

## City of Secrets, City of Lies

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# City of Secrets, City of Lies

by [Paxfacere](#)

## Summary

"Why are you telling me this?" Sokka asks and he is surprised how flat he sounds.

"Sokka- You have the name of the crown prince of the fire nation on your wrist. He is..." she cuts herself off and her face scrunches up. Sokka nods to indicate that he has heard her and takes a big breath.

*What the actual fuck?!*

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Or: Sokka finds himself lost and stranded in Ba Sing Se, his friends might as well be death and he suddenly has a strange word he can't read branded onto his skin...

... and then there is also Lee from the tea shop.

A soul-mate AU.

## Notes

Ho boy. Insead of working on my other countless WIPs and finishing them, I started this. First time writing for this fandom and I'm so excited!

I have the story planned out and a really rough draft written down, but it's still very much in progress.

Also no Beta and english is not my first language.

Let me know what you think :-)

# Chapter 1

...

Sokka is not freaking out- He is absolutely not freaking out!

"What do you mean the gate's closed?! The war- "

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se." The guardsman shoves him rough into his shoulder and Sokka stumbles a few steps back. He throws his hands up in defeat.

"Fine!" He shouts at the guardsman, before turning around.

It's fine. He is not freaking out.

Sokka huffs annoyed, kicks a small pebble and watches it bounce a few steps ahead of him. He drags his hand down his face trying to remember which way he came from, turning in that direction.

It's not fine *obvious*.

Sokka rubs his wrist absentmindedly and squeezes himself through the crowd as he passes the same street vendors he came across earlier. People bump and shove into him as he makes his way past various stalls. Sokka's stomach rumbles as he takes in all the smells of different spices and flavors in the air. Had he known how far he would run- he would have had a bigger breakfast.

Just why didn't he have a plan for this exact scenario as unlikely as it seemed? Sokka is the plan's guy.

He stops in front of a stall selling some meat- skewers. They smell mouthwatering and he reaches for his wallet...

*Right.*

Somewhere along the way he must have lost it. Sokka scratches his wrist. It's itching some again and still looks bruised. Probably from when he fell down the stairs as he was running for his life...

Someone bumps into him again and Sokka curses after them.

... Maybe, if he is lucky he will find his wallet again and- Who is he even kidding. He will not find it.

So.

So. It's not fine and he maaay be freaking out a bit, but he can come up with a plan. He is the plan's guy after all. Right? He just has to gather his thoughts fist.

Here are some facts:

He got separated from his friends. No biggy.

He can't get back into the upper ring, can't even leave the city because he doesn't have the correct papers as the guard so lovingly told him and he has no idea what he should do now. Eh. He'll figure it out eventually.

Aang may or may not be death. He doesn't know where Katara and Toph are, but if they have been with Aang- that could only mean... Well. That one is not so great, actually.

Then there is also the the Dai Li- who is decidedly not side Team Avatar and now that Sokka thinks about it all, he might as well be screwed.

He sits down at the side of the street, away from the crowd and empties his right shoe. Some tiny stone that had been annoying him falls out. He watches it roll away.

How did it even come to all that?

They were all together, trying to get an audience with the Earth King, when Aang finally, finally got his invitation. Katara insisted on coming along, so he and Toph stayed behind.

Sokka sighs as he gets up and he takes another turn left. By the looks of everything... Why does he even try to go back- he has no way to reach the upper ring where all of their stuff was. It may as well be lost forever. He should have seen it was a trap right from the beginning and not only when the Dai Li attacked him and Toph in their accommodation -

Sokka stops walking.

In front of him is a small dark alley. This... This isn't the direction he came from earlier. Sokka walks back, turns right, turns right again and-

Another narrow alley he has never seen in his entire life.

Okay. That's not a problem. Just go back down the street turn left instead and-

Well *shit*.

Sokka kicks a rock angrily and curses when a shooting pain shots up his foot and the rock barely moves. His stupid wrist also doesn't stop bothering him-

Tui and La, just where the *fuck* is he? He turns around himself a few times in the foolish hope to recognize something- anything. He looks back down the ally to see if there is anyone he can ask for directions.

There is nobody. Sokka is all on his own.

Sokka really needs to think positive now. Katara is his sister- Toph is the best earth bender alive and Aang is the literal Avatar... They are Team Avatar. They can't be dead. They just can't. Toph must have gotten away after she shoved him down the stairs, found Aang and Katara in the palace and they escaped all together- and now they are looking for him. Or maybe the Dai Li has them captive somewhere- Sokka just has to find out what happened and figure out how to save them, while keeping the Dai Li off his back. Right?

His stomach rumbles again and Sokka can't ignore how hungry he is any longer.

Just great... The Dai Li almost got him, he is lost, he needs something to eat and he is absolutely penniless. This shitty day just keep getting *better* and *better*.

Sokka stoically keeps on walking. He has to find a street he recognizes eventually or someone he can-

He takes another turn left and walks into something hard - someone yelps loudly - he stumbles and finds himself planted on his ass. Sokka groans.

"Don't you have eyes?" A girl says angrily - sprawled right next to him on the ground too.

"Er- sorry. Sorry!" He must have ran straight into her.

The girl glares at him but then her eyes soften for some reason. She get's up, patts down her pants and begins to picks up her things.

"Are you okay? You look a bit dazed."

"Of course I am- I... Urg. No who am I kidding. I'm hungry and I'm lost, not that I get lost but. You know how it is. My friends got lost, not me. And I don't know where to find them. And they may not be in the city, or they are.... They are-" Sokka can't stop himself from spewing everything out, needing to say it out loud and yet he can't bring himself to voice his biggest fear.

The girl's eyes sweep over him, taking in his foreign appearance, the bruises he has and she must have come to some conclusion when she gives him a sad but understanding smile.

"Oh. I have been there."

"I highly doubt it - no offense," he says and scratches his wrist again.

She watches him a moment before plopping down next to him still on the ground and gives him a small package.

"What's that?" He ask her confused.

"My lunch. You said you are hungry and I'm giving it to you."

Sokka looks at her skeptically, not wanting to believe the kindness some random stranger shows him. When she nudges him on he opens the container and finds some rice and bland looking steamed vegetables -given his situation he is not picky.

"I do know what you've been through. Almost all of the refugees have lost someone on the way," she tells him while he is eating.

A refugee is it? Well, given the situation and how it looks, it's not far from the truth.

"You still didn't have to give me any of your food," he says as he takes another bite. It does taste better than it looks.

"Of course I had. Someone once helped my family when we where new to Ba Sing Se and now I'm helping you. We refugees have to help each other." She says like it's obvious. Sokka pauses.

He is reminded of the sense of community he grew up with in the south pole. Nobody would have let a stranger gone hungry when there was enough food you could share. Sokka didn't expect to find such solidarity elsewhere, and surprisingly not among refugees in the Earth Kingdom. On the other hand it seems obvious that the people running from the war would try to help each other out.

"I *love* that, and thank you. I'm Sokka by the way," he says as he stands up and offers the girl his hand to help her up.

"I'm Jin and- What's that?" She says when she is already standing but still has his hand in hers. The girl pulls his arm to her - the one that's been bothering him so and wipes over a smudge of dirt and-

"By Kyoshi's left *tits*!" Jin exclaims and she sounds half exited, half horrified as she stares at his arm with huge eyes.

"What? What is it?" Sokka pulls his arm out of her grasp and tries to wipe the dirt away but - it's not a smudge of dirt.

Here is another fact:

On his wrist is something written in dark ink and he can't brush it away.

Sokka rubs some more over the place, turns his wrist this way and that way, trying to figure out just what this means because he can't even read the sign that seems to be branded into his skin.

Jin is still staring at him.

"What do you mean what is this? What- That's a soulmark and... stop- don't- You gotta hide that quick - here- " she pulls one of her hair-ties off and quickly wraps it around his wrist, completely covering the mark. Sokka is sure he must have misheard.

"What." Sokka stares at the green fabric, still not comprehending.

"Not here. The walls have eyes and ears. I do know a place were we can talk more privately. Come on." Jin says in a hurried and hushed voice.

Sokka doesn't really know her. It may be naive from him when he starts to follow her, he has no reason to trust her. It could all be a trick from the Dai Li after all. But Jin gave him her lunch and right now he desperately wants to rely on the kindness of strangers. Sokka let's his curiosity wins out.

"Where are we going?"

"Only the best tea-shop in this city."

"Er- I'd feel like I need to inform you that I have zero money to my name."

Jin hums. "Don't worry about that. We'll just have to figure something out for that too, then."

He follows her through another set of alleys and narrow streets. He tries to memorize the path not sure if it is meaningless to try to do so. Meanwhile Jin talks on and on in fake cheerfulness about other refugees and how they build up their life from the ground.

"-you could tell me about your friends too later. Maybe somebody I know, knows something." She keeps flashing him a reassuring smile and he wonders again if he just walked into a trap from the Dai Li. That would just be he luck. Sokka may very well be stupid for being so utterly naive.

"Anyway, Here we are- the Jasmine Dragon and the best tea shop in Ba Sing Se." Jin tells him as he looks at the building with more skepticism.

It's almost completely full. They sit down on an one of the few empty table in the corner. Sokka frowns at Jin. This doesn't look like a place that can offer any privacy at all.

"I'm not so sure- ," he start but a shadow falls over them then.

Sokka cranks his head and sees a young man with the biggest resting bitch face he has ever seen in his entire life standing at their table. He has a nasty burn scar covering half his face and glares at Sokka with such an intensity- like he wants him to catch fire with his stare only.

"What do you want?" The man says in a tone that makes Sokka's hackles rise and he instantly reaches for the place his boomerang used to be, before he catches himself.

Jin let's out a laugh, breaking the tension. Sokka's head snaps back to her confused.

"The usual. Do you like Jasmine?" It takes Sokka an embarrassing long moment to realize she has ask him.

"What?"

"Jasmine tea? Er- Just bring us some," she says to the scary intense guy. He stomps away without any kind of reaction that he has heard her.

"It's always a pleasure, Lee!" She calls after him and the man casually flips her the bird like she isn't one of the paying customers. Sokka takes a bit to shaking himself out of a stupor.

"Who *was* that?" He asks bewildered.

"Oh that's my friend Lee. It's his uncles tea-shop. He works here. He can be a bit rough around the edges but once you know him he is a gem."

She smiles but Sokka has some serious doubts about that. He turns to look in the direction Lee has gone off.

The man is at another table, with the same murderous look while taking another order and now that Sokka is looking he can spot the cutesy apron that is clashing with the whole intense thing he has going on. He seems to be about the same age as Sokka, nineteen, maybe early twenties and for a fleeting moment Sokka thinks he'd be unfairly handsome if not for the scar and the aggression that is rolling off of him in waves-

Lee gives him a glance. Sokka looks away and flushes at being caught staring.

He turns back at Jin.

"So, about this- ", he goes and wants to remove the hair-tie of hers when she stops him with hectic movement, lowering her voice to a whisper.

"Don't! Don't let anyone ever see this." Sokka frowns, still not understanding. His arm has stopped itching some time ago but he still doesn't know what this means- Jin apparently does.

"Okay- but what is this?"

"It's a soulmark, dummy." Sokka blinks owlish. He didn't mishear her earlier then? There a many things he could say to that. So he says the most eloquent thing he could ever come up with.

"Huh? - a soulmark like- like a soul...mark...?"

Sokka knows what a soulmark is - theoretically. They are so rare and he has never met anyone who had one. He isn't sure if Jin isn't just trying to fuck with him. She laughs softly.

"I don't understand- Why do I need to hide it? If I really do have one - and sorry for my skepticism- it should be a blessing from the spirits. There is nothing dangerous- "

"Your mark is written in imperial short-hand. No-one in the Earth Kingdom uses it but it can be easily recognized as such. You do not want anyone to find out that you have the mark of the fire nation on you."

Sokka stares at her, frowns and stares some more before her words truly sink in.

"You are telling me my supposed soulmate is- ", he can't bring himself to say it out loud. His soulmate is fire nation- may as well even be a fire bender by the luck he is having lately and... That is not any blessing from any spirits. Not that he believes her of course.



Sokka curses.

"You are lucky I ran into you. I'm not going to tell anyone- I promise. You better forget this even exists."

She is still whispering.

Jup. He is absolutely fine with pretending that it doesn't exist. Soulmate-who? Sokka doesn't know her... or him.

"So, you said you were lost earlier, any idea what you are doing now? Do you even have a place to stay?" Jin leans back and ask in a normal voice, trying to shift the conversation back from any secrets that Sokka may as well take to the grave with him.

That's a good question and Sokka shakes his head. He can't go back to the upper ring, but he does need to stay somewhere. Finding out what happened to his friends will have to wait, even if it means the Dai Li will come looking for him -

Sokka frowns. Why didn't anyone come for him when he was walking around, getting himself lost earlier anyway? He had assumed the Dai Li was after all of them, when they were attacked. But when Toph kicked him out of the way and he fell down the stair on the side of some building as she ran in the direction of the palace - nobody was after him as he made his getaway. He had thought they lost track of him but surely the Dai Li would have found him by now, right? Maybe they weren't -

Suddenly a tray of tea gets slammed in front of them. Sokka jumps out of his skin. Jin laughs delighted.

"Shit. That was. You are rude! That's no way to treat customers." The guy- Lee glances at Jin, before glaring back at Sokka.

"So? You got your tea. What more do you want?"

Okay. Sokka has had a bad, bad day and while meting Jin was the best thing that could have happened so far he still may or may not be feeling petty.

"Oh. Maybe you could *smile* for a start. I'm inclined to think some friendly face would be better for business. But by the looks of it, It's not your sorry mug that the other customers are coming back for."

"What did you just say?" Lee says dangerously low and Sokka get's the impression he just has set fire to some fuse. Er. Maybe Sokka is feeling more than just a bit petty. Not to excuse his assholery, but something about this Lee guy just sets him off.

"Lee, do you want another scolding for picking fights with customers again?" Jin thankfully interrupts. So Sokka isn't the only one who feels riled up like this. Good to know.

"He started it!" The man says hot-headed and so loud that now several other guests turn to their table to see what this is about.

"Excuse me?! You were the rude one first!"

"If you had to deal with assholes like you all day, you wouldn't be nice to them either!"

This is just stupid.

"Maybe it is you then! The customers are all assholes to you because you are their waiter."

Sokka catches Jin's eyes and she looks at both of them so disappointed. Sokka flushes with embarrassment- he is so grateful for everything she is doing for him and he thanks her, by insulting her friend-

"Oh, really funny. You wouldn't last a day if you had to- "

"Actually. That's a great idea!"

"What is?" They both turn to Jin.

"Didn't you need another waiter? You drove the last one off with your attitude."

Sokka has to stifle a laugh. This sounds about right.

"I didn't drove anyone off! He quit because he got a better job!" Lee yells back.

Sokka now fully starts to laughs at that, that is until Jin's words sink in and he cuts him off with a strangle-

"Eh what?"

"You need a job if you want to afford a place to stay- as a refugee you can't be picky but don't worry. This place is great. I'm sure Mushi will love to have you," she says and Sokka has no idea who Mushi even is.

Lee looks murderous at her, then at him before stomping back into the kitchen without another word. Sokka can hear he has started arguing with someone in the back.

"Don't look so worried- I told you Lee will grow on you eventually. So how about you give it a week, should be enough time to find something else should it not work out."

Sokka still has some doubts. How should the others find him if he is stuck in some tea-shop?

"How about this. I live close by and we have a small storage room. I let you stay there if you give this a chance. It's only me and my gran but I'm sure she loves having a young man around helping her out a bit too."

"Just why are you so nice to me? You don't know me. I could be dangerous. You shouldn't trust me like that..." Sokka realizes it's not him that was naive but her if she just trusts a random stranger she has met earlier like that.

Something complicated crosses her face then. Sokka frowns.

"Like I told you. People were nice to us and I'm just paying back- we refugees stick together-," before Jin can say anything else Lee comes stomping back and beckons Sokka to come with him to the kitchen.

Sokka follows and steps through the doorway and sees a jovial old man waiting for him with a serene smile. The man gives him a look over and introduces himself as Mushi- the owner of the Jasmine Dragon.

"And what is your name- young man."

"I am Sokka...," he glances back to Lee, who still stands stiff and tense and he suddenly remembers Jin telling him that Lee's uncle is the owner here.

The two of them couldn't be any more different. Sokka swears he has never seen anyone so calm and in peace with himself as the kind old man.

Mushi meanwhile gives him a basic run-down of the things he will have to do, his schedule and his pay.

"Does this all sound acceptable?"

Is he really doing this? Jin is right, he doesn't have lots of choices and he needs a new plan if he wants to figure out what happened to his friends. Also going undercover as a refugee working in a tea house should throw the Dai Li off his trail - if they are even still looking for him right now. Sokka nods numbly.

Mushi beams at him.

"Wonderful. I'm sure you and nephew will get along brilliantly." Lee snorts once at that, clearly doubting it and Sokka looks back at him.

Yeah- no. He seriously doubts it too.

Anyway. That's how Sokka gets a job at Mushi's Teahouse.

When Sokka is finally alone, later that night he takes a deep breath, removes Jin's hair-tie and looks at his wrist.

The mark on it is written in bold, strong strokes and he can't make out what it should mean. He guessed it could be a name.

Sokka has been spending so much time in the earth kingdom he picked up quite a lot, and while he is not fully fluent he still can read the most common signs.

Staring at his mark it becomes undoubtedly clear that it is recognizable as something else than standardized Earth. Jin was right. Anyone with two functioning eyes will see that this doesn't belong into the earth kingdom.

Sokka brushes his thumb softly over the mark.

He still can't believe that he's got a soulmate out there. No seriously- he's not believing it. He tries to imagine what kind of person this could belong to but comes up short. He knows not everyone in the fire nation is evil but it is a ruthless war machine and the indoctrination and propaganda runs deep and - okay, maybe he can see why the spirits could think he and his soulmate would need help then but...

It's still such a foreign thought. Sokka and some fire bender - not that he knows for sure but somehow the thought seems fitting and. Just where should he even met some fire bender anyway? He is stuck in Ba Sing Se for the time being. It's not making any sense at all.

Sokka carefully wraps the hair tie over his wrist, making sure it is securely hidden once again before laying down.

The storage room he has claimed for himself is tiny and doesn't fit the bedrolls completely so Sokka has to lie with his knees tucked close to his body - he tries to shift into a different position and his elbow hits the shelf behind him and he lets out a small curse.

Yet he can't complain. It's still better then sleeping on the streets waiting for the Dai Li to just grab him. Sokka still thinks that Jin shouldn't have been so kind to him but it's comforting to know that some people still are trying to care for other people in need.

And Sokka feels like he now needs all the help he can get.

## Chapter 2

The first couple weeks in Sokka's new arrangement pass slowly. Finding a new accommodation is not as easy as he thought, so he still stays in the tiny storage room and wakes up every morning with a crick in his neck.

He does help out Jin's grandmother with her errands and the housework until noon then he heads off to his shift at the teahouse where he cleans dishes, wipes down tables and takes out the trash - with barely any time for anything else in between.

He and Lee try to not interact at all, which is all good because the other man still irritates Sokka so much that he thinks he just might throttle him eventually. But that would be the opposite of keeping a low profile and he can't afford to draw the attention of the Dai Li on himself. So Sokka grinds his teeth instead and focuses on his dishes as he ignores Lee stomping around the tea-shop and being awful towards innocent customers.

The door chimes again. Sokka tenses momentarily and peaks around the corner into the front room to see who has entered.

It's just another pair of girls giggling between themselves. They sit down on one of the free tables as both are stealing glances at Lee. Can they be any more obvious?

Sokka huffs. Yes, he gets it, the man is handsome- who even cares? He is still such a major prick and yet half of their guests are only here to fawn over him.

Lee stops in front of the girl's table then to take their orders. One of the girls - the taller one of the two - blushes an embarrassing shade of red, while the other one leans forward and casually touches Lee's arm. He slaps it away like an annoying fly.

Lee stands stiff and tense as he takes the order and Sokka wonders if he even notices the blatant flirting and just ignores it or if it goes right over his stupid head.

Sokka doesn't understand it at all. Lee's got only even half a nice face on top of his off-putting personality - as mean as it sounds. Well... the scar isn't that bad if you get used to it and he has nice golden eyes distracting from it and okay he is kinda tall in a way earth citizens rarely are. And maybe the apron looks kinda cute and now that Sokka is looking at his back, he can see that he's got a nice ass... but still.

If Lee is not glaring and stomping around, he is just *so* rude to every single customer.

Sokka huffs. He then reminds himself that his hands are currently all soapy right up to his elbows and he is not getting payed to stare at his unlikable coworker but to wash the dirty dishes.

The door chimes again.

When he cranks his head to look who is entering, his view is blocked by Lee, who steps into the back and gives him a look.

"Will you stop jumping every time we got a new customer? You act like the Dai Li is after you," Lee hisses at him as he steps around Sokka and places even more dirty cups on his seemingly never ending pile of dishes.

Sokka glares back but gets distracted for a moment as Lee slams the new cups on his tray in annoyance. He wonders how often they need to replace the sets by the way Lee is handling them. Sokka only then realizes what was said just now.

"What- No I don't- no, wait- " Is this what he had been doing? Of course the Dai Li was on his mind but so far he hasn't neither heard or seen anything of them. It is worrisome and Sokka is just waiting for something to happen- waiting for the other shoe to drop. But was it that obvious?

He didn't think Lee would be any kind of observant to notice how Sokka watches the door, but with Sokka's stammering now he might as well have given himself away.

*Yes Sokka*, why not just tell Lee everything, why not tell everyone in the teahouse everything if he is at it. Sokka really needs to be more careful and school his reaction to remarks like that if he wants to keep a low profile.

"*Are you serious?!"* Lee groans when Sokka doesn't instantly deny the accusations.

"Of course. Of fucking course Jin would drag in someone *wanted* by the Dai Li," he keeps muttering to himself and Sokka stares at Lee again. Lee notices and stares right back at him.

Nobody says anything for a tense moment. Lee then places another freshly brewed cup back on his tray and sighs.

"...Just stop acting so suspicious and you will be fine," he says in a soft way before leaving again. Sokka is sure he must have misheard him.

That's not a reaction he would have expected, but then one of the first things Jin had told him was that this teahouse is a safe places - so he guesses as long as Sokka doesn't bring any attention here, Lee and Mushi won't care.

Sokka glances at Mushi on the other side of the room, happily grinding down tea-leaves and he wonders if the old man has heard him and Lee.

When nothing else happens then, Sokka sighs and continues with his task, fully intended to ignore the next time the door chimes. He can do this. He can concentrate on his job without

acting anyway suspicious. Yes- Sokka, the guy who washes dishes at the Jasmine Dragon is just a regular old refugee without any kind of-

The sound of glass shattering and the start of yelling instantly interrupts any other thoughts Sokka might have had.

He exhales slowly and grabs the broom and a rag and goes to see what Lee has done now- and in Sokka's mind it's already clear that whatever it is, Lee must be at fault.

" - don't care if it's about the fucking avatar. You need to leave. *Now!*" Lee presses out between his teeth angrily and the elderly man sitting at the table gets all red in the face. The other guests don't even pretend to not watch Lee trying to kick out one of their customers.

*"How dare you, you- "*,

Sokka takes in the rest of the scene and sees the ruined tea-set on the floor and Lee drenched in what must have been the hot tea. By the look of it he seems to be unharmed, so Sokka starts picking up the shards just as Mushi steps in front of Lee, interrupting the man's yelling.

"Nephew it would be good for you to take your break," he says sternly and then tries to placate the customer.

Lee doesn't hesitate before ripping off his apron and stomping outside. Sokka glances at the man arguing with Mushi and notices the still red face, the unfocusing eyes and the way his speech slurs slightly - he might as well be drunk.

Sokka steps out through the door into the alley behind the teashop. He sees Lee leaning at the opposite wall, his arms crossed and clearly still fuming.

*"Fuck off,"* he says when he notices Sokka.

Sokka lifts his arm to show off the trash bag he is holding and goes to the other end of the alley to place it on the pile of all the other bags.

Lee huffs annoyed. Sokka rolls his eyes and without thinking, goes and plops himself down on the ground right next to Lee and stretches his legs out.

"... Jeeesh, crazy old man was so clearly drunk- You completely missed your uncle's feat of talking him into leaving and promising to never come back all while making that guy think it was his own idea... So, did you get hurt? The water he threw at you must have been scaldingly hot."

Lee shifts on his feet but some anger seems to leave him at Sokka's words. He frowns instead.

"...It wasn't that hot."

"Okay. That's good- So mind telling me what's about that avatar stuff from back there? What happened?"

From the angle Sokka is looking up at Lee he can see how his jaw works wordlessly.

"You know what this is about," Lee says eventually.

"This fucking rumor that the avatar was in Ba Sing Se and is now dead- if they want to gossip they shouldn't come here, because- " Lee snaps his mouth shut as he pushes himself off the wall and starts pacing. He looks pissed off again.

Sokka *knows* that, has heard the same thing in the last weeks hushed and whispered from almost every corner.

That one rumor that the avatar and his friends got themselves killed. It's the talk of the city.

But Sokka has a hard time believing any of that. Everyone thought the avatar was gone until Katara and him found him trapped in an iceberg years ago, and even if it looks like the trap from the earth King or the Dai Li or whoever else is behind this was a success - if there is one single person who can defy the odds, it's Aang. Sokka will just have to wait for either finding out what really happened or for his friends to find him again.

Sokka steels his shoulders.

"The avatar is not dead. Everyone thought he was gone for hundred years and he came back. So he will come back this time too- "

"*The avatar is a lie!* Who even cares? There is still a wa- there is still shit out there and it's not like he has done anything for anyone until now, I doubt he even *exists*."

The way Lee hisses at him makes Sokka sit up straighter against the wall, a bit taken aback at the tone. Lee may be rude and mean in general but - he is not used to hearing that much vitriol from him. This anger sounds more raw - more personal.

Sokka does wonder if there is a story behind it. Just what must have happened to Lee in the past- and you can tell just by looking at him that something did happen.

"That's not *true*. The avatar and his friends have helped countless of people on their journey," Sokka says softly.

Lee glances at him doubtfully but he stops his pacing and crosses his arms again.

"What's it to you anyway?"

Sokka looks away from Lee and sighs. His eye fall on the green fabric around his wrist and he starts playing around with the knot on it. What should he say - that he is acquainted with the avatar and calls him his friend? Yeah, nah- Sokka plans to keep anything he might know to himself.

"Nothing. Just being cautiously optimistic," he says instead.



Lee hums and when Sokka looks up, the man surprises Sokka when he sits down next to him.

"You should take it off when washing dishes. It's getting all wet and torn. I don't think Jin would appreciate you being so careless with her gifts."

Sokka blinks. It takes him a moment to catch on.

"That's not- " Sokka really tried to put this problem out of his head.

Which didn't seem to be possible at all. It was constantly on his mind and he found himself staring at the mark every single evening when he was alone - memorizing the writing, the word, the name or whatever it said.

At first Sokka was only checking if the mark was still there- doubting it was even real - waiting for it to disappear again. When that didn't happen, he started to look at it in the unlikely chance that he would suddenly know what it meant. And now he had even taken to play around with the fabric absentmindedly - needing to remind himself that it was always just there.

But he can't just tell Lee that the fabric looks so torn because he has a presumed soulmark that he unwraps and rewraps all the damn time.

Sokka looks back at Lee and from the side he is sitting on he can't even see the scar - Lee really does have a pretty profile from up close, Sokka notices incidental - yet the first thing that comes to mind, when he blurts out is,

"Burn mark!" Lee's head snap fully to his and he narrows his eyes dangerously.

Yeah... No, bad choice.

"Er- I have a... a mark from some- fire bender? I just... Try to forget it's even there and Jin gave me her hair-tie to cover it up so I don't have to look at it and I'm not taking it off. I don't even think Jin expects me to," he rushes out to explain and hopes Lee will not question it.

Lee nods stiffly but the tension in his shoulders doesn't ease. Sokka sighs. Could he be any more insensitive? Telling someone who's face looks like someone tried to burn off, that he wants to cover a small mark on his wrist like that...

Sokka looks at Lee and now that they are sitting so close and Lee is watching Sokka back with narrowed eyes, Sokka swears he can even see the vague shape of a hand imprinted.

He might get sick.

Just what has happened to that guy anyway?

Sokka can't help himself there and awkwardly pats Lee's shoulder before he gets up to his feet.

Lee gives Sokka a truly startled look then.

"I think we should go back. Uncle might be missing us," Sokka says because he doesn't want to blurt out more insensitive things accidentally. He might be curious of course but Sokka thinks he has enough tact to not ask.

"He is not your Uncle!" Lee hisses at him and jumps up to standing, not without glaring at Sokka before stomping back inside.

Sokka grins. Not saying he is surprised that they managed any kind of conversation but the glaring and stomping feels like more familiar ground between the two of them.

Mushi doesn't comment on it, when they both return after such a long break, only gives them curious glances and Sokka can't resist asking.

"Hey. Can I call you uncle?"

Mushi looks surprised and half turns towards his nephew with a questioning look, stroking his beard.

"Just what has prompted that? But yes, of course you can."

Lee stares daggers at him across the room as he puts on his apron again, before heading back into the front without another word. In a childish notion Sokka sticks out his tongue at Lee's back. He can hear Mushi stifle a soft laugh, mumbling something of youth and friendships.

Sokka turns back to his huge stack of dishes when Mushi places two steaming cups on the small table next to the stove.

"Thank you for watching out for my nephew. I'm always glad when he makes new friends."

Yeah. Well, Sokka wouldn't use the word friends to describe them.

"He is. Er- " Sokka starts but is already out of any nice adjective he could give as answer. And he doesn't think Mushi would like to hear that Sokka thinks Lee's got a nice ass.

Mushi doesn't seem to mind the lack of response and gestures for Sokka to take one of the cups.

"Here. I find that some Oolong is good to sooth a restless soul. I know that my nephew is a troubled man but he has his heart in the right place and with time I think you will come to see that too. And while I don't know the path you took that led you here Sokka, just know that not everything we have lost is lost forever. The spirits guide us in mysterious ways."

What?

Okay, that does sounds like some shit Aang would say and- yeah Sokka is not going to think about Aang right now, when he tries his best not to - curtesy of all the false rumors.

It's also not the first time that Mushi rambled about some spiritual mumbo-jumbo, making him feel put on the spot. So instead of answering Sokka takes a sip of the tea. He hums and takes another sip.

"It's good," he says trying to keep his surprise to himself. Mushi smiles at him.

"Hey Sokka. Lee," Jin says when she is coming in to pick him up, just as his shift is ending. He grins when he notices her.

Lee nods instead of a greeting as he is giving the empty teahouse one final sweep with the broom and Sokka wipes down the last table.

"So did he behave?" She asks with a smirk. Lee shrugs.

"He is doing an okay job, I guess- ,"

"I'm not asking *you*. Was Lee nice to you or should I tell Mushi to scold him again?"

Sokka barks out a surprised laugh when Lee flusters.

"*Stop telling on my uncle!*" He yells at her before ripping the rag out of Sokka's hands and stomps in to the kitchen.

Jin gives Sokka a conspiring wink. It seems the girl takes great joy in riling Lee up. He kinda gets it- that man is ridiculous when he is like that. He can maybe start to see why Jin likes him. And now that he thinks about it- Lee may be terrible suited for customer services and his temper is off-putting at first but today was the first day where he didn't want to throttle that man. Maybe Jin is right and he will grow on Sokka.

... Or maybe Mushi put something in his tea earlier. That sounds more likely.

"Good night Lee," Jin calls after him as she hooks her arm into his.

A soft "See you guys," returns from the kitchen after a moment.

They go outside and down the alley that only now starts to look familiar to him. So far, Jin has picked him up every time after his shift because he is still getting so, so lost without her help in the maze that is Ba Sing Se's streets. Jin tells him about her day and ask questions about his as they head back to her place.

"Hey, I'm meaning to ask- and I'm not trying to pry but, you and Lee are not...?" Sokka eventually asks when the conversation has lulled down a bit. Lee had recognized Jin's hair tie on his wrist earlier and it made Sokka wonder. They both seem so different from each other and a friendship between the two a bit unlikely from his perspective.

Jin just laughs at him.

"Nah, we are just friends. I mean, I did have a crush on him at first. He is kinda cute you know? His uncle even set us up for a date once, like three years ago but it went no-where and we became friends instead."

"Three years? That's how long you all have been here?"

"Huh, time sure flies by. Lee and his uncle have been longer in the city- but don't bother asking. They never want to talk about their past- all about making new lives for themselves and such."

Sokka frowns. Uncle Mushi loves his teahouse but Lee so clearly hates it - why did he stick around for so long then? Didn't he have anything else he wants to do or be?

"That's kinda sad. I can't imagine trying to forget where I came from, everything I had to leave behind."

Jin hums and looks around before answering in a quite tone.

"Yes. But not everyone has had it good, There is a... There are things outside these walls some people like to forget."

Sokka can see this, yet he think it is strange how everyone can just stay here going on to pretend the past didn't happen. That the war isn't also happening right now.

"I understand this. But just because we are here doesn't mean bad things are still not happening outside these walls - I really need to find out what happened to my friends eventual."

Jin gives him a sad smile and he hates when she does that. Those rumors are just that - not that Jin knows the extend of everything but her conclusions aren't even better. So Sokka changes the subject.

"Okay- Then how about I find out more about my other problem instead- "

Jin stops walking and turns to him sharply.

"Do not do that! I told you it's best if you try to forget it exists for now. Thinks like this should work themself out on their own. Nothing good will come out of you knowing."

Sokka stares at her. He understand her anger against the fire nation but he doesn't understand her in being so against at finding out something that bears little consequence.

He frowns.

"I just want to know what this means- I'm not going out of my way looking for some random fire nation girl- guy - whatever. I don't think I'll ever met them anyway - and I'm just wondering about soulmarks in general. They are supposed to be rare and now I suddenly have one, when I didn't have one before? Nah, I'm not buying it. There must be something more to it."

"Sokka... I wish you would just forget about it but... if I can't convince you otherwise- I can't really help you there but you will maybe be lucky and find some text about it in the library. It's close to the tea-shop. You could ask Lee to take you- he likes to go and read there," she says resigned but finally continues walking again.

Sokka groans.

"If it's close I'm just asking Mushi for directions then. Seriously- what's so great about that Lee? I know that he is your friend but I don't necessarily like him and he hasn't shown many redeeming qualities so far."

"I know! He can really test ones patience sometimes. It took me forever before I wore him down so he would hang out with me and my girlfriends outside the tea-shop," Jin hums and bumps her shoulder into his, making him crack a smile.

"When I first met him and his uncle, he was such a mess for a while. He has mellowed out a lot since then if you can believe it.

I just think whatever happened to them must have been so bad and people always only see his face and his temper and write him off as some asshole. It can't be easy living with such a reminder to whatever caused such an injury. So I just don't let his bad antics get to me and be kind and understanding. I swear I'm not making it up when I tell you he is actually a great guy- Just give him a chance, will you?"

That's exactly what he had been doing, right? He just wrote Lee off as some asshole without trying to understand where he is coming from... and it bother's him. Sokka isn't a person who likes not understanding things- he wants everything to make sense, to follow some logic. Sokka wants to know why things - or people - are the way they are.

Sokka rubs his eyes tiredly. He is pretty much done for the day after working such a long shift. The both of them turn a corner and Jin's place comes into view. Sokka sees the expectant look Jin is giving him as she opens the door then and he sighs.

"Fine. I'll ask him."

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

I'm back with more!

If anyone is wondering about the timeline for this, just know that it started exactly like it did in the series and everything up to Sokka and Katara finding Aang is the same as in canon. Then the story diverged at one point. It is going to make sense later on, I promise!

Anyway. I'm letting this chapter speak for itself - have fun with this one 🙄

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

Sokka may be a curious person by nature but sometimes it is so much easier to drag his feet when he doesn't feel like doing something. Jin's words are still bouncing around in his head and he knows she wasn't wrong - Sokka was kind of an ass to the other man straight from the beginning without giving him much of a chance. So he feels a bit ashamed of himself and uses this as an excuse why he puts off not immediately asking Lee.

He knows that he doesn't have to do this- that he could ask Mushi or anyone else for directions but then he told Jin he would and he intends to keep his words to her. He is going to ask Lee. He really is! Eventually.

But when over a week passes with Sokka still dragging his feet he has to accept that he is acting ridiculous over something so mundane. Sokka can be a big boy and just ask Lee to take him to the library with him. It's not like he is asking him out on a date, right?

It's one of the slower days when he finally manages to get the words out. The only guests are some of their regular customers. Just two old ladies that spend their hours drinking tea and gossiping about someone named Bo.

"*Why* are you asking *me*?" Lee says and gives him a bewildered look.

Sokka cleans out the remaining leaves out of the teapot and shrugs.

"Jin said I should." There is just no point in making up some random excuse that will only sound like one anyway.

Lee frowns and Sokka thinks he's going to try to come up with an excuse of his own or just outright refuse when,

"...fine. We can go when uncle has his next Pai Sho night."

Wait, *really*?

Sokka wants to ask when that is, but he pauses, mentally stumbling over the unfamiliar term.

"What's Pai Sho?" He asks then without thinking about it and immediately regrets it when Lee groans loudly. Mushi draws Sokka's attention when he takes his teapot from the stove and turns to him.

"Pai Sho is a form of Art. It is looking into your opponents eyes and seeing all the answers that lay hidden just be- "

"It's just a board with some tiles!" Lee snaps and interrupts Mushi's gushing with it. Sokka snickers at their usual antics but he finds his interest piqued. If it is something that Lee is so annoyed with and Mushi loves- it's going to be something Sokka will like, he guesses.

"So it's a game?" He asks.

"Oh, it's very much more than just a game. I can teach you if you like."

Sokka nods and Mushi looks at him expectant then.

"What- right now?" He glances toward the front of the tea shop.

The elderly women are still on their first and only cup and if they haven't changed the subject - and they never do- are still discussing Bo's unruly behavior. From the bits and pieces Sokka has heard over the last weeks he can't yet decide if Bo is supposed to be the grandkid of one of them - or the cat.

Mushi hums and gestures for Sokka to take a seat as he goes and opens one of the cabinets. Lee plops down into the corner, crosses his arms and glares at both him and his uncle, while Mushi sets up the board for the game.

"So, what are you looking for?" Lee asks a few days later when they enter Ba Sing Se's public library. It's Mushi's Pai Sho night and lucky for them, he likes to close the teashop earlier on those nights. Mushi supposedly has them every fortnight or so. Sokka had of course wondered why they had never done this since he started working at the teahouse - but one of the players was just sick so they had skipped it the last weeks and Sokka just missed it.

Sokka takes a look around the library and whistles. Someone sends them a dirty glare in passing and makes a shushing noise. Sokka flushes as he turns towards Lee.

"I'm not sure... History?" He says and takes another look around. The inside seems to be in the same style as all the other buildings he saw when he was still staying in the upper ring. If Sokka had more time at hand he could see himself staying and admiring the unique architecture, the tall columns clearly made by some talented earth bender or the rows upon rows of way too many books for him to ever read in his life.

Lee gives him a look. Yeah well. He is not going to tell Lee what's of interest for him. So he waves him off and starts walking in one random direction hoping he can find some library clerk he can ask instead.

"Excuse me- I'm looking for anything about soulmarks, where- "

The clerk gives his wrapt wrist one glance and Sokka puts it behind his back. The man clears his throat.

"Look under the spirit section. That way," he points and Sokka thanks the man.

When he stands in front of said rows he is a bit lost with which books he should start so he just grabs five books that seem to be about soulmates at random and goes looking for a table to sit down. Sokka flips the first book open and starts reading.

*"The beauty of soul-mates lies in their circumstantial rarity. The benevolent spirits involve themselves directly in the life of the recipients, manifesting with them the love, care and wisdom of the spirits when they leave a mark, showing where the spirit realm touches the..."*

Sokka's eyes skim the rest of the page. Just more hogwash. He flips to a different page to see if he can find anything more interesting than outright gushing over the love of the spirits and rolls his eyes. Just the same bullshit, so he grabs another one of his books.

*"It is said that a soul-mark can manifest itself at different times, showing the spirit has chosen a most beautiful devotion towards the way of... Blah blah blah."*

The next book seems to be the same and the fourth one is even worse than the first three combined.

Sokka might as well gorge his eyes out if he has to read even more of this flowery shit. He cracks a smile- Katara would have swooned over all this magical romantically bullshit and Aang would have loved seeing all the devotion to the spirit world in writing. At least Toph would be here to gag over the top alongside with him and...

Tui and La. It hits him then, just how much he misses having his friends around him.

Sokka rubs his temple tiredly and tries to put any thought of his missing friends out of his mind - he does not want to have a break down in the middle of a library.

Sokka sighs and concentrates back on the topic in front of him. So far he has only learned little of importance. The most interesting tit-bit was that soul-marks are supposed to appear when the spirits think that things have been getting off track and they need to intervene to



correct the course of it. Sokka can't even begin to describe how much this information rubs him the wrong way.

Why now and why him? The spirits must be pulling a huge joke when they think that Sokka would be so important to... To what?

He comes up blank.

As he grabs the last book on his pile he almost jumps out of his skin when someone pulls it right out of his hands.

"Don't read that. It's trash." Lee says, interrupting Sokka's musing.

Sokka stares at Lee in confusion and takes another look at the title - it's called love among the dragons. Sokka hadn't really looked at the titles when pulling out books from the shelves - this book seems to be fiction going from the title alone.

Lee sits down next to him and goes on unprompted.

"It's a play about the emperor who gets cursed by a dark spirit because he is jealous of the emperor's soulmate- It's original is such a touching story but this version is just bad and completely misses the point..."

Sokka raises his eyebrows as he looks at Lee surprised. Is he some kind of romantic? What should he say to that?

"Okay? So- you do like plays?" Is all he can gather.

Lee rubs his neck and Sokka swears he looks a bit embarrassed before he schools his face back into a careful neutral mask.

"It's just- the book is trash. Why are you looking at this anyway? ...Are you reading about soulmates?" Lee asks with a look at Sokka's choice of books. Sokka feels caught. He can't very well deny this now with all the evidence on the table saying otherwise. Might as well make conversation then.

"I'm just... looking how soulmarks works. I'm wondering if anyone ever had one they couldn't read. Or what if you never have the chance to meet... what if you have a soulmate you don't like- I think it's bullshit that some spirit can just decide for you like that."

"You won't find books about that here." Lee says like it is obvious and then scratches his chin like he has to think about Sokka's questions.

"It doesn't matter if you can read a soulmark or not. That's not how this works. Soulmates exist because sometimes it's hard. Because you need help. The spirits don't make mistakes when connecting two people."

"Yes, I gathered as much but what does this exactly mean?" Sokka frowns at him.

"Well, sometimes the spirits send us a sign to nudge us in the right direction. Not everyone got a soulmate, but not everyone needs all the help they can get."

Oh. He was right. Lee is a closeted romantic. Sokka has to suppress his gleeful grin. Who would have thought.

Then he has to think about the actual words Lee said. Are the spirits trying to tell him he is just too stupid to find someone on his own? Don't make him laugh.

"So you are telling me if one had a soulmark they can't read, it doesn't matter because the spirits know what they are doing."

Lee nods.

Sokka plays around the fabric around his wrist. All this soulmark rubbish is just so tiresome. He looks around and watches one of the clerks put books back into one of the shelves for a moment.

He then turns back to Lee and - Lee really got such a nice shade of golden eyes, doesn't he?

Lee raises his eyebrow questioning and Sokka flushes at being caught staring.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" He says before he can embarrass himself further.

" - Yes?"

"Why did you take me with you- you could have just told me the direction and let me go on my own instead."

Lee blinks and looks a bit wary at Sokka's question.

"... Jin is my friend and I will never hear the end of it if I'm not trying to be nice to her boyfriend," he grumbles.

Sokka bits his lips to stop himself from laughing out loud - he doesn't want to get shushed again. Lee was trying to be nice to Sokka because he thought -

"Jin is not my girlfriend. She is a friend. She is just helping me out- I had found myself in a tough situation some time ago."

Lee flushes, this time clearly embarrassed at getting it wrong and groans softly.

"Do not tell her I thought that- I will never hear the end of that."

Sokka's shoulder's shake when he tries to keep his laughter quit. Someone clears his throat and gives both of them a mean look.

"Yeah, just make fun of me," Lee grumbles again and Sokka bumps his shoulder into Lee's without thinking about it. He feels warm were they touch.

But it's something Jin is always doing and when Lee bites his lip, Sokka can still see the beginning of a smile he tries to keep to himself. Sokka thinks he doesn't seem to have minded very much. Sokka also thinks that this expression suits him way better than his grumpy default.

"Sorry I'm late," Sokka says to Jin when he comes home and sees that she and her grandma must have eaten dinner already. Jin's gran isn't there right now so Sokka guesses she just went to their neighbors next door, like she does sometimes in the evenings.

"Did you have fun with Lee?" Jin grins when she gives him some of the leftovers and both sit down at the small table.

"It wasn't that bad and- " Sokka starts between bites and swallows down the rest when he sees her face.

" -What?"

"Nothing, just tell me everything. Can't blame me for being curious," Jin says with a smile.

"You sound like you a trying to set us up or something." It is meant as a joke- clearly but Jin shrugs and doesn't even try to look like the joking accusation bothers her.

"Wait- You know that I am joking right- are you for real? Just what gave you that idea? When I told you I don't particular like him? Yes, we must be such a match," he says sarcastically. Jin starts to laugh loudly at this.

"No, I didn't try to set you guys up, I swear! I was just trying to help you guys make friends. I both like you and I find it sad when my own friends can't get along," Sokka nods and relaxes, believing her explanation.

"But now that the thought is on the table- I never managed to set Lee up with one of my girlfriends and I think I did saw him check out some guys once soooo.... maybe think about it?"

Sokka groans at her and she just laughs in his face for this.

It's not even that Sokka can tell her it's a stupid idea because he doesn't like guys. Sokka knows that he thinks Lee is crazily attractive and is absolutely fine with it. It's just that Lee is... Well. He isn't so bad as he first presumed and Sokka did have more fun today then he would have thought.

And now that he is thinking about it, he could even see, given some time that they might, maybe...

No- Sokka- just. No!

No matter if Lee is handsome or not, or is even nice if you squint - Sokka can't just go on and pretend to be a regular refugee, settling down and making a new life for him, when the avatar

is still out there. Sokka can't just forget that he still has some more important things to do, like finding out what has happened to Katara, Toph and Aang.

This should always stay his number one priority- not even all this soulmark stuff is allowed to top that. Sokka subtly tries to change the subject.

"Nah. Lee is way too romantic for me. Did you know that? He kept trying to convince me this one book was trash because it couldn't capture the feeling of the original- " Sokka has to think back a moment before he snaps his fingers.

"Love among the dragons was the title."

Jin raises her eyebrows as she looks at him baffled.

"They have this in the library? Really? I used to love it as a kid and wanted to have it read to me all the time- it's originally fire nation, you know- ", she cuts herself off and Sokka's head snaps to hers, wondering if he misheard her.

"You are not... fire nation, are you?"

Jin looks at him horrified.

"I am *not!*" She says but then she bites her lips and exhales slowly.

"I just... grew up in one of the colonies. And don't go around telling anyone this- please. People always only hear colonies and immediately think fire nation, forgetting that the occupied territories used to be fully earth kingdom once."

Sokka never really thought about it. He knew that the areas used to belong to the earth kingdom but in his mind, once the fire nation laid claim they fully became fire nation, not thinking about all the people who lived there and wouldn't or couldn't leave.

Jin sighs.

"The fire nation really tried to pretend that we are all fire nation there now but my family were all earth citizens through and through and I learned all of the customs and culture in secret growing up. We still were very much treated as inferior and when we had enough money saved up we tried to flee eventually but- ", she stops herself there and Sokka feels for her then.

He remembers that one of the first things she told him was that almost everyone lost someone on the way. And now it's just her and her grandma. It doesn't take lots of detective skills to fill in the rest of the picture.

"I'm not telling anyone, I swear."

Jin smiles relieved and another thought occurs to Sokka unbidden then.

"Is this why you could recognize my mark so easily?"

Jin hums as answer but it sounds more like a question - as if she didn't probably hear him and something about the way she suddenly seems to sit stiffer bothers him. He narrows his eyes at her.

"Say... you can't read imperial signs, can you?"

When Jin doesn't immediately meet his eyes, he can feel the ground shift under him. Sokka grows cold as dread settles into his stomach.

"No. I can't read imperial shorthand," she says but it must sound hollow in her ears too. Sokka knows he shouldn't jump to conclusions but-

"Do you know what my mark says then?"

Jin still can't look him in the eyes as she bites her lips nervously.

"I really can't read imperial... I just know some of the more recognizable words. Like I said I am earth citizen and I wasn't taught it- we fled as I was- "

"Don't just change the subject. Do you know what my mark says. Yes or no? It's not a hard question."

"I...yes," she says in a small voice then and Sokka feels his world tilt sideways.

*"You lied to me!* You could have told me the whole time and yet you didn't say anything!"

Jin gives him a terrified look then and Sokka feels like he stepped on ice where he can already hear it crack under him.

"I meant to tell you! I swear but I didn't know how to breach the subject and then I figured you were better off without knowing. You have to understand- "

"That's not *your* decision to make, *Jin!*" He hisses at her and shit - Jin has done so much for him but he is so angry right now - he hopes he will not say something he is going to regret.

"You don't understand the gravity of the situation Sokka, it's not just about you- " she tries again and he scoffs.

"You have to understand that this isn't just some random name without meaning attached to it - it's not just anyone."

Sokka doesn't like where this is going but now he has to know more than ever. He crosses his arms and waits for her to go on. The dinner on the table has long gone cold - completely forgotten.

"I know that unless you keep up with the royal line of succession nobody bothers to remember the names at the head of this war. Unless you grow up in the fire nation- or the colonies. I guess you don't know that Fire Lord Ozai has two children- the names unique and you can't really go around there, without learning the correlating signs..."

Sokka feels a shiver go down his spine, the foreboding bad feeling growing in intensity. Yet he keeps himself still as he stares at her expressionless.

"Why are you telling me this?" Sokka says and is surprised how flat he sounds.

Jin is still looking at him with a wide, scared expression. Her voice is barely a whisper.

"Sokka- You have the name of the crown prince of the fire nation on your wrist. He is..." She cuts herself off and her face scrunches up.

Sokka nods to indicate that he has heard her and takes a big breath.

What the fuck?!

What the actual. No - no!

Sokka uncrosses his arms and stares at his wrist in horror. That can't be.

Before he can stop himself he tears her hairband off of him, not caring when he can hear the fabric rip.

It is still the same mark he so carefully spend time memorizing.

Sokka would very much want to tear the mark of his wrist, if he only knew how because-

What the fuck. *What the actual fuck?!*

Tui and La just what the-

"You are *joking*," he says weakly then.

She shakes her head as if not understanding him.

The crown- the he can't bring himself to even think it.

What cruel joke is this? He had thought earlier how the spirits thought he might be stupid but- The spirits are just ruthless assholes. The must love playing with him.

"Why should I *trust* you with this? You lied to me- what's saying you are not lying right now too?" He asks her, grappling at straws because she doesn't have proof, it's just her word that he should take for granted- Right? Sokka isn't stupid to fall for that-

"What do I have from lying to you. It's your soulmark- not mine. And look I'm sorry for keeping this from you but this is so much bigger than you could even understand. It's not only- If you don't believe me show your wrist to anyone else, show it to the Dai Li - you will only get yourself arrested instead. I know it was wrong for not telling you but I was only trying to help you!"

Sokka closes his eyes. He can't do this now.

"What's his name?" He interrupts her.

"Sokka..." Jin says so softly and she sounds like she might as well be crying and he wants to be so, so mad at her because she lied about something huge like that but...

He also gets where she is coming from if she is indeed telling the truth - and Sokka doesn't know if he can even trust her anymore - he desperately wants to unlearn everything right this instant. But now there is no turning back again... Now he has to know the rest too.

"What's his name," he asks again more harshly. Jin looks so small, her shoulder's curved inward and he is not letting himself feel sorry for her. He is not!

"Zuko. His name is Zuko."

## Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Jin knew. I bet nobody saw this coming ;)

... So any thoughts?

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

Alternative chapter title for this:

Sokka does lots of mental gymnastics, becomes a master at lying to himself, goes on a date that isn't really a date and realizes he might be the world's biggest idiot.

And since I got ask what Zuko's soulmark is and it doesn't spoil anything, here for everyone: it's a boomerang, but just not on his wrist.

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

*When Sokka is still a kid, he already knows that there is a war out there, but he doesn't really understand what this means. Then the ash starts to fall from the sky and Katara and him loose their mother - yet the war is still, still such a huge unfathomable concept for him to grasp. He knows that bad, terrible things are happening outside their small village too, but... Sokka is only a kid and he has a hard time believing anyone else out there could even be hurting as much as them.*

*Then his father and all the other man leave and Sokka doesn't understand it at all. They are abandoning their village, leaving them behind to fend for themself. It's not making much sense - they should stick together and his sister and him already lost their mum and had barely time to grieve her and now they are loosing their dad too.*

*It just doesn't seem fair.*

*When Katara finds the avatar trapped in an iceberg, Sokka thinks this should have been the most defining moment of his life. It's Aang's responsibility to bring the world back into balance, to stop the war - they should go and save the world but -*

*For Sokka the war still is only this big thing looming in the back that he doesn't understand. Not really. And it already took his mother and it took his father too and now Aang and Katara talk about leaving to find a water bending master...*

*But Aang is just a literal child - they all are. And would it be really so bad to just let them go penguin sliding? To watch Katara and Aang play around with their water bending? Let them be the kids they deserve to be?*



*The war will always be there to fight against another day...*

*Sometimes Sokka wonder's what would have changed if they had felt any sense of urgency.*

*What would have changed if they had left right away instead of staying another year or two or three.*

*But they didn't. They stayed.*

*Sokka learns one big lesson then - one that makes him finally understand why his dad had to leave:*

*The world doesn't wait for a half-baked avatar to take his sweet time mastering the elements.*

*The world doesn't even wait for a single boy to grieve his mother -*

*The war is going on- never stopping and the fire nation is going to devour the rest of the world with it.*

*Sokka learns that the world doesn't stop moving for anything - just because you are not ready to deal with it or you want it to.*

A few days passes at the tea-shop while Sokka goes through the motions.

Realistically Sokka knows that nothing has changed for him. Just because he knows now, whose name is on his wrist, it is still the same mark, still very much there and not going away. It doesn't change that Sokka still needs to figure out where his friends are and above all else...

Sokka still needs to clean those dirty dishes.

Another day passes and he shows up early to his shift and he leaves late. Jin tries to talk to him but there is just nothing to be said. He knows that he should slow down and sort himself out but he doesn't. Sokka is just so sick and tired off all the things that don't make any sense - he is sick and tired of this damn city where nobody ever talks about the damn war that is just right out there and... the tea shop will not stop being any less full just so he can freak out about things he can't even change - might as well make the tables and floors spotless and the tea sets sparkle.

More days passes and Sokka feels Mushi's worried glances and Lee's frown at his back.

But that's fine. Sokka is getting the job done and right now nothing else is allowed to matter more.

Sokka huffs annoyed as his new wristband get's caught on some corner again and he curses the spirits for the countless time for putting him in this spot in the first place.

Yes, he knows that the spirits connect people for a reason and the notion that soulmates are meant to be together exist - that they just need a little help finding each other. But either the spirits don't know what they are doing - and Sokka will never, ever be together with the fire nation's crown prince - the whole idea makes him laugh. And he resents the idea that the spirits can decide for him anyway...

Or the spirits might have been stupidly drunk and he can still disregard their decision altogether.

So, Sokka comes early to his shifts and leaves late instead. Mushi places a cup of tea in front of Sokka and starts with another one of his spiritual wisdoms and Sokka nods along without really listening - he just can't deal with any more of this spirit shit right now. But speaking about spirits... Sokka knows the most spiritual person to exist.

The avatar.

And Aang's job is to return balance to the world and the world is only out of said balance because the fire nation is full of dicks and the son of king dick has his name on Sokka's wrist...

Sokka stops scrubbing the floor to wipe sweat off his brow. He can feel Lee watching him with raised eyebrows again - just as he's gotten in the recent habit of - arms crossed as he leans at the wall. Sokka tries to not pay him any mind, no matter how distracting he is.

Anyway, what if this isn't about him? What if this was never about him?

Now that he thinks about it like that - the mark on his wrist appeared the exact same day he got separated from his friends - from the avatar. That can't be mere coincidence, *right?*

And he is going to find Aang and he will help him end the hundred year war - and since it's the father of the prince he is somehow connected to - the father they are going to defeat - it just simply means that.

It means Sokka will help Aang end the war.

And just because it is implied doesn't mean his soul mark is any kind of romantic link. It's just a spiritual connection when things have fallen out of place, if he remembers the texts at the library correctly, right?

This means he just has to figure out why exactly him but... Sokka guesses that things will start to make sense once he finds Aang again.

So.

So. He can see that. Sokka can see it all rather clearly now. He can even live with that fact - is glad to figure that one out. There is not going to be any kind of magical faceless fire nation girl he should met and fall in love with - the spirits don't get to decide that for him. He is free to make any choices on his own.

And when in his mind all the pieces start to fall into place - for the first time since the night he confronted Jin's lie - Sokka feels like he can finally breathe again.

