has been a while since my last lightning mishap, but it will only sting for a little bit." Iroh looked over to the pond where the white koi was floating lifelessly and despair filled his eyes. "The moon spirit..."

"It's over," Yue said in a choked voice. "There's no hope now."

"No," Aang said in a voice that wasn't his own, "it's not over." With his eyes and tattoos glowing, Aang stepped into the shallow pond, allowing the ocean spirit to swim up to him. The koi's eyes glowed, and Aang was overwhelmed with a fury that wasn't his. The sheer force of the emotion knocked Aang unconscious, and the last thing he remembered was a smooth, deep voice that said, *I will make them pay for what they have done*.

Aang sank into the mud beneath the pond, and the water surrounding the Spirit Oasis glowed bright blue. As he watched La's massive body form out of water, Iroh prayed that the Fire Nation troops attacking would die quick, painless deaths at the hands of La. There was nothing more Iroh could do for them, since Zhao had invoked the wrath of the ocean spirit.

But as La went past the castle in front of the Spirit Oasis, the white koi still in the pond gave a slight shudder, shocking all still at the pond.

Unbeknownst to those at the Spirit Oasis, Sokka was still in the castle when La passed through it. One moment, Sokka was trying to navigate the castle- the next, he was underwater- and the next, he was out in front of the castle, watching a big blue mass of water head down towards the ocean. *That's some angry water*, Sokka thought to himself, having felt the fury of the ocean spirit while he was stuck in its watery body. With a jolt, Sokka noticed Aang was in the middle of all the water, but Sokka quickly realized that Aang wasn't drowning- rather, he was controlling the water. Sokka watched as Aang sent a massive wave over some firebenders standing on a bridge and couldn't help but cheer. "Yeah, Aang! Go kick some firebender butt!"

From the corner of his eye, Sokka saw a flash of blue light, and he suddenly remembered why he left the Spirit Oasis in the first place. As Aang headed out towards the ocean, Sokka slid down an icy railing into the rubble-filled streets of the North Pole. Somewhere below him, Sokka could tell Zuko and Zhao were fighting. Sokka couldn't see either of them, but he could see their fire, painting the black night with orange and blue. There were far more orange flashes than blue, so Sokka assumed Zhao was taking the offensive, launching attack after attack at Zuko. It seemed like they were moving around a lot, making Sokka wonder what Zuko's plan was.

Zuko didn't have a plan. Zuko wanted to stand and fight, but the moon spirit's words echoed in his mind. Zuko knew she wasn't dead, and it was only a matter of time before the others at the Spirit Oasis realized that. Though the moon had disappeared from the sky, Zuko had a feeling it would return soon- and when that happened, Zuko wanted Zhao to be as far away from the Spirit Oasis as possible. So despite the hatred and anger searing every fibre of his being and making his fire burn blue, Zuko continued to lure Zhao away from the Spirit Oasis.

Back at the Spirit Oasis, Mine gently reached into the pond and lifted the koi fish out, then turned to Katara. "You're a healer, right? You can fix this?"

"I..." Katara looked down at her hands helplessly. "I can't waterbend... my bending is just... *gone*."

"I feel it too," Iluak murmured, shaking his head. "It looked like Lee saved her from an immediate death, but without waterbending, I don't know how we can heal her."

"...I don't feel it," Yue said, drawing everyone's eyes to her. She reached upwards, then clenched her fist tightly. The icy walls around the Spirit Oasis cracked, but didn't fall. "Sure, it seems weaker than before, but... I can still waterbend."

Even though he was a considerable distance away, Zuko heard the glacier crack and assumed the Fire Nation had fired on the sea gate again. But instead of making him afraid, the loud noise just made Zuko angry. He hated that his own people were attacking the Northern Water Tribe, punishing them for the simple crime of existing. He hated that just a few, power-hungry, selfish people got to decide the fate of the rest of the world. And above it all, right now he hated Zhao.

So Zuko stopped running. He stood firmly where he was and created a ball of blue fire in his hands. As he waited for Zhao to find him, Zuko spun the ball around and around in his hands, making it burn bigger and brighter.

By the time Sokka found Zuko and Zhao, it was hardly a fight. Zuko was practically dancing circles around his adversary, blasting him with jets of blue fire that Zhao could barely protect himself from. Not wanting to be burnt to a crisp in the crossfire, Sokka kept a safe distance but kept his boomerang at the ready, just in case.

Zhao shot a fireball directly at Zuko, but Zuko dispersed it with a stream of blue fire so hot that Sokka could feel the heat from where he was standing, nearly fifty feet away. Zhao stumbled backwards and Zuko tackled him, shoving his burning hands into Zhao's chest. For a moment, Zuko's hatred consumed him, and all he wanted was for Zhao to burn the way he had.

But then Zuko smelled it.

Zuko didn't remember much from the week after his Agni Kai with his father, but he remembered that smell. It was the only thing he could smell for a week after the first one, and in the weeks and first couple months following, Zuko would get whiffs of it throughout the days randomly. It was the real reason why Zuko preferred to fight with his swords rather than with his bending.

Sokka watched in confusion as Zuko's flames died out. Wasn't Zuko going to finish Zhao off with his flames? Well, it may be hard to burn a firebender to death, Sokka realized, so it may be more practical for Zuko to grab his swords now. But it looked like Zuko was just... frozen.

Zhao, realizing somewhat what was happening to Zuko, took advantage of the opportunity. Within seconds, it was Zuko who was now pinned down under Zhao. Sokka bristled at the sight, but surely this was part of Zuko's plan, right? There was no way that Zuko would let Zhao beat him- really, there was no way Zhao *could* beat Zuko, not unless he fought dirty somehow.

"You filthy traitor," Zhao snarled, but that wasn't what Zuko heard.

Instead, Zuko saw his father standing above him, repeating over and over, "Suffering will be your teacher." Zuko was no longer fighting- he was trained to know that this wasn't something he could fight. All he could do was sit there and take whatever punishment his father would give him today.

Unheard by Zuko, Zhao continued, "You think what I did to you at Pohuai was bad before? There's so much worse I can- no, that I *will* do to you. You're coming back to Pohuai with me." To Sokka's shock, Zuko didn't even flinch at those words. So surely that meant Zuko knew how to get himself out of this, Sokka thought. It would make things worse if he interfered.

But then Zhao lit a flame on one of his fingers and held it right up to Zuko's bad eye. Zuko flinched and tried to cover his face, but Zhao grabbed his hands and pinned them down. Zhao

put out the little flame and ran his fingers along Zuko's scar, and Sokka found himself frozen, unable to do anything but watch and pray to spirits he didn't believe in that Zuko would *do something*.

"You know, despite this," Zhao mused, pressing his fingers into Zuko's scarred skin, "you still have a pretty face, just like your mother did. I don't think a traitor like you deserves that."

As Zuko continued to lie still below Zhao, even as Zhao filled his hand with flame and started to reach toward Zuko's unscarred eye, Sokka finally realized Zuko wouldn't be able to save himself, not this time.

In the Spirit Oasis, Iroh had just come to an important realization as well. "You have been touched by the moon spirit," he said, standing. "Some of its life is in you."

"Yes... you're right," Yue murmured. "The moon spirit gave me life." With a deep breath, Yue added, "Maybe I can give it back."

"What?!" Immediately, Shizu, Mine, and Iluak were at Yue's side.

"There has to be another way," Shizu signed.

"You don't have to do this, Princess Yue," Mine pleaded.

"You've still got so much life left to live," Iluak said.

"Enough!" At Yue's sharp exclamation, the glaciers once again let out loud cracking noises. Yue took another deep breath before saying, "This is my duty- to my people and the rest of the world, too. I have to do this." As Yue stepped towards Iroh, who had scooped up the limp koi in his hands, the three members of the *Unagi* crew were reminded of their young captain and found themselves unable to interfere.

Iroh knelt, offering the koi to the young Princess. Yue placed her hands on the koi, and as the fish began to glow under her touch, Yue closed her eyes, preparing herself for what came next.

But it wasn't what she expected. Yes, Yue felt *something* leave her body and collapsed, but she was able to catch herself before her head fell to the ground. When she opened her eyes again, Yue was still in the same place, not in the Spirit World.

