

Zuko's Lost Days

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Zuko's Lost Days

by [AndyBoy](#), [backatpatrickpark](#)

Summary

The Lower Ring's rumor mill churns wildly. It spits out tales of secret police, the Avatar's return, and young men dragged away after a violent fight. From his position at the tea house, Lee's heard them all. He has better things to worry about, though- for one, the cute Water Tribe boy who seems to be pursuing him.

(Or, after his altercation with Jet, the Dai Li take away Zuko and return with Lee.)

Notes

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

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

A couple months ago I accidentally said "Zuko's Lost Days" instead of "Zuko Alone" and this just kinda.... sprung up; I'm really excited to finally be writing it!

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

The Dai Li's grip on his arms was strong, and despite Zuko's fierce struggles, he was unable to wrench free. On his left, Jet was being dragged away by two more Dai Li officers. His dao lay discarded in the street, along with his opponent's hooked blades.

"This is all your fault!" He writhed in the officers' grip, glaring at Jet. "You just had to run your mouth off."

Jet spat at his feet. "I didn't do anything wrong!" It wasn't clear whether he was addressing his opponent or the Dai Li agent trying to wrangle him into the waiting paddywagon. "All I did was expose some deceitful ashmakers! They're a danger to all of us!"

A throng of Lower Ring citizens had gathered around the two, eager for a spectacle. Customers and acquaintances were yelling out in Zuko's defense. Others shouted for both boys to be taken in. Some people were just plain shouting. Pao was protesting, too, but it was mostly about furniture damage and the cost of losing his waiter during the afternoon rush. Zuko's sight landed on Uncle, who'd pushed his way to the front of the crowd. There was a ferocity in Iroh's eyes that Zuko had rarely seen in the last three years; he realized belatedly that he was raising a hand towards the officer holding Zuko. He called out desperately to him.

"Uncle, please! Don't get involved," he pleaded. The last thing he needed to do right now was to uproot Uncle's life. *Again*. Iroh lowered his hand, and the fire in his eyes dimmed. His expression settled into one of fear and sadness. There was a pang in Zuko's heart, and he rushed to assure him, "I'll be alright! I'll come back." The agent, who'd paused to let him address Uncle, began tugging him towards the cart, where Jet was still struggling. Zuko acquiesced but didn't look away from his uncle. "I'll come back, Uncle. I promise."

With that, the officer lifted Zuko off his feet and flung him into the wagon. Pain blossomed in his shoulder as it collided with the bottom of the cart, and the pained grunt to his right told him Jet had gotten the same treatment. The doors were shut and locked before Zuko was able to right himself; seconds later, the cart lurched and sent him tumbling back down as they began to move. He glared at Jet through the corner of his good eye. Jet glared right back. The guy looked exhausted, covered in sweat with his chest heaving. More importantly, he looked furious. *Betrayed*. Zuko shared the sentiment.

Neither spoke for several long minutes as the cart trundled through the lower ring. The hateful silence was only broken by a deafening rumble - the parting of the inner wall. They were leaving the city. Zuko weighed his options. Two of the Dai Li who'd apprehended them had climbed up front to steer. He'd put good money on there being at least one officer hanging onto the back of the wagon, too. Between the stone cuffs, the watchful officers, and the unfamiliar terrain, he'd be caught in a second even if he could bust out of the wagon.

So there was nothing to do but wait, then. He stared towards the front wall, pointedly ignoring the other boy. "Aw, c'mon. Aren't you scared, *Lee*?" Jet taunted, apparently done sulking. His smug, confident demeanor was belied by the panic in his eyes, but the small triumph of Zuko's arrest seemed to keep him from spiralling. "I've heard that the Dai Li are *ruthless*."

Zuko scoffed indignantly. "They've arrested you too, idiot!"

Jet smirked, leaning forward until his face was just inches from Zuko's "Yes, but you'll have the worst of it. *I* was just trying to expose a danger to the Earth Kingdom. When they figure that out, they'll thank me."

"Like hell they will!" he spat. "We wouldn't either of us be in this mess if you could keep your *delusions* to yourself! You were so hungry for something to attack that you've gone and bitten yourself, too." He turned his nose up. Zuko neglected to mention, of course, that Jet was mostly right. He was a firebender, and a fucking good one. He was a danger, too, when he wanted to be. But he'd not done anything to warrant Jet's attack, so he wouldn't give him the satisfaction of being right.

"Well, that's what you get when you corner a pygmy puma in a dead-end street." Jet sat back on his haunches with an unbearably smug look.

Zuko stared. "What the fuck are you talking about? What puma?"

"It's an expression."

"I've never heard anyone-"

"Yeah, well, you wouldn't have, would you, Fire Nation?"

"Quiet back there!" barked the driver. He opened the slot in the cart's divider to glare at them menacingly. "I don't want to hear another sound out of you two."

"Oh, so now I'm being silenced by the Fire Nation *and* the- *Mmph!*" The agent had flicked his hands and sealed a ring of stone around Jet's jaw to cut him off mid-snarl. Zuko winced and clamped his mouth shut. Satisfied, the driver smirked and turned back around. Tired of Jet's seething stare, Zuko turned away himself.

The rest of the ride was thankfully short. After several quiet minutes, they pulled to a stop, allowing the agents to unlock the cart and pull the two boys out into the open. Zuko drew in the cool evening air into his lungs and tried to memorize their surroundings in case he had to escape this way later. But there wasn't much to see. No prisons, no barracks, nothing man-

made at all. Just a wide, tranquil lake surrounded on all sides by imposing ridges, pale purple in the dying light.

It didn't make any sense. Why would they be taken to a deserted spot in the outer ring, unless- No. Bile rose up in his throat. When he tried to catch Jet's eyes, see if he was coming to the same conclusion, the other boy seemed focused on the dirt on his boots. A rumble broke through his panic.

One of the Dai Li had dropped into an earthbending stance and pulled a stone jetty from the surface of the lake. At the end, there was a round metal hatch just wide enough for a person to go through vertically, and he could see the bars of a ladder inside. Zuko breathed a sigh that was relief, half frustration. *An underwater prison?*

"My luck just keeps improving," he grumbled, too quiet for any of the other men to hear. Still, he supposed anything was better than being extrajudicially murdered like some criminal nobody in the middle of nowhere.

The hatch creaked open, and another Dai Li agent- identical to all the others - emerged and approached the group. Zuko huffed with indignation as he was - because this day couldn't get any more humiliating- seized by his waist and slung over the man's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Jet let out a harsh laugh at the sight before the other agent hauled him, rather more roughly, onto his own back and began his descent into the lake. The man carrying Zuko lowered himself in without much care for his burden, bumping Zuko's forehead against the rim. He grunted in pain but was otherwise silent.

His position dangling over the agent's shoulder left him staring down the dark shaft. There was a weak green light shining at the bottom, several stories below. Zuko gulped. A fall from this height, and he would never get the chance to escape. He squeezed his eyes shut and focused on his breathing in an attempt to will the vertigo away. Logically he knew he wouldn't be allowed to fall, but the way he was jostled with every step down the ladder wasn't too assuring.

They carried on like this until they were about five feet from the bottom. The agent tossed Zuko carelessly to the ground then, knocking the wind out of him, then yanked him back to his feet by the collar of his tunic as he gasped for air. Down the hall, he heard Jet resume his struggles- it seemed he'd shaken the gag- yelling threats, obscenities, and finally pleas towards the men dragging him away. Then, a yelp, the dull thud of a stone door sliding shut, and silence. The agent tugged Zuko, still wheezing, in that same direction, still holding onto his bunched-up collar. It was more than a little humiliating; Zuko was glad there was no one there to see as he was thrust into a dark cell opposite of Jet's, his upper arms seized by another pair of agents.

Ignoring his aching... well, just about everything, Zuko quickly surveyed the room as he was being shoved towards the back. There were the two agents holding onto his arms, shepherding him towards a narrow wooden chair sitting against the far wall. There was one man standing guard at the stone door. There was one more agent- that made four, plus anyone in the hallway- in his line of sight, hunched over in the middle of a set of large steel rings with a small lantern resting on top. He was tinkering with a panel of small levers and wheels,

seemingly paying Zuko no mind. Besides the door into the hallway, which had been bent shut, there didn't seem to be any other exit.

He could fight his way out, he was sure of that. If he could disable the agents on either side of him- simple enough, spit fire towards the one on his left, take back his arm, and send a blast towards his right- then he could make a break for the exit. It would be too easy to just leap up onto the rail and use his momentum to kick a burst of flame towards the guard at the door. Hell, he might not even have to attack the agent in the apparatus, although it would probably be a good measure anyway. It was almost comically easy. He could get free and go back on the run, leave Ba Sing Se and resume his search for the Avatar with no one to answer to besides-

Uncle.

If he used his bending to get out, it would only substantiate Jet's claim that he was Fire Nation. Zuko could manage well enough if it were that simple. But Jet hadn't just implicated him- he'd accused Uncle, too. Even if he could get out of here without being caught- and he knew that he could- the Dai Li would simply return to Pao's and arrest Iroh. What the Dai Li would do to the Dragon of the West if they found him living in the city... Zuko clenched his jaw.

He wouldn't let that happen. The only thing to do was play along with the interrogation. He hadn't cracked under Jet's blades, and he wouldn't crack now. If it kept his Uncle off of the chopping block, he would play the part of the frightened refugee. He didn't have a choice.

Just as he'd made the decision, the two agents shoved him down into the chair. He went willingly, but the stone cuffs clamped around his wrists to secure him nonetheless. Zuko waited silently for the other shoe to drop. Any second now, they would zero in on him, demanding what he knew, trying to determine if Jet's accusations were true. Perhaps they would just skip right to torture. He wasn't looking forward to it by any means, but found himself growing impatient nonetheless. The sooner this thing started, the sooner it would be over. This waiting-going on five minutes now- wasn't doing anything for his nerves.

The man in the apparatus finally finished with his tinkering and addressed him. "You're quieter than your little friend. What's your name, son?" He spoke as if he were making conversation at a party rather than preparing for an interrogation.

Zuko stared dumbly. That hardly seemed like the right tone for a torture session. "Huh?"

"Your name?" the agent repeated, quirking an eyebrow. Zuko decided immediately that he hated this man and his cold smile.

"Uh, my name is Lee," Zuko said, then quickly added, "Sir." There were few things he hated more than grovelling- the cold, bad theatre, and the Avatar all come to mind. But this was more important than his honor; a bruised ego was a small price to pay to keep himself and Uncle alive.

"Mm-hm." The man's eyes were hard and cold as they scanned Zuko up and down. "Have you lived in the city very long, Lee?"

“No, sir. I only arrived with my Uncle a couple of weeks ago.”

The man hummed again. He regarded Zuko’s marred face with a detached frown. “Refugees, I presume?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It must have been very frightening when that boy attacked you,” the agent tutted. Zuko resisted the urge to scowl. “All that time and effort to find a safe haven, only to be attacked in the street?”

Don’t patronize me, he wants to spit. That little tussle was nothing compared to what I’ve seen for the last three years.

Instead, he just nodded.

“It’s no matter, though,” the man remarked easily. Zuko stayed silent. “We’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again, won’t we?”

Again Zuko nodded his assent. It couldn’t be that easy, could it? Just cuffed to a chair and slapped on the wrist? There had to be a catch.

The central agent nodded to the two at Zuko’s sides, and without warning a band of rocks sealed around his head, forcing his head upright and pulling his eyes wide. *Yep, there it is.* He hissed in pain and pulled against his bonds, but that only prompted the stone around his arms to tighten.

“Calm down, Lee,” commanded the agent.

Zuko, predictably, did not calm down.

The agent just tutted again and flicked a switch. The lantern began to slide along the rail with a metallic grinding noise, speeding up as it gained momentum. Each time it came around it illuminated the man so he was the only thing visible in the room before it traveled back around and plunged them into darkness. He droned on in rhythm with each revolution. “You’re safe now. There is no war in Ba Sing Se. There is no war within these walls.”

Zuko opened his mouth to protest- obviously that was untrue, that’s why he was under the lake to begin with- but the agent to his left flicked his wrist and he found himself biting down on a stone gag, just as Jet had been earlier. It clamped down painfully on the sides of his slackened jaw and pulled tight the skin of his scar. All the while, the lantern kept revolving as the man continued to drone about safety, freedom, and peace. Within minutes, it all faded into a monotonous hum in Zuko’s ear.

Here, we are safe.

Against his best judgement, his eyes sought out the light as it glided along the rail. The room seemed darker than it had been just minutes ago. It was near impossible to look away from the light.

Here, we are free.

Zuko's chest rose and fell in time with the light's revolutions and the agent's speech. His vice grip loosened, leaving his wrists to hang limp off the arms of the chair as his whole world narrowed down to the scene in front of him.

Here, you are safe.

An overwhelming sense of warmth and comfort flooded his mind, washing over the shrinking part that demanded he fight back.

Here, you are free.

All at once the dizzying sensation became too much for him to handle. Zuko's eyes fell shut. Even in the darkness behind the lids, he saw the lights stall and then fade as the lantern slowed to a halt on the track.

There is no war in Ba Sing Se.

Lee opened his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Couple things:

-Before anything else, I need to give a HUGE thanks to Andy, who's been working on this idea with me for the last couple months, beta'd this chapter, and is going to write the Book 3 sequel when this is complete.

-This is my first attempt at a serious multi-chapter fic. We've been developing the idea for a couple months now and I'm super excited to finally be getting it out! Obviously the Book 2 timeline is gonna be a little different in this one, but it'll eventually tie back with the main plot. The Gaang's gonna come in too, but they won't show up for another couple chapters.

-I haven't decided yet on my update schedule, as I'm managing a lot of schoolwork, internship, college apps, etc. But don't worry- I'm having a blast writing it and I've got most of it planned out, so it'll be updating consistently even until i figure out a schedule.

Chapter 2

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Summary

Iroh discovers a change, or two, or three, in his nephew, while Lee goes on a (sort-of) date.

Chapter Notes

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

The door to Iroh's apartment had stayed open all night.

Unlike his nephew, he wasn't one to rush into things without considering the dangers. Yet there was no force in any kingdom that could stop him from going after his nephew - if only he knew where he was. And he didn't. He didn't know where Zuko was, how he was being treated, or if he would return. All Iroh knew was that he may well have another son bruised and bleeding on a cell floor in Ba Sing Se.

But what could he do? He'd missed his chance to trail the cart after the duel, when Zuko had begged him not to intervene. The only way to find out where he'd been taken would be to get arrested himself, and then he would hardly be much help, would he? No, that would only be digging both of them deeper into this hole. For all his protective instincts, he trusted Zuko's strength and resourcefulness; logically he knew the boy could handle himself well enough. If he wasn't back by morning, Iroh resolved, it meant he needed help and he'd go after him. So he waited by his open door, formulating plans and watching the moon creep in silence towards the western horizon.

Then, hushed voices in the streets below. Tired footsteps up the stairs. A pale hand clutching at the door frame. Before his nephew was fully over the threshold, Iroh had him in a tight embrace.

"Thank Agni. Were you hurt?" Zuko shook his head against Iroh's shoulder. Then, sharper, Iroh asked, "What were you thinking, Zuko? What do you suppose they would've done if they'd found out who you really are?"

The boy pulled back without a response. If Iroh's words were getting through to him, he didn't show it. His expression was dazed, eyes glassy and unfocused. Perhaps he hadn't pulled away on his own accord either; Iroh noticed how he swayed on his feet, barely keeping upright. How had he even made it up to the apartment in such a state?

Finally, Zuko said, barely audible, "I have to be up for work tomorrow," and staggered towards his room. He collapsed onto the small mattress without bothering to shut the door.

Giving him one long, troubled look, Iroh stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him. Their talk could wait for the morning, he decided. Tonight, his nephew needed rest. Iroh awoke the next morning feeling significantly less well-rested than he had hoped, as his sleep had been troubled with worry for his nephew. He intended to sit Zuko down with a hot cup of tea and get some semblance of a story or explanation out of him, but his nephew had dressed and headed down to the teahouse before Iroh had a chance to corner him.

Work carried on as usual that day, except for most of the usual patrons eyeing Zuko with a mix of curiosity and confusion. Nobody seemed to want to bring up the *incident*. Iroh watched as the boy served the table with little more than a, “Here you are, sir. Enjoy your tea.” No grumbles, no scowls, no narrowed eyes or hunched shoulders. Instead, Zuko wore a rare smile as he went around the shop. He made easy, polite conversation with some of the patrons as he poured their tea. It shouldn’t have been as unsettling as it was, but Zuko had not been particularly easy or polite for the past three years.

Beside him, Pao was also keeping an eye on the boy as he counted out the day’s earnings. “Good to see his attitude’s improved. He was so sulky before. What did the Dai Li do, pull the stick out of his ass?” He laughed at his own joke, then leaned over Iroh’s shoulder to peer into the pot. “What did *you* do? It doesn’t usually smell that strong.”

“Darjeerling needs to be steeped at a much higher heat than other spring teas.”

“Huh. Never knew that.” When Iroh chose not to comment, Pao kept on, “Well, maybe the brush with the law made him more grateful to be here. You know, never know what you got ‘til it’s gone and all that.”

Iroh nodded thoughtfully. Perhaps that was the case. Or perhaps he was taking extra care to appear unassuming and avoid any more attention. But that was the common-sense thing to do, and his nephew had very little of that. If he knew Zuko, and Agni, did he ever, then this wasn’t how he exercised his caution. Zuko’s caution was sharp eyes, fire behind his teeth, and a hand on his blades. No, the boy across the shop wasn’t vigilant. If anything, his behavior was more in line with the shy young prince that he knew years ago, kind and calm if not carefree. The realization made his heart ache.

Zuko’s behavior remained constant throughout the day. Maybe it should have been assuring, but it only put Iroh more on edge; it was nice enough, but it just wasn’t like Zuko. He decided to raise the question as he prepared their tea that night, back at the apartment. Zuko was making his bed when he called out to him, “Nephew, I was hoping I might have a word with you.”

Zuko’s head popped out from behind the sliding screen, still wide-eyed and relaxed. “Yes, Uncle Mushi?”

Iroh had to take great care to keep his eyes from bulging out of his head. So that’s how it was, then. For one reason or another, he was playing along with the illusion they’d created. Was he just trying to stay in that headspace, or did he really believe it?

He tested the theory, “Well, Lee,” he began. Sure enough, the boy responded to that name in a way he hadn’t to his own. “I must tell you that I’m... pleasantly surprised with how you’re

handling our situation, but I'm also concerned that you may be suppressing your feelings. For these past three years you've thought of nothing but winning the war and restoring your honor, but these past few days, you seem perfectly content to pretend that-" Iroh paused and looked back up from the tea service. His nephew had gone deadly still, just staring at the wall with a blank expression.

"Uncle, what are you talking about?" Zuko asked, finally turning to face him with vacant eyes and a calm smile.

"There is no war in Ba Sing Se."

"Uncle, it's that girl over there. She's in here every day and she keeps... looking at me." Lee pointed furtively to the girl in question, and Uncle raised an eyebrow.

She'd been in the shop almost every day since he and Mushi had started there. The girl would sit in the corner nursing her tea for an hour or more, and would every so often raise her eyes to stare at Lee through thick lashes. He was going crazy trying to figure out what her problem was. "What do you suppose she wants?"

Mushi's quizzical expression turned amused. "Why don't you ask her yourself, nephew?" he asked, nodding towards the counter. Sure enough, the girl was leaning there looking coy, drumming her fingers anxiously. Lee yelped, and she gave him a wide smile.

"Hi, there. Thanks for the tea." He swore he saw her flutter her lashes.

He rubbed at the back of his neck. Most customers weren't so... personal with their thanks. "Oh, uh, no problem. It's uh, a tea shop."

"Ha, right..." She quit tapping her nails on the countertop, looked away and then back up at him. "What's your name?"

"I'm Lee. I just moved here with my uncle."

"Cool, Lee. My name's Jin." Lee nodded and turned back to the pot on the stove. Uncle nudged his side to redirect his attention; Jin was still looking at him expectantly.

"Sorry?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to go out sometime?"

"Go out?"

She nodded vigorously. "Yeah! We could get dinner tonight if you want? I know a good place up in the middle ring that does good apps."

Oh! She wants to be friends. He really didn't know anyone his age in Ba Sing Se, besides what's-his-name from the ferry, and Lee hadn't seen him since they'd arrived. As much as he

loved spending time with Uncle, he could really use a friend. Lee returned her smile. "Yes, I'd like that. Thank you."

Jin beamed back at him. "Great! Let's meet here at sundown."

Another tug at his hair. "Uncle!" Lee whined, twisting around to glare not at Mushi but at the comb in his hand. "That *hurts*."

"Don't you want to look nice for your date, pr- Lee?" Mushi chided with a soft smile, nudging Lee to face away from him again. Lee's heart stopped dead. His uncle continued to wax poetic- something about a girl's heart being a precious flower that only bloomed with effort and attention- but Lee ceased to hear it.

For my date?

"Uncle?" he asked cautiously. The comb caught in his hair. "This isn't- this isn't a *date*, is it?"

Mushi's chuckle was warm and familiar behind him. "Of course it is! She's had quite the little crush on you ever since we arrived."

Lee buried his face in his hands with a groan. "Oh, uncle. She'll be so disappointed."

"Why do you say that?"

"Come on, Uncle Mushi, when have I ever shown any interest in, y'know, girls?" Mushi's hands stilled, then lifted out of his hair. Lee pressed on, "I mean, she seems lovely, but I thought we were just going to hang out, as friends. You must've known that I was-" Lee flicked his wrist.

"I'm afraid you never saw fit to mention it," Mushi replied. His tone was calm, but even then there was a slight waver to it. Was he really so surprised? "But you know this doesn't change my love for you, my nephew."

"I know it wouldn't, Uncle." Lee had to wonder why his uncle seemed so shaken by his admission. Men and women like him were perfectly commonplace here, as far as he knew; he'd seen at least two such couples on his walk home today. It wasn't as if they were in the Fire Nation, where you could be jailed for having a relationship like that. (The thought of being gay in a place like that made his chest tighten.)

The comb descended again. It seemed Mushi was over his shock. "Of course you should still keep your word to Jin." he advised, and Lee groaned again.

Still, Lee found himself standing outside the teahouse wondering if it was too late to back out. Suppose Jin tried to invite him on another date, or kiss him, or- he shuddered. Behind him, someone cleared their throat. When he turned to find Jin wearing a loose dress and

messy ponytail, he breathed a sigh of relief. *Pretty casual*, Lee noticed, and the alarm bells going off in his head subsided. *Not a date, then.*

“Oh, look at you, so cute!” she cooed, then reached up to tousle his hair. The alarm bells came back full force. *Flirting! That’s flirting! It’s a date!*

He had to ask. “Look, Jin, when you said-”

Jin carried on as if she hadn’t heard him. “C’mon, let’s go! I want to get ahead of the dinner rush!” Then she grabbed his hand and they were off. Part of Lee wanted to come right out and ask her exactly what this was, but his rumbling stomach made him reconsider. He supposed he could wait until there was food in front of him before springing the question.

Dinner went as well as it could’ve, all things considered. (*All things* being Lee’s awkward nature and rampant homosexuality.) The restaurant was decent and cheap, and the service was quick. They sat together on the patio, saying very little. After several minutes spent watching people passing in the street, Jin was the first to speak.

“Go light on the pepper, Lee. I’ve had the noodles here before, they’re already pretty hot.”

He shrugged and looked down into the red broth, now saturated with ground pepper. “I like heat.”

Jin wrinkled her nose. “I can see that.” She kept the small talk going as he finished defiling his entree. “So... how do you like the city so far, Lee?”

“It’s...” *Peaceful. Safe. Free.* “Pretty good so far.”

She grinned at him and tapped her chin thoughtfully, obviously preparing another question. “What do you do for fun?”

This one didn’t require much thought. “Nothing.”

“There’s *nothing* that you enjoy doing?”

He raised his hands defensively. “I haven’t had much free time, alright?”