"Hey, want to grab something to eat afterwards together?" He ask Lee on a whim without really thinking hard about it, as their latest shift is nearing it's end.

It's Pai Sho night again, so they are closing earlier and even if Sokka has everything figured out he still doesn't really want to go back to Jin's place to face her so soon. At this point, staying angry at her is a choice he is making.

Lee looks at him wary and stops sweeping the front room.

"*Why?*" He ask and sounds like he thinks Sokka might have some nefarious plan for him. Sokka shrugs as he goes to wipe down another table.

"Why not? We've been working together for a while now and I think we we did get off on the wrong foot... Maybe I just want to go out with you so I can get to know you better."

Sokka turns to Lee and sees him grabble with the broom as he must have lost his grip. He gives Sokka a startled look.

Sokka frown's confused. Is is so weird to ask your co-worker out for after work dinner? Maybe it's some Ba Sing Se custom he isn't getting? Well he can ask Jin later when...

Nope. He is not going to ask Jin - he can't just forget that he is still mad at her. Sokka looks at Lee expectant.

"...O-kay?" Lee says. But he doesn't sound too sure.

"It's a date then! Great- Looking forward to later!" Sokka flashes him a big reassuring grin, trying to convey that he is just being friendly before going into the kitchen to grab the trash bag.

He hears Lee curse surprised behind him as apparently does loose his grip and the broom falls on the floor with a clatter.

"...So where do you want to go?" Lee ask's him after they closed down the shop and Lee locked the door.

Sokka shrugs a bit lost. He didn't have many opportunities to eat out and Jin's grandma always has dinner for him ready too. Sokka doesn't really know any place where they could go.

"I don't know. Anything with enough meat is good enough for me, just pick something," Sokka says.

"Okay... Do you like spicy food?"

"Oh yeah. Spicy is fine- lead the way," he says and they start walking towards the district with the big market. Sokka got himself lost in when he first left the upper ring.

Nobody says anything as they walk in silence and it is a bit awkward as Lee keeps giving him glances. Sokka does wonder if it really is so strange that they should grab a dinner together. He knows he wasn't the nicest in the beginning and Lee just tolerates him because he is Jin's friend too. But then - Lee could have just said no to him, right?

The place already smells mouthwatering when they enter. They sit down on a table in the corner and Sokka looks at the menu undecided what he is in the mood for. Maybe some curry?

Lee taps nervously with his foot under the table when he suddenly blurts out.

"Did you- have a fight with Jin?"

Was it that obvious? Sokka shrugs not wanting to go into the details.

"What makes you think that?"

"She hasn't picked you up in a while and...you have been act- I'm just wondering."

"- it wasn't necessarily a fight. She just lied to me about something I found important and I needed to sort myself out."

Lee frowns.

"Jin *lied* to you? That doesn't sound like her."

"Nah, it's fine, I guess. I *do* understand where she was coming from. It just shook my trust in her ... but then she has helped me out in so many ways and I'm just stalling making up with her right now."

Sokka may still be a bit angry but while thinking about everything he realized that he does trust her still. Trusts her enough to realize she would never make up something so huge. And she did help him with so much after all, gave him food and a roof over his head when he had nothing - she could have sold him out to the Dai Li the right moment they met instead and yet she helped him hide.

Sokka is not going to apologize for needing time to think, but he still feels guilty for avoiding her for so long. He knows he must make up with her, eventually. Because now that Sokka sees everything with more clarity... he may not like it, but he can completely understand why she did lie.

Who wouldn't freak out at finding a *soulmark* that bears this *name*?

Zuko. *Prince* Zuko, his mind supplies.

Sokka's right thumb softly brushes over the new wraps he has on his wrist under the table. Just to make sure it's still there, of course and not because he found comfort in the act. For a fleeting moment - and not for the first time - he wonders what mark the... prince must have of him. They don't really use writings like that in the south but then... It shouldn't matter, as this got nothing to do with him, personally - right?

Anyway, Sokka really shouldn't think about some faceless prince of dicks, who is probably ugly as sin, when he can look at Lee instead - whose got a pretty face Sokka does enjoy looking at - even with the scar and the permanent grumpy expression.

Sokka puts his elbows on the table and puts any thought about his cursed mark out of his mind and decides to focus on the moment.

Lee hums.

"I don't know what this may have been about- She does like to stick her nose where it doesn't belong... But she always means well."

"Exactly," He says and Lee nods. But then nobody says anything else and another awkward silence follows.

Sokka drums with his fingers on the table until the waitress comes to take their orders.

When Lee still doesn't say much of anything else afterwards, Sokka can't stand it any longer and starts to talk, picking a topic totally at random.

"Have I told you of that earth bender friend of mine?" Of course he hasn't. He didn't exactly have many conversations with Lee until now.

"When we met her, she single handedly ran an illegal underground earth bending fighting ring- The Earth Rumble it was called."

Lee raises both his brows.

"Er- what?" He says confused.

"Yeah, she started to participate when she was like twelve or so and became the champion, then she took over."

"When she was- how old is your friend? Just what- where were her parents, they can't just have allowed her to- " Sokka leans forward and smirks at Lee's hooked interest.

"Oh, she should be around sixteen now- You bet her parents were not amused when they found out. We were there and witnessed when they kicked her out. It was a huge thing. But that's not the best part- " Sokka continues to talk but quietens his voice a bit - making Lee lean forward to him too, as Lee looks at him in suspension, clearly invested in Sokka's words.

Sokka suddenly - surprising himself - feels *giddy* with having that much attention from Lee focused on him.

"The reason why she did all this, was so she could find worthy students for the metal bending academy that she was starting."

Lee stares at him for a moment longer and then a tiny disbelieving laugh escapes him.

"Now you are having me. No one can metal bend. It doesn't exist."

Sokka smiles when he has to think back about the wonder that is Toph.

"Oh, of course it exist , she invented it after all... She might as well be the best earth bender in the world. You are going to hear from her eventually- Toph Beifong. Don't forget her name," he says proudly and Lee still looks dubious but nods.

The waitress comes back with their food and just in time as Sokka's stomach rumbles. His plate looks even more delicious than it smells and he happily digs in.

"This is was a great idea to come here!" Sokka says to Lee and both continue to eat in silence - but this time it is anything but awkward.

"So, who is we?" Lee asks eventually just as he swallows down a bite and Sokka frowns.

"We?"

"Yeah, when you said you met your earth bender. You said 'we'."

Sokka pauses, grabs his drink and takes a sip as he wonders how he should answer that.

"My sister and a friend. We traveled together before. We flew all the way from the south pole and..."

"Wait- You are not northern water tribe?"

"No, why did you think that?"

"Just because- Oh- I just thought... You don't even hear anything from the south and the- fire nation... Well you know what happened - all the water tribe refugees are from the north- I just assumed... Sorry." He says and rubs his neck a bit embarrassed. It's kind of a cute look on him, Sokka decides.

"It's fine," he says but can't keep himself from frowning.

He can still remember the bitter taste when news of the fire nations attack of the northern water tribe reached them. Of the destruction of Agna Qel'a.

He'll never forget how guilty Aang felt for failing in his responsibility, as he tried to steal himself away in the middle of the night - they didn't even get proper time to pack and say goodbye before Katara and he left everything behind with Aang.

"Why did you leave the south then?"

Sokka hums and looks around the small restaurant not looking at anything particular as he starts to play around with his napkin.

"... My sister and my... other friend are water benders, they are self-taught and we always assumed we would go to the northern water tribe to look for a master eventually. We just thought that we had all the time in the world. But then the north was attacked and it was a huge wake-up call that we had to leave. I couldn't just let them go on their own, so I came with them..."

Sokka is surprised that he isn't even lying. Aang is a water bender and they did leave to find master's for him after all.

Lee opens his mouth to ask something but pauses and then seems to think better of it. Sokka refolds the napkin and lays it back on the table.

"Where...are your friends now?" Lee ask softly instead.

"...I don't know," Sokka says and ignores the huge lump in his throat. That's the big question isn't it? It's not like Sokka isn't trying to figure it out but there are still those nasty rumors and he can't just go around asking everyone about the avatar.

The awkward silence that follows is even worse now and Lee looks so uncomfortable for asking. Sokka knows that Lee must jump to his own conclusions but he doesn't have it in him to argue that point right now.

Lee clear his throat.

"I- almost visited the south pole once, when I traveled with my uncle. We where on a boat but- I decided there was nothing there for me... So we never went..." he says haltingly but there is some gravity behind his words that makes Sokka frown. He wants to ask about it but something stops the right words from forming.

Sokka shifts his weight on his chair, his foot, then brushes against Lee's leg under the table on accident and Lee startles and flushes.

It wasn't Sokka's intention but it puts the morose expression off of Lee's face as his attention shifts back to Sokka. He gives Lee a small smile and doesn't bother to remove his foot as he thinks about anything else he could say to that. It takes a moment but then Lee relaxes again and Sokka feels like he just won a small victory.

"Eh- you didn't miss much. It's mostly just cold. I do prefer the earth kingdom's weather and temperatures- well.. expect the desert. Dreadful place. Should I tell you about that one time I was high on cactus juice when we where traveling through the desert? It started when -"  
Sokka begins and seamlessly changes the topic and when he sees Lee trying hard not to crack a smile, Sokka's goal of the evening just becomes making Lee laugh out loud at least once.

He still has is foot against Lee's leg. Lee is captivated by Sokka's words and Sokka tells himself that the heat that pools in his stomach is only from the spicy food and not the way Lee's eyes focus on him.

"Hey this was great, let's do this again some time," he says when they leave. Sokka's hand finds Lee's arm then, so they don't get separated in the evening crowd as they walk back down the busy street in their shared direction. Lee flushes and mumbles something to him that may sound like an affirmation and Sokka bumps his shoulder into his in a friendly way.

"See you tomorrow for our next shift?"

"... Yeah. Good night," Lee says softly and Sokka flashes him another big smile and waves, before both go their respective ways back home.

Sokka can't wait to tell Jin about this.

He has decided that enough is enough with his childishness and he will start talking to her again. What better way than telling her that he managed to go to dinner with Lee without anyone hurdling any insults at each other or so.

Maybe she was right and they really might become friends. Sokka is still surprised that they got along so well - not that he really learned a lot about Lee - just the bits and pieces that make for an interesting picture.

Lee who so very much adores his uncle but hates working for him, yet he never leaves.

Lee who never talks about his past life to anyone but told Sokka that he had traveled before.

Lee who had a terrible past, has some weird hang ups about the avatar and gets so annoyed at everything in general - who has such a huge chip on his shoulder and yet he let Sokka casually touch him all evening like it is nothing.

Lee who is also so distractingly handsome and had kept looking at Sokka all evening with a look that sends shivers down his spine...

He would be lying if he said he wasn't intrigued by him and wants to fill out the huge open gaps in the puzzle that seems to be Lee.

Sokka whistles a happy tune as he takes a shortcut to Jin's place.

She is going to laugh when he tells her. She will tease him then, that this evening sounds just like a first date or some shit just because she never could set up Lee with one of her girlfriends. Sokka will roll his eyes at her stupid take on them just being friendly with each other, while he is going to take her step for step through the evening telling her why she is wrong...

Sokka stops walking in the middle of the street and someone bumps into him.

"Watch it, you idiot!" He ignores the curses of the man.

Now that Sokka thinks back about it all... This wasn't a date, was it? He clearly told Lee that he meant it in a friendly way only, when he said he wanted to go to dinner together, right?



Sokka is suddenly not so sure anymore.

He can already hear Jin laugh in his face so clearly. But it doesn't matter what Jin thinks this is. It's only important that Lee doesn't misunderstand and...

Tui and La.

Lee does know this wasn't a date, right?

*Right?*

## Chapter End Notes

Sokka: my soulmark? Oh yeah, that's got nothing to do with me. I'm all good.

Also Sokka: just because I said date, doesn't mean it's a date-date.

—

I spend hooours looking for the perfect word pun with spicy food, couldn't find any that I liked and scraped the whole idea.

On a more positive note- I might just drive myself mad by having to use the name Lee instead of Zuko all the time.

Can't the boys just hurry it up and get their shit together faster? Urgh. I can't even...

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

I added a guesstimated chapter-count but it can and probably will change so idk how important that addition is.

Also, this chapter was incredibly hard to write, so the pacing might be all over the place for a bit - sorry in advance.

Now get ready to welcome the angst.

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

Jin does laugh in his face.

Loudly.

And then she does not stop laughing when Sokka tells her everything the next morning and he grumbles at her. Yet he can't bring himself to be really mad at her again for this, because they had just made up last night and this is such a minor thing to be mad at, all things considering.

Yes, He get's it. He was an idiot but it's not *that* funny.

"Oh, come on Sokka, you even called it a date- that's so on you."

Sokka groans and gives her an exasperated look, one that she shrugs off with a grin.

"Why would he even say yes in the first place- we haven't been exactly getting along greatly before."

Jin grins as she stops to inspect another leek. Sokka puts the basket with all their shoppings down so he can rub his neck - they have long since moved the shelf in the storage room, so he has a bit more space, but Sokka still wakes up feeling all tense. If the city wasn't so packed with all these refugees, he would have better luck finding another place to sleep.

"Maybe just ask him?" She says with fondness and they continue going down the street to pick up the rest of the groceries for her grandma.

"I bet he is honestly really charmed by you - and there I invested so much time trying to set him up with someone and all I had to do was pick up some random cute stray from the streets."

"Oh yeah, *very funny*."

She laughs again and Sokka tries to keep his face from cracking a smile at seeing her joy - even if it is at his expense - but it is so good to have her back to talk to.

"Well, at least you got a nice evening out of it. Just tell him it's a misunderstanding. Lee won't take it so hard. I promise."

Sokka sighs. It's mortifying is what it is. But if she says it will be fine, then it will probably be fine. She knows Lee better than him.

"Maybe..."

"Or...or - hear me out there- you don't and see were this leads? From the sound of it, it was a rather nice date. You said you even held hands at the end of it," she says cheekily and Sokka groans yet again.

He would bury his face into his hands, if he weren't currently carrying anything. He rolls his eyes heavenwards instead and wonders what he did to deserve to suffer this conversation.

Oh yeah, wait. He knows what he did. Sokka should have never let that evening happen - and it wouldn't if he had not been so preoccupied with his thoughts.

Sokka can even accept that maybe Lee and him did have indeed some nice vibes going on or whatever - but he can't just go and casually date someone right now.

"We did not hold hands! I only grabbed his arm for like a second or so," he says at last.

"Uh-hu, *sure*."

Jin starts laughing all anew at the face he must have been making. Can she just stop being so happy in the face of his misery?

"I will just talk to him and tell him it's a misunderstanding - you know that I can't just go on dates - This is all just temporary - once I figure out where my friends are, I will have to leave."

"Sokka..."

Jin's expression finally sobers and she gives him that one look he hates so much.

"- you've been staying with us for well over two months now... and you haven't heard anything, maybe you should think that there is a possibility that - " She pauses and Sokka readjust his grip on the basket.

He knows what she is implying. And she is *wrong*. She doesn't know Katara, Aang and Toph - doesn't know what they are capable of.

"I'm just saying your friends would have found you by now..." Jin says so achingly soft to him.

"Well, maybe they were unable to look for me until now? I will find them again, just you wait."

Jin sighs but doesn't say anything else and the teasing mood is fully gone as they finish the rest of the shopping in silence.

Sokka is sure his friends are trying to find him right now... but if they are captive somewhere, then Sokka just has to get to them first- he needs to stop dilly-dallying and start his search in earnest.

Making up his mind Sokka decides that he is going to talk to Lee later. And when he finally finds his friends again he will never, ever mention this embarrassing story to them.

Sokka tries to clear the air as soon as Lee and him are putting on their aprons for their shift.

"About yesterday..."

"What about it?" Lee fastens the tie in the front and glances at Sokka. Lee's face doesn't give away anything he might be thinking and Sokka doesn't know how to interpret his look.

What if he let Jin's teasing get to him and it really was just in his head? Lee would have said no to him if he was thinking it truly was a date, right? And Sokka is always a tactile person anyway - maybe Lee didn't think twice about Sokka being touchy with him all evening.

"Nothing, just, was nice," Sokka mumbles. Lee shrugs and goes on about his work.

"So, do you..." Sokka starts some days later, when he catches Lee watching him yet again, just as he dries off the handful of freshly cleaned dishes. Lee immediately turns away, being caught staring at him but Sokka can still see him flush slightly.

Okay... Sokka is not stupid. He knows that it can't be in his head only - he can remember how Lee looked at him all evening - how he's been looking at Sokka the last week. How he may have looked at Sokka even before that, if he is honest. And Sokka can recognize the start of the spark he has been feeling, for a lack of better words. There was some kind of... chemistry between them. That's just basic signs of attraction. And he knows he thinks Lee is stupidly attractive- maybe it's mutual - that wouldn't have anything to do with liking each other- even if they share some surprisingly pleasant conversation.

It would be so easy to just heed Jin's advice and not say anything, to see where this leads- right?

But no. He really can't.

"- need help with that?"

Lee looks at his tray with the single teapot on it and frowns confused as he steps into the front room.

Sokka takes a glance around the corner and sees the single customer of the day they are having. He can hear Lee start arguing with the man, in his usual rude tone then. And when Sokka dries off his hands, uncle Mushi asks for another game of Pai Sho - and everything is like it just always is.

And okay he get's it. He is making things awkward when they don't have to be, so maybe the discussion should just wait.

Sokka gets the board from the cupboards and maybe it isn't even that important and this thing between them, that may or may not be in his head will fizzle out to nothingness.

Sokka's neck and ears grows warm when he can feel Lee's eyes on him as he steps into the back, just as Sokka makes his opening move.

Yeah, an maybe Sokka is going to be the next King of Omashu.

It takes another handful of days of Sokka watching Lee watch him back - both clearly waiting for the other to do something - before Sokka can't stand it any longer.

He is taking his break, getting fresh air in the alley behind the tea shop when Lee steps through the backdoor to take out the trash. He mumbles something when he sees Sokka and Sokka is so done with the awkwardness.

"Hey about that other evening..." Sokka says and Lee glances at him.

"You know, I hope you don't- misunderstood. I was just trying to make friends- "

Lee nods as he puts the bag on the pile but his face looks so carefully blank and Sokka rushes on, trying to explain himself.

"... I mean, I don't know if you would even be interested in dating... because, well I'm a guy. But Jin is teasing me about it and it must have gotten to my head and I didn't want to send out the wrong signals and I'm really trying not too- but that has nothing to do with you, because I had a lot of fun and wouldn't mind going out again. If you were even interested, that is, but I really can't because I plan to leave Ba Sing Se again as soon as I am able to, so yeah - I gotta stop rambling now."

Sokka wants to bash his head against the wall behind him. He wasn't always this awkward around people he finds attractive, was he? Well he hopes not, because then he finds himself feeling sorry for Katara if she ever had to witness something so embarrassing like this.

"I'm not... I don't usually do this-" Lee says haltingly and Sokka frowns.

"What? Rambling?"

"Making ...friends? Going on... -on dates." He sounds so, so awkward and tries his best not to look at Sokka and Sokka bites his lips because it's incredibly cute. Sokka bumps his shoulder into Lee's and Lee gives him a questioning glance.

Sokka's eyes - without his permission then - dart to Lee's lips for a second. He is sure Lee must still have noticed, because he wets his lips looking nervous and if Sokka would lean in a bit he could just...

Sokka freezes.

What the fuck is wrong with him? They had gone on one single date - yes a rather nice date, but it's not any reason to just throw himself at someone who he was so convinced he couldn't stand just a week ago. And he just now had told Lee that he planned to leave the city anyway.

And Sokka can't just... His friends are still out there, they are! He cannot just go on pretending to be someone he is not. Sokka is not a common refugee and he will not abandon his friends just because he thinks Lee got nice eyes. Sokka takes a small step back and flashes Lee a grin that feels fake.

He probably most likely just needs to get laid, that's gotta be it.

Sokka takes a small step back and flashes Lee a grin that feels fake.

"So, *friends* then?" He squeaks.

"*Sure*," Lee says sounding rather half-heartedly.

When Jin marches in with a big grin later that day Sokka already has a bad feeling.

"Hey guys, are you done soon? Because we are going out tonight!"

"We do?"

"Yeah! You two, me and some friends of mine - there is some street festival at the fountain square in the middle ring. I forgot I hadn't ask you because we weren't talking for a while and now you have to make up for it."

Does he have to? It's not that he isn't interested in the local events, but he is tired out after his shift and nervous about spending more time with Lee - what if he makes a fool out of himself again? He's currently not really trusting himself on that front.

He turns to Lee, expecting him to turn Jin down, wanting to chime in on whatever will be his excuse.

Lee only frowns.

"That was today?"

"Yup- and don't look at me like that, you would have bailed if I had remembered you about it before now,"

Lee sighs and when he sees Sokka's questioning look he grumbles.

"She just bullies me until I give in. It's easier to just go along."

"Damn right I would!"

"Okay, fine let me just..." Sokka says stalling as his stomach makes an unexpected somersault in strange anticipation for the evening.

"You can just head out right away. I can take care of the rest- Have fun kids!" Uncle Mushi calls across the room with a twinkle in his eyes. When he glances at Lee, he sees him send his uncle a glare.

Sokka is acting ridiculous. He told Lee that they could be friends and Sokka can stick to that - and it will be fun finally meeting Jin's other friends.

They can already hear music from some streets away and when they reach the square, Sokka sees a lot of young people mingling and seeming to have fun.

"You have been holding out on me," Sokka says and finally feels exited about this. Jin leads them through the crowd as she looks for her girlfriends.

"Hey- Here we are!" Jin suddenly yells and waves her arm at someone.

Two familiar looking girls then push their way through the crowd to the three of them. The two greet him and for a moment Sokka wonders where he saw them before. But then he recognizes them as the girls from the tea-shop - the ones that were fussing all over Lee when Sokka had just started working there.

"So - this are my friends Ako and Heyong - and this is the ominous Sokka I told you guys about."

"Nice to met you," Sokka says as Lee grunts in greeting.

"You didn't mention what a cutie he is Jin! And you- don't just hide him away in that tea-shop of yours," Ako, the smaller on, says to Lee with a fluttering of her lashes as she casually brushes his arm and then she gives Sokka a wink.

He keeps himself from huffing- it comes back to him how annoyed he was of her blatant flirting with Lee then too.

Sokka turns to Jin and sports her mischievous grin. He indicates a head-shake towards her because whatever she wants to say can't mean anything good for him.

"Oh don't bother with him- Sokka's interest lies fully within the tea-shop at the moment."

*What the fuck Jin?!*

He glares at her but she shrugs innocently. Then he catches Lee's eyes and sees the man is already looking at Sokka and he flushes, remembering their conversation from earlier.

He kinda did tell Lee that he was interested, somewhere between all his rambling, didn't he?

He looks back at the girls instead.

Ako must have come to some conclusion and apparently the wrong one - or the one Jin wanted to imply when her eyes glide between him and Lee before.

"Oh. *Oh*. ... You don't mean- ?"

Is everyone just going along with this insane narrative?

Tui and La.

Yeah. He can kinda see why Lee doesn't have any interests in any of them.

"I think I might need some cactus juice to get through this evening..." he mutters to himself lowly and without thinking about it and bites his lip when he surprisingly hears Lee snort softly next to him.

Jin finally seems to take mercy on him.

"So, shall we?" Jin asks louder and takes the lead, pulling Ako and Heyong with her.

They walk down the street through the crowd and Sokka suddenly really wants to grab onto Lee's arm as he is walking next to Sokka, but he keeps himself from it. Sokka has done it before- it wouldn't be such a big deal, but Sokka can't just go on, sending out such mixed signals - it's just not fair towards Lee.

Ako turns to him again, and thankfully saves him from doing anything stupid.

"So since you have been staying with Jin for some time, I guess you already heard that the avatar was in Ba Sing Se before- "

Sokka smiles a bit pained.

What's with everyone and their need to gossip? He does not want to talk about Aang right now. Sokka wonders fleetingly, if throttling Jin's friend would count as doing something stupid.



"Yes. We've all heard. The avatar is gone or what ever, seriously is there nothing else to gossip about?"

Especially because the rumors aren't even *true*!

"Oh, you sound like Lee, he hates having the avatar brought up, makes him look all constipated. But fine, tell me about yourself then?" Ako says and falls into step next to him and her arm brushes his. He isn't sure if this is just a coincidence.

Sokka can feel Lee so clearly watching them from the other side of his.

"What do you want to know?"

"What's with that?" She asks as her finger's pull on his wrappings and he pulls his arm out of her grasp.

Sokka keeps himself from groaning - can't he forget about that thing, for even one single evening? Apparently this Ako's goal for the evening is to bring up all the topics, he tries very hard to forget about.

He knows that Ako is Jin's friend and just trying to make conversation but right now she isn't endearing herself to him in any shape or form.

"It's a just a mark from some fire bender- can we not..."

Sokka thought Jin was deep in conversation with this Heyong but then she sends him a raised eyebrow over her shoulder, clearly having heard.

But there isn't much to wonder about and Sokka is sticking with this vision. He guesses that this prince of his - no, not *his* prince - absolutely not his prince - this Zuko guy would have to be a fire bender. So it's not even a lie he is telling.

"Oh, a burn mark like Lee's scar? Is it so prominent too?" She says and Sokka decides then and there, that he doesn't like her at all.

Lee doesn't visible react, he just keeps on walking as if he didn't have heard or noticed. Sokka thinks he probably must always notice. The girl can't seriously be surprised that Lee refutes any attempts of her flirting then, can she?

"Yeah, sure, *exactly like that*," he says quietly and the sarcasm might have gone just right over her head. Sokka decides then, to hell with it and grabs onto Lee's arm to give it a squeeze.

They finally stop in front of some stalls to look at nicknacks. Jin pulls Ako along so they can get some sweat treats for their group and Sokka let's go of Lee.

Heyong smiles shyly at him.

"Jin told me you were traveling with friends before you came to Ba Sing Se. That must have been nice. Did you met any powerful benders?"

"Yeah it was good. We flew all over the earth kingdom. Let's see..." Sokka smiles and turns to Lee, giving him a wink as he pretends to think about it. Lee bites back a grin and Sokka suddenly remembers how he sounds when he does laugh out loud, as rare as it is. Sokka kinda hopes he will be able to make him laugh tonight again too.

Maybe this evening is salvageable still.

"Oh, right - I met the most powerful earth bender in the world and then became her friend too."

Heyong giggles, taking Sokka's words as mere hyperbole.

"And your other friends, were they benders too?"

"Jup," he says popping the sound and wants to change the topic when Jin and Ako step back to them with their hands full.

"So, where are your friends now?" Ako asks, having heard them and Sokka laughs uncomfortable.

"I don't know exactly. We got separated and I haven't seen them since."

"Oh. They died then," Ako says and Sokka freezes as Jin groans.

"Ako, you can't just- " Jin starts arguing but Sokka isn't in the mood any longer for this.

"They... sorry- " Sokka turns on his heels, without another word, not caring that Jin is calling after him.

He pushes through the crowd, all the way back until he reaches the fountain.

Sokka places a hand in front of his eyes. He feels nauseous. Ako is wrong of course, they didn't.... What is it about today, that makes all the shitty topics come up?

Sokka takes a deep breath and then sees Lee tentative steps next to him looking out of place and a bit awkward.

"- I... wanted to make sure you are okay... But I can go if you want to."

"Did Jin send you- No, of course she did," he snaps back and rubs his face exhausted.

"Sorry," Sokka says immediately. It's not Lee's fault and Jin means well but right now he isn't in the mood for any kind of games or matchmaking schemes or whatever else she is playing. His mood is well and truly soured and the only thing that wasn't totally bad today was-

"... I guess you were just looking for an excuse to leave too? We can go, if you like- Although I don't think I'm good company right now."

Lee nods but some expression crosses his face and he hesitates.

"Just...come on dude, it's better when I'm not alone with my head right now anyway," Sokka sighs and doesn't wait for Lee to follow him.

They walk in silence for a few streets until they can barely hear the music any longer.

"And I thought Jin was so noisy- her friends are even worse."

"You learn to tune them out. Ako isn't normally that bad. It's just so common to lose someone among the refugees - and she can be rather blunt about things."

"That's still not nice- how she just..." Sokka looks at Lee, not wanting to bring it up, indicating his scar and he can see how Lee's jaw sets.

"That's not the worst way to talk about it," and Sokka turns to stare at him.

"That's the bar you set? Not the worst?"

"Well, most people can't stop staring or ask rudely. Ako is not mean about things, just direct."

When Sokka must look all appalled at him, Lee shrugs a bit helpless.

"It's fine- I'm used to it."

"Well, they just shouldn't. You shouldn't. Things like that...it's nobody's business."

"Are you...." Lee starts then, but doesn't continue his words and they walk again in silence when Sokka doesn't ask.

They turn a handful of other streets until the tea shop finally comes into view. Sokka guesses he will say goodnight here and go further along to Jin's place. He hopes her grandma will be asleep already and not asking why he came back without Jin.

And it's not like he is looking forward to sleeping in his storage room, where he will be alone with his thought all night, anyway.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah?"

"Jin said you've been staying here for a while- Can you really see yourself staying in Ba Sing Se?"

He's not even sure why he brings it up - it's not like Sokka will have to stay here, because the rest of the Gaang...

Lee looks at him strangely.

"Uncle likes it here. Why do you ask?"

"Not important- So you don't?" Sokka already knows the answer to that.

"That's irrelevant- there is no other place I can go."

"You truly think that? You see yourself forever serving tea here? Don't you want other things for yourself? Aren't you sick of pretending of being only your uncle's nephew and nothing else?"

Suddenly there is an avalanche of expressions dancing over Lee's face. Too quick and too many for Sokka to understand but Lee looks panicked.

"I don't... Uncle likes it here- " Lee says as his eyes keep darting around.

Sokka raises his brows. He doesn't know if he should even ask about it and decides not to for the moment.

"Yes, but what do you want? You can't tell me your dream is to serve tea? You could go out there and be anyone... you could- "

"You don't understand. I owe my uncle a lot. And I am not leaving him- "

"I get that, okay you are not leaving but I don't think this will make you happy. Don't you think your uncle would want you to be happy?"

Lee looks back at him and frowns deeply.

"Just what brought this on?"

Sokka flops down on the front stairs of the tea shop and after a moment Lee tentatively sits down next to him.

"You heard Ako- my friends they... they... I'm trying to stay positive and hope that they are still out there but I don't know where they are, if they are alive or captive- if I will ever see them again or if I am stuck here. Cursed to stay in this shitty city forever - washing dishes, *being brand-* Here where everyone drinks tea and gossips about the death of the avatar like it doesn't impact the whole world, here where everyone goes to street festivals completely ignoring that there is still this damn fucking war- "

Suddenly Lee's hand clams over his mouth, stopping Sokka from ranting as Lee looks at him intensely.

"... I know how hard it can be to accept the fate of loved ones. I am sorry for your loss. But... there *is no war* in Ba Sing Se," Lee says forceful but not without kindness and he wonders for a moment if Lee had lost someone too.

Sokka swallows as he stares back at him.

Lee is right. Can't even talk about the war that is taking and taking and taking until Sokka has nothing left, because the Dai Li has his ears and eyes everywhere and...

*It's been weeks.*

It's that sudden thought that cuts through Sokka's mind with a burning clarity.

Sokka hasn't heard or seen anything from the Dai Li since that one day. Shouldn't they have come looking for him? Why did never anyone ever come looking for him.

Not unless they already got what they wanted.

Sokka feels like he got dunked into cold, icy water. How could he have been so stupid - he is supposed to be the smart one - he has all the plans and everything but...

He willfully ignored all the signs right in front of him just because he didn't want it to be true. It suddenly hits him. Ako was right - the rumors are right.

The avatar is truly death.

He has heard it, but he couldn't believe it because this would also mean...

Aang, Toph...

His baby sister, they all...

*They are gone.*

Sokka will never see his friends again. He truly is a lost war refugee in Ba Sing Se now.

And the cherry on top of the only-for-him-hand-crafted nightmare - he is literal branded by the fire nation - by the crown prince like he is some...

This isn't about the avatar, it was never about the avatar because Aang is gone and the only one left is *him*. This means...

The spirits branded him just like he is the personal property of the family who is currently trying to burn down the world. Like he isn't even a person of his own, like he...

Sokka's mind starts to reel. All the things he had been pushing down...

He needs to do something. He needs to just-

The spirit's aren't allowed to decide for him, not when they gave him their big fuck-you-in-particular of their gift.

Lee frowns and his expression shifts minuscule.

"Are you...?" Lee asks- Lee, who right now feels like he might be the only thing real in front of Sokka. Who Sokka just today called them friends - who Sokka went on a date on. Lee,

who Sokka thinks is unfairly handsome and Sokka can also acknowledge that there is at least something between them - Lee who is still looking at Sokka wearingly.

Sokka is suddenly hit by the realization how irrationally much he wants him.

They stare at each other. Lee slowly pulls back his hand but Sokka reaches up and grabs his wrist.

He rubs his thumb over the pulse point absentmindedly like he does with his own wrist. Lee grows stiff and his hand slacks in Sokka's hold. Something shifts in the air and he swears Lee must be holding his breath.

And Sokka really, really needs his mind to shut the fuck up now or he might just fully fall apart. So he does this instead:

He touches Lee's shoulders not particular caring that this may be a colossal stupid move on his part and pulls him closer.

And when he moves against Lee- at first clumsy and testing his mind sings *finally* - he grows bolder and suddenly it's all teeth and bite and tongue and Sokka feels an electric spark going up his spine at the realization that Lee kisses him back with the same fervor.

Sokka pulls back and exhales deeply, grasping for air. Lee chases the kiss and looks at him with a mixture of want and uncertainty and his breath is so hot on Sokka's face.

"Are you sure? Earlier you said- " he sounds wrecked and Sokka can't believe that *he* just did that.

"Yes. Forget what I said," and Sokka- yes. Yes he is. He's made up his mind.

"But what about- " Lee frowns and throws a glance at Sokka's wrist.

"What- This? I am not letting anyone else decide for me what I should want. This means *nothing* to me," Sokka spats and can't bring himself to care that Lee seemingly has figured out what this might mean. Lee pauses still but his expression shifts.

"*Okay*," he says with some finality to the word and then he kisses Sokka again, hot and wanting as Sokka's hands find their way into his hair.

Sokka has no idea how it leads to them stumbling up the stairs to the apartment above the tea-shop. He kicks his shoes off and Lee shoves him against the door as he places hot kisses along his jaw and Sokka mumbles encouraging words of *yes, yes yes-*

He wonder's for the tiniest moment where uncle Mushi- You know what? Right now he doesn't care.

Lee pulls Sokka backwards with him, and they stumble further into the room.

Sokka pushes his hands under Lee's shirt and his skin feels almost searingly hot under his fingers and then Lee makes a sound in the back of his throat that shoots right down to Sokka's-

*Tui and La.*

Why didn't they just do that right from the beginning?

Lee grabs his ass and Sokka gasps into another kiss. Sokka pulls his hands back and goes for Lee's waistband - forget the damn shirt- the pants should come off first.

And there was Sokka trying to wrack his head all these days, wondering if he had been imagining things between the two of them, when they could have done this the whole time instead...

He can already hear Katara laugh at him-

"Stop. Hey stop - are you... " Lee suddenly says with urgency.

Sokka looks confused at Lee as he lets go of Sokka. His golden eyes look blown huge, his dark hair is a mess and just why did he stop going on with the program?

Lee touches Sokka's face with trembling fingers and Sokka's cheeks feel like they might be wet.

"Oh. *Shit.*" He hears Lee mutter to himself as he stares at Sokka horrified.

Sokka stares back as it dawns on him.

"If it's any consolation to you- Im not crying because you are a shitty kisser..." And Sokka laughs all wet and broken because he doesn't know what else he could say to save this moment.

## Chapter End Notes

Speaking of hurrying it up last chapter...

Did I mention this is not going to be a slow-burn but rather a giving into physical attraction, rushing into something without knowing anything of significance about each

other because it's easier than to deal with big and heavy emotional stuff and watch things crash and burn? Yeah.... I guess you can tell after this.

Anyway, next time with 100% more Zuko.



# Interlude

## Chapter Notes

Hullo, Zuko here.

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

Sokka is weird.

Like really weird.

One day Jin just dragged him in, dusty and beat up, as if she had just picked him up straight from the road on her way to the tea shop. He stares at Zuko right from the start, in a way that pisses him off and Zuko already knows he's going to be a pain in the ass to deal with.

But then Sokka keeps looking at Zuko all the damn time with those blue eyes of his - even after his uncle basically decided to adopt him like the stay he is - keeps staring when Zuko just wants to work in total quite and peace. Zuko can barely keep himself from huffing and stomping around - wanting this stranger to understand that he is not welcome, wanting him to leave again, because he knows exactly what Sokka must be thinking.

And Zuko does wonder how long it will take for him to finally crack this time and ask about his scar. They always do. And Sokka seems to be so rude and mouth off like he has no filter - it should be any day now when he asks and Zuko is going to tell him to shove his questions somewhere where Agni doesn't shine. It should be any day when he will ask what's wrong with his -

"Hey, what's with the oolong face?" Sokka says and looks at Zuko expectant.

Zuko stares at Sokka.

When he doesn't answer Sokka leans forward to him and continues in a conversationally tone.

"Well, what is it? Did the lady in the corner ask you to marry her granddaughter again?"

Zuko still stares. He ignores the question.

"Was that... Did you just make a *pun*?"

"Yes- Get it? Because we work in a..."

Zuko groans loudly and throws the door into the back ally open and goes outside without hearing the rest.

So yes. Sokka is weird because he makes bad puns and he stares at Zuko and because he never, ever asks.

The thing is, Sokka may be a bit strange, but Zuko can deal with that. He can ignore the looks or the bad jokes just fine. What he can't ignore is the constant touching. Sokka seems to be such a tactile person and Zuko is absolutely lost on how he should handle any of that.

The first time Sokka's hand brushes Zuko's in passing, Zuko startles so bad, he drops his tray and the cups smash on the floor, spilling the tea. His uncle gives them a curious glance over his shoulder and Zuko flushes in embarrassment at being so clumsy over literal nothing.

But it doesn't stop there. Sokka keeps clapping him on the back, forcing him into giving high-fives like he is just a kid or bumping against his shoulder - there are so many little touches throughout the days and Zuko tries very hard to stop himself from outright flinching every time. Does Sokka even notice what he is doing? People...

People just don't touch him so casually. Even Jin, who is his one and only friend, doesn't touch him as much.

It makes Zuko's skin crawl - but not necessarily in a bad way - more in the way of an itch he wants to scratch but can't figure out how to. It does makes Zuko wonder though.

"Just what are you doing?" Zuko snaps at Sokka, when he can't stand any longer.

Sokka frowns and holds his fingers all up in Zuko's face and he feels his brow twitch. Sokka has been stopping his work to count his fingers at random, all the while muttering to himself the whole day long and it's already another thing that drives Zuko insane.

"Steaming tea swirls dance,

In the shop, fingers counting,

Moments blend like leaves."

Zuko blinks confused.

"Was this... Are you doing haiku?"

"Yes! Thank you for noticing- " Sokka beams at him but then his face falls at the expression Zuko must be making.

"Oh harhar. Make fun of me for having a hobby," he says but then he grins and punches Zuko into his shoulder- not hard, just playful and Zuko's stomach flips and he jerks away by the sudden electric spark that runs all the way down to his fingertips.

*Oh*- This is new.

Zuko turns away with a grumble, frowning at himself.

No, people don't touch him casually ever and never that thoughtless or playful like that and Zuko wonders if Sokka even notices the effect he is having on him.

It's a gradual realization, it creeps slowly on Zuko until he suddenly becomes aware of it. Zuko just might as well have developed a small crush on his co-worker.

(Then, later, much later, Sokka rests his foot against his leg under a table and he is looking at Zuko and Zuko realizes that Sokka knows exactly. Of course, yes- of course, Zuko thinks.)

Zuko takes another deep breath and watches the flame in his hand flicker synchronized to his breathing-

Maybe it's just because he hasn't been able to firebend as he wants to. It makes him feel cagey, his inner flame waiting in strange anticipation when his mind circles around troubling thoughts, like he is a trapped wild animal.

Uncle thinks it is good that Zuko spends some time of his day meditating, but for Zuko it is the only way to not completely go mad inside his head or forget who he is. The tiny moment behind drawn curtains where he doesn't have to pretend to be someone else.

His uncle places a cup in front of him on the table. It smells like jasmine.

"You have been in a good mood since Sokka started working with us, nephew," his uncle says and the flame in his palm doesn't even flicker.

Zuko ignores his uncle's words and continues to focus on his breathing.

*Nephew*, his uncle calls him - like that's what he is called. Like the name *Zuko* doesn't exist anymore- is only a fragment of a past that Zuko best forgets to have happened. And it's been three years in Ba Sing Se and he wants to yell at his uncle to start calling him by his name again but then - it's been three years and he has yet to tell uncle that he doesn't like jasmine, that he doesn't like any tea.

"You know that it would be okay if you wanted to participate in all the experiences that comes with youths, say, like going on dates," his uncle says calmly at random, like he is just making conversation. And oh, sweet Agni - can he just not?

"What? And *lie* to someone? Pretend to be someone I am not?" Zuko scoffs.

"But haven't you worked in our teashop since we came to Ba Sing Se, nephew? All the people in our community that know you, your friends? The past doesn't have to define us. We are who we say we are. That's not lying," his uncle says with kindness and Zuko gives him a glare.

This is not the first time they are having this argument. His uncle may be glad to be only Mushi, the owner of the jasmin dragon but Zuko will never be anyone else. He will never only be Lee.

His uncle sighs when Zuko ignores him.

"All I am saying is, that I want you to be happy, nephew. And I am afraid that you will not let yourself be, even if you could. And maybe it is time to let go of the past, that- "

"I will *never be happy!* My past will always define me- you are *wrong* uncle," he snaps back heated and Zuko closes his fists and extinguishing the flame in his hand.

"...Forgive an old man his musings," his uncle says after a moment and Zuko tries to not feel guilty for yelling at him again. But he will not feel guilty for speaking the truth.

Because Zuko will never be Lee.

And since his uncle brought it up, clearly embarrassing able to guess what's up with Zuko lately - he may have a crush on Sokka because he is funny in a weird way and his blue eyes focus on Zuko all the time, and he is so tactile and his touches make Zuko's stomach do backflips but...

It can't lead to anything. Zuko just isn't who he pretends to be and he doesn't want to lie to someone, hiding parts of who he is.

But on the other hand - Sokka is *also* a massive liar.

Zuko understands and Zuko is not stupid. He can't allow himself to be, if he wants to keep his head down in enemy territory after all.

Everyone in Ba Sing Se is a liar. You need to be, if you want to survive in this oppressive city where every refugee has a story they pretend to never have happened and the war as a whole doesn't exist.

And Zuko can read between the lines, can tell when he is being lied to - (this realization was surprising to him too, really) - and Sokka makes it rather obvious that there are things he hides.

But then, Zuko grew up with a sister that had perfected lying as if it were an art-form by the age of five and suddenly, in comparison it is so easy to look out for the signs that someone is dishonest. Azula taught him well.

*("Oh, Zuzu, you really believe that, do you- you dumb-dumb?")*

Anyway, Zuko started to notice at first, by the way Sokka would always watch the door in the beginning. Of course Zuko could easily recognize such behavior, when he wasn't any different in his first weeks in the city. And when Zuko brings up the Dai Li on a lucky guess, Sokka all but confirms his suspicions.

He wonders fleetingly what Sokka might have done, to have someone out there looking for him, but Zuko decides as long as he doesn't place the tea-shop in any danger, he doesn't really care. It's not like Zuko does not have his secrets too or any of the other refugees are always honest and good.

"...Just stop acting so suspicious and you will be fine," he tells Sokka and hopes he didn't make any mistakes with this.

The next thing Zuko becomes aware of, is Sokka's hangup every time his missing friends are brought up. The way he pauses, how he forces himself to smile and then go on to talk about how he will find them.

He's a refugee and with missing friends it's not hard to fill in the picture and Zuko is sure that Sokka must be aware how it looks- but right now he seems to want to lie to himself and pretend that everything will turn out well.

And Zuko does feel sorry for Sokka but - he just hopes he will not be around him when the realization finally and truly does sink in.

But that all might be well and good if not for Sokka's biggest lie - his wrist and the burn-mark he keeps hidden from view.

Zuko doesn't even question it at first because he knows a thing or two of burn marks from personal experiences. And if Sokka touches his warped arm all the time it is his business only.

But then Zuko sees the staple of books Sokka is reading in the library and glances at his wrist and he suddenly starts to wonder if it could be related.

"I'm just... looking how soulmarks works. I'm wondering if anyone ever had one they couldn't read. Or what if you never have the chance to meet... what if you have a soulmate you don't like- I think it's bullshit that some spirit can just decide for you like that," Sokka tells him then and Zuko frowns, while he thinks about it- his mind already jumping into overdrive.

"It doesn't matter if you can read a soulmark or not. That's not how this works. Soulmates exist because sometimes it's hard. Because you need help. The spirits don't make mistakes when connecting two people," Zuko answers and he truly believes what he is saying.

Later, while he breaths along with the flame in his palm behind drawn curtains - before his uncle starts to talk about all the things of letting go and happiness, Zuko wonders about the things he had learned that day.

Of course it's just guesswork on his part if Sokka might have a soulmate or not. But if Zuko is right, then Sokka has one on his wrist and he hides it for one reason or another. And if Zuko is right, then Sokka can't read it, doesn't know who it connects him to and doesn't even like the idea of having a soulmark forced on him. And if Zuko is right, there may be a chance that...

Zuko exhales slowly as the flame flickers.

Zuko can understand Sokka's reservation of the whole idea since Zuko's got his own mark. He can't really read his own- since it's just some picture and he doesn't know who he could be connected to. But it doesn't bother him as much. And if the spirits decide something like that for him, he just has to trust they know what they are doing. Because Zuko is not going to wait around for anything to happen.

His whole life is so different than he expected it to be. He used to be a spare-prince once and suddenly he was the heir to the dragon throne. And just as sudden he turned into an exiled prince, task to find the avatar and when that didn't work out he became a refugee in Ba Sing Se serving tea. He may have his mark but he will not go out of his way chasing an unobtainable destiny.

If there is reason or rhyme to any kind of these things - it will happen. And if not, then Zuko doesn't try to let it bother him any longer. And either the spirits will help him or they won't. But Zuko's got to make his own choices.

(But then Zuko had some years to get used to the idea of having such a mark on him.)

So yeah. He gets it - can relate to Sokka, wanted to tell him the whole time, "*Me too*," but it still is only guesswork on his part, so he doesn't.

But having a soulmark in itself, is not the problem for Zuko. The one thing that is troubling Zuko right now - so much that he even tries to meditate - soulmates are supposed to be rare and meeting someone else who's got one makes Zuko wonder if there is any real chance that Sokka could be...

...*His*.

It's not that far-fetched isn't it?

They are rare and yet they both have a mark, so there is at least a chance that could be each others. But then it's all guessing on Zuko's part and he doesn't truly know. Maybe Sokka

really only has a burn mark and his reading about soulmates is just coincidence and it's only wishful thinking anyway, because Zuko's got a crush on him. Because Zuko doesn't really know.

Then, out of the blue, without warning this happens.

"Hey, want to grab something to eat afterwards together?" Sokka says and Zuko's mind blanks for a moment.

"*Why?*" He asks and tries to keep his mind calm or he might just jump to the wrong conclusions-

"Why not? We've been working together for a while now and I think we we did get off on the wrong foot... Maybe I just want to go out with you so I can get to know you better."

Zuko's grip on the broom slacks in surprise because this just sounds like Sokka is trying to ask him out on a ... date.

And Sokka looks expectant at him and before he can get any semblance of thought why this might be a really bad idea his stupid mouth has already answered, before his brain can catch up to it.

"...O-kay?"

"It's a date then! Great- Looking forward to later!" Sokka flashes him a cheeky grin and Zuko stares as Sokka goes into the back whistling to himself.

And maybe his uncle's words did get to him and would it really be so bad to just let go of the past and be just Lee who's got a crush on his co-worker, all the soul-marks and destinies and the war and fire nation be damned?

*("Oh Zuzu, you always fail to think things through, you dummy.")*

When Sokka, days later, rambles some non-sense of having fun and going out again but needing to leave Ba Sing Se and Zuko should feel so, so relieved.

Because if Sokka goes, he can stop worrying his head about all the way he is only playing pretend- how he doesn't have to lie, how he can stop getting himself worked up about Sokka's soulmark that might not even exist.

But then Sokka's blue eyes flicker over Zuko's face and he realizes how close they are standing and suddenly Zuko is sure Sokka must hear how loud his heartbeat is in his ears and Zuko is sure that Sokka might-

"So, friends then?" He says and Zuko has never heard a more obvious lie.

"Sure," he answers and he should be glad and take this as an excuse and stop before anything further can even happen, because he might have his silly crush and his wishful thinking, but Zuko is still not really Lee and he is still only playing pretend.

But then, Zuko is lying too.

*("Oh, Zuzu...")*

"Can I ask you something?" Sokka asks him later that same day.

"Yeah?" They are standing in front of the tea shop and Zuko should just tell him a good night and let things be - the day was already bad enough - he shouldn't let things give a chance to turn worse.

"Jin said you've been staying here for a while- Can you really see yourself staying in Ba Sing Se?"

What... Is this about earlier? About Sokka wanting to leave again? Zuko should tell him that, No - he can't, because this city is the worst and Sokka should just leave as long as he is able to, but Zuko doesn't. Why doesn't he?

"Uncle likes it here. Why do you ask?"

"Not important- So you don't?" He sounds rhetorical but he could see right through Zuko's evasion of the question.

"That's irrelevant- there is no other place I can go."

"You truly think that? You see yourself forever serving tea here? Don't you want other things for yourself? Aren't you sick of pretending of being only your uncle's nephew and nothing else?"

Zuko freezes. He knows that Sokka is a liar but... Is he that good? Does he know and was only playing along about them not being who they claim to be? If Sokka has figured it out then...

*("You are not a good liar at all, Zuzu. You can't really believe you would think you could trick other people with your subpar skills, don't you?")*

"I don't... Uncle likes it here- " he says hastily and braces himself for the accusation that must surely follow.

"Yes, but what do you want? You can't tell me your dream is to serve tea? You could go out there and be anyone... you could- "

"You don't understand. I owe my uncle a lot. And I am not leaving him- "

Oh sweet Agni- just what the fuck are they even discussing at this point?



"I get that, okay you are not leaving but I don't think this will make you happy. Don't you think your uncle would want you to be happy?"

Zuko exhales slowly. It must have been a figure of speech. Sokka doesn't know.

But instead he brings up all the things his uncle tried to tell him. And his uncle only wants him to be happy and they are not leaving Ba Sing Se for as long as there is a war outside these walls and the avatar doesn't exist, so there will always be this war and Zuko is never going to be anything else than a tea server, isn't he?

Zuko plops down next to Sokka on the steps, and Sokka continues talking, working himself into a rant about the war and Zuko stops him from going on but he isn't even listening properly.

All the things suddenly it hit too close to home for him. Because Zuko will forever play pretend, won't he?

And maybe his uncle did get to him because he is sitting next to Sokka, their knees are touching and Sokka carefully takes hold of his hand and his expression shifts, as emotions flitter over his face.

The air feels charged and Zuko has to keep his inner flame still because... it would be *so easy* right now to give into this.

It would be so easy to try and leave his past behind and try to become someone who is going to be happy.

Maybe being Lee wouldn't have to be a lie, if it means Zuko can-

And then Sokka kisses him suddenly and overwhelming - unbeknownst to him, putting Zuko out of his inner conflict, deciding for him - and by sweet Agni - this is not pretending any longer and Zuko will *gladly* be only Lee if he can get Sokka to kiss him like that again.

Sokka breaks the kiss off as sudden as he started it and gasps for air and Zuko chases his lips, completely forgotten what he was getting so worked up about.

"Are you sure? Earlier you said- " Zuko ask.

"Yes. Forget what I said," Sokka says and he suddenly sounds so certain, where he was still lying earlier.

"But what about- " he looks pointedly at the wrappings on Sokka's arm. He doesn't even know why he brings it up now- because he doesn't even *know* and there is still such a huge chance that Zuko is wrong and it's only a burn mark or Sokka might not even be-

"What- This? I am not letting anyone else decide for me what I should want. This means nothing to me," Sokka says resolutely, like he couldn't care less in the slightest and while it is all the confirmation that Sokka has in fact a soulmark, it also means Sokka will not let it get in the way of things he might want.

Zuko nods to himself. Okay.

Sokka has a soulmate that may or may not be Zuko but that didn't stop him from kissing Zuko.

Okay, he thinks.

Zuko's opinion of his soul-mark never changed- it shouldn't even matter if Sokka is or isn't his. If the spirits bind them, then it will work out and if not - he will not chase some random destiny, when the person he wants sits right in front of him.

"Okay," Zuko says with finality and decides then and there, that he will not let this get in the way. And if this means he has to play pretend and lie to Sokka about his identity, about who he truly is then he will continue to lie just so he can keep him.

*("Stupid, you are always so stupid, Zuzu. You never think things through.")*

And then Sokka kisses him again and any semblance of coherent thought falls straight out of Zuko's head.

## Chapter End Notes

Writing Zuko is even harder for me than writing Sokka, so this chapter is a hot mess - but then so is Zuko 🐼🐼

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

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

The early morning light filters through the window and paints the room in a soft orangey glow. A stray ray of light hits Sokka's square in the face and it's like someone - for example the sun - tried to punch him awake. He blinks dazzled and groans, as he fully wakes up.

Sokka runs a hand over his face - it feels puffy - and goes and rubs the rest of sleep out of his eyes. He turns his head to the side and sees Lee is already awake. Lee lays with his scared side down, buried deep into his pillow as watches Sokka, still looking sleepy. They lay close on the shared bedroll but with enough space between them so they are not touching.

Sokka rolls onto his side so he is fully facing Lee and the blanket that Lee must have thrown haphazardly over them yesterday slips off and Sokka pulls it back up.

This moment should have been nice - this is how Sokka might have imagined he would get to wake up today and yet it isn't. Not really. Not even close.

Lee has yet to say anything so Sokka tries to preserve this moment and not ruin it with anything he could say. Instead he uses this opportunity to study Lee's face from up close. The way his brow curves, to the shape of his eyes - now looking more awake and studying Sokka back - all the way down his aristocratic nose, Lee's sharp jaw, his... his mouth.

Sokka swallows and tries not to remember just how exactly Lee's mouth had felt against his own. Lee just continues to look at him and Sokka can't even guess what must be going through his head.

Lee is the first to break the silence, eventually.

"What's... on your mind?" Lee asks clearly wondering the same thing as Sokka - his voice still a bit rough from sleep and Sokka itches to reach out and close the gap between them, just so he can run his fingers through Lee's sleep mused hair. He doesn't.

Sokka shrugs helpless.

And it's not like there is really anything Sokka could answer to that. Just what do you say after such a colossal disaster of an evening?

*'Sorry for jumping you and then having kind of an emotional breakdown when I had my hands halfway down your pants. Yes, very romantic. I was so sure you wouldn't mind...'*

Nope, that's not really cutting it.

Where are they even standing right now? He has no idea - and Sokka doesn't want to pile on more with his bad decisions.

Maybe it's time that he should acknowledge that he was running around rather clueless and without any kind of real plan.

In his head everything was so simple - work in the tea shop as a cover for the Dai Li and find out what had happened, but Sokka had zero idea how he actually should have gone about that in the first place.

And Sokka can't just afford to not think things through - from here on out, everything needs to be more deliberate. But then... no plan of his could have ever foreseen that he would end up here - without his friends, with them being...

*Shit*, this is going to hurt so bad for a long, long time.

And Sokka- he *knew*. Right from the get go when the Dai Li suddenly attacked them out of the blue - and if it weren't for Toph, Sokka wouldn't even have made it.

So, he knew - he just didn't want it to be true.

What a headache.

All his other problems now seem so inconsequential in comparison. Who the fuck cares that some flaming dick of a prince - just some random jerkbender called Zuko - has his name on Sokka's person, it's not like Sokka can ask Aang about any of this spiritual shit any longer, like he had hoped.

Who cares that he is such a stumbling mess in regards to Lee when he doesn't have Katara to tease him about his dating life like she used to.

And then there will also never be another Toph around to save his life or make her weird innuendos that could make even the most weathered sailor blush.

"Shit... this just sucks," he says aloud, more to himself than anything.

"...yeah, it's... er- rough," Lee says after a pause and Sokka snorts despite himself. It's not really funny but Lee clearly doesn't know how else to deal with the situation. And Sokka thinks that Lee should have kicked out Sokka anyway - instead he'd spend the rest of the evening trying to calm Sokka down.

Well, he was more like freaking out, completely overwhelmed, while Sokka tried to explain what he just had come to realize and - no, that Lee hadn't done anything wrong, no really, it's fine- it's not your fault, yes I am sure. And eventually Sokka could compose himself for the most part - without any real input from Lee. But Sokka guesses it's the thought that counts.

Sokka sighs.

"I just- what am I gonna do now? I don't have any family left out there anymore..." He says, wondering to himself and decides, to hell with it and reaches out to card his fingers through Lee's hair. If he didn't kick Sokka out for ruining the mood yesterday then he probably won't for this offense.