For one dreadful moment, Yue was terrified that it hadn't worked, but then the koi in Iroh's hands began to glow even brighter than before. Yue took the koi from Iroh and quickly placed it back in the pond. The warm light filled the entire pond, and as Yue caught sight of her reflection, she realized she was changing. Transfixed, Yue watched as her eyes and hair turned their natural brown color. "What..."

Before Yue could form a proper question, the light gathered in the center of the pool and rose above it. There was a blinding flash, and when Yue could see again, a white-haired woman was floating above the pond's surface, smiling warmly down at her.

“Hello, Yue.” Her voice sounded like silver.

“Tui?” The moon spirit smiled and nodded. Everyone else at the oasis had the good sense not to interrupt.

“I- I don’t understand,” Yue stammered. “I thought that- that without you, I would- die.”

“That was indeed true when you were but a babe,” Tui replied, “but look at you now. You have grown stronger and braver than anyone could have imagined. You no longer need my spirit within you to live.”

“But my father,” Yue stuttered, “he- he had a vision, the night I was born-“

“It is true, I gave your father a vision of you becoming the new moon spirit,” Tui said, putting a finger on her chin. “It seemed to be the only possible future. And it was never because you were not strong enough to survive- it was because I was. I believed it was my destiny to be destroyed by that man, and it was your destiny to replace me.

“But a few short years ago, something changed. I saw a new future, one where both of us could survive. If I helped a certain human boy remain on the correct path, I could retain my position as the moon spirit and you could live the rest of your life as a human, as you were meant to. Your destiny is no longer tied to mine- you are free to shape it as you please.”

“So that means... you’re leaving me?” A confusing mix of conflicting emotions rose up in Yue as Tui looked at her fondly.

“Thank you for keeping me as part of you for so much of your life,” Tui said, smiling and cupping Yue’s cheek with a glowing hand. “I understand my blessing has been such a burden on your shoulders- but you were able to handle it with such grace and strength. Your mother is proud of you, dear Yue.” A single tear fell from Yue’s eye. “Go now, and live your life free of this burden. Go, and become the person you were always meant to be.”

With that, the spirit of Tui faded away, and the bright full moon reappeared in the sky above them. The koi fish in Iroh’s hands wriggled, and he gently set it back in the water.

The light of the full moon returned, and Sokka found himself reaching for his boomerang before he could even think about what he was doing. As he threw his boomerang at Zhao, Sokka thought back to the day his mother had been taken prisoner by the Fire Nation. He remembered what his father had said to the Fire Nation soldier with Kya before knocking out the soldier with a single punch, then being knocked out himself. As Sokka’s boomerang hit its mark, he found himself repeating the wise words of his father on that day.

“That’s my *wife* , you bitch!!”

So maybe it wasn’t exactly what Sokka had meant to say. It got the message across, though.

Sokka ran to Zuko, not even bothering to catch his boomerang as it came back to him. “Lee? Lee, c’mon, you have to get up,” Sokka whispered, gently shaking Zuko. But Zuko didn’t

react to his voice or even his touch- he just kept looking upwards with a terrified look in his eyes. “We have to get out of here-“

“You’re not going anywhere,” Zhao snarled, evidently having recovered from Sokka’s boomerang hitting him. Sokka started to regret not catching his boomerang, as it was now lying in the snow behind Zhao. Sokka needed a weapon- but suddenly realized he had two.

Sokka pulled Zuko’s dao swords off of the sheath on his back and, with a deep breath, turned to face Zhao. As he stared down the man that had tortured Zuko, terrorized him, Aang, and Katara as they travelled north, and who was the reason Zuko had left the South Pole the first time, Sokka felt rage burning in him with an intensity he’d never felt before.

“You know you can’t win against me.” Despite the swirling, chaotic anger inside him, Sokka knew Zhao was right. These swords were heavier than the ones Sokka was used to and sat awkwardly in his hands. Even with his practice in the past month or so, Sokka wasn’t anywhere near the swordsman Zuko was- it would take him years to catch up, if he could catch up at all. Zhao may have been no match for Zuko, but Sokka knew he couldn’t compete with someone who could create fire with their mind (even though Zuko said he could.)

“I know,” Sokka said simply, “but I can at least make you hurt.” Raising one of his swords, Sokka narrowed his eyes and said, “I’ll die before I let you take him again.”

But before Sokka or Zhao could make another move, a sharp shard of ice whizzed past Sokka’s ear and ripped straight through the center of Zhao’s chest. Sokka whipped around to see who had shot the ice, then gaped at his mother as she calmly walked towards Zhao.

“You know, Ursa was kind enough to give you another chance after you hurt her son,” Kya said in the icy tone she only had when she was truly furious. “Unfortunately for you, I don’t believe in second chances. Not for disgusting creatures like you.”

Kya grabbed Zhao by the armor and dragged him over to a nearby bridge, where Sokka assumed she was going to throw him in the canal below to drown. But before Kya could get a chance to, the water came to her. A giant hand erupted from the water, grabbed Zhao, and dragged him into the depths below.

“Uh,” Sokka said, trying to fill the sudden silence. He pointed up to the sky. “Moon’s back.”

Kya ran over to him with a loud cry of, “Sokka!” Immediately, she started looking over Sokka, searching for any injuries. “Are you hurt? What were you thinking, trying to take that man on by yourself? Put those swords down, they’re dangerous!”

“Mom,” Sokka groaned, “Stop being such a mom.”

(Part of Sokka didn’t want her to stop. He’d missed her more than he ever realized.)

“Sokka, I’m never going to stop being-“

“Shut up!” Kya and Sokka stared in surprise at Zuko, whose outburst had seemingly come out of nowhere.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Zuko said. Then he pointed somewhere behind Sokka and Kya and said, “I was talking to *him* .”

KYA!!!! HAVE I EVER MENTIONED HOW MUCH I LOVE KYA BEING A BAMF!!!!!!!!!!!! GET HIS ASS KYA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

...that being said, you may be wondering what's gonna happen now because sokka and yue are obviously on the path to a relationship, but this is listed as a zukka fic. i'm of the belief that even if yue had lived, she and sokka wouldn't have worked out together anyway. for more on that, you'll have to read the next book!

ZHAO'S DEAD!!! YEAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!

Meltdown

Chapter Notes

cw: hallucinations, mental illness, depictions of mental illness that aren't entirely correct for plot convenience (more on this in the end notes),

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

Sokka turned to look where Zuko was pointing, but no one was there. Sokka let out something between a laugh and a sigh in relief and said, “Man, you can’t scare me like that...” He trailed off as he saw Zuko wince.

“Stop talking at the same time, would you? All three of you know I hate that.” Sokka and Kya looked at each other, then at the empty spot Zuko was looking at, then back at Zuko.

“Lee,” Kya said slowly, “who do you think is here right now?”

“You, Kya,” Zuko said, pointing at her. His finger moved towards Sokka. “Sokka.” Zuko’s finger moved to the space between Kya and Sokka. “And the other Sokka.”

In a concerned voice, Kya started, “There’s only one Sokka here-“

“Don’t you think I know that?! I know you think I’m stupid, and incompetent, and worthless,” Zuko hissed, making Kya and Sokka look at each other in surprise, “but even I’m not dumb enough to think there’s actually two Sokkas here!”

“No one said you were any of those things,” Sokka said, holding his hands up placatingly.

“He did,” Zuko said, accusingly jabbing a finger at the empty space where the alleged second Sokka was. “And I know you two have thought it.” Zuko’s shoulders slumped forwards slightly, and when he spoke again, his voice was tinged with sadness instead of anger. “How could you not have? It’s kinda true...”

“What? No, that’s not true at all!” If Sokka hadn’t been so shocked by Zuko’s statement, he would have said the same thing his mother did.

“No, no, you’re lying,” Zuko said, wringing his hands. “Sokka’s right.” Zuko gestured to the empty space between Sokka and Kya.

“And what’s he- er, I- saying?”

“He’s saying that’s why everyone’s become so distant from me. That they knew I’d fail to prepare the Northern Water Tribe for the invasion. That... everybody is disappointed in me.”

This was starting to get a little ridiculous. “Come on, you can’t really believe that,” Sokka huffed. “You did everything you could-“

“It wasn’t enough! Does this look like I succeeded to you?!” Zuko gestured wildly around at the wreckage surrounding them. Large, still-flaming boulders were lodged in craters in the ground, and many of the houses around them were little more than ice shards and puddles. “If I had just been better, none of this would have happened. Hahn wouldn’t have died, this invasion wouldn’t have happened, you wouldn’t have had to rescue me from Zhao, you wouldn’t have realized how pathetic I am, you would- you would still care-“ Zuko was shivering, rubbing his hands along the sleeves of his parka, but Sokka doubted it was from the cold.