These little pleasantries were starting to put him on edge; for some reason, he couldn’t seem to recall much about himself. It was just nerves, he reasoned. Small talk had never been his strong suit. Maybe he should cut in, say something nice to break the tension. Watching her shove a clump of noodles into her mouth, he offered, “You have quite the appetite, for a girl!” Even as he said it, Lee cringed. It was hardly a compliment, was it? An awkward silence fell over the table for a minute before she resumed her valiant effort to find out more about Lee.

“Where were you and your uncle living before you came here?”

Lee opened his mouth, expecting the answer to be there on the tip of his tongue, but again it wouldn’t come to him. “We’ve been travelling together for a long time.” That was right, wasn’t it?

“Oh! Why were you travelling so much?” She asked through a mouthful of noodles.

Lee wracked his brain. “Well... I guess we just moved around a lot and never really got the chance to settle in. We were never safe anywhere we went.” His next sentence comes out without him really thinking about it. “It’s safe in Ba Sing Se.” Jin nodded her agreement and got back to her noodles.

As Lee was counting out the coins to pay for their meal, Jin leaned across the table and whispered, “Hey, I wanna show you one of my favorite places in the city. Have you been to the firelight fountain yet?” He shook his head.

“I’m so excited for you to see it; The lamps make the water sparkle and reflect in the pool in the most beautiful way!” she squealed, pulling him along. He found himself grinning back at her as they turned a corner; even if it was a date, he was starting to enjoy himself.

Just in time for him to decide he was having a good time, Lee realized he was on a collision course with another pedestrian just two- no, one- no, half a foot in front of him. He tumbled to the ground with a yelp, as did the young man he’d bumped into, who dropped the stack of fliers he’d been holding. Jin helped two boys to their feet up amidst the flurry of papers.

Jin cried, “I’m so sorry, are you alright?” Amid her apologies, Lee stooped down to catch a couple fliers before they hit the ground. He scanned the one on top as he straightened up. In brown ink it depicted some kind of enormous... buffalo? Whatever it was, it was bizarre, with an arrow marking down its forehead and its broad mouth hanging open. He’d hate to be the one who found this thing.

“Here, I’ve got it- oh thank you, Jin. Here you are, sorry about that.” He held the stack out towards the young man, who just gaped and sputtered for a few moments, unresponsive to Lee’s gesture. *He’s got pretty eyes*, Lee thought. Actually, the whole of him was pretty, with strong features, warm brown skin, and a sleeveless blue tunic that matched his eyes strikingly. With a start he realized he’d been staring far too long, and that the other boy was staring back at him. Lee pushed the fliers towards him again, more forcefully. This time, he took them, expression unreadable. Jin pulled at his sleeve. Lee smiled apologetically and allowed her to lead him down the street, but let his eyes linger for a moment longer. *She never said for sure it was a date. Just looking couldn’t hurt.*

“Ah!” the boy finally said, although it was more of a shout. Even his voice crack was kind of cute. “Zu-”

“Bless you!” Lee called back cheerfully, taking Jin’s hand as they walked on.

Jin continued to rattle on as they strolled through the Middle Ring (Lee didn’t hold it against her; one of them had to fill the silence, and he was hardly the talkative type). “It’s so nice at this time of night, when the sky is all dark blue, the red lights look so nice reflected in- Oh.”

The square was pretty, definitely, with a beautiful tiered fountain full of delicate lanterns that sat in a ring of streetlamps. But it was totally dark. Jin’s smile dimmed. “I can’t believe it. They aren’t lit.” Lee frowned at the disappointment in her voice. He wished there was

something he could do, but it wasn't like he could interrupt the date and run home for his spark rocks.

Maybe he could cheer her up in another way. Lee fished in his pocket for the coupons Uncle had given him. "Here, I brought you something," He held them out, trying for a smile. "For a free cup of tea. So you don't have to spend so much when you come in to stare at me."

Her disappointment seemed to wane slightly as she took the coupon, and he counted it as a victory. "Lee, this is so sweet." When she looked back up at him, there was a mischievous glint in her eyes. "I have something for you too, Lee. Close your eyes?" He swallowed thickly but complied. *Spirits above, don't let her kiss me.*

Apparently the spirits weren't listening. Jin leaned in and kissed him. It was... alright, he supposed. Not as bad as he had been dreading, at least. Brief and warm, but not particularly exciting until a pair of bright blue eyes popped into his mind. Lee squeaked and pulled away from the kiss.

Even without the lamplight, he could see Jin chewing on her bottom lip. "You were thinking of that boy from earlier, weren't you?"

Lee flinched backwards. "I- how did you know?"

Jin giggled despite herself and poked him in the ribs. "I was, too." Still, he felt guilty. He'd taken her out knowing she probably expected more from him than friendship; she should've been out with a boy who could give her that.

"I'm really sorry, Jin. I thought you already knew." He hung his head and traced cracks in the pavement with his eyes. "Guess I really wasted your night, huh?"

Jin's hand found his shoulder and rubbed at the tense muscle there. When he looked up, she was fixing him with that same fond smile. "Hey, it's no sweat, Lee! Really! I had fun, and you're not bad company. Maybe we could hang out more, just as friends."

Friends.

"That would be.... nice."

"Great." Then, Jin smirked devilishly. "I don't suppose you have a sister though, do you?"

Lee stopped mid-step with a rough gasp. For one short moment, an electric jolt seemed to shoot through his brain and down his spine. It was like a static shock, magnified tenfold. The sensation left him as quickly as it'd come, leaving nothing but a strange, unsettled feeling. Jin stared at him, concerned and Lee shivered to try to shake the strange feeling; probably it was just nausea from dinner.

"No. It's always been just me and Uncle."

Zuko: *behaves like a normal fucking person*

Iroh: oh god something is very very wrong

--

Thanks for reading! This took a little longer to write than I wanted it to, but think it was worth it. Hopefully the next one will be out sooner. I hope the perspective shift wasn't too sudden; originally this was meant to be two chapters, but the Iroh perspective was too short to go on its own.

Chapter 3

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Summary

Sokka spots a familiar face.

Chapter Notes

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

Prince Zuko. Prince Fucking Zuko was in Ba Sing Se. He'd played at being quiet, and polite, and civil, but there was no mistaking him even then. He was here, and he was plotting something.

Sokka tapped his foot impatiently. Sheltered under the veranda of a fruit vendor in the square where he'd Zuko pass by with that poor, innocent girl the night before. He wondered what had become of her. Clearly, in his endless deviousness, Zuko had lured the girl in to get whatever devious information he needed to carry out his devious plans. That run-in couldn't have been an accident- the way Zuko's eyes had lingered on Appa's posters and the long, probing looks he'd given Sokka made that clear enough. So here he was, doing some recon. It wasn't his best plan, he'd admit, but his options were limited, okay? It probably would've been smarter to bring the rest of the gang for backup, but they needed all hands on deck to find Appa, and getting all of them captured by the Fire Nation wasn't conducive to that goal. Absentmindedly he tossed a moon peach up and down in the palm of his hand.

The vendor tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, kid, you gonna buy that or not?" Sokka hummed the affirmative, tossed the woman a coin, and resumed his Zuko-watching.

Then, jackpot: pale skin, golden eyes, jet-black hair and an angry scar larger than Sokka's hand. Did he really think he would look any less Fire Nation-y if he just threw on a green robe? Apparently so; that's what he wore beneath a thin white apron as he strolled past with a thin parcel strapped across his back. He gave no indication of seeing Sokka as he slipped from under the veranda and trailed the firebender.

He strained to make out the shape of the parcel. Whatever was in there? Weapons? It looked a little too light, lay a little too flat. Instructions from the firelord, maybe, or battle plans commandeered from some general at the palace. Though just a speculation, the mental image of Zuko having a political in while their gang struggled to get the light of day from the officials here made his blood boil. He picked up pace and drew closer to the boy.

It wasn't until they were well down into the lower ring that Zuko seemed to pick up on his presence.

He had no time to react beyond widened eyes as Sokka seized his wrist and tugged him into

the alley beside a tiny shop. The struggle he anticipated never came. Back to the wall, Zuko just blinked up at him with big eyes and a strange soft smile instead of the twisted and hateful scowls he was so accustomed to seeing there. That alone was enough to freeze Sokka in place, and Zuko took advantage. Seemingly unphazed, he breezed out of Sokka's hold and down the alley. He nodded towards the storefront and ducked inside without losing that faux-coy look. Sokka stayed frozen for longer than he should've, but how could you blame him? He'd always trusted his instincts, but they didn't know what this was, any better than he did.

He crept towards the entrance. The only way out of this was further in. He couldn't go back to get help, not with Zuko on his tail; he had to resolve this issue here and now. His hand went to his back and curled around boomerang as he took his first careful step inside. In the shadowy corner he could pick out Zuko's form next to that of a girl around their age. Shooting large-eyed glances at him and realizing they'd been spotted, the pair huddled together and dissolved into a fit of-

Sokka's brain shorted out. Of all the crazy shit he'd been through in the past couple months, nothing quite stacked up to the sound of Zuko in a fit of uncontrollable giggles. In a haze of *Prince Zuko- girly giggles- Ba Sing Se- evil plan- Fire Nation- giggling*, he had to remember to keep his guard up. Clearly this was a distraction, or they were mocking him for walking into their trap.

But there was no big trap waiting inside, no fire nation soldiers springing through the windows. It was just a normal, kind of dingy tea shop, cramped with plain, splintering wooden tables and benches; one propped up against the far wall seemed to have been cleaved in half. The whole place was completely run-of-the-mill, with the exception of Zuko's stupid face as he approached the counter and set his parcel down in front of the bored-looking shopkeeper behind it. He managed to catch the tail end of their conversation as he took an empty table at the edge of the room.

"-forever to find them. How long did he say he'd be out?" Zuko was probably asking about one of his cohorts.

Right here in the open? he marveled to himself as the man pulled open the package to reveal- Sokka held his breath- tea leaves. Oh. *I guess even fronts for imperialist armies have to make ends meet sometime.* Unless it wasn't a front, but that didn't make sense. Waiting to tables at a hole-in-the-wall tea shop didn't seem like the best way to infiltrate the government.

Something came down in front of him while he was watching Zuko; when he glanced up, it was into shiny hazel eyes. There was a girl- *a pretty girl*- bracing herself on the table as she hovered above him. When Sokka raised his eyebrows at her, she raised hers right back and just said, "Hey."

He didn't wanna be impolite to this very pretty, interested girl, but he couldn't risk taking his eyes off Zuko. Why must the fire nation continue to interfere with his love life? "Oh, uh, hi. Do I know you?" he asked, glancing away from her quickly- good, Zuko was still hovering over the stovetop fiddling with his spark rocks- and back.

The girl tilted her head. "We ran into each other the other night- literally! I made you drop your flyers, do you remember?"

Sokka squinted and sure enough, he recognized her as the girl he saw with Zuko yesterday. She was alright, then. Was she in on this? She didn't look fire nation, but you never could tell (after all, if Prince Dickwad could blend in here, anyone could). "Okay, cool. I'm Sokka."

"Noticed you looking at Lee," she sing-songed.

"Lee?" Sokka asked hesitantly. She must've made a mistake; he'd had at least one eye on Zuko since he sat down. Perhaps there was a boy called Lee at one of the tables the prince was waiting on, but he really hadn't been looking at any of the patrons. With a jolt he realized he had taken his eyes off Zuko again, and the back of the shop was empty besides the owner. Shit, where'd he gone?

Jin sensed his confusion if not his panic, and quickly clarified, "Lee, my friend Lee," and pointed behind Sokka. The speed at which he swung around sent a jolt of pain up his neck. Back by the far wall, Zuko came to an abrupt stop, caught in the middle of what was obviously an *ABORT! ABORT!* motion. Or a firebending form, the sneaky bastard. *Lee, huh?* So he really thought he had everyone fooled, just cause he got himself a little job and a phony name. What was he playing at? Jin bumped her elbow into his arm with more force than was probably necessary, severing his train of thought. "Pretty cute, right?"

If Sokka hadn't been gaping before, he sure was now. There were a lot of choice words he'd use to describe Zuko, and *cute* did not even approach the bottom of the list. In fact, it had been steadily inching towards the top of his list of words that were not, under any circumstances, to appear in a sentence besides Zuko's name.

It seemed like Jin had a death wish, because she kept pointing that sly little smile towards the Fire Prince. "Oh, yeah, he's real sweet. Awful shy though, you should go talk to him!" Mentally, he added those to the list too. Sweet, shy, cute boys did not invade villages or kidnap twelve year-olds. That was the behavior of an imperialist lunatic- one like Zuko, who Jin was now pulling over to Sokka's table quite forcefully, his feet dragging on the worn floor.

"Uh, hi." The prince stood in front of Sokka's table, twirling his fingers. "Lee, here. I'm sorry if we got off on the wrong foot." *Understatement of the fucking century.* "Yesterday, I mean. Jin probably told you, I'm new in-"

Jin took mercy on the both of them and cut him off. "Lee, Sokka here thinks you're cute. Right, Sokka?" He really did try to deny it, but there was no stopping her. "Here, I'll let you boys get to know each other." She ruffled Zuko's hair- he had hair now!- and Zuko just... let her. Sokka watched dumbfounded as she waltzed back to her table without one burn or blister.

Sokka looked at Zuko. Zuko looked back at Sokka. Sokka swiveled his head towards a smirking Jin, and then back at Zuko, whose eyes were so big it almost looked like it hurt. His unmarred cheek was deep red, surely with rage and indignation.

As badly as he wanted to make a scene, to rub it in Zuko's face that he'd been found out- even if Sokka really didn't know *what* he'd found out- he knew the smart move was to stay quiet. If the firebender blew up here (and what were the chances he wouldn't?) then the Dai

Li would surely be on the place in minutes, and Sokka would never figure out why he was here to begin with. Zuko would become just one more of Ba Sing Se's mysteries. And on a more personal level, he felt like he had to keep this between the two of them.

"Okay, then, *Lee*," Sokka drew out the syllable to make it clear he was playing along. "Why don't we talk, just the two of us?" An honest-to-god grin split the firebender's face. If this day got any weirder Sokka was gonna hurl.

"Well, my shift is over in forty-five, can you stick around?" Zuko asked, like he was actually giving him the choice. "The place should be clear by then, and we can talk over tea." Sokka nodded in what he hoped was a very serious and intimidating manner. Zuko beamed and with a swish of his apron was back at the counter.

Watching Zuko commit espionage was getting boring, he decided around ten minutes in. While he was infinitely grateful for the lack of flames, swords, and general terror, Sokka almost wished he would get a sneer, or a shove, or a muttered "*peasant*", just to remind him there were some stakes. Instead, Zuko spent his shift padding around the shop, quietly chattering with the customers as he poured out their tea. Even his furtive glances at Sokka were paired with that weird, nervous little smile, outrageously out of place on the prince. There was something palpably different in the way he carried himself, like he really was someone else. But of course that was what he *wanted* Sokka to think, wasn't it? When the crowd lulled, and Jin would spring from her seat and crash giggling into Zuko, and he didn't set the whole place aflame? That was obviously just part of his friendly act.

Sokka wanted to scream; clearly Zuko didn't take him seriously. He could literally turn the Prince in to the Earth Kingdom without a second thought and wash his hands of the guy. Yet didn't even care enough to address it until his phony little shift was over. Asshole.

By the end of Zuko's shift, the place was almost vacated. The shopkeeper had left fifteen minutes ago and so had Jin, with a smile to Zuko and a wink at Sokka. The only actual patron left was a university student slouched in the corner, drooling over her half-done homework. That was good; privacy was rare in this city. Still, they couldn't be too discreet.

Sans apron now, Zuko plopped down in the chair opposite him with two steaming cups. "Okay, we can talk now. My Uncle's gonna come by in a while to close up, but you've got me 'til then," he said.

Oh. So he was here with General Iroh. That wasn't surprising, though, was it? He'd have trouble remembering a time he'd had the displeasure of seeing Zuko without the old man at his side. Even now Sokka wasn't sure how to feel about him. He'd stood against Zhao at the North Pole and Azula in that ghost town, but that didn't change the fact he was Fire Nation. (*Did it?*) At the very, very least, he seemed better company than the boy that Sokka had gone and got himself stuck with.

"And how long will that be?"

Zuko tapped his chin thoughtfully, failing to hide his sly little smile the mug bastard. "Oh, about a half-hour. Then we've gotta clean up. But we can go somewhere after, if you like."

His tone wasn't any less friendly than it had been when they were surrounded by citizens. Huh, he really wasn't dropping this.

"Good, cause I've got questions."

Sokka narrowed his eyes and leaned forward in his chair to catch the cup of steaming herbal tea Zuko slid across the table to him. He hesitated before taking a sip, but even despite being a royal jackass, Zuko didn't seem the poisoning type; he had always been so upfront in his aggression.

It hit Sokka then that *that* was what had him sweating: when it came to things like planning and forethought, Zuko had all the grace of a newborn hippo-cow. It wasn't the phony shyness that set off all his alarms, it was the fact that Zuko was acting at all. There was nothing at all right about this: the Fire Nation's ferocious banished prince, sipping tea and giggling under the sickly green light from the lanterns at the door.

"So," Zuko began. That soft, foreign smile crept up onto his features again. "What do you want to know?"

Chapter End Notes

the rhetorical questions and polysyndeton really went crazy this chapter huh!! this one was hard to write for some reason so i apologize if it was kinda ooc :/

Chapter 4

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Summary

While Sokka carries out some Very Important Reconnaissance, Lee continues his tradition of awkward first dates.

Chapter Notes

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

The date- (was it a date? If it wasn't, it was at least an opportunity to get one)- was going pretty well. He finally had a name to pair with the boy's cute face: Sokka. Even his name was pretty. Much more exciting than *Lee*, at any rate.

He was sort of intense, though, all heavy looks and personal questions. Like, a lot of personal questions. The first thing he said right out the gate was, "Why are you here?" His tone was almost brusque, but that really didn't bother Lee. Between Sokka and his crush on that boy from the ferry- *Spirits*, *what had his name been?* - he was starting to think he had a type.

"I work here. We can go somewhere else after, if you like!" Lee offered.

"I meant the city," Sokka clarified. Then, more to himself, "Can't have been here too long."

He shook his head in confirmation. "We really only got here a week ago."

"Yeah? Anyone else with you?"

"I moved here with my uncle."

"Just you two?" Sokka leaned forward, one eyebrow raised. "What about your father?"

"My father," Lee repeated, and just like last night, there was an answer there that wouldn't come to him. It would've surfaced to tell him that father wasn't with them, but there was more to it, wasn't there? He knew there was. "I don't really know him. I- He wasn't good, I think, so I'm with Uncle now."

"Oh." Sokka's expression could've been relief or disappointment, or maybe just discomfort.

Lee shifted in his seat, tapping the sides of his cup with nervous energy. "What about you? You live in the middle ring, right?" It began to feel less like an inquest and more like a friendly conversation again.

“Ah,” Sokka hesitated. “Upper ring, actually. I figured you probably saw it on those fliers when you picked them up last night.”

Lee faltered. *Upper ring?* The spirits were playing some kind of cruel trick on him. He’d only been here a few days, but cute upper ring boys paying visits to poor tea servers didn’t seem to be the norm. He wasn’t very interesting and he wasn’t very pretty and oh, Sokka was still looking at him expectantly, mouth twitching with impatience. “Ah, no, I hadn’t been reading. I was busier looking at the big, ah, sky buffalo?” Lee tried.

Sokka looked offended on the buffalo’s behalf. “Appa’s a sky *bison!*”

“There’s a difference?”

“Bison’s got a hump,” said the student at the corner table, who had woken up and was gathering her books in a rush. “Have a good one, Lee, Lee’s boyfriend!”

“No problem, Kyoh!” Lee called back. Only belatedly did he realize he hadn’t denied Sokka being his boyfriend. *Well, if things went well...* “Oh, sorry. So... You must be pretty important then, if you live up here. Don’t they have tea shops in the Upper Ring?”

“I’m not here to sip tea.” Sokka said, putting his cup down for emphasis. “I came here because I saw you.” And, like, Lee knew that already, but hearing it from Sokka’s mouth just made him melt. He really did like him, then! He rested his face in one hand but made no attempt to hide his smile.

Sokka’s eyes were just as pretty as they were last night. Something about them was so strikingly familiar, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. The way he looked at Lee was funny, too, like he was a puzzle that needed solving. Lee hoped he wasn’t expecting to find anything interesting. There wasn’t much to know about him.

Something about that heavy look seemed out of place on Sokka’s features. Maybe he just felt like he was doing all the work here; that’s how it’d been with Jin last night. Maybe he should take a shot at the questions. He eyed the boy’s arms, lean but muscled, which his tunic left bare, and shivered. “Aren’t you cold in that?” he asked. Sokka shook his head mutely, looking confused at the shift in the conversation. “Really? Because I’m chilly, and I’m in a full robe!”

Sokka shrugged. “Well, I guess you get used to the cold, growing up at the South Pole. Anyway-”

Lee’s gasp interrupted him. “The South Pole? That’s so cool, Sokka!” He couldn’t remember meeting anyone from the Water Tribes before. How the hell had he gotten the attention of the most interesting guy in the whole city? “How come you’re in Ba Sing Se, then?” he asked. Sokka went completely stiff.

The interrogation was not going to plan. There was something wrong with Zuko, but that wasn’t exactly news, nor was it the issue at hand. No, the real problem was that he wasn’t showing any of it. It was getting harder and harder to play along. What was most infuriating

was how Zuko had the gall to sit here pretending he was innocent, that he wasn't the one to practically- no, literally- chase Sokka and Katara from their home.

Zuko's quiet, raspy voice breached their silence. "That was too personal, wasn't it?" Quieter, he added, "I'm sorry. I know how you must feel."

"Do you?" Sokka bit, finally about to lose his temper. His heart jumped with excitement when the firebender flinched away- he was gonna yell, or attack, or do *something*! He was finally going to reveal himself for who he was.

But Zuko didn't do any of that. He just fixed his eyes on the table and said in a whisper, "I haven't been home in a long time, either." Even with twitching lips and his dark brow furrowed, he looked younger than he ever had before. Sixteen, seventeen at most.

What if he's not pretending?

It was a small thought, and probably a stupid one, but it stuck in his head and refused to leave. Maybe it wasn't an act to him. If Zuko couldn't remember what he'd done, he wouldn't have any trouble sitting here and acting as if he didn't know a thing about Sokka. Because he didn't. Despite himself, Sokka murmured his own apology, and the teahouse went quiet.

"Hey." Something cool pressed up against his hand; it was Zuko's, pale fingers drumming against his own. The firebender's smile was almost loopy now, his head cocked to the side. What is he trying to- "Look, your hands are bigger than mine."

What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck.

Zuko paid no mind to the fact Sokka was about to spontaneously combust. "And warm, too! How are you so warm?" That was weird. Far from the weirdest thing that had happened in the last fifteen seconds, but it still caught his notice. Shouldn't a firebender's hands be... hot? Zuko's fingers were chill, almost clammy as they slid between Sokka's and then drew back.

"Hey, I've got to get back to my friends now," Sokka said carefully, trying to gauge his response. Nothing. Zuko in his right mind would've had him by the collar now, demanding Aang's location under threat of violence. The one in front of him just swung his feet below the table and nodded with a sad little, "Oh, okay." He seemed almost... harmless. But that didn't mean he could be left to his own devices. "Could I come back sometime and, um, talk to you again?"

The prince brightened immediately, grabbing Sokka's hand again as he stood. "That'd be really nice. I'm getting off early tomorrow and we can go somewhere else to talk, if you'd like."

"Great. It's a date, then." Sokka blanched the second that left his mouth. Why, out of every word in every language, had he used *date*? Zuko, on the other hand, blushed (and he could not get used to the sight of a smile on that face) and gave a shy wave as Sokka inched towards the door.

“See you tomorrow, Sokka!”

“See ya,” He hesitated, but at this point, why not? “Lee.”