Lee looks surprised at him but also the tiniest bit pleased, so Sokka guesses he can't have minded too much. Sokka scoots closer and their knees bump against each other.

"the- er... war?" Lee ask haltingly and while he tries to keep his pleased look to himself, he sounds so uncomfortable still.

Sokka hums in question, distracted by the way their legs tangle under the blanket.

"was it... the fire nation?"

Sokka pauses for a moment and removes his hand from Lee's hair - but not without softly dragging his fingers over Lee's cheek - before laying it between them.

What's some more trauma dumping between two guys anyway?

"The southern raiders- my mom died when I was just a kid. And my father went off to fight the war. I never saw him again and it's been years, doesn't take a genius to realize they are not coming back. They- I mean when he left he took all the men with him, I was left back there, responsible for everything. And it was always just Katara - my little sister and me... and well our other friend, the bender I told you about too, and now both..."

Sokka stops himself and swallows down the thick lump in his throat. Did he cry when their mom died? He must have, of course he had but he can barely remember how it was. He can't even remember her face anymore. And with his dad gone for so long, the memories already turning hazy - will he forgot how Katara looked eventually too?

Lee lifts his hand and he looks like he wants to take Sokka's but loses his confidence halfway. Instead he starts to pat Sokka's shoulder in an hesitant '*there, there*' motion before jerking it back.

A surprised laugh escapes Sokka. If it sounds slightly wet, nobody is mentioning it.

Sokka decides to take mercy on him and snuggles closer, fitting his head into the crock of Lee's neck while Lee moves to make space for Sokka, wrapping his arm around him.

Yeah. This would have been *really* nice in other circumstances.

"My... Mother also died when I was a kid," Lee says out of the blue and sounds surprised by his own admission and Sokka wonders if he had ever told someone before.

"- also the... war?" He ask quietly.

"Yes, I mean no just- I don't know, but one day she was just gone- I think my father had her killed."

Sokka inhales sharply and pops himself up to look down at Lee.

*What the fuck.* Just what- how can he say that so calmly?

"Oh, it wasn't personal- just some- forget it. It doesn't matter." Lee says when he sees the expression Sokka is making and he cringes at himself by the looks of it.

"Not personal? *Not personal he says-* that's, something like this- that's fucked up."

"Maybe? Yeah- I mean I guess," Lee says unsure, like it's just a thing that does happen to someone. Not for the first time Sokka wonders what a life he must have lead before. Sokka's fingers find their way back to Lee's unscarred cheekbones on their own accord and Lee's eyes snap back to look at him and Sokka loses his trail of thoughts. He realizes the position they are in - Sokka halfway laying on top of Lee and he flushes.

Sokka sits up and ties his hair back into his wolf tail just as an excuse to put some distance between them.

Can they just go back? To some days ago where they weren't sharing any emotional stuff? Or maybe just to yesterday where Sokka's biggest worry was that he didn't want to mislead Lee because he had the idea of leaving Ba Sing Se again. Both mood points now.

But that just leaves the next question unanswered. What is Sokka going to do now? Go out and fight the fire nation all on his own? Without Aang - without the avatar, is there even any hope to win this war? Maybe. But it will certainly not be some lone lost refugee who does that, not Sokka anyway.

Or maybe it is going to be his job to assassinate the royal jerkbender whats-his-name, disrupting the line of succession and that's the reason for his mark. Yeah sure. He's leaving Ba Sing Se, find his way to the fire nation capital without getting killed, infiltrate some palace like it's nothing and then...

Sokka, all on his own, without any bending powers and no real plan for that anyway - he'd rather go and visit the Dai Li no matter how pretty half-baked lunatic revenge ideas sound right now.

Or he is going to finally accept his new situation. He has a roof over his head, a job to provide for himself and new friends that he can trust - it could all be so much worse.

(It could all be so much better too.)

Sokka takes a moment as he looks around. Lee's room is small and rather spare. It looks impersonal, just the necessities and nothing more. And while it must be nice to have space all for himself, Sokka thinks it is a bit sad - haven't they been living here for a while? It looks like Lee either never truly settled in, or he never planned to stay.

"How do you do it? How can you go on with your life, knowing what's happening out there, that the avatar will not..." Sokka asks Lee then with curiosity. Lee, now sitting on his bedroll too, crosses his legs and seems to think about it.

"What should I do? I never even thought the avatar was real anyway- I still don't and... the... fire nation will eventually conquer the earth kingdom. I am only staying here with my uncle because there is no other place for us- might as well live our lives here." Sokka looks at the single chest that must hold all of Lee's belongings - yeah, that doesn't look like living a life.

"You *believe* the fire nation will *win*?" Sokka asks stumped instead. Lee frowns.

"... I do," he whispers and Sokka feels a shiver go down his spine at the certainty in Lee's voice.

Sokka suddenly can understand Jin and her friends. Going out and pretending the war isn't happening because if it's either giving into the despair of the grim reality that the fire nation is going to burn down the world or trying to live their life to the fullest, fully aware that it will not last - and maybe, when Sokka's loss has scraped over a bit - is not so raw and overwhelming in his shape and form- when everything feels more dull and bearable - he will just do that.

Because there isn't really anything he can do left for him. He couldn't stop his mother from dying and his father from leaving. He couldn't stop the destruction of Agna Qel'a. He couldn't foresee that the earth kingdom would try to get rid of the avatar, when he would have been their biggest ally and -

That's not a perspective he considered before, had he? He was too overwhelmed by his situation to question it but just why would they do that? It's not making sense really-

But no - Sokka isn't clearly thinking right now - not everyone was always friendly towards them, when they all were traveling. And Sokka still doesn't know what had happened between Aang and the Earth King.

Sokka sighs. He wished he could also go back to the time when everything was so simple and his biggest worry was that they had packed enough meat.

"So I guess we have to do that then - making the most of it, enjoying our lives in spite. As a big fuck you to the fire nation," he says.

Lee frowns still but he nods and Sokka punches his shoulder - not hard just a light tap of course - to get the morose expression off.

"If one of us is allowed to look all sad and mopey- it's not you today," Sokka says because he can't help himself, trying to lift the mood, even if he doesn't really feel like it.

Lee finally cracks a smile.

The short moment doesn't last when Sokka's eyes fall towards his arm then and he remembers something else.

"Hey, I've been wondering- how did you know about this?"

"Just a lucky guess? Because at the library you, well I just though - Do you, er, know who it might be?" Lee's voice hitches as he asks and he looks curios at Sokka.

Sokka contemplates lying but it's not like he will show Lee his mark- not that he could read it anyway. But somehow the situation still looks so, so bad. Being branded by such a name and all the heavy implications surely would send anyone running. And Lee seems so troubled by the fire nation anyway, if Sokka is reading him correctly - no matter what must have happened to him - Sokka doesn't want to scare him off.

"Yeah. I do, it's just- not someone I would want to be connected to," he says honestly.

Lee surprisingly stiffens, apparently caught off guard and nods uncomfortable. Sokka just realizes how callous this may have sounded.

"Hey, this has nothing to do with you- I told you I don't care for them."

"Okay." Lee says but he still sounds unhappy about it.

Sokka frowns. Does that even matter now? Lee didn't kick Sokka out but that might have been him just being a decent human being. Maybe he is just humoring Sokka now and waiting until he leaves. He probably long overstayed his welcome.

Oh, might as well be honest about this too - not like Sokka can bomb anything between them even further.

"I'm sorry for being such a mess right now. I meant what I said before. I'd be interested in going on another date with you, if you'd still like that. Just, maybe, we should take it slower. Yesterday was really..." He trails off not sure how he could describe what had happened right before he well, ruined it.

"-intense?" Lee says.

"-hot," he says at the exact same time and a surprised laugh escapes Lee.

"... it's just. I might not be in the best head space for more right now, sorry if- "

"Okay. Then just dating? We can take it slower and you take the time you need?" Lee says and he sounds almost hopeful and Sokka exhales relieved. This wasn't a No - more like the opposite. So, Sokka will take it slow and work through his stuff and Lee doesn't seem to be going anywhere anyway and suddenly Sokka is so, so glad.

"Earlier I said something about making the most of it- can I... kiss you? Again? I mean, I don't want to presume anyway, because yesterday I didn't even ask if you would mind and- "

Lee interrupts Sokka's rambling by leaning forward. It's just a peck, soft and short and bittersweet.

When Sokka walks back home to Jin's place she is just outside and getting the well-water in preparations for cooking lunch. It would be just around the time when Sokka normally heads off to his shift but Lee had insisted he should take the day off and that his uncle won't mind.



"Oh, thank the spirits! Just where did you guys disappear to yesterday? And here I was so worried and you just casually return after your walk of shame- "

Jin trails off when Sokka stops in front of her. Her jovial mood disappears and Sokka can guess what a mess he must look like.

"...oh."

Jin doesn't even question what happened. That can wait. Without another word - without asking anything, she pulls him into a tight, bone-crushing hug.

"Oh Sokka."

And Sokka has to swallow down a sob, because she had always gently tried to remind him that this exact scenario was so very likely - but now she is just being a supportive friend.

And while he might have lost his friends, he is still not fully alone. Even if everything sucks so bad - he has Jin and Lee now and he would never have met them in different circumstances.

Sokka just wished the trade off wasn't so steep.

And maybe, in some far and distant future, it will be okay again.

## Chapter End Notes

Welcome to Ba Sing Se for real Sokka.

A bit of a sad and slow chapter but very much needed to transition into the next part of the story - but from here on out it should be all smooth sailing right towards the end 😊



# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

I do think the chapter is rather tame but it has now earned it's M-rating.

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

Time passes strange. Sokka's first weeks in Ba Sing Se were over in a flash but now it feels like the weeks, the days - every single hour drags on and on.

Some days are still easy. Sokka helps out Jin's grandmother and goes to his shift at the tea shop and everything is as it were before.

Other days Sokka can't barely get up in the morning, staring at the ceiling and wondering just what the fuck he is doing- drags himself to his job and continues to stare at the wall in the kitchen, his hands all soapy and the dishes pile up without getting done.

Sokka wonders who the fuck he is anymore.

Uncle Mushi is very understanding, just like Lee promised. If Sokka takes it slow, if he needs more breaks or if he sometimes wants needs to head home early, Mushi never says anything. He always places a cup on the table and departs some wisdom onto Sokka and Sokka is glad that he has so much support from everyone around him.

Lee pokes his head out from behind the door and his eyes fall on Sokka.

"...are you- taking a break right now?" He ask and steps into the alley.

Sokka sits on the ground with his back to the wall, legs stretched out as he watches a cat dig through the pile of trash bags.

"Sure," he says toneless.

Lee sits down next to him and hums questioning. Sokka doesn't response at first because he doesn't really want to talk about it. But then, when was he ever good at keeping his thoughts to himself?

"The girl... The one sitting right next to the door wears a braid. It's so, so stupid because it's not even in the same style and she looks nothing like her, but... Katara always had her hair braided when we were younger and- " Sokka presses the back of his hand in front of his eyes - not because he is crying, he isn't - but because everything still sucks balls so bad.

"I don't think uncle would appreciate me brawling into his tea- might make it bitter or whatever," he says trying to make a joke, but it falls flat.

Lee clears his throat awkwardly. He just never knows how to handle it when Sokka has one of these moments.

Sokka turns to him, and without overthinking it wraps his arms around Lee, pulling him closer. And while Lee may never know what to do or say, he always hugs Sokka back. It's a bit of an awkward position for a hug but Sokka still nuzzles his head in the crook of Lee's neck and breathes in the calming scent of his.

When they pull apart Lee is looking at Sokka with warm eyes and he glances down to what must be his lips. Sokka's stomach flips and his fingertips tingle in anticipation. Sokka leans forward and-

Lee lets go of him and gets up. Sokka keeps a groan to himself but still huffs annoyed.

That's on him- that's so on him and he curses his past self for the countless time again. He told Lee that they should take it slow, that they shouldn't rush.

But Sokka never meant to fully stop whatever it was they were doing. And it's not like things between them have turned weird. Because they talk now with each other and they have been going on those promised dates - and they are really nice - but every damn time Sokka thinks they might be having a moment - Lee pulls away.

Sokka really wants to shake some sense into him because just dating is great but his earlier realization about how much he wants Lee just never went away. And Sokka is more than a bit frustrated at this point.

So, yeah. Time passes strange and some days are good and some days are bad. And before Sokka realizes it, weeks have past and the daily life takes over again and he starts to feel a semblance of something he might call normality. And while the days seem to, not getting lighter, exactly - but the pain takes on a duller shape, doesn't feel as sharp and pointed.

(Everything still hurts like shit, of course- but that will never go away anyway.)

And before Sokka realizes it, weeks have past and his frustration just grew with it.

"Evening, guys," Jin says when she comes into the shop around closing time and steps into the back where they are sitting around the small table.

Today was one of the slower days, so they have already finished all the work of the day. And now Sokka is deep into his last Pai Sho match with uncle Mushi.

Jin steps closer and leans over Sokka's shoulder.

"I don't think I will ever get the hang of it- this looks so complicated to me..."

Lee looks at the board with a frown.

"It really isn't. Sokka is just waiting until uncle plays a wheel-tile so he can win in two rounds when he places a tile there and there," Lee says and points at the board and uncle Mushi hums like he hadn't considered this possibility.

Sokka groans at this and gives Lee a glare.

"Gee, Thanks for ruining my strategy, *buddy*."

Lee shrugs unhelpful. Why does he feel the need to comment, when he doesn't even like this game? Lee must just want them to hurry it up. At least Jin seems amused by them.

Uncle Mushi places his next tile on the board and leans back with a hand on his beard self-satisfied. Sokka squints a bit surprised at his choice. Well, that's one way to end a game for sure.

"I guess it is a tie now. Should we continue at another time then?" He says and Sokka nods, but he is not able to keep his eyes away from the board. Just by studying it right now, Sokka has already a new idea for a strategy he could try the next time. Uncle Mushi chuckles at his enthusiasm.

"Let's clean up and then I'm going to leave you youths to it," he says and Jin and Lee go and set the table in the front room for the dinner Jin brought with her.

Uncle Mushi and him pick up the tiles and Sokka places the board back into the cupboards.

"This was a good game- you have certainly an interesting way to play, Sokka. I'm looking forward to the next match."

"Thank you," Sokka flashes uncle a grin and then hurries to his friends.

"- and then Ako says they are going on another date again, like the two of them hadn't been lying to each other for weeks. He didn't even tell her his real name at first- Just where does she find these guys anyway? Ugh."

Sokka sits down next to Lee, who shifts nervously on his chair and smiles a bit pinched. Did he miss anything important from Jin's story?

Jin goes and opens her containers and fixes everyone a plate. Sokka thanks her for it and grabs some chopsticks before starting to eat.

"Well, anyway now it's not only me and Heyong and I'm not above begging but won't you guys come too, because I can't stand to watch more of Ako and Bo's disaster of a relationship- "

"Wait- Ako is dating someone named *Bo* now?" He pauses between bites when a startled laugh escapes him. Sokka turns to Lee who looks amused too - both clearly thinking about the old ladies from among their regulars.

"Yes, why?"

"Oh- nothing. So, what do you mean? Where should we come to? - oh and thanks for dinner by the way," Sokka says but not without a frown. He must have missed more from before, to get the context.

Jin points her chopsticks at him then.

"*Oh!* I totally forgot! You probably wouldn't know. This time of the year there are lot of meteor showers visible from the city. Normally it's just me and the girls because grumpy pants here apparently hates the stars."

"I don't hate the stars- I just don't care for them," Lee grumbles and Sokka sees that there is some rice sticking to his cheek and Sokka hides a grin. It looks cute.

"So- are you coming then? You don't have to if you're not feeling up to it, of course. But I'd really like you to."

Sokka thinks about it. Maybe it would be nice to go out again and find some more normality? He turns to Lee and raises a questioning brow. If Jin can convince Lee, than he wouldn't mind going at all. But Lee just rolls his eyes at them.

"You want to stand half of the night on some square with the rest of Ba Sing Se's population just for a handful of shooting stars? That doesn't sound like fun- I can get the same view from the roof without getting squished in some crowd," Lee says unamused by the prospect and when put like that, Sokka also doesn't see the appeal.

"Well, let's do that then?" He turns back to Jin but she wrinkles her nose.

"Yeah, that sounds all nice and good. but I'm not going to climb on some insecure roof in the dark- and neither would Heyong or Ako."

Sokka lays down his chopsticks and his plate and fully turns to face Lee.

"So just you and me then?" He asks and Lee does look surprised.

"You really want to watch the stars from the roof?" He asks skeptically, but Sokka already knows Lee won't say no to him.

"Sure, If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to."

"Yes, great, go and have *your date* and leave me hanging," Jin makes a face but gives them a contemplating look.

Lee glances at Sokka and he grins openly at him. Because either they spend some nice evening together - and he always likes spending time with Lee. Or he will spend time with Lee and the evening will just end with the same frustration Sokka is in anyway. But in either case, he's got a date with Lee out of it - He can't really loose there.

A few days later and an hour after closing time, Sokka finds himself back in Lee's room above the tea shop. Unsurprisingly the room has the same sad and spare look as before and Sokka wonders why Lee brought him here.

"How do we get to the roof anyway?" Sokka asks and rubs his arm absentmindedly.

"We climb out of the window?" Lee says and gives Sokka a look, like it should be obvious. Yeah, that makes it sound simple enough.

But then Lee goes, opens his window and Sokka has barely any time to blink and Lee is already gone, fast like some kind of... some kind of circus acrobat.

Just how the fuck did he do that?

Sokka hurries over and cranks his neck to look upwards towards the roof. He can't really see anything from his position.

"Come on," Lee's voice comes from above him. Sokka takes a skeptical look down and is greeted with a nice view of the back ally from above instead.

"Yeah, *Sure*- let me just climb out and break my neck, you wouldn't *mind* I'd hope."

"Just... step on the windowsill and grab the top of the frame. I'll pull you up then." Lee says a bit exasperated and like it should be so easy. Sokka still hesitates.

"Don't worry. I'm not letting you fall," and okay maybe it's time to see how much he can trust Lee for real.

Sokka tries to not look down as he does exactly like Lee told him to and his hand fumbles for a place to get a secure grip. Then Lee grabs his elbow and a yelp escapes him as Lee pulls him onto the roof - just like he said he would.

"Wasn't so hard?" Lee says with a smirk and Sokka playfully punches his shoulder.

"Yeah, sure. I would have been really pissed at you if that's how I died. Not anyone can be some... *cat-like human* like you."

Lee mumbles something that Sokka doesn't catch and he shrugs. They sit down, trying to find a comfortable position and Sokka's shoulder brushes against Lee's.

Sokka then looks at the sky and frowns.

"Looks uneventful- When should this start? Should we have brought snacks?" He asks and Lee shrugs.

"I don't- Jin would have known."

And then there isn't much to say to that, so Sokka takes his time and looks at the rest of the scenery. He can't make out much of anything in the dark save for the nearest rooftops and the massive shape in the distance that must be the wall of Ba Sing Se.

Sokka moves closer so their arms are touching but Lee doesn't say anything. Sokka drums his fingers on his legs because sometimes getting Lee to talk to him is like pulling teeth.

"You made climbing up here look so easy- do you sit here often?" Sokka wonders aloud.

"Sometimes- It's a nice place to think."

"And what do you like to think about when you are all alone on your own?" Sokka asks and aims for a flirting tone and lays his hand on Lee's leg. It might be a bit cheesy but hey, if it works?

"At the moment when I'm up here? I think about that woman with the fancy dresses that comes in often."

"Er- what?" Sokka says completely taken aback and removes his hands and- oh look at that. The accumulations of light he sees somewhere to his right must be the big market. He looks back towards Lee.

"Yeah, it's been bugging me for a while, she always wears expansive looking robes and is all done up but her accent is so off and just look at her shoes the next time- she tries to look wealthy but if she has some plans then her disguise needs some work because-" Sokka starts to snicker and interrupts Lee's words with it.

"*What?*"

"Did it occur to you that she always seems to come in when the man with the glasses and the beard shows up? Don't overthink this- she is probably just dressing up because she wants to catch his attention," Sokka says and bites the inside of his cheek.

"Oh," Lee says and Sokka finally can't keep himself from laughing. Lee glares at him.

"Yes, make fun of me," Lee grumbles again.

Sokka smiles at that and lays his head on Lee's shoulder. And maybe Sokka is currently frustrated because the thing between them has stalled to nothing but he still really likes spending time with Lee.

Sokka looks back up and watches the night sky. The soft lights emitted from the city dims the light of the stars and makes them lose some of their glow. At home - back at the southern water tribe - the night sky was always one of the most magnifying views and Sokka wishes he could go back just for that.

"The stars look so different here than at the south pole," he muses and Lee hums.

"Of course it would, you can see vastly different constellations from here - Ba Sing Se is at a total different latitude than the south pole."

Sokka raises an eyebrow amused.

"I know that- Hey, you once said you were on a boat before, right? Did you learn how to navigate by the stars? My dad tried to teach me when I was younger and- well... I tried to look out for the stars when I was traveling... with my ...friends," Sokka tells him and is trying to ignore the break in his voice.

He allows himself to recognize the raw pain that is still sitting somewhere deep inside him for what it is- it's *still* shitty, it *still* hurts like a bitch but when Lee answers, Sokka pulls his focus with all his might back to the present. The pain won't go anywhere, might as well try to enjoy this moment instead.

"I- tried to learn at first but not really, no. I mean.. I was just mainly me giving the direction and the crew followed suit, so there was just no point," he says uncomfortable and with a helpless shrug. This sounds like a sore point for Lee.

Sokka wonders if Lee would have gotten his scar around this time and that's why he doesn't want to talk about it. And Sokka is certainly not asking now. He changes the subject then, because the evening is still way too early to ruin it yet.

"Well, at least navigating by the stars is a useful skill. There are people that read the stars and try to make predictions on it. Did I ever tell you about that crazy old aunt that told me the stars had preordained that I would suffer immensely and it would all be self-made? What a hogwash. How stupid and gullible and... *Oh*. Er- well unless you believe in the power of the stars, then no offense to you."

Lee snorts and Sokka sighs relieved. Lee doesn't strike him as someone to believe in something like this, but then you'd never know and Sokka is not trying to start a fight about it.

Sokka shivers slightly then from the cool night air and Lee places his arm around him and pulls him close. Lee is always so very nicely warm and Sokka sighs content.

"I used to believe in destiny, but- nowadays I wouldn't trust the stars with anything- probably not even navigation anyway," Lee says.

"What- why's that?"



"The stars can't predict anything. Even things that everyone already has accepted as certainty don't have to come true..."

Sokka frowns, wondering what Lee might mean when it clicks.

"Oh, you mean the thing with the comet?" Lee stiffens but nods and Sokka hums in thought.

"Yeah. I get that. That was crazy wasn't it? Everyone was so sure that the fire nation would obliterate the whole world with the comet from this Sozin dude and then it didn't show up... Every hundred years? What a joke. Something must have gone colossal wrong for the stars to be that misaligned and - "

Sokka loses his trail of thoughts when his eyes register some movement up ahead.

"Oh. *Look*," he says and points to the sky where they can see the first shooting stars of the night. Sokka wonders if he is allowed to make a wish on every single one to them - but then it's not like he believes in the power of the star and all the things he could wish for are either flat out impossible or might just be within his grasp if he is lucky.

Lee is the first to climb down, making it look easy and effortless again. And why is some tea server fit like that anyway? Not that Sokka would complain about Lee being in form, mind you.

Sokka places his foot on the ledge and Lee grabs him, his hands catching him around his waist and pulls him inside. Sokka smiles softly as Lee lets him down.

"One day- I'm going to look where one of these stars landed and make a sword out of it," Sokka says and he might as well be drunk on the mood the cool night air, the cuddles and the sight of the stars left him in.

Lee frowns but there is the ghost of a smile on his lips too. He so rarely fully smiles, Sokka laments.

"A... Sword? What-why?"

"Just how cool would that be. It could be like- like a space sword," he says and grins at Lee.

"Nah, I just always wanted to learn sword-fighting but never had the opportunity- and I'm just talking nonsense now anyway."

Lee hums, but his thumbs stroke over Sokka's sides, just reminding him where his hands still are and exactly how close they are standing and heat pools in Sokka's stomach.

Sokka looks at Lee, who is still looking at him with this certain kind of expression and Sokka will be damned if he is letting Lee flee for another time.

"I am going to kiss you now," he proclaims and gives Lee enough time to back away, to let go, to step back.

Lee doesn't.

Sokka leans upwards - just the tiny amount that Lee is taller than him and Lee meets him halfway.

The kiss starts very chaste and Sokka wonders for a tiny moment if he is misremembering the heated kisses from before but then Lee opens his mouth to him and Sokka is hit by such a sudden wave of *want*.

He isn't sure - and he doesn't care - how they go from just kissing to stumbling towards Lee's bedroll and Sokka pushes Lee back with hands on Lee's chest.

Sokka straddles his lap and Lee makes a sound, half surprised by Sokka's weight and half a strangled groan. Encouraged by it Sokka grinds his hips down, just so he can tease more sounds out of Lee. Lee reaches up and pulls Sokka's head down towards him and the kiss takes on a more desperate and filthy note.

Lee's hands then find Sokka's waist again and his palms feel like they might burn a hole through Sokka's shirt. Sokka has to break the kiss just to tear off his shirt - so he can feel more of Lee's hands on him - his fingertips hot on Sokka's naked back.

Sokka shifts his weight and Lee makes the strangled noise again and Sokka gasps into another kiss as Lee's teeth scrap Sokka's lower lip - he has never been so turned on in his life.

"Fuck, *Lee-*," he starts but Lee completely at random decides to freeze.

It's just for a moment, almost over before Sokka realizes that Lee stopped kissing back for a second and Sokka pops himself up on his elbows looking at Lee bewildered.

"What- what did I do?" He asks honestly and a bit breathy and very confused. And also extremely frustrated at the interruption.

Lee's golden eyes look back at him, blown huge with lust and want but the rest of Lee's expression is constricted in such a way that Sokka isn't a fan of.

"Nothing," he says and tries to kiss Sokka again and Sokka pulls his head away and narrows his eyes.

"Noth- that wasn't *nothing*. I did something and you froze. You have to tell me if something is wrong, if you don't do that, I think we should stop right here- " Sokka sits up straighter and gives Lee a look, not understanding what just happened. Because if Lee isn't telling when Sokka does something that he doesn't like or want, then they absolutely can't go further.

Lee appears to wring with himself before he answers, looking unhappy about it.

"Don't- please don't call me that."

"*Call you what?* Your name?" Sokka asks even more confused. Just what the hell...?

"It's not- " Lee cuts himself off and pulls his hand down his face as he curses softly.

"Shit- sorry I don't... Just don't call me -Lee. I don't like... that," Lee says decidedly with some weird edge to his voice.

"Okay- And that's it? Just me saying your name, nothing else?"

Lee nods slowly, seemingly relieved and Sokka wonders what's that about anyway.

"You are going to tell me when I do something you don't like from here on out, will you? I certainly will," He say and feels ridiculous for having to even have this conversation right now when it should be such a given.

"Yes, and - you haven't done anything wrong- it's just the name-thing, really," Lee says and he looks so sincere at that. Sokka pauses still before deciding he is going to believe Lee for now.

"Okay, Then- Should I find a nickname for you instead? Honey? Sweetheart? ... Er- *Buddy*?" Sokka wonders teasingly, just trying to save the mood before it's fully gone. He is one frustrated individual after all.

Lee flushes and starts to protest. But Sokka realizes there is just one name he wants to call Lee.

Sokka grins down at Lee.

"How about I call you *mine*? Like, we've been dating - you could be my boyfriend instead, if you wanted?"

Sokka might as well hit bullseye with that one when Lee's eyes snap back to Sokka, all golden molten heat and Sokka remembers just how much he was turned on before now.

Lee mumbles something that may sound like '*sweet Agni*' and '*yes*' looking all embarrassed and before Sokka can get his bearings, Lee flips their position and Sokka finds himself pressed into the bedroll by Lee's weight and a hot mouth pressed against his own.

Oh, okay - now that's more like it.

They kiss deeply- hungrily and Lee tastes like jasmine tea, tastes like smoke, like something so unique that Sokka comes to recognize as unmistakably Lee. And it's like kissing fire, licking into heat, into flames - his tongue feels like it might be burning and Sokka stands corrected.

He's never been so turned on like *this* in his life.

Sokka fumbles blindly to get Lee's shirt off but is seriously distracted when Lee manages to get his hand between them and his fingers tease at the hemline of Sokka's pants. But Lee still hesitates.

"Wait let me just- " he gasps against Lee's lips. Sokka moves his hips to pull down his pants and Lee sits back on his heels as he watches Sokka fully undress - save for his wrapped wrist - with undivided attention.

"Can I...?" Lee asks with a heated look and Sokka swallows.

"You can do whatever you want with me," he says and he means it because he is so pent up from weeks of nothing ever happening and he is so hard right now and if Lee doesn't touch him right this instant he might just perish on the spot.

Lee licks his lips and Sokka nods when he realizes what Lee wants to do and then he suddenly has Lee's mouth on him and -

"Holy *shit*- Tui and- " Sokka gasps open mouthed because it's been way too long since any one touched him.

And then Lee does something with his tongue and Sokka's arm flies blindly in need to hold onto something and he grasps the blanket under him.

"Do that a-again!" He commands and he can just feel Lee's self-satisfied grin against him without even seeing it from the position they are in. Lee flicks his tongue in *just* the right way again and Sokka whimpers.

Sokka then gets himself a bit lost in this blissful feeling of Lee's burning tongue and his hot mouth as he starts to mumble more encouraging nonsense.

"Hey wait- " he says when he suddenly can feel himself rapidly tumbling closer towards the edge. Lee pulls off of him and sits up so fast with such a wide look that Sokka starts to laugh.

But Sokka be damned - he may not be a horny fifteen year old any longer but if they don't slow down, it's going to be over before they even really started it.

And it may have been too long since anyone touched his dick but he has yet to get his hands on Lee's.

"Just- You are still wearing way too many clothes and I need to touch you right now," he says and licks his lips in anticipation.

Lee looks at him, still wide eyed and then he doesn't wait and tears his shirt off and pulls down his pants - trying to get them off so fast that he is falling over himself in the process.

Sokka laughs delighted.

"Very *eager*?" He teases, while he gets an eyeful of everything. Lee certainly is fit for just some waiter.

Lee grumbles something as he presses himself back - flush together against Sokka and he hums very pleased. Sokka lets his hands wander, trying to touch every inch of skin he can reach, while Lee gets his hand back between them.

And then Sokka is lost on the feeling of skin on skin, is lost in kisses that might as well be blistering hot, lost in the feeling of Lee against him - and it's like letting fire and heat and want consume him and he will gladly just burn with it.

## Chapter End Notes

Now there you have it.

Anyway, we're like 8 chapters in and I'm still trying to set up all the plot points in the background for later 🙄... I do think some things in this chapter might as well make it obvious, so can anyone already guess the direction the story will take?

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

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

Sokka wakes up to warm arms wrapped around him and fluttering kisses on his left shoulder. He hums content and snuggles deeper into the embrace. Then the kisses start to wander away from his shoulder and towards his neck and Sokka hums again before he finally cracks his eyes open and decides to roll over to face Lee.

"Morning," Lee mumbles, smiling all sleepy at him and Sokka smiles back feeling kinda sappy.

Lee lays with his scared side facing up and without trying to overthink it, Sokka reaches out and touches Lee's cheek with a tender brush of his fingers. Lee stills and doesn't move, but he lets Sokka touch him without pulling his face away and Sokka wonders if anyone has ever touched his scar there.

The skin feels a bit more rough compared to the other side of his face. Sokka wants to ask so bad what had happened to him, but he doesn't. If Lee wanted him to know- he would tell Sokka about it. And if he doesn't, then Sokka is not prying.

Instead Sokka's index finger traces all the way up the edge of Lee's eye, where the skin feels more welted.

"I like the color of your eyes," Sokka whispers into the space between them.

Lee looks back intensely at him and Sokka cradles the rest of Lee's face in his hands and leans forward to kiss his scared cheek. Sokka then starts to place more kisses along his way, as his lips wanders towards Lee's jaw.

"I like your smile," Sokka mumbles against his skin and he kisses the corner of Lee's mouth. Lee moves his head and catches Sokka's mouth with his own and they share some more lazy kisses in the early glow of the morning light.

"I could get used to waking up like that every day," Sokka says when he eventually manages to pull himself away and sit up. His eyes roam the room just to see where all their clothes landed last night.

He reaches over to grab his shirt and- oh that's not his. Sokka shrugs and puts it on. The earth kingdom styled clothes look all the same to him anyway.

"That's mine," Lee raises an eyebrow as Sokka fishes for his pants- this time definitely his own.

"Yeah, sure and you are my boyfriend now, so you gotta share," Sokka aims for being cheeky and Lee huffs out a breath.

"I mean- unless you changed your mind, then no take-backs. You're stuck with me now," Sokka adds and hopes this conversation is not going to become extremely awkward in the next few seconds.

"I'm not going to change my mind," Lee huffs out again but he wears a small smile still and Sokka counts this as a win. Then Lee looks for clean clothes to wear and Sokka uses the opportunity to ogle him shamelessly while Lee gets dressed.

"You are impossible," Lee says with a glance towards him and Sokka grins at him- at his boyfriend. And maybe it's the still lasting afterglow but Sokka thinks it should be illegal to feel like he does right now... and accounting for that this is Ba Sing Se - it probably is, Sokka thinks amused.

"Hey I wanted to ask, what's the hang up with your name?" Sokka suddenly remembers. Lee's smile fades again and something in his face closes off. Sokka frowns. He absolutely doesn't like that look.

Lee shrugs his shoulders but he isn't looking at Sokka when he wrings for words.

"It's just... What everyone calls me here but- The name doesn't feel like mine," he says and he sounds honest but Sokka isn't so sure he gets it.

"Okay? I'm not sure I understand," because this is all still pretty weird and if there is more to it, Sokka wants to know. Because he isn't letting something like this ruin the mood again if he can help it.

Lee shrugs helplessly and goes to open the window and let fresh air into the room.

"... Do you want me to call you by some other name that you'd- " Sokka breaks off when he can make out footsteps and other sounds coming from the small living space outside Lee's room. Sokka forgets then what he wanted to ask.

"Is your uncle back?"

"Mh? Yes I guess," Lee finally turns back to Sokka and answers like it bears no consequences.

"Okay- does that mean I should climb out of the window? I think I could manage without breaking my neck, after you showed me how to do it last night."

Lee's eyes dart skeptical down to the alley and he crosses his arms. Sokka feels affronted for Lee doubting his hard-worn new skills.

"Please don't try to climb out- Uncle will not mind you staying here, he likes you."

"So, no climbing. Got it- but don't think I wouldn't be able to," he tells Lee serious, who huff at Sokka.

Sokka sighs. It's not only about uncle Mushi minding them being together, but rather that they haven't had a chance to talk about if they want to share the news just yet.

Jin's going to laugh in his face so loudly.

"Are you okay with other people knowing about us? Or just your uncle?" Sokka ask and Lee blinks, like he hadn't even considered it.

"...I don't mind other people knowing," Lee says and Sokka grins at him. This sound's good.

"And you are sure your uncle doesn't mind? He may like me as someone working in his shop and as your friend just fine- but maybe not as someone who wants to do all kind of debauched and questionable things to his nephew."

Lee's eyes snap to him and he flushes and Sokka winks at him. And yeah, Sokka thinks he will get great joy out of teasing Lee from here on out.

Lee mumbles something before he pushes himself away from the window.

"Don't worry. I think uncle likes you even more then me- I don't play Pai Sho with him. I'm absolutely sure he won't mind," Lee says sounding serious and Sokka blinks taken aback at that statement, before he gets it.

"Was that- did you try to make a *joke*?" Lee grumbles something else again and Sokka barks out a laugh at him.

"That was *so* awful, please leave the jokes to me."

Uncle Mushi greets them like its not out of the ordinary that Sokka stumbles out of Lee's room with mused hair and borrowed clothes. Lee sits down at the table where three cups of tea are already set. Sokka sits next to him and skirts around his chair feeling so awkward. And oh sweet La can they just skip this?

"I got some breakfast from the bakery down the street, if you boys are hungry," uncle says as he puts down the freshly brewed tea with the pot. Sokka leans forward as the floral aroma tickles his senses, thinking he might just recognize it.

"Is that chrysanthemum?" Sokka blurts out just to counteract any awkwardness that he feels and uncle smiles at him.

"Ah yes, you have developed a good nose it seems. Some chrysanthemum tea in the morning might just be my favorite way to start the day," he says and beams at Sokka for getting it right.



"Every tea is your favorite," Lee mutters with an annoyed huff to himself. Then he starts to fill the cups and Sokka keeps himself from smiling at the familiar interactions between Lee and his uncle.

Sokka takes a sip- it really is good. He might as well have developed a taste for tea and wonders, not for the first time how uncle Mushi always gets the temperature just right.

Lee gives Sokka a pointed look. And okay- maybe Sokka was acting ridiculous for even doubting uncle wouldn't approve or even say something to them. Sokka though he was long over his need for approvals from others anyway. And let's not forget that uncle cares so much about Lee's happiness and if that is going to include Sokka, of course he won't mind them being together.

"How was your Pai Sho night?" Sokka ask curios, just so they don't all sit there in silence.

"Oh, I certainly had a nice evening. I tried a similar strategy to the one with the wheel tile from our last game," Mushi says and Sokka looks at him surprised.

"And did it work? Did you *win*?"

Mushi hums into his cup with a smile.

"Should I get the board and we go through the game after breakfast? My friends were certainly caught by surprise."

Sokka nods eager. Oh yes, he is definitely interested now. While he manages a win every now and then, Uncle Mushi is still the better player between the two of them. Sokka sees Lee look at him, rolling his eyes at their enthusiasm. Sokka blows Lee a kiss and watches how he clumsily fumbles with his tea-cup.

And when later uncle Mushi sets up his board, Lee pulls Sokka onto his lap and lays his head on Sokka's shoulder and -

Yeah, Sokka can definitely get used to this.

Of course not everything is perfect in Sokka's life and he still wishes some things were so drastically different and not as painful and shitty- but his job in the tea-shop is definitely not one of them any longer.

Having a hot new boyfriend, with whom he works together, turns every shifts into so much fun. Sokka can already see himself getting addicted to endlessly teasing Lee throughout their days.

When they met up before their shift, they share sloppy kisses and putting on the aprons quickly turns into heated fumbling. Then they have to spring apart when uncle walks into the back, pretending he didn't see anything. Lee will groan softly, all embarrassed and Sokka uses those moments to train keeping his face completely straight.

Lee also like to play it cool during working hours and doesn't react when Sokka passes him with some kind of excuse, just so he can brush Lee's arm for the third time in so many hours.

And when Sokka takes a look around to see if non of the customers are watching - he likes to give Lee a soft peck on his cheek - not caring which side of Lee's face he is closest to.

(Some of the girls that are always there to fawn over Lee might have just noticed something is up. They giggle when they see him too and Sokka rubs his neck feeling caught out.)

Needless to say it becomes Sokka's greatest mission to shower his boyfriend with all kind of affection throughout the days and... Did he mention he's got a boyfriend now? As in Lee is his boyfriend? Sokka doesn't think he will never not feels giddy at this prospect.

One day Lee is replacing the cups on his tray and Sokka watches Lee with rapt attention.

"*What?*" He asks with a raised brow and Sokka shrugs all innocent.

"Nothing- just thought I'm going to take a break now."

Lee narrows his eyes at Sokka, but then he huffs and concentrates back on his work.

Sokka hums as he looks towards the front room. There is only one table with customers left. The tea-shop is almost empty after the rush in the early afternoon and the influx of the evening is still some hours away.

"Do you think you could spare a minute or two after this order?" Sokka asks and Lee eyes him skeptically but nods anyway.

"Great," Sokka flashes him a grin and heads outside to take his break.

"What is it?" Lee says as he steps into the alley still looking dubious. Sokka hums uncommitted and looks around if he can see anyone. Of course there is no-one.

"I've been thinking about it- that neat little trick you did with your tongue before- I just want to make sure I remember correctly. You think I could give it a try?" He asks and tries to keep his face straight. Lee opens his mouth in surprise.

"Wha- Right now? *Here?*"

Sokka looks up and down the alley again- yeah he get's it, it's not really the most romantic place to get propositioned. Sokka shrugs.

"Let me rephrase- I really want to get my mouth on you right now and blow you so hard you are seeing stars," Sokka says, as Lee still stares at him unmoving.

Lee softly curses something and his hands spring into action, fumbling with his waistband. Sokka grins expectant at Lee as he sits down back on his heels in front of him.

"Hurry up- we don't have endless time to spare- "

When Lee pulls his pants down he is already half-hard. Sokka licks his lips and then continues to make eye-contact, just as he does exactly like he said he would.

And despite telling Lee they should hurry, Sokka takes his sweet, sweet time with him. Because teasing Lee is always fun, no matter which way or form.

But the best thing about having a boyfriend now, Sokka thinks, are not the quick make-outs before work or the blow-jobs in the back alley - instead there are all the little things that Sokka comes to love about being together with someone.

It's all those little things that Sokka never got to experience before. Because there weren't many kids his age at the south pole and then they were always traveling. And with the war looming in the back, Sokka had never time for more than a short fumble with almost strangers - the closest thing to a relationship with Suki from the kyoshi warriors- and that was over before it even really started.

But it's all the little things that makes Sokka's heart skip a beat - like Lee and him sitting on the roof and Lee pulling him close with Ba Sing Se under them and the open night sky above.

It's the small things he starts to cherish so much - like the way Lee allows himself to really smile at Sokka, showing that he at least must be happy too.

It's also the way that Lee let's Sokka touches his face without restrictions - so clearly craving the contact and Sokka's heart aches with it.

And while it's also great that uncle doesn't mind if Sokka stays the night and Sokka doesn't have to sleep in a barely lit storage room with a tiny window then - it's not the reason he starts to stay over more often than going back to Jin's place.

Because it's all those small things and when Sokka tells Lee that he thinks Lee is beautiful as they lay naked in the dark - Sokka doesn't even need to see Lee's face to know how skeptical Lee frowns.

And it's all those small moments he loves right until Sokka can rapidly start to feel the words becoming too small, to truly capture what he means.

But then, having a boyfriend is still as much about all bodily pleasures - especially when whispered half-confessions in the dark suddenly turn way too fast, way too real for Sokka's comfort.

Sokka takes another look around, but there is truly nobody there to overhear them. He turns back to Lee and watches him work for a moment.

"Hey, it's uncle's Pai Sho night tonight, right?" Sokka ask, just as Lee pours a fresh cup of tea.

Lee glances at him.

"Yes, as you know. Why? Do you have some specific plans?"

Sokka shrugs his shoulder.

"Sure- I think I'd like to sit on your cock all night."

Lee's head snap up to him as he stares at Sokka with some startled expression.

"Too forward? Or would you rather sit on mine? I'm not choosy- " Sokka rubs his neck and flushes. Maybe he should have ask Lee first if he even likes Sokka being so direct with him.

"Er... Are you okay?" Sokka ask after a moment when Lee still doesn't react.

"Wha- *oh shit*," Lee curses suddenly, just as Sokka notices that Lee is pouring the steaming water over his left hand instead of into the cup. Lee drops the tea pot in surprise and it breaks with a loud crash, while the rest of the water spills on the floor.

"Oh *fuck*- I didn't think, I'm sorry, *sorry*- " Sokka curses and immediately turns on the faucet. Lee rushes over to hold his hand under the cold running water as he takes a few deep calming breaths. Sokka still winces when he sees how pink the skin is looking.

"I'm *so* sorry," Sokka says again and hopes Lee doesn't suffer some minor burns from it.

"Not your fault, you just... caught me by -surprise," Lee says haltingly, while looking at him a bit flushed.

Lee removes his hand from under the stream after a minute and wiggles his fingers at Sokka.

"It wasn't that hot- and it's not the first accident with hot tea water anyway. I got used to it," Lee says and Sokka shoots him a look as he turns of the water.

"It was *boiling*. At least. There is no getting used to it. If it's burning hot, it is burning hot."

"But it wasn't boiling, that would- "

"-ruin the tea. *I know*," Sokka quotes uncle Mushi and sighs.

He takes Lee's hand in his own to take another look at it. The skin doesn't seem that pink any longer. That's good.

Sokka raises Lee's hand to his lips so he can kiss the inside of Lee's wrist.

"So, no more dirty-talk at work?" he asks a bit disappointed at the prospect and Lee huffs, sounding at least slightly amused.

Sokka lets go of Lee and goes to grab the broom so he can clean up the shards. Lee starts to wipe up the hot water.

"I am sorry though," Sokka tells Lee again and Lee glances at him.

"... you could make it up to me, if you'd like."

"*Oh?* What do you have in mind?" Sokka asks surprised, because Lee isn't someone who easily asks outright for things at all. Not that Sokka would even say no to most things Lee could ask of him.

"It's Pai Sho night- I'm sure you'll come up with something," Lee says and Sokka grins back at him.

"Really smooth buddy."

When Sokka wakes up in the middle of the night later, it is to some noise from outside the window he can't identify at first. He blinks bleary into the dark, trying to make out just what had woken him up... but by the sounds of it, it's just some animals fighting outside or going through the trash or whatever.

Sokka- still feeling sated and aching in all the right sweet ways, rolls over and plasters himself back against Lee's warm back. Lee is snoring softly.

Sokka's eyes then, find their way to his warped arm, still visible for him to see in the dark. And he hasn't tried to really think about it because he doesn't want to sour his current happy mood.

Yet the mark is still there. Is still taunting him with the uncertainty of what it might mean-

What it could mean for Lee and Sokka, eventual.

Because he doesn't guess the spirits would make such a huge mistake just for fun- there still must be something to it, even if he hasn't managed to work it out. But it also doesn't mean that this is something that's going to affect him right now- it could also mean Sokka and prince jerk-face are to only meet years down the line.

So, Sokka hasn't changed his mind. This will not get between him and Lee. And while Lee doesn't ask about it anymore- pretends just as much as Sokka that it doesn't exist... Sokka can't just keep it hidden away forever. He knows he's going to tell Lee eventually, if he sees any real future for them staying together.

Sokka sighs and snuggles closer and closes his eyes, trying to fall back asleep.

It would be so easy if it could have just been Lee's name on Sokka's wrist. That would be nice. Then he wouldn't need to hide his mark - to lie about it - wouldn't have to wonder about the meaning of it any longer. It would also mean that Lee would have something of Sokka on him too.

Sokka smiles then and presses a soft kiss to Lee's nape. Lee just continues sleeping, non the wiser.

The idea to be known, to be imprinted on someone else's skin like this suddenly doesn't sound so horrifying anymore. It wouldn't feel like having a brand of ownership on him - it could be just like the text from the library stated - a sign of devotion to each other. And while Sokka may not be the biggest romantic and still thinks this spirit mumbo-jumbo is shit - he can also see the appeal.

But then- his soulmark was never meant to be taken in a romantic way anyway. He is just connected to the royal jerk-bender for some reason that has yet to come true. Sokka wonder's again what that prince of his must have as a mark. He secretly hopes it's something so huge and embarrassing and he's the laughing stock of the whole fire nation for it.

Lee mumbles something in his sleep and Sokka hums content.

Having Lee as a soulmate would be really nice - he could forever stay just in this moment, without wracking his brain about all this - But it's not like Lee could just suddenly turn into prince turd-face and resolve Sokka's issues.

And just the idea makes his laugh- Lee as a prince? Seriously, have you seen the way the man talks to customers? No change in hell, that someone like him could have grown up with a golden spoon and getting royally spoiled. And not to speak of Lee's nonexistent manners. How would that work out anyway?

Sokka cuddles closer still as his mind already drifts off to sleep.

It's a mood point anyway. Sokka has seen enough of Lee's bare skin to know that there are no hidden marks on him anywhere.

Jin watches them like a hawk when they met up for dinner some odd days later. She has yet to say anything about them and Sokka is just waiting for her to.

They go to the place with the amazing spicy food - the place Lee and Sokka went to for their first date all those many weeks ago. It feels like it must have been a different life for Sokka.

They sit in some corner, Sokka next to Lee and his knee presses against Lee's thigh. Jin eyes them skeptically while ordering the spiciest of the dishes. Sokka looks at her.

"I didn't think you'd like hot food- we could have come here earlier."

"Oh, no, it's fine. I'm not always in the mood for it. But I don't mind if it's spicy- reminds me of my childhood, you know?" Jin says and Sokka nods in understanding. He hadn't forgotten

that Jin grew up in occupied territory. He guesses the cuisine must have been vastly different there- not that he has much experience with fire nation dishes.

But Sokka doesn't want to think about the war right now - it's happening anyway and there isn't much to do about it.

He turns to Lee instead, who looks contemplating. Does Lee know about Jin's past? Sokka guesses he probably would - they've been friends for years, haven't they?

"Yeah, but the food isn't that hot here anyway- you'd need original fire flakes if you'd want to get the taste right," Lee says to Jin and Sokka frowns. It's not anything specific about that sentence that makes Sokka pause, but something starts to nag him in the back of his mind-

"*Exactly!*" Jin hums in agreement and Sokka rolls his eyes at them.

"Seriously? Not that hot? You'd probably eat chilies like candy and wouldn't call it hot- Jin, did he tell you how he got his hands burned last week and acted like it was nothing? It's like the man wants to shrug off anything that has to do with any kind of heat- "

- and not to mention how hot his body temperature runs all the time- not that Sokka is complaining- but he's not going to tell Jin that.

"I didn't burn my hands! The water wasn't even boiling," Lee snaps at Sokka and Sokka gives him an unimpressed look.

"Oh yeah. Now that I think about it- some customer once threw steaming tea-water at you before- just as I first started working for uncle. You shrugged it off then too," Sokka says and bumps his shoulder into Lee's.

Lee shifts on his seat and Jin raises an eyebrow at them.

"Well, that's Lee for you- he might just start to pretend he is heat-resistant all together," Jin says with a laugh and Sokka frowns again because-

The waitress comes back with their orders and places the plates on the table. Sokka loses his trail of thought and they start to eat.

When Sokka turns towards Lee, he is already looking at Sokka with a small smile and Sokka's mind drifts in another direction. Sokka swallows down a bite.

"Hey, I think the food here is spicy enough for me but speaking about all the hot and spicy stuff- do you think uncle would mind if I stayed over again tonight?"

Lee groans softly.

"That's the worst line you could have come up with."

Sokka shrugs happily. If it works it works. He is also pretty sure that Lee actually likes his cheesy lines.

"You've been staying quite often at Lee's the last month or so... Do you guys want to tell me something?" Jin finally ask them.

"Like what?" Sokka says, playing innocent and Jin gives him an unimpressed look.

"Oh I don't know- and If my guess is correct then I don't think I want to know any details anyway."

Sokka loops his arm into Lee's and grins at her big and broad.

"Nah. We're just two bros going to hang out later- *right*, buddy?" Sokka says and elbows Lee in his side, who grumbles at that.

Jin rolls her eyes at his antics and Sokka glances back at Lee. His face might as well give anything away anyway - the bad liar that he is. But Jin smiles.

"I'm so happy for you guys."

And yeah- Sokka is so very happy for them too.

## Chapter End Notes

Look at that - that might just be Sokka's subconscious working hard on overtime in the background.

And before anyone asks- yes, Zuko's mark is there and is visible- and that's all I'm telling you 😬

(Anyway, I might start to feel nervous about the next handful of chapters 🙄)



# Interlude

## Chapter Notes

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

She is looking through her bag for paper to write on, when she finds a small old hand-mirror at the bottom. She didn't even realize she had it anymore as she picks it up to inspect it.

The face that stares right back in the reflection is an unknown woman to her. It might be her mother's face that she sees. Something about the shape of her nose, the look in her eyes - does she remember her mother looking like that?

It's been so many years and she isn't even sure anymore. But then, her mother had never such a hardness in her face, such dark circles under her eye. All those marks, hard won with a cost too steep. Maybe she is just not recognizing herself anymore.

She scoffs and throws the mirror on top of the bag and decides she doesn't need the papers right now anyway.

When she steps out of her tent, she is greeted by the chilly morning air. The camp still covered in a soft layer of fog.

Perfect.

With sure steps, she walks through the landscape of too many tents to count. Many men in armor are already up and busy with different preparations. They greet her with respect but at the same time give her a wide berth. Not for the first time she thinks that they may be scared of her.

That's good. It gives her some vindictive satisfaction at the prospect. These days she often feels more like a vengeful spirit just waiting to be unleashed. She thinks about the smell of ozone, of lightning that frizzles and flashes and she thinks she is going to be just like that when she gets her revenge. Quick and deadly.

She reaches the edge of the camp and with it the last of the tents. She doesn't wait and opens the flaps to poke her head inside.

She allows herself a small smile as she is greeted by one of the few things that can make her smile these days.

"Wake up. Training is still on," she says sternly.

"Just five more minutes, Katara," Aang says sleepily and rubs his eyes.

Katara gives him an unimpressed look. She opens the water flask at her side as she gets ready into stance and Aang blinks at her.

"We're training now. Here or outside - you're choice."

That get's Aang moving, as he springs into motion.

Katara doesn't wait for him to get ready. She steps out of the tent and away from their camp until she reaches the clearing at the river. Aang is quick to follow.

"We are going through the basic forms today," she tells him as she starts their training.

It takes two hours of going through the same repetitive motions before Aang flops down in the grass frustrated at her.

"I already knows this stuff. Shouldn't we focus on fighting instead?"

Katara shakes her head. She just doesn't feel like kicking his ass today. And it's not like he could learn anything new in one single day. The focus needs to be on the things he should know.

"I'm making sure the foundation of your water bending is flawless. You can ask Toph later to stomp you into the ground when it's *her turn*," she snaps at him.

Aang groans at her tone.

"You can't stay mad at her forever, Katara."

"I'm *not* mad at *Toph!*"

"Uh-hu. How about you go and get Toph for my next training session then?" Aang says and Katara's mood truly sours.

She wants to snap back at him, to get her himself. But it's not his fault and it's not Toph's fault either.

"*Fine*," she says and stomps back.

This time the camp is more lively as more of the warriors are up and making sure everything is ready to go for the big day.

She passes a group training their sword fighting and another checking our their gear.

Katara finds Toph at her make-shift armory at the other side of camp where she spend the last days fixing armors and weapons for everyone.

"Yo, sugar queen- what's up?" She ask while the metal of her armor ripples over her body, just like it is a part of her, changing the shape slightly.

Katara doesn't answer but crosses her arms as she watches her work.

"I managed to add a double layer to improve the armor's durability and function without weighting it down. Impressive stuff, right?" She grins broad and Katara huffs.

"Aang wants a last training session with you now."

Toph picks at her left ear.

"What was that? Are you twinkle toes messenger hawk now? At least say pretty please, when you are asking something."

Katara knows that Toph is just being Toph but Katara still glares at her- not that Toph could tell. But it's easier than to blow up because it's not Toph's fault and everyone of them is already stressed under the circumstances.

"Aang is feeling flighty and he wants you to beat some sense into him again," she says and abruptly turns to walk away.

"Hey, whats your problem now?" Toph ask, picking up on the subtext and Katara wheels back on her.

She is normally so much better at controlling her anger. The problem is that she is always angry.

"Oh, you know exactly what my problem is."

Toph huffs and blows some stray hair out of her eyes. She pops her hands on her hips.

"This again? Yes please, remind me how everything is my fault. It's not like I haven't heard enough of this in the last months."

"I never said it was your fault."

"No- you just act like some jerk. He was my friend too! How many times should I tell you that I was just trying to save- "

"*Well maybe you didn't try enough!*" Katara yells back.

Toph flicks her feet and suddenly the ground ripples as Katara gets swept off her own feet. Toph doesn't look amused any longer.

"You weren't there when the Dai Li attacked us. Would you rather I'd let them burry him under rocks?"

Katara huffs as she gets up. She knows that. Has ask Toph again and again what happened- how Toph moved him out of harms way and then she didn't realize he wasn't behind her,

wasn't following any longer when she found them again at the palace.

Katara knows she is being unfair- that it's not Toph's fault. But it's so much easier to direct her anger at Toph.

And it may not be fair. But nothing is.

"You go play some more in the dirt with Aang. I'm going to talk with dad."

Katara walks back through the camp and the other warriors hurry out of her way.

They can tell when she is in a bad mood. Gone is the sweet little water tribe girl and all that's left is a hardened shell of a water bender in her wake.

When she enters the big tent right next to her own, chief Hakoda, Bato and a handful of other of the warriors are in a meeting. They must be going over the rest of the plan and the debate seems heated.

" - I'm not sending my men to die if you are wrong! It will be certain doom if the date is of. I am not willing- "

Her father glances up and notices her.

"Oh, Katara, good timing- "

The warrior that got interrupted glares at her. Katara steps over to them and takes a look at the drawn maps on the table.

"Please tell these men again that we are absolutely sure with the date," Bato says to her.

But that's the problem. She isn't.

Katara still nods.

"Aang spoke with Avatar Roku at length. The scrolls we found before were precise. We have been going over the calculations again and again. Yes we are sure."

The other warriors seem more mollified even when some still look doubtful.

"This is certainly a good plan of yours. I'm sure it will work," Bato says and claps her shoulder.