“You’re not making any sense,” Sokka said nervously. “Of course I still care about y-“

“THEN WHY ARE YOU LEAVING ME?!” The flames around the three of them flared up into bright white columns that faded just as quickly as they rose. Zuko fell to the ground, squeezing himself tightly and rocking back and forth. His whole body shook as he fought back tears.

“Mom,” Sokka whispered, “can you go find Nattiq, please?” Maybe Zhao had hit Zuko’s head really hard while they were fighting. Or the fire near Zuko’s face had somehow gotten into his brain, making him act like this. There had to be *something* making Zuko act like this, Sokka figured, something physical that could be fixed. Nattiq had fixed Zuko when Sokka thought he was beyond hope before- surely he could fix Zuko now.

The last thing Kya wanted to do was leave Zuko while he was in this state, but she could sense that Sokka needed some time to talk to Zuko alone. Besides, she realized that Zuko could have some sort of injury, so it was best to go get someone who could help him physically. And with Zuko as confused as he was, maybe it was better if she left so there was less going on around Zuko.

Kya gave Sokka a tight squeeze on the shoulder, then she was gone. Cautiously, Sokka approached Zuko, slowly kneeling down in the snow next to him.

“I thought,” Zuko said quietly, then swallowed hard. “I thought that. That maybe if I could prove how strong I was... if I pushed myself beyond my limits, that maybe. Maybe you would think I was worth something again.” Sokka took a moment to truly look at Zuko. Zuko looked absolutely exhausted- there was a dark circle under his good eye, and both his eyes were bloodshot. His face looked thinner than Sokka thought it was. And yet, despite how tired Zuko looked, he was stiff as a board, tensed up as his eyes darted around.

“Zuko.” Sokka gently took the prince’s hands in his own. It had been a while since he’d called Zuko by his true name- he’d forgotten how natural it felt, and how nice the name was to say. “I never... I thought you...” Sokka sighed and shook his head. “You think I would just... abandon you if I thought you were weak? Why would you think that?” Sokka was expecting Zuko to get angry with him, to accuse him of something he didn’t say or do.

He wasn’t expecting Zuko to look at him, heartbroken, and say, “That’s what everyone does.”

Before Sokka could think about what he was doing and whether it was what Zuko needed or not, Sokka was hugging Zuko tightly. “Zuko,” Sokka whispered, rubbing Zuko’s back with a hand, “oh, Zuko. That... that was never the reason.”

Zuko froze. The other Sokka, the one Zuko believed to be real, tried to rip Zuko away from the Sokka hugging him, but his hands passed straight through Zuko. “He can’t touch me. He’s not real,” Zuko realized. The fake Sokka faded away, and Zuko tentatively wrapped his arms around the Sokka hugging him. “You’re... real? But why...”

“I’m sorry I’ve been so distant,” Sokka said softly. “I didn’t think you noticed because you were so preoccupied with the invasion preparations-“

“Of course I noticed,” Zuko said, pulling out of the hug so he could look at Sokka. “I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to come off as desperate and clingy. I’m not great with people, but even I know that drives people away.”

Sokka was about to say something, but Zuko’s eyes widened in horror as he looked behind Sokka. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Why is *he* here?!” Zuko scrambled to his feet to face whoever he saw, but when Sokka followed Zuko’s gaze, nobody was there.

“Zuko, there’s no one-“

“I’m not scared of you,” Zuko said, looking more scared than Sokka had ever seen him. He was paler than usual, he was trembling all over- Sokka had to wonder if Zuko was going to wet himself. “I- I won’t let you hurt him!”

Zuko closed his eyes and flinched, covering his face with his hands. After a minute or so of nothing happening, Zuko’s good eye opened slightly. His hands dropped to his sides, but didn’t relax as Zuko scanned the area around him.

“There’s no one else here, Zuko,” Sokka said, struggling to keep his voice level. “It’s just us.” Zuko looked around once more before his eyes settled on Sokka.

“Sokka, what’s happening to me?” Zuko’s voice quivered slightly.

“I-“ Sokka’s voice broke, and he took a deep breath before continuing, “I don’t know, but I promise I’ll help you figure it out.” Sokka glanced at the bridge, which still had Zhao’s bloodstains on it, and realized this might not be the best place for Zuko to be currently. Taking one of his mittens off, Sokka wrote a quick message in the snow for his mom to see, then offered his hand to Zuko, who was still looking around with a dazed expression. “Let’s get out of here.”

“...Okay.” Zuko hesitated before taking Sokka’s hand, but once he did, he wasn’t letting go. Zuko squeezed Sokka’s hand tightly as he led him through the streets of the North Pole, trying his best to ignore the voices and people Sokka didn’t seem to hear or see.

As Sokka led Zuko to his mom's igloo, he tried to think of what he could possibly do to help Zuko. He'd never seen someone's mind break like this before. That alone was terrifying enough, but the fact that it was Sokka's best friend, the one Sokka thought could endure anything...

But his mind isn't broken, Sokka thought as he led Zuko inside Kya's igloo and sat him down near the remains of a fire. Thankfully, the small area the South Pole tribespeople resided in had come out of the siege relatively unscathed. Even the kettle of cloudberry tea Kya had been making earlier that night had remained intact, despite everything. Sokka looked at Zuko, then back at the kettle, then back to Zuko. If the stupid tea kettle hadn't broken during the siege, surely Zuko's mind couldn't have, right?

As he gazed at Zuko, Sokka was again struck by how exhausted he looked. Even with all the nervous energy Zuko had right now, Sokka doubted he would be awake for much longer simply because his body seemed ready to collapse.

Sokka remembered hearing once that sleep deprivation could cause hallucinations, so maybe that was all that was wrong with Zuko. Maybe he just needed a good sleep and he'd be back to normal. That, Sokka knew, was something he could help Zuko with. Feeling somewhat hopeful, Sokka reached for a small sealskin pouch on one of his mother's shelves, opened it to make sure it was what he wanted, then dumped a liberal amount of the powder inside into one of the teacups. He casually stirred it up until a noise came from behind him.

He turned to see Zuko, still sitting right where Sokka had left him, looking at him with wide eyes. Sokka had forgotten that Zuko was right behind him, watching as he drugged his tea.

For a moment, the two of them just stared at each other. Awkwardly, Sokka tried to laugh it off. "Uh--"

"Do you really think putting me to sleep will make this any better?" Hysteria was rising in Zuko's voice as tears welled up in his eyes. "I'm already seeing and hearing things- If I go to sleep now, I'm just going to have nightmares. And if you give me that, I won't be able to wake up. Sokka, don't do it, please don't do it..."

Sokka sighed and set the drugged cup of tea off to the side. He then poured Zuko a new cup of tea, making sure Zuko could see that he wasn't adding anything to the cup. Carrying the two cups, Sokka sat down on the bed and offered one to Zuko. "You need to drink."

Zuko stared at him in surprise. "You... listened to me?"

It was hard for Sokka not to take personal offense from this. His first instinct was to reply *Why wouldn't I*, but Sokka bit back his words and let them die on his tongue. He reminded himself that, for a long time, Zuko had lived in an environment where he wasn't listened to, where his needs weren't met. The memory Zuko had shown him, Iluak, and Nattiq the night they arrived at the North Pole came to mind, and Sokka tried not to flinch as he remembered how Zuko had begged for his life only to be thrown inside the cooler without a second thought from Zhao. As Sokka looked at Zuko, he wondered if the prince was as scared now as he'd been back then. He certainly looked like it.

“Yeah, I did,” Sokka whispered, gently taking Zuko’s hand. “You really need to sleep, Zuko, but I won’t make you do anything you’re not ready for. You know what’s going on in your head better than I do.”

“But I don’t know what’s going on,” Zuko said, “that’s the problem.” He took the teacup in his hands with a sigh and stared down at the liquid inside. Within a few seconds, the tea was steaming again. “Do you want me to warm yours, too?”

“You don’t have to,” Sokka said quickly, making Zuko roll his eyes and take the other teacup from him. When Zuko handed it back to him, the tea was piping hot. “Thanks.”