Sokka glowered all the way back to the Upper Ring. So much for recon. His little chat with Zuko had barely answered any of his questions and gave him approximately forty-seven new ones. Among them: Was this real? What did Zuko know, and why had he forgotten everything else? What could possibly make someone’s memories go away, just like that? He starts a list in his mind: *A kick to the head. Hypnosis. Some spirit world mumbo-jumbo. Early, early, early, early, early onset dementia.* Nothing seemed right.

Lee tackled Mushi in a tight hug the minute he stepped into the shop. He began rambling, unable to control how the words bubbled out of him in a giddy stream. “Uncle, I met this boy today and we had tea and he was so cute and I think he’s really interested in me and he said he’d come again tomorrow!”

Uncle dodged out of the way of Lee’s swinging broom as he gestured wildly and replied with a smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes. “That’s wonderful, nephew.”

Lee kept on, oblivious to his disquiet. “He’s so cute, and his name is Sokka and he’s from the water tribe and he lives in the Upper Ring! Isn’t that cool?” Lee took little note of how Mushi’s eyes widened at that.

“Ah, Lee, that might not be-”

“I know what you’re gonna say, Uncle, he might just be looking to take advantage cause we’re not so well off. But we’re gonna go out after my shift tomorrow, and if that’s the way it is I’ll drop him,” he promised. Then with a dreamy sigh he added, “But I really think he’s something special.”

Chapter End Notes

I think I'm sticking to the Sunday upload schedule for now (and i promise it's not gonna be just talking forever, lmao)

Fr, though, thank you for all the nice comments and stuff, they really make my day! Like not to get sappy but I didn't know it was gonna get such a nice response 🥺🥺🥺

Chapter 5

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Summary

Lee enjoys another day out. Sokka gets history's strangest shovel-talk.

Chapter Notes

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

There was a small hill forming in the dirt road from Lee's incessant foot-tapping. He was starting to wonder if he was being stood up. Still, he leaned back against her shop's weak wooden door frame and fidgeted with his hands on the chance Sokka would show up. It had only occurred to him this morning, as he'd scrubbed the remaining half of his face raw, that he hadn't actually told Sokka *when* he finished work. So he'd been leant against the shop's front wall for upwards of an hour, eyes peeled for a bobbing ponytail or a flash of blue standing out against his native greens and browns.

If he doesn't show up now, I'm going home, he repeated to himself for the fifth time. *Last chance. If he shows up now I'm gonna tell him off for keeping me waiting.*

Something brushed against his arm, and he turned to see ocean-blue eyes flashing back at him. "Hi, Lee."

"Sokka!" Lee started, unable to help the eagerness in his voice. Had he been mad just now? That wasn't like him at all. "Sokka, it's so good to see you!"

"You weren't waiting too long, were you?" Lee shook his head. "Oh, good. I thought maybe we'd go up to the marketplace in the Middle Ring, just poke around for a bit and chat some more." Another nod, and they set off. Walking with Sokka felt strangely comfortable, the small talk not so awkward now that they knew a little more about each other.

"Good day?" Lee nodded. "And your uncle? How's he doing?" Sokka's voice was almost forcibly upbeat and confident.

"Oh, Mushi? Just fine. Thrilled about working in a tea house, you know. It's his favorite thing," Lee rolled his wrist in a *you-know-how-it-is* gesture, then paused. "He was kind of... weird about me seeing you, actually."

"Is he really?"

"Yeah, but I think he's just nervous for me to be dating when I really don't know the city."

Sokka's eyes had gone wide at the mention of dating, but all he said was, "No, that makes sense."

Lee continued, hands clasped in front of himself. "He actually wanted to talk to you after this." That was probably moving too fast, though, wasn't it? This might not even be a date; no matter how anxious Uncle had seemed, it would still be weird to insist Sokka meet him today. He added, "It's okay if you can't, though."

"No, that's- that would be fine. I'd like to get a chance to talk to him."

They made small talk as they ascended into the Middle Ring. Lee was straining by now to hear what Sokka was saying; he was right beside him, but was speaking into his poor ear. Lee could make out his quick and pitchy tone, and the outlines of his rapid-fire speech, but the words faded into the din of the marketplace before he could catch them. "Here, walk to my right," he said, and Sokka looked at him quizzically. "I can see and hear you better from there."

"That's a blind spot for you?"

Lee wished he had more than one eyebrow to raise. He almost wanted to make a snappy remark- *No, the huge burnt section that looks like it's trying to slough away from my face is entirely functional, just a preference-* but stopped himself, giving a simple "Yes," instead. It was kind of a stupid question, but it's not as if he had some kind of ulterior motive for asking. Sokka ducked away and then fell in on his right, his apologetic smile now at the center of Lee's vision.

It was mid-afternoon by now, when the market reached peak business. Idle wandering got more difficult among the swarms of shoppers pressing in on them. Finally, after one two many people jostled them trying to squeeze through, Sokka's fingers closed around his wrist, just as warm as they'd been the day before. It was just a temporary hold meant to keep him close through the throng, but it was loose enough that Lee could slip his hand up into Sokka's grip instead, lacing their fingers together.

Sokka balked at him. "Tui and La, why's your hand so cold?"

He could've asked the opposite- his date's hand was uncomfortably warm. A little sweaty, actually. He must've been nervous. "Because it's chilly! Come on, you're not cold?" Several passers-by in short sleeves threw him funny looks; it was a balmy day, considering the season. Still, Lee's skin was clammy beneath his robe and Sokka's hands were blessedly warm. He couldn't help noticing there was something much lighter in Sokka's manners today, a new softness in his smile and ease in his posture. Yesterday, he had been so intense- but perhaps he'd just had nerves. Lee smiled to himself and tapped his fingertips against the back of Sokka's hand.

"You know, I don't have a lot of time to spend today. But I want to keep seeing you."

Lee squeezed his hand. "That'd be nice. Oh, and maybe next time we could go to that new zoo in the Outer Ring!"

“Huh, maybe. Y’know, my buddy actually built that.”

That couldn’t be right. “But I heard the avatar built it himself.” That’s what everyone had said. (“*Yeah, and he managed to corral these tiger-antelopes that were about to like, gore my brother,*” Jin had told him. “*You didn’t tell me you had a brother,*” Lee had replied. “*Is he cute?*”))

“Yeah,” Sokka said carefully. “Aang’s my best friend.” He was giving Lee that funny look again, as if he was waiting to measure his response. Lee turned it over in his head. *Av-a-tar*. Something unpleasant shifted deep in his gut, but he forced himself to ignore it. Now was not the time for indigestion.

That resolved, Lee perked right back up. “Sokka, that’s amazing! You didn’t tell me you were so important! Is that why you live in the Upper Ring? Spirits, I bet you get to go on so many adventures, you must be so brave!” He was literally hanging off of Sokka’s arm now, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Sokka looked flustered and didn’t respond. Maybe he didn’t like to gloat.

“Do you think they’ll have turtleducks?” Lee blurted. Sokka gaped at him. “At the zoo, that is. They’re my favorites.” After a few more moments of gaping, Sokka couldn’t seem to help snickering.

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just... you don’t look like a turtleduck kind of guy.”

Without thinking, Lee snatched his hand back with a scowl; Sokka went ramrod straight. “And what kind of guy do I *look like*?” Okay, so the scar was a sore spot. He could admit that. However it’d come to be- and beyond the memory of agony and a lingering sense of guilt, even he couldn’t recall- it wasn’t anyone’s business to remark on.

Sokka’s hands flew out in a protective stance, flapping frantically in front of him as he sputtered. “No! No, that wasn’t what I- it’s just, uh. And actually, you know, it does make sense! Because you’re so... shy? Yeah, ha, you’re kinda like a sweet little duck.” He finished his desperate rambling with a pained smile, cheeks flushed red. It was absolutely adorable. Lee’s annoyance melted away, warmth filling his chest in its place, distant but familiar, and he slotted his hand back into Sokka’s.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have gotten mad at you."

Sokka started again with the personal questions, but they were a bit more casual this time. Did he feel safer in Ba Sing Se? Where were he and Mushi living? Had it been tough getting entrance to the city? (*Of course, tenement housing, not particularly.*) Lee noticed his eyes wandering over the stalls as they drew into a quieter section of the market; the boy made a quiet *I-wonder* noise and shepherded Lee over to a fruit stall.

“Here,” Sokka drew the syllable out as he fished in his bag, coming up with some coins. “Buy us some fruit? I have to go get something real quick.” He dashed off without waiting for an answer, leaving Lee to prod at the underripe fruits. What would he like? The other day,

when Sokka had crowded him against the wall (Lee wondered with a flutter in his stomach if he planned to do that again sometime), his breath had smelled like moon peaches. But the only ones on the stall were hard as rocks, so maybe it'd be better to split an orange. Or if that wasn't any good-

Someone tapped his shoulder, and Lee turned to Sokka, who was holding out a round wooden carving, barely bigger than the palm of his hand. Picking it up carefully, Lee examined it. It was cheap and coarse and not particularly detailed, but it was unmistakably a turtleduck. His smile became watery, though he wasn't sure why. It was just a little carving. Not wanting to choke up, he murmured his thanks as quietly as he could and committed himself to figuring out where he could put it in the apartment so he would see it most often.

"I'd've carved you one myself, but I saw it on the stand, and I just..." Without warning he paused and rested his fingers on Lee's arm, the ghost of a touch. Then, quiet as anything, "Lee?"

Lee, determined not to tear up, kept his eyes down. "Mhm?" He ran a nail through the shallow ridge below the shell and drew out some wood shavings.

"Why did you leave home?"

"I," Lee began confidently, but the sentence wouldn't complete itself. Spirits, he could scream. This is exactly what had happened with Jin. He tried to probe his brain, but it was like trying to walk through a wall. He knew why he'd come to Ba Sing Se: it was safe, it was good, it was free. But why had he been moving in the first place? The further he tried to reach, the more his head pounded, pain blooming behind his eyes. "I can't say, Sokka. It was a long time ago. I've been with Uncle as long as I can remember."

That, at least, he knew. The pain went away.

Half a head shorter than himself and holding two mugs of tea, General Iroh had no right to be as imposing as he was.

And yet Sokka suddenly felt very, very trapped. Zuko's arm was curled tightly around his own, keeping him tethered in front of the open door to their apartment, face to face with the old man. He wasn't necessarily scared of the guy- as far as the Fire Nation went, he seemed like a decent, dare-he-say moral, man. But even knowing that, Sokka found it hard to be at ease at the his doorstep.

The man in question smiled warmly at the two boys. "Ah, Lee, I left my good tea cozy down at the shop. Would you go grab it for me while I have a word with your young suitor here?"

"Why would you bring your own-" Zuko began, then let out a soft little "Ooooh." He let out another of those quiet, nervous little laughs as he unwound his arm from Sokka's and slipped away down the stairs with a reassuring smile. In a moment, he was gone, and Sokka was left alone with in the dim stairwell with the Dragon of the West.

“Won’t you come in, Sokka? I’ve already fixed some tea,” Iroh offered, then retreated through the door as if he didn’t expect an answer. To be fair, Sokka figured, he really didn’t need one.

“Tea,” Sokka repeated flatly. It was a bad idea. He shouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place. Maybe it wasn’t a trap, but it sure as hell was a stupid idea. And only an idiot would walk right into it. These were the thoughts repeating like a mantra in Sokka’s head as he walked right into it.

Zuko and Iroh’s apartment was... The cliché, condescending thing to say would’ve been *quaint*, but really it was just shoddy and small. It couldn’t have been more than a room and a half, if you counted the water closet. Crammed into the small space were two tatami mattresses, a meager kitchenette, and a low table that they had to step carefully to reach. The rough plaster had pulled away from the wall in places, and there was a large, unsavory looking brown stain in one corner of the ceiling. Yet it had a sense of hominess to it that you couldn’t deny. Cramped as it was, the place was tidy enough. There wasn’t any mess strewn on the floor (which was more than he could say for their place in the Upper Ring, most times), and there were a couple small touches that livened the place up: a vase of lilies on the small counter, a new tea set on the uneven table, a picnic basket beside the door.

These small touches weren’t enough to dispel the feeling that this was no place for two royals from the wealthiest family on Earth. If it was a front, Sokka found himself thinking, it was a very good one. If not, it was just sort of sad.

Iroh settled beside the low table, set down their mugs and gestured for Sokka to do the same.

“I’ve always found Jasmine good for a troubled mind,” he began, because tea selection was apparently the most pressing order of business today. He slid one cup across to Sokka.

“Then maybe you should brew some for *Lee*—” Sokka flexed his fingers in a quotation mark. “Because he’s delusional!”

“Not of his own accord. It’s a delusion, yes, but it wasn’t self-imposed.” Sokka raised one eyebrow very, very, very high. *Answers!* “My nephew was arrested for defending himself in a fight- yes, really, defending- and when he was returned, he had lost almost every memory of his past life.”

“The Dai Li,” Sokka breathed. “You mean they did that to him? That’s—” He shook his head. “No, that’s just insane. What could you do to someone to make them reject their whole identity?”

Iroh was quiet for a moment. A strange, sad look crept into his eyes. “I wouldn’t quite say that. He’s not so far from his true self as you think.” Sokka couldn’t help notice he didn’t offer a theory of what had been done to his nephew.

“I find that hard to believe.”

“I can understand why, and I don’t blame you for it. But my nephew has good in him. He is not at heart a cruel person.”

“That’s touching, it is.” His heart wasn’t in the sarcasm, he guessed, because it came out more genuine than he intended. Sokka switched gears. “But usually, the good isn’t on the outside of him. Suppose he doesn’t stay like this? Eventually he’ll come back to himself and he’ll be a danger to everyone here. I can’t take a chance like that.”

Iroh tightened his fingers around his cup and for a split second the tea inside bubbled violently, crackling with steam. It settled within the space of a breath, but his voice was harder than Sokka’d ever heard when he spoke again. “You cannot expose him. If they ever found out what he is, he’d be tortured without mercy.”

“But *he* doesn’t know what he is!” Sokka interjected.

“Do you think that will change anything?”

Sokka broke eye contact, mind racing as he studied the grounds shifting at the bottom of his cup. The Earth Kingdom would take Zuko with or without his memories if Sokka reported him; there was no point in denying that. The fact they opposed the fire nation didn’t mean their methods were always clean- General Fong was Earth Kingdom and he’d nearly killed Katara regardless. Sokka didn’t doubt their capacity for torture. And whatever he understood of it, the general understood tenfold what waited for his nephew if he was turned in. Facing something like that, would this Zuko have the same stubborn resiliency as always? Or would he break down right away, give into his fear now that he’d run out of anger?

The image of a beaten, bruised and tear-streaked Zuko, huddling powerless and confused in a grimy cell was far more horrifying than he would’ve expected. Before, he might’ve said the guy deserved it. Might’ve. But now... Zuko didn’t even know who he was. What he stood for. What good was it to punish someone for something they didn’t know they’d done? Sokka wasn’t sure he would be able to live with that.

“I’m not going to turn you guys in,” he said with a finality that surprised himself. “But I might have to tell my friends, just so they won’t panic if they see you guys. Believe it or not, I’m the reasonable one.”

Iroh nodded, perhaps sensing that this was the best he could ask for for now. They spent a silent, somewhat uneasy minute sipping at their tea (which was actually quite delicious), before Iroh spoke up again. “Be careful with him, Sokka. He really is fond of-”

The door swung open with all the fury of an embarrassed teenager. “Here it is, Uncle!” Zuko cried, brandishing the tea cozy. “Are the two of you done?”

Sokka murmured his goodbyes to Iroh and stood. With another small bow and a, “See you soon, Lee,” he rushed from the apartment and back down to the street, head still swirling.

“Hey snoozles, you hung that one upside down.”

“What? I swear I-” Sokka glared at her as if she could see it, then at the missing poster- *the right-side-up missing poster!*- that he’d just finished plastering to the wall. “It’s getting old, Toph.”

He didn't have the energy for an actual retort, stretched thin between all these new concerns. It was stupid; finding Appa and talking to the Earth King should've been his only real priorities. If Iroh and Zuko really were here as refugees, and if Zuko really was an amnesiac- and he was certain of it, now- then they wouldn't get in the way anymore. Still, something about it was irking him, driving his need to find the whole truth. And now he had to spend every minute that he wasn't searching for Appa, or planning the invasion, mulling over how to reveal Zuko's presence in the city without getting him arrested.

How was he supposed to tell them? *"Oh, you know that guy who's been chasing us down all year so his dad can dominate the whole planet? Good, good, just checking. Hey, by the way-"*

No way would that go down well. Maybe he could go back to framing it as reconnaissance. Yeah, maybe Zuko would subconsciously let some Fire Nation war plans slip without ever realizing it. Real Fucking Likely.

Sokka had to stop himself groaning outright. There was no way he could carry it off. Maybe he wouldn't tell them after all. He'd given General Iroh his word that he wouldn't have them turned in, and who was to say one of the others wouldn't rat them out? Katara especially wouldn't be having it, not that he would ever blame her. But then there was a chance they'd run into Zuko on their own anyway, same as he had. Then he'd be turned for sure. The thought of what the Dai Li would do to Zuko, without him ever knowing what he's done to deserve it made something twist in his gut that was at once foreign and familiar. Familiar in what it was- protectiveness, a feeling he knew far too well- but strange in who it was directed at.

No, he scolded himself, he could not afford to start caring about Zuko, because that would be a catastrophically stupid thing to do.

Toph finally finished laughing at her own joke. "You know, Sokka, you really can be stupid sometimes."

Chapter End Notes

can't have shit in ba sing se mfs took my childhood trauma

hey guys, I'm really sorry about the delay with this chapter; the next couple should be right on schedule. I'm also trying to get back and respond to all your sweet comments on the last chapter (and fr, the response to this fic has really blown me away I love y'all)!

Chapter 6

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Notes

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

The Universe wasn't done punishing Sokka. He found himself longing for twenty minutes ago, when finding Appa, getting to the Earth King, keeping Zuko safe, and planning an invasion were the most of his worries. Now he had to deal with Jet, and all his excuses and - surprise, surprise!- lies.

Luckily, Katara was taking charge this time. "I thought you said you weren't with your gang!" she accused.

Jet sputtered wildly, looking between Katara and his own friends. "I'm not! Two people's not a gang! It's barely a group!"

"And we haven't been together since Jet got arrested," Smellerbee provided helpfully.

"*Arrested?*" Katara near-screamed. "Is there anything you're not lying about?" Jet held his hands out in defense as she reached back to draw from her waterskin.

"I don't know what she's talking about, I swear!"

"Jet picked a fight with this boy at the tea shop and got them both dragged off by the Dai Li," insisted Smellerbee, and Sokka's brain ground to a halt. Tea shop boy? He missed Jet's response, missed Longshot's pointed look at the ground that said *and he lost, too*, missed what Toph's conveniently-revealed lie-detector powers declared. All he could hear were the gears grinding in his head, churning until they spat out an inevitable conclusion:

"Jet's been brainwashed!"

The whole group turned to stare at him, except for Toph who levelled the same look forty-five degrees to his right. It sounded ridiculous, but it was the only real explanation. Just like Zuko, Jet'd been dragged off for stirring up trouble, then turned up on the straight-and-narrow with no memory of the incident. And if his instinct was right- and wasn't it always, he preened internally- it was the *very same* incident. Someone, somehow, had taken their memory. Admittedly, it didn't give him much to go on, but it was better than nothing.

Jet and Katara broke the silence at the same time.

"That's crazy--"

"That must be the stupidest thing--"

"-Are you insane? Are you *high*-?"

“-You’ve ever said-”

“-I wasn’t even arrested!”

"-Are you trying to outdo yourself?"

“No, no, no! Okay, because- listen!” Sokka yelled over them. Every passerby in a 30-foot radius turned to stare at them, and cautiously he lowered his voice. “I think I’ve met the other boy Jet got arrested. And his memory’s messed up, too.” He had to be cautious not to let too much slip, because any real mention of Zuko could turn this discussion into a mission into a showdown. “But we can’t just show up and start interrogating him. ‘Cause he doesn’t know he’s brainwashed.”

“No one does, Sokka. That’s kind of the whole point.”

“Maybe if we get the two of them together, it’ll jog their memories!” Aang suggested brightly, and Sokka couldn’t help his grimace. For one thing, he didn’t want a confused, upset, *normal* Zuko in their house, and certainly not with Jet around. For another, if that didn’t work, and in all honesty it probably wouldn’t, all it would really do was make Zuko uncomfortable; Sokka didn’t want to drive him away, strangely enough.

“I dunno, Aang. I’ve tried asking him outright already, and he couldn’t tell me anything. I think we could still get something out of talking to him, just in a way that’s less...” He looked around at their ragtag little group, then at Jet’s gang, who apparently went to their day jobs fully armored. “Conspicuous. You know, so the Dai Li doesn’t know we’re onto them.” There. He could introduce them to Zuko without anyone feeling (too) threatened, and if they were lucky they’d turn up some information, too. Two sparrowkeets, one stone.

“Uh huh,” Katara said flatly. As usual, she was dangerously close to seeing right through his bullshit. “And you think that the best course of action is what, exactly?”

“I’ll just ask him to come over to our place, and you guys can talk to him for yourselves.” Then, before anyone could interject about the admittedly convoluted plan, he stuck a thumb out at Jet. “And hey, remember what happens when you don’t trust my instincts?” Katara grumbled something about his *stupid plans* but raised her hand in acquiesce, while Aang whistled innocently.

Toph blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Whatever, Sokka. Go get your boyfriend and meet us back home.”

“He’s not-” Sokka started, then paused. He really didn’t want to know what Toph’s lie-detecting powers would have to say about the matter.

Zuko’s apartment wasn’t more than ten minutes away from where they’d found Jet, so within eight, Sokka slumped, panting, against the wall of his complex. His eyes slipped closed as he tried to catch his breath, and a sudden chill enveloped both of his hands; after a second of confusion, he thought, *Oh, that’s only Zuko-* and boy, he’d never have thought he would say that. When he opened his eyes, it *was* only Zuko, rocking back and forth on his heels like an excited kid. (But he was a kid, wasn’t he? They both were.)

“How are you?” he managed between gasps for air.

Zuko was undaunted by the fact that Sokka seemed to be dying and kept up his rocking. “Great! You’ll never guess what happened today! It’s too crazy.” His voice wasn’t so rough anymore, Sokka noted in the back of his mind. Before, he sounded like he’d spent his whole life screaming at people and choking on smoke (and to be fair, he probably had). The rough grain wasn’t gone now, but it had softened out from gentle use and jasmine tea. “This gentleman came in today and said he’d heard about Uncle’s tea-”

“Yeah, shit’s good.”

“Let me finish!” Some of those princely manners had survived, apparently. “And he told Uncle he was going to sponsor his very own tea shop, which means-” Here Zuko broke off with a grin that suited his face more every day. “We’re moving to a new apartment in the Upper Ring!”

Upper Ring? Did he say- “You said Upper Ring?” Zuko nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, cool, yeah. Okay. Cool!” Not cool. Super not cool. “Lee, that’s great!”

“Isn’t it? This way you don’t have to come all the way down here to see me. And I can come to you for a change.”

Right, great. Now that there was almost a hundred-percent chance that Zuko would eventually have a run-in with the rest of the gang, he might as well go ahead and organize it himself. “Well, that reminds me, actually. I was wondering, since I met your Uncle, if you’d wanna meet my family? You could join us for dinner tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, are you down?”

Zuko looked absolutely giddy by now. “Of course! That would be wonderful, Sokka. You’ll need to walk me up, though-” Sokka groaned internally. He kept forgetting about the useless class divisions here. “Could you meet me at the Middle Ring’s gate around sundown?”