Katara bristles at that. They treat her like one of the warriors and it's everything she ever wanted but it's not her that should have been standing here.

"It's not my plan- It's *Sokka's*. It was his idea!" She grinds out at Bato and she sees her dad give her a specific kind of look.

"Let's take a break, shall we?" Her dad says to the warriors and the meeting dissolves.

Katara waits until they are alone before speaking again.

"It's not *fair!*" She says and she knows she sounds like a petulant child.

"It isn't." Her dad says and pulls her into a hug and she has to swallow down a sob. Katara thought she had done her crying but she may have tears left to shed.

It really, really isn't fair.

Her dad lets go but he lays his hands on her shoulders and takes a good look at her.

"Katara, I am so proud of you for all of this," he tells her and she looks away. This words should have been for Sokka.

"Your brother would be so proud of you too," her father says then.

Would he? Would he even recognize this creature she has become? This creature fueled by nothing but anger and hatred?

"I just... I miss him so much- it should have been his plan- if Sokka was here, then there would be no chance that this could go wrong. He'd probably have an emergency plan from A-Z at the ready... He should have been the one to lead all the men into this."

Hakoda looks torn and she knows how much he is hurting too. Because now they only have each other left and yet...

"We only need the one plan. It will work."

Katara nods.

But she is angry at her dad too. If he hadn't left all those years ago...

Sokka was so convinced that their dad was alive. But slowly with time, he'd stopped bringing him up. Slowly with time, Katara could see him loose hope. And when they talked about finding dad again, his smiles would turn sad and it told her everything she needed to know.

If dad had never left- or if she had just kept Sokka closer to her- maybe he wouldn't have died without knowing that their father was still alive.

"Chief Hakoda- " one of the warriors calls as he enters the tent.

Katara nods at her dad. She won't keep him from the meeting any longer. It is a rather important day for all them. And while she may have come looking for her father so she could partake in the rest of all the talks - Katara isn't really interested any longer.

Katara is freezing and unfreezing parts of the small steam at the edge of camp, when Aang sits down next to her later.

"Did Toph already stomp you into the ground?" she asks.

"Katara..." Aang starts and Katara scoffs, knowing what he wants to say.

"I'm still not mad at Toph."

Aang looks at her dubious.

"Then are you... angry at me?" Aang asks and he lays his hand on top of hers.

And yes. *Yes*, she is angry at him too. She is so mad at him for almost...

Katara has to look away.

He is taller than her now. She isn't sure when that happened, but suddenly the small boy they found frozen in an iceberg had gotten so tall. His voice is deeper too and it sends shivers down her spine.

Sometimes when she looks at him, she tries to imagine what could have been, if not for the war that took her mother from her- if not for the war that took her brother from her.

Aang turns and winks to some of the warriors in passing. Katara's eyes fall on the lightning scar on his back peaking out from behind his robes-

She wonders what could have been, if not for the war that had also almost taken Aang from her too.

"I'm not angry at you. I am angry at *myself*. That all these things are happening to the people I care about and I can't do anything to stop it. How these things will keep happening to others until the war is over."

Aang hums sadly, clearly reminded of all the people he had lost. And Katara reminds herself then, that Sokka was Aang and Toph's friend too - that they share her pain.

That she isn't alone in this.

"Promise me one thing. We are going to stay together tomorrow. I need to know that you are alright. That I can save you again should we have another run into with the lightning princess..."

"Katara, that might not be possible if we want to- "

"Promise me Aang," she says and Aang nods.

Katara turns to the water and she starts to let some droplets dance between her fingers. She looks back to Aang watching her.

"Are you certain about that day? Are you sure what the past avatars have told you- If we have miscalculated with tomorrow then..."

Aang nods slowly, resolutely and Katara exhales.

"I am certain," he says to her.

And Katara smiles. But it's not a pretty smile - because Katara doesn't know how else to smile any more.

And Katara is is going to be ready to let her anger unleash at the fire nation for taking her brother from her. And if Katara should come faces to face with the lightning princess she is going to make her pay for almost taking Aang from her too.

Because Katara is always angry now - there is a lot to be unleashed.

"Then let us end this war."

## Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand the rest of the Gaang is alive and still kicking - Hurrah! 🙄

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

Buckle up, it's time that I take you all for a ride.

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

It's nothing specific that wakes Sokka in the middle of the night.

He lays on his stomach, his face buried into the crock of his arm. He can feel the brush of fingers through his hair, scraping against his scalp where the hair is shorter - soft touches to his ear, fingers tracing over his brow, over his cheek - all done in slow deliberate movements.

"Hm, that's nice," he hums into the dark.

"There is... something that I need to tell you," Lee whispers back.

"What is it?" He mumbles and waits for Lee to go on. But an answer never comes and Sokka falls back asleep.

Jin is already waiting for him at the fountain square.

"Sorry, I'm so late," he tells her and puts his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

Jin gives him a look with raised brows but she doesn't question it. Which is good, because Sokka is certainly not telling her that his only excuse is that got distracted by Lee kissing him rather nicely.

"Don't worry about it. Heyong doesn't get off from work for another hour and Ako couldn't be punctual to save her life anyway," she tells him.

Sokka smiles a bit sheepish and sits down next to her so they can wait together. Jin elbows him into his side with a happy grin.



"I'm just glad that you decided to come for once. Having you hang out with me and the girls will be so much fun- I feel like I never really see you anymore these days."

"I know. And I'm sorry- there's just always... so much to do at the tea shop. You know how it is," Sokka says and rubs his neck - it weren't only some nice kisses that made him lose track of the time. Some wandering hands may have been involved too.

Jin gives him an unimpressed look, like she can guess that's just a load of ostrich-horse crap.

"Sure. I know. No problem," she says still and Sokka nods.

He turns to watch some random people walking over the square and thinks he may have spotted Ako already somewhere in the distance.

"*Oh*- By the way. Sokka... you are wearing your tunic the wrong side up," Jin says amused.

Sokka's eyes snap down to his sleeve and he realizes that the seams are, in fact on the outside. He groans and puts his face in his hands as Jin laughs at him.

Yes, *okay* - It weren't just some nice kisses and wandering hands - more like a quick fumble that turned into a not so quick fumble. Which led to Sokka spending way too much time with his head lost somewhere between Lee's tights. But only until he had reduced Lee to a whimpering, incoherent mess of course - Lee just makes it too easy for Sokka to get carried away with him - so, if anyone is at fault for Sokka being late...

"Hey Jin, Hello Sokka... What's so funny?" Ako asks when she shows up right then, interrupting Jin still laughing at him.

"Oh, don't mind us. I was just teasing Sokka," Jin says and gets up to hug Ako in greeting. Sokka waves at her and stands up too.

He hadn't really seen Ako since that one evening that went totally sideways so many weeks ago. Since then Jin had kept insisting that Ako was really, really sorry for leaving such a horrible first impression. And when Jin started to beg him to come to their routinely nights out, Sokka decided he could give Ako another chance. He's not one to hold a grudge anyway.

Ako gives him a look with a wry smile, her eyes lingering on his sleeve. And yes - Sokka knows that he got dressed in a hurry. Can they just not make a thing out of it?

The three of them start walking down the street towards the place the girls like to hang out together.

There are tables placed outside and it's already full with other young adults ready to enjoy Ba Sing Se's warm evenings. Ako spots an empty table and they sit down there.

"I'm right back," Jin says and goes to get some drinks for them.

Sokka hums and takes a look around, thinking about what he should even talk about with Jin's friend. But then Ako puts her elbows on the table and leans forward, interest gleaming in her eyes. Oh right, he should have remembered that she is a gossip.

"So, I hear congratulations are in order. Jin said you and Lee started dating," Ako says to him and he can't help himself but beam at her in confirmation.

"Yeah, but just some weeks now."

Two months and five days. Not that Sokka is counting of course.

"I'm so surprised someone got Lee to actually date. He may be such a pretty guy, but he makes such an intense impression- I can't imagine he is always like that?"

Sokka shrugs, not knowing what he should even say to that.

He guesses intense would be one way to describe Lee. It's just... the way he moves, how he holds himself, how he goes about all his tasks - everything Lee does has some kind of force behind it and it's like there is some fire burning inside Lee. Sokka can't help watching him, being enthralled with everything he does. And it's... overwhelming - being wanted by someone like that.

Sokka's tongue involuntarily find the spot where Lee bit the inside of his lips earlier.

Overwhelming could be one word for it- aggressive kisser maybe another. Not that Sokka is complaining, the opposite in fact. But yeah, intense is certainly accurate.

But that's not all that is to him. Because Lee can be so soft and sweet in so many little ways and sometimes he touches and looks at Sokka with so much reverent, like he can't believe Sokka is real and it makes all of Sokka's insides light up, makes him feel giddy and happy and nervous and nauseous at the same time -

"Awww. What got you looking like that?" Ako asks with a skewed smile and Sokka flushes at getting so lost in thoughts.

"Ako, please- " Jin says when she sits down. She hands them their drinks and Sokka takes a sip. It tastes surprisingly fruity, reminding him a bit about cactus juice. He takes another sip.

"Sokka, you can just tell her to shut up if she is annoying you," Jin says to him and Ako grins unapologetic.

"I was just going to ask if they are only fooling around or if it's serious. But looking at *that* expression, I can guess. Have you guys already done some big love proclamations yet?"

Well, she certainly is noisy. Sokka smiles uncomfortable at her.

"We just started dating- can we please drop it now?"

"Well, if the heart knows, the heart knows. But sorry for being so curious, I don't want to make you uncomfortable...it's just. This is *Lee*. I know so many people that had a crush on

him at one point and he'd never dated anyone before."

"Well, technically he dated me," Jin says as she sips her drink. Sokka feels relieved at the opportunity to change the subject and he turns to Jin.

"Right. You mentioned it once, but you never told me about it."

Jin laughs a bit embarrassed and starts to play with her drink absentmindedly.

"It was just this one date, but it was very sweet. Do you know that small fountain with all the lanterns - near the silk trader?"

Sokka nods.

"It used to be my favorite place back then. I wanted to show it to Lee that evening, but everything was dark. I was so disappointed - then Lee told me to close my eyes and when I opened them again, all the lanterns were lit."

Sokka laughs trying to imagine the scene- Jin standing there waiting while Lee runs around lighting all the lanterns on his own. It's cheesy but definitely something he can see Lee doing.

"Wait- how long did he let you stand there with your eyes closed? The fountain has so many lanterns..." Sokka suddenly says.

"It wasn't that long- just a moment," Jin shrugs with a fond smile and Sokka frowns at the nagging feeling he suddenly gets.

Ako hums. She looks at Jin with the same gleam she had earlier in her eyes.

"That's all really sweet. But speaking about sweet things - I've been dying to tell you what romantic thing Bo did last week. He invited me over and cooked dinner for me and then - "

Sokka hums along to Ako's story, but he has trouble listening to her any longer.

The feeling that he is overlooking something crucial doesn't leave him for the rest of the night.

Jasmine. Rock. Boat. And the White Lotus of course. The layout of the pieces seems random. Everything so insignificant.

Sokka's strategy was working- until it suddenly wasn't. Uncle Mushi is good at this game after all. Sokka scratches his chin as he tries to concentrate on the board in front of him. But his mind is distracted today.

"I think I may need a bit," he eventually admits after several minutes without making his move.

"Don't rush. Sometimes it's so easy to get lost in the details and we fail to see all the things coming together as a whole- creating the bigger picture," uncle says.

Sokka leans back and he glances towards Lee pouring tea. Lee catches his eyes and a small smile flickers over his face. Sokka's stomach flutter's in an now all familiar way and he smiles back. Because yeah - wouldn't be the first time he gets himself lost and distracted by Lee smiling at him.

Sokka looks back at the board, trying to take it in as a whole. Uncle might not be wrong, he does sometimes get lost in the details and misses the bigger picture. Sokka hums as he realizes what his next move should be and he places a tile.

His eyes unsolicited find their way back to Lee yet again.

The bigger picture... just what would the bigger picture be?

*Just who are you?*

Sokka doesn't know where this thought comes from. Why this question suddenly and disjointed pops up inside his head at all and he frowns at himself.

Sokka let's out a hoarse sound when Lee bites his left shoulder.

He's trapped between the bedroll and by Lee's weight pressed flush against his back, leaving him no room to move. They've been laying like this for what feels like torturous hours and Sokka can't even tell anymore where he ends and where Lee begins. It feels like Lee's fire is burning right under Sokka's skin too- is trying to fill every space inside of him with his flame.

Lee keeps rolling his hips in just the right way and another strangled gasp escapes Sokka - and suddenly it's too much - it's not enough. Sokka feels like he is overflowing with it, with the heat and the fire and this hot static electricity he can feel between the two of them, fully surrounding him and he comes with a sob and a curl of his toes.

Lee makes a strangled sound and he snaps his hips again. And again, and ... and then he is already following Sokka over the edge.

Sokka pants, trying to catch his breath and Lee presses his head down between Sokka's shoulders, breathing hard.

"... just- fuck. *Sokka*," he says and sounds so out of it as Sokka feels.

"Yeah, I know," Sokka grins blissfully exhausted. Everything feels sweaty and sticky and aching in the best kind of way.

Lee let's out a weird raspy noise, his head still pressed against his skin, his weight still pinning Sokka down and Sokka frowns.

"You okay there buddy?"

"No. Yes, just- I... I," Lee stops. There is something desperate, something wrecked about the way he sounds and Sokka tries to crank his head, but he can barely move under the weight.

Does Lee feel this too? This things between them?

Sokka doesn't know when it shifted- but right now it's like he always felt like this. And it might be too big to put into simple words because they will not be enough - words will never be enough. But this desperation in Lee's voice- Sokka can feel it too. This overpowering, burning need to press himself closer still. And it feels like catching fire- like burning with such an intensity for Lee and... it's feels like this thing between them is too big for words and his feelings for Lee could so easily destroy Sokka alongside with them. He guesses he gets it.

"Yeah, me too," Sokka whispers.

But maybe, on the other hand, Sokka is just feeling so wistful right now, because he's never gotten so throughoutly fucked like this.

Lee let's out shaky breath and drops his weight fully on Sokka, crushing Sokka with it - like he wants to burry himself even deeper, like he wants to disappear into the very marrow of Sokka's bones- like he is afraid that Sokka could just disappear.

Sokka get's the strange distant feeling that Lee is holding on to him like Sokka is something he has already lost.

It's a warm sunny afternoon when he is walking through the market with Lee. It's one of the few days where the tea shop has closed and they have the day off to do as they please. Lee had the brilliant idea that he wants to cook something for him and Sokka is certainly not complaining.

"By the look of it- I'm a very well kept man," he says as he turns some cabbages around in his hands.

Lee takes them out of his hands and puts them back down with a shake of his head.

"Is there some reason for you wanting to spoil me?" Sokka ask and inspects a strange looking vegetable he has never seen or heard of next. He sniffs at it and makes a face when it smells revolting.

Lee huffs and takes the vegetable away too. He gives Sokka a handful of bell peppers instead and Sokka finds his arms full.

"Yeah, there is .... um- something I want to talk to you about after dinner."

Lee is not looking at him and Sokka frowns at his odd tone. Now that he thinks about it, Lee had been acting a bit off, ever since the last time Sokka stayed over.

"You... don't happen to plan to break up with me?" He ask with a laugh and ignores the sudden spike in anxiety.

"No? Why would I want to break up with you?" Lee ask and sounds affronted by the mere idea.

Sokka huffs. A wire smile enters his face.

"I see. You are buttering me up with your amazing cooking skill because you want me to be in a pliant mood when you introduce me to some kinky stuff later."

Lee gives Sokka a blank look at first.

"It's not some kinky stuff!" Lee says appalled then and he turns to pays for the vegetables. The merchant side eyes them weirdly. Sokka notices the look and stares right back, daring the man to say anything.

"...Just some thing I really need to tell you."

"Hey, no judgement. You can tell me if you are into some weird things- I may just be up to it."

Lee looks at him exasperated but Sokka can still spot the fond smile he tries to hide. He links their arms together and they continue walking down the market.

"I think... there are some important things I really need to say to you too- So, shall we get the meat and then head back?" Sokka ask and Lee nods.

The idea alone makes him nervous already.

But Sokka can't just put it off forever. And even if Lee never ask about it anymore - Sokka still doesn't like that he has to keep things from Lee. Maybe it will not be so bad to have another person to share his secrets with?

And while Sokka may be nervous about the idea of telling Lee, he doesn't think his soulmark would get between the two of them any longer.

But way more important - he wants Lee to know. Wants Lee to know about every part of him - the good as well as the bad.

So, if they are going to talk later about important stuff anyway, Sokka can tell Lee then.

Lee puts a pot with water on the stove and Sokka grabs the knife to start chopping the vegetables. Lee takes the knife out of his hands.

"I'm doing all the cooking today," Lee says and Sokka makes a face.

"And what should I do? Sit around and look pretty? That's boring."

Lee shrugs and starts with the other preparations.

"Just talk to me- tell me a story? I like hearing you talk."

Sokka leans at the window to watch Lee and Sokka smiles. He thinks about it for a moment, before starting with a random story he found funny. Lee hums and nods along to it while he works.

"- and that's the version Ako told us and- Hey, is it supposed to rain? It was sunny earlier..."

Sokka wonders aloud when he notices it suddenly starting to get darker in the kitchen. His eyes glance towards the window. It's either going to start raining, or some big cloud must currently block the sun because the light inside is getting dimmer by the second. Was it cloudy earlier? Sokka isn't even sure.

He shrugs.

"Anyway- You should have heard Heyong's laugh. I've never heard another human snort like some- " Sokka turns his attention back towards Lee and he stops talking.

It's nothing specific. At one moment Lee is chopping onions and Sokka grins at him. And the next Lee stops moving, the knife hovering over the cutting board and Lee frowns.

"What's wrong?" Sokka ask, still in a happy mood.

"It's...nothing," Lee says and he continues with his task.

And it's truly nothing out of the ordinary. Sokka can't even put his finger on just why this moment strikes him as odd. Lee goes and peels another onion.

Sokka moves around the table and touches Lee's arm.

"Are you- "

His arm feels cool. Not cold - but for someone who is always running so much warmer than the average person - it doesn't feel right either.

Sokka pulls his hand away.

"Are you *sure*?"

"I- yes, sure. What were you saying?" Lee asks and aims for a smile - but it looks off around the edges, and that's when Sokka truly realizes something is wrong.

Sokka knows how Lee's smiles look. He has imprinted them to memory and he can sure as hell tell when it's so clearly fake.

Just what's going on? His eyes move back towards the window. And serious why is it getting dark in the middle of the day anyway?

Sokka huffs out a breath.

He walks back over, throws the window open and leans outwards. He can see some passersby down at the street staring at the sky and he turns to squint towards the sun, to see what's up.

It's impossible to not notice. A sudden bad foreboding feeling hits Sokka.

"Is that... an eclipse? *Right now?*" He says aghast and turns back to Lee, who is looking at Sokka. His expression is still not right for him.

"A solar eclipse? What- *today?*" Lee says dumbfounded and just as surprised.

Sokka nods stumped and so very confused.

"Why is there an eclipse happening now? Why had I never heard anything about this? Shouldn't this be- common knowledge or some shit?"

Lee looks equally unsure.

"I don't know. But it's nothing new that the stars are misaligned, I guess," he says and Sokka snorts.

"Oh yeah, sure. Maybe it's the last one that never bothered to show up and is just running late by what- three years? That would be-" Sokka says sarcastically and then he stops-

It's like someone gave his brain a hard shake and some things he barely thought to remember are suddenly coming back to him.

Sokka looks at Lee. Lee looks at the vegetables in front of him before grabbing the bell peppers.

The bigger picture uncle Mushi had said- how Sokka just needed to put all the details together.

"I hope it's not the same eclipse- that would be horrifying news. Really horrifying. Maybe we should count? If it's the same- it's only lasting eight minutes anyway," Sokka says with a hitch to his voice and he doesn't know if he is joking anymore.

Lee looks back up at him with a frown.

"What same eclipse? How do you know this?"



Sokka shrugs. The room is darker still.

"Read some stuff once."

Lee nods and goes to get the big pan. Sokka watches him but in his head he has already started counting.

What does he know about Lee exactly?

A lot of small random details as it seems. All about his uncle and his life here in Ba Sing Se and the tea shop.

Then there are now also all the new things that make Sokka feel a certain kind of way. Like the places Lee is ticklish or how he wants to be kissed. The way he likes Sokka to touch him - or how Lee sounds when he comes undone.

But now that Sokka thinks about it, there are also so many details he's learned about Lee that are flat out weird.

Things like Lee's certainty that the fire nation will win this war.

Or the one time he told Sokka about his mother. And regarding that, still - *what the fuck?*

Then there is also the story about Lee having been on some boat. How he had glossed over the fact that he was giving orders to the crew. Sokka didn't think it was important then- but he had still listened, was still remembering it now.

And Lee's insistence that he can't leave the city - that may make him sound like any regular refugee but Sokka always got the feeling that there is more to it too.

But least not to forget - what's with the absolute bonkers insistence that Sokka shouldn't call him by his name?

Sokka has a hard time to compartmentalize any of these things now.

Then there are also all the small and insignificant details that Sokka wouldn't give any meaning to in other circumstances.

The way Lee never gets bothered by steaming water. How he knows how fire nation dishes should taste like. How Lee lit so many lanterns for Jin in supposedly only a few moments. How Lee's body always runs so hot and yet when Sokka touched his arm just now...

The bigger picture, Sokka thinks sardonically.

*Just who are you?*

Sokka glances back towards the window. Has it been around eight minutes in total?

His eyes move back to Lee, wanting to see if he can find any sign that Sokka is wrong.

But when it's like someone is slowly turning the light back on, Lee huffs out a soft breath. It would be missable if not for the way Sokka watches him like a hawk and he sees it for what it is.

The relieved exhale.

Should Sokka touch Lee's arm now, he is sure what he would find. Sokka leans against the edge of the table and crosses his arms instead.

"Is the bending back on?" He ask conversationally.

Lee stops cutting the meat and glances at Sokka before he continues nonplused.

"Bending? What bending, what do you mean?" He ask sounding truly confused. Sokka would just love to believe him, if not for the way his voice hitched.

"Like I said, I read about eclipses before. Did you know that fire benders lose their bending during it? *Fascinating stuff.*"

Maybe Lee is going to laugh at him now and ask what the hell Sokka is talking about?

Lee doesn't. Of course he doesn't. He stills completely instead.

Lee looks at Sokka with a wide eyed look and it's so clear that he doesn't know to react to such an implied accusation.

Sokka is suddenly so sick to play games anymore. He pushes himself away from the table.

"Who *the fuck* are you?"

Lee's eyes dart around for a moment, like the answer to that lays hidden somewhere in this room.

"I... "

Lee then reminds Sokka more of a trapped animal. Sokka flashes his teeth.

"I ask you a question," he snaps.

Lee rolls his shoulder and looks at Sokka warily. He notices that he is still holding the cutting knife and quickly lays it down on the table. Lee puts his hands up in front of him - like he wants to show to Sokka that he is harmless.

Sokka looks at these hands and knows exactly what they should be capable of. There is nothing harmless about them.

"I am- "

Lee looks so helpless, so vulnerable then and Sokka suddenly falters and he deflates. Because this is still Lee, Sokka's very sweet boyfriend, who he is so crazy about. And hadn't Lee said

that he wanted to talk to Sokka? It's not like Sokka had been forthcoming with everything so he can't fault him there. Telling someone that they are a firedender hiding from the war isn't the worst secret it could have been-

*The bigger picture.*

Suddenly all those tiny moments, all the details Sokka hadn't yet fully managed to merge, snap themselves together in a different way in his mind. They reshape themselves into a new form - so unfathomable and ludicrous that he can't stop himself -

The nagging feeling that he was missing something, turns to cold iciness in his veins. It's not even making sense, logical speaking because Lee doesn't have a mark on him. Yet all of Sokka's instincts are telling him that he's got it now.

- and once the idea has taken a hold of him, Sokka can't stop himself from pulling the wrappings of his arm and shoving his wrist up in Lee's face.

Sokka so desperately wishes he is going to be wrong.

"This. That's *your* name," Sokka says, his voice hard again.

And in just a moment Sokka will stand there looking like the world's biggest idiot because Lee doesn't know what he is talking about...

Lee nods slowly.

"... I- yes- that's my name," he whispers back so painfully soft.

And for a terrifying beautiful moment- one that makes Sokka's heartbeat skip a beat - Lee realizes what he is just looking at now and he stares at Sokka disbelieving, in wonderment. And for this small terrifying moment everything is perfect because Lee is Sokka's soulmate and Lee is still only Lee and Sokka is so very much in lo—

"- But I thought... I don't understand," Lee adds and he sounds so confused and hopeful and terrified and - *No*.

No. Sokka is done with trying to interpret Lee's looks, or his tone or the way he acts because Lee is not even called Lee and...

And that's when all the other things fall into place and the rest of the situation catches up with them - crashing into Sokka's world as everything rearranges itself and the Lee Sokka thought he knew, ceases to exist.

## Chapter End Notes

Sokka: \*gushes over Zuko the whole chapter long\*

Random eclipse happens

Sokka: you're a firebender?!

Zuko: ????

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Finally - this chapter felt like it took years to write. But do you guys realize what all this means?

The invasion is happening!!! 🎉🎉🎉

(just without Sokka, lol)

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

\*throws in chapter, ducks, and hides\*

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

At first nothing happens.

Then several things happen all at once.

Sokka starts to smell something burning and his first instinct is that the non metaphorical, literal firebender in the room must be the cause.

Lee - the fire nation prince Zuko makes an inconspicuous movement and Sokka jerks back from him. Prince jerkface even has the audacity to look hurt by it.

The pot on the stove starts sizzling and smoking because nobody was watching it any longer.

The royal jerkiness curses and rushes over to the stove. He pulls the pot away and makes a scrunched up face.

"Sorry- I forgot about the rice, we can..."

He trails off when he sees Sokka's expression.

"I don't care about the rice right now," Sokka says and moves his jaw. He's feeling surprisingly calm all things considering.

He takes a deep breath.

"What do you mean with, you don't understand? This is your name. On my skin," Sokka grinds out.

The prince blinks with some kind of blank expression. Or he doesn't, but Sokka is certainly not going to read into anything right now.

"What is it, that you thought exactly? That's your *fire nation* name. Because you are the prince of the literal enemy. And again - it is on *my skin!* I think it's not getting any clearer

than that."

Sokka remembers all the times he'd look at his mark horrified at being branded like that. He takes another deep breath. If he's going to get angry and start yelling, he will not be able to hear what the royal jerkbender has to say in his defense. So, Sokka is willing himself to stay collected.

Prince super jerk cringes at Sokka's words, fully aware how bad it sounds when put like that.

"You, er... learned to read imperial shorthand?" He ask awkwardly, still holding onto the pot.

Is that ass for real? Or is it supposed to be a joke? Sokka crosses his arms to tuck his wrist closer to himself. Right now everything feels like a joke.

And the worst part is, if Sokka wasn't so fucking mad - he'd even crack a smile at Lee's adorable way of-

*Zuko.* His name is Zuko.

Right.

"Why would I try to learn fire nation signs?" Sokka asks toneless.

"Because you said... you said you couldn't read it before but- you know what's written there- who I... am."

"Jin recognized it. She told me what it meant."

"Right. She would know, of course," Zuko says and Sokka stares hard at him.

"What do you mean, *of course*? There is no of course in that."

"Well, she grew up in the colonies. And she must have seen the wanted posters back then. I never confirmed it but I always guessed she..." Zuko trails off again.

"... knew," he says and both realize that Jin could have told Sokka the whole time if that's true.

And Sokka can't just deal with anything from this sentence - Jin knowing about his mark is one thing, but her having known that Lee and the royal jerkbender are one and the same? Nope - Sokka is not thinking about that now. And wanted posters. What wanted posters? No - Sokka doesn't care.

He needs to focus his anger at the well-deserving jerk in front of him. He takes a big breath.

He's still feeling so calm.

"You *lied* to me about pretty much *everything*."

Zuko makes a face and finally puts the pot back down.

"I didn't lie about everything- just... just the name."

Sokka scoffs.

"Yes, the name and all that terrible rest attached to this piece of information. Just, maybe, if you can't even be honest about who you are, you shouldn't drag other people into a relationship with you."

Zuko's nostrils flare then.

"As far as I'm aware, *you* did all the dragging. And it's not like you have been honest with me about everything either. I just never cared about that," Zuko says and he sounds like he is growing defensive.

And what? Sokka frowns. Does he mean... just because Sokka was the one who took all the first steps? He shakes his head at himself.

"So you are saying this it's *my* fault? And what do you mean I haven't been *honest*?"

Zuko looks pointed at Sokka's arm still tucked close to him.

And that's the point where Sokka feels like he can't stay calm any longer.

The pure *audacity* of this guy!

"*Fuck you, you asshole!*" Sokka suddenly explodes.

"You lied straight to my face the whole time! I may have kept some things from you but I never lied like that. You knew I had this mark right from the beginning. That's not the same!" Sokka yells at him.

Zuko draws his shoulders up and... *There*.

Sokka already knew this side existed, was aware that there was some bottled up anger somewhere. But Sokka never really got to really see this side of him - only occasional when Zuko dealt with rude customers and stupidly, Sokka had thought it was maybe because he'd made him happy enough. Now he realizes that Zuko must have tried to hold back the whole time.

"*Not the same?! You lie to me all the damn time,*" Zuko yells back.

Sokka feels something like grim satisfaction come over him. It should be easier to deal with some angry fire nation asshole than this mopey sorry face he is so sick of looking at.

"When have I ever really lied to you? Please be so kind to inform me!"

"I don't know what about exactly? But I'm not stupid- I can tell when someone is hiding things from me and you clearly do!"

Sokka throws his hands up in dramatic notion.

"Boy, you are just paranoid! That's such a you issue! Unless you give me something concrete-"

"*The Dai Li*," Zuko snaps at him. Sokka stares back hard.

"You made it pretty obvious, that you are hiding from them."

Sokka scoffs. This is starting to sound like Zuko is gasping at straws because he doesn't want to admit how big he fucked up.

"Everyone is hiding away from the Dai Li in Ba Sing Se- That's nothing special! So when else did I lie?"

"Your mark. You told me it's a burn mark at first - was it some joke to you, by the way?"

Sokka grinds his teeth.

"*Nothing* about this is a *joke* to me! And it certainly is a mark from a firebender because *you are a firebender!*"

"Okay - Let's focus on that then. You told me you didn't know who your soulmate is and then you said it wasn't me. But you know who I am, *so you lied!*"

"But I didn't know who you were! I just put it together earlier. And what do you mean it wasn't you? I never said it like that- "

Sokka stops yelling and another thought crosses his mind.

How can a single person be so stupid anyway? He isn't sure which one of the two of them he means. Sokka looks back at Zuko.

No definitely him - Sokka is the bigger idiot.

"Did you *know*? About *this*? About us?" Sokka asks and points his index finger between the two of them exaggerated.

Zuko glares at him.

"Where did you get that from now? Of course I didn't know. I suspected it once at first but you said you knew who's name it was then and said it had nothing to do with me - "

At this point they might just start to argue in circles. Sokka pulls at his hair in frustration.

"Because you used a different name you jerk - I didn't anticipate that you'd be the same person! And sorry for not realizing sooner that you are the fucking prince of the fucking fire nation hiding in a tea shop in Ba Sing Se!"

Distantly, Sokka is aware how laughable small his earlier worry of Zuko being a random firebender is in comparison.



"Yes, please be any louder. I'm sure the people in the upper ring haven't heard you yet," Zuko yells back at him.

Why does he now seem to find the time to be sarcastic? Seriously. *This guy...* Sokka would have loved to quip back fondly at Lee right now.

It would have been just so, so much easier if it had been all about some weird kinky stuff, Sokka thinks with something of a hysterical edge.

"Point still stands. You knew about my mark and that's not the same as lying about your whole identity. Why are you in Ba Sing Se anyway? Shouldn't you like, fight? At the head of this war?"

"I'm in *exile*- I'm a *traitor*! There just isn't another save place for me to go!" Zuko snaps at him.

"You know what? That doesn't even *matter*! Because Ba Sin Se will not be save from the war for much longer."

Zuko draws back and looks at him uncomprehending.

"What do you mean with *that*?"

Sokka throws his hands up again.

"Don't you *get it*?"

Zuko shakes his head bewildered.

"The eclipse earlier? *Sozin's comet*? No place will be save when the fire nation's gonna realize the comet is most likely just late... is still coming."

Zuko makes a grimace in bitter triumphant.

"*This!* This is *exactly* what I meant! You do this all the time. You make random statements and then you don't explain or change the subject- I just never felt the need to call you out on it- "

Sokka frowns. What? No, He doesn't do that.

" - when you exaggerate in your stories. Like... The girl that invented metal bending? Your strange travel stories? The way you just- flew across the earth kingdom all the way from the south pole without elaborating? Please. I can tell when I am getting lied to."

*Oh*, Sokka gets it now.

It's not his fault that Lee doesn't believe him. And he always only changed the subject in concern about the avatar-stuff. He can't just go on and tell about that, when it's not for him to share. Sokka didn't think Zuko would even notice that he did this among all Sokka's rambling.

"But all these things got *nothing* to do with *you*! And I still didn't *lie*! I just couldn't mention things for the chance that the Dai Li or the fire nation or who else should learn about it. There are *lives* that could be on the line when- "

"And I never told you about my identity before because that's literal *my life* on the line!" Zuko yells at least and that's what brings Sokka to a full stop.

Exiled he had said. Wanted posters. Traitor.

Sokka may be angry and hurt as hell but he is still a man of logic and if what Zuko is saying is true and he had reason to fear for his safety that's a concern that Sokka can relate to.

Sokka rubs his forehead and the fight fully bleeds out of him.

"You know what. That all doesn't matter. The avatar is gone and with the comet the fire nation is going to destroy everything else that's left. We will all be death by then anyway."

Zuko, still breathing hard from all the shouting, looks so confused.

Sokka shakes his head and turns towards the door. He is exhausted. He doesn't care if he should explain what he means or why he knows that. Sokka just feels defeated.

"That's it?" Zuko ask with a thick voice.

"Man I don't know what you want to hear from me, but I am done. I don't care - *Congratulations*, you guys won."

Sokka reaches for the doorknob. Zuko looks at him wide eyed and moves to step between Sokka and the door to stop him.

Sokka slightly flinches back a step, as he stares at Zuko. He doesn't think Zuko would try to hurt him but he is still a firebender - is still theoretical dangerous as any weapon.

Zuko's face scrunches up.

"Wait... just don't- *Wait!*" Zuko says with something crazed like he is just remembering something.

"Your *soulmark* - you are my soulmate!"

Like this is going to make Sokka want to stay.

Zuko grabs his left foot and starts to pull of his shoe.

Sokka stares at him bewildered.

"What are you doing?"

Zuko hobbles around on one leg, turning his ankle in a awkward angle and - *Nope*.

Nope, nope, nope. Sokka is not looking at that.

There is a small boomerang on the bottom of Zuko's foot. Sokka would recognize it anywhere.

*What in La's name?!*

"That's yours, *right?*" Zuko asks plainly.

Sokka thinks he is going to be sick.

"This *is* a joke. I was right the whole time- it is *just* a joke. I don't know what I did to any spirits but they clearly must *hate* me. It's like they want you to *step on me*, it's like you are *supposed* to walk all over me," he mutters to himself not knowing how else to deal with that.

"What."

Zuko gives him a look, as if not understanding. He shakes his head even more perplexed.

All the time Sokka had thought that Zuko was just extremely ticklish on his feet, not giving it any importance or thought when he always pulled his foot away but now...

"You never thought to, what, show me this? You'd never thought to say - *Hey Sokka, look what I've got there?*"

Zuko falters.

"I didn't- I *was* going to tell you about it-"

Sokka pulls his hand over his face. He is still so angry but he doesn't have the energy left to scream at Zuko again.

"We've been *fucking* for *weeks* and you still managed to keep *this* from me... "

"I was going to tell you," he repeats.

"Yeah, but you didn't."

"I was- I wanted to tell you... If I had gotten the time earlier, I could have explained everything better to you."

Zuko cards his hand through his hair. It looks so messy. His hair is always so messy and Sokka wants to reach out to-

That's not helpful right now.

"Was everything that happened between us a lie to you?" Sokka asks because he apparently likes hurting himself.

"No, of course not- I was always honest except... well my past- and the... soulmark."

Sokka nods slowly, not sure if he can believe him. He can't decide if he prefers to everything having been a lie or just some parts of it.

But the anger from before has already simmered down a bit and Sokka can think clearer again - he remembers that there were instances where Lee... where Zuko tried to tell him something. He just never did.

Sokka looks down at his arm. The mark sitting still so bold on his skin.

He wasn't honest either. He was so worried that Zuko would... would be as horrified as Sokka was. But then for Zuko it must have been the same, just in reverse. Sokka's mind flicks back to the way Zuko had held onto him the last time Sokka stayed over, some days ago. The feeling of... desperation he had oddly sensed. Was Zuko afraid that once he told Sokka the whole truth, he would bolt?

Sokka wonders how he would have taken everything if Zuko had gotten the time to explain himself properly.

"I wanted to show you my mark later today," he says and he takes a look around at that, as if remembering for the first time where they still are. Remembering what they had done before all this - the grocery shopping together, the easy talks, Sokka making some jokes trying to earn a laugh. The normality of every everything.

The kitchen is still a mess with the half done dinner. But the room is darker again. When had it gotten so late already?

Zuko nods and goes to light a lamp, as if remembering too. He's still wearing only one shoe and Sokka can't see it with Zuko's back facing him then, but it's clear he must have used his bending for the light.

Zuko turns back to him looking unhappy. Sokka still feels so very hurt. They stare at each other and there is this big rift between them that Sokka is not used to.

"I can't believe that *you* are that prince of mine," he says without thinking about it and a small smile flickers over Zuko's face.

It's so achingly familiar that it throws Sokka completely off.

It's gone in an instant and Zuko's face is back to his grumpy default.

But the smile was *there*.

And it's such a look Lee would have made and when Sokka looks at him it's not the face of some stranger looking back, but the same face he'd tried to memorize.

The same face he'd touched and kissed and dreamed about. And it makes Sokka question if everything else truly was genuine between them.

And Sokka may be angry and hurt but... exiled, Zuko had said. Traitor. Wanted posters. How he wouldn't be save anywhere else but Ba Sing Se. Three odd years, maybe four or so? Zuko really must have tried to build a life for himself here.

Sokka just realizes that there is still so much he doesn't know.

He looks back at Zuko watching him and he remembers all the other times Zuko was looking at him before and Sokka's heart flutters in his chest.

Sokka huffs and bites his lips but he can't help himself when a small smile still escapes. And Sokka may as well be stupid, because a not so small part of him suddenly hopes they can manage to move past this. That this is not the end for them.

That's when the door rattles and uncle Mushi opens it.

He pauses in the doorway as he takes in the scene. The pot with the burned rice, the half cut vegetables and the meat, Zuko's shoe right in front of him. The look on both of them.

His eyes glances to Sokka's arm, naked without the fabric for a second.

He doesn't react to it, but Sokka can tell that a master of Pai Sho can quickly figure out what must have happened here.

Uncle gives Zuko a small disapproving look, but Sokka doesn't care what that may imply.

"It seems... I am interrupting something," he says and Zuko and Sokka exchange another glance.

Zuko shakes his head and looks back at his uncle.

"*What is it, uncle?*" Zuko ask suddenly with an anxious tone.

Sokka looks back at uncle Mushi but he looks as calm and collected as always. Of course Zuko would have a better reading on that man. He must see something that Sokka doesn't.

"Nephew... I'm not sure if- "

He doesn't even need to look at Sokka but it's clear that it's something he wouldn't be privy to in other circumstances.

"You can speak freely," Zuko demands.

Uncle pauses still.

"Very well, I just received an urgent message from a Pai Sho friend of mine. There was an invasion of Caldera earlier today in an attempt to take out the fire lord. The avatar and his allies- "

Sokka's head snap up.

"The *avatar*? He's *alive*? What happened? Did they succeed- are they save now? Did you hear anything about his bending masters? Two girls- "

Zuko interrupts with a loud groan.

"*Agni*- the spirits must hate me," he mutters to himself.

Sokka pays him no mind. Uncle reaches inside his tunic and hands Sokka the letter he must have received.

It looks wrinkled and there are several ink spots over the page. Sokka squints his eyes. He can't read it.

The writing looks messy, as if done in a hurry but the signs are still sharp and refined in a way that indicates imperial shorthand. Everything in the letter is way more elegant looking than the blunt and elaborate writing that standardized earth could ever be and Sokka wonders for a moment if he really should have tried to learn it before.

He shakes his head and hands the letter back.

Uncle hums.

"The letter only says that they managed to successfully invade but the assassination failed. The avatar got away safely but prisoners were taken. There is no word about the avatar's teachers. My correspondent wrote to inform me as soon as it had happened. I'm sorry that I don't know more as of now."

Of course uncle Mushi would be fire nation too. And having friends secretly keeping him informed about everything happening out there... Sokka is not surprised that the Pai Sho master would have such a grip on the situation. He truly must be what had kept Zuko safe all the years in the city.

Sokka nods.

"Still, Thank you," He says.

He looks back at Zuko for a moment... hesitating.

"... I'm heading back to Jin's place, I guess. I- you can better talk about this with out me here, so... good night," he says and slips out the door before anyone can stop him.

He's halfway down the stairs when he can hear Zuko and his uncle start arguing with each other. He can't make out any of the words and he doesn't want to know what it may be about anyway.

Sokka steps out into the streets. He doesn't get far when the door creaks behind him. Sokka turns to look at Zuko, who must have rushed after him.

"Your *friends*... the one you thought had died- that's the avatar? Your sister- ?"

"She is his waterbending master."

Zuko nods to himself.

"See. I was right. You have been lying too," He says with a thick voice - like that's what Sokka should convince that all of that isn't such a big deal.

Sokka looks back at Zuko. And Sokka wishes he would see some random fire nation jerk standing there in his place. But for him it's just the same man he had spend so much time with. And there may be so much he doesn't know but stupidly, Sokka just wants a hug from him and hear Zuko tell him that everything is going to be alright.

"Whatever," he says instead.

"But what about- " Zuko starts again.

"I told you before. I don't care about my soulmark."

That's not allowed to change, now that he knows. Because Sokka is so done with all of this. He is so done with this city where everyone is lying to his face - and if there is a chance that his baby sister, that Aang and Toph are alive... He's not going to sit around any longer, to see if both of them could have moved passed this.

Because if he's right, then the comet is going to happen.

Zuko looks so miserable standing there in the dark with one shoe still missing. And Sokka would love nothing more than to kiss the unhappy expression off of him but he turns around instead.

"See you, I guess," Sokka says and Zuko wordlessly watches him walk away.

## Chapter End Notes

I swear, swear, swear it's not getting worse than that - it's going to be better soon! I promise!!

But at least now all the secrets and lies are out in the open... or are they?

(Also I did it! I really drove myself mad because I wrote 'Lee' instead of 'Zuko' the whole time this chapter before catching myself 😞)

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

Ahoy - longish chapter ahead.

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

Three days and Sokka has already walked the perimeters of the inner wall two times. Now he tries to inspect parts of the outer wall too.

His feet are killing him. He's not used to walking so much any more, but at least it gave Sokka a good way to clear his head and enough time think things through.

His head is not clearer though.

Because after three days, he is still mad, still confused and still very much hurt.

Sokka was so ready to stay in Ba Sing Se - to try to move on and live his life after loosing everything.

So why did the things have to turn so messy?

Sokka sighs and kicks a pebble. It bounces off the wall. He looks up and frowns. He retakes his steps just to be sure and - there is a small blindspot under the watchtower. He sighs again. This information has zero value to him because he's not going to be able to climb the wall anyway, so he turns back, letting himself get lost inside his head again.

Why was it so easy to let himself fall for someone like 'Lee' anyway? They never talked about anything of real importance. There was no need to. Because the war, the fire nation or even the avatar just don't exist in Ba Sing Se.

It makes Sokka feel like such an idiot. His life here - he didn't realize how much he had *wanted* it. Because ever since he was a child - ever since his mother was killed, he knew that there was this dark impossible future looming over all of them. And just at the first chance of normality - of a life without any spirits or benders or the fire nation - he had simply carved.

He had wanted it all so bad, that he was willing to overlook the signs that it was too good to be true.



What a *mess*.

Sokka rubs his forehead and he walks back to the station, waiting for the next monorail - He's already memorized the timetables these past three days. Which doesn't matter. He can't even make it past the city gate.

He may have gotten so good at finding his way around the city during the last months and yet he still can't just leave - he never gotten into the city through the official means. Sokka has neither a proper passport or one of the travel permits for the various merchants. And it would take months to get any of them now.

He should have done all these things months ago - walking the wall, looking for alternative ways out of the city or even getting proper papers. But he hadn't. He had let himself grown so commonplace with everything. Had let himself become distracted.

Sokka boards the train and watches the fields pass by on his way back to the insides of the inner wall again.

He had wanted all this so bad - the life here. And selfishly, Sokka wants it back just like it was. The girls-nights with Jin and her friends. Pai Sho with uncle at the tea shop. Spending time with Zuko even if it's just going grocery shopping together like any other Tuesday.

Sokka grumbles unhappy at himself as he leaves the station and he walks towards the market. He guesses, he's going to need to stock his provisions and his supplies.

Sokka pushes a stray strand of hair behind his ear and his eyes fall on his wrist - now tightly wrapped again. *Right*. There is also the fact that they are soulmates.

...What a *joke*. That just makes it worse. Because, who says it's on them? The way they managed to fit so seamlessly together? Who says that his feelings are even...

Sokka feels robbed. He wants his life from just a few days ago back where it was just them and he was so stupidly happy.

Sokka picks up all the things he's going to need - just like he used to, when he was traveling before. He looks to the sky and knows that he needs to head back or Jin will question it. He had told her he'd be back at the time his shift normally ends and he plans to keep his words. Sokka sighs and follows the street back down to her place.

When he got home three days ago - he couldn't confront her. It changes nothing. Maybe the reason she originally helped him was her seeing Zuko's name on him - fully aware that it meant her friend 'Lee'. But she still helped him so much, was still his friend when he needed one and it just never was her secret to tell.

And Sokka wants to be so mad at her but... he also kinda gets it.

It's not her.

It's also not Zuko. And it's not even him.

It's this damn *city* where you aren't allowed to talk about the war - where false rumors are all you ever hear and everything is a lie anyway.

But know that Sokka knows that Aang is still out there - that his sister could be alive as well and there is still hope left for the rest of the world - he's going to leave.

There is no point in confronting Jin now.

When he gets back, Sokka grabs his measly belongings and throws them into a bag.

It's not much that he has still at Jin's place left. Most of his things should be somewhere at the tea shop, more specific Zuko's room... It doesn't matter. Sokka packs the food he had gotten earlier. Rearranges his travel supplies. He grabs a spare shirt and... is this Zuko's?

Sokka lets out a shaky breath and holds it up to his face. It still smells like him.

Sokka places his hand over his eyes. He's not letting himself get distracted again. The avatar and the war are way more important than some...

Some what?

Some silly romantic feelings for the guy that had been lying to him and just happened to be his soulmate?

Even if Zuko most likely lied for a good reason and Sokka's silly feelings may more than just a bit silly. But his soulmate?

He's... Sokka had wished he could change Zuko for Lee before - but they are the literal same person and...

And nothing. He thought having a soulmate he wanted would change how he feels about his mark, but now he's got his wish in some twisted sense and yet he still feels the same way about it.

He still doesn't want it and worse yet- what if it just means that his feelings aren't even his own? Aren't even real? What if the only reason he feels so crazily attracted to Zuko is because some asshole spirit said that he should?

No.

He's not allowed to second guess everything now. He's going to leave, using the momentum of restlessness before he feels like he might fully come apart.

Sokka hears the footsteps and quickly rubs over his eyes.

When he turns, he sees Jin standing in the doorway to his storage room looking at him with a deep frown. She crosses her arms.

"Hey Sokka- Did you have a fight with Lee, because you have been- What... What are you doing?" She starts and stops to ask when she sees him closing his bag.

"I'm leaving Ba Sing Se tonight."

"What? *Why*- what happened?" She ask bewildered. Sokka swallows.

"I heard that my friends are alive- at least one of them- I hope my sister is... I really need to find them and let them know that I am alive as well."

Sokka gets up and looks at her. She looks so confused but she is still frowning.

"You are just going to leave like that?" She ask, clearly shaken and Sokka nods.

He will miss her teasing him, immensely.

"It's the *avatar* - the one friend I head word of. And I am going to find him and help him end the war before it is too late," Sokka says resolutely and it feels so good to have a set goal for him again, after drifting aimlessly for month. And it feels so good to be honest about this for once.

Because Zuko wasn't wrong with his words either.

He *is* a liar.

Jin stares at him in shock.

"But, I don't understand- "

Sokka just pulls Jin into a tight hug before she can say anything else. She hugs him right back.

"Thank you so much for everything you've done for me. You've been a true friend to me, right when I needed one the most," he says into the hug and she shakes.

Sokka means it. He can't even be mad at her. Because after everything, she was still there for him. Helped him out so much. She may have lied, but there is no use fighting about it now, when he is leaving either way. Sokka isn't a person to hold onto grudges. And he doesn't want to start with that now. His hurt feelings about the situation are his own problem.

"But...what about Lee?" She asks and her eyes look wet.

Sokka shrugs helplessly.

Because that's the question. What about him? Sokka hasn't a single clue what he should do about it.

He shrugs again.

"I will write you," he says and he shoulders his bag and moves past Jin.

She is now openly crying, not really understanding what he is saying, or why he has to go.

"But *Sokka...*" She says sniffling.

He raises his hand in a wave and smiles crooked at her.

"I am going to miss you so much. Please stay safe, Jin."

"Sokka, you can't just- "

He steps into the early darkness of the night.

Sokka turns left and takes the shortcut back to the market. He crosses the street and walks through some alley when his steps falter...

Ah, *shit-*

Sokka comes to a halt and pulls his hand down his face.

Tui and La.

What the fuck is he doing? He's not... Sokka is so mad still. But he could forgive Jin for keeping the literal same lie as Zuko- then why is he so mad at him? Just because of his soulmark?

Sokka never used to run from any fight, never would have backed away from any confrontation and he would never cower from the fire nation. And he is certainly not starting with any of that now, just because some fire nation jerkbender happens to be his *boyfriend*.

And if Sokka leaves now, he will never find out the true meaning of their soulmarks and if any of what they had was real.

He turns around and walks back up the street. Three days and it's about time that Sokka found his warrior pride again.

Sokka doesn't even make it as far as the tea shop before someone yanks at his arm. He yelps surprised and starts to struggle, trying to get out of the tight grip as he is pulled into a narrow side street by a mask figure dressed in all black.

The man let's go just as quickly as he had grabbed him and yanks off the mask. Sokka immediately recognizes the scar and with it, the rest.

Just what-

"It's me! *Shhhhh*, be quiet- It's just me," Zuko hisses in a whisper as he secures the mask somewhere at his hips.

Sokka glares back at him.

"What the fuck was that?! What are you *doing*?"

"I was *looking* for you," Zuko whispers back with a weird edge.

"Okay? That doesn't mean you should drag me into some alley- and... What's with the weird get up and why are we whispering?"

Zuko glares at him.

"You've disappeared for days and then I thought I may have spotted some Dai Li agents watching the shop."

Sokka blinks uncomprehending and takes another look at Zuko. The all black clothes, some face-mask pulled down to his chin, the mask at his hips. Is this part of a theater costume for some kind of blue spirit? And... are those two swords on his back?

He shakes his head out of it.

"What? The Dai Li- but why *now*? And this still doesn't explain all *this*," he says and waves his hand at everything Zuko.

"I was *worried* about you, *you idiot!*" Zuko snaps back at him.

"Oh," Sokka says just like the idiot he is.

He takes yet another look at Zuko. Does that mean... He was prepared to fight the Dai Li for him? Sokka bites back a grin and Zuko raises an eyebrow, looking unamused.

"Yes, *oh*- and... Wait- You are leaving." Zuko says as his eyes land on the bag slung over Sokka's shoulder. It's not a question.

"I'm- " Sokka falters and he swallows nervously when he sees the hurt look Zuko is giving him.

"... Yeah - I have to. But I came looking for you because I really need to talk to you again. And look, I just wanted to say that I am sorry for- "

"What's your plan? If I really saw the Dai Li they might still be watching out for you. I guess you can't just leave the regular way without them noticing it?"

Zuko takes a careful look around. Sokka frowns confused. Is he not going to let Sokka even try to explain? Has he nothing to say to Sokka either? Sokka's stomach start to twists itself into knots.

"What? Nope, I wouldn't be able to regardless as I don't have the correct papers. But that doesn't matter. Don't you want- "

"No I don't- There is no point if you are leaving either way. So, again, what's your plan?" Zuko is still avoiding looking at Sokka.

"But don't you- "

"Your plan?" He grinds out and Sokka's stomach drops at this.

Okay. Zuko is definitely angry at him.

This is not how this should go. He's not ready to leave without talking things out. If he had just more time to-

"The upper ring? I want to go to the upper ring," he says and already feels stupid for bringing it up. It's such an unnecessary risk, but if it gets him more final time with Zuko, then he suddenly wants to take all the risks.

Zuko's eyes settle back on Sokka expressionless.

"What's in the upper ring?"

"We- stayed there before, me and my friends- the... avatar too. I don't know why, but the Dai Li attacked us out of nowhere. I got away and got lost in the lower ring. That's when I met Jin - you know the rest. I just thought, maybe I could take a look around... Just in case there's a hint about what had happened."

It's a loud of ostrich-horse crap and by the way Zuko glances at him it's clear that they both know how stupid this idea is.

Zuko rolls his shoulders and finally looks at Sokka again for a moment. He sighs.

"Let's go."

"But..." Sokka starts. He doesn't want Zuko's help, he just wants to talk to him. But Zuko has already started moving.

Navigating through the city unseen is suddenly so easy with Zuko. He maneuvers them through the street's like he's never done anything else. They climb over walls and walk over roofs and Sokka doesn't know why he is surprised by this - he knows how graceful Zuko made it look when they used to climb out of his window.

Zuko weasels and weaves himself through the narrow streets and alleys, intuitively knows how to duck - hide - stay out of sight. And yeah. It makes sense. Zuko must be so used to always watching over his shoulder.

"Here- that's where we stayed," Sokka says when he starts to recognize the street in the upper ring - the house they all stayed in so many months ago.

The lights are out and it looks empty.

Zuko takes a look down the street and grabs Sokka's wrist. He pulls Sokka along with him as they silently walk around the house, taking a look. But there is nothing to be learned here.

It was a stupid idea to come.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Sokka asks when Zuko starts to fumble at one of the windows. Sokka crosses his arm as he watches.

Suddenly the window springs open and Sokka stares at Zuko.

"You are really good at all this stealthy sneaking around and breaking in stuff. If I didn't know better I'd say you are a- "

Zuko gives him a look and goes to climb inside.

Sokka huffs, wondering why he is even surprised anymore.

"Come on, it's clear," Zuko says from the inside and reaches Sokka a hand to help him climb in too.

The first floor of the house looks truly ransacked. Half of the furniture is toppled over, there are broken chairs, books and papers all over the floor. Someone must have gone through the dressers, as they are all open and their insides carelessly tossed around.

Zuko slowly walks around the room taking a look at everything, peaking behind doors and under things - just to see if it could be some kind of trap. But the air is stale and dusty and it looks like it must have been forever since anyone was here.

Sokka then spots a smashed tea cup in a corner - the one Katara had been drinking from, right before she left with Aang. He takes a shaky breath.

"It's been empty the whole time," he says and Sokka doesn't know how he should feel about it. He had been sleeping in a tiny storage room - and yet there are people in the city who have it worse than him. Sokka thinks about all the overflowing quarters with the refugees in the lower ring, while here are houses left empty to collect dust.

Sokka traces his finger over the dresser absentmindedly and - is that Katara's comb?

Sokka stares at it for a moment before he suddenly has to blink back tears.

He had literal nothing of her left - of all of them left - while all their stuff was just lying around here waiting for him. Sokka quickly stuffs it into his bag and looks for other things to take with him.

He glances back at Zuko. Zuko watches Sokka with a kinder expression than earlier.

"So, what's with the two swords?" Sokka asks because he can't stand the silence any longer and opens the only closed drawer of the dresser.

Zuko huffs.

"I can't just bend in this city. The swords are the next best option."

"So they are not just for show- you can really fight with them?"

"Er- sure... I have gotten some training when I was younger."

Sokka closes the drawer again with some force. It's empty anyway.

"Are you *kidding* me?" He huffs annoyed and Zuko frowns.

"What?"

"I told you how I'd always wanted to learn- and you never said anything to that? You could have taught me! We could have been sword-fighting the whole time."

Zuko opens his mouth to say something and then stops, staking his head at himself.

Sokka wants to ask about it, when he notices something else. His breath catches and he rushes over to the fallen down shelf and pulls some of the books away.

"My *boomerang!* Oh, how I *missed* you!" Sokka says and picks it up, starting to smooch the hell out of it.

He can't believe that he could just have gone back here and picked it up the whole time. He even vaguely remembers throwing it at one of the Dai Li agents in here right before everything else had exploded into chaos.