“Shut up,” Zuko whispered. Sokka looked over at him and he said, “Not talking to you, Sokka.”

“Who is it this time?” Zuko closed his eyes.

“My mother,” he said after a beat of silence. “She’s... not very pleased with me. Don’t worry, I already know it isn’t real.”

“Hey, that’s progress,” Sokka said, trying to be optimistic. Zuko gave him a withering look.

“She’s been dead for years, Sokka. It’s not that hard to tell.” Zuko took a sip of his tea, then sighed loudly. “I’ve heard of people having hallucinations before, but I never thought they’d be so... real.” He pointed to the icy table in front of him and said, “I can see my mother sitting right there in the place your mom likes to sit. She looks just like when I last saw her. Her shadow is on the wall, and I can even see where her footprints are disturbing that thin layer of snow on the floor.”

“...You’re awfully calm about this,” Sokka said, not knowing how to respond to what Zuko just said.

“It’s not so bad right now,” Zuko replied. “She’s the only one there, and she was always soft-spoken. She’s not screaming at me or trying to attack me, and I know for sure that she can’t be real. Sure, she’s saying she’s disappointed in me and that kind of hurts, but... it’s nice, seeing her again. It’s a relief that I still know what her face looked like, what her voice sounded like, that kind of stuff. I think... I think the hardest part of this hallucination will be... when it disappears.”

“I won’t disappear.” Sokka extended his hand halfway between himself and Zuko, giving Zuko the space to decide when or if he wanted Sokka’s touch. “For as long as you need me with you, I’ll be here. And then when you need time alone, I’ll give it to you. I won’t judge you or take it the wrong way- I know you just need to be alone sometimes, and that’s perfectly fine. I want you to feel better, Zuko, and I’ll do whatever you need to make that happen.”

Before Sokka knew what was happening, Zuko had dropped his cup of tea and buried his face in Sokka’s chest. His chest heaved as he fought back tears. “I- I can’t do this,” he choked out. “Sokka, I can’t- it’s too much, everything’s too much-“

“Zuko, it’s okay,” Sokka whispered, “it’s gonna be okay-“

“No it’s not,” Zuko said, pulling away from Sokka suddenly. “It won’t be okay. Not for me.” These brief moments of clarity Zuko seemed to be having were quite jarring to Sokka, but at least that meant Zuko was getting better. Hopefully. “Sokka, do you really think I’m going to survive this war?”

The question caught Sokka completely off guard. “Huh?”

“I can’t hide from the Fire Nation forever. When they find out I’m alive, do you really think they’ll just leave me alone? My father likes to make examples of traitors, to have them publicly tortured before they’re carted off to prison or executed. He already hated me enough to want me killed without knowing I was a traitor. He’s going to make an example of me, and he’s going to enjoy it.”

“But- but wouldn’t people realize that’s wrong? Wouldn’t people think it’s too extreme of him to hurt his own son, and step in to help you?”

“They didn’t last time,” Zuko said, a faraway look in his eyes. Zuko couldn’t see his mother anymore, but a small, whimpering figure had appeared on the ground in front of him. Zuko looked away from it and said, “And I can’t stay anywhere else, either, because I’m the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation. Most people see me as a threat, but the more powerful Earth Kingdom generals would want to use me as a bargaining chip. They’d try to trade me to my father to get something in return, but my father wouldn’t want me back. He wouldn’t give them anything.”

The whimpering and begging had been growing steadily louder, but now it was too loud to ignore. Zuko turned on the tiny figure kneeling in front of him and shouted, “Would you shut up already?! Father’s not going to forgive you, you stupid brat!” The hatred and disgust that had been bubbling up inside Zuko for a long, long time finally boiled over as he watched his younger self beg and plead for mercy. “Agni, you’re unbearable! It’s no wonder no one ever wants to stay with you, you pathetic piece of-“

“Zuko, stop!” Zuko barely heard Sokka’s horrified cry over the sounds of his own sobs.

“I’m sorry,” the thirteen-year-old Zuko wailed, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“I should burn your face off myself,” Zuko snarled, stepping forwards.

Sokka hadn’t realized who Zuko was talking to at first, but now it was unmistakable. He jumped in front of Zuko, stopping him from advancing on the hallucination. “Stop it, Zuko!”

“Stop trying to protect me, Sokka! I deserve this!” Even before Sokka could say anything, uncertainty filled Zuko’s eyes. “I- I deserved it, right? Didn’t I deserve all of this?”

“Zuko…” Sokka gently took the prince’s non-flaming hand in both of his own.

“I had to have done something to deserve all of this.” All of the anger was gone from Zuko’s voice, having been replaced by confusion and pain and hurt.

“Zuko,” Sokka said. His voice was quiet but firm. “There’s nothing you possibly could have done to deserve what’s happened to you. *Nobody* deserves to suffer the way you have.”

Zuko collapsed against Sokka again, this time sobbing uncontrollably. Carefully, Sokka sat back down on the bed with Zuko, holding him close. Sokka gently rubbed Zuko’s back as he came undone, clinging to Sokka tightly as he cried. It occurred to Sokka that this was the first time he’d seen Zuko cry, *really* cry, in years. “It’s okay, Zuko,” Sokka breathed, “let it all out. You’re safe here.”

“I’m scared,” Zuko wailed, “I’m really, really-“ The rest of Zuko’s sentence was swallowed up by hysteric gasps and sobs.

“I’m here,” Sokka murmured, “I’m here. I’m not letting go. And Zuko, you’ll always have a home in the South Pole. I don’t care if I have to build you an igloo brick by brick in the freezing cold. I’ll make sure you always have a place there.” Sokka rested his chin on Zuko’s shoulder and sighed, basking in the warmth radiating from Zuko. “I’ll take care of you, and you’ll take care of me, just like we always have.”

It occurred to Zuko then that he loved Sokka. Nobody else made him feel safe the way Sokka did, nor did anyone understand him like Sokka did. Sokka always took care of Zuko when he couldn’t take care of himself, and though Zuko would never admit it, he liked when Sokka took care of him. Zuko knew he was in love with Sokka because there was simply nothing else this emotion could possibly be.

It made part of Zuko hurt, because Zuko knew Sokka was in love with Yue and would never feel the same way about him. But for now, surrounded by Sokka’s warmth, Zuko couldn’t force himself to be too bothered by it.

After some indeterminate amount of time, Sokka heard muffled voices outside. He tapped Zuko on the back, and Zuko pulled away from him, quickly wiping his eyes with a hand. Zuko’s other hand took Sokka’s as Kya and Nattiq stepped into the igloo.

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Nattiq,” Sokka said, partially so Zuko knew they weren’t hallucinations. “Mom, did you tell Nattiq what’s going on?”

“Yes,” Kya replied. She took note of how tense Zuko was as he sat next to Sokka, how his eyes were staring at nothing, and how tightly the firebender was clinging to Sokka’s hand and added, “I’m guessing things got worse while I was gone?”

“Well, yeah, but they also kinda got better.” Nattiq sat down next to Zuko, but the prince gave no sign of noticing. After giving Zuko a little nudge to make sure he knew that Nattiq was there, Sokka continued, “There’s moments when he’s here and with it, but then all of a sudden it’s like his mind is somewhere else. But even when he’s aware, his thoughts are all over the place and he’s saying things that don’t make sense.”

Nattiq frowned and pulled away from Zuko, putting his healing water back in his pouch. When Kya had told Nattiq that Sokka found Zuko lying on the ground stunned after a fight and immediately afterwards he’d started to hallucinate, Nattiq had assumed Zuko had been

hit in the head, but there was no sign of any physical trauma that would cause what Kya had described.

“...Lee, how much have you been sleeping?” Zuko tensed up and squeezed Sokka’s hand instead of answering.

“It’s okay,” Sokka encouraged, running his thumb along the back of Zuko’s hand, “you can tell him. Nattiq’s just trying to help you. He needs the most accurate information you can give so he can diagnose you right, okay? None of us are gonna be mad at you for what you say.”

“...Promise?” It was little more than a whisper.

Sokka looked to Kya, who nodded. “I promise,” he replied.

After a pause, Zuko looked off to the side and murmured, “The most sleep a night I’ve gotten since we came here was four hours. On average, though, it’s been about half that.”