His hands had warmed up in Sokka’s own. He was almost sort of cute like this- but it was the same way a baby saber-tooth moose lion was cute. Sooner or later his teeth would grow in, so tempted as Sokka was to coo over him, he couldn’t be too cautious. “Yeah, sounds great. I’m sure-”

In the time it took Sokka to blink, Zuko had his arms slung around his neck and his lips pressed to Sokka’s. He tried not to lean into it too much, but it was hard not to enjoy kissing Zuko. His lips were cold and he smelled like Jasmine. Something deep in Sokka urged him to cup his cheeks, to lick at the seam of his lips and run his hands through that soft new hair, but all too soon the firebender pulled away.

“Was that okay?” he asked, softer and more unsure than Sokka had ever heard him. His eyes flitted downward and his fingers flexed on his shoulders. Zuko was clearly beginning to doubt his own impulsiveness.

Was that okay? It really wasn't. It was a disaster- an *unmitigated* disaster, thrown his way because apparently the Universe wasn't done tormenting him yet, because he didn't have it hard enough. Because what he really needed was a clingy, amnesiac firebender to take care of. The only words that should describe this whole thing he had with Zuko were "miserably ironic".

But Zuko's eyes- calm, questioning, innocent- rose back to his, and Sokka found himself murmuring, "Yes," and thanking every god he knew that Toph wasn't here to point out he was telling the truth.

"I kissed him."

"Shut. Up!" Jin cried, whirling around from her small mirror. She still had a dark blob of half-removed makeup below each eye. Lee just nodded in response, not moving from his seat on the edge of her bed; he only had one nice set of robes and he didn't want to wrinkle them. She threw her washcloth at him. "*Shut up!* Lee, this is big! Okay, what was it like? Did he make the first move? Did he-"

"No, I kissed *him*. It was pretty short, and I'm sure I reeked of tea, but he was warm and it was nice." Lee picked beneath his nails. They were already clean, of course, but he didn't want anything out of place when he met Sokka's family. "And then-"

"And? There's more?"

"He's bringing me to dinner to meet his family. Oh, and-"

Jin smacked him with a worn-out pillow, then collapsed backwards onto the bed. She stuck an accusing finger up at Lee. "It isn't fair. You've been here like two weeks! And you have a place in the Upper Ring, and you're dating, like, the- fucking, the Avatar's brother! Nothing like that ever happens to me."

"Maybe if you let people finish their sentences," he teased back. She stuck her tongue up at him, and he mimicked the gesture. "Uncle wants you to come work at the new shop."

Jin smiled up at him, bright and surprised. In reality, he'd been the one to suggest it. He didn't want to leave his best friend behind. "For real?"

"For real." The sky was beginning to redden outside, dying Jin's small, beige-washed room in shades of orange and gold. Jin was gold, too. Lee leaned over her to adjust his collar in the mirror one last time. "I'd better go. Sokka's going to be waiting for me." He took a deep breath as he stood from the bed. "I hope this goes well."

Jin pulled him into a warm hug. "I know it will."

When I said I'd be messing around with the timeline, I especially meant Lake Laogai. I am streeetching this bih out✌️😬 Anyway, I'm glad to be back on schedule (because 11:55 on a Sunday is still a Sunday😊); thanks for your patience, those of you who've stuck around!

Chapter 7

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Summary

In which family dinner goes about as well as Lee could hope and about as chaotic as Sokka could expect.

Chapter Notes

TW for emetophobia in the paragraph beginning with "the world around him swam".

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

Sokka wondered if Zuko knew he was glowing under the setting sun. The evening light haloed around his hair, fluffy from being combed one too many times. He wore a raw silk robe over an olive-colored tunic, clearly secondhand by the way they billowed around him in places and made him seem smaller than he was. Golden hour light seemed to swirl around him, and for a moment it was easy for Sokka to forget how strange this all was and just let himself look at the boy. There was an incredible temptation to just grab him and kiss him again. Of course he didn't give into it- Spirits' sake, it was *Zuko*! But that had meant less and less to him lately.

"You look nice," Zuko said and hooked his arm into Sokka's. Sokka looked down at himself. He was wearing the same clothes as he had been two hours ago (although yeah, maybe he had straightened out his hair and then hung around a tiny perfume stall to "freshen up" until the vendor had not-so-politely chased him away. He wanted to give a good impression, after all). All the way up to their temporary house in the Upper Ring, Zuko walked closer to him than he ever had before, staring up at Sokka with big eyes while he talked about his friends.

It seemed like no time at all before they were on Sokka's stoop. He pulled the door open a bit, but stopped Zuko coming in with gentle hands on his shoulders. "Let me just run inside and make sure the place is decent, alright? Just stay here for a minute." He stepped inside and shut the door quickly without giving Zuko the chance to assure him that the place was lovely and there was no need to clean up for him. What an odd life he was leading, where he spent his days searching for bison and anticipated kindness from Zuko.

Inside the house. Aang and Katara were sitting on the floor beside each other as they quietly sifted through the few tips that'd come in for Appa. From the ones Sokka had seen, they

didn't have much credence. They both looked up at him with expectant eyes when he cleared his throat. "Okay, remember how you promised not to freak out?"

"I never said that," Aang responded. Sokka had to appreciate his candor, no matter how frustrating.

"Please. If you scare him off, we have less of a chance of finding out what's going on here." And, he silently added, *I won't get another date*. "So I need you guys to just act normal and..." The relative peace of the room had seeped in. "Where's Toph?"

Katara waved a dismissive hand. "Picking up the food. Why are you being so fidgety about this guy? It's not like we're gonna jump him."

"I just don't want anybody getting the wrong—"

Before he could give them the *right* idea, the door opened with a colossal bang, and to no one's great surprise, Toph stood immediately outside, arm outstretched as if she had punched it open. Sokka shoved his hands into his pockets, hard, to stop himself making a *shut-up!* gesture that she couldn't've seen anyway before the mocking began. "Gee Sokka, what kind of boyfriend are you? You left your prettyboy out in the cold." Sure enough, Zuko stood beside her shivering and hugging the warm food to his chest. He smiled sheepishly at Sokka, eyes flitting over the rest of the group with nervous energy as the entire room fell quiet. Like, dead quiet. Wherever the line was between a pre-pandemonium silence and a heavy, expectant silence, they were toeing it.

"Right! Okay, everyone, this is *Lee*," Sokka began, putting an incredible amount of stress on the name. "Lee, this is Aang and my sister, Katara. I see you've met Toph." He watched Zuko's face for even a lick of recognition as he gestured, and he could tell Aang and Katara were doing the same. When his eyes did light up, though, they were accompanied by his easy smile and a bow, performed as best he could with his arms full of food. If he kept doing cute shit like that, tonight was going to be an even bigger struggle than it was already shaping up to be. He was almost adorably awkward when he made his introductions, stumbling through what a joy it was to be invited and how honored he was to meet them (Zuko didn't seem to notice how everyone flinched at that word). Contrary to her word, Katara looked ready to jump him; she was stilled only by her own surprise and Sokka's tight grip on her forearm.

Aang, Spirits bless him, launched right into a welcome spiel. Zuko looked like he didn't know what to make of the kid, but his smile grew a little surer as he handed some of the food off to the airbender and helped arrange their cushions on the floor. Aang's own face was the brightest it'd been in weeks, and something told Sokka this wasn't the first time he'd entertained the thought of befriending Zuko.

"You guys go ahead and set up. Sokka, could I ask you something real quick?" Katara started, in a tone too sugary sweet to be genuine. Without waiting for his answer, she pulled him into her room and positioned them besides the door. Her voice never rose above a hiss as she glared out into the living room through the cracked door. "Zuko? It's fucking Zuko?"

This was where Sokka's incredible eloquence would come in handy. "Yeah. No. Sort of? That is, it's him, but he doesn't know it! And watch your language, please."

“No.” At least it wasn’t *Fuck no*. You learn to take the small victories.

“Kat-”

“No! And how could you bring him right to us?”

“You guys said I could!”

“You never said it was *him*! No maniac fire nation princes in the house! I can’t believe I have to say this.”

Sokka threw on his best puppydog eyes. “Can you make an exception? He’s very polite!”

“No! Sokka, we need to *tell someone*!”

Here we go. “Think about it logically, Katara. No, no, c’mon, just think. What good would that do us? We tell the Dai Li, and they’d just lock him up or kill him!” He can see the Good! forming on her tongue. “Look, if he gets his memory back, maybe we can get some info out of him. And if he doesn’t, he’s no real threat to anyone.”

“You’ve thought about this,” she said, and it was difficult to hear anything in her tone besides hurt and accusation.

“Maybe.”

“How long have you known he was here?” Katara asked, finally turning away from the door to look at him. Her eyes were as cold as her voice.

Sokka grimaced. “Uh... a couple days?”

A resounding *THWACK* shot through the dining room. Sokka and his sister shuffled in from the other room and sat down with the rest of the group.

Lee shifted nervously on his cushion as Sokka sat down on his left, tapping his fingers on top of Lee’s hand. He had to admit this wasn’t exactly what he expected when Sokka invited him to meet the family. Of course he of all people couldn’t judge a non-traditional unit, but that didn’t make him any more prepared to spend the night eating take-out on the floor with a bunch of pre-teens.

He wasn’t sure what he’d expected of the avatar, either. Everyone knew he was young, but Lee didn’t realize he was a *kid*. But that’s exactly what Aang was: a round-faced, bright-eyed kid. Apparently he didn’t let any of that power get to his head, either, because he might have been one the friendliest person Lee had ever met. When he’d walked in, Aang skipped over the nice-to-meet-you’s entirely, barrelling straightforward into how glad he was to be friends, and then proceeded to talk. A lot. Lee didn’t mind; it really took the stress out of trying to remember his own details.

Toph was nice, too. Just... in her own way. The ribbing had started the minute she saw him shivering on the stoop. (*Someone poked him in the stomach and asked in a high, unrestrained*

voice, “Are you gonna stand there freezing your balls off, or are you coming in?” Unused to street harassment, Lee just squeezed out, “Sokka said to wait out here.” He got another jab for that, this time in the chest. “Yeah, well, your boyfriend’s an idiot. Hold the food.”) It was hard not to retreat into himself whenever she poked fun- but then Sokka was the butt of the joke, then Aang, then Katara. So either she really had it out for everyone here, or she was making her best effort to include Lee in their group, the best way she knew how.

“You’re here with your uncle?” Aang asked. Lee looked up from the fried rice he was sifting through, feeling his chest warm up. If Aang knew that, it must’ve been because Sokka told him. Sokka talked about him to his family! Sure, they’d been on dates (he was pretty sure that’s what they were), and kissed, and met each other’s families. Somehow, though, it was just setting in that Sokka actually liked him. He couldn’t help his giddy little smile.

“Yeah. We live in the Lower Ring. Well, we did. We’re moving not too far from here later this week to open up our shop.” He left it at that, not wanting to gloat.

“Hm, so we’ll be seeing more of you, Lee?” Sokka’s sister asked in between large bites of picken. Lee just nodded in response. He disliked the way Katara said his name, like it was a lie she was trying to catch him in. It was as clear as anything that she didn’t like him, and he couldn’t help wondering what he’d done.

Perhaps she was just protective of her brother. The more he thought about it, the more likely it seemed. She had looked ready to spring on him before he’d so much as said hello, knees apart and hands spread in what he assumed was a bending stance (not that Lee knew anything about that). It was... discouraging, to say the least. He wasn’t sure what he’d hoped for, and he supposed that a frosty attitude was better than outright rejection, but it stung nonetheless. He took some solace in that it wasn’t a class thing; if the kids’ dinner arrangement and rough manners were anything to go by, they weren’t too uppity themselves. But that only led him to keep wondering what gave her that half-suspicious, half-incredulous look every time he opened his mouth. Lee tried not to look crestfallen, but he found himself growing unsteady nonetheless.

Sokka’s eyes were fixed on his shaking hands. “You’re cold again.” It was an observation, not a question. Sokka got up- very helpfully taking his heat away from Lee’s side. He returned with a heavy sealhide anorak that looked about a thousand times warmer than any of Lee’s thin clothes. He draped it over Lee’s shoulders, and although Lee murmured that he was fine without it, he still shuffled it into place around his body and curled his fingers into the soft fur lining. Katara’s eye twitched.

She hadn’t said anything, but Sokka apparently still felt the need to retort, “He’s *chilly*, Katara!” For emphasis, he pulled Lee in by the shoulders as he sat back down, so he was pressed tight into Sokka’s side. The little display squeezed another indignant huff out of his sister, who started clearing everyone’s dishes (with the exception of Aang, who’d made puppy eyes at her when she tried to take his half-finished vegetable dumplings) with a resolute frown.

Aang leaned into Sokka’s left side and cupped one tattooed hand by his mouth in feigned secrecy. “So are we gonna have him talk with Jet?” he asked in an exaggerated whisper. Lee got the sense he was being baited.

“Who?”

“Oh, it’s this guy we know, Jet,” Sokka explained. Something clicked in Lee’s head. “You guys might’ve met. You live not too far from each other.”

Jet. He swirled the name around in his head and for once he came back with an image. Spiky hair, warm skin, a rough voice that rose above the crashing waves. More than anything, he remembered the sense of excitement and novelty. A bitter sort of aftertaste followed the memory, but as always his mind skipped ahead as if there were nothing there. “I know him,” he said faintly, because he was only mostly sure that he did. The whole group swivelled their heads towards him, and he tried not to retreat too far into Sokka’s anorak.

“How?”

“We came in on the same ferry.” There wasn’t much more to say, besides the lingering crush (and that wasn’t the sort of thing you mentioned to your boyfriend’s family).

Aang leaned forward. His eyes were unnervingly big. “Then what happened?”

Lee shrugged. There was a headache starting to form high in his forehead. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since.” The whole group sank back looking disappointed. “Sorry. I guess that’s not very interesting.”

Aang rocked back on the floor, fingers drumming on his own feet. “That’s fine! So... what are you doing in Ba Sing Se?”

“Oh, I mean, I live here.”

“But you’ve only been here a couple weeks,” Katara prompted. *Oh. She wants to know what we were doing before.* He could say they were travelling, like he’d told Jin, but something in her tone told him she’d just keep asking until he told her everything there was to know, and Lee was suddenly much too tired to go down that path.

“Yeah,” he murmured, crowding in closer to Sokka’s side. His headache had sharpened and with a pained grunt he pressed a hand to his forehead as if that could relieve him. A second later, another warm hand nudged his out of the way to take its place. Lee pushed his head into Sokka’s touch as the other boy checked for a fever. Sokka’s face was full of worry when Lee’s eyes opened again.

“If you’re not feeling well, we can wrap this up,” Sokka told him gently. He was so considerate.

Katara cried out, “Oh, but we were just getting to know him!” She sounded almost distressed by the thought of Lee leaving; odd, considering she didn’t like him.

Sokka shot her a warning glance over Lee’s head. “Lee, do you wanna lay down in my room? Or do you want me to take you home?”

“Oh, I don’t want to be any worry. I’m fine to go home, really.” He slid from Sokka’s hold and stood, smiling faintly at the others. “It’s getting late anyway. I’d hate to impose.”

The others looked disappointed but acquiesced and headed to the door with him. He got a sharp punch in the bicep from Toph and a warm hug from Aang. Pulling away, he met Katara's eyes. They were the same shade as Sokka's, and looking into them he couldn't imagine that they were hard or cold. They just looked worried. He extended his hand and she took it hesitantly.

It was a start.

"Thank you all for having me. Hopefully I'll see you again soon." With everyone assenting, Lee made his way out.

Sokka caught the door before it shut all the way. "Lee, why don't you let me walk back with you?" he offered, then shouldered through so he was halfway in and halfway out. More moonlight seemed to land on his face than on anything else, and it lit his blue eyes up like- Lee fumbled for the right comparison. They just weren't like anything he could ever remember seeing.

"That's alright. I only need a chaperone to walk up. I can get back to the lower ring on my own." Inside, he heard Aang grumble something about *all the division in this stupid city*. "And my head is already feeling better."

"Take my coat at least."

Lee waved it away, then leaned up and pressed a kiss to Sokka's cheek. The skin there was already warm, but heated further under his lips. He heard Katara gasp and thought *shit, the water tribe prissy about this sort of thing?* It didn't seem right. Somehow he knew- though he wasn't sure how- they were a pretty tight-knit, community-driven culture; once again Lee told himself it was just protectiveness over her brother. He whispered his usual, "See you tomorrow," closed the door, and set off for home.

By the time he was strolling through the middle ring's gate, Lee was grinning like a fool. He was so relieved, there was nothing for it. His nerves really hadn't gone away all night, but the dinner was fun and they'd been (mostly) welcoming. So Katara didn't like him. She was probably protective of her brother, and who could blame her? If he had siblings he'd probably feel the same. She would come around eventually.

He waved at a drunk man stumbling past, then skipped effortlessly up onto the curb when the effort of waving back sent the man careening towards him. Things really *were* looking up: Uncle's shop, their new apartment, shifts with Jin and dates with Sokka. He could never have imagined things going so well for him.

And maybe it was because he dared to imagine it now, that his brain decided to set itself on fire.

His whole body jolted and his stomach twisted, and this time there was no mistaking the feeling. It was fear, and not the same fear he'd felt before Jin kissed him or after he'd kissed Sokka; it was terror, driving into his head like the blunt of a sword and seizing like cold fingers around his spine. *Terror from what?* Looking around, there was nobody and nothing except the retreating figure of the drunk, dead set on going home and uninterested in Lee. But

for just a moment he was more certain than he could ever remember feeling that someone wanted to hurt him. He was certain he deserved it, and he was certain he had to hurt them first. For Lee, who couldn't so much as remember where he'd grown up, this new conviction was almost as exhilarating as it was horrifying.

The world around him swam. Lee jerked sideways into a lamppost, gripping so hard that he felt the wood splinter beneath his nails as he tried to right himself against the current running through his nerves. Fear, then anger, then fear again, broken only by the waves of fire thrumming under his skin; the flame in the lamp above him seemed to flare up with each wave, and Lee squeezed his aching eyes shut against the harsh light. A memory of a scent—the stench of stale seawater, he was certain, though Lee had never been to sea—lingered in his nose. He gagged once, twice, then lurched into the alley and vomited until the saltwater smell had left and only stomach acid was trickling down his chin.

The drunk man had doubled back and clapped his hand onto Lee's shoulder with a slurred out, "Y'okay, kid?" The stink of cheap alcohol on his breath was a welcome change. The lamplight had waned again, and with an odd, blank feeling Lee stared down at his own mess. A mangled, half-digested bit of pork stared back. All of the sudden and violent sensations had left, replaced by what was real: the cold sweat on his back, the soreness of his lips, the stillness of the night air as his body swayed through it. For once, the evening's chill was a relief against his hot skin.

"I'll manage," he said quietly, more to himself than to the man, and, gently pushing the hand from his shoulder, resumed his walk home.

Chapter End Notes

has a gay little aneurism that makes your sister want to tear me to pieces

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Okay so I know the last couple notes have been dedicated to clearing up the schedule, but a couple people have commented pointing out that even though I said I update Sundays, it usually doesn't show up until Monday morning because I post Sunday night. That's just kind of how my writing schedule's shaped up, so I just wanna put that out there in case anyone's been stressing out waiting for updates (doubt it lmao). Anyway!! Hope you're all having a good week!

Chapter 8

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Notes

help girl this story convinced me to buy a bunch of jasmine incense and now my whole room smells like jasmine... anyway can you guys BELIEVE i put this up 2am Sunday instead of 1AM Monday? thanksgiving miracle

Edit 11/23: Ok so an important chunk got cut out somehow when this chapter went up, should be good now.

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

Sokka watched as Zuko retreated down the street in the direction of the Middle Ring's gate, and his hands twitched on the windowsill. Maybe he should have insisted on walking him home. Katara's face appeared behind him in the window's reflection, looking puzzled and impatient. He turned to her but fixed his eyes on the ceiling. "*Kataraaa*, can we talk about this later?" he whined, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"No! I want to know why you thought it was a good idea to bring Zuko- amnesia or not- to our house!"

Toph did a spit take, the majority of which ended up on Sokka's tunic. "Wait, that was Zuko? The crazy ponytail guy? But he was so..." She grimaced. "Soft."

"You mean you couldn't tell if he was lying?" Katara prompted. Toph folded her arms and scowled, clearly insulted.

"No, I could tell he *wasn't* lying. I mean, he was nervous, and then in pain near the end. I thought it was pretty obvious. But he never lied- he thought everything he said was true."

"So he really is brainwashed," Aang concluded.

"Right. So." Katara whirled back on Sokka. "Why?" It was an all-encompassing sort of *why*, and Sokka wished he had an all-encompassing answer.

"Look, there's a lot of things we can find out from him! That's why I'm doing recon!"

"How was that 'recon'? You let him go home the minute he got uncomfortable!"

"Come on, don't be dramatic-"

“Oh, sorry, am I gonna hurt your little war criminal’s feelings?” They were leaning into each other’s space now, a sure sign that things were going to get petty.

“*Ad hominem!*” Sokka cried out. Katara removed his pointer finger from her face, unamused. “Don’t you want to find out what’s going on here?”

To his other side, Aang snickered. “You’re interrogating the prince of the Fire Nation. By… holding his hand?”

“I’m, uh,” *Think! Think!* “Testing his grip to see how strong he is!”

Toph crossed her arms. “And taking him on tea dates.”

“To gain his trust.”

Katara stuck one menacing little pointer finger into his chest. “And *kissing him?*” He was honestly surprised she hadn’t brought it up earlier. The moment it happened, Sokka could tell it was going to be a big deal. He couldn’t blame her. If he were in her position- he shuddered and pushed the thought of Zuko kissing his sister as far out of mind as it could get- he probably wouldn’t be too happy, either.

“Oh, sue me, Katara! He’s very pretty! And,” Sokka stuck his nose up. “I can’t afford to drive him away. I happen to be gathering very important intelligence from him.”

“Oh yeah, what have you learned from the guy who doesn’t even know his own name?”

“Uh, I learned, for example, that he has a blind spot!”

“Oh! Don’t tell me, it’s the big burned-off half of his face. Gee, Sokka, where would we be without your incredible reconnaissance work?”

Sokka tried not to be too offended on Zuko’s behalf. “Hey, you said it yourself- he doesn’t even know his own name! He’s all info, no threat!”

“For now.” Katara warned, but it sounded like a concession. “But I don’t see anything good coming from this.”

“Well, I think he’s nice,” Aang volunteered, oblivious to Sokka’s inner turmoil. “If Sokka thinks we should keep him around, I do too.”

“I need someone new to tease anyway. You guys are getting boring,” Toph added with a hearty yawn. “I’m with Aang and Sokka. As long as he doesn’t set anyone on fire-”

“I don’t think he can!”

“-then I’m good.” Decision made, she strode away. A crash in the next room over signalled that she’d fallen into bed. Aang followed with a bright, sleepy smile. That left just Sokka and Katara in the living room, never having moved from the door.

When she met his eyes again, she looked more tired than anything. “Sokka, I trust you to figure this out,” she told him quietly. “I just don’t want anyone to get hurt.” Katara turned down and made for the bedroom. With a deep sigh and the knowledge he couldn’t argue that point, Sokka followed her.

That night, he dreamt of crackling flames and cold lips against his cheek.

The next day was a rerun of all the days before. They gathered up their flyers and split up to canvas the city for Appa. He ended up, as he usually did, kicking up dirt in the Lower Ring. It occurred to him that Zuko might not want to see him everyday, but these were unprecedented circumstances (*and why wouldn’t he want to spend time with someone this charming?*). Nerves calmed, he jogged up to the royal family’s little apartment complex.

Iroh met him at the door with a tired-looking smile. Sokka returned it with exuberance.

“Hello, General- ah, no, sorry, *Mister*-”

Iroh raised a hand. “No need, my boy. He’s down at the tea shop.”

“Oh! Great, alright, see ya!” A firm hand caught his tunic and he stopped mid-step.

“I’d like to have another talk with you about my nephew once you’ve seen him.”

Another talk about Zuko. Had something changed? “Yes, sir.” With a nod and a bow, he headed back downstairs.