But it's so good to have it back!

He turns to Zuko.

Zuko looks at him with a funny face and... *of course*. Zuko should recognize Sokka's boomerang from anywhere.

Sokka grins at him.

"The real deal looks bigger, right? Want to get your hands on mine?"



There is an awkward pause.

"... Is this another innuendo?" Zuko asks and Sokka frowns.

"What? What other innuendo?"

"...never mind."

He looks back at Zuko.

Why is it suddenly so hard to talk to him? Because it might be the last time Sokka has the chance to?

But Sokka doesn't want to give this up, no matter how conflicted he feels about this situation.

"Zuko- " Sokka tries to start and Zuko startles pretty badly, staring at Sokka jaw slacked.

Sokka flushes.

"Er- you don't mind if I..." Maybe he shouldn't have just presumed.

"... I don't mind," Zuko croaks after a pause and Sokka nods to himself.

"Okay, that's... good...because I- I want to be so mad at you, but I understand why you lied to me. That still doesn't make it less shitty. And I wasn't honest either and I am sorry for that - I'm not going to apologize for needing some days to think though. Can we just- "

Zuko shrugs and turns away.

"You don't need to explain. I get it."

"Do you?" Sokka asks and he sees Zuko scoff.

"Yeah, It's fine," Zuko says in a tone that tells Sokka it's not fine and Zuko crosses his arms. Sokka sighs.

"Hey- Look at me. I don't think you understand me there. I am not saying I will pretend that you didn't hurt me. But I am not leaving because of you. I am leaving because I really have to."

"Yeah, I get that," he says and Sokka wants to shake some sense into him.

"No, you don't. Because even if I am angry, I still don't want to leave you, you jerk. But... you could come with me, you know? We could be together and try to figure out what our soulmarks mean and... and I know it's terrible selfish of me to ask you this, but would you please leave with me?"

Zuko looks back at Sokka with an unreadable expression. He wishes they wouldn't stand here in the dark so he could get a proper read on Zuko's face.

"The thing with the comet- What is this about? You sounded so sure that it's happening before."

Sokka leans against the dusty dresser.

"We visited a spirit library before coming to Ba Sing Se. Long story short, I found a page about the darkest day for the fire nation, but it was dated in the past. What a shame- if it had happened some years later - like now - and we would have known about that date, it would have been a great opportunity to fight the fire lord- "

"The invasion? That was your idea then?" Zuko ask cautiously.

"No- I don't know. The eclipse some days ago caught me by surprise too - In the library, there was this... this planetarium where you could look at the stars for a specific date. I tried to find an alternative date for another eclipse, but the mechanism wasn't working correctly."

Sokka rubs his neck. Zuko listens quietly.

"Sozin's comet ended up showing up when it was supposed to. The stars were aligned right, but we all know that they aren't. It's mostly just guesswork on my part because the movement of the stars should be calculable and if things just happens to be pushed back for three or so years that would be horrifying. I wouldn't take any chances on that."

Zuko hums, still listening.

"I really need to leave. Let my sister know that I am alive and help the avatar end this war. And I know it's unfair to ask you, but will you come with me?" Sokka asks again.

A conflicting expression goes over zuko's face.

"Helping you find the avatar? That's... it's the *avatar*. I can't just..." Zuko says, looking troubled.

"What's your deal with the avatar anyway? You could help us, you know? You could be his firebending teacher, if you'd like."

"What do you mean- can't the avatar firebend?"

"No- There just wasn't anyone. But you could be his teacher- you could help us end the war. So... will you come with me?"

Sokka is so close to outright begging.

Zuko sighs.

"What's your plan to get out of this city?"

Zuko's change in subject is as good as any rejection. Sokka shrugs helpless. His stomach ties itself in even tighter knots.

"Well. With the proper permit leaving is easy. I'd just try to hide somewhere with a traveling merchant, smuggling myself out of the city."

"That's it? That's a horrible plan- if the Dai Li is really looking for you, then they will discover you easily."

"I *know*! But I don't have any other ideas. This city with his stupid walls doesn't make it simple and unless you have flying listed under all your crazy sneaky skills or you hide some earthbending somewhere, that's all I have."

Zuko frowns.

"Earthbending?"

"Yeah. There is a blindspot on the insides under one of the watchtowers. Getting up the outer wall there would be really simple - Toph got us into the city like that with her bending."

"Then let's do that."

"Sure, let's do that- I didn't know that you are an earthbender. Did you hide the fact that you are the avatar from me too, dear prince of mine?" It's not meant as a dig and Sokka cringes at himself, when he realizes his teasing could be taken as such.

But Zuko suddenly and barks out a surprised laugh and Sokka has to openly grin back. It's good to hear Zuko laugh among the serious mood - Sokka's face falls again when he realizes this may as well be the last time he is going to make Zuko laugh.

Zuko's face grows somber too.

"But seriously, getting up wouldn't be a problem with an earthbender. Getting down could be problematic. I haven't seen the other side of the wall. But the biggest problem is that I don't know how many guards are up at the wall and sneaking past them is just a stupid idea. So back to smuggling."

"I can be sneaky. Leave it to me and I'll deal with some guards."

Sokka raises his eyebrows.

Okay, just where did Zuko hid all of his crazy skills? And this confidence in said skills? Sokka drums his fingers on his leg nervously.

"That still doesn't mean you can earthbend."

"No, but I can get you an earthbender to cooperate," Zuko says with a glint in his eyes.

Yeah... This is definitely the wrong time for Zuko being so cocky and sure of himself, because it's kinda hot. Sokka bites the inside of his cheek. He can't let himself get distracted right now.

Sokka huffs instead.

"This is a *stupid* plan. I can see *so many* things going *wrong* and you just want to- what? Fight possible all of the guards in Ba Sing Se - just to *help* me? Or are you trying to get rid of me that bad?"

Zuko looks at him and Sokka wishes again, that it wasn't so dark in here and he could properly see his face.

"...I just want to make sure you are safe," Zuko says, completely disarming Sokka with his words.

Sokka blinks and then lets out a shaky breath.

"*Fine*. Let's do it your way."

Zuko nods and he places the blue mask back on his face. Then he turns to the open window and before Sokka can say anything else, Zuko has already climbed out.

"You are such an *idiot*," Sokka says to the empty room, not even sure who he means.

They hastily make their way back through the city, silently navigating the streets and alleys. Zuko - with his mask and the dark clothes - looks more like some spirits stalking the night. Sokka, with a makeshift face-cover rushes after him until they reach the inner wall.

And they should hurry now. All the walking back and forth in this huge city, took hours of their time and it's only a few more until dawn.

They spot a single Dai Li agent and Zuko indicates for Sokka to hide some place, while he grabs the agent's attention. Before Sokka can protest, Zuko has already rushed off, the agent quickly after him.

Sokka stares after Zuko, before grabbing his boomerang - he's not going to sit out on the action because Zuko thinks he needs to protect him or prove himself to Sokka or some shit.

Sokka runs after him, turning the corner, but Zuko has the Dai Li agent already at his mercy - his swords pressed under the chin as he ties up the man's hands.

Sokka stares at Zuko. *Seriously?* He just- he took out one Dai Li agent with just his swords? In such a short time?

Sokka is absolutely begging him to teach him sword-fighting later-

Oh. *Right*. There is no later.

"You know I'm not helpless?" He asks a bit miffed, voice slightly damped through the fabric on his face.

Zuko nods and says something softly but Sokka can't hear it through the mask. The Dai Li agent is just glaring at them.

The three of them walk all the way to the outer wall in silence, moving like shadows, still unseen. The agent struggles, but it only takes Zuko three times to put him back into his place and the man comes to accept his fate as hostage.

Sokka nibbles his lips nervously as they walk. He keeps stealing glances at Zuko but the damn mask doesn't let Sokka see his face. And Zuko is... so crazy competent in all of this and it's a side of him that Sokka didn't know existed. Sokka already knew how intense Zuko can be and watching him being so ruthless, so commanding... Sokka stops himself before his mind can fully drift off in a direction that is not helpful now.

When they reach the outer wall, Sokka feels the pit in his stomach grow larger. This is too easy. Plans are never so easy.

"Now. Up," Zuko demands with his raspy voice, holding his sword tighter in his grip and Sokka takes a deep breath.

The earthbender complies, still glaring at them and he creates a small platform with the movement of his feet.

Sokka's finger traces the edge of his boomerang just in case the agent does something funny. But they reach the top of the wall, next to the watchtower unnoticed, just like he hoped they would. It feels too easy. Sokka's stomach is twisted into tight knots.

They walk across the wall to the other side and Sokka can see the outside of Ba Sing Se for the first time in months.

Everything is so quiet. Why is it so *quiet*?

"And now down here," Zuko commands and the Dai Li agents keep looking around to see if there are any other guards.

There are none.

Sokka thinks this should be a bigger concern but when he looks at Zuko he can only see the damn mask in the way and... This can't just be the last time they see each other.

Sokka suddenly feels *desperate*. He frantically grabs Zuko's arm.

"You are coming with me, right? I can't just-"

Because Sokka was so worried about his soulmark - but he doesn't know what it means or even why they have it. And he was so worried that things between them weren't real but - what if he is wrong? He can't just give up now, without figuring this out.

Because if he leaves without Zuko, he will never have a chance to get the life he had wanted so bad back.

Zuko tilts his head.

"*Please*. I don't want to *lose* you," Sokka says hoarse and if it's the last time they are seeing each other he might as well just put all the cards on the table.

"I- "

Zuko suddenly jerks away from Sokka, turning himself and the Dai Li agent, still with a sword under his chin, with him.

Wha-

Sokka frowns and turns into the direction Zuko is looking.

"Oh, don't let me interrupt you. It was such a sweet moment," A women says as she steps out from under the archway of the watchtower.

Sokka shoots a confused and worried look at Zuko, but he has completely frozen.

The women smiles all sharp at them.

"You didn't think I'd let you leave just like this, would you *Zuzu*?"

## Chapter End Notes

I am screaming! Sokka and Zuko were driving me insane, because both of them decided to go completely off script and nothing - literal nothing - in this chapter went down as planned 🙄🙄 (for example, the Lake Laogai was involved in my original outline.) Idiots. Both of them - but the end result is the same. Haha.

FINALLY!

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Notes

Here - in case anyone got a bit confused by the current timeline:

4,5 years ago - Zuko stops his mission for whatever reason before he reaches the south pole and then the siblings find the avatar.

(1 year of travel time added to the original timeline because having all 3 seasons happen in the span of only some months feels a bit cramped)

3,5 years ago - the eclipse and then the comet were supposed to happen. Neither did.

1,5 years ago - the northern water tribe was attacked and the Gaang started traveling.

~half a year ago - the Gaang gets separated in Ba Sing Se and this story starts.

3 days ago - the eclipse and the invasion happened.

—

Now onto the 2nd part of the last chapter!

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

*"You didn't think I'd let you leave just like this, would you Zuzu?"*

A shives goes down Sokka's spine at her words and he takes a good look at the women.

The red and black armor is a dead giveaway that she is fire nation. But why is the fire nation here? How?

And the nickname?

*Zuzu.*

She knows exactly who Zuko is.

Sokka observes the shape of her face as good as he's able to in the dim light of the early morning hours - she looks so shockingly familiar. They could be related... most likely are.

This can't be good.

And then there is also something truly unsettling about her in a way he can't place. The way she stands, the look in her eyes, her skewed topknot. The choppy bangs are certainly a... statement.

"Have you nothing to say?" She ask haughtily.

Zuko finally seems to come out of his trance. He removes his sword and places it back into the scabbard on his back. The Dai Li agent stumbles as he's let go off, just as Zuko goes and pulls off the mask. It gets carelessly dropped to the floor with a clatter.

The earthbender stares at the women and she jerks her head and he... makes a run for it, disappearing down on the inside of the wall with his bending.

Sokka looks after him uncomprehending. Shouldn't anyone have stopped him? He's now going to inform the guards or the rest of the Dai Li and -

Sokka looks around but there is still no one else, safe for them.

He pulls down the makeshift face-mask and turns back. Why is this women up here anyway?

"Azula," Zuko breaths out then and something suddenly clicks for Sokka. Two children Jin had said once before. That women must most likely be Zuko's sister, if his guess is correct.

The sister which would be... the princess of the fire nation.

And she is here in Ba Sing Se with no guard in sight. Something is definitely not right.

"What are you doing here?" Zuko ask toneless.

"Waiting for you, of course. Haven't you missed me? Aren't you glad to see me? It's been years after all," she says with such a clear fake sweetness as she opens her arms, inviting Zuko to take a look at her.

Sokka glances at Zuko but his face is a careful blank mask and unreadable for Sokka.

"How did you know I am here?" Zuko ask instead, ignoring her words.

The princess laughs once. But it's a sharp, chilling sound that makes Sokka tense up instantly. Sokka's fingers carefully trace the edge of his boomerang and he was never more glad to have it back with him. He still has no idea what is happening right now. But nothing about this situation looks good.

Her eyes never leave Zuko.

"Oh, Zuzu you dummy. I've always known you were here."



"What- " Sokka starts but Zuko makes some jerked movement, placing himself between Sokka and the princess.

She gives Sokka a curious glance, like he is an insect she can't wait to examine later, before she smiles back at Zuko, still all unsettling.

"You are lying," Zuko says but it must sounds unsure even for his own ears.

The princess crosses her arms and inspects her nails like the conversation isn't even the slightest of interest to her.

"Am I?"

"If you knew were I was the whole time, why only show yourself now then?"

"Oh, don't be stupid Zuzu. If had told you earlier, you would have ran like the *coward* you are. And I so very much like knowing where I have left my toys."

Sokka suddenly bristles at her words and he can't keep calm any longer.

"*Hey!*" He says and takes a step forward. Zuko grabs his arms and tries to pull Sokka behind him again with a frantic head shake and something wide in his look. Sokka falters. Is he- is there fear in his eyes?

When he turns back to the princess, she is still looking at Zuko for a moment. Then her eyes fully settle on Sokka.

Azula is still smiling and another chill runs down his spine.

"And you must be the water-tribe peasant my Dai Li agents told me all about. Imagine my surprise when they informed me that you were planning on leaving my city. Haven't I been a good host?"

...What?

Sokka suddenly loses the thread on his thoughts and he shares a quick look with Zuko.

What would she want from Sokka? And what does she mean with-

"Your agents? Your city?" Zuko ask the exact same thing Sokka is thinking. More dread settles in Sokka's stomach. Just what's going on?

"Yes. My city. It's been under my control for months. Oh, you couldn't tell? Maybe I should have gotten around to redecorating this place earlier."

Does that mean- Ba Sing Se is.... under fire nation control? For month's now? That doesn't make sense. But, no... in a terrible way, it actually does.

Sokka, for a complete insane moment, thinks back to his Pai Sho matches with uncle. It was all about predicting your opponents moves and not letting them realize what advantages you

had on the board. And all the war refugees in the city - nobody talks about the war anyway. Nobody within the city would have notice that anything had changed, unless the fire nation would have announced themselves. But if it was about making sure Zuko stayed put, right were he was... Zuko hadn't even know he was just a tile already back on the board. On top of that, it's a massive advantage to have hidden up your sleeve regarding the rest of the war efforts.

Now Sokka just has to figure out how he plays into this scenario that suddenly turned several shades of fucked up. But more important - they should find a way away from up here before she gets bored of whatever game she is trying to play. He takes quick glance around.

Ah, of course non of the guards would be up at the wall now, Sokka realizes then. She doesn't want them to.

The princess smiles at Sokka sharply. Sokka flashes his teeth in return. He is not letting himself be intimidated - and whatever this is, he is not letting himself be out-witted either.

"I expected you to be prettier to be honest. But I shouldn't be surprised - Zuzu was always so *tasteless*," she spats.

Zuko makes an affronted sound but Sokka mind is focused on the princess.

That makes it obvious that she, unsurprisingly knows about them. But what else does she know? And what does she truly want?

Azula hums once and she is still looking at Sokka.

"Your sister was pretty. Or at least she was until I was done with her," she adds, looking at her nails again and Sokka freezes.

"My- ...You are *lying*," he says, echoing Zuko's words from moments before. He's not going to fall for anything she says.

"Why would I lie when the truth is so much more satisfying. Let's see. Ah, yes...your sister wore a betrothal necklace- I remember it because it's so unusual for you southern water heathens. Did she get it from the avatar? They seemed a bit young but it was so sweet how they tried to protect each other. She certainly did try to put up a fight."

How does she... Sokka stares at her in shock. The princess has-

*"What have you done to my sister?!"*

Before Sokka can do anything else, Zuko has already roughly grabbed his arm and shoves him back with a frantic shake of his head.

"Stop- don't listen to her. She is lying," Zuko hisses at him.

Azula hums.

"It doesn't matter if you believe me. The avatar is gone now. I killed him. And then I killed your sister and the pesky earthbender along with them. You are lucky you turned out to be

so... *interesting* or I'd already be done with you too."

She is not saying it but it's clear what she is implying. She knows. She definitely knows.

But how? Sokka thought he was so careful- the only time anyone could have seen his mark was when he first got it and he was wandering the city getting lost. Sokka even remembers thinking how strange it was that nobody ever came after him.

Of course they wouldn't. Not, if he had a royal fire nation name on him, when Ba Sing Se was already under fire nation control.

Multiple things fall into place for Sokka now. Azula said she had control of the city- of the Dai Li for months - that can only mean she was behind the attack on them. She was most likely behind the invitation to meet the earth king too. The perfect trap if her goal was to get to the avatar. But if Aang is alive now-

The rumors!

Sokka and Zuko share a quick glance. Of course that's where they must have originated.

"We know the avatar is alive. We heard about the invasion he has led- " Zuko starts and Sokka rams his elbow in Zuko's ribs.

"*Idiot*- don't just go and tell that we know about that," Sokka hisses and Zuko shoots him an apologetic look.

Because Sokka gets the feeling that any kind of information they might have, they better keep to themselves if they want to gain the upper hand in her game - it's just like playing Pai Sho.

Something like displeasure flicks over her face for the first time at Zuko's words.

"I see. Although... I wouldn't call this sorry mess I saw an invasion. But it seems that uncle must have some way to sneak information passed my Dai Li agents. Maybe I should pay him a visit after I am done talking to you."

Sokka slightly rolls on the ball of his feet as he looks around. The light of the early hours already makes it much easier to see. Azula is still standing under the archway of the watchtower and they are trapped with her atop of the wall.

He's not naive enough to believe that her only intention is talking to them or even just to catch up with her long lost brother. They need to get out of here. And fast.

Sokka doesn't think jumping down the wall would end well and making a run for it wouldn't get them down either.

This can't be the end- Sokka really needs to come up with a plan.

"Why show yourself now? You have control of this city, you have control of the Dai Li. And we were stuck with no real way out. Why show up now?" Sokka asks and something flickers over her face as she regards him.

First step of Sokka's plan - keep her talking until he has a real strategy on how the fuck to get out of here. Preferable with both of them alive and unharmed.

"Yes, why indeed?" She says sounding bored.

Sokka's mind is rattling through all the things that could have changed. The only thing he can come up with-

He takes another step forward towards the princess and Zuko grabs his elbow trying to push him behind him yet again.

It's really sweet, Sokka notes distantly and he swears he's going seriously punch Zuko later if he doesn't stop his overprotective bullshit right now. That's not productive!

"I think, I know exactly why. Because this sorry thing, as you have called it, was almost a success. The avatar almost succeeded with his invasion. You really thought you had killed the avatar before, hadn't you? But he caught you by surprise, making it clear that you had failed. And now you are scared that we are going to leave your city and whatever you had planned is failing too- "

Suddenly she moves as quick as a flash and Sokka barely has any time before he scrambles back with a yelp, as blue fire and heat dances around his feet.

Just *Fuuu-*

Zuko jerks him back just as suddenly. Sokka pants and it takes him a moment to realize he is unharmed for now - wasn't burned to crisps.

"Don't *goad* her, you idiot!" Zuko snaps at him and the expression from earlier is back on his face.

But the princess is still looking at Sokka, with some hatred in her eyes now.

"You can't truly believe that Zuzu would go with you? He's a *coward*. The only thing he is good at is running away and hiding. He would never leave with you! He's an *honorless, spineless, traitor!*" she yells enraged.

A strand of hair has come loose out of her skewed topknot and for a moment she looks totally unhinged. Something about Sokka's words must truly have hit a mark. Maybe she believes what she is saying but that doesn't mean she wasn't worried - maybe she really just came here to check whatever the Dai Li told her? But that doesn't matter -

"You are starting to *bore* me," she says as she regains composure and the unpleasant smile is back on her face.

It doesn't matter because, scratch the plan. New plan - do whatever it takes to get as far away from her as possible.

Zuko has already moved into what must be a bending stance as he glares at his sister.

"Azula," he says warningly.

"Oh, don't be like that Zuzu. You never let me play with your things." The composure she is projecting is already slipping again.

Sokka's eyes flicker towards the watchtower. There must be some other way down from the wall without an earthbender and...

Sokka's mind stumbles.

How did she even get here anyway? Not atop the wall but to Ba Sing Se? From her words alone - she was there at the invasion.

How is she here so fast? It's been only three days. Which means - she most likely flew some how.

But wouldn't an airship be visible from the city?

Sokka's eyes dart around- for somewhere, something-

There is only the wall behind them. The light is getting brighter already and Sokka's eyes glance over the rest of the city and the open space outside the wall. It's a good place to overview everything. He would notice if there were any airships somewhere. The only thing he can't see right now is... whatever is behind her on the other side of the watchtower.

"We need to leave now!" He says under his breath, as quietly as possible to Zuko. The indescribable nod, indicates that he has heard him.

It might be stupid and ends with them dead either way, but staying here with the princess who's definitely not fully sane right now isn't any option. He's not waiting a moment longer.

Sokka springs into motion and grabs Zuko's blue mask from the ground and hurls it at her with an angle.

She blinks surprised - easily dodges it - but Sokka throws his boomerang for good luck too, forcing her out of the way with it and he makes a run for it.

He catches his boomerang again and doesn't dare to look back as he runs through the archway and into insides of the watchtower. The second sound of running footsteps indicates that Zuko caught on and is right behind him. Good-

Azula lets out an enraged yell and suddenly there's a terrifying crackling sound behind them.

Before Sokka can realize what that is, he gets thrown off his feet as another body slams into his back. His right cheek, his arms and knees scrap painfully along the floor as the hair on his neck rises.

He is sure is going deaf when he can feel pure static electricity wash over their heads, thundering and booming in his ears.

*What the fuck, what the fuck what the-*

Sokka still has to blink the afterimage of the flashing light away as he gets up again. His ears are ringing.

"How *fitting!* I should have guessed that you are just as much of a coward as him. You both deserve each other!" She yells and her composure seems to be slipping some more. Azula stands there hunched, her hand still crackling with the remaining energy.

Zuko is panting hard. He immediately jumps back into a bending stance, his hands at the ready.

The princess moves and throws a blue ball of fire at him. Zuko is quick to react and creates a wall of fire to block it.

She lets loose another stream of blue flames as Zuko starts to meet hers. Sokka takes cover behind Zuko waiting for an opportunity to hit her with his boomerang.

Blue and red fire dances through the air, creating so much heat that Sokka feels like he will be boiled alive at the end of this.

"What happened to you Lala?" Zuko pants.

She just answers with the heat of her blue flames. Zuko manages to block everything and Sokka uses the opportunity to create more space between them, when he forces her to dodge his boomerang.

The princess grows more enraged as a result. At this point, her hair must have come loose and she is breathing hard, reminding Sokka more of some angry spirit out to get them.

Something seems to have finally cracked.

"This is your fault! Everything is your fault," she screams at Zuko.

"You had everything! And then you fucked it up! If you could have just been better at keeping your mouth shut! If you just had been better at doing your job. But you couldn't even do that one single thing father ever ask of you. You disappoint me, Zuzu! And you disappointed father!"

Sokka wishes he and Zuko had gotten a proper moment to talk about everything earlier that night. Because he doesn't even know what this might be about anymore.

Sokka dares to take a glance behind them. They really need to get to the next section of the wall as long as they have the chance to.

He turns back to the princess. Zuko just shakes his head before he yells back.

"He's impossible to please. Azula you can't-"

"Maybe for you, because you are such a failure! But I never make any mistakes! I have never failed him before and now I am going to finish with you what he started! But first I'm going to make you suffer for it!"

Before- ?

Sokka doesn't know what this may be about but he can guess that his earlier assumption that she really thought she had killed the avatar may be correct. The fire lord wouldn't have been pleased with any of that, would he?

Suddenly she smiles her unsettling smile again as her eyes lock back on Sokka.

Sokka reacts and throws his boomerang on pure instinct without any thought about it.

Azula draws her hand behind her with pointed fingers but she immediately needs to duck out of the way and the crackling energy in her hands disappears into thin air. She snarls at him and Sokka catches his boomerang again, huffing out disbelieving.

He'd... been toast for sure, if not for his instant reaction.

Before she can do anything else, Zuko makes an angry sound, throws his flames at her again and pushes her further back with it as they start another exchange of fiery blows.

Sokka mind starts racing - she couldn't instantly throw the lightning at him like that? Does she, unlike with the fire, need to recharge it or something? Not that it matters. Sokka isn't sure he wants to wait around any longer to find out if his hypotheses is correct. He is not letting her grill them.

"Zuko, come on!" He yells and makes a sprint for it through the archway on the other side and with that, onto the next section of the wall. He's hoping Zuko is going to be right behind him.

"What are we doing?" Zuko yells as he comes running after him.

He risks a look over his shoulder as he hears that the princess must be close behind them, her hands pointed to collecting more of that lightning. She looks so pissed off.

Sokka throws his boomerang yet again and she yells frustrated when she dodges him. The slip in her concentration lets her loose the charge and it creates some distance between them.

Great. Now they just need to create even more space. Sokka hopes both of them can run faster than her.

They sprint along the top of the wall and the first rays of sunlight break over the horizon then. And Sokka can suddenly see it - Zuko sees it too.

He was right, Sokka thinks, as he feels hysterical laughter bubbling up inside him. This certainly would be the first time that he could get so lucky with something like that. Now they just need to reach the next watchtower in the distance.

The princess must have realized her mistake and she roars something. The sound of flames is behind them but Zuko and him already have a lead on her.

They try to be as fast as possible but Sokka can feel the exhaustion and the rest of the night starting to catch up to him. He wants to stop because he has to catch his breath, but Zuko isn't letting him. He grabs his arm and pulls Sokka along with him the rest of the wall.

They reach the next watchtower and with it the war balloon she must have used to come here - in the cover of the darkness most likely - and that's hidden from the view from below the wall.

Sokka moves to scramble inside and he holds out his arm for Zuko. He so hopes this isn't another trick. He didn't think the princess would be so careless, leaving an exit strategy just waiting for them lying around - but then, she didn't seem really fully there either.

He glances down the wall and Azula isn't that far behind them anymore.

Just any minute-

"Come on!" He yells at Zuko and wiggles his fingers, waiting for Zuko to take his hand.

But Zuko still hesitates for a moment.

If that idiot is getting them both killed now, Sokka is going to be so pissed.

"You can't possibly consider to stay. Just Hurry up!"

Zuko blinks.

"Right, of course."

He finally grabs Sokka's arm and jumps in beside him.

"How does this work?" Zuko asks with a panicked edge.

"Just use your fire!" Sokka yells back.

Zuko nods frantic and closes his hands, before he punches multiple fists of flames into the engine and the war balloon lifts up with a jolt.

Sokka swears he can barely hear anything from the loud thumping of his heart in his ears, but then there is the sound of more crackling electricity again.

"Shit, shit, shit! Can't you make this thing go any faster?"

Zuko makes weird face and he generates some more flames. Sokka stares at his hands transfixed for a moment. It's one thing to know someone is a firebender. It's another to see someone firebend from up so close, not counting all the instances just some minutes ago.



There is another thundering sound and Sokka throws himself down on instinct, covering his head and ears with a curse.

He's sure this will be-

It takes a moment to realize that nothing happened.

Zuko is still firing up the engine with single minded concentration. Sokka takes a quick look to confirm that they are rapidly growing in altitude. He looks back down and sees the enraged crazy lightning princess growing already smaller a top of the wall, alongside with the rest of Ba Sing Se.

They are too far up for her lightning to reach them now.

Sokka turns to Zuko. Both are still panting hard and the adrenaline is still rushing through Sokka.

Zuko stops with his bending and looks at him then, disbelieving and overwhelmed with everything. One of his sleeves is completely seared and there are scorch-marks on the rest of his clothes. His right arm is scrapped all over from when he had thrown Sokka off his feet and Zuko's hair is a sweaty mess, sticking to his forehead. Sokka knows he doesn't look better.

The battered skin on Sokka's cheek hurts when he opens his mouth and he takes another breath.

"That... That was *amazing!* *You were amazing!*" Sokka grabs Zuko's shoulders and starts shaking him. Zuko wants to say something, but no sound escapes him.

"You were all *WHAM-* and *WUSH* with your bending. And then with her going *BZZZ* and... and... and- " Sokka feels lightheaded and like he can't form a coherent sentences anymore.

Zuko's face suddenly scrunches up in anger.

"Did you have to goad her like that? She almost killed you!"

"Well- She almost killed both of us... but she didn't! And I was sure you wouldn't let anything happen to me."

Zuko blinks taken aback, but he is still looking so pissed at Sokka. Sokka can't help but grin back. They did it. They really got away like that! He can't believe it-

"Of course I wouldn't! That doesn't mean you should put yourself in danger. That was incredible stupid. Can you just stop doing things that will make me worry, you- "

Zuko is still hissing at him but Sokka puts his arms around Zuko's neck and pulls him into a kiss, interrupting his rant. It feels more appropriate for the situation.

Zuko immediately wraps his arms around Sokka and pulls him so tight against him that it should have hurt. Sokka doesn't care. They kiss openmouthed and hungrily and it feels like

Zuko is trying to make up for everything that has happened the last few days and Sokka's toes curls with it.

He can't believe how close he came to losing this.

Sokka has to break away because a set of hysterical giggles suddenly bubbles out of him. Zuko gives him a disbelieving half-grin. It takes a moment for Sokka to calm down again.

"Looks like you are coming with me now after all," Sokka says blissfully happy with himself then and Zuko blinks. His expression falls and he looks like he just realized what that could mean for him.

Zuko's his face suddenly turns stony and a bit green and Sokka frowns. But wha-

... Zuko had hesitated for a moment before taking Sokka's hand, hadn't he?

Sokka takes a quick look around when the new situation truly sinks in then. They are now trapped in the small space of the war balloon for the next how many hours it will take until they can land safely in the distance and they still haven't really gotten a chance to talk about anything really.

"...Cosy," Sokka says with a nervous laugh when Zuko still looks like he is about to throw up.

That's going to be an awkward ride for sure.

## Chapter End Notes

Haha - dreaded writing this chapter the most. I'm not even sure I like how it's turned out - I'm just relieved to finally got this part done. But I soooo look forward to writing all of the rest! So there is that.

A few words about Azula, if anyone is wondering or even interested in my rambling. The timeline here so different, which means she spent all over four more years under Ozai's A+ parenting skills.

In this, she really thought she had killed Aang, but she hadn't and the invasion really did come as a surprise. It still failed but that's not really the point. She kinda fucked up in Ozai's eyes and she was bound to crack sooner or later, it was inevitable or idk.

But again, that's not the point here - I'm just explaining some of my thought process behind the chapter.

The actual point is, that it was convenient for the plot, because she was careless and

over confident, and her carelessness gave our boys the literal perfect opportunity. And also - for everyone who's not caught on already - a story about destiny and what it means, a story about the meaning we give destiny - a bit of cheesy simple plot conveniences should be expected 😊😊

(And sorry for my cringy action scene 🤔 how does anyone even writes stuff like that, making it make sense and be compelling?)

But also - Team-work!!!

Anyway, next time - a Zuko-field trip! Yay! Because what better way to get two characters to communicate? Trap them somewhere together of course 😊

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

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

The sun is already high up in the sky when Sokka gets woken up by the rumbling of his stomach. He had just wanted to rest his eyes for a second, but the exhaustion from the last night must have knocked him out cold.

He rubs his eyes and stretches his arms and then Sokka groans because every single muscle in his body feels stiff and aching - but not remotely in any kind of fun way.

"-fuck me," he mumbles with some well deserved pity for himself.

That's when he notices Zuko sitting on the opposite side of him, watching him with tired, slow blinking eyes - he must have slept too. That most likely wasn't really ideal, Sokka realizes suddenly - both of them knocked out and unaware - but the balloon hasn't crashed yet, so it doesn't even matter now anyway. Zuko still looks like he'd fought with a polar bear dog that could spew fire, but his lip twitches with the ghost of a smile as he looks at Sokka and Sokka grins back in earnest for a moment.

"Let's never do any of that ever again," Sokka says.

When Zuko only nods stiffly, Sokka's face falls again.

*...Right.*

Sokka huffs and opens his bag to search for the food he had the foresight to buy. They haven't talked about anything yet but Sokka is still feeling like he's starving, so food has to take priority.

The things inside his bag are in disarray. Sokka finds a broken half of Katara's comb. He sighs and carefully lays it next to him. He is not going to feel sad about it because he'd rather have something broken of hers, than nothing at all. Sokka pulls out more stuff.

"Is that... my shirt?" Zuko asks, just as Sokka finds the bread he was looking for. Sokka just shrugs, tears the bread apart and throws half of it to Zuko. He catches it easily and hums in thanks. But then he doesn't say anything else and the uncomfortable silence that has settled over them continues.

Sokka nibbles on his half and watches Zuko do the same. When he is done with it and his stomach feels like it's no longer collapsing in itself from hunger, Sokka starts to nervously

drums his fingers on his legs.

Still, nobody is talking.

Zuko gets up to fuel the crackling fire in the engine some more and then leans on the sides, watching the sky with an constricted expression. Sokka keeps himself busy by inspecting the hole in his pants. He hisses when he pokes at the raw and tender skin of his knee below. Zuko gives him a glance at the sound but doesn't say anything.

Sokka sighs. There is just so much that they really should address and Sokka hasn't a single cue where to even start.

"So... pretty clouds?" He says eventually and Zuko glances at Sokka again.

"Yeah... Fluffy."

Sokka snorts and yet another silent moment follows.

"Your, er... sister seems nice," he tries again. Zuko sends him such a glare that he gives up with that approach.

Sokka carefully touches his slightly swollen and battered cheek as he is thinking. He tries not to wince when it stings. He's going to feel that one for days for sure.

"Uncle must be worried sick about you. I hope he is not assuming the worst," Sokka tries for the third time to start a conversation and finally Zuko sighs and turns to him.

"He knew I went looking for you and he ... You know he was worried about you, too? Well, he didn't say that, but he didn't try to stop me either so.... But I don't think he will assume the worst. If Azula really pays him a visit, she'd gloat about killing me and- uncle was always better at not letting her deceive him."

Sokka draws a face. He's done a fantastic job at leaving Ba Sing Se like that and making everyone worried. But more importantly- now he is worried about uncle instead. If the crazy princess visits him... Sokka shudders, not wanting to imagine.

"That doesn't sound very reassuring."

Zuko huffs.

"He's managed worse, I'm sure he's going to be fine."

"If you believe that, you know him- Wait! ...He *is* your uncle, *right?* It didn't occur to me but I guess his real name isn't Mushi either, isn't it? Then who- "

The thought hadn't even crossed Sokka's mind admits all the other stuff going on. Zuko blinks taken aback, like he is just now realizing that Sokka wouldn't already know.

"... he's um- he was prince Iroh. Before."

The name sounds familiar. Something about that tickles Sokka's brain. Wasn't there also someone who-

"*Oh!* ...What the fuck? Iroh as is in *General Iroh?!!*"

Sokka stares at Zuko.

You can't really travel through the earth kingdom without hearing any of the stories. General Iroh - who's infamous for his six-hundred-day siege on Ba Sing Se. And now he owns a tea shop in the same city for more days than that? Talk about irony, or more like Iroh-ny.

"Yes," Zuko says plainly and Sokka stares some more.

"Are you shitting me? Don't tell me I actually ask the *dragon of the west* if I could call him uncle?"

"... looks like you did." Zuko looks amused at that and it finally wipes the grumpy expression off of him. Sokka groans loudly.

Tui and La.

"See, he is going to be fine. I'm more worried about Jin at the moment," Zuko says and Sokka immediately feels guilty for leaving her the way he did too.

"Yeah, me as well. I hope she is going to be save somewhere."

"I really hope so. But unless we turn back, there is nothing we can do for now. So... any idea where we should go now?" Zuko finally asks.

Sokka sighs. Zuko is right with that, but that doesn't mean Sokka will not stop feeling guilty or worrying about everything.

"I'm not sure - somewhere west from here. I have some guesses where my friends could be. We always had contingency plans in case we got separated - but that never included presumed death and separation for multiple months. I just hope they had a met-up point for after this invasion thingy and..."

Sokka stops himself and looks away from Zuko. He starts to inspect the raw skin on his arm instead, to keep himself busy.

"... just drop me off somewhere and I'll manage to find them," he says eventually. He hears Zuko take a sharp breath.

"You no longer want me to come with you?"

"Hey, just because I ask before, doesn't mean you have to. Especially when it's clear that you don't actually want to - you hesitated before. So, just drop me off somewhere. No hard feelings, okay?"

He doesn't need to mention that he has lots of feelings regarding that. But he will not force Zuko to actually tag along when he doesn't want that, no matter how heartbroken Sokka will be.

Sokka is still not looking at Zuko and he has no clue what face he must be making. He starts scratching his arm. He hopes he really can find Katara, so she can heal all his bruises-

"No, that's not it...that got nothing to do with you. It wasn't... personal."

Sokka finally looks up. Zuko just frowns.

"What is it then? I know it wasn't fair for me to ask when it's regarding your safety or whatever kept you in the city before, but that's mood now anyway. But you'd rather spend time with your homicidal sister than leave with me? How should I not take this personal?"

And okay, Sokka though he had really cooled down regarding everything but by the look of it, he is still, maybe the tiniest bit angry at Zuko.

"Because... just leaving like that may seem easy for you but it isn't that easy for me."

"Uh-hu. Try again, because she shot literal lightning at us."

"Yeah, maybe. But she wasn't wrong."

Sokka blinks and Zuko groans.

"Not with that! I mean what she had said. She wasn't wrong with her words- I *am* a coward."

Sokka blinks again. Why would he believe that? This may be the most confusing conversation Sokka ever had had.

"No, you are not. You never hesitated with anything last night. You were really ruthless - no complains, big fan there but... I just don't get it."

"Yeah. You wouldn't understand," Zuko says sounding suddenly defensive.

"Then explain it to me?" Sokka asks exasperated.

Zuko makes some face before answering.

"I was... I used to have this mission. I was charged with finding the avatar before," Zuko pulls his hand down his face as some emotion flitter over it.

"This is about the avatar then?"

Zuko- even back as Lee had always acted so weird when the avatar got brought up. Zuko shrugs with one shoulder. Sokka crosses his arms.

"I couldn't find him and I thought he might not be real, that maybe he didn't exist and... I just gave up. And... thinking that he was just there somewhere, that I gave up to soon..." There is some weird tone to it and Sokka hums, thinking back about all the conversations when the avatar got brought up.

"Okay? Just because you couldn't find him before, you'd rather face your sister than the avatar? That doesn't make sense."

Zuko makes a frustrated sound.

"I told you you wouldn't understand. I became a traitor when I gave up, when I failed- I had this one chance to regain my honor and I willingly gave up on it."

Sokka looks at him confused.

"Regain your honor? I didn't think you could *loose* it?"

Zuko crosses and uncrosses his arms and he clearly wants to start pacing but there is just not enough space for it. Sokka watches him.

"You just don't get it," Zuko says heated - even more frustrated, more worked up now.

"Look, I have zero clue how it's even possible - you can't just loose your honor and nobody can give it to you or take it away and you are not even *trying* to *explain* things here," Sokka says, starting to feel frustrated too.

Zuko suddenly glares at Sokka. Just what's his problem now? It seems to be an emotional topic but Sokka is just confused.

"The avatar was supposed to be my ticket back home! And I had this one chance to make things right again and I couldn't even do that right- I ran away and became a traitor to my nation. And now I will never get it back because there is nothing honorable about being such a failure!" Zuko snaps at him and it sounds, like he truly believes that.

Zuko never came across as someone so self-conscious but then, he never came across like the spoiled righteous fire nation prince that Sokka had in mind, either. What ever this is, Zuko clearly struggles with it - Sokka takes a deep breath. While Zuko seems to be getting riled up now, at least Sokka wants to stay level-headed.

"That sounds like it's been weighting on you but I still don't think you are a failure. And whatever it is that you thought you did or whatever happened can't have been such a *big deal*-"

Sokka was just trying to defuse the situation but it must have been the wrong words when Zuko suddenly wheels back on Sokka with some real anger.



"Not a *big deal*? That's easy for you to say when the remainder of what you did isn't sitting *right at your face!*" He yells at Sokka. Okay what-

Sokka inhales sharply as the words register. He'd never ask and he had never really expected to get an answer.

Zuko makes another frustrated sound before he angrily punches more flames back into the engine. Sokka flinches back and stares at him with wide eyes. Yeah no. The bending makes him still feel a bit jumpy, especially when Zuko is in that mood.

Zuko notices Sokka's reaction and horror creeps on his face. He suddenly deflates.

"*Shit*- ...sorry. I didn't *mean* to..."

Zuko plops down opposite from Sokka and lays his head on his knees - hiding his face - while his hands mess through his hair. He seems to be taking some calming breaths.

"What- What *happened*?" Sokka ask softly after a moment, not sure if Zuko is even going to answer - or blow up again.

"I... I embarrassed father- the fire lord at a war meeting and he decided to teach me a lesson. He... burned my face and he exiled me. He said I could come back home when I had found the avatar..."

Ah. It's slowly starting to dawn on Sokka just how bad it must be for Zuko, to be confronted with the avatar again, if he thought he'd had left it behind him.

Zuko still has his head tucked against his knees and Sokka doesn't even know to to react to any of that. He wants to give Zuko a hug but he doesn't know how receptive he'd be to that right now.

"That's... fucked up," Sokka says eventually and pauses.

"You know that this is fucked up, *right*?"

"I know," Zuko mumbles at least.

"I mean... How *old* were you even? You must have been a *child*- " Sokka ask horrified, when he realize that. Because Zuko's been living in Ba Sing Se for so long- and before that he was looking for the avatar, he couldn't have been much older than Aang was when they found him could he? Sokka swears if they don't find Aang to defeat the fire lord, he's going to *kill* that man with his own bare hands for putting Zuko through this.

Zuko finally looks up at him and he looks even more tired than before.

"I was thirteen and- yeah I know. It's been... yeah."

Sokka watches him for another long speechless moment and Zuko eyes him back warily, waiting for Sokka to say anything.

"You know, going against this- choosing to just walk away, makes you anything but a coward for it."

Zuko laughs dryly at Sokka's words.

"That's sweet for you to say, but even the spirits agree with me there," he scoffs.

"What do you mean with that?"

"My... soulmark. Do you want to know when I got it? After I abandoned my mission. I ran away just right before I reached the south pole. And it's on my foot to remind me how much of a failure I actually am. The spirits were really clear with their message to me there- "

"But you still- Wait! When was that exactly?"

Sokka mentally stumbles over his words. He didn't really think about it. It never occurred to him that they could have gotten their marks at different times.

"Something like, four maybe four and a half years ago, or so. Why?"

Sokka escapes a startled laugh- not that this is anything to laugh at and Zuko rightfully glares at him for that.

"That must have been just around the time when Katara and me found the avatar. He was frozen in an iceberg. And if you didn't find him before, it's because he wasn't there to be found. You must just have missed him when you turned back."

Zuko frowns as he thinks about Sokka's words.

"...I would have met you then too?" He ask eventual.

Sokka thinks it's a bit sweet that Zuko is immediately focusing on that part.

"Most likely. Well, probably for the best that you didn't. If you had showed up in all your fire nation-y glory I would have tried to hit you with my boomerang."

Zuko blinks and then he makes a startled laugh too. Sokka can't help but grin at him, feeling all warm at that sound.

"So you think that could be it? I turned around and we didn't met when we were supposed to? And- hey, why did it take you so long to figure out what your mark read then?"

Sokka scratches his chin.

"I only got mine when I was separated from everyone in Ba Sing Se. The day I first met you, actually."

Zuko hums. The earlier frustration and anger seems to be gone as he looks at Sokka contemplating.

"That would make sense. I got mine, when I should have met you and it's on my foot because I ran away. And you got yours when we met and it's on your wrist because you are always the first to reach out- did you realize you do that by the way?"

Sokka makes a face at that.

"Yeah sure - just interpret things like they are convenient for you. But we don't actually *know*. We may have some part to play but I'd still rather ask the avatar- you know, the guy who's supposed to be the bridge between our and the spirit world - about all this."

"Sure," Zuko says, but he sounds like he is just humoring Sokka and Sokka huffs.

There's a lull in the conversation and Sokka takes the time to digest all the new information he's leaned. So much about Zuko is starting to make sense in a really horrible way.

Zuko goes and fuels the fire, while correcting the course before sitting down again, watching the clouds, also lost in thoughts.

After maybe half an hour or more has passed, Sokka stretches out his leg and pokes Zuko with his foot to get his attention. Zuko looks at him questioning.

"So, Can I just...lets circle back what you said earlier. What made you give up? Just because you couldn't find the avatar? You sounded really determined," Sokka wonders aloud - the one question he couldn't make sense of right now.

"I don't know. I was... angry most of the time, but uncle was there - and he didn't have to be and he talked so much - You know how he is. I didn't want to hear it then, but he always said that I had a choice too. That I could just... walk away, if that's what I wanted."

"Well, your uncle is a wise man. What made you listen to him?"

Zuko shrugs.

"I'm not even sure. Maybe when he told me about Roku, I suddenly understood, or- I don't know, something just got to me."

Sokka frowns.

"Roku?"

"Oh right... Roku, avatar Roku was my... great grand father. On my mother's side. Uncle told me about it once."

Sokka blinks and then a laugh escapes him.

"What? Does that mean Aang is your grandpa?"

"... Who is Aang?" Zuko asks confused.

"The avatar. Duh."

Sokka grin's at Zuko's perplexed expression. He gets to his knees and moves closer to Zuko until he's sitting next to him. Zuko makes space for him and gives Sokka a small smile. Sokka just feels relieved that they could manage to talk about so much without having another screaming match, no matter how awful the earlier topics were.

Sokka still really, really wants to move past all this.

But then another thought pops up, remembering what else they yelled at each other and Sokka frowns. Zuko looks at him questioning.

"Hey, Can I ask you something that I've been wondering about?"

"Yeah?... Go ahead."

"You said you didn't care that I lied when we were fighting before. What was that about?"

Zuko hums and he takes some time to think about it.

"You've... met Azula. She wasn't always like that - well she was always good at lying and scheming, but not so... I don't know what actually happened. I haven't seen her in years. But nevertheless... she is still my little sister. Nothing could ever stop me from...caring about her. And I... care about you too."

Sokka frowns at Zuko's words. Sokka has to think about Katara then and he gets it maybe? He can't imagine there'd be a lot he wouldn't forgive her. And everything he has heard or seen - Zuko's family is so truly fucked up. Maybe Sokka's dishonesty must have been so small on the scale and maybe it truly didn't bother Zuko as much.

"Okay? Well, I care about you too, you know?"

Zuko glances at him with a frown. He sighs.

"Yeah and I don't get that. What do you even want with me? I lied to you and yet you still insisted that I should come with you. Why you aren't more angry at me?"

"Do you *want* me to be angry at you again? Because I was *really* mad before."

Sokka realizes that he really isn't any longer. He's... He doesn't know exactly how he feels about everything. But Zuko and Lee - there just the same person for him now, only that he's gotten more insight into who that is and. Yeah the lying was really shitty. But then Zuko was also so ready to help him without any question and he'd defended him from his sister. And the only thing Sokka really wants right now - maybe beyond any reason - is to keep Zuko close to him.

"No! Of course I don't want that. I Just- I thought you would hate me, that you would never want to speak to me again."

Sokka blinks.

"So why did you lie? You could have tried to explain things before it got so far, or you could have said you are not interested in me or did you think I wouldn't figure things out? Then you wouldn't have needed to say anything ever."

Zuko huffs and looks away from Sokka.

"I thought I had to lie to you at first because, I didn't think that there was any chance you could possible... want me, if you'd knew the whole truth. But the... lying just felt shitty. I am so sorry for not telling you everything earlier though. You just... You make me want to do all kind of things, no matter the consequences. You make want to be reckless. You... really *frustrate* me."

Sokka blinks at the words and bites the inside of his non-hurting cheek, as he takes a moment to consider what he should say to that.

"Okay... So, you are just an idiot? But who am I to talk - I embarrassed myself so much in the beginning. I wanted to be logical and think things through and only ended dragging you around as results. Because...one look at you and I'm...I feel like I'm losing my head when I'm around you. I feel like I can't think straight. You really frustrate me too, man."

Zuko huffs again and Sokka bumps his shoulder against Zuko's.

"I am sorry for keeping things from you before and making you worried about me. How about from now on, I want us to be completely honest with each other."

"I'd like that."

"Good. And for the record. I really liked dating you and everything that comes with that."

"Yeah, I really liked that too."

Sokka feels a familiar fluttering in his chest at the soft look Zuko is giving him. For a moment he thinks back to the amazing kiss they had after their escape. By the looks of everything, they still can move forward together from here on out.

Sokka grins at Zuko.

"We've been doing a lot of things really backwards, haven't we?"

Zuko hums and Sokka reaches out to squeeze his arm. Zuko's eyes focus on Sokka's hand on him and he looks a bit constipated and Sokka frowns again.

"...what is it now?"

"Can I... take look at it?"

It takes Sokka a moment to realize what he's asking.

Sokka lets go of Zuko and moves closer so he can lean his head on Zuko's shoulder. He holds out his arm, waiting for Zuko to take it.

Zuko still hesitates for a moment and Sokka suddenly feels *nervous*. Which is stupid. They've seen each other more naked than just some scandalous wrist. It's not like Zuko would take one look at his own name and be horrified about it.

Zuko's hand feel warm against him as he carefully starts to undo the tie. The fabric looks worse for wear from the last night, but Zuko pulls it away with gentle fingers, like he'd never touched anything more precious. The wrappings fall away and Zuko exhales slowly.

The mark is still there of course, like always - bold and unabashed.

Zuko's fingers softly brush over Sokka's skin and Sokka shivers at the contact.

"I never thought it be something so obvious like my name," he says sounding awed.

"Yeah. It's like the spirits want it to be seen so bad," Sokka grumbles and draws a face.

Zuko hums questioning as his index finger traces the strokes of the writing.

"I don't... like it." Sokka confesses and he cringes at himself.

"Sorry- probably not what you want to hear. But If we are going to be honest. I almost left without looking for you because this whole soulmark business is still pissing me off. Who says we only wanted to be together because some spirit decided that we want that? I think it's a load of ostrich-horse crap."

"That is a concern for you?" Zuko asks sounding wistful, still brushing his thumb over Sokka's skin.

"Yes. Doesn't all that bother you?"

"No, not necessarily."

Sokka frowns at that.

"What's your opinion then? And don't hold back."

Zuko takes his arm and lifts it to his face where he places a soft kiss to Sokka's wrist and Sokka feels himself flush. He feels strangely exposed with his naked wrist.

"I am sorry- that you are stuck with this. With me. I think I can understand what you mean but... I don't care if someone else decided for me or not. Not if it got me you and... I can't help but like that that it's my name on you - that everyone can tell that you are...er- " Zuko suddenly cuts his words off.

"That I am yours?" Sokka finishes the sentence a bit amused.

"Yes. That you are mine. I mean we don't have to... I'm just glad you are still talking to me and- " Zuko says softly and Sokka removes his head from Zuko's shoulder, so he can look at Zuko's face again.

Why are the both of them such messes?

"I am. Yours. If you still want that too. Even if I don't like any of this," Sokka says, indicating his mark.

Zuko exhales and he nods in earnest and Sokka leans forward to press his lips against Zuko's for a short moment.

Zuko smiles at him but he looks back at Sokka still a bit guarded.

"You are not... scared of me then?" Zuko asks.

"What- why should I be scared of you?"

"Because of the bending?"

Oh, right. That's probably the thing that's taking the most to get used to.

"I'm not sure. No, I don't think so- it's just making me a bit nervous. Haven't had the best track record with fire benders."

Zuko makes a face and Sokka watches him for another moment.

"Maybe tell me about it? Having all that fire at your command. Is there like, literal fire inside you? I bet that would be uncomfortable," Sokka wonders aloud and Zuko snorts.

"It's not like that. There is- Every firebender has something we call inner flame and it's like a... second heartbeat I can always feel. I can draw from that. It's more like ...a spark that's always there but it's not literal fire."

Sokka tries to imagine it but this must be one of the things you'd have experience to really get it.

"That sounds... exhilarating. And you are always in control of it? Of your fire?"

"Yeah. It's like an extension of me. Just like another limb maybe?"

Zuko's fingers trace over Sokka's wrist absentmindedly again then and Sokka's heart skips a beat.

"Wait. I don't think I'm explaining it right. Here- "

He let's go of Sokka's arm and opens his palm and suddenly there is a small flame in his hand.

Sokka watches enraptured and a bit awed. He brings up his hand - not touching the flame - but holding it close to feel the heat. And it feels familiar to him. Like he recognizes the kind of heat, remembering how hot Zuko's body would always feel against him. A warm sensation floods Sokka's stomach.

"Fire bending is still dangerous of course. If you are not careful, you lose control and the fire spreads and burns everything in its path. But a small flame like that - when it's just mine- " he stops and gives Sokka a confused look.

"Are you- "

Sokka swallows. He doesn't know what made Zuko stop talking.

"Go on," he says a bit hoarse, not sure why and Zuko squints at him for a second longer.

"When it's just mine, it's still like a part of me. I'm still in control- I can easily hold it here, or restrain it or- " Zuko is taking a measured breath and the flame flickers with it and suddenly someone is whimpering and Sokka blinks.

It takes him a long moment to realize that he just made that sound. Zuko frowns at him again and then he moves his fingers and the flame is gone.

They stare at each other for another moment and Sokka flushes, fully embarrassed at himself. He isn't even sure what it was about Zuko's words that made him react like that.

"...can I?" Zuko asks quietly and Sokka nods, not sure what he is even asking.

Zuko reaches out and places his palm against Sokka's arm. It feels hot to the touch but it's still pleasant. Zuko watches him closely as he slowly moves his still heated hand downwards until he lays it on Sokka's leg and Sokka bites his lips.

"Do you like that? Hearing about my bending?" He asks in a sudden raspy voice, leaning closer to Sokka. Zuko starts moving his hand again, slowly creeping up Sokka's thigh and Sokka swallows before he nods.

He doesn't know what's suddenly gotten into either of them.

"...or is it about me being so fully in control?" Zuko whispers slowly as if contemplating loudly - so close to him that his breath is hot on Sokka's face and Sokka's mouth has gone completely dry.

Before - when they were just enjoying being together - they were mostly fooling around. Doing whatever felt good. Be that Zuko having his way with Sokka, or Sokka having his way with Zuko. But then there was also the last time Sokka stayed over. How Zuko had pinned Sokka down, keeping him there, leaving Sokka fully at his mercy, how he-

Zuko shifts his position and his knees bump against Sokka's and Sokka hisses, being reminded just how scraped his knee actually is - remembering just how scraped all over both of them still are. Suddenly the strange spell is broken and Zuko quickly withdraws his hands as if burned.

"*Sorry*," He says and he flushes, seemingly embarrassed at himself and Sokka laughs nervously.



"Maybe, er... shelf that though for later, when we are not feeling like we wrestled with multiple polar bear dogs..." Sokka frowns.

"It's been a long day- and even longer night. I could really need some more sleep, if I'm honest," Sokka adds and right on cue a yawn escapes Zuko.

"We should be far away from Ba Sing Se now anyway - should we look for a place to rest?" He asks then and Zuko nods.

Sokka pauses and he sniffs at himself. Urgh. He also still smells all sweaty.

"...and preferable somewhere with a bath."

Zuko snorts and then crinkles his nose too. Yeah. Both of them could use one, if Sokka is being *really* honest.

"Let's do that- hey, you didn't really answer earlier, but where are we even going?"

"Oh. I had thought we should start looking at the western air temple. Not that I'm sure, but it's worth a try and-" Sokka shrugs and then he frowns at Zuko.

"Does that mean you *are* coming with me?" He asks, hopping he hadn't misunderstood anything from any of their conversation.

Zuko grins at him unabashed and Sokka's heart jumps right into his throat. He's maybe still feeling rattled about the weirdly charged moment some minutes ago.

"Unless you think that the avatar doesn't need a firebending teacher any longer," Zuko says at last and Sokka beams at him.

"No! He absolutely does! But speaking about Aang, we can ask him about our soulmarks when we find him. I'm sure he must know something about it."

Zuko just hums.

Sokka pauses again and a wry expression enters his face.

"You know. If it was all just about getting back your honor - I can't imagine anything more honorable than helping the avatar bring balance back to the world," Sokka teases, hoping Zuko takes it as a joke.

Zuko gives him a mean side eye - but the amused twitch at the corner of his mouth betrays him and Sokka starts to laugh.