Fighting hard to keep his expression neutral, Sokka turned to Nattiq. “So that must be it, right? He’s hallucinating because he hasn’t been sleeping?”

Nattiq’s eyes narrowed slightly as he rested his chin on a hand. “Lee, have you been taking care of yourself otherwise? Eating, drinking, bathing, that kind of stuff,” he clarified.

“Well, no,” Zuko said, shifting suddenly, “but it’s not like I’ve had time for those kinds of things with the invasion looming over us.” All of a sudden, Zuko was agitated again. “I shouldn’t have taken as many breaks as I did. I should have slept less, eaten less, been out helping the tribespeople train more-“

In a reassuring voice, Kya said, “You did the best you could.”

“No I didn’t,” Zuko replied without hesitation. “If I had done more, I could have saved more people.” With this, Zuko stood and started to pace. “It’s my fault the tribespeople are dead,” he lamented, “because I didn’t train them as much as I could have-“

“Zuko, I don’t think you could have done anything more for them,” Sokka said. “I mean, you’ve clearly pushed yourself past your breaking point.”

“But that’s the thing!” Zuko stopped suddenly, turning so he could face Sokka. Sokka stared at him blankly. “I could have done more for them, but I didn’t!” Before Sokka, Kya, or Nattiq could protest, Zuko added, “And I’m not just saying that- I had a reason not to. I didn’t teach them everything I could on purpose.”

“Zuko-“

“Don’t you realize it’s my people you’re out there fighting?! Because of me, people from my home are dying!” Zuko took a deep breath and said, “I know it’s easy for you to see the Fire Nation as your enemy- they’ve taken so much from each of you- but it’s not that simple for me. I have a duty to protect them, but instead I’m teaching their enemies how to take them down.” He sat down right on the floor and looked down at the snow. “Everyone that died in

this siege was killed by me, either because I didn't train the tribesmen enough or I trained them too well."

Sokka wanted to comfort Zuko somehow, but he had absolutely no clue how to respond to that. He looked to Kya for guidance, only to find her in a similar situation.

Unsure of what to say as well but wanting to say *something*, Nattiq decided to share his thoughts on Zuko's condition. "I think you might have, uh..." Nattiq hesitated for a beat, wondering if he'd made the right call telling the group this now. Realizing he couldn't leave the others without an answer now, he finished, "...psychosis."

Zuko stared at Nattiq for a while. "...I guess you could say that," Zuko finally said, "but that's kind of harsh. You don't even know my sister."

"Wh- no, that's not what I- I said psychosis. One word, not two. It's a mental condition," Nattiq explained, noticing Sokka and Kya's confused expressions as well. "Psychosis makes people hallucinate and believe things that, well... most other people don't. It's not usually permanent, especially if it's treated."

"So you can heal him," Sokka said, relieved.

Nattiq winced. "Not exactly. If I don't have to, I prefer not to mess with the brain because it's such a sensitive area. Even if you manage to 'fix' one thing in one part of it, you can completely mess up another area with even the slightest mistake. I could accidentally make Lee lose some of his memories, change his personality, lose mobility... it's a risk I'm not willing to take, especially since I know his brain is fine."

"If my brain was fine, my sister wouldn't be sitting next to you right now," Zuko said matter-of-factly. Sokka found Zuko's supposed calmness a little unnerving.

"What I meant was that you don't have any sort abnormal growth in your brain, like a tumor or something. I checked for that when I removed the poison from you a few weeks ago, and something like that doesn't grow this fast. If I thought a tumor was a possibility, that's the only reason I'd consider trying to heal your head."

"So what, you're just going to leave him like this?!" Zuko flinched slightly as Sokka raised his voice, and Sokka immediately forced himself to be calm. "There has to be something you can do for him. It hasn't been super bad while you've been here yet, but... he's suffering. A lot." Zuko gently took Sokka's hand, as if Sokka was the one who needed to be reassured. Sokka felt a lump growing in his throat and looked away. "It just came on so suddenly..."

"Did it though?" Sokka looked up in surprise at Kya's question. "I've seen psychosis once before- when I was young, one of our elders suffered from it. Her episodes seemed random at first, but the other elders soon discovered a pattern. She would start to become suspicious of everyone around her, despite being around her tribe, and she would spend much more time alone than usual." Kya's eyes traveled to Zuko as she continued, "But she would also believe that she was to blame for things out of her control. When Hakoda, Bato, and I would sneak out for an adventure in the middle of the night, sometimes she would be out there because she

couldn't sleep. She would pull herself away from her family and friends, and she wouldn't take care of herself."

"Some people also report having trouble concentrating," Nattiq added. "Sometimes they spread themselves too thin bouncing around multiple projects because they can't focus on just one thing. They can be over-emotional at times, and not emotional at all other times."

Sokka felt sick to his stomach as he said, "So he's been showing signs this whole time and I didn't notice?"

Immediately, Kya was by Sokka's side, making Zuko flinch slightly and scoot away. "It's not your fault, sweetie. None of us noticed it." Kya looked at Zuko as she said, "The best thing we can do now is help him through this instead of dwelling on what we could have done."

"Sokka?" Zuko tugged Sokka's sleeve and whispered, "I want to go to sleep now."

"Nattiq, is it okay if he goes to sleep?" Nattiq seemed preoccupied by his own thoughts, but he nodded. "Alright, come on." Sokka grabbed the mug of drugged tea in one hand and took Zuko's hand in his other, then led Zuko back to his little room in the igloo. As Zuko took a seat on Sokka's pile of sleeping bags and blankets, Sokka handed him the tea. He watched as Zuko warmed the drink with his hands, but noticed Zuko's hesitation to take a sip. Zuko seemed like he wanted to say something, but Sokka knew better than to rush him.

"...Please stay with me." Zuko's voice was so small, yet so desperate. It made Sokka's heart ache.

"Of course," Sokka said, settling in next to Zuko. "There's nothing in the world that could make me leave your side right now." As Zuko gingerly took a sip of the tea, Sokka added, "If my mom came in here and told me my dad was outside right now, I still wouldn't leave you. Not even the Koi-zilla Aang just turned into could make me go."

"Koi-zilla?" Zuko actually cracked a smile and it made Sokka's heart sing.

"Yeah, 'cause it was a big old koi fish. Which honestly isn't the scariest thing I've ever seen. You know how many fish I've caught over the years?"

Zuko took another big sip of his tea and said, "Bet you've never caught anything as big as my first catch, though."

"Your first and *only* catch," Sokka reminded him. "And really, it was my parents and Bato's catch too, since all three of them had to help you reel it in."

"Mm, but I got it on the line, so it was my catch." With a final gulp, Zuko finished off his tea. He set the cup on an ice shelf and laid down in the sleeping bag. With a yawn, he added, "People couldn't think of that fish without thinking of me."

"I guess that's true." With a small smile, Sokka pulled out the small knife he usually kept on his belt. It wasn't nearly as useful as his jawbone knife, but it was just as important to him. "You know, this knife is made from the bones of that fish."

Zuko looked up at Sokka. “Really?”

“Yeah. The hilt of it is.” As Zuko’s sleepy eyes passed over the knife, Sokka said, “My dad gave this to me for my first birthday after you left. I’ve kept it with me ever since.”

“I wish I could have stayed with you,” Zuko murmured. It seemed like he was going to say something else, but before he could, Sokka realized he had fallen asleep.

“Yeah,” Sokka sighed, stroking Zuko’s hair, “me too.”

Some time after Zuko fell asleep, Kya found herself struggling to keep her eyes open. She had checked on the boys a few times, always finding Zuko sound asleep and Sokka sitting there, looking down at Zuko with all the sadness of the world in his eyes. She could tell that Sokka needed time alone to process his emotions before he would be able to talk about them, so she left him alone for the most part, only checking in every so often to let him know she was there if he needed her. Nattiq had left soon after he knew Zuko was asleep, as many more people would need Nattiq’s services tonight.

So Kya was left alone with her thoughts, and her mother’s guilt. For those long, long years she spent in prison and the years following in the North Pole, what kept Kya going was the thought of her home, of Katara and Sokka, of Hakoda and Bato, and all the others she had been taken from. Only on occasion would she think about the young firebender who had lived with her for a short few months, and she had always assumed he was safe and well taken care of in the Fire Nation. There was no reason for her to think that Iroh and Ursa couldn’t protect him from his father, so when Sokka mentioned how he, Katara, and Aang had found the prince on their travels, Kya was shocked. To her horror, she realized she hadn’t thought about Zuko in months, and she swore then that she would do better for him.