The teahouse was strangely empty considering the time of day; there were only three other customer besides Zuko, who sat in a corner staring down into a full cup of tea. He looked downcast, still besides the *tap-tap-tapping* of his fingers along the side of his cup. Sokka frowned, too, and made his way to the table.

“Hi, Lee.” The shop owner was glaring at them from behind the counter as he took the seat opposite Zuko. Zuko started, then looked back towards his cup. “I’m surprised they let you in here. I mean, you guys quit, right?”

Zuko shrugged. “Pao is pretending he’s mad at me, but I think he’s too fond to kick me out.” Sokka’s eyes flew from the owner’s glare to the cut-up table in the corner. Either Pao was very sentimental, or he was just trying to avoid another little “incident” in his store.

Sokka took a sip of his tea. It was sour. “Mph. No wonder business is slow.”

“Hey!” Pao yelled over his rattling kettle.

A quiet rasp called his attention back to the boy in front of him. Zuko was attempting to laugh along with him, but his smile was weak, plastered on. He had his eyes fixed on his cooling tea; when they did flick up to Sokka’s, they were wet and uneasy. It was nearly impossible to resist the urge to reach out and cup his cheek, to brush Zuko’s shaking lip with his thumb until he gave in and told him what was wrong.

“Lee, are you feeling alright? I know last night was kinda rough-” Behind him, another patron choked on his tea. “It stressed you out, didn’t it?”

“Oh, no, Sokka, I had a wonderful time.” Zuko assured him. “Really, it was lovely.”

“Did... did something happen while you were walking home?” Sokka asked, and guilt quickly began to seep in. He should’ve insisted on walking the boy home last night. Zuko was older than him, he reminded himself, and perfectly capable of defending himself.

Zuko’s tone didn’t do much to assure him. “Ah, no, nothing... well, I mean not nothing, but it doesn’t matter.” He took a shaky sip of his tea and grimaced. “You’re right. This tastes like shit.” Both boys ignored the sharp huff from behind the counter.

“Hey, Z-” The boy’s golden eyes narrowed as Sokka scrambled to correct the slip-up. “Lee, if it’s upsetting you, you can tell me.”

“I just got kind of sick. That’s all.”

Sokka frowned at the tension in Zuko’s voice. “But are you okay now?”

“Yeah. It came and went. It just shook me more than anything.” Even in the stuffy shop, Zuko seemed to be shivering a little, and Sokka wished he’d brought a jacket to throw over the kid’s shoulders. His eyes fell to the table; Zuko had his hands folded neatly in front of him, tea pushed to the side. His fingers were scratched and bruised as if he’s been holding to something for dear life.

“Your hands-”

Zuko jerked them away. “Please, Sokka. I’m fine,” he said, though the waver in his voice was less than convincing. On went the shaky smile. “Anyway. Uncle and I are moving out this afternoon. It won’t take too long, you know, it’s not like we’ve got a lot to take with us.” He gave a weak little laugh, then fluttered his eyes. (How had Sokka not noticed his flirting, at the start? It hit him like a ton of bricks now.) “We’ll be settled in by the morning, and I was wondering...”

“If I could show you around,” Sokka finished for him. Zuko nodded. “I’d love to.”

“It wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

The way his life was going, it probably would. “No, of course not.”

“That’s good. I wouldn’t want to interrupt your...” Zuko frowned, brow furrowing adorably as he stared down into his tea. “What is it that you guys *do*?”

Oh, he shouldn’t. At this point he knew he really shouldn’t. “We’re doing what we can to bring this war to an end.”

The change was instantaneous. Zuko’s eyes clouded over. His jaw tightened and any expression slipped from his face. There was nothing recognizable as Zuko- either version of

him- behind his face. He was just *blank*. Sokka didn't have a single doubt about what the next words out of his mouth would be; just the reaction was proof enough.

Sokka tried to bring him back. "But hey, that doesn't matter here, does it?" he added in a faux-casual tone. Zuko blinked at him once, twice, brow furrowing as he came out of his daze. He didn't give any indication that he'd slipped away besides a tiny, disoriented, "Huh?"

"Don't worry about it." Zuko only looked more distressed. Sokka felt a twinge of guilt for baiting him into that state. "Have any plans?"

Zuko nodded. When he spoke, his voice was a little steadier. "I've been waiting on Jin, actually. She's gonna help with the move. What about you?"

"Oh, Uncle wanted to talk to me after this." Zuko stared at him for a second, looking like he was fighting off an actual smile. Sokka realized belatedly that he'd said *Uncle*, not *Your uncle* or *Mushi*, but the slip-up cheered Zuko, at least. He didn't correct himself. "I'm supposed to be looking for Appa today, though, so I don't know if I can stay to help with the move."

Zuko's lips twitched downward again, and, without any good excuse, Sokka leaned across the table and pressed a kiss to them. He waited until they had warmed and turned back upwards against his, and even then hesitated to pull away. Surely it couldn't hurt to go and sit beside him, to dart his tongue out and taste-

Someone pressed two hands down on Sokka's shoulders. "Lee! When you're done jumping him, you're getting noodles with me," Jin chirped. Sokka pulled away reluctantly, smiling gently at Zuko even as Jin prodded at him to stand up. The three of them walked to the door together.

Zuko looked up at him and squeezed his hand as they walked out. "See you tomorrow," they said in unison, then laughed. Sokka pulled him in for one more quick kiss, because at this point he was already so fucked he couldn't think of a reason not to. Honestly, he couldn't believe that there was anything wrong about this, anyway. It wasn't like he was kissing the angry, firebending prince that had spent months terrorizing his friends. This Zuko was practically a different person. What was there to regret about kissing this strange, cold boy?

With a flurry of giggles, Jin pulled Zuko away and left Sokka to walk on alone. Strangely enough, he wasn't intimidated by the prospect of talking to Iroh again. He probably should've been, considering that he's been getting... closer to Zuko lately, but to him it felt more like something that brought them together than it did a point of tension. He was a sort of common interest. When the old General invited him in again, he entered the apartment without hesitation.

The place was just as clean as it'd been last time, but now it lacked any of the little touches that made it look lived in. The few things Iroh and Zuko had- with the exception of the teapot on the low table- were in a small stack of boxes by the door. Within the hour, those would be carried out, and by tomorrow evening there would probably be another family of refugees sitting down at this rickety table and wondering if they were finally safe.

“You had him meet your friends,” Iroh said as he poured two cups of tea. It wasn’t a question or an accusation, just an observation of fact.

Sokka blurted, “They have to know he’s not a threat.” Just saying it, he felt silly. Iroh hadn’t asked for an explanation and the reason was clear enough without one. Still, he felt that he had to show he was responsible, that he could keep Zuko out of danger now that he needed it.

“I’m worried about him. He seems so... delicate! I know he’s not, but after seeing the way he was before! I mean, he’s so soft, and he’s always shivering-” Sokka paused. “Why is he always shivering? Shouldn’t a firebender run hot?”

“On the contrary, firebenders run cool to compensate for the fire within us. Your people and mine live in the extreme cold and extreme heat, respectively; our bending alters our constitution to keep us from overheating just as a waterbender’s keeps them from succumbing to the cold.”

For a moment Sokka thought to Katara- how she would always be hot to the touch even in the coldest depths of polar winter, and how at the height of summer when the sun hung for days in the sky, she would shake with fever no matter how cool they kept her. Gran-gran had always told him it had to do with her *gift*, and while it helped him to stop worrying, he’d never truly understood the connection before now.

Sokka reached one hand out, a question; Iroh followed suit, allowing Sokka to rest his fingers atop his own hand. Where Zuko’s was pallid and cold to the touch, the skin beneath his fingers was warm and dappled with age. The warmth wasn’t steady, though. It came and went in waves, as if renewed with each breath. More than just heat, there was an undercurrent of energy underneath that just wasn’t there with Zuko.

“But it seems that Zuko’s flame has been dormant since he lost his memory. In our nation, it wouldn’t be such an issue, but the weather here is middling at best, and his body doesn’t know how to sustain itself.”

Sokka’s heart tightened as he pulled his hand back. He of all people knew that being non-bending wouldn’t make Zuko incapable, but this softer, unsuspecting boy was such a contrast to his old image of Zuko that he seemed almost delicate. He was a lamb next to a lion. He did nothing to stop the protectiveness that was solidifying in his gut.

“He’s just so different,” Sokka muttered, staring down into his tea. The steam wafting off the surface curled over his lips, and his mind strayed to the kiss they had shared yesterday. “He’s so gentle now.”

Something fiercely defensive glinted in Iroh’s eyes. “Did you think he was born sharp and bitter?” Sokka shook his head quickly, but it must’ve been obvious he was unsure. Iroh continued, “For years all he’s known is cruelty. He’s shielded his heart accordingly.”

Sokka glanced out of the small window. In the street below, he could see Zuko walking side by side with Jin, grinning and waving his hands as he spoke. He found it hard to look away, when he looked so sincere and carefree. The scent of jasmine grew stronger in his nose and he turned back to Iroh. “Was he really like this, once? Before he was angry, was he kind?”

The old general smiled sadly. “The kindest boy I’ve ever known.”

Sokka looked back to the boy on the street and caught his eye. Lee smiled back.

Chapter End Notes

Why don't you go hold Uncle Iroh's hand for a minute and maybe you'll feel better

I hope you're all doing good this week! Also if I waited all week to reply to y'all's comments... no i didn't 😊🍷 At this point we're going to start exiting the rom-com phase and start delving a bit more into the ✨identity crises✨

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Lads idk if this one's up to snuff ☺ lotta doors opening and closing in this one, lotta ushy gushy shit, sorry in advance

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

In the dark silence of his new room, all Lee could perceive was the fire tearing through his blood. It was the second time he'd gone through this, but it was no less terrifying than when he'd been caught in the street. Then, it'd been an overload of sensations that pushed him over; tonight it was the complete lack of anything else.

He somehow managed to remain upright as his legs buckled and wave after wave of heat rolled under his skin in time with his rapid heartbeat. The anger had already begun to ebb, and the fear with it, but this time they left behind a sense of guilt that washed over Lee as he clung, shaking, to his bedpost. He didn't throw up this time, didn't tear at the wood beneath his aching fingers, but nonetheless his whole body sagged with exhaustion and he slumped to the floor with a sound that didn't quite reach his ringing ear. *At least it's dark this time, he thought. At least there's no one to see me like this.*

Even that small relief was shattered: his door slid open and in came Uncle, bringing with him light and noise and movement that drove another nail into his head. Lee narrowed his eyes at him. He wanted him there, but he didn't need him, or perhaps it was the other way around. He opened his mouth to insist Mushi leave, or maybe to beg him to stay, but his vision darkened suddenly and the words never made it past his throat.

Lee collapsed to the cry of someone else's name.

When he came to, he was lying on the rug in their main room with an ice-cold cloth pressed against his forehead. He groaned as Uncle's hand, burning hot, replaced it.

"Nephew, are you-"

"I'm fine," he rasped, struggling away from his touch.

"You're unwell," Uncle insisted, moving the cloth back up to Lee's face. Lee batted it away with a scowl and then a grimace as the expression stretched the tight skin of his scar.

"I said I'm *fine*, Uncle!" he snapped back in a voice he almost couldn't recognize as his own. It was too hard, too rough. He raised a hand to his throat. "It was just a nightmare."

Uncle looked at him in that way he always did, as if he understood what was happening in a way that Lee just couldn't. Part of Lee wanted to grab onto him and beg to know what was

happening, but that would mean telling Uncle about these feelings; he would have to come clean about all the guilt, fear, and anger, and that prospect was almost as terrifying as the experience itself.

It was the anger that frightened him the most. He didn't know what he was so furious at, but it was as strong a feeling as he'd ever felt; it felt like a knife he could pull from his own back and point away from him. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt someone. He had to keep them away from that version of him, he resolved. Nobody else could see him in that moment.

He reached out for Mushi's hand and gave it an apologetic squeeze. Lee would've liked to say sorry out loud, but that would mean hearing his own voice again. He hauled himself up and back to his room and fell back into bed, although he knew he wouldn't be going back to sleep that night.

Lee didn't know how long he lay still in his bed, staring up at the unfamiliar ceiling. His heart had calmed and his skin cooled, but the stench of the ocean never left his nose.

When he could hear Mushi snoring again, he rolled out of bed and fumbled across the top of his new dresser. He slotted a stick of incense into the simple wooden holder and struck his spark rocks. Lee had never been very good with them, and by the time the stick lit, the rocks were burning hot beneath his thumbs. He blew the flame out before the end could catch properly and had to relight it again. This time it caught and Lee sat back to watch the herbs burn away, entranced by the way the smoke snaked away from him in elegant, curling plumes. He leaned forward and blew on the end to see the tip flare orange, to watch the pale ashes crumble away. It was one little thing he was in control of. He sat and watched it burn until his eyes stung from dryness and all he could smell was smoke.

Lee only crawled back into bed when pale sunlight began to creep through his blinds, hauling his rumpled sheets over himself to make it seem as if he was only waking up now. His door slid open just a crack; Lee pulled himself upright just as Uncle stepped inside.

Lee spoke first. "I'm sorry about last night."

"You don't need to apologize for your feelings," Uncle replied calmly. He was almost frustratingly kind, sometimes. "I'll be down at the shop today making sure everything is set up properly. Please come and see me if you need anything." Lee almost laughed at the amount of stress Uncle put on the last several words. He nodded instead, and Uncle shot him one last warm, concerned look before he left.

The exchange had him feeling marginally better, but he was still exhausted from the long, sleepless night. Lee turned over and pressed his face into his pillow, drifting off for real this time.

It could have been minutes or hours later when he was awakened by someone pounding at the door. He stumbled to the door and peered out with blurry eyes to see familiar blue eyes peering right back at him.

The moment Lee had the door open, Sokka pulled him in close and started talking at a rapid pace that barely registered in Lee's sleep-addled mind. "Hey, Lee! Uncle gave me the new

address yesterday, but I thought maybe it was the wrong one or you were both out, because you- hey, you don't look too good."

That caught Lee's attention. "I don't?" he croaked. Sokka caught his chin in one hand before he run off to find a mirror.

"Yeah, look. Your brows are all knitted, and you've got a dark circle here," Sokka brushed the skin below his good eye. "And these are too pink. You're dehydrated." He thumbed Lee's lip, seemingly as taken by the way it trembled as Lee was with the gesture itself. "And for what it's worth, I've only been as long as you have, so I dunno if I'd be a good tour guide. But," he offered, "I thought we could go get lunch and eat it at my place? It's kinda gloomy outside anyway."

"Is everyone going to be there?" Lee asked quietly. Sokka's friends were great, but he just wasn't sure he could handle another family dinner in his exhausted state.

"Nah, they're out, doing," Sokka paused to look Lee up and down with cautious eyes. Lee rolled his hands, urging him to continue. "Stuff."

"Stuff."

"*Leeeee!*" Sokka whined. "Do you want lunch or not?"

Lee let out an exaggerated sigh and a lofty, "Oh, I suppose." (Because something about being near Sokka made him playful, even when he felt like shit). Sokka brightened and made for the door with Lee's hand in his, but skidded to a stop before they got far. He eyed Lee up and down. "Need a coat?"

Lee shrugged. "Don't have one," he replied casually, although he thought his heart might give out from the feeling of having his needs anticipated like that.

Soka swung their hands between them and kicked up rocks as they walked the short distance back to his house, stopping along the way to pick up noodles. As promised, everyone was out - doing *stuff*- so they had the whole place to themselves. Lee sat politely waiting for his broth to cool, while Sokka sprawled out on the floor, propped up on his elbows as he picked at his food.

When he glanced up from his bowl, Sokka was staring at him again. "You sure you're okay?" He asked, and Lee didn't have to think about his answer. It felt like he'd known Sokka so much longer than what, a week? Two? He knew it was strange- Jin teased him relentlessly for falling so fast- but it wasn't the sort of thing he could help. Sokka was such a sudden and sure thing.

But what if he didn't feel the same? Lee wouldn't blame him, of course. All of the sudden, though, he was seized with the need to know. He hated all this not-knowing.

Lee summoned up the courage to ask, "We're together, right?" He could see the playful *duh, we're both here* forming on Sokka's lips and jumped ahead. "Like, together-together."

“Yeah, I guess we are.” Sokka said it like the idea was only just beginning to dawn on him. He dropped a warm kiss onto Lee’s forehead, and Lee squirmed up in his arms to catch his lips. “Together-together.”

Sokka had subconsciously started keeping score of all the differences between Zuko and Lee. Technically, yes, he knew they were the same person, but he was hard pressed to find anything similar between them.

Zuko’s lips were always in a tight scowl while Lee’s were soft and pink, and even now they were trembling beneath his thumb. Zuko was stiff, sharp and dangerous while Lee melted in his arms. Zuko’s hair, it went without saying, was an absolute tragedy. Lee’s was soft to the touch and just long enough to wind his fingers into whenever they kissed.

Sokka didn’t think Zuko could ever have needed him the way Lee did, even if they had been this close back then. He tried not to get a complex from it, but he really did enjoy the feeling of being needed. It felt good to finally have someone he could protect.

His train of thought crashed when Lee jerked out of his arms. “What’s that?” he asked with a giddy smile creeping up his face.

“What’s what?” Sokka followed his pointed finger to one of the bannisters behind them, where Momo was gnawing at a peach pit. “Oh, Momo?”

“He looks so sweet,” Lee cooed. It was only as Sokka watched him reach one hand out that he realized Momo did *not* have a handle on the whole brainwashing situation and probably wouldn’t be too keen on getting pets from the guy who had spent months shooting fire at them. The second Lee was within range, Momo let out an angry chirp and sunk his teeth into the offending hand. Lee cried out in pain as Sokka quickly shooed the lemur away, cursing under his breath. So much for his protective instinct.

Sokka surprised himself; even as he watched Lee draw back he couldn’t find it in himself to go on the defensive. That was the other thing about Lee: he was so gentle. He didn’t yell, he didn’t punch, and he certainly didn’t set things on fire when he didn’t get his way. Instead he just frowned at the (almost smug-looking) lemur and nursed his bitten wrist. “Your rabbit-monkey hates me,” he whined.

“Don’t worry about it.” Sokka pulled Lee’s arm closer to inspect it. It didn’t look too bad, but he wanted to be sure. “You know how finicky animals can be.” Lee shook his head with a deepening frown.

“No, my mother always said animals won’t hurt you if you’ve given them a reason. They’re like people, that way.”

Sokka stilled. *Mother? He’s never mentioned a mother before.* It could’ve been memories returning, but there was also the chance this was just something rising to the surface, something that had never been wiped away to begin with. Best to tread carefully. “I thought you said it was just you and Uncle,” Sokka prompted gently.

Lee's brow scrunched up in that cute way it did when his memory was called into question. "Oh. It is."

"For a long time," Sokka reminded him.

"For a long time," Lee repeated, but he didn't seem to spot the inconsistency. His attention was now entirely focused on petting Momo. He finally ran a cautious finger behind the lemur's ear and his expression when he leaned into the touch was nothing short of sunny.

The door flew open, then, and both boys' heads snapped towards the front of the house, where Katara was staring at Sokka with narrowed eyes. "Hey, shithead, we've all been looking for you. Shouldn't you be- oh. Hey." Her eyes had finally fallen on Lee. She nodded stiffly towards him, and he gave her a painfully shy wave in return. Sokka wished he could've told Lee it wasn't anything personal, except it really was, and while part of him wanted to be defensive of his boyfriend- his heart thudded just thinking the word- he'd be lying to say Katara's attitude was anything less than reasonable.

A loud, even knock came at the door, mercifully breaking the trio's awkward silence. Katara peered out.

"It's Joo Dee."

She gave a meaningful jerk of her head in their direction- *Get him out of here before she sees him*. It went without saying- between the two of them, at least- that Joo Dee was an extension of the government, and anything she knew, the Dai Lee would know too. There was always the chance that if Lee were tied to them somehow, he could be manipulated against them the same way Jet and Joo Dee were.

(Despite this realization, Sokka still couldn't convince himself that all of the very-public tea dates were a bad idea.)

"Hey, Lee, why don't we go to my room? Like, now? *Now-now?*" Sokka asked in one rushed breath, by the end of which he was already tugging Lee up by his arm and into his room. They made it inside just as Katara opened the front door and Sokka slammed his own.

Sokka and Lee stared at each other for a moment, both unsure of what to say. Lee, bless him, immediately dove into niceties. "Oh, this is your room? It's nice! Sort of empty, though, but I guess all you really need is the-" He suddenly flushed and bit his lip. "Bed."

Sokka glanced around and saw what he meant. The room was large and well-furnished, but showed few signs of being lived in, as the group spent most nights on bedrolls in the front room (it was a bonding thing, they would all insist, but in reality, sleeping apart from one another just felt foreign to them now). All of Sokka's travel stuff was stacked in one corner of the room, all of his impulse buys in another. In the middle stood a plush bed that was probably average by rich people standards but still larger than his own at home. The source of Lee's embarrassment hit him as he considered its size. "Oh! Well, that's not quite what-"

Lee's eyes only got wider. "Sokka, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have assumed," he began, but Sokka was distracted by the footsteps approaching his room. The room where he had the

fugitive Prince, who was currently stumbling through a loud and frantic apology.

He couldn't just clap a hand over Lee's mouth, but he had to quiet him down somehow. At least he would have a good excuse if Katara walks in, he thought as he moved in to seal his mouth over Lee's. Cool hands curled around the back of his neck and cupped his jaw. He could still smell the jasmine on Lee's clothes and skin, but his mouth sort of tasted like the chili broth he'd drank earlier. Lee's tongue was thankfully warmer than the rest of his body, as Sokka came to find out (and he was sure to find out very, very thoroughly). To his right, the door opened and then shut just as quickly. Relief washed over him. He pulled back from the kiss and pressed a finger to his wet lips in a *hush-now* motion. Lee's response was a dazed nod. He leant back in (and far be it for Sokka to deny him).

He could hear snippets of the conversation in the main room. "Don't tell me," Katara deadpanned, voice muffled through the clay wall. "You went on another vacation to Lake Laogai."

Sokka couldn't hear Joo Dee's response, distracted as he was by the way Lee's lips suddenly slackened against his. At first he wondered if he was trying to get some more tongue, but when he pulled back and opened his eyes, it was to the sight of that horrible, blank look.

"Lee?" His honey-brown eyes seemed to flicker in and out of focus, and Sokka's breath caught with the sudden realization that he had to be very, *very* careful with how he navigated the whole brainwashing thing. He'd assumed it could be reversed, but did he have to worry about bringing *all* of him back whenever he slipped away? Having a confused, angry firebender in the house while under state supervision would be... far from ideal, and he'd leave it at that. Or worse, what if he couldn't be back at all? Sokka had no idea how fragile his mental state might be. "Lee," he repeated as firmly as he could without raising his voice. "You there, love?"

That thousand yard stare faded away and for just a second, Lee wore a look of incredible distress. Then he seized Sokka's cheeks and reeled him into another hungry kiss. *Back to normal*. Sokka breathed a new wave of relief, even as Katara's warning echoed in his ears: *For now*. Sokka moved away once more. He wiped a string of spit off from Lee's chin. "Are you cold again?" he asked softly.

They both recognized the bait; he'd just had his hands on Lee's face, after all. Lee nodded anyway. Sokka walked backwards until they could fall onto his bed, then pulled Lee tight against himself. It wasn't quite the protective, secure embrace he meant it to be; Lee was still well-muscled and had an inch on him, but Sokka still appreciated the effort he made to snuggle up against his chest. He smushed the boy- no, his *boyfriend*- against himself and took little notice of how Lee's hand seems to heat up against his skin as they drifted off.

His foot collides with fur and flesh and he watches Sokka as he tumbles down. The snow is black around him and red where he lands; pride and heat swell in the chest of someone who is not quite Lee. Something crashes into the back of his head, and not-Lee collapses beside Sokka, who has anger in his eyes and tears cutting through his warpaint.