## Chapter End Notes

👏 com-muni-cation 👏

(and fluffy, fluffy fluffy clouds)

(And the two of them decided screw the author - they are just doing whatever they want now 🙄)

So. Funny that, for someone who's writing a whole ass story about characters lying to each other - I can't stand the unnecessary-drama-due- miscommunication-trope. Haha, I'm just contrary like that 🍷 - but at least you get characters talking out their issues with that 🥳

For anyone interested, when I started this I had an outline but no actual chapter count and overview of them and I was soooo sure we'd spent like over 80% of the story in Ba Sing Se and it would take like ~3 chapters to wrap everything up. But now we are leaving the city already and there are still at least five chapters - probably more left and I wished the beginning wasn't so rushed now 🙄 Had I anticipated this, I would have given this baby a whole other name, lol

And since it's been exactly two months today since I uploaded the first chapter and I hadn't said it before - I am so blown away by all the comments, subs, bookmarks, kudos and even clicks this is getting! 🤯 I can't believe anyone is interested in my drivel. So for anyone reading this - all of you are so amazing!!! 💕💕💕

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

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

The western air temple is huge.

They slowly walk around, turning corners, peering behind columns and into empty hallways - looking for anything to indicate that someone was recently here.

Sokka turns yet another corner and a plaza with a ruined fountain comes into view. It's such a beautiful sight in the soft glow of afternoon light. But there is still no sign of anyone.

"It was worth a shot," he says, trying to sound optimistic but realistically he knew that their chances would be slim. Zuko squeezes his shoulder for a moment.

"I think I know someone who could help us look next. She's a bounty-hunter who claims she can find anyone, anywhere."

Sokka doesn't even stop to wonder why Zuko knows a bounty-hunter at this point.

"Sure. Maybe," he says half-heartily and kicks a stone a bit dejected and watches it bounce a few steps away from him. It's been a few rough days - everything with Zuko, the Dai Li and the princess - them leaving Ba Sing Se like that, almost two full days of traveling...

Sokka turns to Zuko, who is looking at a mural on the wall. He's wearing his spare shirt - the one Sokka brought for himself and while Zuko's arm is still a bit grazed, Sokka can barely tell that they have been through some small ordeal. He is just so glad that Zuko is here with him and he isn't all alone.

Because even if the others had been here, there was no guaranty that they would have stayed here for multiple days. Sokka sighs.

It's so stupid - he knew how slim the chances were, but he'd really could have used this win.

Sokka rubs his neck, taking another look around. He doesn't know where they should even start looking next.

Suddenly the stone he had kicked catches his attention again, realizing it's it's still in motion, rolling further away from him.

Sokka frowns, because that's certainly odd.

The small stone skits to halt, before it starts bouncing right back at Sokka.

Sokka blinks.

"Um- Zuko?"

He turns to look at Zuko who hums absentmindedly, as he takes a look at another mural on the wall.

There is a rumbling sound.

"Zuko- " Sokka says more alarmed and Zuko finally looks at him.

"What- "

But before Sokka can even do anything or take a single step, the earth rapidly rises to meet his feet - rocks, stones and dust creating a hard crust right up to his knees.

Sokka curses and he strains his muscles, but it's no use. He is already immobilized.

He snaps his head to Zuko, who is in the exact same predicament and a panicked expression meets his.

"*damn...*do you think- the Dai Li?"

He is such an idiot. He didn't think anyone would follow them here, or that the Dai Li would even leave Ba Sing Se but then, he doubts the princess would give up so easily. They must have just walked into a trap and...

*Shit, shit, shit-*

Zuko immediately puts up his hands and Sokka reaches for his boomerang - as long as they are still able to. He takes a calming breath, his eyes darting around hoping he can spot the earthbender.

"Well, well, well. Look who we have here," a voice carries over the plaza then.

Zuko is still looking at Sokka with worry, but Sokka pays him no mind as he's cranking his head in the direction the voice is coming from, relieve like he's never felt before flooding his senses.

"*Toph!*" He calls excited when the girl in question steps into view.

Sokka takes a moment to work through the surge of emotion that wells up inside him. She is alive. And she is unharmed. And she is here. Sokka really found her - she is really here!

It was never better to see her.

"*Toph-* you can't believe how-"

"Ah, ah, ah, ah. Dead man don't speak," she says as she steps closer and Sokka snap his mouth shut with an audible click.

Toph starts walking around them in a large circle, in a way that must be just for show, pretending to take a look at them and Sokka was never more glad for her dramatics. He still can't move, but that doesn't bother him any longer.

He shoots Zuko a reassuring grin, because this is Toph and everything is going to be fine now. Zuko still frowns and looks uncertain but he lowers his hands a bit.

Toph finally pauses a few steps away from Sokka and crosses her arms.

"It's been months. And you dare to show up now?" She says sounding really put off.

"I know, I would have- "

"I'm not done," she snaps at him, holding up her hand and Sokka stops talking. But whatever she wants to say, or yell at him or insult him with - it doesn't matter. It will not stop Sokka from feeling so relieved.

He grins back at Zuko overexcited. Zuko scowls at him.

"I saved your live and as thanks, you disappear on me. You left me all alone to deal with mopey twinkletoes drowning in his guilt and sugar queen's moodiness and her passive aggressive tries to guilt-trip me for literal saving your life..."

Toph huffs annoyed.

"I had to listen to them bawling out their eyes for *weeks*. I had to keep everything together because I'm the only one who didn't go insane and now you casually stroll in here like nothing ever happened- "

Toph makes a dramatic pause and while Sokka want to feels terrible for everything they all went through, he can't help but grin big and broad and overwhelmed at hearing they are all alive.

"You have some serious groveling to do, if you ever want to make it up to me. What do you say in your defense?"

Sokka might just cry from the relieve he feels - no scratch that. He is definitely going to cry.

"I will. I'm going to be the best groveler who's ever groveled. Toph- you don't know how glad I am to see you."

Toph harrumphs and pauses for a moment, but then she flicks her hands and Sokka can move his feet again. Toph steps closer and then she is hugging him.

And it hurts - literally. Sokka swears something in his spine just cracked - but of course it hurts. Hugs from Toph, as rare as they are, always kinda do. '*You have to really feel them,*' she used say.

And Sokka doesn't mind in the slightest, he just snuffles a bit - okay maybe a lot - when she lets go off him.

"I missed you Snoozels," she says more softly.

"I missed you too- " and because it's still Toph she goes and punches him hard into his shoulder.

"*Ouch.*"

Yeah. Can't be too emotional, can't she? He may have deserved that. Sokka grumbles at her as he rubs over the place she punched him.

"Like I said. Lot's of groveling," she says with a smirk and then she pauses again.

"So. Who is your friend?"

They both turn to Zuko who watched the interaction with a weirded out expression.

"-right. That's Zuko. He's um..."

What exactly should Sokka even call him? His 'boyfriend' suddenly sounds too juvenile. His 'lover'? Nah- doesn't feel right either. How about *'his soulmate, who Sokka is pretending to be anything but, because Sokka still has some serious problems with the concept as a whole'*? Yeah that has a nice ring to it.

"He's...important- to me." He settles on and Toph blows a strand of hair out of her face.

"Oh. That's better going to be good." She mutters to herself.

But she moves her wrist and frees Zuko with that motion too. Sokka gives Zuko another glance to see he is fine, before turning back to Toph.

"Are the others with you here? Are they well? Is everyone- "

Toph jerks her head and starts moving, indicating that they should go with her.

"That way. Come on," she says and they start following her somewhere deeper into the temple.

Zuko gives him a worried glance and Sokka reaches out to take his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. Toph must have sense that, but she doesn't draw any attention to it.

"So what happened back in Ba Sing Se?" Sokka ask her as they stop walking along some corridor and Toph opens a hidden pathway with her bending.

"What do you think? It was a trap by the fire nation. We barely made it out alive."

Sokka swallows down the lump in his throat. They are alive - no use on dwelling on the rest.

"We've heard. There were a lot of rumors. Mostly the Aang had died."

Toph just sighs.

"He... almost did."

Sokka nods. He already guessed that. The princess must have really believed that she killed Aang. Sokka suddenly feels anxious - not knowing in what exact shape he can expect everyone to be.

At least Toph seems to be fine.

"New armor?" he asks trying to change the topic.

"Sure. It's tougher now, more lighter too," Toph says with a grin and moves her arm and the metal readjust its shape, showing of the multiple layers, before snapping back into the original shape.

"Neat," he grins at her.

Zuko, who's kept quiet until now, suddenly speaks up.

"Wait. You can really metalbend?"

He turns to Sokka with a unreadable expression.

"You weren't pulling my leg?"

Sokka just rolls his eyes. He doesn't want to start this discussion again.

"Whatever Snoozles told you - he understated my abilities," Toph says to Zuko with a snort.

"He said you are the best earthbender in the world... I believe him now," Zuko says completely honest, sounding a bit awed. And baffled.

"Hey. Don't go inflate her ego, it's already big enough-"

"Ohhh, I like him already." Toph says at the exact same time.

They step out onto another plaza similar to the other one and Sokka can already hear the voices before he sees anyone. He turns to Zuko who suddenly looks unsure.

"It's going to be fine," he says and gives Zuko's hand another squeeze.

They turn the corner and Sokka's eye water at the sigh that greets him.

Aang leans against Appa, while Katara is looking through her bags and - it's such a familiar scene - one that he has seen hundreds of times before. He'd never thought he'd see it ever again. Sokka has to blink back the tears that start to impact his vision.

"Yo! Look who I dug up fresh from his grave," Toph yells loudly, before Sokka get the chance to collect himself.

Katara turns to them and then she shrieks as she looks at him like she's seeing a ghost.

"Hey Katara- " he starts but she drops her bag.

Then she moves herself so quickly it shouldn't be humanly possible - or maybe Sokka does - but the next he knows is that they are hugging and sobbing and babbling non-sense and then Aang is hugging him, hugging both of them too. There is another hand touching his shoulder and Appa is licking all over him and... *Ew*.

For a moment everything is so perfect.

It takes a while before they can detangle themselves but they are still talking over each other.

"-We thought you were dead!"

"-I thought you were dead!"

"What happened to you - "

"Dad's not going to believe it!"

"- I got lost in Ba Sing Se."

"Hey Sokka, it's good to see you!"

"What - Dad is alive?"

"- It was a trap and - "

"Aang have you grown again?"

" -seriously, what happened?"

" -Aang almost didn't make it and- "

"Is that Suki?"

"I missed you."

"Sure thing! I'm taller than you now."

"Hey, who is your friend?"

All eyes turn to Zuko at that.



Zuko plasters on a fake smile to hide how uncomfortable he feels at all the attention but Sokka can easily read him and he decides to take charge here.

"Okay- maybe we should start with some introductions before we get into anything else"

"So, you've met Toph already-"

"Yes, yes, don't forget your groveling later," she huff already disinterested and sits down to pop her feet up on some rocks, crossing her arms behind her head.

"Hi! I'm Aang," Aang says then, taking the initiative and holding out his hand for Zuko. Zuko hesitates and glances at Sokka before taking Aang's hand.

"Hi. Er Zuko here." He says a bit awkwardly and clearly nervous. Katara squints at him.

She is still holding tightly onto Sokka's arm not letting him go - he's not letting go either - and he turns to her next.

"This is Katara my sister. And this is Suki of the Kyoshi Warriors - and I really want to hear that story later!"

"Hello," Suki says pleasantly and gives Zuko a small smile and Zuko nods at her.

Sokka keeps himself from sighing relieved. So far so good.

"Oh right. And that's Appa. Aang's flying bison - with whom we *flew*. All over the earth kingdom. From the *south pole*," he says a bit pointed to Zuko and Aang looks between them confused. Zuko gives him a sheepish look. But far he is taking everything in big strides.

"Okay, Good. This is everyone- Everyone, that's Zuko my- "

Sokka moves his arm, the one Katara isn't clinging to and holds out his hand in Zuko's direction and he pauses, because... where should he even start?

"Is that a spiritmark?" Aang suddenly says with eyes on Sokka's wrist.

Sokka blinks confused. How does Aang... Oh right. He's so used to have kept it hidden, but with everything going on, Sokka didn't think twice to rewrap it. At least not in front of Zuko who knew anyway.

"...Yeah. He's er. That." Sokka says slowly and he sees the corner of Zuko's mouth twitch.

Suki just frowns as she looks at the mark.

Katara makes a grab for his arm, taking a look. Her eyebrows almost disappear into her hairline as she blinks at him weirded out, poking at his wrist.

Aang seems to be the only one exited.

"That's great! That's such a rare blessing from the spirits. Good for you!" he claps Sokka on the back. Sokka grumbles a bit at that.

There is another silent moment, none of the others sure how to digest that information until Toph suddenly starts crackling.

"Oh. I already *love* this so much," she says gleefully to herself.

After some more confused conversation that goes nowhere, they decide to sit down and start at the beginning.

Zuko wants to sit further away from them but Sokka isn't having any of that and pulls him down next to him. Katara sits on his other side, insisting she needs to check him over because she doesn't like how his cheek looks - it's not even that bad anymore but he'd gladly let her just for her piece of mind.

Aang goes to sit down next to Toph and Suki - turning his back to Sokka and that's when Sokka's eyes fall on a huge scar poking out behind his robes. When Toph said earlier, that he almost didn't make it...

Sokka swallows before he glances at Suki. What's the story there he wonders and... hadn't Katara mentioned Dad too? Sokka has still so many questions, but first things first.

"So what exactly happened back there?" Sokka asks and leans against Katara.

Aang sighs.

"It was a trap. From the princess of the fire nation. She had gained control of the city. We fought her and then Toph showed up without you and there wasn't really any time to look for you. We barely got away. The princess she- "

It's suddenly becomes clear to Sokka just what the scar on Aang must mean.

"...She shot lightning at you."

"Yeah. How do you know?"

"We ran into her too," he says and gives Zuko a glance, who looks at his hands. Katara takes in a sharp breath at his words but Sokka goes on unprompted by it.

"What happened then? There were rumors all over the city that you'd died."

Sokka can feel all the emotions and the grief well up again now - how he'd tried to keep himself moving. How he'd tried to distract himself and stay optimistic even if he didn't really believe it.

"It was bad. It took a week for him to wake up," Katara chimes in with a far away voice. Sokka swallows down guilt for not being able to be there for her - for any of them.

There is a sudden maudlin mood in the air and Sokka frowns. He gets the feeling that there is more to it.

"What is it?"

Aang sighs frustrated.

"I lost the avatar state. My seventh chakra... It's blocked now."

Sokka nods. That might be a problem for later.

"I'm just glad that you are all alive," he says instead.

"How did you find out? You said there were rumors saying otherwise," Suki asks then.

"I heard about the... Invasion. And seriously- what the fuck was that? From word alone you almost managed to pull it off - even without me there. What made you do that?"

Katara sighs.

"You did. It was your plan."

"*Mine?* But I never planned an invasion of the fire nation," Sokka asks confused.

"No, but you gave us the idea. Remember when we visited the spirit library? You were so desperate to find an alternative date."

"Yeah and that's what I've been wondering- how did you even know that it was happening?"

Aang rubs his neck and Sokka turns to him again.

"I spoke to Avatar Roku after I woke up. I wanted to ask about the avatar state - not that he could help there but instead he told me that the movement of the stars was stalled by the spirits until then. But now things were going back to how they were supposed to - and that means that Sozin's comet is going to happen at the end of the summer."

Sokka ignores how miffed he feels by more of this spirit stuff. He was right with his guess about the comet. And the end of the summer... that's so soon already. He frowns as he thinks over Aang's words.

"Stalled? But why would they do that? And why are they moving again?"

"I don't know, avatar Roku didn't, or couldn't say."

Sokka takes a moment to shake himself out of it.

"Okay, unimportant now. How did you work out the correct date for the eclipse?"

Katara sighs.

"We know when the comet is going to happen. We tried to calculate the eclipse based on the things we found in the library. Nobody was even sure we got it right but it was still our best chance."

Sokka blinks, feeling so impressed at everything they managed without him there - if he were younger, he would have felt threaten at his place in the group by it. Sokka just smiles at them.

"You guys are amazing. And you did all that without me there... Did you come up with everything?" He turns to Katara.

Katara makes a scrunched up face and she looks like she will start crying again.

"I tried to be so much like you. But we still failed. It didn't work."

Sokka immediately pulls her into another hug and she starts sniffing into his shoulder.

"Katara... You didn't fail. Everyone is alive and well and I count that as a win."

It takes another emotional moment before they can go on with the conversation.

"So- how did you met Suki again? Did you ran into her after Ba Sing Se?"

Suki takes some contemplating look at Zuko, who is just quietly listening to everything before turning to Sokka.

"Not exactly like that. My warriors and me, we were captured by the princess. She used our armor to disguise herself to get into the city- "

"That's a great idea," he says, interrupting Suki and everyone gives him a look. Sokka shrugs.

"What? Just because the princess used it for her evil goals doesn't make the plan not brilliant because it's so simple- If we could so easily infiltrate the- ...er. Sorry. Go on."

"Yeah, anyway. We were captured and as the leader they wanted to ship me to a specific fire nation prison. Our ship got attacked by a fleet, operating under warriors from the southern water tribe and I was freed. It was pure coincidence but shortly after that, we met up with this guys here and thats when we started all the planning."

Ah. Okay. Sokka can fill in the rest of the picture. He bites his lips and turns to Katara.

"So, you did met dad?"

"Yeah, he was with us during the invasion- but we had to split up when he decided to pull back. We have a met up point, shortly before the comet- if he wasn't captured, you can hopefully met him there."

Sokka nods, feeling another surge of emotions well up in him. This is more than he ever expected and he doesn't know how to feel about everything. He turns to Suki instead.

"Well, It's good to see you here."

Suki smiles, but her eyes keep darting to his mark. Sokka feels a bit uncomfortable by that, not used to having his wrist so exposed for everyone.

"It's good to see you too - so what happened on your end?"

Sokka sighs.

"I got lost after we were separated. And then there were all the rumors- I just assumed the worst and I don't know, I worked in a tea shop to get by- owned by Zuko's uncle here and... it's not as dramatic as everything you've been up to."

Sokka turns to Zuko. He looks so misplaced and lost, but he looks back at Sokka - and he is really here with him and Sokka can't keep the smile off his face.

"Well, I heard that you guys are alive and we came looking for you here on a lucky guess and I can't believe we've found you all!"

Toph snorts and Suki gives him a frown. Aang just beams at both him and Zuko.

It's Katara that speaks up.

"I think you missed a few steps. Earlier you said you ran into the princess. And why did you bring your... friend. Sokka- what's the meaning of this? Why do you have a- a *soulmark*? What happened?" She asks grabbing at his arm again. He pulls it out of reach.

"Do you *know* what it reads?" Suki ask then, clearly implying something. She is looking at Zuko again but she doesn't sound judging, just curious.

Zuko still grows stiffer beside him and Sokka levels her with a challenging look, feeling protective over Zuko.

"Do *you*?"

There is a sudden tension in the air and Toph mutters something that sounds like 'you are such a bunch of losers.'

"What- what is it?" Aang ask taking a look at everyone.

Sokka and Zuko exchange a glance, neither knowing where to start.

"So. The thing is Zuko is-"

"Why not let him speak for himself?" Katara ask and she suddenly sounds suspicious, having caught on the strange tension.

Zuko nods as if steeling himself.

"Right. I'm er. actually Prince Zuko. Of the fire nation. Son of...fire lord Ozai? Who you want to defeat and I can help you by teaching firebending to the avatar, because I am a firebender. Oh - and I'm sorry you had to meet my sister..." Zuko trails off when he notices Sokka staring at him.

A pin drop could have been heard across the plaza. Katara takes in a sharp breath and her nails start to dig into his arm. Sokka huffs.

"Seriously? Did you have say it like that?"

"What? Should I have lied again?" Zuko ask him really defensively.

"No, but maybe don't start just like that- "

Toph starts laughing.

"*Oh, Snoozles...*"

Aang puts on a truly genuine smile, not caring for any of that in the slightest.

"You can teach me firebending?"

He turns to Sokka.

"You found me a firebending teacher? That's really great!"

Katara suddenly lets go of his arm and jerks back from him.

"You brought the *prince* of the *fire nation* with you?" She yells appalled.

Sokka just grins a bit sheepish at her. Yeah, maybe she may be utterly relieved to see him but that doesn't extend to some - in her view - random man he picked up somewhere in Ba Sing Se and certainly not to Zuko. Sokka just needs to explain everything to her then.

"Yeah I know how it sounds but he's not- "

"Do you? Because the princess of the fire nation almost *killed* us. And *you* just bring *him* here. *To Aang*," she says sounding really angry.

"Katara. It's *not* like that."

"Then explain it to me. Because you show up here - after months missing - with a '*soulmark*' from... from *him*. A soulmark- you? *Especially* you. Don't tell me you suddenly believe any of that. Don't you see? This is some kind of trick. And I'm really wondering why you are falling for that now."

"It's not like that!" He repeats, growing defensive. Why has she suddenly got it so wrong?

"Isn't it? We've been gone through hell, while you just spend months cozying it up in a... a tea shop? And now you endanger us even further and- "

"Hey. Nothing about this was easy for me. I- was lost, and all alone- and I had nobody. I thought I had lost you, I was grieving you! And Zuko... He didn't even know about all the avatar-stuff. But he's a good guy and he wants to help and I trust him with my life and- "

"What did he mean with he lied? He said again- what did he lie about? Sokka how can you possible *trust* him? He's the *prince* of the *fire nation*. And you expect *us* to trust him? What really happened to you? Because from my point of view he could be working with his sister- it could all be some elaborate plan to get to Aang. And he lied about something before... Who says he's not lying now?"

Sokka sends a helpless glance to Zuko. Zuko has put on a carefully blank face at Katara's accusations. He must probably regret ever coming here with Sokka. And no one is jumping to Zuko's defense either and Sokka is momentarily hit with how much he misses Jin already - she was always *Lee's*- Zuko's biggest supporter. Damn he hopes she is save... and never mind that right now.

Sokka turns back to his sister.

"You got it all wrong Katara! He wouldn't. That's just not how it was. He- "

Before Sokka can even say anything else she must see something in his eyes and she trows up her hands.

"*Oh* I get it now. Isn't *that* just lovely," she snaps at him as she gets up and stomps away from the plaza.

"*Katara*- " Sokka calls as he scrambles to get up too, to follow her.

"Let her. It wasn't really easy for her. She just needs some time," Aang tells him with a sighs and Sokka huffs.

Aang turns to Zuko then.

"If Sokka says we can trust you, that's good enough for me. Especially since I really need to learn firebending."

Aang sound truly genuine with that but Zuko just hums, not really believing him.

Katara stays gone for the reminder of the evening and Sokka tries to not let it bother him. All he wanted was to talk to her again, to keep her close to him - but he can understand that she is angry. And he can still get another chance to explain everything.

The rest of the evening passes quickly with talking some more - maybe not about as emotionally charged topics - but Toph and Suki fill him in about the invasion and what else had happened. Aang tries a few times to get Zuko to talk to him with no real luck. Zuko just has defaulted to his standard grumpy expression, silently listening to the conversation.

It's already later at night, after everyone has tucked themselves in, when Katara finally comes back. Aang, Toph and Suki lay closely piled together and he and Zuko - sharing the only bedroll Sokka got - a bit further apart from the others.

Katara rolls out her own bedroll with a loud huff - and places herself between Zuko and Sokka and the rest of the group. She squints at both of them and with the soft moonlight illuminating the space, she can tell that they are still awake.

"If you even think about hurting Aang- well you better not be thinking about it. Do you understand?"

"Katara," Sokka warns her.

*"Will you losers shut up? I'm trying to sleep,"* Toph snaps at them then and Suki snickers - both now clearly awake too.

Katara huffs and lays down on her side - her back demonstrative turned to them and Sokka sighs already exhausted.

"Hey- are you still awake?" He turns on his side and whispers to Zuko some time later when the soft snoring from the others indicate that they managed to fall back asleep.

Golden eyes blink tired back at him.

"What is it?"

They lay facing each other now and Sokka tangles his legs between Zuko's, cuddling closer.

"Are you alright?" Sokka asks and Zuko just hums. That wasn't really a yes.

"I'm sorry about Katara- "

Zuko sighs.

"Your sister isn't wrong to be suspicious. I would be too and-"

"Stop right there. Katara just doesn't know you yet. But she will come around, you'll see."

Zuko makes a noncommittal sound but he reaches up to brush some hair out of Sokka's face and it's better than nothing so Sokka takes it.

"I'm sorry for earlier. Should I have... lied?" Zuko asks after a moment.

"No, It's fine. It's better that way- getting everything straight out of the way."

"Yeah, but your sisters reaction to everything was warranted- it's how I expected- If you'd think it be better that I would leave- "



Sokka reaches up and pinches Zuko's nose. Zuko glares back at him for that.

"Okay. New rule. Stop with the self-decapitating bullshit right now. And don't you dare to think about leaving either. I'd rather not have to go so soon again because I would just have to leave with you...We need you here. I need you here and we are in this together now-" Sokka pauses and then brushes his fingers tenderly alongside Zuko's jaw.

"...I'm yours and you are mine, right?"

Zuko blinks and an unfamiliar sappy expression - one that Sokka isn't really used to seeing - enters his face.

"... Yeah. No take-backs, wasn't it?" He echos Sokka's words from what feels like forever ago and then he crinkles his eyes as he smiles at Sokka so achingly soft - and spirits, Sokka just loves him so much.

Sokka doesn't answer. He touches Zuko's cheek carefully instead, cradling his face as he leans forward and kisses him.

It takes a bit before Zuko is kissing him back properly - teeth scraping along Sokka's lips and Sokka sucks in a breath. He moves to press himself even closer and Zuko groans into the kiss and-

Zuko pulls his head away.

"Don't start anything, the other's-"

"-are asleep," Sokka says without missing a beat, but he flushes at letting himself get momentarily carried away and Zuko snorts. Sokka hums and he makes a kissy-face - just to tease Zuko and Zuko puts his hand square in Sokka's face to shove him away.

"Hey! Don't be so rude- seriously, I thought you were supposed to be a prince but you have like zero manners."

"Just go to sleep, Sokka," Zuko says with exasperated fondness, not rising to the bait.

"*Fine, fine-* if your highness commands."

He grins playfully but he rolls over onto his other side. Zuko drapes his arm around him and pulls Sokka close to him.

"...you were just waiting to hold that over me, weren't you?"

"Maybe?"

Sokka nestles himself tighter into the embrace and he sighs content. He's so damn happy with the situation - he's got his sister back, he has Aang, Toph and Appa and even Suki is here. And Zuko is cuddling him right now, like the personal heater he is...

He just hopes that he can convince Katara that Zuko is no threat eventually.

"I'm so glad that I have you here with me," he adds after a while but Zuko only hums sleepily.

When Sokka blinks he can see a pair of blue eyes focused back on him in the dim moonlight, a few steps across from him.

Katara is silently watching him, a million different expressions on her face and he stares right back at her. He isn't sure what she has heard, but he doesn't care. Her eyes fall on Zuko's arm still so tightly wrapped around him and her face looks suddenly unsure.

He demonstratively pulls Zuko's arm close against him.

"*Night* Katara." He says to her and she sends him a glare and huffs before turning around - her back facing him once again.

Sokka is still grinning when he starts to fall asleep. Having her be angry at him - because she thinks he is doing something stupid - makes him feel like he was only gone for a single day - Sokka has missed that, missed her so much.

It's so good to be home again.

## Chapter End Notes

Wuhu, we now enter the last leg of the story - just some answers and their resolutions is all that's missing 🙄

Also, Katara is sooo fun to write like that. She is of course glad to have her brother back but she spends months in angry-mode and now one reason for being so angry is gone but that doesn't mean the emotions just vanishes and she needs a new target to re-direct her anger at or so - they are all going to be fine eventual.

Next chapter: hopefully some real answers 😊

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Notes

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

Katara has been staring at Zuko wordlessly for the last thirty minutes without ever looking away. Sokka is certain that she can easily make it up to an hour or even longer if she wants - she is just that stubborn.

At one point Sokka starts to lean fully against Zuko, aware it just makes Katara glare harder at them. Sokka has had half a mind to say *fuck this* and climb onto Zuko's lap just to annoy her further - because what Katara is showing in stubbornness right now, he can easily match with being petty.

Zuko just sips a cup of the tea he made for everyone, truly and absolutely uncomfortable with the siblings non-verbal squabble.

The rest of the group doesn't seem to mind their staring match and are just enjoying that breakfast could happen without any yelling or anyone hurling insults.

Aang clears his throat.

"So, can we start with the firebending training immediately- is that okay with you?"

Zuko nods. "Sure, We can do some breathing techniques then."

Aang groans loudly. "I know how to breathe! Can we not skip that and jump right in with more advanced stuff, sifu hotman?"

Zuko makes a weird face as he mouth the nickname to himself. He shakes his head at himself.

"... I'm not exactly a master - and I haven't even gotten the time to bend the last years properly. I might be a bit rusted. So let's just stick to the basics first."

Sokka snorts into his tea and Zuko glances at him. Rusted is just not under any of the terms Sokka would use to describe Zuko's bending. What he saw until now was pretty darn impressive.

Katara sends Zuko a dirty look.

"How convenient for you. You don't plan to teach Aang anything, do you?"

"*Katara*," Sokka says exasperated and Zuko shifts uncomfortable next to him. "He really wasn't able to- "

"Are you his guard-dog? Let him speak for himself- not that I'd want to hear any of his excuses!" She snaps back at Sokka and throws her hands up before she moves to standing, already stomping away towards Appa.

Sokka grinds his teeth. Yeah, he has missed her a great deal and maybe even their petty sibling banter but right now he could do without her being so infatuating.

Toph mutters something under her breath and Aang looks after Katara for a moment before turning back to Zuko.

"Basics are cool. We just shouldn't forget that we are a bit on a time constrain."

Aang doesn't need to say it out loud but everyone is thinking the same now. They really haven't gotten too much time left anymore.

"Let's see what we can do," Zuko says then, but he doesn't even try to sound too confident in that.

Aang doesn't say anything to that and another strained moment follows until Suki turns to him.

"So, what about you Sokka?" She ask curious and and he's glad she's trying to change the topic. "Have any of your skills gone rusted?"

She glints at him and he grins back when he realizes what she's getting at.

"I haven't gotten a proper workout in months- I even lost my boomerang for a while, but I bet you all my skills are still as sharp as ever."

Suki grins now too and Zuko looks between the two of them with a frown.

Toph snorts.

"Oh, I'm sure you still got plenty of workout."

Sokka turns her and it takes him a second to get what she is implying and he feels his ears grow warm. Suki doesn't make it better when she stifles a laugh.

Aang who's still feeding Momo some leftovers, beams at him.

"Did Zuko teach you some awesome new skills then?"

Zuko makes a jerked movement next to him but Sokka doesn't pay him any mind because he groans when he sees Toph's expression.

"Toph, not another word- " he says with a warning. She ignores him before turning to Aang.

"It means Snoozles spent his days getting railed," Toph says in a bored voice and picks her ear.

Zuko suddenly starts violently coughing into his tea-cup and Sokka puts his face in his hands with another groan. Can't she just let the earth swallow him whole? He knew it was only about time until the teasing would start but it's not even been a full day and Zuko hadn't gotten the time to get used to any of them yet.

Katara, who just came back, immediately turns away again. "Unbelievable," she mutters to herself as she stomps off.

Suki is just fully laughing at his discomfort.

Sokka had almost forgotten how awful they could be. Just remind him, why had he missed any of them? He already feels sorry for Zuko that he has to endure all that now too. At least Aang looks just as embarrassed at Toph's clarification as Sokka feels.

"Thanks Toph- remind me, *how* old are you again?"

"Sweet, sweet sixteen but hey - do you guys want to hear that one story of earth rumble again, where- "

"No!" He and Aang yell simultaneous.

"I think not even I'm old enough to have heard any of that," he says with a shudder and turns to Suki hoping she will give him backup.

Suki just raises an eyebrow at him, fully nonplused by Toph's antics. "All I have been hearing right now, is that you got lazy... So want me to beat your ass again, later?"

"Suki..." He starts and a huge grin forms despite his neck still feeling warm. "I thought you'd never ask."

A few days later Sokka gets woken up by Zuko kissing his cheek. Zuko mumbles something about going on a trip and Sokka hums, not even cracking his eyes open.

"We are going to be back later," Zuko says softly and his fingers brush over Sokka's face.

"Have fun," Sokka tells his pillow, already drifting off again.

The next time Sokka gets woken up is with a rough kick against his bedroll. He rubs his eyes tiredly as he stares at an angry Katara looming over him.

"Your prince has kidnapped Aang!" She hisses at him.

"No, he didn't," he immediately replies before her words even catch up with his brain. Sokka frowns and sits up to take a look around.

Toph is still snoring some feet away and Suki glances at them as she digs through her bags for a change of clothes. There is no sign of Zuko, Aang and Appa.

Katara still glares at him. "This is *your* fault, he- "

"Katara, Zuko didn't kidnap Aang."

"Then where *are* they?" She ask, some restrained anger coloring her voice.

Toph groans and mumbles something annoyed as she sits up in her bedroll, now awake too. She makes some disgusting sound and then spits on the ground next to her.

"They went for some extra firebending training. Something about learning from the original source because training was going too slow for Aang and blah blah - I haven't been listening to be honest."

Katara wheels on Toph. "You *knew* about that and you still let Aang leave with him?"

Toph shrugs. "Hey- If it makes Aang master firebending any faster."

Katara grinds her jaw, trying to keep her anger to a minimum before turning to him again. "They better be back before sundown or I'm going to hunt your prince down."

Sokka doesn't respond because she wouldn't even try to hear it, if the last days are anything to go by.

Katara goes and starts sorting through her bags huffing and muttering to herself. But considering that she isn't immediately jumping to start a rescue mission... he'll take that.

Sokka stretches his arms and puts up his hair before he gets up too. Suki steps next to him with a smirk as he rolls up his bedroll.

"I think it's cute how she calls him your prince. Her words of choice for the fire nation princess weren't so... kind."

"Yeah. And I'd prefer if she would stop trying to antagonize him at all. Zuko doesn't deserve that." He grumbles.

Suki elbows him with her arm. "You two are cute..." Suki pauses before she gives him a screwed grin. "So, ready for a rematch?"

Sokka groans, thinking about all the bruises she has already giving him... and all the bruises she is going to give him.

The rest of the day passes with practiced routine - chores, training, eating together - just like Sokka was never gone at all. But when it turns afternoon with no sign from Appa in the sky, Sokka starts to feel anxious.

Zuko had said that they would be back, but he hadn't even mentioned that he and Aang planned to go somewhere. It must have been a spur of the moment thing maybe.

But right now he still has to help Suki skin some game they caught in the surrounding areas of the temple. Katara prepares vegetables for the dinner later, but not without glaring at him and going on a long rant which he is only half listening to at this point.

Toph is nowhere to be seen, already out of patience for Katara and yeah, his patience is growing thinner too.

"- and just how can you even trust him? The princess almost killed Aang when she- "

"I know what she did, Katara! She shot lightning at us too but Zuko is not his sister, he will not harm Aang, so can you please stop for once?" He snaps back at her, already so exhausted.

Katara's eyebrows rises. Her face turns murderous and it takes him a moment to realize that the anger she shows now is no longer directed at him.

"She shot lightning at *you* too?! You didn't mention any of that."

"Yeah. Because you didn't even try to let me explain anything to you," He says not without some frustration. He loves his sister so much but her stubbornness is truly infatuating.

"... Fine. So explain."

Sokka wipes his hand on his pants and turns to her. "We ran into the princess as I was leaving Ba Sing Se to look for you guys - singular - just me. Zuko didn't want to come along by the way. So great job on making him feel welcome," he adds pointed.

"She wasn't exactly happy when she realized that Aang wasn't death and she wanted... I don't know revenge or so- she attacked both of us then and Zuko hadn't exactly any choice but to leave with me."

"But..." Katara frowns.

Suki frowns too. "He didn't even want to come with you? Aren't you his soulmate?"

Sokka pauses, shrugging a bit frustrated at everything. He isn't exactly sure how much he wants to share. He will certainly not betray Zuko's trust and tell them about all the fucked up stuff that happened to him.

Sokka decides then, that he can keep it simple. So he gives the two of them only a bare minimum recounting of his time in Ba Sing Se - just about Jin, the soulmark business, his co-worker Lee, and finally figuring things out- if they have any more questions they should take it up with Zuko.

"So, there you have it. I didn't know who he was and I really never ever mentioned anything about the avatar to anyone. He couldn't have known about Aang."

"That all sounds... messed up." Suki says unhelpful. And yeah, she isn't wrong. It really was messy.

Katara is still frowning. "So he lied to you the whole time and yet you trust him? It could still be some trick- "

"Katara..." he interrupts her, sounding pleading.

Katara makes a frustrated movement then and Sokka has no idea how he could ever convince her. She sighs and a lot of different emotions flicker over her face before she looks at him.

"You ...love him?" She ask suddenly.

Sokka rubs his neck. He hadn't said that but she must have gotten it from even the minimal explanation he gave.

"I... *Yeah.*" Sokka frowns at himself. "... But not because of who he is, or what name he has- he could still be called Lee for all I care- or who he was supposed to be or that he's my soulmark but because he's... he's just Zuko, I guess."

"Damn, Snoozles," Toph says when she uses just this moment to show up again.

Suki glances at him with a bit of a pitiful look and he knows how stupid he sounds, when he says it like that.

Katara sighs again, not looking happy at his words. "I don't trust him but... I do trust you and I can try to leave off for now, *for your sake*. I just hope you are right for all of *our* sakes. But if he even shows only a sliver of a hint of deception-"

"Yeah, yeah I get it. You will freeze his ass."

Katara gives him a small smirk then and skits closer to him. Sokka opens his arms hoping she takes him up on it. She does, because then she is hugging him back. He pulls Katara as tightly against him he's able, reminding himself yet again just how glad he is that she is here, and alive and well.

Reminding himself that no matter how much they argue or butt heads they also always manage to make up again and while it's not Sokka's preferred outcome, it's at least a start.

When Aang and Zuko come back just before dinner, both speak excited about some new bending trick they have learned and Sokka can barely keep up with what they are trying to say. But wherever they had gone - by the looks of it, both found some common ground and Sokka is glad for Zuko. But then... he already knew Aang would be the easiest to crack.



They go to show off some kind of firebending dance and Sokka can't help but stare at Zuko, completely awed at his prowess. Sokka feels his cheek grow warm, because watching Zuko move so fluently - all the heat and fire flying through the air.... is certainly doing things for him.

Sokka glances around the plaza, wondering if he can sneak off with Zuko later. Getting any kind of privacy the last days had been darn impossible with Katara being so suspicious, Aang's training and all the the rest of the mundane chores between all that.

The others clap excited when the two benders finish their dance and Zuko's cheeks are all flushed as he and Aang share a grin. Sokka feels his chest swell at the sight because in this moment Zuko just looks so fucking damn happy.

Zuko catches his eyes and... the bastard winks at him. Sokka bite his lips. Yeah, getting some privacy would be really nice.

But when Sokka gets up to approach Zuko, Katara is already quicker. "You don't mind if I borrow him for a moment?" She says to him and Sokka frowns. Didn't she say she would lay off earlier?

Sokka narrows his eyes at her. "*Why?*" He ask suspicious and hurries after her. Zuko looks between them confused.

Katara turns to Zuko and smiles at him all sharp. "Let's have some honest conversation. I'm so interested in figuring out what your intentions with my brother are - maybe I can give you some advice even."

Sokka pales at that. "Don't you *dare*-" but Katara has already grabbed Zuko's elbow.

"Er- " Zuko says unhelpful as his sister starts to pull him somewhere to the other side of the plaza. Zuko sends him one last look for help over his shoulders and Sokka shrugs apologetic in his direction.

Maybe it was better when she only tried to antagonize him before?

Sokka spends the rest of the evening playing some game with Aang and Suki. When he glances to the ruined fountain, Zuko and Katara are still talking to each other and Sokka frowns at this.

But when the others are getting ready to sleep and the two are still seemingly deep in conversation, Sokka huffs before he tucks himself in too. So far nobody has murdered anyone and maybe Zuko did manage to endorse himself to his sister.

Yeah or maybe Katara is just talking him into some crazy revenge scheme against the fire nation with all the things he could know, Sokka thinks amused as he closes his eyes.

When Sokka wakes up the next morning to Aang freaking out, Zuko and Katara are already long gone.

"She just *took* Appa? Why didn't she say anything- "

"Forget about Appa. She took *Zuko!*" Sokka, says as he starts to freak out too. He gives Aang immediately a sheepish look at Aang's indignant yell. "*Sorry.*"

Aang looks unimpressed at him but Toph sits up with a groan.

"You losers truly sleep through anything, do you? They weren't exactly silent as they packed up."

Sokka stares at Toph. "What- where have they gone? What are they doing?"

"Why did they not ask to take Appa?" Aang says at the same time.

"Something, something blah blah about you not going to approve because Katara wanted looking for revenge on someone and Zuko could help her - it was a bit unclear because it was late and I just wanted to go back to sleep."

Aang grumbles something that Sokka isn't listening to, because his worry isn't quelled by any of that.

"What? *Revenge?* On *whom?* And why wouldn't Zuko wake me up to tell me-"

"Yeah Sparky was more focused on trying to prove himself to your sister, thought you would only worry needlessly-"

"Now I am absolutely going to worry and - what? - *Sparky?*" He asks exasperated.

Zuko wouldn't just... Sokka suddenly remembers how he tried to help out Sokka even when he was convinced Sokka was still so mad at him during the last night in Ba Sing Se. Yeah, no... Zuko absolutely would go along with any harebrained scheme of Katara's.

Aang is still grumbling something to Toph. Toph blows some hair out of her face and interrupts him.

"You know twinkletoes, instead of worrying about them you should worry about yourself. Because all I'm getting is that you now have two free slots in your training schedule that we are going to fill in with some extra earthbending today."

"...yes Sifu Toph." Aang grumbles some more.

Sokka stares at his friends disbelieving.

"Is no-one concerned that Zuko and Katara just went somewhere on a spontaneous trip looking for revenge on who-knows-whom without further notice?!"

Suki, who had watched everything with mild amusement turns to him. "No? But I can distract you if you want and beat that concern out of you?"

"That's sweet of you, Suki because I'm going to win this time but- seriously *no one*?"

Toph gets up and claps his back hard. "Don't worry, Sugar Queen will get you Sparky back in one piece."

"Yeah but - *Sparky*?" He asks again but still doesn't get an answer.

After Toph's over the top excessive training session, Aang plops down exhausted on the side of the temple - feet dangling in the air. Sokka thinks this moment is as good as any and he sits down, crosslegged next to Aang too.

"Hey, you got a moment?"

Aang hums affirming and looks at Sokka.

"So, I didn't really get around to talk to you with all your cool new bending tricks and Katara being, well her but... Do you know what this means. You called it a spirit mark- have you seen any before?" Sokka says and holds out his arm for Aang to take. He'd thought that he wanted Zuko to be there when he'd ask Aang - but maybe all of that are just excuses and he had waited until he and Aang got a moment alone - in case Aang tells him something he doesn't want to hear.

Aang carefully touches his wrist, looking wistful. "Yeah. Two of the monks had one before, they explained it to me once. I heard you call them soulmarks now? I think it's a bit of a misnomer. It's only showing that there exists a spiritual connection between two individuals, nothing else."

Sokka hums and licks his lips, strange anticipation humming through him. "Yeah I get that, but what does this mean exactly?"

Aang tilts his head and seems to be thinking about it for a moment. "There is... energy flowing within every living being. This only means that between you and Zuko the energy flow got connected."

"By the spirits, right? So... could it be broken again by them? Or... could *you* break it even? You are the avatar," he asks curiously, letting his mind be carefully blank.

"Can I?" Aang asks and when Sokka nods and he skits closer. Aang places his finger pads on Sokka's forehead - Sokka thinks to remember that Aang once said something about chakra

points being located there or so. Sokka swallows nervously - he trusts Aang - but he doesn't want anything between Zuko and him become messed up by accident.

Aang must be sensing something going by his expression alone and he pulls his hand away.

"The sprits most likely - I don't know if I could. Maybe? But I wouldn't want to mess with that. You know that regular bending comes from within our self because it's connected to the benders energy flow? I guess, only theoretically, I could try to bend the energy like any of the elements, trying to sever that connection but I'm not going to experiment on either of you. Worst case I corrupt or destroy your spirit."

Sokka frowns. What Aang says makes sense but... he still really, really doesn't like any of this spiritual mumbo-jumbo stuff.

"Oh- Wait! Regular bending you say? If Zuko and my... er *energy flow* are connected, and the bending comes from that too - could I learn firebending then? Or could Zuko give me his bending or could he- "

Sokka's mind is already stumbling over all the implications but Aang glints at him. "No, I don't think so. I mean, give it a try if you like."

Sokka cracks a smile and holds his palm out. "How's *that*?"

Aang snorts, making a ridiculous sound when nothing happens but he grows serious again. "I can't imagine you could just use someone else's bending without some kind of... *force* - it's such a essential part of who we are and...what I sensed just now just felt like... you. Maybe think about it more like a bridge between you guys - you and Zuko are still individuals after all."

Sokka frowns as he digest all the new information. He's still trying to keep a lid on his emotions, wanting to hear really anything before he can parse out how he's gonna feel about it.

Aang has turned away from Sokka and both end up watching a blindfolded Suki train with Toph, who's giving her instructions on the other side of the plaza for a moment.

"Maybe you will have some greater affinity or appreciation for fire now but you are not suddenly a firebender. Was that what got you so worried?" Aang ask lighthearted and turns back to Sokka.

Sokka blinks, his mind jumping in another completely irrelevant direction at that. He laughs nervously before he focuses back on the topic.

"Nah. I am more worried that...whatever is between me and Zuko there isn't..." Sokka frowns, not sure how to formulate his muddled thoughts on the question that's been bothering him all this time.

Aang hums and he seems to understand what Sokka can't manage to ask. "Like I said. Soulmate is a bit of a misnomer. People just assume things they want to be true, without

questioning the spiritual component of the concept. You may share a connection now, but what you do with that is up to you."

Sokka takes a careful measured breath. "Okay. Fine, *good* even, but- why me? Why him? That's what I'm not getting. Why go through all this if it doesn't even mean anything of significance."

Sokka can hear Suki and Toph giggle in the background.

Aang shrugs. "Who knows what the spirits had in mind when they gave you your marks- Did anything specific happen when you both got them?" Aang ask with genuine curiosity.

"No? I mean, I got it on the same day we were separated. Zuko got his already some years ago - he almost visited the south-pole and he thinks it was when he was supposed to met me - must have been around the time we would have found you in the iceberg if you can believe it. He just never went and then he got his mark instead."

Aang makes a contemplating face. Sokka watches him with rapid attention. "What?"

"I'm not sure if it could be related," Aang starts carefully. "But you remember that I spoke to avatar Roku and what he told me?"

"Yeah?"

"How the rightful movement of the stars was stalled by the spirits and how that changed somewhere when I.. when I almost died?"

"Yeah. And?" Sokka doesn't like one bit where this is going now.

"Nothing. Just... that Roku had mentioned that it started around the time when I woke up from the iceberg. I thought it had something to do with me and that I disrupted something because I was gone for so long. Funny coincidence right? Might still not have something to do with me- "

"Everything has to do with you," Sokka breaths out and he can even distantly remember how he first assumed it was all about Aang back when he didn't know that Lee and Zuko where the literal same person. "What? You are not seriously suggesting that Zuko should have gone to the south pole to - to met you, but he didn't and the whole spirit world pulled an overnigher to stop the movement of the stars and gave him his mark as... as what? That's not even making *sense!*"

Aang holds up his hands. "Hey, I'm not suggesting anything. I don't know what the spirits intended."

Sokka pulls his hand down his face and stares at the other side of the canyon for a moment.

"This is so stupid."

"What? I'm seriously not suggesting anything."

"No. But I don't like how likely that sounds. Come on Aang. The stars start moving just again around the same time that I got that damn thing on my wrist? That's a bit too much coincident for my liking. And just for what- that you get the firebending teacher you were supposed to get and with enough time so the fire lord will not use the comet to burn down the world before you are ready to face him? That's preposterous!"

It sounds so ridiculous when framed like that.

Aang frowns and makes some funny expression. "Well, Remember the swamp?"

"What has that to do with anything?" he asks exasperated.

"I had a vision from Toph- you remember right? How she was always supposed to be my earthbending teacher? Maybe Zuko was in fact always meant to be my firebending teacher as well. Wouldn't just be the first time that some spirits intervene is all that I'm saying."

Sokka huffs, getting annoyed. "Yeah but why go through any of that trouble? Why not find another teacher? I mean there was almost zero chance that Zuko would have even left Ba Sing Se if not..." Sokka trails off and he frowns again.

Yeah- Without Sokka, Zuko would have never left Ba Sing Se and he would have never met Aang, wouldn't he?

But then on the flip side... If Zuko did all the things he was supposed to do - if any of this can even be believed - and he never decided to stop looking for Aang- he would have met them all these years ago. What else would have been different then? He wouldn't have gotten a mark... But also, if Zuko hadn't given up, he would have been their enemy then right?

Sokka tries to imagine it for a moment - Zuko as the fire nation prince hunting down Aang. Would they have left immediately on their journey to escape him then? Going north to the northern water tribe with Zuko hot on their tails... and then what? How should he even become Aang's teacher under these circumstances?

No. Sokka can't see it at all. Zuko is not this person he just envisioned at all.

Sokka huffs.

"I just don't see it. But you know what? Who cares what the spirits intended - how things were supposed to be or how they are. If you tell me things between Zuko and me are on our own and the rest of spirit stuff has something to do with you, then that's good enough for me. Because your spirits still suck ass."

Aang just snorts good humorously. "Yeah who cares, right? We are all back together and that's what counts."

Sokka tentatively smiles back at Aang - he still is unsure how he should feel about all this and he doesn't like being played like some Pai Sho tile, but Sokka is still pragmatic at heart. If the end result from everything is that Aang can defeat the fire Lord - who Sokka now has a huge grudge against on a more personal level - he can make an exception.

"Are you okay?" Aang asks serious even if he still grins at him.

And...

"Yes... I guess, yeah. I am," Sokka says and he suddenly feels just so relieved - surprisingly almost a bit disappointed - but mostly relieved. Because even if Aang isn't sure of everything - all this only means that everything between him and Zuko wasn't just another lie.

Sokka claps Aang's back.

"Thanks for the talk, buddy."

Aang flashes him a broad smile.

When the sun starts to set and there is no sign from Appa, Sokka starts to truly worry. Suki and Toph try to distract him but it's no use. Aang keeps glancing at the sky and eventually Sokka gets up, truly annoyed.

"Not gonna disappear for a day or two too?" Toph teases him and he scowls at her.

"I'm just going to look if I can spot them from the other side of the temple- I'm right back," he snaps at her before stomping down towards the corridor they went through days ago.

He walks for a while - turns a few corners, barely noticing where he goes-

Just what the fuck was Katara even thinking?

Sokka stops walking to card his fingers through his hair and curses.

He wants to be so mad at her. He also wants to be mad at Zuko for letting himself get roped into anything by her. Zuko had done the same yesterday with Aang - and then he'd even looked so stupidly happy at the end of it.

Sokka should feel glad that the others so readily choose to adopt Zuko into their group - not accounting Katara, but even that seems to have suddenly changed - and Zuko just lets himself get carried away by everything and he seems to be so unusual happy...

It makes Sokka feel a bit inadequate, like he's just suddenly not enough anymore and.... It's stupid. He *is* glad for Zuko, of course.

They are not the only people in the world and Sokka huffs frustrated. It's just that when they were together in Ba Sing Se, it had just felt exactly like they were. But now that the comet isn't so far off... What happens after? After Aang wins the war? Because... Zuko is still the prince isn't he? That didn't change when he became exiled, or did it?

But where leaves this Sokka?

Sokka really misses Zuko in this moment and feels pathetic for it. It's been only two days. But it's been two days, when they spend almost every single day together, all those long months before and Sokka really, really just wants to talk to Zuko about all it all.

Sokka sighs and leans against the wall looking for a long moment forward to the end of the corridor where the other plaza lays behind - he hadn't even noticed how far he went.

It's good that Sokka got his answers now but he wishes Zuko was here this moment, because he really wants to hear his input - not that Zuko would care about any of that stuff like Sokka - but it would still be nice to talk to him.

About all this spirit stuff - the meaning of the marks - Aang...

Sokka flushes when he suddenly remembers what else Aang had mentioned.

Does he have some... affinity for fire now, he wonders?

Despite his earlier skepticism about it, he can say that Zuko's bending is really mesmerizing to him. And it's not like he didn't know how much he liked Zuko running so hot all the time and-

When Zuko had told him about his bending before... what was *that* anyway?

Sokka feels his cheeks heat, remembering Zuko's intense gaze on him from back then. He'd chalked it up sleep deprivation and both being exhausted. But when he thinks about it now, together with everything else that happened...

It's because it's more fresh in his mind but Sokka immediately thinks back to the events from yesterday - the way Zuko had danced with Aang - his fire looking like it was nothing but an extension of Zuko's unextinguishable flame - burning with all the intensity and the heat and-

... Yeah.

Sokka takes a look around but he's still only on his own so he stuffs his hands down the front of his pants without thinking twice about it.

Sokka wouldn't have called any of that affinity for Zuko's firebending but it doesn't take away that he suddenly feels like some animal in heat right now - pun very much intended.

And how long has it been since he and Zuko did anything of that nature anyway?

Sokka breaths through his nose, remembering that too, before he pulls himself out of the tight constrains of his pants.

He really wished Zuko was here right now. Would he look at Sokka the same way again as he did before? How he'd focused on Sokka and the way... the way his hand felt so hot against Sokka's arm - right after he had held literal fire in his palm.



And before all that - even before Sokka knew what Zuko was capable of... He still had always felt so searingly hot against Sokka's skin anyway.

Sokka bites his lips trying to imagine it right now. All the places Zuko had touched him before - for a moment Sokka pretends it's Zuko's hand stroking him and not just his own.

Would it make a difference now that Sokka knows just why Zuko had felt like that? He tries to imagine that too - how would it feel - all the scorching skin of Zuko against him, fully aware what he is - what he can do?

And what about all the *other* places Zuko could touch him right now with the burning hot fingers of his and -

The orgasm that suddenly washes over him takes Sokka fully by surprise - intense and overwhelming by how quick he got himself there - making him spill hot all over his hand.

Sokka takes a moment to get his breathing back under control and he huffs at himself.

Yeah, It's has been way too long since he got Zuko all to himself.

When he gets back - there was no sign of Appa from the other side of the temple - Katara and Zuko have already returned from their trip.

Zuko looks at him sheepish when he spots Sokka. Katara goes and throws her arms around him, giving him a hug. She then starts some weird tale how the two started to talk it out and it ended up with spontaneously looking for their mother's killer and how she couldn't dish out any kind of revenge but she and Zuko have come to an understanding and Sokka can just feel his brain short circuit at the deranged input.

Aang gapes at her like an elephant koi fish.

"You know what?" Sokka says, his voice pitching high after Katara is done with her explanation. "I don't even care. But maybe next time don't just leave without an explanation just you can get some great *bonding moments*."

He turns to Zuko and flicks his fingers at Zuko's forehead. "I'll never ever want to hear another complain that you worry about me when you do stuff like that, *you ass*."

"I'm sorry, I didn't- "

"- think this through? Yeah, I get that," Sokka huffs again.

"I'm *sorry*." Zuko says, managing to look truly remorseful.

Sokka glares at him and Katara for another moment. "It's fine. It's done. Just glad that you and Katara are both back. But please don't do that again."

Zuko nods over-eager and Sokka has a hard time to be really mad - he is just glad that both are safely back again. Aang starts a philosophical debate about revenge and forgiveness with Katara and Sokka can see Zuko frown at them, clearly interested in that discussion.

"Hey Snoozels. Can Suki and me borrow your boyfriend tomorrow?" Toph ask, when both girls join them next to Appa.

"Why? What do you need?" Zuko says curious and Sokka immediately grabs his elbow to hold onto him. He should be so happy that Zuko seems to become a full-fledged member of the Gaang in such a short amount of time but...

"No! Can I just have like- five minutes alone with you because I haven't really spent any time with you recently and I really need to talk to you," Sokka pauses before turning to Toph. "Just get your own boyfriend."

Suki gives him a confused look. "Don't you know that- " Toph waves her off and blows some hair out of her face.

"You had him all to yourself for months. You're pining ass can survive another day - or five - without him."

Zuko gives him a soft look then even as he tries to stop himself from laughing at the exasperated face Sokka must be making.

Sokka is still holding onto Zuko's arm tightly before he addresses everyone. "No! No more spontaneous trips- and seriously? How can you all not see how dangerous that was? The fire nation is still aware that Aang is alive - they are still looking for him right now and a big flying bison is really obvious hint on where we are - Do you want to give our location away that bad, because- "

There is a loud deafening sound, interrupting his words. The whole temple starts to tremble with it. Sokka sees Katara and Aang blink confused. Zuko cranks his head.

It takes another earth shaken rumbling until everyone suddenly seems to understand what is happening now.

Yeah. It was only about time before the fire nation would find them here wasn't it? Sokka even knew that the lightning princess wouldn't give up that easily.