But she hadn’t. She had been so concerned with Sokka, Katara, and even Aang, who all (to some extent) wore their hearts on their sleeves and were so much more open about how their travels had affected them, that she had let Zuko fall through the cracks. Zuko had some trouble expressing his emotions in words as a child, but it had been easy enough to learn how to read him. She mistakenly thought Zuko would be the same after all these years- she couldn’t have been more wrong. Zuko had successfully hidden his emotions until he had reached his breaking point, and *no one* had noticed.

Kya was so lost in her own thoughts that she didn’t hear footsteps approaching her until she spotted a figure at the door of the igloo. She looked up to see General Iroh looking at her.

He quickly held up his hands to signal that he had no ill intentions and said, “I am not here to harm anyone. I sensed my nephew here and-”

To Iroh’s surprise, Kya lunged towards him and hugged him tightly. “Oh Iroh,” she sobbed, “I- I failed him, I-“

Iroh hugged Kya back for a few minutes, then guided her back to her chair. “Tell me what happened,” he said calmly.

So Kya did. Kya told him everything- she told him about her time in the Fire Nation prison, her time in the North Pole, and of course everything that had happened with Zuko. Some of this she hadn't shared with anyone, but Iroh was just so easy to talk to that it all came spilling out of her.

After a few moments of quiet once Kya was done, she looked at Iroh and said, "I'm sorry, I know you didn't come here to see me." She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. "He's asleep right now, but when he wakes--"

"I am not sure I can wait for so long," Iroh murmured, frowning at the sky outside. "I doubt the Northern Water Tribe would be pleased to discover me here. Besides, the hallucinations you mentioned my nephew having were all of his family. Seeing me may cause him to suffer more."

"But... aren't you going to take him with you?"

Sadness filled Iroh's eyes. "There is nothing I wish I could do more," he said, "but I cannot. When my brother learns of my treachery, I will be hunted by the Fire Nation. I will be in danger for a little while, but I have some old friends I can reconnect with. They will help me disappear, and my brother will soon shift his focus to more glorious pursuits. However, if I am seen traveling with a young man with a scar on his face, word will reach the Firelord. I have no doubt he will piece together that Prince Zuko is alive if he is seen with me. And when he does, he will stop at nothing to have Prince Zuko killed."

Kya blinked, then said, "But the Fire Nation has been trying to kill the Avatar since he's been back, right? Surely Le- Zuko would be able to handle whatever the Fire Nation has to throw at him."

"The Avatar is not a threat to my brother- not yet, at least. Reputation is very, very important to him, and the Avatar offers Ozai an opportunity. He wishes for the Avatar to be captured and brought to him so he can end the Avatar Cycle permanently, cementing his position in Fire Nation history for decades to come. But Prince Zuko is a threat to his reputation, not an opportunity. Any member of the Fire Nation military will be instructed to kill him on sight. And this time, my brother will want proof that he is truly dead." Iroh sighed and stood up, peeking inside the room where Sokka and Zuko were.

Kya followed him to find that Sokka had fallen asleep sitting up. He still had one hand entwined in Zuko's hair while the other protectively rested on Zuko's arm.

"It is my responsibility to keep him safe," Iroh whispered. "Even though it is the most difficult thing in the world for me to walk away, I know that I must."

Kya squeezed Iroh's shoulder as a tear slipped down his cheek. "We'll take care of him, I promise."

"I know." That didn't make it any easier, though.

So Iroh took one last look at his sleeping nephew and left, forcing himself to take step after agonizing step through the cold snow of the North Pole.

Chapter End Notes

ZUKO REALIZED!!!!!! HE REALIZED HE'S IN LOVE!!!!!!! FINALLY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
if only it was under better circumstances...

i meant to publish the chapter earlier but life happened and would not stop happening. this past semester was an absolute mess and even though this isn't the longest chapter i've ever written, i had to do a lot of research for it. also i got a job!! i'm going to be part of a production team for a podcast!!

*from the pre-chapter notes: for plot reasons, zuko's hallucinations are his family members and he can tell what's a hallucination and what isn't (at times). in reality, psychosis is not usually like this! hallucinations can be of things/people you haven't seen or heard before, and audio hallucinations are reported to be the most common type. also, it's generally not a good idea to tell someone suffering from psychosis that they are hallucinating. this is because their brain is genuinely reacting as if there is some sort of external stimulus there even though it isn't, so it seems VERY real. one of the videos i encountered during my research did a good job of explaining this, i think: it said that telling someone experiencing psychosis that they're hallucinating is like telling someone who can clearly see their cat sitting in front of them that their cat is NOT sitting in front of them. in the end, it usually just causes more confusion and frustration for someone suffering from a condition that is already super disorienting and usually pretty scary. also, the signs that i wrote that precede psychosis are a few of the more common ones, but certainly not the only ones. if you think someone you know is exhibiting signs of psychosis, you should talk to a doctor as soon as possible! early intervention really helps with the treatment of psychosis. finally, i forget if this is actually in the chapter or not (at one point i know it was, but i might have taken it out in editing), but psychosis is much more of a symptom than an illness itself. psychosis can be caused by extreme stress (looks at zuko), lack of sleep (looks at zuko again), traumatic incidents (once again looks at zuko), drug use, or an underlying mental condition.

fun fact, the part where they're talking about zuko catching a fish is a reference to a deleted chapter from the previous fic! the chapter was called zuko's big catch

thanks for reading! <3 ONLY ONE MORE CHAPTER THEN I CAN MOVE ON TO BOOK 2!!!

Departure

Chapter Notes

WE DID IT EVERYONE!!!!!! and before my birthday (sun 8/21), too!

for info about my plan for the future of this series, see the end notes!

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

When the dust settled, forty-one Northern Water tribespeople were gone.

The number had initially been higher, but several people had found their way back or had been found by their fellow tribespeople in the search parties sent out after the invasion. The search parties had discovered some bodies, too, but a few people remained missing, forever lost in the snow or ocean.

It took Zuko a few days to be able to see people again, but when he did, he immediately noticed how differently they treated him. Warriors would come up to him and thank him, telling him how one of the techniques he taught had saved their lives. The warriors' families would gaze at him with tear-filled eyes and thank him for saving their sons, or their brothers, or their husbands or fathers. Tribe elders and waterbenders would take his hands and look into his eyes and tell him he had saved them all by saving the moon spirit. People regarded him with a reverence they didn't have before, a reverence he didn't deserve.

"But you *do* deserve it," Sokka had replied when Zuko told him about it a week after the siege.

"Forty-one people will never return," Zuko said, looking down at his feet. "And countless more Fire Nation soldiers won't return to their homes and families."

"That's true," Sokka said carefully, "but try and think about how many innocent people you saved. The Fire Nation came here with the intent of destroying the Northern Water Tribe. They wouldn't have just killed the warriors- if they had their way, they would have killed the healers, the elders- even them." Sokka pointed at a few kids playing at a nearby fountain.

“Zhao and his soldiers didn’t come here looking for a fair fight. You helped level the playing field.”

Zuko found that he couldn’t argue with that, so he decided to move on to something else that bothered him. “But people are saying I saved the moon spirit.”

Sokka had frowned and said, “Don’t try to convince me you didn’t. I literally saw you do it.”

“Yes, I pushed Zhao’s hands out of the way, but the moon spirit would have still survived,” Zuko said, exasperated. “A couple days ago, Arnook told me he had a vision of Yue becoming the moon spirit one day, and Yue said Tui told her something similar. Even though Tui wouldn’t have survived, Yue would have become the new moon spirit.”

At this, Sokka had stopped to think, and Zuko thought he had him. “So maybe you didn’t save the moon spirit and preserve the balance of the whole world,” Sokka conceded. “If you hadn’t been there, the world might have gone on turning.” Then Sokka had looked at him and said, “But you saved Tui and you saved Yue, the current moon spirit and the Princess of the Northern Water Tribe. Maybe that’s what they respect you for.”

Zuko couldn’t come up with an argument for that. Stupid Sokka and his stupid good reasoning skills.

The Northern Water Tribe held some sort of ceremony for the dead. Zuko didn’t go. He didn’t feel welcome- not because of the tribe itself, but because he was still mourning the losses of their enemy. Also, it felt strange to go to a funeral where Zuko could still see the dead among the living.