Lee shot up in bed with a gasp, uncomfortably hot. He was all mussed up, clothes rumpled where he was pushed between Sokka and the mattress and hair sticking out at all angles. The room -Sokka's room, he remembered as he took it in- was still and moonlit. They must've been down for at least six hours. Sokka was shooting for seven, if his soft, even breathing was a good indication. He wouldn't sleep so well, Lee thought, if he knew what had been dreamt on the next pillow over.

That was all it had been, though: a dream. *You can't control what you dream*, he told himself over and over and over again as he pulled his shoes on quietly. *It's just an overactive mind*. Still, he was afraid to even look over at Sokka. If his mind really was processing reality, it would have been a much more pleasant dream, one about tea and noodles and Sokka's bed. Maybe his wires got crossed somewhere.

From here Lee's thoughts dissolved into questions. How could he think these things? Where did it all come from and why? How would he stop it next time- was there any stopping it at all?

Lee slipped silently from Sokka's room and through the front door, careful not to disturb the three sleeping forms in the front room. As always, his uneasiness would start to fade within time, but for now he could only take solace in the chill on his skin as he stepped back into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: During the part where Lee hears Lake Laogai mentioned, Sokka thinking of him as "blank" is a reference to a (pretty important) part of the last chapter that I accidentally cut out while I was uploading it. It's there now if you want to take a look.

Also, I promise I'm trying to get back to everyone's comments! You're all the nicest I just always have trouble thinking what to say :)

Chapter 10

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Notes

Parts of this chapter focus on consent issues and codependency. There's nothing too in-depth regarding the consent issues, but I'm leaving this as a warning in case it's triggering for anyone.

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

The weather remained gloomy all week, facing Ba Sing Se with day after day of vicious wind and rain that tore leaves from the trees and against the unyielding stone city. The stairwell beneath Lee and Iroh's apartment had come to be, in Sokka's mind, an oasis of light and warmth. He and Lee had a nice little routine going: they would meet at the Jasmine Dragon in the afternoon, Sokka would sit and work on the invasion plans until his boyfriend's shift ended, and then they would walk back hand-in-hand to Lee and Iroh's apartment to dry off, chat for a while, and then maybe cuddle.

Today was no different. Lee, who'd spent the whole walk over clinging to Sokka like he was his own personal heat pack, pulled away with a yelp as Sokka began to shake himself dry like a polar dog that'd just hauled itself out of the sea. His hair'd come loose out in the rain; he pulled it out of its wet, lopsided wolftail to retie it. As he shook it out he caught Lee staring at him, but not with that strange, worried look he'd been giving Sokka for the last couple of days. Instead there was a glint in his eye, and before Sokka got to ask what's wrong he had two arms full of lovey-dovey-kissy-smoochy fire prince.

"Wait, c'mere," Lee muttered, and pulled Sokka in towards him so that they were pressed flush against one another with his own back to the wall. Sokka went willingly when Lee pulled him in closer, unable to deny him anything. "Here, like this. It was nice," he whispered. "The last time you did this." That gave Sokka pause. He hadn't ever pushed Lee up against the wall- oh, except on that first day, when he'd been so suspicious and cornered him in the alley. It felt distant, now. *Spirits, he's wanted me all this time.* The fingers in his hair were barely warmer than the cool rainwater and at first Sokka mistook them for rivulets making their way down his scalp. Kissing Lee was just so pleasant, more pleasant than anything he could remember in this sweet, heady moment. He couldn't be sure how long they spent lost in it before Lee pulled away and began peppering his face with sweet little kisses. His mouth stalled at the apple of Sokka's cheek and he murmured something against the skin there.

Sokka blinked down at his boyfriend. "What was that?"

“I said.” A cold hand splayed over his pectoral. “Come.” A nip at his jaw. “Up.” A quick, wet kiss. “Stairs.”

Oh spirits, he wants to... do an activity. Together. With me.

Sokka grinned, giddy, and cupped Lee’s jaw, but his fingertip lingered just a second too long on hardened scar tissue; his conscience wailed, and despite his best efforts he couldn’t ignore it for long.

He’s not himself, is he? Lee isn’t- but he is- but isn’t he? Spirits, this is making less sense all the time. Lee’s kinda Zuko, sort of, a little... maybe. It doesn’t seem right to let him do... that.

“Oh!” Sokka squeaked. “I wish I could. I really, really, *really* wish I could, but I-” Another kiss cut him off.

“Come on, Uncle’s at the shop and he won’t be home for *hours*.” Lee’s hands were inching towards dangerous territory, running in circles down his abdomen.

“Lee! I have to go! Aang needs help with, um, Avatar stuff.” The hands retreated, though Sokka wasn’t as relieved as he probably should’ve been. “You know, uh, balance and peace and all that. I promised I’d help.” Lee pouted a very pink, shiny and kissable pout, and Sokka had to fight hard to keep himself from leaning back in. “So I’ll, I’ll, fuck.” He lost the battle and stole one more kiss. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lee muttered his okay and pulled himself from Sokka’s arms. Something about this tone betrayed his reaction was more than just a case of blue balls, or sensitivity to rejection; he looked genuinely lost and distressed at the thought of being left alone. *Poor thing*, Sokka caught himself thinking. It was a condescending thought, but it played on loop in his brain and refused to be shooed away. Iroh had told him, not too long ago, that his nephew became hardened to shield himself from the cruelty of others. But Lee wasn’t like that- he was sweet, and shy, and *soft*. He couldn’t even keep himself warm.

Sokka didn’t know when his conviction- the one where he’d sworn not to care about the boy- had worn off, but it had. Day by day it had eroded until all that remained was the desire to hold Lee tight and keep him far, far away from anything that could hurt him. He didn’t know if it was appropriate, or even healthy, to feel this way about someone. What he did know was that he cared for Lee (or perhaps something more), and there was nothing that could change that.

“He doesn’t even wanna go past second,” Lee groaned and flung himself down on his bed with his forearm over his eyes. “Jiiiiiiiiiiiiin, he doesn’t even wanna-”

Jin groaned right back at him. “Did I come all the way up here to listen to you whine, Lee?” She held up the fashion journal and shook the spread of slim, green-clad ladies in Lee’s face. “Which one?”

“The empire waist, I guess. Can you even afford any of those?”

Jin yawned as she circled the pattern number and dog-eared the page. “Uncle pays well, you know. Anyway, Sokka’s probably just being chivalrous. He’s decent like that.”

“Just third base, that’s all I’m asking,” he groaned, then popped his eye open. “Wait, you’re getting pa-”

“What about this one?”

“That’s cute, I guess. Second and a half! I bet he just doesn’t find me attractive,” he grumbled, resting a hand against his scar.

Jin rolled her eyes. “Lee, you’re a hot piece of ass, and don’t you forget it. It’s got more sleeve than I want, though,” she added under her breath.

Lee nodded in acknowledgement, but he could feel himself drifting. The hand on his face came down to rest against his chest. “I don’t know what I’ll do if he decides he doesn’t want me,” he admitted quietly. More he needed a distraction from what he’d dubbed his *attacks*. That was only part of it, though. Lately Lee had begun to feel more and more like there wasn’t anything he could be sure of, so he was clinging to the exception. Even if he didn’t know who he was, he could be sure he was Sokka’s. It felt like losing Sokka would be losing himself.

The magazine plopped down beside his head as Jin rolled over to look at him. “Hey. Lee. First of all: he’s just as crazy about you as you are about him. It’s actually sickening. Second, and this is really important, Lee-” Her dark brown eyes bore into his, and she seemed to be studying him for a second. “I’ve never met anyone with eyes like yours,” she muttered. “Just you and your uncle.”

Lee frowned. “That’s your ‘really important’ advice?”

She whacked him. “No! Shut up! Babes, you are your own person. You’re important as an individual, whether or not you’re getting any from him.”

“I’m my own person,” Lee repeated. He wasn’t sure he believed it.

Today it was Lee who had Sokka up against the stairwell wall, kissing down his slim throat. Sokka squirmed a little yet he didn’t seem in any great rush to stop. Lee took what he could get; even if Sokka batted his wandering hands upwards, he was still allowed to tug out his boyfriend’s wolftail and sink his fingers into that soft dark hair.

“Sokka, why don’t we go upstairs and-”

“Spar!” Sokka interjected.

“Spar?” Lee echoed. Spirits above, he was never going to get any.

“Yeah, it’s like, practice-fighting. Just light blows- er, hits. It’s really fun!”

“I don’t know how good I’d be, though. I’m not much of a fighter. I mean,” He smiled coyly and, shoving away that lingering image of Sokka bleeding in the snow beside him, leaned in to whisper, “You’d probably have me on the floor in a *second*, Sokka.”

“Oh, okay! I’ll uh, I’ll teach you some self defense, then!” Sokka squeaked, out from his place between Lee and the wall.

They clambered up the stairs together (the new neighbors must be tired of them already, but Lee thought they would understand if they saw his boyfriend). Upstairs, they pushed some furniture around to make room for their spar. As Lee carefully folded the screen into a corner, he heard Sokka huffing a little laugh. He stood in the doorway to Lee’s room wearing a ridiculously self-satisfied expression, and Lee could see him cupping something in his hands. He raised the thing, pinched between his pointer and thumb, and Lee saw it was his little wooden turtleduck, snatched from its place on his dresser.

“Awww,” Sokka cooed, slipping out of Lee’s way as he tried to take the carving back. “You want it back, my little duck?” The minute it slipped past his lips he looked mortified, wide-eyed and red as a head of cabbage.

“Your little duck?” Lee snickered. Somehow he managed to not let on how sweet he found the pet name. Sokka leant forward to hide his burning face over Lee’s shoulder.

“Whatever. Can we beat each other up now?”

Lee laughed softly and plucked his duck from Sokka’s hands, placing it back on the shelf with more care than it probably needed. The two boys stepped back into the living room- Lee took a second to marvel how much space they had here- and bowed playfully to each other. He imitated the stance Sokka took, though judging by the barely-contained laugh from his boyfriend, it was a poor imitation.

Lee quirked his eyebrow. “How’s my form?”

Sokka rolled his eyes but steps behind him to help him adjust. His hands- as warm and steadying as ever- slid up from Lee’s waist up to his shoulders, straightening his back as he nudged Lee’s feet into position with one of his own. Then Sokka’s hands returned to his waist, and Lee was assailed from behind with tiny kisses along his jaw. Lee pushed him away with a giggle and resumed his unsteady stance, just as he was shown. Sokka took an offensive stance in front of him.

“Okay, let’s start. I’m gonna come in slow, and you’ve gotta try blocking me and getting in a light blow.” Lee thumbs-upped, and Sokka’s fist came towards him. It was neither fast nor forceful, and even with limited experience Lee could tell it wouldn’t hurt. He caught the blow, if you could call it that, easily.

“Okay, well, that works now but ideally you can’t really catch-” Sokka explained, trailing off when Lee’s fingers clamped down on his fist. “Ah, Lee-” He must’ve kept talking. Lee couldn’t hear anything over his own pounding blood. Sokka’s hand grew cold in his grip.

Without knowing how, he found himself tugging up on Sokka's wrist and bracing his forearm against his elbow, forcing his boyfriend downwards. It was as if he had no control over his own body. (Or perhaps he was entirely in control, for once, and that was equally horrifying). By the time his actions reached his mind, Sokka was hunched on the floor, face screwed up in pain.

Lee staggered backwards, chest heaving with something that was only half exertion. Heat was starting to inch under his skin. The first emotion to register was Lee's absolute shock at his own strength, but what hit him harder was the sick sense of pride and triumph that roared in his chest and urged him to keep going, to prove his resolve. It tightened around his chest, making it impossible to breathe. Worst of all was the knowledge that this wasn't just a random attack. Lee brought this on himself, somehow. That he could've lived with; that he could've hidden away in his dreams with all the other terrible things he couldn't help feeling. But he had used it all against Sokka, like he'd sworn he never would. There was something strangely familiar in his boyfriend's wounded expression, and Lee couldn't help the feeling that they'd done this all before.

"Lee," Sokka started. Nothing came after. He was probably disgusted beyond words. Lee could barely watch as Sokka hauled himself back to his feet, wincing as he rubbed at his arm. The guilt Lee felt far outweighed the relief at seeing that he was alright. A shaking, dark hand reached out for him and made to take his hand, as if *Lee* were the one who needed comfort now.

He flinched back from the touch. If he put hands on Sokka again, there was no knowing what he would do. Desperate to breathe again, Lee fled his own home without another look at Sokka.

Chapter End Notes

Lee the unstoppable toppable vs his own psyche vs his vaguely consent-conscious boyfriend vs my total lack of combat knowledge street fight no rules go

hope you guys enjoyed the week! only two left till winter break !!!

Chapter 11

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Notes

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

With each step he took, it became clearer and clearer to Lee that he had nowhere to go. He could run back to the shop, of course, but he just left there and Uncle would want to know what had happened; telling him was not an option. The only other person he really knew was Jin, and he couldn't possibly saddle her with this. He bit the inside of his cheek; it wasn't fair that he had to be alone with himself. He stood in the cold rain, for a minute, so unsure of where to go that he was afraid to take a step in any direction.

Behind him, the door creaked open. Something warm- with a flash of relief, Lee realized he wasn't so hot anymore- closed around his wrist and tugged him back through the entryway and down onto the bottom stair.

Lee spoke first. "Sokka, I am so, so sorry. I don't know what-"

"Hey, no, I'm fine!" Sokka rolled his arm around with a visible wince. "See? Totally fine." Despite his insistence, he was obviously hurt. Lee had done that; Sokka was in pain because of him.

"I think I'm a bad person," he whispered, and buried his face into the crook of Sokka's neck, not really caring that he smeared his boyfriend with tears.

"Hey, come on, where's this coming from?" Sokka asked gently, like Lee hadn't practically attacked him just five minutes ago. His fingers skated up and down Lee's back as he struggled to even out his breathing. *He's not denying it*, screamed the bitter, insecure boy in his mind. *He knows the kind of person you really are*. "Lee? You with me, love?"

"I hurt you."

"It was a spar," Sokka reminded him. Lee knew he should just take the out and curl back into his boyfriend's arms, but he couldn't accept the excuse. He gave a final gross, sobbing breath to clear his voice.

"But it wasn't part of that. It was... I keep having these... these moments, where it's like I'm not in control of my own mind. It doesn't matter what I'm doing; it just hits me, like that!" He snapped his fingers together in front of Sokka's face. Sokka flinched away, and with a jolt Lee recognized the same fearful look as when he'd had him on the floor. "It's like I'm burning up inside, and I feel hurt, and frightened, and so, so angry, and I-" Lee broke off, muffling the end of his sentence in Sokka's tunic.

Sokka tilted his chin up to meet his eyes and softly asked, "What was that?" His expression was nearly unreadable now, the fear dissipated, but Lee could swear it had the same

apprehension that he saw in Katara when they first met. He tried desperately to keep from trembling.

“Sometimes, just for a second, I think about... hurting the people around me. Lashing out at them so I don’t have to be the only one who feels it.” He hastily added, “I never would! I wouldn’t. It’s just so scary sometimes, because I thought I was a good person, and-” He broke off into hiccuping sobs, wishing he could explain it better. Words had never come easily to him, and especially not when he was so worked up. Sokka drew him into his chest and tight him there. Lee slung his arms around his boyfriend’s shoulders, sniffing quietly as the tears began again.

“I wanted to hurt you, just now,” he whispered, more to himself than to Sokka. A fresh wave of horror washed over him. “I’m so fucking terrible, Sokka, that I was gonna hurt you.” Sokka didn’t say anything, just held him a little tighter. “I didn’t mean to,” Lee added, uselessly, after a minute of tense silence.

“I know you didn’t.” Something in Sokka’s tone rubbed him the wrong way. It was the same resigned surety that Uncle always gave him, that told Lee he knew more than he was letting on. Moreso, it gave the impression he knew more about Lee than he knew himself. What must’ve been comfort to Sokka landed as condescension in Lee’s lap. Perhaps that was the best he could ask for, though.

He’d come clean, but there wasn’t a shred of relief in it. If he felt any better, it was only because the heat had abated and he was wrapped up tight in Sokka’s arms. Confessing had done nothing to stave off the creeping certainty that Lee was not the person he’d thought he was.

It wasn’t that Sokka didn’t believe anything Jet said. It was just that, from a purely logical perspective, nothing he said could be trusted. So why they’d followed Jet to his apartment to hear him out was beyond him. Sokka watched now as Katara raised the glowing water to his temples and Jet’s face fell slack. It was strange to see him without a smug smile or a scowl; he looked young. His expression was familiar, Sokka realized. It was that same vacant look Lee wore when he slipped away, after hearing about the war or-

“The lake!” Jet yelled, eyes snapping open. “They took me to a headquarters under the lake.”

“Lake Laogai,” Sokka said with a nod, and everyone turned to him. “That’s where Joo Dee and-” It might not be a great idea to bring Lee up in Jet’s presence. “That’s where Joo Dee said she went.”

Jet pointed towards him, wide-eyed. “That’s it! Lake Laogai! I can take us there.”

Smellerbee grimaced. “Are we sure this is the right thing to do? We came here for a new start. Should we really be barging in on the secret police?”

“Better than the secret police barging in on you,” Toph put in with a shrug.

“And anyway,” said Jet. He closed his eyes and stuck up one finger in a gesture so smug Sokka could’ve screamed. He met Katara’s eyes with a *You seeing this shit?* kinda look that she returned in the affirmative. “The Dai Li are not here for the protection of the city. I know that now. Their only real goal is to maintain the status quo for the city’s elite.” Team avatar exchanged reluctant *Yeah, okay, that’s fair*; grumbles. “And they proved that when they arrested me for outing that firebender!” *OH!* “If they really cared they would have locked that little-”

Sokka retreated back into his thoughts for the remainder of the rant. And oh, did he have a lot to think on, because that last little puzzle piece has fallen right into place. Jet spots a firebender, Jet accuses said firebender. Jet and Zuko, being Jet and Zuko, fight it out and are arrested, then brainwashed. But whatever they did to Zuko went deeper, somehow. Jet was himself, minus bad intentions and a few days’ memories; Zuko was... Lee. If it were reversed, would everything still be there? Were the memories locked away, like Jet’s had been, or was it all just gone?

Aang, meanwhile, was feigning surprise. “What? Haha, firebenders? Here? Nooooo. Pfft, I mean! That’s crazy! No way.”

“Sokka, you said you knew him,” Jet began, leaning forward in his chair. Aang went quiet, shooting a nervous glance at Sokka.

“I’m handling it,” he replied, and hoped his cracking voice didn’t undermine his finality. No way in hell was he putting Lee back in Jet’s path.

“There’s only one way to handle ashmakers,” Jet sneered. “But you were never man enough to-”

Jet hit the ground with a satisfying thud; the seat Sokka had kicked out from under him landing on its side next to him. Jet lunged for him but was held back by Longshot, who glared daggers at Sokka. Before he could do anything more, he was being pulled out into the hall by his collar.

“Are you out of your mind?” Katara hissed when the flimsy door shut behind them.

“But he said-”

“We all heard, Sokka. And I get it. I do. But he might know where Appa is.” Sokka sighed; of course she was right. Katara probably wanted to beat Jet up more than he did, but she was keeping it together for Aang and Appa.

“Sugar queen’s right,” Toph seconded, easily batting away Katara’s responding smack. “I hate to mess up a good fight, but I think we’d all prefer it if you waited until we get the cow back to pummel him.”

“I’m sorry. Should we ask him to take us there, then?” They all turned to Aang; they made decisions as a team, but this was his call.

"If they've got Appa..." Aang began. That was all he needed to say, really. Have Appa, will follow.

"It could be a trap," Sokka pointed out gently. In all likelihood, it was. "Jet gave us those false tips before."

Aang nodded, but there was already a determined look in his eyes. "You're right. But I have to go. I know it's dangerous, but if there's a chance Appa is down there, I have to find out."

Katara laid a hand on Aang's shoulder. "And we'll be right there with you, Aang." Sokka did the same, and Toph gave the airbender an especially spirited arm punch.

Aang beamed at his friends. "Then we'll go. Tomorrow morning." He paused. "Sokka, what about... y'know?"

Sokka thought for a moment. "I mean, finding out more about the brainwashing thing would be great, but we've got to stick to the mission. We're going in to get Appa, and he really can't..." *Fight? Defend himself? Perform more than one (admittedly skilled) martial arts move without having an emotional breakdown?* "There's no use bringing Lee," he concluded.

Katara narrowed her eyes at him. She was wearing that same betrayed look that she had when he'd bought Lee over for dinner last week.

"What? Do you think we should bring him?"

"You call him Lee when he's not around," she said quietly. Her statement hung in the air for a minute as Sokka tried to figure out what exactly was wrong with that. What was wrong with him calling his boyfriend by his- *SHIT!*

Sokka sputtered wildly for a minute. "It's his- he prefers to be called Lee!"

"He doesn't prefer anything, Sokka. He literally doesn't know his name. You- you're getting too caught up in this whole thing." Her voice was calm, but Sokka couldn't tell if it was less of a silent fury thing or just a way to keep Jet's gang out of their business. He prayed it was the second.

"Am not! I have a plan."

They all looked at him expectantly. "Go ahead and lay it out, then, O Wise One," Toph said dryly after a minute of exaggerated silence.

Sokka bit the inside of his cheek. He hadn't thought this far. "It's in the works."

"In the-" Katara threw her hands up. "It's in the works! Oh, I knew it! You're in over your head. As soon as you brought him over I knew this was gonna complicate things. *Oh*, but Katara, I said, *surely he's got a plan! Surely he's not actually dating Prince Zuko!*"

Sokka wanted to protest, to say that wasn't fair. But it was, wasn't it? Not to him, at least. "I'm gonna fix it," he said quietly.

“I hope so. For all our sakes.” Her hand found Sokka’s. Under her breath, she added, “And his.”

In a move that greatly exhausted every coworker they had, Jin and Lee had managed to swing their breaktime right to the end of their lunch hour; the one caveat being that they couldn’t, for the mental wellbeing of their fellow workers, spend the extended break inside the shop. The two would sneak pastries from the kitchen (they called it “sneaking” only because they needed some sense of teenage rebellion. In reality, Uncle insisted they take whatever they like from the kitchen and would overstock on pastries for them). While they lounged around the shop’s terrace, Jin would tell him everything that had happened in the lower ring since he’d left. Knowing every fight, fuck, and firing was an odd little relief for Lee; even if he’d only lived there a few weeks, Jin made him feel like he was still a part of the community. As a force of habit, Jin would shake her hair out to give her head a break while they chatted. She couldn’t seem to stop fidgeting with the little metal pin today.

Lee tapped on her wrist to get her attention. “Is there something bothering you?”

“It’s you, actually.”

Oh. Lee was taking up too much of her time, then. Spirits, why was he so clingy? “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize that I-.” Jin punched him in the arm to shut him up. “Sorry, go on.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, stupid. I’m just a little worried about you, is all. You’ve been kind of off lately.” Great. Sokka knew, Uncle suspected, and now Jin had begun to pick up on it, too. Whatever this *thing* hanging over him was, it had squeezed out of him and now everyone could tell what kind of person he was. “You know you can tell me if there’s something bothering you.”

“I’m *fine*,” he insisted, then poured every ounce of conversational skill he had into changing the subject. “Hey, you said you were gonna tell me about Kyoh’s new girlfriend today.

Jin kept pressing like he’d said nothing. “Is it to do with you and Sokka? Because if he’s not treating you right-”

“No.”

“I’ll kill him. I’ll kill him dead.”

“Jin-”

“Just putting it out there.” She waved a hand at the empty air in front of her. “Okay? It’s there. It’s on the table.”

“Take it off the table.”

“I will not.”

Lee buried his face in his hands. He wanted to insist to her that he and Sokka were doing just fine, and that everything was peachy, but he wasn’t even sure of that. After all, Lee was kind,

not naive. After everything he'd told Sokka about his attacks- *Spirits, why had he done that? Stupid, stupid, stupid!*- there was no way it'd be as sweet and easygoing as it was before. He settled for telling Jin, "Sokka's lovely. You know that. I... appreciate the gesture, though."