Everyone scrambles to grab things in a hurry, a flurry of motion - starting to make their getaway and for a tiny sarcastic moment Sokka think he should have just kept his mouth shut for once.

## Chapter End Notes

Sokka and Katara: \*glare at each other\*

Zuko: don't drag me into this

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Aaaaaah, maybe not my most favorite chapter because this, the last and the next one are all one big convoluted chunk, making it so hard to decide where certain scenes should be placed, I had to rearranged everything multiple times and it's driving me soooo barmy 🤪 and then the chapter kept getting longer and longer so I decided to push Sokka and Zuko's talk into the next part 🤔👁️🤔 so, sorry for the lack of Zuko right now.

Zuko has having the time of his life in the background - he had such a huge mental block leaving Ba Sing Se is but now that he met Aang and he can firebend and everyone knows who he is and he doesn't have to lie about that and the others (not counting Katara at first) are giving him a chance - Zuko is so ready to let himself be dragged into any crazy Gaang adventures at the detriment of Sokka.

Sokka can pine a bit instead.

Haha and Toph is just a menace.

Sooooo- lots of information here, but i don't think any of that should have come as a surprised anymore, or did it? . Oh and don't mind me casually introducing spirit bending like that. I like the lion turtle from canon just fine but Sokka - as the plan's guy low-key pitching an idea for Aang to figure out works so much better in this setting.

(and way too much things in here that were never planned 🤪)

I just realized I should have given Katara the whole boiling rock plot, would have made some things easier for me in hindsight, but oh well. Would even have been easier if I didn't scrape it at all but I just diiiiiidn't want to write it, I'm too lazy for that.

Also, not gonna re-write the Azula scene from the show at the end of the chapter, re-watch for all I care 😊

Sooooo, next time lots of Zuko & Sokka moments to make up for the lack in this updated and then all the getting ready for the big final. I'm already so ✨hyped✨ for what else it will take to wrap everything up 😊

# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

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

Sokka had always loved the ocean - the sound of the waves against the ice, the salt in the cold air, the calmness of the sea as well as the unpredictability of it all.

The waves wash over the beach in a fluent steady motion right now, pushing and pulling on the water before the ocean turns into an endless block of darkness in the distance. Sokka's naked toes curl in the warm sand under him while the chills of the nightly air is kissing his arms - it's still warm enough that he doesn't need another layer - and everything about this just reminds him how far from home he really is.

"Are you angry at me?" Zuko ask him with a small voice. He's been sitting next to Sokka silently for a while now, probably done waiting for Sokka to start talking to him.

Sokka frowns at this. Should he be angry? He isn't even sure what he feels at the moment. All this back and forth recently - Ba Sing Se, when Zuko was still only Lee - the princess, finding his friends alive and well, the few days at the western air temple - his talk with Aang. It feels like weeks have past but everything happened in such a quick succession that Sokka got serious whiplash from all the events. There just wasn't a lot of time to process any of that, wasn't there?

Sokka hums and digs his fingers into the sand. "No? Why should I be angry at you?" He ask genuinely confused.

"I just... feel like you were avoiding me all day."

Sokka glances at Zuko. He has his arms tucked under his knees, like he wants to make himself smaller and Sokka gives him a reassuring smile. Zuko tentatively smiles back.

"Nah, just feeling a bit overwhelmed, need to sort out my head I guess- you don't have to stay up with me if you'd rather go to bed too."

It's been a while since the others left them sitting there, everyone tired from the last days but Sokka had wanted to stay for a moment longer and Zuko had just wordlessly joined him.

Zuko hums but he still doesn't get up. "I am sorry. I know it was stupid and unnecessary and I didn't even think when I left with your sister. You were right about the rest too yesterday- and we haven't gotten a lot of time together but- "

"It's *fine*. I'm not angry at you... I mean we can't just spend every second with each other," he interrupts Zuko and gives him another glance. Sokka just feels so stupidly needy when Zuko says it like that.

"Yes but... I like spending time with you," Zuko says quietly.

Sokka sighs and turns back to the water. It's high tide now. "Yeah me too, but I'm not complaining just because there are other things that are more important right now - like Aang learning fire bending. I'm really not angry."

"Then what's bothering you so?"

Sokka doesn't answer at first, not sure how to phrase his words. Just what is bothering him exactly right now? They surprisingly managed to get away unharmed from the princess, everyone is still together and they have found a (hopeful) great hideout when Zuko suggested the old inhabited house on ember island. That's all good but then...

He turns to look at Zuko, who's already watching him with his full attention. Sokka sighs. "What's going to happen after everything?"

"After what?"

"After Aang *wins*. After we can end the war - and I'm not entertaining any other possibility right now but... what are we going to do then? Were will we go? And what happens to the fire nation? ...Who's gonna be the next fire lord?" Sokka swallows, not really wanting to voice this question and he turns to look back into the dark distance before he carries on with his words. "There has to be someone, right? But who will it be? Your sister? Uncle? *You?* - or is there someone I don't know about? You must have ask yourself that question at one point too, right?"

"I- " Zuko stops himself and Sokka knows exactly what expression he must make even if Sokka doesn't look at him.

The sound of the waves feels so loud in Sokka's ears, contrasting Zuko's soft rasp when he eventually answers. Sokka still hears him way too clearly.

"I... don't *know*. I'm not sure if Azula is a real choice any longer but I... I was in exile for so long. I didn't think I would ever go back."

"So it's gonna be uncle then?"

Zuko makes a frustrated sound and Sokka turns his head to look back at him.

"Just what brought that on?" Zuko asks.

Sokka cards his fingers through his hair, not caring that he's getting sand in it when he does so.

"Before... it was just you and me and the tea shop where it felt like the rest of the world didn't exist - but that's no longer the case. But we really need to talk about this if there is any real

possibility that you... Zuko- what's going to *happen* to us?" Sokka ask bluntly because he really needs to know the answer to that.

Zuko draws an unhappy face then.

"... if we are talking about the scenario were Aang does win - then realistically- I guess uncle could step in for a while, but even then there has to come someone after him and eventually..." Zuko doesn't need to say it out loud because Sokka knows it too.

"Okay," Sokka says with a small voice, not liking any of this even one bit. "But that doesn't answer my other question."

Zuko skits closer just so he can lean his head against Sokka's shoulder and he takes a big breath. Sokka feels warm at the contact.

"What did you think you would do after everything?" Zuko asks.

"I'm not sure- I thought I could go home for a while, maybe keep traveling. I don't know. I never wanted to think about it because it seemed so impossible that the war could really end one day but... that still not an answer- What about us?"

Zuko hums and Sokka can feel the sound as much as he hears it reverberate through the contact on his shoulder.

"And what would you do if any of this was not a concern?" Zuko ask instead.

"You mean when you not most likely end up stuck as the *freaking fire lord*?" He ask bitter and with some real frustration - in no realm of any possibility did Sokka see himself confronted with this situation. *Ever*.

"...yeah *that*. But if this wouldn't matter - if we could do anything right now - what would we do?"

"Really?" Sokka huffs, but he's already thinking about it. Zuko removes his head and turns to look fully at Sokka intently.

Sokka feels his mouth twitch. "We would go grocery shopping."

Sokka snorts at the flabbergast expression Zuko makes.

"What? *Groceries*? Why groceries?"

"No forget that- It's stupid... It's just the last thing we did in Ba Sing Se. But if we could do anything, I would want that boring ass life back. Going to work, playing Pai Sho with your uncle, hanging out with our friends, maybe you could introduce me to some fancy fire nation dishes that are way to spicy for me. Or I don't know," Sokka pauses and then he frowns. "This really does sounds boring- "

Zuko gives him such an unusual soft look that Sokka momentarily stumbles over his thoughts, making him forget what else he wanted to say.

"We could do all that regardless of where we are going to be, even if I should go back to the fire nation and you come with me... I could never ask this of you, of course," Zuko says and then he glides his hand down Sokka's arm, squeezing his wrist before entwining their fingers together. Sokka just sighs frustrated.

"But we can also travel, or visit to the south pole - the fire nation be *damned* if you prefer that. Or we can go back to Ba Sing Se like we never left if you want. I'm sure uncle will figure something out when we leave him no other choice - just as long as we can stay together," Zuko says with an earnest expression like he believes it all and Sokka scoffs.

Sokka knows that Zuko wouldn't just do that. He is too honorable for any of that - no matter what he says on that topic. But it's still a nice sentiment.

Sokka pulls his face into a grimace, not ready to burst that bubble yet.

"Let's *please* stop pretending and be honest. You *are* going to be the next fire lord. And even if I do tag along... don't you think- What would I even *do*? You'd be running a nation, where the only thing I know about is, how good at war it is. And won't people mind? If I am sticking around, people surely will talk about me negatively and that would affect you too... And it's not like I could have any *use* to you- I couldn't even give you an heir and I'm pretty sure that's going to be expected of you at one point- and I am a foreigner on top of it all and I literally know nothing about the fire nation except how much it sucks to even consider- "

"You are *overthinking* this." Zuko interrupts him.

Sokka takes a big shaky breath, keeping a lid on his spiraling thoughts. He really didn't think he'd even be confronted with that situation and it feels terrifying.

"I already said I'm not going to ask this of you. But you have to know... no matter what's going to happen, I wouldn't let anything come between us as long as that's what you want too... and should it really come to it - It may not be worth much right now but It's still my name on you, would be the name of the... the fire lord on you then- and the spirits have given us their blessing with this - nobody would ever be able to dispute that. This means something."

Zuko squeezes his hand. Sokka squeezes back hard.

He knows Zuko's views differ from his own. And while Sokka struggled with his mark so much but somehow Zuko's words make it all sound so simple.

"But does it? *Mean* something? I spoke with Aang - and sorry for not waiting for you to be there but..." Sokka stops not sure how he should go about this - how will Zuko even take this?

"... What did he say?" Zuko asks when Sokka doesn't go on.

"Mostly lots of boring spiritual whatever. Aang wasn't even sure about everything but... it's totally all about him and not about us anyway. Something about needing a fire bending teacher and how it had to be you, and how I was supposed to bring you all along."

"Okay- and why does that mean it's not *also* about us?" Zuko asks with some raised eyebrows. Sokka gives him half a glare.

"Because it just *isn't*. There is some spiritual connection between us, but that's all. Something about energy similar like bending - you better ask Aang about that - I would only explain it wrong but that doesn't matter because it still is only about Aang needing a teacher because apparently you fucked up the cosmic order of things so bad when you-

"Hey!" Zuko frowns. "Wait... I-what?"

Sokka just waves him off. "Doesn't matter. What's more important is that I was right! The spirit's can't decide shit for us and- "

Zuko blinks confused. "I don't think I understand... We still have the blessing the... this connection right? How can that *not* matter?"

Sokka huffs frustrated but continues to work himself into a rant - all the things that had kept dancing around in his head the last days finally getting voiced.

"No, don't you *get* it? Just stop interpreting things how they are convenient for you. What's more important is that I was right! I fucking called it! And if we are going to be *really* honest with everything here, then it's not just some spiritual nonsense making me so *insane* to even *consider* that I'd rather face a whole nation of jerks that sucks balls so bad then to leave you when we both know I couldn't do that- "

Zuko blinks at him with a stupefied expression but Sokka doesn't pay him any mind anymore.

" - and it's absolutely *terrifying* to realize I feel this strongly about you without some spirit making me feel this way. That everything I feel for you is all- "

"I love you."

"Exactly, that's just what I'm saying! That I love you has nothing to do with any spirits. And that's not even the point. The point is, that I was right and realizing how I... " Sokka trails off as Zuko's words register.

"...*What* did you just say?"

"You love me?" Zuko asks softly at the same time with an unreadable expression and a bit slack jawed as they stare at each other for a moment.

"...I- *yeah*. I thought that was obvious," Sokka says to him with a helpless shrug and Zuko lets out a tiny disbelieving laugh and there is just something so disarming about it.

Zuko stares at him for a moment longer before he lets go of Sokka's hands just so he can cradle Sokka's face.

He leans forward and kisses Sokka with so much care and affection and Sokka is helpless to do anything else other than to just melt against him.



Sokka pulls him closer - his fingers tangling in Zuko's hair. Zuko shifts his weight until Sokka finds himself pressed down on the sand and they continue to kiss unhurriedly and sensual like they hadn't had the time for in a while.

"Say it again," Sokka mumbles as he kisses Zuko's scared cheek.

"I love you," Zuko kisses into Sokka's skin, more words alongside Sokka's jaw - sweet kisses to his neck.

His hand finds placement somewhere on Sokka's hips, thumb stroking skin that peaks out from under clothes. Sokka gasps into the chilly night air as he can't help himself but babble more sentimental non-sense back, hands wrapping around Zuko - trying to pull him closer still.

Zuko's teeth scrap Sokka's skin and Sokka involuntary grinds his hips against him in response. Zuko makes a sound in the back of his throat at this.

"You know- " Sokka starts with another gasp and he turns his head, baring his neck - just so Zuko doesn't stop nipping at the skin there.

" -not that I'm complaining right now- but if we do it here, there's going to be sand literal *everywhere* and - "

Zuko makes some weird choking sound then and it takes Sokka a few seconds to realize that he started laughing into the crook of Sokka's neck, his body shaking with it.

"Hey- it's not that funny."

Zuko moves to sit back up, bracketing Sokka's tights but he is still laughing slightly and Sokka is already missing Zuko's mouth on his skin - just why did he have to say anything at all? Sokka pops himself up on his elbows.

"Sorry, I know... You are just so ridiculous sometimes." Zuko says with a fond grin.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sokka ask back disbelieving. What just happened?

"You seriously picked *this* moment to start complaining when you were never exactly choosy before?"

"I said I wasn't complaining and what do you mean I'm not *choosy* - I do have some standards, you know?" Sokka ask exasperated and Zuko laughs again.

"...Standards? *You*? Do I need to remind you that you once got me off in a backstreet alley next to a pile of trash bags."

"- hey, if your mind was focusing on that, then I wasn't doing it right," Sokka shots back and Zuko snorts. Why are they still talking when they could be doing literal anything else but talk?

"Are you actively *trying* to ruin the mood right now or what?" Zuko ask then. But he is still grinning at Sokka playfully, not yet bothered by the interruption - looking flushed and so happy in the moment... Sokka is sure he will be able to deal with some minor inconvenience for him.

"Just forget what I said and come back here- I swear I'm going to hold my tongue for now... and speaking about my tongue anyway..."

"*Really?* I think that might be the worst you said to me yet," Zuko groans but he's already moving into the position they where in moments earlier, pressing himself back against Sokka.

Sokka escapes a laugh and he grabs Zuko's neck so he can pull him close to his face again.

"Oh, we both know that you love my stupid lines," he says and Zuko crinkles his eyes at him.

"Yes, I guess I do," he mumbles against Sokka's lips before he kisses Sokka properly.

"Look what we found!" Aang yells excited and really loud, as he comes running into the courtyard with Katara on his heels and Sokka startles at the unexpected interruption, letting the sword he was practicing with drop with a curse.

Sokka wheels in the direction of Aang and Zuko flicks his hands at the back of his head.

"*Ouch*- Hey what was that for?" Sokka ask as he turns back to Zuko with a glare.

"You'd be death now- once again," Zuko says in a bored voice and Sokka stares at him unamused.

"And maybe your teaching just sucks?" Sokka says and he wipes some sweat from his brow before he turns to Aang. Zuko hums and picks up the fallen sword but doesn't say anything to that.

Aang pats Sokka's back. "Be glad he's just teaching you swords and is not throwing fire at you relentlessly all day."

"Oh I *wish*. Because it looks like you two are having more fun with that."

Zuko shifts his weight and sighs. "...What? It's not supposed to be any fun. It just looks easier because Aang is getting better at fire bending."

"Maybe your teaching *does* suck then, because better is still *not good enough* to defeat the fire lord," Katara crosses her arms as she joins the conversation and stares at Zuko hard. Sokka shakes his head at her - while Katara and Zuko have some kind of weird understanding now, she still can't help herself in aggravating Zuko.

"*Fine!* He is getting *really* good - does that sound *better?*" Zuko snaps back at her.

Well... It's not even been two full weeks - Sokka is sure they can't be like this forever, can they?

"*Aww*, Thanks sifu," Aang beams at him.

"Soooo, does that mean I'm getting really good too?" Sokka bumps his shoulder teasingly into Zuko's.

Zuko glances at him unimpressed. "...let's not get ahead of yourself."

Sokka mumbles something to that and Katara snicker.

"I think Sokka is improving at a really good rate with the sword," Suki says encouraging from the sides, where she and Toph were watching them train.

"*Thanks*. At least someone believes that I'm not completely hopeless at this," Sokka says as he grins back at her.

"I never said you were *hopeless* - you are clearly getting better," Zuko starts with a frown in Suki's direction.

"Maybe then you shouldn't have told Snoozles five minutes ago - and I quote you there '*even a five-year old is able to do that stance, it's not that hard, are you actively trying to be bad at this?*'," Toph adds unhelpful with a self satisfied grin from next to Suki.

Suki and Katara laugh at Toph's words.

"That was meant to be *encouraging!*" Zuko snaps at Toph and Sokka starts to laugh too.

He goes and pats Zuko's back before leaning closer, whispering to him. "As much as I love you, but I gotta be honest - your teaching-style is kind of... awful."

Zuko glares at him, which is a bit dampened by the still soft expression at the rest of Sokka's words.

Aang clears his throat. "So does really nobody want to know what we found?"

"Fine- what have you found?"

"Here! Look at *this!*" Aang says excitedly and pulls some paper out, showing off some... Is that a theater poster? Sokka blinks as he stares at it, not sure what exactly he is looking at. Nobody else says anything - equally confused as him.

"*This looks amazing!*" Toph says thrilled after a few seconds of silence.

"Right? It truly does- *Hey!*"

"... Just what are we looking at?" Sokka ask with a frown ignoring Toph.

The poster shows someone who looks like Aang and- is that supposed to be the rest of them? It's clearly not a wanted poster or it would be designed differently. There is something written as well but since they technically are currently hiding in fire nation territory - nobody of them can read the signs. Well, nobody except Zuko.

Maybe Sokka should have ask Zuko to teach him to read instead of sword-fighting.

"We overheard some kids talking. It's a play about us!"

"Why would- " Sokka starts but Aang interrupts him, still excited.

"We should totally go and watch this! The next performance should be starting soon, so if we hurry we can still make it!"

"*Absolutely not!* We really need to keep a low profile. Did nobody even listen to anything I said about this topic?"

Zuko takes the poster from Aang. "Yeah and you don't want to see this. *Trust me.* It's produced by the ember island players - they butcher anything they do anyway," he says with a frown.

Suki and Toph step next to them and Suki takes the poster from Zuko to look at it. "Could still be fun. And don't worry - we just go in disguise."

Aang nods in agreement and they start to discuss what could be shown if it's really about them.

Sokka grinds his teeth because he already knows it's a lost cause - very much to his chagrin - so he turns to Zuko. "I thought you like plays?"

"Sure, but this is not going be fun, it's just propaganda- I'd rather... *not* watch this," he says a bit uncomfortable.

Sokka glances at the others still talking excited among themselves. "So, are we both going to say here?"

"No, you can go if you want."

Sokka hums. "It's fine. If you say it's going to be bad I don't want to see it anyway. Maybe you can show me some fire nation play that passes your snobbish tastes sometimes in the future instead."

Zuko frowns at him. They haven't breached the topic again - mostly because Sokka really tries to not think about it at all but Zuko gets what he is implying now and he smiles strained.

"So you are not coming with us?" Aang ask then.

"Nah. In case anything goes wrong we can have Appa ready for a quick getaway. You guys have fun with your *propaganda* - Zuko and me are going to raid this place instead. I bet ya, I can find another cute baby picture of Zuko."

"How often should I tell you that was my father," Zuko says exasperated.

"And I still *refuse* to believe that," Sokka answers with a shudder.

"You really don't want to come? You two are *boring*," Aang says but he doesn't sound that disappointed, already trying to drag Katara off so that they can make it still in time.

Toph snorts. "Oh, I bet they will have plenty of fun without us."

"*Ew*. Toph, don't be *gross*," Katara says with some disgust as she hurries after Aang.

Sokka drags his hand down his face with a groan and Zuko makes the uncomfortable pinched expression he always makes at Toph's completely unnecessary comments. Can they just please not be like this?

Suki laughs at them. "It's so much funnier when I'm no longer on the receiving end of this."

Zuko raises an eyebrow questioning.

Sokka glares at her. "Hey! Be cool Suki - I'm also pretty sure Toph would beat us up if we'd tried to do the same."

"You can certainly *try*, but I bet you nothing you could say would-" Toph starts but Sokka makes a shooing motion at Suki.

"Aren't going to be late?"

"*Right!* See you later!" Suki says and grabs Toph's hand to hurry after Aang and Katara before Toph can say anything to make it worse.

Sokka turns to Zuko with a grin when they are left alone in the courtyard.

"You *really* want to search for more boring pictures?" Zuko asks with a frown.

"You should know me better than that."

Zuko hums.

"So what's that between you and Suki?" Zuko asks as he pulls his tunic off.

"You are asking that right *now*?" Sokka asks bewildered and throws his shoe somewhere to the sides before he frowns at himself. "Didn't I tell you? Well, technically she is my ex but we weren't really together - just having some fun, you know? And... I really didn't say anything to you?"

"No you didn't. But you are right - really wrong moment."

"It's fine. So, what about *you*?"

Zuko, who was just about to pull down his pants, stops the motion and looks at Sokka confused. "What? Are you asking about me and... *Suki*?"

Sokka snorts as he fumbles with his waistband. "Obviously not but - I never ask before because it doesn't really matter but since you ask first, fair is fair. So I was wondering, Jin once said you never dated anyone but you aren't inexperienced- Any exes I should know about?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Zuko says with a smirk and Sokka shoves his shoulder playfully.

"*Jerk*," he says, but still making it sound endearing.

Zuko plops himself down on their bedroll they dragged into the small sitting room next to the main hall - the rest of the house is in such desolate condition that the group sleeps piled together there - which Sokka kinda appreciates because it still doesn't feel *real* that they are all *alive* - but it also means he's not going to pass up on getting any time alone with Zuko.

Sokka sits down next to him.

"There was someone... It was nothing serious and eventual he figured out that we - uncle and me - are fire-benders and he tried to sell us out to the Dai Li. There was no proof for that and he was arrested. I haven't seen him since..." Zuko trails off and frowns.

"This reminds me- I forgot that I had wanted to ask you when we talked about everything else - how *did* you realize? I thought I was always so careful before. Just what gave it away - only... the eclipse? It came really out of nowhere that you suddenly knew everything."

Sokka frowns too. He had thought that they talked about everything from before, but clearly not.

"Surprisingly your uncle. There were so many small things I found odd about you, but he said something during Pai Sho that had nothing to do with any of that and it still put everything into a different perspective for me."

Zuko hums again.

"Makes sense I guess... uncle's speciality is making you see things from a different perspective."

"I thought your uncle's speciality was tea?"

Zuko glances at him unimpressed.

"Sorry, sorry," Sokka laughs. "But you are right, your uncle certainly has a way to- "

"Do we really have to talk about my uncle right now?"

Sokka turns to look at Zuko sitting there, still only half undressed and he grins at him.

"Sure, but *you* started with the conversation - *I* had something entirely else for us to pass the time in mind," he says and moves just so he can pull off his pants and throws them in the direction of his shoes.

Zuko blinks and then his gaze turns more heated as he looks at Sokka appreciatingly.

"*Oh*, I think I know *exactly* what's on your mind," Zuko says and then he skims out of his pants - undressing all the way too, before he crowds Sokka's space.

Sokka licks his lips in anticipation. "*Yeah?* You're gonna tell me? Gonna tell me how you want me right now too, when you're at it?" He asks challenging in a low voice, his hands coming to rest on Zuko's shoulders.

Zuko hums, before he pauses to look at Sokka for a moment longer, contemplating.

"Can I... try something?"

Sokka nods curiously. "Go on."

Zuko rubs the fingers on his left hand together and Sokka swears he sees a small spark - already gone again - when Zuko places his hand slowly on Sokka's naked chest, eyes fixed on Sokka's face to see if he is going to object.

"Is this okay? Tell me if it's too much - I wouldn't want to hurt you..." Zuko is leaning so close that his breath is hot on Sokka's face.

Sokka blinks before he's suddenly hit by the sensation - like burning, smoldering flames against his skin and his world narrows down to the place Zuko's hand is on him only. He knows, somewhere in the back of his mind that it's not even that hot - can't be, because Zuko would never ever let him get burned - yet Sokka makes a keening sound at the overwhelming feeling like he is, fingers digging into Zuko's skin in turn.

Zuko jerks back his hand and Sokka feels his head swim at the abrupt loss. "*Sorry*- that was so stupid from me, sorry for just- "

"*No!*" Sokka moans at him, because *holy fucking spirit shit*. "Do that again!"

Zuko blinks bewildered at him. "Are you sure?"

He makes a grabbing motion for Zuko's hand. "*Yes* and...can you make it even *hotter?*" He asks, getting excited at the prospect and a wry expression enters Zuko's face as his eyes flick over Sokka and he realizes just how much into that Sokka so very obviously is.

"I'm not making it- I would never actually burn you," Zuko says appalled but he puts his fingertips right back on Sokka, slowly and carefully tracing his way towards Sokka's stomach and Sokka feels like his brain already short circuits at the minimal contact.

"Like *this*?" Zuko asks and Sokka nods overeager, currently not trusting his voice but wanting more of that sensation.

"Lay back down and tell me when it's too much," Zuko commands as his fingers still drag down over Sokka's skin, his eyes fixed intensely on Sokka's face.

Sokka manages a shaky grin. "You're so demanding," he breaths out.

Zuko huffs amused and pulls his hand away making Sokka whine at the loss again.

"Nooooo- please do that again. Come on Hot Stuff, don't be so cruel to me and just stop there. Please, please, *please* do that again- " Sokka starts begging.

Zuko makes another amused sound and then he looks at Sokka all molten golden heat. "I'm going to... when you stop with your whining and do as I say - but I'm not repeating myself - lay back down."

And...

*Tui and La.*

Sokka curses at the sudden shift in tone and immediately flops down, letting his legs fall open when he does so and Zuko lets out a surprised laugh at Sokka's eagerness.

But before Sokka can do or say even anything else, something truly wicked enters Zuko's gaze then and Zuko rubs his hands together. This time Sokka is sure that he is seeing some sparks.

Zuko, without warning, places both his palms on Sokka's upper thighs - burning, burning, *burning* hot and Sokka is left gasping for air because it's almost to the point of being unbearable - the way the rest of the world falls away, leaving only Zuko and his searing hands existing, keeping Sokka right there in place and fully at Zuko's mercy. Sokka already feels like he is about to burst just right from this single, simple touch alone... and they haven't even truly started yet.

Watching Aang train with Zuko is always such a spectacle. Sokka would rather do just that but instead he finds himself going through the basic sword forms, to keep himself busy.

He slashes the sword through the air before he huffs at himself and takes a second to glance down the pathway towards the beach. Sokka wonders how the others are even able to take a break right now - he feels way to restless.

"Can we take a break now too?" Aang ask, his voice caring over from the other side of the courtyard. Sokka pauses between forms and turns in Aang's direction to see him flops down



exhausted.

Zuko - right next to Aang - frowns and crosses his arms. "No. I didn't like your footwork there. The comet is in only six days and this should look better by now."

Five days are all that they have left until then - the few short weeks hiding and training here passed way to quickly - and tomorrow they will met with their other allies and maybe even Sokka's dad.

Sokka moves back into the first stance Zuko showed him. He's not going to become an anxious mess right now, when he can use the remaining hours to work on his skills.

Aang groans and refuse to get up. "Just give me five minutes to rest and then we will try again," he grumbles and looks longly towards the pathway down the beach.

Zuko sighs and turns his head towards Sokka. He raises his eyebrows, when he sees that Sokka is looking at them and indicates with his hands that Sokka should widen the position of his feet.

Sokka grumbles to himself at the already expected critique but does just so and Zuko nods before turning back to Aang.

"If you confront my father, he will not give you five minutes to rest either."

Aang groans again. "Yes sifu hotman."

Zuko hums and then he sits down next to Aang and Sokka lowers his sword surprised. Why doesn't Zuko feel so anxious as he does these last few days anyway?

But Sokka already moves so he can sits down next to Zuko too. Zuko only looks at Aang. "What's the plan about that anyway?"

Aang watches both of them for a moment and shrugs. "It depends on what the others can tell us tomorrow but I'm going to challenge the fire lord."

Zuko frowns some more. "Yes I know that, but what's your plan?"

"What do you mean plan? I will have to fight him until only one of us is left standing," Aang says with a rough voice and Sokka is glad that he he sitting there just so he can reach out and squeeze Aang's shoulder.

He already knows how hard on Aang that is.

"You really are planing to kill him then?" Zuko ask carefully - because he's gotten to know Aang, knows about his philosophies and his world view and yet they all had avoided talking about this so much.

Aang looks back at Zuko with a pinched expression. "I will. Because I have to and that's what's expected of me."

"...but you don't actually want to," Zuko adds softly and Sokka can hear how torn he himself is about that decision and Sokka's heart aches for Zuko for a moment. Because after everything atrocious that man had done - he is still Zuko's father.

Aang scratches behind his ear. "It's not *right* - taking a life. It's wrong and goes against anything I believe in and I wish there was another solution but... It's my duty and I can't just do nothing when the world depends on me."

Aang makes a frustrated sound.

Zuko hums and somehow his eyes find Sokka's then. "Yeah, I know. Sometimes our duty will have to come before the things we actually want."

Sokka swallows and turns back to Aang without inserting himself into the conversation just yet.

"I didn't used to take this serious. And then the fire nation attacked the northern water tribe, almost whipping them out too, just because I wasn't feeling ready to be the Avatar. And while I wish there was another solution... I'm not twelve anymore. I'm not that naive. I will do what I have to even if..."

Aang trails off but Sokka can hear it so clearly. Aang's willingness to do whatever it takes - even if it will destroy him alongside with it.

Sokka gazes down in the direction of the beach for a moment. He isn't sure if it's better or not that Katara isn't here to hear this but then... she already knows about all this too.

Zuko simple nods to Aang's words. His gaze is back on Sokka then and for a moment he looks so exhausted.

Sokka squeezes Aang's shoulder again.

"No matter what happens," Sokka starts to say to Aang but he is still looking at only Zuko. "No matter what you decide to do, we will support you and we will all be there for you - and we will all make it out alive at the end of this and then I am going to stay with you for as long as you will have me, because... I guess this all has to mean at least *something*."

And maybe it does. All this trouble just so Aang can loose himself when he goes against everything he believes in? Just so Katara is going to loose Aang to it too, when she never ever let herself give it a chance? Just so Toph, and Suki and the rest of their friends and allies will die during upcoming next days? Something about the maudlin mood makes Sokka suddenly want to be optimistic - because he isn't going to loose Zuko to an unknown future he's afraid of when he can help it either. And the spirits wouldn't go so much out of their way just so they are all going to loose here.

Sokka suddenly and unexpected refuses to believe that.

Aang looks confused between the two of them and he frowns, considering something, but Sokka's eyes are still only on Zuko and he doesn't notice. There are a lot of emotions on

Zuko's face but he simple nods, before he turns back to Aang.

"The fire lord has to be stopped by any means possible - and then I will take over his place and we can end this war for good."

## Chapter End Notes

I'm sooooo ready to be done with this story.

Surprisingly this might be one of my favorite chapters despite that I scrapped one last plot-line for the next part I suddenly found stupid and the messy re-arranging of scenes from the last few chapters is still not to my liking. 🙄

On the other hand, I'm short a few scenes that I absolutely under no circumstances could manage to fit in anywhere. (like Sokka asking about Zuko's soulmark aghin and Zuko ending up shoving him with his foot 🙄🤔.... Uh. Yeah... never mind.)

And funny titbit, the beginning scene with the confession was originally set at the air temple and was planned as them to finally making up but somehow Sokka said screw this because absolutely refused to stay angry so long 🙄

Oh. And before I forgot. The last chapter made all this soulmate stuff sound so cut and dry but it still is a bit open up to interpretation and it's funny how Sokka accuses Zuko of viewing everything how he thinks Zuko finds convenient when he does literally the same. You can of course look at it how ever you want 😊

Also some character growth I guess 🤔

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Notes

That took a hot minute to write - my last two weeks were kind of bad and then the chapter just got longer and longer. I should have split it up, but I didn't want to and now we have some monster of a +11k word update - it's going to be a bit silly, and a bit stupid and really heavy in the middle and I need to warn for some contents now >

CW: character getting burned. description of the pain. Burn injury.

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

There are four days left for final preparations.

Only four single days left, because the fifth day from now is the dawn of Sozin's Comet and with it - most likely the end of literal everything.

Sokka is still trying to feel optimistic about it though.

They arrive at the small campsite somewhere in the afternoon hours and when they climb down from Appa, various people are already there to welcome Aang and the rest of their group. Aang starts to greet every single one by name and Sokka just has to wonder who the hell all these people even are.

"Oi, Toph!" Some man in earth kingdom styled clothes that seems vague familiar to Sokka yells towards them and Toph starts grinning.

"That's the Bolder! We met at earth rumble," Toph explains excited to Zuko just as she pulls Suki after her to meet him.

Katara takes an anxious look around, before she seems to have spotted someone and pushes her way through, past Aang and Toph and Sokka and by extension Zuko, immediately trail after her.

They don't even make it that far when they can still hear the Bolder start the beginning of the most crude joke Sokka has ever heard in his entire life.

"Did he just say..." Zuko ask him with a horrified expression and Sokka flushes in embarrassment and nods. And... yup, Sokka is just going to pretend he'd never heard any of that.

Toph's loud laughter is still following them when they both hurry after Katara.

Katara comes to a stop in front of an old man in water tribe clothes - but Sokka is sure he has never met him. The man only nods in greeting. "You are late," he says looking at Aang when he comes up to Katara.

"Where is chief Hakoda?" His sister grinds out, before Aang can even make a single sound, while she looks around again.

Sokka raises his eyebrows at her rude attitude. He gets that she's feeling anxious about their dad - Sokka does too - but she isn't usually like that.

The man doesn't seem fazed at Katara's interruption. "The rest of our tribes are down at the beach. But everyone of the order is already here - even our leader could finally join us and you shouldn't keep the grand lotus waiting when we are all here for one single purpose - that way," he says sternly and looks in the direction of the big tent in the middle of the camp.

"Wait- Did you say grand lotus?" Zuko starts with a weird edge, but Sokka shares a look with Katara and she has already grabbed his arm and they both hurry away, passed all the tents.

"Who was that? I don't think I remember him? And what order did he mean?" Sokka ask and huffs at Katara's fast pace up the small hill.

"That's Pakku. You wouldn't know him- He's a water-bending master from the northern water tribe. He's one of the survivors of the attack on Agna Qel'a," Katara grinds out just as they reaches the peak of the hill. Sokka stops right in his track when he can see the fire nation ship on the waters beyond the beach and he curses.

But Katara looks at him bemused.

It takes a second to realize that nobody is running screaming and all the people he can see getting to work down the hill are wearing shades of blue. Huh? That's certainly clever.

"Dad and the others managed to pick up a lot of the survivors in the aftermath. That's how we first met the order - they call themself the White Lotus," Katara says as she follows the trail down and they pass a few water tribe warriors coming their way.

Sokka can't help but notice the wary glances Katara gets and he can already guess what kind of impression she must have made before.

"So you trust these guys? What about this grand lotus dude - it sounded like you haven't met him before?" Sokka ask.

Not for the first time Sokka wonders just how much he had missed - they all kept so busy during the last months while he spend his time... washing dishes.

Sokka pauses when more water tribe men greet them in passing. He thinks he'd recognized one of them as one of the older boys from their village - now clearly fully grown adults too - but Sokka isn't even sure since it has been so long.

Katara gives him a knowing look before she answers. "The grand lotus is the leader, we just never could met him before. But the order has been so reliable up until know with their inside knowledge and they are working hard to help shift the tides of the war - I do trust them."

Sokka grins at her - he's still feeling so proud of her for managing all that. "So if they indeed are our allies - what has that Pakku-guy done to warrant your scorn dear baby sister of mine?"

Katara huffs. "He's just some prick who challenged me on everything because apparently a woman isn't fit to lead an invasion."

"Then I hope you kicked his butt at least once," Sokka says and Katara flashes him grins that tells him everything he need to know.

But before Sokka can say anything else, Katara suddenly pulls him to a stop and Sokka frowns. Then he realizes just why they stopped walking.

Another pair of warriors stands a few paces away in discussion with each other and is that Bato? Yeah, that's really Bato there talking to -

"*Dad,*" Sokka breath's out disbelieving when he finally recognizes him. It must have been... close to a decade - at least eight years or maybe longer - Sokka isn't even sure but it's so unmistakably his dad standing right *there*.

The men both turn their heads towards them at Sokka's words.

"Is that- " His father has barely any time to realizes just what exactly he's seeing before Sokka rips himself away from Katara's grip, scrambling over his feet as he runs the last steps over. He throws his arms around his father who catches him with an *uff*.

His dad immediately hugs him back tightly with a tremble. "It's a miracle," he whispers disbelieving and Sokka can't help but sniffles into the hug.

His father just as abruptly pulls away and his hands come to rest on Sokka's shoulders, squeezing them- as he looks over at Sokka.

"Look at you- how much you've *grown*... and I just missed it all," he marvels, his eyes glistering with tears.

"...I- I missed you dad," Sokka says with another snuffle.

His dad just pulls him back against him, way too tightly. "I missed you too."

Katara finally steps closer at this - she is crying too - and joins them in their reunion hug and it takes quite a moment before anyone is letting go again.

"But how- Katara was so sure that-" dad shakes his head as he breaks off his words, one hand again clasping at Sokka's shoulders.

"We got separated- and I was lost and- I don't even know where to start because- " Sokka still can't stop himself from sniffing because it's his dad - *right here*.

"Oh. Right! There is someone that you probably should met- " Sokka starts as he suddenly remembers and turns around.

"Where are the others?" He ask Katara when he realizes that nobody else is there with them - even Bato and the other water tribe members having left to give them some privacy. In Sokka's defense he was a bit preoccupied with the thoughts of meeting dad again to have noticed.

"I think they followed master Pakku to start the meeting," Katara shrugs as she still dabbles her eyes dry.

"Right, I was just on my way too - I didn't realize you'd be already here but..." His dad gives Sokka another long look. "We can talk later when there's time. I want to know *everything*."

Sokka nods and his dad squeezes his shoulder before the three of them turn to walk back up the path towards the camp.

"This is more than I ever expected."

Sokka grins at his father. "Yeah, Me too."

His father pulls open the flaps of the tent and Sokka stops right there at the entrance at just what he's seeing exactly.

"*Uncle?!*"

All eyes in the tent fall on Sokka.

Uncle Mushi - er... Sokka guesses he's uncle Iroh now... although Sokka isn't sure if he's even still allowed to call him that because calling the infamous general Iroh - the *dragon of the west* - 'uncle' feels, maybe the tiniest bit daunting.

Anyway, general Iroh stands there in the center next to a table with lots of maps and with a hand on Zuko's shoulder - and Sokka is sure they must also have hugged it out because his eyes look a bit damp and Zuko looks so plainly relieved. Next to them are Aang, Toph and Suki and Sokka guesses they have already gotten over the introductions to each other.

His father gives him a small shove then, so he doesn't block the entrance and Sokka steps closer to Zuko as he waves awkwardly at Iroh, not sure how else to greet the man.

He swears he can hear Zuko snicker softly at him.

"Sokka, my boy," Iroh says and before Sokka can do anything else he finds himself pulled into the second, although shorter reunion hug of the day.

"It's so good to see you again, looking so well," General Iroh says as he pulls away and... who is Sokka even kidding, he is still just going to call him uncle because getting hugged from the freaking dragon of the west wasn't on any of Sokka's bingo cards either.

"Yeah, you too," Sokka manages a grin, as he flushes embarrassed at everything. Sokka can see Katara look at him with her eyebrows almost disappearing at her hairline from the corner of his eyes.

He looks back at uncle. "So, Pai Sho friends, huh?" He can't help but add and uncle chuckles.

Zuko clears his throat. "You just wanted to tell me what had happened uncle."

"Right, where was I? Ah, yes - just as you two disappeared- " Sokka exchanges a guilty look with Zuko - he hopes the man isn't too cross with him, even if it didn't sound like that. "- Ba Sing Se fell under the hand of the fire nation - I never thought it would be possible but I always had an exit plan in anticipation for this unlikely chance."

Zuko hums sounding unsurprised.

And yeah- that does makes sense. Sokka knows now that Uncle wouldn't have left anything to chance regarding their safety. Although Sokka is more interested in all the details - uncle doesn't seem to want to share when he looks at Aang a moment before his eyes are fixed back on Sokka.

"Had I realized that you are friends with the avatar, I could have aided you all months ago."

Yeah. A lot of things could have been avoided if everyone would have been honest with everything. Sokka cringes at himself again, remembering just what kind of mess he had left behind.

Katara lets out a huff next to him and his dad places a hand on Sokka's shoulder - he must probably wonder what this is all about.

It occurs to Sokka then that uncle must have known about the eclipse too - was *that* the reason they had closed the shop down at this day - because he was waiting for any news? Sokka hadn't even questioned how quick uncle was informed about it - for a small moment



Sokka wishes he could have read the letter he saw back there in full. He guesses he really should learn how to read fire nation signs, never mind that right now.

The only thing Sokka is left to wonder is why uncle wouldn't have told Zuko that the eclipse was happening.

Sokka shrugs at uncle in lieu of an answer.

"I guess destiny makes a fool out of all of us sometimes," uncle says at last with a glint in his eyes as he takes time to look at everyone gathered in the tent before he turns to Zuko with a certain kind of look.

Sokka keeps himself from groaning at uncle's words.

Zuko doesn't and groans really loud. "Uncle *please*-"

But before uncle can say anything else, dad clears his throat. "With all due respect, we are not here today to exchange pleasantries - everyone can catch up later - but to garner what we have learned about plans of the fire nation for the upcoming days."

Uncle nods to that and his face turns unusual grim. "Right - I sadly don't have any good news - our order members in the in capital have informed us that our worst fears are indeed true - Fire Lord Ozai is not only aware of Sozin's comet. He plans to finally win the war when he's going to utilize the comet's powers to burn the whole earth kingdom down using an airship fleet."

Katara and Aang simultaneously take a loud gasp and both - along with Suki stare openly at uncle Iroh horrified. Toph curses colorful.

It's like someone suddenly sucked out all the air of the room and -

*Tui and La.*

That's the worst kind of news the meeting could have revealed.

His dad is squeezing his shoulders hard and Sokka turns to look at Zuko who's already giving him a worried glance.

Sokka always knew that the war would end when the fire nation burned everything to the ground - he just never thought it would be quite so literal. But it also means Zuko was right - the fire lord does need to be stopped by any means possible.

It's his dad that breaks the tense and oppressing silence that has settled. "I know how bad that sounds, but it also means there are still four days left until the dawn of the comet and to come up with a plan to stop this from being realized."

Aang nods and steps forward into the center of the tent looking steadily at everyone. "It is my fault that the war could progress so far when I was gone for so long - and it's my duty to deal with the fire lord. I can challenge him before any of this can happen. I will not fail again."

Katara take a shaky breath and Sokka sees her grind her teeth. Aang may be feeling prepared for this right now, motivated by all the guilt he has built up - but they still all know he's never going to be the same afterwards if he can really put an end to this.

Toph slaps her fist into the palm of her other hand. "So why are we still talking? I know we all think that twinkle toes is ready- let's go."

"Not so fast - " Suki says then. "Aang can't just walk up to him right now and challenge him like that. We all know from the failed invasion how heavily protected he is in the palace."

Sokka hums. "Then we need to wait until he leaves - can we not just intercept him right before he starts his plans of evil? He can't very well burn the world down from within his palace, can't he? Aang will just have to wait for the right moment."

"I can do that," Aang nods, radiating confidence that Sokka is damn sure Aang doesn't truly feel.

Uncle still looks grim but he nods at Sokka. "The airship fleet isn't located near the capital but on the edge of the earth kingdom - it will take a few short hours to reach it - This only gives a small time frame to intercept him. I would hazard the fire lord plans to leave somewhere the evening of the day before the comet so they are ready to start at dawn."

Uncle turns towards the table and everyone steps closer to look at the map where he points out Caldera and the small island he spoke of. Sokka takes a moment to study the map while he tries to categorize all the information.

"What about the princess?" Katara says suddenly and Zuko grows stiffer besides Sokka. "Just stopping fire lord Ozai can't be all it takes - won't she just continue with his plans? And what about after Aang wins - is she going to be the next fire lord then? The war would still not be over - we need to do something about the princess too."

Uncle Iroh hums sadly, clearly considering his next words. Sokka doesn't really know what kind of relationship he had with Zuko's crazy sister and Sokka can't really focus on that now anyway.

"I will deal with my sister," Zuko says suddenly with a hard look towards Katara, leaving no room for arguments. Katara looks back and a wordless conversation seems to happen before she nods at Zuko with some kind of understanding.

Sokka frowns at both of them. One of these days - when the end of the world isn't hanging over their heads most likely - he will manage to weasel out of Zuko just what exactly he and Katara spoke about. He had been really tightlipped about it while muttering how scary he found Katara.

Aang turns to Katara and his hand carefully touches her arm. "We will make sure that the next fire lord is going to be someone who is going to end the war and restore peace," he reassure her, but Katara frowns.

"And *you* are going to be this next fire lord, general Iroh?" His dad ask uncle to confirm some conception he must have had.

Sokka and Zuko both stare a look at this and Sokka nods minuscule - indicating that yes, no matter what will happen they are in this together. He reaches out and takes Zuko's hand. Zuko squeezes back tightly.

Uncle shakes his head and wants to starts to say something. Zuko beats him to it.

"No. I am."

Sokka can see Katara's eyes snapping to his - piercing him with a certain look - like she never even considered this possibility while Aang looks steadily at Zuko.

Toph just lets out a yawn and Suki elbows her and if they are surprised, both hide it really well.

"Nephew, I know you don't- "

"I know." Zuko cuts his uncle off and they also share a look - having a silent conversation - before uncle's expression turns undeniably proud.

Sokka turns his head just so he can glance at his dad to gauge his reaction. His father gives him an uncertain look and Sokka isn't sure if he even realizes what all this truly means - Sokka wishes he'd gotten time to talk to him before all this - but it doesn't truly matter as it wouldn't have changed the outcome either way.

"Okay- That's good. So twinkletoes deals with the looser lord and sparky with crazy blue - what's the rest of us doing?" Toph ask.

"I will go with Zuko and you guys can- "

"No! I'm not letting you anywhere near my sister again," Zuko interrupts him suddenly and Sokka can't help himself but huff because no chance in hell will he let Zuko go on his own.

Sokka pulls his hand away from Zuko so he can cross his arms. "That's nice *buddy*, but it's not open for debate - I'm coming with you."

Zuko fully turns to him and grabs his shoulder's hard, some frantic look in his eyes. "You are absolutely not. I will not be able to do whatever it is that I will have to, if I am just worrying about you the whole time."

"Oh, so you don't want to worry about *me* but I can worry about *you*? I'm not letting you deal with her alone."

Zuko makes a frustrated sound but Katara interrupts their discussion before it can get too heated. "He won't be alone because I will be with him - I still need to settle things with her too and I'm not letting you near her ever again either," she says, not leaving room for objection.

Sokka throws his hand up. "How nice of you to gang up on me, but you can't just make that decision for me."

Zuko reaches up and carefully cups Sokka's jaw as he gives him a long imploring look. "Sokka," he simply stresses and Sokka pulls a face, fully aware how hard he'd refuse almost anything that Zuko ask of him.

"I'm not letting anything happen to Zuko - and Zuko to me neither. I promise," Katara says to him then and Sokka knows when he's already lost - both of them can be so hard-headed - just doesn't mean he has to like any of that.

"*Fine. Okay.*" Sokka pulls away from Zuko frustrated and Zuko exhales relieved.

"So you two deal with the princess and Aang with the fire lord and whatever power vacuum his demise will create is getting taken care off," Sokka can so clearly see Aang cringe from the corner of his eyes.

"That leaves the rest of us. What else is there to do, because this all sounds way too simple." Sokka rubs his chin and starts pacing and everyone looks at him expectant. He doesn't pay them any mind - fully in thinking-mode now.

"What about the fleet? When Aang intercepts the fire lord successfully what will the rest of the airship crew do - I would guess they are already present on the island getting the ships ready - but will they just stand around and wait awkwardly for someone who will never show up then? Is there a protocol or order for these kind of scenarios?"

"You worry too much Snoozles - I don't think there's any contingency plan for this case. The fire lord wouldn't even account for his plans getting interrupted."

"Maybe not but I don't like the mental image of a bunch of fire benders itching to burn down the world, just waiting around twirling their thumbs- are they going to be fed up waiting and take matters in their own hands is all I am asking." Sokka turns to uncle. Iroh should know more of fire nation military protocol.

Uncle hums. "That's a good question. The fire lord's chosen generals wouldn't go against any direct orders - that would be treason. I don't know what these orders are but If I had to guess - I'd say they will still leave at dawn. I wouldn't count on anyone sitting still. The generals were chosen for a reason."

Sokka can already imagine. What kind of human being wouldn't trip themselves over for the chance to be part of a warmongering crazy lord-of-dick's plans to raze everything to the ground? There is a reason after all why everyone is pushing Aang so hard to commit regicide, Sokka think with barely any sarcasm.

Sokka nods at uncle and looks at Zuko before he shakes his head and paces some more. Zuko frowns at him.

"So we and the rest of my men will have to fight them then," his dad says with a neutral expression.

Sokka sighs. "I'd rather not fight who-knows how many fire benders on the cusp of a cosmic event that gives them a insurmountable power boost - And you really don't know the actual orders uncle? I guess telling them that the fire lord isn't coming and they should go home would be a bit too simple, wouldn't it?" Sokka tries to joke because he just can't stand the tense mood any longer but nobody even cracks a smile.

"Not unless the fire lord himself issues a new command," uncle adds and Sokka hums again and glances at Suki who shrugs at him. Why doesn't anyone else come up with anything right now?

"Okay. Then I guess we just do it the old fashioned way," Sokka says and he sees Toph start to grin to herself, clearly already thinking along the same line.

His dad looks at him questioning. "What's your plan then?"

"Plain old sabotage. Toph, Suki and me will deal with that," Sokka grins at his father. "Can't burn everything down if they can't get their airships up in the air after all."

Suki lets out a whooping sound.

Sokka steps closer to the table again. "You said that the airship fleet is located on this island here - how long will it take to get there if we take one of your ships?" Sokka asks his father, his eyes fixed on the map.

"Traveling by ship is not so fast as you'd be by air - and we need to account that we could run into other military vessels and also find a way onto the island unseen." His father places his index finger on the map and starts to traces a jacked line on it, sowing off the way and Sokka frowns.

"I would say we would have to leave tomorrow so there's enough time that we can make it the day before the comet - do you think one night will be sufficient?"

Sokka nods already thinking along the same line as his dad. Sokka knows how effective Toph is with her bending and the longer they take for everything the more likely that they are getting discovered.

"Good this all sounds like a plan- so, Aang will challenge the fire lord the evening before the comet and Zuko and Katara are lying waiting so Zuko can claim the throne immediately after Aang has taken out the fire lord - The rest of us make sure the fleet never has a chance to lift off just in case that word of the change in power isn't fast enough and before anyone on the fleet get's too inpatient. Any questions?" Sokka summarizes.

"Yes- What about the rest of the White Lotus?" Katara asks and Sokka frowns. Right... he'd almost forgotten about them being here too.

Uncle clears his throat. "The next plans for our order was always to reconquer Ba Sing Se. With the fall of the city it seems that the outcome of the war was already decided - but with the focus of the fire nation elsewhere that day is the perfect opportunity to free the city again."

Sokka licks his lips. "Then I have one last question too," He starts and already feels terrified of what the answer could be. He had missed the time to ask uncle earlier and he still desperately needs to know.

"Do you know what happened to Jin when the fire nation took the city? Is she... save? Or her grandma? Or what about- "

Uncle hums and seems to consider him and Zuko reaches out to give Sokka's arm a squeeze - he must have ask his uncle the same question earlier too. But Sokka isn't sure what his gesture should convey.

"Princess Azula wasn't the only one with her spies all over the city. We tried to evacuate as many as we could when we realized what was happening. Your friends should be save with a Pai Sho friend of mine somewhere in the Jiasui region," uncle says and Sokka lets out a long relieved exhale - he was so worried about Jin somewhere in the back of his mind but he hadn't realized exactly just how guilty he'd felt about it and it's a such huge weight off his shoulders.

When this is all over he needs to find a way to make it up to her.

"Pai Sho huh," Sokka says bemused instead.

Uncle Iroh nods. "I think you owe me another game after everything."

Sokka grins back. "I'm looking forward to it."

The rest of the evening is spend in a weird haze - going over the rest of the details, making preparations, saying goodbyes - at one hand Sokka wants to catch up with his dad, but there just isn't that much time to really get into anything - and they are going to spend the next days together on his father's stolen fire nation ship anyway - and on the other hand he wants to be near Aang, Katara and Zuko which in the worst case... could be the last time they all are seeing each other ever again. Sokka tries very much not to think about the worst case but he just has to be a realist about these things.

Anyway - the choice how he spends the next how many hours is clear - and Sokka had to wait years to see his dad again... he can keep him waiting for a few hours in return.

That night he and Zuko stay up long into the early morning hours. So long that *Agni's* light already kisses the horizon softly, just shy of greeting the dawn of the new day - both of them too anxious to fall asleep anyway.

And they cling to each other in the tiny space of their shared tent, whispering sweet words of nothings and everythings - Zuko tells Sokka that he loves him in any way that he is able to - with his words, with his eyes, with his mouth and his hands - leaving red fingerprints littered over Sokka's skin - tells Sokka with all the rest of him too.

Sokka answers each confession with so many kisses - he kisses Zuko's hair, kisses his cheeks, his nose and his jaw and all of his face. Sokka kisses his hands, his stomach and his thighs - kisses the soulmark on the sole of Zuko's foot too while he's at it - Zuko just laughs because he really *is* ticklish there. And it's such a small thing - barely noticeable too, if you don't know to take a look - but somehow in this tiny moment, somewhere before the world will literally go up in flames - for Sokka it means everything.

"Where are we meeting again?" Sokka asks anxiously as everyone in the group has already said their final goodbyes somewhere after noon. Admits all their plans - the next met-up point never came up. But they all know how important that is - Sokka would rather not repeat any of that presumed dead business. One time was more than enough for him.

"Caldera." Zuko says plainly. "I need to be there until everything settles. And if not- "

"We will meet you there," Sokka says leaving no room for any discussion.

Zuko still gives him such an unhappy look and Sokka huffs not wanting this to be the last moment between them. He grins at Zuko all crooked. "You worry too much. It's going to be fine because- you are my... my *boomerang*! I know I will get you back."

Zuko lets out a small laugh and despite that they took the whole night for farewells, Zuko pulls Sokka into a crushing hug and Sokka holds on just as tightly, deeply breathing in the all familiar scent of his.

When they finally can part, Sokka steps closer to his dad and along with Toph and Suki they make their way across the sand towards the small row-boat so they can board the fire nation ship.

"Good luck," Sokka calls over his shoulder as he takes one last look at Zuko, Katara, Aang and Appa before everyone heads towards uncertain doom.

His dad clasps his hand on Sokka's back for a moment. "I didn't get to say it yet but- I'm so proud of you - how you handled everything yesterday, you acted like true leader there."

"Thanks dad!" Sokka beams at his dad as he sits down and takes one of the oars. That's just everything he had ever wanted to hear from him. To make him proud. Suki gives him a small smile then - because she too knows how much that means to Sokka.

His dad pushes the small boat with them into the waves before he sits down and takes the other oar and they both start rowing.

"...So you and -Ozai's son?" His dad asks suddenly and Sokka can clearly hear how disbelieving he is about that.

Sokka groans. They have at least two full days to catch up in between and his dad couldn't even wait before they are on the ship? Sokka glances at Toph, expecting some teasing comment but Toph just chuckles nervously as she starts to look really green.

Well, they have two days but that doesn't mean they can just laze around - better make the most of it.

Traveling by ship - even a highly modernized military vessel - is just plain boring Sokka decides. There isn't anything to see but the metal hull of the insides - the endless water of the outside and the red-black fire nation armor that came with the stolen ship and they wear as disguises.

His father's nautical adventures about tricking the fire nation by learning all about their militia protocols and forms would have sounded magical for a younger version of Sokka - but he's too jaded and too anxious about the next days to appreciate any of them now.

When they reach the small volcanic-looking island they keep their ship at distance to avoid getting spotted by the fire nation naval forces and to find a good place to land unseen.

Then it's just a waiting game until the last night has fully settled and Sokka, Toph and Suki can use the cover of the darkness, approaching the rocky shore with one of the rowboats.

"Tui and  *fucking*  La," Sokka curses softly when he peaks over the top of crater down into the center of the island and the sight that greets him with it.

Just how big is that fleet anyway and... how should they ever deal with so many airships in half a night? Then there is also all that movement down there, despite the hour - various soldiers or crew members or whatever walking around and going about different jobs, preparing the airships or Sokka doesn't even know but they are certainly keeping themselves busy.