Sokka didn’t go either. When Zuko asked him why, he’d expected Sokka to say something about how he didn’t want to leave Zuko alone. He was already starting to feel guilty when Sokka answered, “It’s because of Yue.”

“Yue?” Sokka nodded. “But... why wouldn’t she want you to be there? She would want her boyfriend’s support, right?”

With a wince, Sokka said, “That’s kinda the problem, actually. First off, I’m not her boyfriend. Not yet, anyway.”

Zuko rolled his eyes. Dating had always been confusing to him, but he just couldn’t understand why two people who so clearly liked each other weren’t in a relationship yet.

“Even though Yue never really liked Hahn, it’s not like she’s happy he’s gone. She needs time to mourn for Hahn without being confused by her feelings for me. I think she just needs some space.” That sounded way too thoughtful for Sokka, and Zuko found himself wondering if Kya had advised Sokka on this matter, but he kept his suspicions to himself. Sokka seemed awfully proud of himself and Zuko didn’t want to ruin his moment.

Kya had, in fact, helped Sokka to figure this out, but he had come to her already having his doubts about attending the mass funeral. It was so different from how Sokka was used to mourning back home. Sokka knew he could come off as disrespectful sometimes when he didn’t mean to be, and he didn’t want to offend any of the Northerners. Sure, their little group had a few problems at the beginning, but the Northern Water Tribe had been for the most part hospitable and willing to listen to them. Sokka didn’t want to seem ungrateful to the Northern Water Tribe, not after all they had done for him and his friends.

But he’d be lying if he said his hesitance to go to the ceremony wasn’t because of Zuko, too. Sokka knew not to tell him this, but Zuko was the biggest reason why he didn’t want to attend. He knew the funeral would be hard for Zuko even if he didn’t go because of his firmly held belief that those deaths were his fault. He knew that Zuko would be haunted by hallucinations during the funeral.

He also knew that if he had gone, somebody else would have stayed with Zuko. Sokka, Kya, and the *Unagi* crew had set up shifts to watch over Zuko and promised he would never be on his own for as long as this psychosis lasted. Sokka had wondered if it wouldn’t be best to give Zuko some space as that was what Zuko often needed to recover, but when Nattiq had told him about the risks of leaving a person with psychosis unattended, Sokka realized the last thing he wanted to do was leave Zuko alone. So Sokka took on the majority of the shifts, only leaving when he absolutely needed a break. He had sat through hours of Zuko screaming at him and accusing him of things he didn’t do and hours of Zuko sobbing uncontrollably, as silent and steady as Nattiq told him he needed to be. It was hard, but Sokka needed to do it. Although his mother and the other adults kept telling him it wasn’t his fault that this happened to Zuko, Sokka knew better. He was smart enough to know that it wasn’t entirely

his fault- after all, nobody else had seen this coming, either- but a big part of the blame fell on him. Sokka had pushed Zuko away knowing that he was the only one Zuko could talk to about anything, and for what? Because he wanted to impress Yue and seem cool to the other boys his age in the Northern Water Tribe?

Sokka had to remind himself that it had initially been because he was upset with Zuko, and for a good reason. Still, he didn't have to take it as far as he did.

So Sokka looked after Zuko because he felt it was his duty to, since he'd played a major role in putting Zuko in this condition. But there was something else, too.

It wasn't that Sokka didn't trust the others to look after Zuko- all of them clearly cared about him and Nattiq had told them how to look after a person suffering from psychosis. But it wasn't lost on Sokka that none of them noticed what Zuko was going through either, and nobody knew Zuko the way he did. When it came down to it, Sokka knew he was the best person to look after Zuko, and that didn't bother him one bit. Sokka didn't want to spend extended periods of time away from Zuko- and yet, as the days went on, it became clear that was exactly what was going to happen.

Both Sokka and Zuko knew it, but they didn't talk about it until their last day at the North Pole. It was the night of the waxing half moon, and the night of Nattiq's wedding. Nattiq had decided he was going to leave with the rest of the *Unagi* crew, figuring that they would need his services more than the Northern Water Tribe would. Kaskae, as the chief's nephew and second in line for the position of chief, was going to stay in the North Pole. Both he and Nattiq wanted to be married before Nattiq left, so they planned to hold the ceremony just before the departure.

As Sokka was carrying his things onto the *Unagi*, though, there was a surprise waiting for him. There, in the halls of the ship, was Chief Arnook, standing in the middle of a hallway with a worried frown on his face. He was looking into one of the extra bedrooms of the ship.

Before Sokka could ask what he was doing, Arnook said, "Are you sure you have everything? Extra parkas? Your whalebone knife? How about your mother's hair pins for good luck?"

Sokka's jaw dropped as Princess Yue stepped out of the room, crossing her arms as she looked at her father. "You already know I do. I saw you looking through my bags earlier."

"P- Princess Yue?!" Sokka gaped at her as she approached him with a smile. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm coming with you!" Her grin was as bright as the full moon.

"You're *what*!?"

"My father and I have been talking," Yue said with an earnest look at her father, "and we both agree that isolationism isn't the future for our tribe. Sure, it's protected us in the past, but without you, our allies, that siege could have destroyed us. As the future chief of the Northern Water Tribe, I am the perfect person to reach out and start creating relationships between the Earth Kingdom and the Northern Water Tribe. Sokka, isn't it great?! I'll get to travel the Earth Kingdom with you!"

"Yeah, it is," Sokka said with a half smile. "I just... didn't expect this at all, honestly." He looked at Arnook and asked, "You're really okay with this?"

Arnook let out a heavy sigh. "My daughter can be very persuasive, just like her mother. Your group is heading to the stronghold of Omashu, yes?"

"It's not a stronghold," Sokka corrected, "but it's very safe. Aang is friends with the King of Omashu, and he's a really strong earthbender. He'll be a great ally for the Northern Water Tribe, and we'll be safe from the Fire Nation there."

Both Yue and Arnook seemed happy with this statement, and Sokka puffed his chest with pride. *Southern Water Tribe diplomacy at its finest*, he thought.

Sokka helped Yue move in, then the two of them set off for the wedding ceremony. Like most everything in the Northern Water Tribe, Sokka found it to be extravagant to the point of being

wasteful and excessively spiritual. At least Sokka got to sit down during the three-hour ceremony, though- Yue and Zuko were part of Kaskae and Nattiq's parties respectively, so they had to stand as the ceremony took place. Both of them looked as radiant as ever, and with Yue in a beautiful silver parka and Zuko in a parka adorned with golden thread, Sokka couldn't help but be reminded of the moon and sun. Though they were both stunning, Sokka found his eyes drawn more often to Zuko, perhaps because the gold on his outfit stood out so much from the sea of blue and gray fabric.

After the ceremony was finished, Sokka made a beeline for the lavish spread of food set out. Once he'd secured himself a heaping pile of food, he looked around for somewhere to sit. The wedding feast was taking place in the big ceremonial hall that Sokka and the others had first been welcomed in, and Sokka beamed as he spotted Zuko sitting alone near where they'd sat on the first night.

"Hey, you," Sokka said as he sat down next to Zuko. Zuko gave him a distracted smile in return. "How are things?"

"Things'? Oh, you mean- the hallucinations are settling down, I'm not getting them as much anymore."

"Sorry, bad wording." Sokka clarified, "How are you?"

"Me? I'm alright." Zuko smiled softly and Sokka's heart fluttered in his chest. "I'm happy for Nattiq, mostly. He and Kaskae are good for each other." Zuko's smile faded as he said, "Sokka, I need to tell you-"

A loud crash interrupted him, making Zuko wince. Sokka glanced over to see that Aang had just ridden his air scooter into Pakku, who had been carrying a big tray of food. As Pakku started to yell at Aang, Sokka took Zuko's hand and said, "Come with me."

Zuko was annoyed by the heat that rose in his cheeks at the request, but he picked up his food and did as Sokka asked. Sokka led him over to a different table, one that was much quieter. "...Thanks," Zuko said as he sat down, pointedly looking away from Sokka.