Jin gave a nod, then a sigh. "Alright. I'm just worried about you," she said again. Something in Lee, already worn thin from the constraint stress of hiding his emotions, snapped.

"Would you just drop it?" he snarled in that rough voice; his hand flew to his throat. Jin stared back at him, shocked, and Lee couldn't help wondering what she saw in the eyes that fascinated her so much.

Gently he reached for the barrette in Jin's twitching hands; she allowed him to take it. Lee slipped behind her. He pinned her hair in a dark little twist at the back of her head and hoped she would see it as the apology it was. What he was apologizing for, Lee wasn't quite certain; maybe for being difficult, or for lying, or for having deceived her into thinking he was a good person in the first place.

Stepping away, Jin popped the last bit of her pastry into her mouth and offered him a jam-smeared smile. Lee breathed a sigh of relief, even as she proceeded to finish off his pastry, too. They were alright, for now.

Their walk back to the apartment was largely silent today. The rain had finally let up, but it'd left pale grey skies and cold, damp air in its wake. Sokka went to the teashop as always, but not until the very end of Lee's shift. His boyfriend looked smaller and paler than usual, and nothing he said would stop Sokka's worrying; Lee seemed to be retreating into himself. When Sokka took his hand as he always did, Lee looked at him with quiet confusion, as if he was anticipating coldness or resentment after their talk the day before. Poor guy probably thought he deserved it, too. *Maybe he does*, Sokka's still-aching arm pointed out. But Sokka couldn't bring himself to be angry at Lee, and certainly not after everything he'd confessed. He hadn't acted out of malice- not out of his own, anyway. So Sokka held his hand, to assure him things were fine.

Things were not, of course, fine. The one thing that had unnerved Sokka more than anything the other day was the heat that had been rolling off of Lee's skin. It wasn't like the steady, sustaining current he'd felt holding Iroh's hand; it was feverish and uncontrolled. Was it just his body trying to compensate for his lack of heat regulation? Or was it a sign that something was waking up in him? After all, as much as he could overlook, there was no forgetting that Lee was not all Lee, or that Lee was partly Zuko, or that perhaps Lee was no one at all. This was first on his list of problems regarding his boyfriend.

"I probably won't be around to see you for the next couple days." It was a very blasé way of saying they were breaking into a secret police base to uncover a deep-state conspiracy and rescue their bison, but he didn't want to panic Lee, and he certainly didn't want to awaken anything in him.

Lee turned his face down. "Oh. I understand." He was clearly holding back tears. Just seeing him broke Sokka's heart, and without another word he threw his coat over Lee's shoulders.

Despite being just barely taller than Sokka, Lee looked like he was drowning in the anorak, or perhaps hiding in it. Sokka pulled him in tight by the hood and laid a kiss on his forehead.

“It’s nothing you did, little duck,” he said as Lee began to sniffle into his shoulder. A stuttering, miserable little laugh came from Lee at the pet name. “Just something me and the gang need to take care of.”

There was the second issue: Team Avatar had shit to do if they wanted his invasion to be a success. All this free time in Ba Sing Se was the exception, not the rule. They couldn’t sit on their asses much longer waiting for an in with the Earth King. Things were beginning to move again, and, sooner rather than later, they would have to leave. But leaving Ba Sing Se meant leaving Lee, sensitive and alone, with something neither of them quite understand boiling inside of him.

Lee pulled back from him then, looking a little better despite his wet cheeks. “All this avatar stuff you do-” He cupped Sokka’s cheek, seemingly fixated on rubbing the patchy peach fuzz there. “Is it ever dangerous?”

“Sometimes,” Sokka said, because it was probably easier to hear than *often*, which itself was code for *always, extremely*. Lee squeezed him a little tighter around the middle with a quiet, “*Oh*”, so small and so sad that it hurt to hear. That little sound marked the second-and-a-half issue, which was that Lee seemed to fall apart without someone to cling to. He wouldn’t do well if- no, *when* Sokka had to leave. Perhaps, he thought as he combed his fingers through Lee’s hair, it would’ve been better for both of them if he’d left well enough alone. But he hadn’t, and it wouldn’t do well to keep dwelling on the what-if’s. Sokka was, after all, the plan guy. He’d have to figure it out from here.

“I should probably get going, Lee,” Sokka told him, drawing away.

“Your coat-” Lee protested, and attempted to shrug it from his shoulders. Sokka hoisted it back over him with his free hand.

“Hold onto it, love. There’s a cold front coming in. Don’t want you getting sick, right?” Lee nodded. Sokka pressed a kiss to his pale cheek and smiled when he got a kiss in return. “I’ll see you soon, love.” Lee finally gave him a real smile; it was small and shy, but it lit Sokka’s heart up as he watched Lee go upstairs, buried in his heavy coat.

The third and final problem with Lee: despite everything, Sokka was hopelessly in love with him.

Chapter End Notes

Phew shits getting kind of complicated :) i hope nothing goes :) wrong :)
But you guys!!! 10000 hits?? holy shit! I honestly can't thank everyone who's keeping up with this story enough. It honestly means the world to me!!

Chapter 12

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Summary

Sokka and Katara have a nice day at the lake.

Chapter Notes

Putting up a TW because this chapter has a fair amount of violence/injury/gore in it. I'm still outlining the rest of the story, so I don't know how much violence there's gonna be/if it's gonna be as in-depth as some of the stuff in here. If I decide the future chapters are gonna be consistent with this, I'll add a violence warning for the whole fic.

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

At some ungodly hour of the morning- Sokka hadn't bothered to check the time, but he saw Yue's last lights creeping from the sky as he'd locked their door- they peeled themselves out of bed and set out for Lake Laogai. The usually bustling streets were silent and pale; the Jasmine Dragon was shuttered as they crept by it. Katara toyed with some condensation she'd whipped off of a shop window as they passed by. Aang was uncharacteristically stoic, hardset in his determination to find Appa.

It felt a little weird to be out doing something again, or at least heading out to do something. All they'd really done as a group for the last couple weeks was search for clues on Appa. He guessed it was inevitable they'd be getting back into trouble eventually. He wondered where he was going to find trouble when the war was over. (*When the war ends wasn't the outlandish thought it sounded like- it would end; the only question was whether they were going to live to see it.*) *He thought of what he wanted, when happiness was a consideration again: a reunion with his tribe, a life without fear of the fire nation, a cold hand in his own.*

His stomach grumbled. *Some seal jerky*, he added to the list. He reached into his pocket, but his emergency jerky stash was missing. He'd tucked it into his coat at some point, he remembered, and groaned at the unfairness. Lee worked at a teahouse, for Spirits' sake. He wasn't going hungry, and meanwhile all that poor Sokka had was the one tiny, lint-covered stump of jerky he managed to fish from the corner of his pocket.

Katara looked over at him in disgust. "You're not gonna eat that," she said, sounding like she knew damn well he was going to eat that.

“Why? Did you want it?” Sokka asked as he gnawed on the stump. It tasted like disappointment.

They made the now-familiar trek down into the lower ring. There was a crisp morning chill in the air, and Sokka couldn’t help wondering how Lee was holding up. It was stupid to worry, of course; Lee probably wasn’t even awake yet, and it wasn’t like he couldn’t last twelve hours without seeing Sokka. There was nothing to worry about. (There were, in fact, many things to worry about right then but whether or not Lee was warm and happy at that exact moment could probably have been lower on his list of priorities.)

It’s a wonder they weren’t being followed, he thought. It struck him as they finally came up on the Freedom Fighters, leaning against the outer wall of their shoddy apartment complex, that there really wasn’t any need. The teenagers’ armor might’ve suited them in the forests outside Gaipan, but they stuck out like three sore thumbs on the streets of Ba Sing Se.

The seven of them ducked into the alley behind the complex, planning in hushed voices how to get past the inner wall to the lake without being noted. With one stomp of her foot, Toph opened the ground beneath herself and disappeared into it. *Well, that’s one way.* One by one they followed her into the hole. Katara was the last of them above ground, staring down at them with a nervous expression. She’d never had an issue with tiny spaces, but he’d be surprised if their ordeal with General Fong didn’t leave her afraid of going underground. She only joined them in the hole when Aang held his arms out and let her jump down to him. Sokka gave them an obligatory *oogies*, although he appreciated them watching out for each other. Toph began to burrow forward while Aang carefully sealed up the passage behind them.

“Why wasn’t your wrestling name the blind badgermole?” Sokka quipped. Toph grunted, and a small rock fell onto his head from the ceiling. “Ow.”

“Badgermoles are already blind, idiot.”

The trudge below the city was mostly silent as the morning dragged on, as they weren’t too deep underground and this plan relied on them avoiding detection. But Sokka swore that little bastard Toph kept closing the walls in whenever he and Jet were shoulder-to-shoulder. They were trying to shove past each other for the millionth time when Toph stopped abruptly in front of them, making the whole group trip over each other.

She pressed a hand against the tunnel wall, deliberating. “We’re far enough from the wall now.” She plopped herself down on the tunnel floor. “Aang, bring us up.”

“Sure thing, Sifu,” Aang said cheerfully, then proceeded to blast them all up through the ground. It would’ve been fine, except for the fact that at some point the landscape had shifted, and when they burst from the ground, it was onto a grassy slope over a picturesque lake. Sokka got a great view of it tumbled down, and down, and down the hill, only able to think about how bad he hated earthbenders. After what felt like hours of falling and not an inconsiderate amount of screaming, the slope evened out and he finally came to rest in the silt by the lake. He struggled up to rest on his elbows.

Just as Sokka finally got a breath of air into his battered lungs, someone slapped him on the back and knocked it right back out of him. He rolled over with a groan, and was greeted by Aang's broad grin. "You found the lake! Good job, Sokka!"

Jet's stupid, attractive *-no, no, fuck off, fuck off, that's the dying brain cells talking-* face came into view next to Aang's. "Alright there, Socks?"

"Nobody calls me that," Sokka grumbled. He pushed away the freedom fighter's extended hand and hauled himself up, only slightly wheezing.

Beside him, Toph shuffled her feet in the dirt then whistled. "Now that's creative." She braced herself against the earth and thrust her hands upwards; a thin jetty rose from the shore ten yards down. Another push of her wrists, and a heavy slab of rock flew off and into the lake, revealing a deep hole. As they reached the getty, they could see ladder rungs at the rim-the entrance.

Jet stared down into the shaft with wide eyes. It reminded Sokka of how unnerved his boyfriend was by the gaps in his memory; The freedom fighter was facing it head on now.

"I'll go down first," he offered. Jet's expression hardened, but with a nod he allowed Sokka to go down ahead of him. One after another they slip down the shaft, regrouping at the bottom. There were no agents in sight, thank the Spirits.

Jet was the first to speak. "We should split up." The idea was greeted with mumbles of disagreement.

"Jet's-" Deep in his soul, Sokka heaved a sigh. "-right. We'll get around better in small groups. Quicker, too."

"Hm," Said Jet. Unfortunately, he kept talking. "We should have one earthbender on each team. Smellerbee, Longshot, you guys stick with- it's Toph, right? Right. You guys stick with Toph. Katara, why don't we-"

"No."

Alright! I guess it's just us guys, then, huh?" Jet whistled, drawing Sokka and Aang into playful headlocks. Sokka didn't know how much more charisma he could put up with today.

Not much, as it turned out. They did all right for the first five minute or so, but Sokka's resolve crumbled shortly after they slipped past the room of Joo Dee's in training.

"All this to hide a war," Sokka marvelled as the women's monotonous voices faded behind them, equal parts horrified, impressed, and furious. He wondered who those women had been, before. Beside him, Aang spoke up.

"Jet, they brought you in because you were talking about the war, didn't they?"

"Damn right," Jet scoffed. "They wiped my mind because I tried to expose Sokka's little Fire Nation friend," he hissed. Sokka said nothing. "Aang, you believe me, don't you?"

Aang looked back, unimpressed. "Over Sokka? Not again." Of course they both knew that Lee was Fire Nation (or, at least, he had been), almost certainly better than Jet did. But Jet didn't need to know that.

Nonetheless, he pressed on. "Can't you see that you're putting everyone in danger by not turning him in?" (It could've been a valid point, Sokka reasoned, but it was one he'd already reckoned with weeks ago. Lee was not dangerous.)

Sokka wheeled on him. "Lee's not who you think he is."

"Then he's got you fooled, too." They were practically nose to nose. It was a miracle they weren't growling at each other.

"You're one to talk about having people fooled. Lee is..." *Sweet? Soft? Gentle?* "Good."

Jet's frown morphed into a sneering grin. "Oh, I bet he's *real* good to you, huh?" he taunted. Sokka scowled, not even dignifying that with a response (especially since the response would probably have to be a yes).

"Yeah, he is pretty nice," Aang said, bless his big heart. "We had him over last week, and he was just like, hanging off of him, and-"

"Mhm." Lowering his voice, Jet added to Sokka, "Sort of pretty for an ashmaker, isn't he? Not enough to tempt me, though. Not that he didn't try. We got awfully close on the ferry. You know, I never realized fire nation boys were so-"

Sokka took a swipe at Jet, who stepped back with a sly grin. It was almost playful. "Shut. Up! You're wrong about him." Sokka wasn't even sure *what* he was defending him from. The implication that Lee like-liked Jet (entirely possible, if gross), the fact that he was a firebender (no doubt), or the fact Sokka was gone on him (absolutely irrefutable).

"Yeah. I like him, when he's not... y'know," Aang went on, louder, having clearly picked up on the new tension even if he couldn't understand its cause. "He broke me out of prison, that one time."

"Yeah, because he-" Sokka did a double take. "He did what?"

Aang's eyes widened. "Um, maybe we should talk about something else."

"No, hang on, when were you in prison?"

"You were in a Fire Nation Prison?" Jet gawked. He seemed perfectly content to ignore the part where his unrequited nemesis broke Aang out. Which made no sense, because had he not been, like, evil until he reached Ba Sing Se? "That's fucking wicked."

Aang laughed nervously, quickly changing the subject. "Hey, that room up ahead looks pretty big!"

"That might be it," Jet agreed, though he sounded a bit unsure. It was good enough for Aang, who eagerly bent the door open. They stepped inside, ready for a reunion or a fight, but they

got neither. The place was totally empty.

At least, that's how it seemed until the entrance- no, the exit- slammed behind them.

With the sound of grinding rocks, a gap appeared in the opposite wall, and from it emerged Long Feng. He was unaccompanied. He clearly didn't think them much of a threat- or perhaps he was going to try and bargain.

"Left the little girls at home, I see," he sneered. Despite his tone, the remark sent relief flooding into Sokka's mind; they didn't know the others were here yet. They were all right. "Avatar, you have made yourself an enemy of our state. Now either you persist with your silly crusade, and be taken into custody, or you agree to leave Ba Sing Se, and I return your little pet."

"Then you do have Appa!" Aang cried, dropping into a fighting stance.

Long Feng faltered. "Did you not- No matter. Will you accept the deal, or will you have to be re-educated?" For once, Sokka prayed for a fight, because both options sucked. Either they got brainwashed and stuck in this city forever, or they take Appa, and he leaves behind any chance at getting the invasion off the ground. And abandoning Ba Sing Se would mean abandoning Lee, with no protection or explanation or way to get back to him.

"You're in no position to be bargaining!" growled Jet. Sokka reached for boomerang as the other boy drew his blades.

"Oh, aren't I?" If Long Feng was intimidated, he didn't show it. If anything, his expression was turning giddy. "Jet, the Earth King has invited you to Lake Laogai."

At Sokka's side, Jet stood up straighter. *Shit. Shit!* "I am honored to accept his invitation." Jet's voice was hollow and devoid of its usual slyness or anger. His hands tightened on his blades.

Jet and Sokka must've been at each other's throats by now, Katara thought with a snicker. Poor Aang was probably mediating to keep them from killing each other over who had better hair or a deeper voice or whatever it was boys fought about.

Their little group was doing alright, though. Somehow they hadn't run into any guards or agents as they prowled through the halls. The place was a little too empty, actually, but they would probably be fighting their way out, whether it was now or later, so she wasn't particularly worried about it. She walked beside Toph; they moved somewhat slowly to give her time to scope the area out with her feet. In front of them, Smellerbee and Longshot were watching for guards. She couldn't help noticing their hands were intertwined.

Toph whistled sharply for their attention. With a hand to the wall, she explained, "There's a huge cell to the left and down. Something big is in there."

Katara perked up immediately. “Appa?”

“It’s a little far for me to tell exactly, but it’s gotta be.” Toph adjusted her feet against the stone tile. “There’s guards right outside. Two big guys.”

Katara frowned. Beating two guys was easy enough, but she didn’t want to go in fighting if they didn’t have to. “Why don’t we just tunnel in?”

Toph shook her head. “This place is crawling with earthbenders. They’d be able to tell if we were going under them.”

Smellerbee cracked her knuckles casually. “Leave it to us.” She nodded at Longshot, who skillfully nocked an arrow, aiming straight at the guard nearest them.

“You’re not gonna,” Katara started to ask, because there was no way he meant to aim as high as he did. She was silenced by the *shing* of an arrow flying past her ear. It was nothing more than a flash of darkness in the dim green light, and the guard crumpled to the ground like a rag doll. The second guard was slumped on top of his comrade before he had time to shout for help; all that came from him was a weak gurgle of a gasp. Katara stared on in horror. They were dead, or dying.

Without thinking she rushed to the men’s sides; the first man was already dead. No pulse, no breath, gone to the spirits. The second man was still alive, but only just. It wasn’t a *bigwound*, per se, an entry hole not half an inch in diameter, but she’d never seen anything so severe. Not much blood could escape with the arrow as embedded as it was, but the hole through his trachea and the internal bleeding might’ve been enough to kill him. Slowly, or perhaps not at all if she could heal it. But there was nothing she could do for the way the arrow lodged itself into his spinal cord. She wondered if he felt it; his eyes could still move and they told her yes.

In that stupid, sexist north pole healing hut she had heard that the nervous system was difficult, even for trained healers. She looked down at the man. His face twitched, but his body was completely still, without so much as a breath. He was paralyzed. He would run out of air in the next minute, and there was nothing she could do.

(The spirit water, she remembered, but she was saving that, for Aang or Sokka or Toph, or maybe even for Zuko if nobody else needed it. Because if this was how she felt when she was helpless to save a complete stranger, an enemy, then failing a loved one would kill her. It would kill her for sure.) She drew water out anyway, numbed the nerves around his neck, so at least he wouldn’t be in pain, and whispered that she’s sorry, she didn’t know. Because it was the least she could do, or maybe because it was the most she could do.

Something shone in the man’s eyes- anger? Resignation? Gratitude? His green eyes slipped closed and his head fell softly into her lap, not like a man who’d lost the power to hold his head up, but one who’d used the last of his strength to lay it down. Katara raised hers to Longshot and Smellerbee, who were approaching from up the hall. Toph stood beside them, uncharacteristically quiet and looking... taller. She was on her tippy-toes, Katara realized, shifting from one foot to the other like there was something she wanted to avoid “seeing”.

“You- they’re dead.”

Smellerbee prodded the man in her arms with her sword. She wrinkled her nose at the way his lips twitched, still trying for a breath as his consciousness waned. “Ish.”

“*Ish?*” Katara repeated, disbelieving. She cradled the man’s head in her lap, even as blood began to trickle over her right thigh.

“*Esque. C’mon, before someone sees.*”

“What happened to making a new start?” Katara asked, trying to keep from shaking. Gently she laid the man on the floor and stood to face the freedom fighters. “You guys said you were putting this behind you!”

“We did!” Smellerbee hissed back. “*You* guys asked *us* to help you.”

“Murder is not helping!”

“How did you expect-”

Longshot raised one finger towards Smellerbee. “Sh.” It was the most Katara’d ever heard him say; even that one syllable was sharp and short, like he couldn’t expel it fast enough. Smellerbee looked away, clearly kvetching in her head, but stayed silent. Longshot turned to Katara and thumbed a tear track off of her cheek with an absurdly compassionate look for someone who’d just taken two lives. It shouldn’t have comforted her as much as it did. Turning again from her, he tapped Toph’s shoulder, then the heavy stone door.

She stepped towards the cell door, and something hot and wet seeped up through her moccasins. *Cold water, lemon juice, don’t look down.* She hoisted Toph over the men and for once the girl didn’t complain, just rested her fingertips against the stone and moved it aside like it weighed nothing.

The cell was so dark that she couldn’t see Appa at first. It certainly *smelled* like they were keeping him in there, but it wasn’t until she called his name that a massive shadow broke from the corner and tentatively approached, accompanied by clanging chains. Somehow, her heart broke even further. She stepped toward him, and he shrunk back with a noise that was half-growl, half-whimper.

“Appa? It’s us, buddy.” Slowly, slowly, she reached out to pet along his nose, and he allowed her to step closer. With another minute of light petting and gentle words, Appa finally relaxed, giving her a nuzzle so enthusiastic it knocked her back onto the ground. His smell was overwhelming as always, but so was his joy, and Katara found herself shedding tears of relief into his soft fur. Pinned under his head, she could hear, but not see, how Toph ran to Appa’s side. Katara wondered if she was offering an apologetic hug or just some deceptively nonchalant pats. Either way, she could tell Toph was just as relieved as she was. There was the heavy metallic sound of a shattering chain, and she watched in delight as Appa rose to hover above her, thrashing his heavy tail against the ground in delight. Katara rose to her feet, never pulling her hand from Appa’s face. “Come on, buddy, let’s get you out of here.”

Jet never lost that blank look, even as he drew his hooked swords and raised them to strike. Sokka pulled Aang to the side as they slashed through the air, but couldn't find it in himself to hold this against Jet. Whatever they'd done to him down here was the cause of this. Whatever. He'd find something else to hold against Jet, either way. It was their thing.

And oh Spirits, what if someone manipulated poor Lee like this? He wasn't physically weak, he'd proven that much, but he wouldn't ever use it unless he was made to. And apparently he *could* be made to, Sokka thought as he ducked away from Jet's swinging blades. Pinning Sokka during a spar had sent him into a breakdown, then he couldn't even imagine what he'd be like in the aftermath of actual combat. He'd be so terrified, and hurt, and-

Sokka ducked out of Jet's way just a second too late, reflexes slowed by his thoughts. The pain only blossomed as he watched the blade draw away, shining red. He raised a hand to his left cheek- in his head, Katara's voice was screaming not to make her job any harder by sticking his dirty fingers in an open wound, but he really had to know- and found it wet, split open below his poor, perfect cheekbones. He was lucky he'd dodged even a little, or that gash probably would've been in his neck. Nonetheless, the pain was unreal when it finally set in. Sokka staggered backwards, falling flat on his ass. He tried to focus on the moment, which was hard enough when his face was intact. Aang was yelling, probably all those non-confrontational mottos he always ran through while he drove his opponent back, before inevitably having to beat the hell out of them. (Poor kid.)

By some miracle though, it seemed to be working. Jet straightened up, and then Long Feng was yelling, then Aang again, and then Sokka's vision came into focus just in time to watch Jet launch one sword straight at Long Feng.

My man, he thought, because he was wildly out of it enough to appreciate Jet. *Oh man*, he thought next, as the sword missed its target entirely and ricocheted off the wall. It went clattering towards him, and he caught it as he began climbing to his feet. By the time he straightened up, Long Feng was already on the tail end of a dramatic exit.

It all happened in a matter of seconds. The ground began to shift under Sokka's feet, which really wasn't at all fair because he was still struggling to stay upright despite the searing pain in his cheek. It felt like it was getting worse (it probably was). When his vision steadied, he saw Aang and Jet looking at him- no, past him, in panic. they both dove for him as the rumbling got louder. Sokka turned his head just in time to see the physical manifestation of the Universe's disdain for him before he was knocked over by Jet on one side, then tossed forward by the force of the rock. In a moment of small mercy from the Universe, he saw it get slightly smaller and perhaps a little slower as it came towards him (*thanks, Aang*). Jet lay beside him, closer to the rock; they'd shared the blow, but Sokka would guess he got the worst of it. He probably should've been reevaluating Jet's morality and place in his life, given that he probably just saved his life, but between the gash in his cheek and the ache in his body, he didn't feel like contemplating much of anything. It was weird; Sokka had been hurt many, many times since they left home, but he was sure it'd never been quite this severe.