"We can still do this- " Toph says with confidence and Suki nods with a set jaw. And yeah - they will have to, there is no stepping out now.

Toph bends them cover and they make their way down to the airship nearest to them - staying hidden. Sokka takes a quick look around the corner and sees a single soldier standing at the ramp. Would have been too easy to sneak in to the open front door, wouldn't it?

He turns back to Toph, who has her hand on the metal, looking concentrated.

"I can get us up there on the gallery outside," she says and without warning Sokka is flung up in the air by her earthbending and it takes everything in him to not yelp loudly and give himself away as he finds himself thrown onto the exact spot she said she would get them up to.



"Warn a man next time!" He hisses at her and Suki snickers - quicker up on her feet - already reaching towards the door right there.

"You can find your way into the next airship without my help, if you do prefer that - so, where to?" Toph ask unamused.

Sokka grumbles. "Sorry- Just... let's look for the control room so we can jam some levers."

In Sokka's opinion it takes them way too long until they have figured out which corridor they need to follow but at least Toph's amazing skills can easily detect when someone is coming... and where to best hide in the two cases that that was already true.

"It's clear," Toph says as they finally reach the right door.

"Good. Don't bent anything too obviously out of shape - we don't need to risk early detection should anyone come to check the instruments," Sokka tells them before Suki and Toph step inside the control room and Sokka takes the watch outside.

He crosses his arms, pulling the long sleeves of the stolen armor back in place and leans at the wall before he lets out a shaky breath.

Aang should have already engaged the fire lord hours ago - Sokka tries to not think about it but... just when will they know about the outcome of this? Is there anyone who would sent a messenger hawk in a hurry - anyone who will even remember that the fleet is getting ready beyond all the chaos that should be happen right now at the heart of the fire nation? And then there's also Zuko and Katara admits that all-

Suddenly Sokka sees someone turn the corner and the man stops right in his tracks as he stares at Sokka.

"Hey- who are you? I don't think I have ever seen you before."

Oh *fucking* - Sokka can feel his pulse start to race in his ears.

"Yeah. I'm... " Sokka starts, trying to come up with a believable lie on the spot. He's not going to panic now because they do wear the fire nation armor for a reason after all. "I am... Lee. I'm new here you see, from the colonies - I work in um... communications."

Is that even a *thing*?

The man - he could be an engineer if Sokka had to guess - looks at him for a tense second but then just hums. "Oh, hi. I work down in the engine room. That's probably why we never met before. Big airship, you know?"

Does that mean the engineer believes him? Sokka keeps the relieved sighs to himself but then he frowns. "The engine room you say? I bet that's fascinating- You know... I'd always wanted to understand how these things fly anyway- "

Forty minutes later Toph grins when she has fully disabled the engine of the third airship in a way that no one else can tell. Going in and down to the engine room is certainly quicker than all the way up to the control room - but everything is still taking too long for Sokka's tastes.

"Good. Onto the next one," Sokka says and they share a nod before they hurry the way back.

But just before they can reach the bomb bay Toph stops and immediately gets into a bending stance. "Someone's coming!" She says as she opens a big air vent for them to hide in.

Suki makes a grimace when Sokka steps on her toes and Toph presses herself against his back and bends the metal to hide them from view. It's all a bit cramped.

"Sorry- " he mouth-whispers to Suki but then he has to keep quite because they can already hear her voices outside coming closer.

"-nd another hawk. Someone will have to reply eventually to inform us what's causing the delay," a man with a commanding voice snaps impatient.

"Yes sir!"

"And then tell admiral Zhao to bring the ship's crew he has taken into custody to me before he does something *rash*."

"Y-yes sir!"

"I want to have some word with whoever is in charge, because something is clear- "

The voices are regrettably already getting smaller again. Sokka sucks in a breath, not liking the conclusion he's coming to.

Toph waits a few heartbeats before she bends their way out of the air vent again.

"Sokka, do you think your dad... What should we do?" Suki asks him carefully.

Sokka bites the inside of his cheek. They all knew that this could happen - and they all know what's at stake here. "Let's just focus on our job. That's more important."

Toph blows hair out of her face. "Then hurry up- I can sense someone's coming this way again."

Sokka nods and they do exactly that - make their way outside and back into the next few airships. Toph's brilliant the whole way through and they can disable a handful more engines that way.

Meanwhile it becomes clear that something isn't right. The soldiers hurry nervously along between all the airships like sparrowkeets - getting more frenzied as the night passes and the

night sky slowly starts to turn brighter.

It makes it even harder to stay out of sight - but it also means that the three of them can overhear more than one heated discussion about just where the fuck the fire lord is and why no-one has replied to any of the urgent messenger hawks.

Sokka takes another calming breath - no news is better than bad news, right?

They climb out the small opening Toph has created at the side of one of the airships when they hear that there is a commotion. A few of the soldiers also have stopped their frenzied running around to watch whatever is going to unfold now.

Sokka peaks around the corner and sees a handful of fire nation marines stepping down into the center of the island and between them are his dad, Bato and two other tribe members - all still in fire nation red, with their heads held high - but fully surrounded. Sokka curses at the sight.

This is really, really bad.

"Come on!" Toph says urgently. "Let's use the distraction, we don't have the time."

Sokka glances at the sky - yeah. They need to utilize this moment if they want a chance to be done before the quickly approaching dawn. And there is nothing to help his father now - they all knew that this most likely would be a one way trip anyway.

Sokka gives himself a small moment to think about Aang then - is he still fighting or has he finished his job? Is he alright right now? And Katara and Zuko... Are they still alive? What is happening on their end- has Zuko already had the chance to seize the throne?

Sokka makes a quick head-count of all the remaining airships - they will never make it in time, won't they?

Sokka turns to both Suki and Toph and... He guesses that there must be some other option left on how to stop the fleet from leaving and at the same time to help his dad, right? Sokka outright refuses to just give up without any kind of fight.

"Yeah, you guys go and disable the rest. You don't actually need me for that."

"Sokka- " Suki starts but he just cuts her sentence off, before she can start to argue.

"I know but... It's my *dad*."

Suki gives him another way too long look before Toph grabs her arm impatiently, looking upset. "If Snoozles wants to be stupid, then let him. Come on." Sokka grimaces as he watches the girls briskly walk away.

Sokka turns around - walking in the opposing direction. Some high ranking looking man, trailed by a handful soldiers passes him then - without even a second glance towards Sokka - marching towards the naval party at the center and Sokka quickly mingles himself under the man's subordinates like he belongs right there.

The other group hasn't noticed them walking up to them yet.

"- or I will have to deal with these imposters on my own and where is General Shu anyway?" a tall man in impressive armor yells at one of the soldier who jerks back into formal posture.

"S-sir, he- "

"Admiral Zhao," the man - the general Sokka has trailed, says enraged as they come within earshot - Sokka suddenly recognize his voice as the one they had overheard from the air vent earlier that night. At the same time his dad's eyes fall on him and widen before he looks away again with a set jaw.

"It would be good to remind you about the protocol on how deal with unverified ships until you can confirm the crew's identities. We wouldn't want to have another... *Incident*."

"General Shu- with all due *respect*," this Zhao guy grinds out, clearly having *zero* respect for the other general. "But these men don't even *look* like they are fire nation and the ship they have so clearly stolen- "

Ah. Sokka suddenly understands. There must be some history between the two of them. But right now this seems to only work in his father's favor.

General Shu shuts the admiral up with an impressive glare before turning to Sokka's dad. "State your purpose and business and why you have been caught lingering in restricted waters, before I will have to agree with *Zhao*."

"As I already told the admiral, our delegation isn't part of the naval forces stationed in this sector. As is stated under article thirty-six section five on confidential missions I am not authorized to explain myself to you unless you can give me a signed order by one of the - " Sokka is a big fan on just how calm his dad can stay while he rattles off all kind of things that sound very important. He can't help himself but be awed at how highly regulated everything in the fire nation forces seems to be - if only his friends had shown such a dedication to keeping plans an.... wrong moment to go on a internal tangent.

Admiral Zhao meanwhile looks like he will just explode as his eyebrow twitches. "Do you hear that- Section *five*?! These men are so clearly spies, making a farce out of our protocols. I'd say we'd be done with this interference the old fashioned way." Zhao suddenly makes a move and then there is some huge ball of fire in his fist.

His dad doesn't even flinch as he steadily looks at the admiral. One of the soldiers next to Sokka elbows him and gives Sokka a grin, finding all that very entertaining.

Sokka fails to see the humor in any of that right now.

"Admiral- keep protocol or do I need to reprimand you again." General Shu hisses and the admiral lowers his arm and sighs but then he pulls his hands back ready to strike or only pretending to strike or... this time his dad does flinch and -

"*NO! Don't!*" Someone yells.

Sokka blinks when he realizes he just did that.

The admiral wheels around, eyes immediately finding Sokka but at least the fire in his hand goes out as everyone else also turns to look at him. Sokka sees the fearful look on his dad clearly.

Okay, yup... Zuko is going to be so *pissed* at him for this.

"You dare, *boy?*" The admiral barks out at him, looking all enraged at Sokka and Sokka swallows as he takes some steps closer to his dad and the other water tribe men.

Sokka will never ever complain again for Zuko not thinking things through - he kind of knew that their mission was bound to fail when he saw the size of the whole fleet but it only fully sinks in now - like a cold heavy weight on his stomach - the certainty that they are really all going to die here because apparently Sokka is *just as stupid*.

"Didn't you hear what they said?! They are on a... a confidential mission - And don't call me boy!" Sokka snaps at Zhao, radiating all fake bravado - not wanting that man to demand him. At the same time Sokka swears he is just going to piss his pants at all the men in imposing fire nation armor looking at him with narrowed eyes. Just how can his dad stay so calm right now?

The eyebrow on Zhao's face twitches dangerously but he still shares a bemused look with the general.

"And you knows this because... you *also* a part of this... delegation?" he ask, sounding like it's a joke to them - and yeah it somehow feels like one. A particular bad joke.

"Maybe *you* are- authorized to tell us what this is *about* then?" He questions and some of the soldiers next to them start to snicker.

Oh, now it's on. Especially since they are going to die anyway.

Sokka puffs out his chest, confident in a way he doesn't feel and for an insane moment he has to remember how Zuko would sound when he dealt with one of the rude customers back in the tea shop.

"Do you even realize who you are talking to?" He hears more snickers, but Sokka doesn't care any longer. He will not go out without telling them a piece of his mind. He can hear his father make a groan then - fully aware how Sokka used to be as a kid - how is still is apparently.

"No, but we are all so eager to hear more... just hurry it up a bit. It's almost dawn and even without the fire lord at present we have a schedule to keep," General Shu ask impatiently as

he crosses his arms.

Sokka sets his jaw. "The fire lord? Which... *Ohhh*, you must mean *Ozai*? I will have to disappoint you there because he just has been replaced."

Or... At least he will be, given some hours. Sokka desperately hopes Aang has already won and Zuko has too - then it wouldn't even be a lie. He then glances at the sky. It's already turning an ugly shade of orange now.

General Shu raises an eyebrow unamused. "What are you talking about, boy?"

Zhao scoffs - but still very much amused. "Watch your mouth welp and don't use our fire lord's exalted name in vain," he says at the same time.

Sokka flashes a grin and hopes it doesn't look too shaky. "Well - we could have long gotten to this part, if you hadn't tried to break protocol, *Admiral*," Sokka throws out a taunt - no idea what he's even saying, but by the way Zhao looks like he's getting closer to losing his patience again, it must have landed.

"Your precious *Ozai* just got defeated by the avatar. That also means your pretty plans to burn down the earth kingdom are all getting revoked because *fire lord Zuko* will- "

Admiral Zhao suddenly starts to laugh loudly, interrupting Sokka's words.

"You want us to believe that the traitor of a prince is the next fire lord now? That little prissy blemish on the royal family? - I was there to see the embarrassment of him as he got himself banished - how he'd cried like a - *FUCK*-"

Sokka feels an unfamiliar fury welling up in him when...*ah. Shit*, the knuckles of his hand start blooming with the hurt from the punch he just threw. "*Don't you ever dare*- "

Before he, or anyone else can say or do anything else, two of Zhao's subordinates have Sokka already in a tight hold, immobilizing his arms behind him. His dad makes a really enraged sound and from the corner of Sokka's eyes he can see that more soldiers are now holding him back too.

Zhao grabs him roughly by his collar before he spits some blood on Sokka's boots. "I don't care for your little act but you are going to pay for that, *you fucking runt!*"

Sokka just stares back at Zhao with true anger - for a moment not caring what this means for him - but he stopped feeling hopeful on that front some time ago anyway.

"Admiral Zhao, please control yourself. And *you*- do you have any *proof* for what you are saying?" General Shu asks curiously, like he wants to see how this all will play out.

Zhao lets go of Sokka's collar and Sokka takes a shaky breath, surprised that the man listened but the soldiers still have him in their grip.

"You mean more proof than a whole delegation from the new fire lord himself?" Sokka asks, and now he's just lying straight through his teeth, not even caring any longer.

His dad suddenly agrees and starts to quote more stuff that all sounds so important, fully supporting Sokka's lie. The other water tribe men make also sounds of agreement from behind him. And maybe they can convince the general of exactly that and he will believe them all and let them go? That would be quite the nice cop-out, wouldn't it?

Sokka kind of wishes he were just that naive to believe any of that.

Admiral Zhao suddenly smiles in a way that is just mean - and there is some blood on his upper lip and teeth, Sokka must have gotten him good - he turns to the still considering general.

"General Shu, don't you have your orders? Even without Fire Lord Ozai - we wouldn't want to cause any delays. If what he says is true then we will soon get informed another way too but now.... dawn is already here."

And just then the first rays of sunlight break over the horizon - bringing the comet with it too and the sky turns more golden than orange and Sokka can feel a rush of... *something*. That's when Sokka knows they have lost their non-existing chance.

The general nods towards Zhao and takes one last look at Sokka and his dad and the others before he turns around and barks orders at his subordinates and the small crowd that had gathered.

He just hopes Toph and Suki can keep themselves safely hidden and they could be disabled enough of the airships so the damage to earth kingdom will not be as severe and - who is he even kidding now - the world will still burn.

The Admiral exhales and his eyes find Sokka again. "So, shall we end this farce? Let us be done with the imposters - starting with the insolent little runt here."

General Shu doesn't even bother to say anything as he starts to make his way across the stony terrain away from their group, followed by his men.

Admiral Zhao opens his palm and the fire Sokka saw earlier had *nothing* on the flames he sees now and...

"Ahh. Yes. All this power."

And despite that Sokka *knew* this was about to happen to him - he still thinks that this is really the appropriate time to truly panic. Sokka starts struggling against the soldiers holding onto him in earnest.

Zuko will be so, so angry at Sokka once he learns of Sokka's unfortunate demise.

Sokka can hear his father yell something but his mind can only focus on the insurmountable heat Zhao's flame radiates. This will definitely not be as nice as when Zuko touches him with his heated palms, Sokka thinks as his thoughts fully turn hysterical.

Zhao takes a step closer, bridging the gap between them and Sokka starts trashing in the tight grip on him. He indeed manages to break free for just a second and he pulls his arms forward and -

And...

Then -

- there's a torrid, white-hot caustic feeling radiating out from his arm. Towards his hand. Towards his shoulder. He can feel all his nerves getting set ablaze by the pain. It runs through him until there is nothing of him left but the searing feeling of getting set on fire as he can hear his thundering heartbeat reverberate in his ears. Someone screams and Sokka is pretty sure that's him and he is distantly aware that his legs must give out from under him and he -

Just as suddenly the agonizing pain stops and Zhao staggers back with a loud curse.

Sokka falls forward, having lost all support holding him up. He lays there in the dirt as he gasps for air, his throat feeling hoarse. Then there is also the smell of burned flesh making him so nauseous and Sokka crawls up on one arm and retches.

He can hear sounds of movements and voices and yells around him but everything feels blurry as Sokka still pants. He feels sweaty and the staccato of a second heartbeat he can hear so clearly in his ears now gives him vertigo - makes him want to puke with it.

Someone talks to him and then he's getting pulled up back on his feet and it takes Sokka way too long to realize that Toph and Suki somehow are here to hold him up and his dad is there in front of him too. His dad looks so pale and he says so many frantic things to Sokka but Sokka can't follow any of that now because he's hit with the sudden realization just where exactly Zhao had grabbed him -

Sokka's eyes snap to his wrist and he feels dizzy with it - but if it's *gone*... if the mark got burned off of him then -

Sokka blinks confused. He feels way too light headed to really believe his eyes.

The sleeve is completely seared off but the mark is still there. Zuko's name is still there and - there isn't a single thing wrong with his arm - nothing to indicate what just had happened either.

But... He was so sure he had even smelled -

Sokka's head snaps up and it feels like all his senses return to his body.

Admiral Zhao lays whimpering in front of him, holding onto his charred hand - still smoking with it. All the other soldiers - some of the other generals maybe - all the other however many people suddenly are present here, watch Zhao with a horrified expression.

What the *fuck* had just happened?



Sokka still feels shaky on his legs but his mind jumps into overdrive trying to re-categorize anything he knows. The second heartbeat - Zuko's bending and what had Aang even said exactly? Nothing of that explains just why he is unhurt... Sokka's eyes move upwards and he can see the comet already so high up in the sky.

Is it just because of *that*? But Sokka is not a bender - it doesn't *work* like that.

Sokka draws a deep breath then, creating a rattling sound with his aching throat - he can fully freak out some time later when he has the proper time to think about this. And *oh*, just *how* he absolutely will *freak out* about this.

Zhao is still whimpering on the floor, as one of the soldiers tries to treat his burned hand in vain - Sokka sees how black the skin looks there, sees just how... - he feels bile rise again and he averts his gaze.

Somehow his eyes land on General Shu instead. The General seems to startle at this.

"*Who* did you say you are exactly?" He ask with a horror-stricken glance at Sokka's arm.

Sokka blinks and before his conscious mind can tell him not to, he holds up his wrist. The light of the comet and the early morning hours illuminate Zuko's name on his skin - making it seem just as golden as the color of the sky.

"I'm... Sokka - son of chief Hakoda from the south pole - " he tells the general and why is he even saying that? That's so *irrelevant* right now.

General Shu raises his eyebrows and Sokka can just feel way too many eyes focused on him - he was always such a horrible public speaker anyway. Sokka feels so close to hysterics again and if not for his dad right there, he might just keel over.

"And I told you. Avatar Aang has defeated fire lord Ozai - " he continues a bit louder. And... Aang just *has* to - because it's the dawn of the new day and no angry loser lord has shown up the whole night - that's a *good* sign right?

Suki stands on his other side, holding onto him too, Toph some steps away and he doesn't care if they managed their job - he's just glad that they seems save.

"and... and that means that from now there is a new fire lord - fire lord Zuko... er- chosen by- by *Agni*- " Is that even the right way to address him? Zuko often enough muttered that name to himself so it seems important and who even *cares*? Sokka is just making up things as he goes now anyway. He laughs nervously once, hoping no-one will call him out on that - he's only met with so many openmouthed stares.

"And you can see that the spirits have given us this *blessing* so I can speak on his behalf making my words as good as his because - "

Had Zuko even phrased it like that? Sokka isn't sure right now. But better lay on a bit thick to oversell what he's saying.

His arm starts to really cramp from holding it in that position - and almost getting it burned to a stump some minutes ago doesn't help either.

" - non of the plans regarding the earth kingdom will be getting realized. This fleet here will not lift off to burn anything to the ground."

Sokka isn't fully convinced he didn't actually die - that this moment is truly happening because so many fire nation soldiers are still staring at him with the same horrified expression and nobody makes any kind of move...

General Shu clears his throat awkwardly then. "Arrest that man for treason," he croaks at someone.

Sokka knows then that he's floundered with his words, but at least he gave it one last try.

His dad and Suki move into a more protective stance as they still help him stand on shaky legs and Toph - two steps away - gets her hands in a bending position - fully ready to defend them and Sokka feels a rush of affection for them all.

Four soldiers come out of their daze then and they approach... the still whimpering admiral Zhao as he gets roughly subdued?

Er... What?

Sokka glances over his shoulder and Bato and the other crew members give him a huge bewildered, disbelieving look. Bato shrugs.

"But- Treason? *Him?*" Sokka squeaks out - he's clearly missing something now. Why would they grab Zhao...

General Shu turns back to Sokka and he looks so shaken and then he moves to his knees and all the way too the floor and - Is that man *bowing* to him?! The other soldiers follow suit.

Okay- *what the fuck is happening?*

"Please, forgive me you highness. I didn't know what admiral Zhao would try - "

High- *what?* Sokka turns his head left and right. Who... Does the general mean him? As in *Sokka?*!

"Er. " Sokka says inelible when he looks back at the man.

" - you need to know that I would never approve of his disregard for regulation's and Zhao will be *punished* accordingly. There will be no necessity to invoke the new fire lord's *wrath* on us all for a singe man's unwarranted action. I deeply apologize that we weren't able to recognize the fire lord's consort and that- "

Con- what the fuck? And Zuko's... *wrath?* What *wrath*- why would...

General Shu says some more things that don't make sense and Sokka can hear the tremble in his voice. He realizes that general isn't only bowing, he is prostrating himself- *cowering* before Sokka.

Is he... scared? *Of Zuko?! Why would anyone - Oh*, right Sokka can guess that Ozai wasn't always the most *rational* person to be around.

But the general still has gotten the totally wrong impression.

"*Consort?*" Sokka ask for clarification, his voice pitching high. Just where did the man get that exactly admits Sokka's crappy speech?

Sokka can hear his father make a choking sound.

"I never said any of that?! And can you please get up from the floor. It's making me *nervous*," Sokka laughs with an hysteric edge.

Sokka for a fleeting foolish moment hopes that an enraged Ozai will show up right now and take him out so he doesn't have to deal with this awkwardness any longer.

General Shu gets up but he keeps his head bowed low, not meeting Sokka's eyes. He somehow suddenly seems even more terrified.

"You did not need to say it. Such a b-blessing by the spirits is more binding than any mortal pledges could ever be - or did I misunderstand the relation between you and your lord husband - our e-exalted new fire lord - then you will have to forgive me any transgression should I have offended y-your highness again," the general stammers out and he seems to consider throwing himself on the ground again and this time Sokka sees so clearly just how the man is scared shitless of what he assumes Zuko could theoretically do to him.

Sokka is now absolutely convinced that he did die just mere moments ago. He is dead, *right?* That's the most logical solution, *Right?! The fire must have outright killed him. And now there's only a pile of ash left for Zuko to mourn because this is not really happening to him.*

Nope, nope, nope.

Sokka looks at his friends for a moment. Toph and Suki are so pale, both looking horrified - he can't even discern the expression on his father's face - but they are standing protectively close to him.

And then there is the terrified general because he thought he'd stepped on... on Sokka's toes.

There are the rest of all the soldiers and the airship crew with all the workers and the engineers too, looking at him so wary yet somehow everyone's still bowing low.

And behind all them is the whole of the fleet. But dawn has come and nobody has died yet, nobody has burned down anything - not for a lack of trying though but...

Sokka wets his cracked lips when the situation slowly sinks in - that there is still a possibility where they can make it off this island alive. He still has his arm at an awkward angle and he

slowly lowers it down. And it's like coming out of a daze when he glances back at his friends for another moment.

Because nothing of what Sokka had said is even *true* - for all he knows Zuko, Katara and Aang could be long dead. For all he knows the fire nation has finally and ultimately won the war and even Ba Sing Se is only a pile of rubble now.

Well, Sokka guesses he can just lie some more.

"No," Sokka says and he steels his shoulders, trying to enact Zuko's best customer service voice - slightly mean and not taking any ostrich-horse shit from anyone - when he addresses everyone at present here.

"No, you got that right. I'm speaking on my husband's behalf when I tell you that you are going to inform all the other forces stationed in the earth kingdom to cease fighting immediately and to surrender because the war is over now."

And because Sokka the liar said so - it's going to become the truth.

The next how many hours pass by in a weird state of being for him. Sokka still feels like he might just pass out - only semi convinced that he isn't *actually* dead.

His dad is hovering in a way that's almost bothersome and General Shu trips over himself to help Sokka and it's not even *amusing* how terrified he so clearly is of Zuko - Zuko would never blame the man for the actions of Zhao, wouldn't blame him for what almost happened to Sokka he thinks.

Anyway, the general insists that they need to take his airship if they want to go to the capital as fast as possible, while he also issues so many different commands. Sokka just nods along, having trouble staying focused any longer.

Toph disappears for a moment - probably to fix the engine so nobody asks more questions that will only give him a bigger headache and Suki helps Sokka stay upright while they wait for Bato to get the rest of the water tribe men from their stolen naval vessel.

"He told me his name was Lee," Sokka can hear someone whisper as they pass a group of engineers - he recognizes one of them and gives him a wave - the group just gapes back at Sokka with a stupefied expression.

Then everyone is counted for and they should finally leave but there are still too many people asking way too many questions he doesn't know the answer to. His dad just takes over for him which he is so glad about.

"Everyone out. His royal Snoozle-ness needs a moment to rest," Toph barks out as soon she comes back. She can probably sense just how close to collapsing Sokka is - everyone wanting something isn't helpful either.

His dad gives him a nod and then he ushers all the various people out of the room.

Sokka hums thankfully at Toph and Suki helps him sit down somewhere. "You okay?" she finally asks him.

"Sure, *never better* - still can't believe anyone found my crappy speech actually convincing," he laughs self deprecating while he closes his eyes tiredly for a second.

He hopes Zuko will find everything more funny when he tells him later.

"I think it had more to do with how scared they are of you - do you even realize just how terrifying that looked what happened to the admiral?" Suki asks with a shudder.

"Sorry no- I was a bit more preoccupied by being terrified for my life there."

"Yeah- It felt like your heart was about to give out multiple times," Toph mumbles with a soft voice.

"I'm pretty sure it did. I'm only twenty percent sure this *isn't* the afterlife," Sokka hums, eyes still closed.

No-one says anything for a moment and then they are already taking off and Sokka so hopes he see the others also alive soon again - but first he's going to nap because he's so close to falling asleep anyway right now.

"So... *husband*? Does Sparky know that?" Toph ask suddenly and Sokka snaps his eyes back open.

"Toph, *please* don't," he groans. He doesn't need even more teasing from Toph, especially right now when he's feeling like *this*. Sokka turns to Suki looking for help.

"Congrats?" Suki says unhelpful and he glares at her.

"Can we just please skip all that - I'm way too tired and we don't know what to expect when we met the others again."

"You are right, sorry..." Toph says surprisingly subdued. "Just... I never thought that *you'd* be the next fire lady - but I should have seen this coming."

Sokka groans. "Please shut up." He puts his face in his hands for a moment before he stupidly turns to Suki with a helpless glance. "Suki can you not- "

Suki shrugs. "No actually- I want to hear that."

Toph grins to herself. "I'm only saying that Sparky can count himself lucky to have you. You will make such a fine wife with all your delicate sensibilities."

Suki snorts.

"I *hate* you both," Sokka grumbles but he already closes his eyes again.

"Oh Snoozles, I can tell that was a lie," Toph says with a smirk.

## Chapter End Notes

Sokka: Hey, you remember Zhao? He tried to hurt me and got his hand burned pretty gruesome instead.

Zuko: good 😈

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Oh wow. We really are almost at the end.

So. Sooooo.

Some words about uncle Iroh here - I'd always imagined him as this big spy master in the background but I kind of think the parts are also a bit underwhelming.

And - as much as I love him as a character - even in canon I perceive his choices and how he handles Zuko as questionable sometimes - I do think uncle really drops the ball in the story. He didn't really tell Zuko a lot of the stuff that was going on and that was a deliberate choice of his - on the other hand - Zuko at that time of the story wouldn't have wanted to hear anything regarding the avatar and the war anyway.

Regarding the rest - I know this chapter is a hot mess with so much things going on and I don't want to say too much about it anyway - but Sokka spend the majority of the story struggling with his soulmark, hating it, hiding it - I wanted to end the story with him basically showing it off to everyone, being proud of having Zuko's name on him.

And then also - the story was so much about honesty and lies and I wanted Sokka to end the war with a massive lie - it was so much more amusing and lighthearted and silly in my head and I'm just as surprise how dark this got for a moment here - the end is the same. Although it did made me question if I even wanted to post this update at all, but I'm not going to leave this unfinished with only one chapter missing just because I'm self-conscious about my story right now.

Anyway still thanks for reading ❤️ I hope I can finish to the final update during the next week.



## Chapter 20

### Chapter Notes

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

"*What happened to your leg, Sokka?!*"

These accusatory words are the first thing Katara says to him when she pulls away from the relieved hug that borders on being over excessive - it's not like Sokka didn't hug her back with the same fervor.

Sokka waves her off. "Yeah, I think I might have broken it a bit... funny story - a true feat of bravery blah blah, Katara- *Where is Zuko?*"

Katara mumbles the words '*might have*' to herself while her eyes roam over him to look for other injuries - her gaze lingering on his scorched sleeve for a second. Katara huffs and crosses her arms. "He's alive and he's... fine."

Sokka can feel most of the tension bleed out of him as he sags with relieve. "*Hey, watch it!*" Suki grumbles from under his arm where she prods him up and Sokka immediately shifts his weight back on his uninjured leg.

"Sorry Suki," he says sheepish and he can basically hear her roll her eyes at him as he turns back to his sister.

"And... the princess? Did Zuko have to-"

Katara sighs. "Alive but dealt with - I think I'm just going to take you to Zuko, he can tell you better about everything that had happened with us. I can also take a look at your leg there as well."

Sokka nods with even more relieve. Katara moves to pry his arm away from Suki - so the girls can trade places - and Sokka leans on Katara instead. Suki cracks her neck with a grimace and sighs at finally getting freed of being Sokka's personal crutch.

They all then - along with Toph - slowly start to make their way across the enclosed courtyard towards the palace.

"So I guess everything worked according to plan for you too? You could stop the fleet? Nothing interesting... *happened?*" Katara ask as they walk and Sokka doesn't like her tone even one bit.



He shares a quick glance with Suki and Sokka shrugs half-heartedly. "Er. More or less, we had to adjust some things on the spot - just nothing so dramatic neither of us couldn't handle."

Toph snorts which only ensures that Katara narrows her eyes at the girl.

Various people in red robes or armor meanwhile hurry all over the courtyard in a frenzy and their group gets some inquiring glances before they finally reach the other side of it.

"So I guess whatever happened to your leg was also nothing *dramatic*?" Katara ask again in the same tone, not letting up, as she helps him hopple up the stairs towards the golden framed entrance.

Sokka groans at Katara. "No, that truly was something only a warrior- "

"He passed out and fell down the airship ramp," Toph answer in a dry tone from where she walks on Sokka's other side.

Sokka makes an affronted sound. "Geez, *thanks* Toph - you make me sound like such a klutz."

Katara pulls to a stop - wheeling so fast on Toph that Sokka almost looses her support holding him up. "You passed out? Why did you pass out? So something *did* happen to you guys!" Katara snaps accusingly as Sokka scrambles to not fall backwards down the stairs. Katara jerks him back with an apologetic look and she quickly helps him hobble the rest of the way up too before she starts glaring at them again.

Sokka huffs at her. "I didn't pass out. I was just dizzy because I've been up all night- *Toph stop over-exaggerating.*"

"Okay- you guys stop with all this crap right now and get out with it! Just what is with all these guys in armor you showed up here? Why is dad suddenly in charge of some fire nation generals and why are they all are acting so weird around you? I swear I saw most of them bow to you- " Katara presses out between clenched teeth. She then takes one big breath. "*Sokka* what in La's name *happened*?"

Suki and Sokka share another glance and not even Toph immediately quirks back because that's the big question, isn't it?

Just how should any of them even start to explain? And he's not even talking about his leg there - that truly was only an accident because Sokka was hit with a dizzy spell and he really just fell stupid - it's not that bad anyway - although Sokka does kinda feel bad for the three general's that had accompanied them because he was sure he gave them a heart-attack and he still couldn't relieve them of the impression that Zuko is just like his father when nothing could be further from the truth - *Zuko* will *hate* this once he hears about it.

But that's all beside the point considering the fucked up rest... Sokka is still not fully convinced that any of that really did happen to them - *to him* - and he has zero idea how he should tell Katara or anyone else ever about it without sounding like some raving lunatic.

"*Katara*, can we just..." Sokka stresses.

Katara frowns at his miserable tone. She peers at him from his side, like she is only seeing him now for the first time from so close up... Seeing the exhaustion that is written into every line of his face and Katara makes a frustrated sound.

"*Fine*- let's just get you to Zuko first. But you are not getting out of this conversation," Katara grumbles and she starts walking again. Sokka exhales relieved.

They finally make their way passed the threshold, stepping through the grand arching doorway and for a moment Sokka gets distracted as he takes in all the red and gold of the huge entrance hall. His eyes somehow become affixed on the ornate piece of a gilded ceiling painting, just making him realize where they actual really are right now as they wobble further inside.

Sokka eventually pulls his eyes away from the ceiling to take in the rest and his eyes fall onto a group of men dressed in red robes talking to -

"*Aang!*" Sokka calls out with even more relieve.

Aang turns towards them and then his face breaks out in a huge grin that is so typical for him when he recognizes his friends. He makes a small bow to the men before he rushes over - literal skipping his steps with clear excitement.

"You guys are fine!" Aang exclaims before he goes and gives everyone a big squeeze.

Sokka grins back at Aang and he can't help but notice Aang's hand lingering on Katara's upper arm when he pulls back from the hug - mindful for Sokka's leg-situation, of course. A tiny blush graces Katara's cheeks at this.

"What's wrong with your leg?" Aang asks concerned as he gives Suki and Toph a quick glance again - to see if they are injured somewhere too.

"-just fell stupid. Katara was just bringing me to Zuko to check it out," Sokka says and he can clearly feel Katara's irritated stare without even looking at her.

Aang nods. "Sure. I'll walk with you... *Anything* to get away from these fire sages for a moment really. They just keep going on and on about all the avatar stuff on repeat anyway," Aang pauses before he adds with a disappointed shrug, "And somehow they weren't that impressed with this cool air-bending trick I tried to show them."

Sokka has to bite back a laugh - Suki and Toph do snicker. They all know exactly what skill Aang was trying to show off.

Katara hums then and Aang moves to Sokka's other side so he can help Sokka walk too and the group slowly makes their way down a corridor somewhere to the left of the hall, where even more red and gold greets them along with palace staff making their way hurriedly passed them.

Toph and Suki trail behind, having a conversation of their own while Aang is chattering happily. Yet Sokka can't help but frown at Aang's usual demeanor - all smiles and so happy looking. Sokka was really convinced that when they would meet Aang again, he'd be some kind of... mess.

"So... Did you- *you know?* Ozai?" Sokka interrupts his chattering in a careful tone.

Aang turns to him with a big smile. "Nope- couldn't do it."

Sokka freezes. Does that mean... all the things he just went through are for naught because-

Wait. No. Aang still must have done at least *something* or otherwise he wouldn't walk there, looking so damn pleased with himself.

"I took his bending instead," Aang says with a cheeky grin when he notices Sokka's flabbergast expression.

Sokka only starts back even more surprised. Toph and Suki stop their conversation as well.

"You took- That was an *option?* Wait! You can do that?"

"Yeah apparently I can. This way, he isn't a threat to anyone ever again and I didn't even have to go against any of my beliefs."

"Uh-hu? Just... *How?*" Sokka asks fully baffled. Somehow he should be glad that Aang could manage to find an alternative way, but his mind is getting stuck on the logistics of that feat. "That's- *what* gave you that idea?"

"Well, *you* did!" Aang claps his back, making both him and Katara stumble and Katara grumble something at that. "Do you remember our talk at the western air temple? You said something then that stuck with me." Aang grins even broader and Sokka stares at him still disbelieving.

"I.. I *did?* What did I even say? I must have forgotten about that because I would certainly remember that I told you to *steal* the *fire* lords *fire* bending!" Sokka is damn well sure he would remember any of that. Especially since his whole thoughts had kept circling back towards all that - trying to recall Aang's actual words - ever since he'd almost...

"You didn't have to. But I did tell you then how the bending is connected to the spiritual energy flow of each person and how you could theoretically try to bend that energy instead. You even ask me if it was possible that you would get Zuko's bending that way - anyway I thought I had nothing to lose because it was that or letting myself get fried and I gave it a try and it worked all out!"

Sokka blinks, trying to take all that in... Oh. *Yeah*. That was one of the concerns Sokka had had before they worked out all the rest.

Sokka sighs. "Hey about *that*... Now that you bring it up again, say... If someone - *only theoretically speaking of course* - had a firebender as their soulmate, would it be possible to become... fireproof?"

"*Fireproof?*" Katara ask with sudden alarm.

More soldiers in fire nation armor hurry past them with barely any glance at their misplaced looking group. It's so glaring obvious that the fire nation is in turmoil at all the things on the cusp of change - Zuko must certainly be really busy right now to keep everything together.

"What- *no*, I'm only speaking in theoretically terms." Sokka waves her off, too interested in Aang's answer.

Aang frowns like he's thinking it over - ignoring what could be the reason behind Sokka's strange question. "No, not really. I mean - fire benders aren't fireproof either - more heat-resistant and much harder to burn but not impossible - so that shouldn't carry over through such a bond."

"What about the comet then? Could that have something to do with that, because I'm damn sure I wasn't literal fireproof yesterday!"

Katara takes in a sharp breath, "*Sokka-* "

Sokka ignores Katara and takes a big breath too, because he had done so good until now to not fully freak out and he'd rather keep it that way for a bit longer.

Aang just gives him a curious glance. "Sure. Your guess is good as any. The comet greatly increases every fire benders power, so why not that too and that's not even accounting if any spirit should directly intervene," Aang says and then he strangely seems to get excited for some reason.

"I have to go and look into that! Being the bridge to the spirit world is like my job as the avatar and now I don't have to focus on defeating the fire lord any longer I can focus on stuff like that."

Sokka groans softly because it's such a stupid *wishy-washy non-answer* but at the same time he's still so glad that all the weight is now off Aang's shoulders.

"You do that. Doesn't mean I still don't hate all this illogical spiritual mumbo jumbo stuff - *no offense* Aang," Sokka can't help himself from grumbling before he notices Katara's accusing stare.

Sokka forces back an easy grin and quickly changes the subject. "Hey- so if Ozai is still alive- Does that mean *I* can have a go at him now?"

Aang makes a disapproving sound while Toph snorts *really* loud.

"Won't it make family dinners awkward if you murder your father-in-law first chance you get?" Toph ask teasingly.

Suki snickers at that and Sokka shuts her up with a glare - she and Toph both have lost any privilege to ever tease him about anything ever again anyway after the last how many hours he had to endure at their hands.

Sokka hums contemplating after a pause. "Eh. I wouldn't actually murder him, just...*you know*," he says with an easy shrug.

Suki nods with understanding and Aang looks even more disapproving.

"In... laws? What- fireproof? I know you want to postpone that discussion but by all the spirits - for the last time - Sokka, what happened?!" Katara says with exasperated frustration and she pulls to a stop as the group then reaches some arched doorway with two guards posted outside. Sokka removes his arm from her shoulder so he can fully turn to her.

"Katara. Can we please- "

"*Avatar Aang!*" Two men in red robes hurrying their way interrupt Sokka before he can even figure out how to finish that sentence - which he's a bit glad for. "It's so good that we find you again. We had wondered where you had wandered off to, so do you mind- "

"Yeah sure. Toph, Suki do you mind accompanying us? One of the fire sages had raised an interesting question about earth bending that I *couldn't* possible answer without you!"

Toph makes a questioning sound and Sokka bites his tongue to not laugh at Aang's sheepish grin there - clearly intending to use the girls as some kind of buffer.

Aang turns back to Katara and him with a whisper as he removes the support he's offering Sokka. "I can swing by the infirmary to check on you and Zuko later if I'll figure out how to get them off my back."

Sokka's mind comes to a crashing halt before the sages can even usher Aang down the corridor followed by Toph and Suki.

"*Infirmary?! You said you'd bring me to Zuko and- why is Zuko there?! You said he was fine.*"

One of the posted guards clears his throat and Sokka glares at the man, contemplating to just shove his whole arm all up in his face if he's going to bother Sokka in any kind of way - but the look on Katara's face stops him right in his tracks.

She makes that specific expression of hers - the one when she wants to say something but doesn't know how to and Sokka's breath hitches because -

"*Katara!*" Sokka says alarmed.

- she had said he was fine. That he was alive! But there's still a huge range of what that could even mean and Katara hasn't moved yet, hasn't said anything and Sokka feels his mind start to spiral with all the theoretical things that could have happened - One thing worse than the others.

"Zuko really *is* fine now, okay?" She rushes out with a imploring tone when she catches his panicked expression.

"What happened?" Sokka ask sharply and he still feels his words tilt sideways. Because 'now' means that he wasn't.

That Zuko at one point wasn't fine.

"His sister, the princess. She... she challenged him to a -duel and at one point she shot lightning at me and...Zuko jumped right in front of it... I tried to heal him but he was in such bad shape - he almost didn't make it," Katara says softly and Sokka takes a shaky breath.

Of course Zuko had to go and do something so reckless - it's not like Sokka doesn't know exactly how he is. Just why had he let them both talk Sokka out of coming with them?

"Can we *please*- " he starts with a rough voice and doesn't even need to finish the question before Katara reaches her arm around him again so she can help him walk on his wobbly leg.

The two of them step trough the arched door and them entering must have alerted Zuko because he's already looking in their direction.

He's lying on a bed, dressed in a loose robe and he blinks tiredly. But when his eyes met Sokka's, Zuko smiles relieved - all soft edges and smooth lines. Sokka takes another shaky breath then and suddenly all the rest of the tension bleeds out of his shoulders because Zuko is alive and here and save and smiling at him in just that way and right now it might as well be the most beautiful thing Sokka has ever seen.

Katara helps Sokka walk over to the bed and she must say something but Sokka fully stopped listening. With Katara's help he sits down on the edge as she props up his leg and Sokka - not without some winching - scoots closer to Zuko until they both sit shoulder pressed against shoulder - Sokka has yet to take his eyes off of him.

"Hey," Sokka whispers as he lets himself fully settle into the soft comfy pillows behind him.

"Hi," Zuko whispers back, looking so utterly exhausted but the same smile is still curling around his lips and Sokka wants to kiss every inch of it.

Katara unnecessarily clears her throat and then she carefully pulls up the fabric of his pants before she opens the flask with her healing waters. For a moment the soft sloshing of the water that accompanies her bending is all that can be heard.

"So... I take it everything worked out like we planned?" Sokka ask as his eyes finally land on the lightning scar covering Zuko's torso - peering out behind the loose robes. It looks just like Aang's too. Sokka swallows heavily.

Zuko only gives him a soft look. "More or less," he says and both turn to watch Katara work on Sokka's leg. "And for you?"

"Same."

Katara makes a huff that could also be a laugh and then she pinches Sokka's leg before she continues with her healing.

"*Ouch!* Hey! What was that for?"

Katara gives him a small shrug. "You two deserve each other. Apparently you are both idiots."

Sokka huffs. "That's still not a reason to be mean to me. *Hello? Injured person here?* Never heard of bedside manners? I think I want a different healer now!"

"Tough luck, because I want a less idiotic brother but I'm just stuck with you instead," she says fully amused before she turns serious again. "Your leg should be fine now. But don't stain it and keep pressure of it for a while and if there's any pinching or it feels off in any way you will tell me immediately."

"Will do - Thanks sis, your the best!" Sokka beams at her and Katara nods. Then she walks around the infirmary-bed to the other side. She uses the rest of her water to give Zuko another check over too.

Zuko is only looking at Sokka as Katara works on him and Sokka reaches out to brush some stand of hair out of Zuko's lovely face. Zuko crinkles his eyes at him.

"Everything looks good," Katara says as she finally pulls the water back into the flask and walks towards the door. "I'll give you guys some minutes to rest - and I can't believe I actually have to say that but when I say rest - "

"*Yup.* We get it," Sokka rushes out to interrupt her embarrassed, because Toph's bad enough - he doesn't need hear anything from Katara, like... ever.

"Good. And now don't mind me while I'm going to talk to dad because I am sure he will actually tell me just *what the hell you did Sokka!*"

Sokka freezes again with his hand still somewhere in Zuko's hairs. Sokka just hopes that nobody could got around to start any kind of bizarre rumors before he even had the chance to talk to Zuko about... well... everything.

Despite her irritated words, Katara leaves the infirmary with a fond smile at them both as she closes the door behind her with a soft click.

Sokka looks back to Zuko, who's giving him a curious look but he hasn't ask about it yet.

"Don't mind her," Sokka says with an uneasy laugh. Zuko only hums.

For a moment neither says anything else and Sokka eventually sighs. "Katara said you saved her life because you jumped in front of your sister's lightning? I didn't think I needed to explicitly tell you but apparently I do. You really need to stop doing things so stupid!"

"Sorry- I- I didn't think and... I know how important she is to you and- " Zuko cringes and he even looks guilty about it then and now Sokka can't have any of that, can't he?

"Yeah but you are important too! So stop doing things like that!"

Sokka moves his hand so he can cup Zuko's face. "But also, *thank you* for watching out for her," and then he turns Zuko's face so he can kiss his temple softly, lingering a moment - hoping it gets the sentiment across - because Sokka doesn't know how else he can even react to something like this.

Zuko takes a deep breath and Sokka's eyes land on the scared skin on Zuko's chest again. He reaches out and when Zuko doesn't protest, starts tracing the jacked lines and edges he can see. Sokka has still a hard time to grasp just how close he actually came to losing him when he wasn't even there, when he himself almost...

"Do you want to talk about it? Are you *okay*?" he asks.

"There isn't a lot to say. Azula wasn't... she was even worse off then when we met her and... We fought. She challenged me to an Agni Kai but we won - well Katara won but- Azula is still... She is still my sister and..." Zuko trails off but Sokka understands exactly what he means beyond his jumbled words and he nods. Zuko exhales.

"- I'm okay right this moment. That's what matters," Zuko says then and he grabs Sokka's hand to give it a squeeze before he tangles their fingers together.

"And you? Something happened I hazard but... Are *you* okay? " Zuko ask him and Sokka wants to wave him off. He didn't want to talk to Katara then and he doesn't want to talk now but...

Sokka can't lie - doesn't want to. Not to him and not right now.

"No. I'm not."

Zuko watches him with an unreadable expression for a moment. "What happened? Do you want to tell me about it?" He asks carefully blank.

Sokka lets himself falls back into the pillows. He pulls his hand away so he can press the heel of both of his hands to his eyes and Sokka takes a big breath.

"... I don't know where to even start because that was the most fucked up thing that ever happened to me I swear this will give me nightmares for a while and the spirits are- I don't even... I think you saved my life- the soulmark I mean and... Let's- later. I will tell you later because right now I just need to reassure myself that we both are alive because I almost *wasn't* and apparently you almost *weren't either* and *please* can we just talk later about it all?"

Zuko takes a sharp breath and he moves, making a soft groan while he does so, as he carefully pries Sokka's hands away from his face. Sokka stares at the ceiling so he doesn't have to look at Zuko's devastated expression.



"Just tell me when you are ready," Zuko whispers and Sokka finally looks back at him. Zuko gives him a reassuring smile. "We are both here right now and everything else has to be okay."

Sokka answers with a crooked smile -despite the disturbing and harrowing feeling he's carried with him ever since sunrise.

"Yeah. I- I *know*," Sokka says and then he suddenly can feel the realization sink in that everything truly will be okay for the first time since *ever*. That they are all alive, all save - Zuko and Sokka both, Katara, Aang, Toph and Suki - even his dad and-

"The war is *over* now," Sokka adds the tiniest bit baffled and Zuko smiles at him in the same way as he did before and Sokka itches to touch that smile and he just does that.

- no matter how he feels right now - everything *will* be okay.

"That reminds me," Zuko starts, leaning into Sokka's touch. "We still need for someone get word out to the troops in the earth kingdom that... - *what?* Why are you *looking* like that?" Zuko ask when he sees Sokka's grin.

"Yeah. I already took care of all that. Let's say the generals were very eager to listen to me."

Zuko sighs relieved. "That's good to hear- *Wait*. They listened to *you*? But you don't have the authority for that?"

"Oh, well - maybe not, but you do and... I did kinda speak on your behalf, so there is that."

"They...on my behalf and they really *listened* to you?" Zuko ask baffled, before he narrows his eyes. "What did you do?"

"*Nothing!* What makes you think it's something I did?" Sokka says with a sudden nervous laugh.

"Sokka..."

"I *really* didn't do anything! Just... found some poor general, who's apparently somewhere really high up the food chain. He seemed terrified that he would get the full blame for what had almost happened to me and that's why he was very eager to do as I said." Sokka immediately starts rambling with another nervous laugh.

"For- what almost happened? Because earlier you said that you almost...." Zuko suddenly stares so hard at Sokka. " -Is he? To blame?" Zuko ask in such an unusual dark tone Sokka has never heard of him and Sokka waves him off before Zuko even can get the wrong idea.

"Nah. That was someone else but don't worry, that admiral already got himself arrested for treason and anyway- you agreed that we can just talk later..."

"- *Treason?* Why would anyo- "

"- *that's* what you want to focus on? Because I'm telling you now, it's all just some *huge* misunderstanding and in a week everyone will *just laugh* about this."

Sokka is really sure Toph and Suki are laughing about this right this exact moment.

"Sokka, *just what*- "

"Oh, right. That all just reminds me. We can absolutely never ever tell anyone the true meaning of our soulmarks," Sokka goes on and makes another uneasy chuckle at Zuko's fully perplexed look.

"The meaning... which is?" Zuko makes a face and it's so clear that he can't follow Sokka's nervous rambling any longer.

"The perception that soulmates are destined to be together? Have you never listen to anything I said about any of that? *I told you* it's all about Aang and not about us."

Zuko nods with a confused expression. "Yeah...I don't -"

Sokka huffs at him. "Anyway- we can't tell that to anyone ever. It's so, so important that no-one knows about this or I'm going to look like the worlds biggest idiot there."

"I- you what? I think now you have really lost me- Why would you... You know that you are not an idiot, Sokka. *Right?*"

Sokka goes on unprompted and he can't stop himself from working himself into an even bigger rant now, as his words turn fully sarcastic. "You sure? Because then we can also go all out and make an even bigger idiot out of me, just so everyone has a chance to realize how true that is. How about throwing some huge wedding when we are at it? Would be even nice to have some big event to celebrate the end of the war with a bang and what better way then that. *Everyone loves weddings!*"

Zuko abruptly tries to sit up and only groans before his head fall back onto the pillow. Sokka still catches his alarmed expression as he laughs with a bit of an hysteric edge once. He maaaay really have given him some time to freak out earlier.

"But hey. We absolutely can't forgot to invite Jin or she is going to be so pissed at both of us. Maybe we can even invite her to live with us, when we are at that too. I bet she'll love that. And can we also- "

"*Sokka stop*, What are you talking about now and...*Wedding?* What wedding- *Who's* wedding?"

"This *not my* fault, okay? And it's not like we technically need one now anyway!" Sokka snaps back defensive and cringes at himself at his tone. It's certainly not Zuko's fault either.

"We... *don't?* What? Sokka, No, that's not what I meant." Zuko says to him with even more alarm.

"You don't agree? I mean, yeah. In that case weddings are overrated. *Fuck weddings*. At this point it's just some empty rite anyway. A technicality so to speak, because that's all a bit backwards again."

"Sokka- for the last time... what did you do?" Zuko says even more confused and worried and Sokka cringes at himself again and he finally takes a big calming breath before looking back at Zuko.

Zuko just watches him with a raised eyebrow, waiting for Sokka to explain all of his unhinged babbling.

"Yeah. I kinda... maybe... told the rest of the fire nation that we are already married. But! In my defense it wasn't even my idea. Just some presumption that I didn't dispute because I hadn't had the heart to tell the poor general that he was wrong because he seemed so terrified of what you could potentially do to him and that was the easiest way to get anyone to listen to me and... We can't take that back now! How would that look, me getting caught in such a lie? Don't make me go back on my words, and embarrass me in front of all your generals- "

"In front of- the whole fire- you. I - the generals. What?!" Zuko stammers out, looking completely overwhelmed.

Sokka shrugs sheepishly. "Er- Surprise?"

Zuko blinks and then for the next minute his expression wanes between looking appalled, pure disbelief and amusement - the latter finally winning and Zuko starts to laugh, pulling his hand down his face until he groans because he's still recovering and Sokka shifts to press the flat of his hand against Zuko's chest, leaning over him.

"Are you mad at me?" Sokka asks when Zuko seems to have collected himself a bit more.

Zuko huffs still amused. "You are the most ridiculous man I know and... no, I'm not mad."

Sokka sighs relieved that Zuko does find it more funny than anything else.

"I- sorry. It kind of happened, I mean- We can of course tell everyone it's just a misunderstanding," Sokka adds with a little helpless shrug.

"Or maybe..." Zuko suddenly starts to say slowly, like he's tasting the words, seeing how they fit. "...Maybe we shouldn't say anything."

They... what? They shouldn't? Sokka blinks taken aback at the glint in Zuko's eyes.

"How would that even look? Retracting something like that. That would be quite the... *scandal*," Zuko continues carefully and Sokka's heart jumps right into his throat at the searching expression on Zuko's face then.

They both share a long look - blue eyes meeting golden - and Sokka's mouth twitches when he's finally caught on.

"Yeah. *Right*... We shouldn't," Sokka says equally slowly - still giving Zuko time to call off his buff. "What would everyone even say? First day on the job and already a scandal at your hands? That's not a good look for the new fire lord."

"No, we can't have that, can we?" Zuko agrees easily. Sokka start to fully grin at Zuko and Zuko mirrors his expression with something similar. And they both have done a lot of things a bit backwards - Sokka thinks it kind of figures that this is just another on of these thing now too.

"We can't. You are right- We need to fully commit to my lie," Sokka says as he leans over Zuko, his fingers finding themself back - gingerly tracing Zuko's jaw.

Zuko moves to cup Sokka's head - hands tangling in Sokka's hair - pulling him closer as his breath is ghosting over Sokka's face. "Then we better make sure that your lie is convincing if we want to fool anyone."

Sokka nods and he's hit with such a huge feeling of relieve again - because everyone is alive and save and the war is really, truly, finally over now. And while there are still some things they both have to begrudgingly deal with or have to face later - Sokka doesn't know why he was ever worried about Zuko's reaction.

Because they both managed to overcome so many things together and if Zuko says everything is going to be okay... then it will be.

A wry expression enters Sokka's face then.

"Just like I called it before... No take-backs. Looks like you're *really* stuck with me now," he says before he presses his lips against Zuko's.

Zuko just snorts into the kiss.

## Chapter End Notes

~Five minutes later

Katara: \*throws open the door\* What the fuck Sokka??

Sokka (and Zuko): \*snores, passed out from exhaustion of the last days\*

Or

Everyone: Sokka, what the fuck happened?!  
Sokka: I can explain... No, Wait. I actually can't.

Or

Katara: ... You are seriously telling me that these two idiots are now responsible for a whole nation???

---

Aaaaaand that's all I have, so I hope the ending isn't that much a disappointment because I'm so over this story now. lol.

So, Anyway - a few quick words if anyone is even interested -

I do adore soulmate stories soooo much and at the same time think the concept is fully bonkers - which you can probably tell from reading this alone. But I also always wanted to write a story where the main characters are kinda not romantic soulmates, but somehow kind of are and at the same time fall in love without any of this soulmate stuff - and I know that doesn't even make sense.

But I'd imagined that for Sokka and Zuko both - any misconceptions of who they are and who they are supposed to be - needed to be fully out of the picture until both were striped bare to the essentials of who they are as people without anything of the big important stuff holding them back like Sokka's connection to Aang or Zuko's identity. That's what sparked the idea for this. And for all of this to happen, Zuko needed to stop chasing the avatar early on, which changed so many small and big things (like the gaang never leaving immediately, which also means that Zuko doesn't chase them down and the whole northern water-tribe plot from canon happened at a different time etc. etc.) But the point - right from the beginning - for me was always to somehow get back to canon-timeline of the events. Back to how things were supposed to be. Which left two big questions while writing. What happened to the eclipse and Sozin's comet. Originally I would have just pretended they don't exist because this is an AU anyway and I can do what I want but then I randomly decided that some spiritual intervention was going on and the rest of the story kinda fell into place with all of this.

I am well aware that this story is so messy at times - I'm sure there are some big plot-holes that I missed, my writing isn't perfect either and the characterization could be so much better and my mental health has been for worse the last month, which somehow got reflected in my writing but... I just wrote and actually finished something with over 90k words and I am really, really fucking proud of me for this. *(even more so that I write exclusively on my phone)*

...especially considering that I started writing this as a dare to myself because writing longer stories always ends up with me scrapping things just short before I'm actually

done. I was fully convinced that this thing would never see a second chapter when I uploaded the first but... look at that - here we are.

Anyway, I have learned so many things - like how much I hate having an actual outline for something - and for the next projects I will do things very differently and hey... I already have ~10k words in some Zuko-centric modern Zuko/Sokka Mafia-AU and while I plan to not upload another WIP before it's done, who knows what will happen with that. Lol.

For anyone still reading until here: I'm so, so speechless for all the support and attention this has been getting and I can't put into words just how much I appreciate all of this and how much I appreciate everyone who's been there along this journey with me 💖

Thank you all so very much for reading - It was such a joy!



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