Sokka, who figured that Zuko was just tired of eye contact, replied, “No problem. I remembered how loud the feast we had when we came was, so when I heard the wedding feast would be in here, I came here as soon as I could. I did some testing with Aang blowing his voice around with wind, and this is where all the noise is the quietest. Or at least seems the quietest.” Zuko dropped his fork and stared directly at Sokka. Sokka, who had swelled with pride after his statement, suddenly started to worry. “What? What’s wrong?”

“N- nothing.” Zuko looked off to the side, and Sokka could see the flush of his cheeks. “That’s... really nice of you, Sokka. You didn’t have to do all of that.”

“I know,” Sokka said, “but I wanted to. Even if you were feeling normal, I know this kind of event isn’t your favorite. But I also know that you’re stubborn and want to be there for your friends, so you’d stay here in this environment until you couldn’t. So I thought if I could make it even a little easier for you to be here, it’d be worth the effort.”

Zuko didn’t know what to say. He was reminded of that crazy thought he’d had on the night Zhao died, the thought that he was in love with Sokka- a thought which, whenever it came to Zuko’s mind, he forced down with a vengeance. Despite how many times he’d pushed it away, the thought persisted, as if it had rooted itself in the very core of Zuko’s being and refused to be killed.

“I’m not going with you to Omashu,” Zuko finally blurted out. He looked down at his boots, not wanting to see Sokka’s reaction.

It took Sokka a while to respond. “I know.” His words and the resigned tone of his voice made Zuko look back at Sokka, despite himself. Sokka was gazing at him sadly, but there was an understanding in his eyes that Zuko hadn’t expected. “You said the hallucinations are getting better, but they’re not gone.” There was a lump in Zuko’s throat that he couldn’t speak around, so he simply shook his head. “The last thing you need right now is to be thrown in a situation where you’re constantly being chased by Fire Nation soldiers. You need time and space to heal.” Sokka offered him a smile. “And I know for a fact that you *will* heal.”

“And what if I don’t?”

Sokka's first instinct was to tell Zuko that he's the strongest person he knows and of course he'll recover, but one look at Zuko's face told him that wasn't what the firebender needed to hear right now. "Then I'll take care of you," Sokka responded simply. "After the war we'll live together, wherever we end up. My family and I will look after you, and you'll look after us. I won't think any less of you, Zuko."

It wasn't long before Sokka was pulled away for a dance with Yue, but Zuko couldn't stop thinking about what he said. He'd spoken so confidently about a future after the war, while Zuko had never let himself imagine one. It made his heart yearn for something he couldn't quite explain.

Later, in a quiet moment with Nattiq soon after setting sail, Zuko would ask, "Is it possible for a boy to like another boy romantically, even if both of them were born as boys? Just curious."

Nattiq, who would know exactly why the young prince was asking him that, would nod and say, "Of course it is." Teasingly he would add, "Is there someone you have your eye on, Lee?"

Zuko would turn bright red at this and stammer, "N- no! I was just curious, that's all. Good night." Then he would run to his cabin in record time, and Nattiq would laugh and look at the stars, remembering what it was like to be young and in love, figuring things out for the first time.

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"What a day, huh?" Sokka looked up as Zuko entered their shared room, looking redder than usual.

"Yeah." The Unagi crew had been just about to depart when Pakku suddenly announced that he and some of the other Northern Water Tribe members were going to sail to the South Pole to help their sister tribe. After that astonishing development, one of the former prisoners from the Southern Water Tribe announced that he and a few others were going to join the Southern Water Tribe's fleet and fight back against their former captors. Zuko and Sokka had looked at each other blankly, neither knowing what to do, until Iluak invited those who wanted to leave

the North Pole to discuss logistics aboard the *Unagi*. After an hour's discussion, the plan was made.

Anybody who was to go to the South Pole, which included both Northerners wanting to help and Southerners looking to return home, would travel on some of the Northern Water Tribe's ships. The *Unagi*, carrying team Avatar, its usual crew, and those who wanted to join the Southern fleet, would sail alongside them until they reached the northwestern end of the Earth Kingdom's lower peninsula. From there, the Northern boats would sail south, the *Unagi* would head towards Chameleon Bay where Hakoda's forces were said to be, and Sokka, Yue, Aang, and Katara would set off for Omashu on Appa. With the amount of waterbenders they had, it would take less than a week to reach the point where they were to spilt up. It would be less than a week before Sokka left his mother and Zuko behind on a ship heading straight for his father.

Sokka knew this was what had to be done, but the heartbreaking truth of the matter was that Sokka *didn't want to leave Zuko*. It had only been a couple of weeks since Sokka had seen Zuko break and beg for him to stay. While Sokka knew Zuko's crew would keep him safe, he worried that Zuko would reach a breaking point again and none of them would notice. Granted, it was hard to notice when Zuko needed help- Sokka himself hadn't realized until Zuko was in the middle of a full-on breakdown- but Sokka knew what to look out for, and he wasn't sure the others did. Sokka was a little reassured by the fact that Kya would be with Zuko, but she hadn't seen it either. He didn't know if anyone would look after Zuko the way he did- he wasn't sure if they were even capable of it.

At the thought of his mother, Sokka couldn't help but frown. Zuko and his crew had said it was far safer and easier to travel in the Earth Kingdom without an adult, but Sokka didn't want to leave her as he had only just found her. And the fact that she and Zuko were going to be meeting up with the Southern Water Tribe's fleet, where his father was- Sokka would be lying if he said he hadn't considered sneaking along with them.

"They need you, Sokka," Zuko said, startling Sokka out of his thoughts.

"Huh?" Sokka scowled, then said, "Are you using your stupid energy reading on me again?" Zuko shook his head.

"I don't have to. You had that look on your face that you always get when you're overthinking things, and then all of a sudden it changed to the face you make when you're

thinking about sneaking seal jerky from the kitchen. I know you want to come with me, but Aang, Katara, and Yue- they all depend on you, Sokka, more than they realize.”

“You don’t know that’s what I’m thinking about,” Sokka protested. “Maybe I’m making that face because I actually want seal jerky right now.”

Zuko had a knowing look on his face, but said, “Maybe you’re right. Would you like me to go get you some?” Sokka realized that Zuko was really asking him if he needed to be alone for a little while, but doing so in a way that wouldn’t force him to say so explicitly.

“No,” Sokka whispered. All of a sudden, his chest was hurting. “No, you should just... stay.” Zuko seemed a little surprised by the reply, but he did stay.

And that made Sokka realize why this was eating at him so much: it wasn’t because he was jealous of Zuko getting to spend time with his mom and dad (which he was) or because he was worried about Zuko (which he *definitely* was), but because Sokka would miss his closest friend. Sokka loved Katara and Aang, he truly did, but it was hard traveling with them in the war-torn Earth Kingdom because they were just so young and naive. Even though Yue was older, Sokka had no doubt she would be the same or even worse than them, considering her sheltered upbringing. Sokka couldn’t talk to any of them the way he could talk to Zuko- none of them understood him the way Zuko did. Ever since Zuko’s breakdown, Sokka had been spending more time with him, and he realized just how much he’d taken Zuko’s companionship for granted- and now it was being taken away from him again. Sokka knew it wasn’t going to be forever, but still, Sokka would miss Zuko so much that it would hurt. It already did hurt, if he was being honest.

But he’s not gone yet, Sokka was reminded as Zuko laid in bed next to him. It wasn’t long before Zuko, completely exhausted from the day, was sound asleep next to him. As gently as he could, Sokka lifted Zuko, repositioning him so that his head was laying on Sokka’s chest. “I promise I’ll make the most of the time we have left,” Sokka whispered, “and I promise I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

~ ~ ~

Far away in a golden room filled with flames, a girl was kneeling before her father’s throne. Venom was in his voice as he said, “Iroh is a traitor, cowering and hiding with the same

people who killed your brother. I have a task for you...”

Without standing, she looked up at her father, unable to hide her smile. *Finally*, she thought, *a chance to prove you wrong*.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for sticking with me throughout the process of writing this fic!!! i appreciate y'all so much <3 <3 <3

so... this series still has books 2 & 3 to cover, so there's gonna be two more full books! book 2 will start to be published winter 2023, but expect a little one-shot about hakoda taking care of zuko after his burn in the fall or summer!

tbh, part of my big long hiatus was me trying to think of a different ending to this. i did NOT want to split the boys up, but in the end, it's the only ending that sets us up for the rest of this story properly

thanks for reading!! love u all!!!!!! <3 <3 <3 <3 <3

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