That seemed to be the end of it, though. Long Feng didn't seem to be coming back. Sokka and Jet collapsed next to each other, roughed up but very much alive. Just two schmucks

lying side by side in a cave. “So,” Jet wheezed out. Sokka winced at the sound of his voice. The rock had clearly gotten him in the ribs. “What now?”

Sokka groaned and twisted to look over at the other boy. “You’re gonna tell me you’re sorry for everything you said about my boyfriend, and then I’m gonna say that we’re not so different after all, and then we’re gonna be great friends.” His voice was kind of vague and mumbly, because it hurt to move his mouth much and his wind hadn’t quite come back to him yet.

Aang appeared above them, somehow managing to look worried and optimistic at the same time. “You are?”

“No,” Sokka and Jet said in sync. Aang rolled his eyes and frowned, but held out two hands to help them up.

Jet looked at him and grimaced. “I am sorry about your cheek, though, Socks. S’pretty nasty.” He was one to speak, standing at a forty-five degree angle and clutching at his side.

Sokka didn’t have the mental fortitude to argue against the nickname. “Not your fault,” he said, because as much as he liked to hold things against Jet, it really wasn’t. “Let’s find Appa and get out of here.”

Aang bent the door back out of the way, allowing them to stagger out into the hall. As they moved, Sokka undid one of his arm wrappings and pressed the cloth against his wound, hissing through his teeth at the pain. Jet leaned against him as they walked; he just hadn’t gotten his wind back, he insisted, but Sokka was starting to think he’d broken some ribs. It was slow goings, but since no one seemed to be pursuing them, they could afford to take it at their own pace. He relied on the rhythm of his steps and Jet’s weight on his side to distract him from the burning pain in his face as they trudged through the empty, unmarked halls. (He could see how you could get hypnotized down here, dark and uniform as it was.)

“Over there!” Jet whispered suddenly, pointing down the hall. Sokka squinted towards the end of the hall, where a cell door was hanging open. Sokka was tempted to write it off as another trap, but then he heard a great, familiar growl and his sister’s tearful laughter. He didn’t think he’d ever felt so relieved in his life. Ahead of them, Aang broke into a sprint towards the room.

The relief sunk a bit when he reached the door. There were two Dai Li agents (well, former Dai Li agents, at any rate) lying dead beside the door with arrows through their necks. One was crumpled against the wall with his mouth hanging open and eyes still wide, but the other was laid down as if he were only sleeping calmly. Sokka looked over at Aang, who looked like he was either about to hurl or start bawling.

“Come on,” Sokka said gently. He reached out and gave his friend’s shoulder a squeeze. “It’s all right, buddy, let’s just focus on getting Appa.”

There was a commotion inside the cell when they darkened the door: moving rocks, hushed chatter, a sword being drawn. Katara and Smellerbee stood on the defensive in front of Appa- regardless of everything else, Sokka’s heart soared at the sight of that big stinky cow- but

relaxed when they recognized the boys. Longshot, who was now tucking an arrow back into his quiver, had clearly been standing guard. Toph was... on the ceiling for some reason, or at least she'd created herself a ledge near the ceiling, and was now feeling the wall out.

Katara rushed towards the door. Even in the low light, Sokka could see rust-colored stains down the thigh of her dress, and the man laid down outside suddenly made a lot more sense.

"Aang!" The kids caught each other in a tight hug- *man, just kiss her already, come on-* and pulled away blushing. *Damn.* Katara turned to him next, only slightly less giddy. "Sokka! I was- oh! Oh!" Her eyes went as wide as saucers, and she began trying to wrangle him to the ground without even giving him his hug. Aang was no help, sprinting towards Appa with a joyful cry. "*Oh!* Sokka, your face is-"

Sokka paused in his struggle. "Roguishly handsome?"

She didn't humor him with a reply. In a second he was on the floor again, shutting his eyes against the glow of the water on his cheek as Katara got to work healing him with a strange fervor. He knew the gash had been pretty big, but if she was this worried, it must've been more serious. Healing went as it always did: the pain of water hitting the wound, then a pleasant numbness that blossomed out over the right side of his face. When she took away the water, the pain had faded to a faint sting. He raised one hand to feel along the former wound, but she slapped it away.

Katara sat back on her haunches. "It's totally healed, but it was pretty big, Sokka. It's gonna scar."

"Badass," he said with a shrug and a surge of relief when the words didn't pain him on the way out. Sokka got back on his feet, with considerably less effort this time, and while his sister got to work on Jet's injuries, he finally got to go greet Appa. Aang had plastered himself to the bison's head in a big, well-earned hug. As glad as he was to see the big guy, Sokka couldn't even begin to imagine how relieved Aang must've been; besides his staff and the clothes on his back, Appa was the only thing left of the life he'd always known.


There was a great rumbling overhead, and the high ceiling split cleanly, allowing sunlight to spill down into the cell. After an hour in the dark, the light seemed far too harsh, and they all squinted. Appa, on the other hand, gave a delighted moo, thrashing his tail and hovering with excitement.

Aang finally pulled his face from Appa's fur. "Let's get out of here before our good luck ends." Sokka huffed, even as he went to climb on. "Good" was not how he would describe his luck today.

Appa lowered himself again to allow everyone onto his back. Without a saddle to kick back in, they all had to hold onto his fur for dear life as he geared up, then launched himself skyward. Sokka looked over at poor Jet, who was digging his knees into the bison's back to keep from bouncing on his newly-healed ribs. Aang sat quite unbothered on Appa's, one hand tightly intertwined in the fur there, though it was probably more for comfort than it was for balance. All together and mostly alive, they turned above the lake and set out for the Inner Wall.

Chapter End Notes

Jet: h-

sokka:  **i am not arguing with a cowboy bebop recolor !!!!! go back to bandai visual**

-I hope this didn't come off as me disliking Jet; I absolutely love him, and if i write him to be kind of a cunt it's because it's a quality i greatly admire

-sorry there was no Zuko this chapter, I know we all like Leeko very much but I 1) really wanted to take a deeper look at the Jet et al., especially as foils for the gaang, and 2) I needed a break from that fruit.

-i know the violence/combat stuff probably wasn't all that accurate (esp. the arrow part). You all know my main skills are like. fluff and banter.

-lot of notes this week! obviously i wanna stay consistent in my schedule but with this week being christmas and all, between shopping and visits and appointments and parties I may or may not have the next chapter done by next sunday. I'll try and keep up with comments, though. (and get around to last week's. I didn't forget u guys!)

-happy holidays!!!

Chapter 13

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Summary

Cold and flu season hits Ba Sing Se.

Chapter Notes

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

Sokka hadn't been kidding about that cold front.

Nobody else seemed to be hit as hard as Lee was, though. Jin, for instance, had only donned a light jacket when they went out for their usual kiki at lunch. Lee, buried in the warmth of Sokka's anorak- a coat designed to withstand polar temperatures- was still shivering. (He did appreciate the weird jerky Sokka left in the pocket, though. It was very considerate of him.) He'd woken up cold and disoriented and thought he was probably sick, but chose to ignore it. It was better than the alternative, in his mind; Lee would gladly put up with a head cold if it meant he could avoid that rolling heat beneath his skin.

By lunchtime, though, what had started off as a little chill had evolved into the full-body shivers; Lee felt like he was freezing from the inside out. Apparently he wasn't very good at hiding it, because Jin had been mothering him since they clocked in. "Are you sure you don't wanna go back inside?" she asked, eyeing his pallid face. Lee somehow managed to shake his head without his teeth chattering comically, but she saw right through him. She grabbed his hands and they both gasped. Jin's hands were red-hot, but she didn't look flushed or feverish. "Lee, this is serious. You need to go home."

Ignoring all of Lee's halfhearted objections, she herded him into the kitchen through the back door. The warmth inside fanned across his nose until it tingled but couldn't seem to break his skin. "I'm fine. I just run cold, is all," Lee protested, but his voice was muffled into the fur hood that he'd rucked up to cover half of his face. Jin shook her head incredulously and waved another worker over.

"Run cold my ass. Sun! Sun, what do you call this?" She thrust Lee deeper into the kitchen, and he barely kept from falling into Sun's chest. A big friendly bear of a guy, Sun was the pastry chef Quon hired for the shop back when they opened. He was a few years older than Lee, with strong features, a broad smile, and an injured leg that had cut short his army career. He slapped one perpetually flour-coated hand against Lee's exposed forehead and whistled. "You're not doing too good, huh?" Lee grunted in response, past denying that he was ill at this point.

“I’m gonna get Uncle, all right?” Jin told him, far too gently- spirits, it must’ve been *bad*- and maneuvered Lee to lean against the kitchen counter. “Great. Hang in there. Sun, keep an eye on him.”

The chef flashed a thumbs up as she left. “No problem. Here, this is what my old lady used to do when I was running cold.” Lee craned his neck to watch as Sun swung the kettle off of its perch over the stove, then picked up the oven’s bellows. Very carefully, he twisted the cover off of the kettle and let a bit of hot steam pour out, then puffed it in Lee’s direction. For the second that it covered him, the warmth was exquisite, but in a second it left, and Lee was left cold and damp.

“You’ve been really down lately, Lee,” Sun said as he waited for more steam to accumulate. That tracked- they’d met just a day or so after Lee had his first attack, so he’d probably noticed him withdrawing. Another pump of steam, and the man snapped his fingers suddenly. “How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“It’s probably your wisdom teeth, then,” said Sun, and pumped the bellows again. Lee squeezed his eyes shut as the warmth rushed over him but left just as quickly.

The condensation pulled a tuft of hair down onto Lee’s forehead. “W-wisdom teeth?”

“Yeah, mine started coming in around sixteen, but I couldn’t afford to get ‘em out til last year. They hurt somethin’ awful. I was always sulking. I bet that’s your problem.”

Lee rubbed at the side of his jaw. It *did* ache a little, but he’d been shivering all morning, so most of him was aching right now. And it didn’t explain any of his actual problems: the fear, the violence, the heat. But he was feeling crummier by the second, and wasn’t in any mood to argue over what his problem may or may not have been.

Not a minute later Jin returned to the kitchen with Uncle at her heels. Lee slid down from the countertop to greet them. Uncle bustled forward with a deep furrow in his brow, and Lee fought the urge to roll his eyes as he got yet another hot palm to the forehead.

“Let me guess,” he muttered. His sarcasm was dulled by the waver in his voice. “It’s too cold.”

“You’re very sick,” Uncle stated, like Lee hadn’t noticed. “Go home, put the fire on, and close all the windows. Only go back to bed after you’ve warmed up somewhat. Make yourself a pot of the tea in the meantime, from the red canister on the top shelf,” Lee nodded along, repeating the instructions in his mind. “Without milk,” Uncle added.

“Are you sure you don’t need me here today?” Lee asked. He wanted to go home very badly now, but he didn’t want to be a burden by leaving.

Uncle laid a firm hand on his shoulder. “Your health comes before anything else,” he said, giving Lee the distinct impression that he was worse off than he’d thought. Lee hugged him

and as always Uncle seemed half-surprised by the gesture before he returned it warmly. "I'll be home soon. Just go take care of yourself until then."

Sun and Jin were chatting at the back door as he went out.

"You thought it was a good idea to soak him in water before sending him back out?" Jin was saying. Lee couldn't tell if she was disappointed or amused. Sun looked between the bellows in one hand and the pot in his other, then at Lee's glistening face.

"Steam is-? Oh, sorry, boss." He whipped the tea towel from his shoulder and caught Lee's face in his hand mid-step. After a sufficient amount of smushing and rubbing, Sun was satisfied and ushered him back outside. "There you go, buddy. Feel better!" he called, then pointed to his jaw. "And eat soft foods!" Jin squeezed into the doorway beside him and tossed Lee a kiss.

Lee gave a half-hearted wave to the both of them, then made the (thankfully short) walk home. His blood felt increasingly like lead, cold and heavy no matter how tightly he pulled the parka around him. The stairwell, in all of its light and warmth, felt bleak as he trudged inside and up, up, up. By the time he reached their apartment, he was gripping the rail desperately to keep from bowling over.

After what felt like five minutes just to get through the door, he dragged himself through the teamaking process, just like Uncle said to: hot water, red canister, no milk. When he drank it, the tea had no taste or smell, despite its rosy dark color. He took one step towards his bedroom but stumbled; the lead in his blood had finally frozen solid. It really was illness, this time, he thought with a strange joy. It was all physical, and none of it his fault. He was sick and dying, that was all. His knees buckled and he went gladly towards the floor, which swung up to meet him halfway.

Lee couldn't remember crawling back to his bed, but that's where he was when he woke up, burrowed beneath a mound of blankets with his cheek in a cold puddle of drool. Only half-lucid, he raised the edge of the blanket to check that he was still wearing Sokka's coat (he was). As if summoned by the sound of his shuffling blankets, Uncle was at his bedside when he looked back up, holding out a steaming mug. Lee squeaked in surprise and accepted it, taking a hefty sip as Uncle reordered the pillows behind him. Something hot and solid slid over his tongue and down his throat before he could hack it up. The offending bit of... something moved far slowly down into his stomach. Bleary eyed, he stared down into the cup. A couple more of the horrible little blobs bobbed happily on the surface.

"Uncle," Lee rasped. "This tea has... chunks in it." He held the cup out as proof, but his hands shook and a good amount sloshed out onto Mushi's robes.

Mushi gently pushed Lee's hands towards him, cup and all. "That is soup."

"Ah." So it was. The tea was broth, and the bits were potatoes, or maybe yellow carrots, or lumps of chicken. It made no difference to him. He shrugged off some of his blankets as he ate. The apartment was colder than it had been when he got home- how long ago was that? Was it night? His room had no windows, so he couldn't be sure. Mushi stayed until he

reached the bottom of his soup. If he stayed any longer, Lee took no notice, almost immediately falling unconscious again.

The hours passed in flashes of steel battleships and plush red silks, of blue fire and burning flesh. His dreams belonged to someone else, but he bore through them anyway. They played on a loop, alternating between mountains, tundras, and forests, but kept constant the heavy ache in his feet as he chased down Sokka and his family. Part of him worried desperately about his boyfriend, but he was otherwise indifferent. *I have no use for him, father wants the avatar, and when I get him, Father will want me, too.* The thought had Lee blinking awake with a little giggle. Imagine father wanting *him*. Uncle loomed above him with a sad, concerned look. Had he been talking in his sleep? Lee wanted to reach out and tell Mushi not to worry, he wasn't going anywhere, nobody else wanted him, but his eyes fell shut again before the first word left his white-coated tongue.

They weren't all bad. In one dream, Lee sat atop the outer wall and looked out over a vast blue lake that wrapped around the city and stretched to the horizon. It was warm and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was safe and protected there. Another was a lovely and unrepeatable dream about Sokka and a big, warm bed in the South Pole. In another, he was a child again, leaning back against a woman's chest and watching the ducks- one real, one wooden- float in circles around a tiny pond. Everything was washed in deep reds, from the walls boxing them in to their soft, elaborate clothing. *Whose life was this?*

Lee shot up in a cold sweat. The piece of jerky he'd been working on before he fell asleep tumbled from his mouth and stuck to the blanket. He inspected it in its new lint coating; as gross as he felt right now, he wasn't gross enough to eat it. The mass of blankets fought him each step of the way as he tried to pry himself out of bed, jerky stub clutched in his sweaty palm, but he fought back, and was soon stumbling into the living room, victorious. He made it as far as the bin, where he disposed of the slimy jerky, before the scene outside the window caught his eye. His frame was wracked with shivers but he leaned against the open window anyway to watch it unfold. High above the golden rooftops flew a fuck-off big cow- *no, a fuck-off big bison, like the one on Sokka's poster's that first day (Eppa? Obba? Abba.)*- with little flecks of blue and orange and green clinging to it. More pressingly, it was barreling towards the royal palace.

"Uncle?" Lee called in as strong a voice as he could muster.

Uncle emerged from his room, looking surprised to see him out of bed. "Yes?"

"Am I awake right now?" Lee asked, and pointed to the scene outside.

"Hm." Uncle looked past him as the bison lowered over the palace, and a loud rumbling began near city center. "No."

"No, I figured I wasn't," he murmured as Uncle closed their shutters and shepherded him back to bed. It was strange: he couldn't ever remember feeling tired in a dream before. Nor could he remember lying down to sleep. "I think this was a very important part of the dream," mumbled Lee into his pillow. "I don't think I'm supposed to be missing it."

“You’re not missing anything, nephew,” Mushi assured him. “And why don’t you take off that coat, you’ll be more comfortable.” Lee whined and shuffled away under the blankets. He drifted off- again, somehow- with Sokka’s parka clutched tight in his hands.

Iroh left the shop not long after he sent his nephew home. The one positive of Zuko’s situation was that he had opportunity to dote on the boy again, but truly he was beginning to think he preferred his stubborn, angry nephew over this miserable, passive one. At least when they had been chasing the Avatar, he had been able to make attempts to help his nephew come to terms with his past and his future, and to gently nudge him towards a better life. Now, all of Zuko’s potentials - the good and the bad- were locked away somewhere, and it felt like the only things Iroh could do for him were brew tea and feign interest in his budding social life.

Worried as he was, Zuko falling ill was almost a welcome distraction. If nothing else, it was something he could at least hope to fix. He would be lying to say that he knew exactly what to do in this case- in all of his travels and all of his studies, he’d never once heard of anyone *forgetting* how to firebend.

He decided his best option was to treat it more or less as one would hypothermia. If his suspicions were correct, and the sickness was caused by the flickering out of Zuko’s internal flame, then the most important thing to do (and perhaps the *only* thing to do) was to get him warm and keep him that way. Hour after hour he went in to make sure Zuko was warm and sufficiently piled with blankets- and it worked. By the mid-afternoon the boy had finished shivering, and an early evening check-in found him napping soundly with a healthy flush to his skin.

In the in-between, there was very little to do except think. Iroh sits down to think, and he thought as he made tea and he thought as he brushed Zuko’s damp back from his cold, sweaty forehead. Even in his sleep, the boy sported a furrowed brow and a grimace. It was almost comically tragic: Zuko subconsciously held tight to his trauma as if it were a liferaft.

He could’ve done more. Perhaps if he’d been more proactive- but anything he could’ve done would’ve gone hand-in-hand with risking discovery by the Earth Kingdom. Always, but especially now, his first priority was to keep Zuko safe. So he’d stalled. (And, quite frankly, there was some small selfish part of him which relished the thought of a calm, normal life with the boy he considered his son. Second chances came so very rarely.)

In these last couple weeks, though, it’d become clear that the boy was hounded by the shadows of his past, even if he couldn’t see them for what they were. The memories hadn’t gone; they were somewhere below the surface, bubbling up every so often. They wouldn’t stop tormenting them until he faced them. Even knowing all this, Iroh wasn’t sure what right he had to take this chance at a simpler, happier existence from Zuko, but it was what had to be done. If Zuko was to be the one to choose his own destiny, then he needed to know who he was. That, Iroh knew for sure. What he didn’t know was how to get him back.

In the evening he woke Zuko to give him some more broth, sans vegetables this time. Zuko’s eyes flickered open, lusterless and lost as he gulped it down. He stared past Iroh and into their main room, smacking his mouth like he had to check that it still worked before he

spoke. “Did Sokka come back yet?” he asked in a tired, rattling voice. When Iroh shook his head no, he wilted. “You’ll let him in if he comes?”

“I’ll let him in, nephew,” Iroh promised.

Zuko frowned in an almost childlike manner. “You always call me that. Why not my name?”

“Lee is a very good name,” Iroh sighed. *But it never suited you. It isn’t so strong or so proud as Zuko*, he thought. Out loud, he said, “But there are many Lees, and you are my one and only nephew.” It was a poor excuse, but it was enough to placate Zuko. Contented, he turned over and went back to sleep under that damn blue coat. Iroh picked up the half-finished cup of broth, and as he went to pour it back into the pot, he thought of what he was going to do about Zuko and Sokka.

He didn’t doubt for a second Sokka was a good young man; the Water Tribe valued loyalty and protectiveness in its men, and he had those in spades. In all of their talks, he’d shown care and concern for Zuko. Even when they’d been on opposite sides, he’d been able to see those traits in the way the young warrior looked after his companions. He knew, too, that Sokka’s intentions were never to take advantage of Zuko’s compromised state. Iroh was young once, and foolish once, too (although that was far more recently), and he could understand how love crept up where it had no right to be. If things were different, he would have been thrilled to see Zuko with such a nice partner. But in the end, reality had to come first, and their love, no matter how sweet or well-intentioned, was built on illusions.

Sokka wouldn’t be staying in Ba Sing Se much longer, not with the comet looming just months ahead. He was an essential member of the Avatar’s team, after all, and they were not a sedentary bunch. The sight of their bison barrelling in and out of the palace indicated some plans in motion; Iroh sighed and went to pour himself another cup of tea, wishing he’d had the foresight to pick up something stronger.

Not long after sunset, someone knocks on the door. As expected, it was Sokka. The boy was bruised and battered but vibrating with energy. It was a look Iroh knew well from his military days, a look of small victory. A hard-earned one, too, judging by the drying blood on his tunic and freshly healed scar along his cheek. Iroh stepped back from the door and went to pour a second cup as a wordless invitation.

Sokka made himself quite comfortable at the table. “Is L- is *Zuko* out?” he asked as he accepted his cup.

“He was ill today,” Iroh replied with a nod towards the bedroom.

“Ill?” Sokka repeated, puffing up with panic. “He’s ill? For how long? Does he need to see a healer? Because my sister is a healer and she might be able to-” Iroh silenced him with a raised hand.

“He is already recovering; he had a very bad reaction to the cold weather without his bending.”

“Can I see him?”

"If he's awake, yes." Sokka rose quickly, not even bothering to put his cup down first. Iroh gestured for him to pause. "You and I need to talk, first."

The young man straightened and slowly sat back down. His cup made a quiet clack on the porcelain tabletop as he put it down. "Yes, sir."

"I don't expect you'll be around much longer, will you?" Iroh asked bluntly. There was no use beating around the bush. Sokka said nothing, but began to tap incessantly on his own wrist. "That was not a condemnation. You know where you're needed."

Something cleared in the boy's eyes and he nodded. "There are... things that we need to do," Sokka hedged, obviously wanting to keep his plans vague. He had a strategist's head, this one. He took a deep breath. "But yes, we're leaving. Soon. I wish I didn't have to go..." He turned his head in the direction of Zuko's bedroom as his voice trailed off.

"You must be very fond of Ba Sing Se."

Sokka hid his face in his teacup, glaring over the rim at Iroh's chuckle. "You know what I mean. I'm worried about him."

"He's very attached to you," Iroh agreed. It felt like an understatement; most of the time his nephew didn't spend with Sokka was spent talking about Sokka, caressing the little wooden duck he'd bought him, or staring dreamily out the window, clearly waiting for him to come up the street.

"Yes, and I'm pretty much the same- I mean, it drives my sister up the wall- but it's not just that." Sokka's voice dropped to a whisper. "I don't know what he's told you about it, but he's been having... issues lately, with his memories and his emotions. His emotions spring on him out of nowhere. It's really upsetting him. He's scared. I can't- I don't want to leave him like that."

"I know that you have a lot of weight on your shoulders, and the right choice is never easy to make." Iroh set his cup down and looked at the boy for a moment. *If things were different...* "But you don't strike me as any stranger to sacrifice."

Fortunately Lee had returned to his senses. Unfortunately, everything he sensed was *gross*. His hair felt slick and heavy, his mouth tasted like he'd been licking a washroom floor all day, and his clothes clung to his body, drenched through with sweat in some places. There was somehow a new piece of wet jerky beside his head. With a groan he turned over, right into a cold spot of drool on the pillow. Great.

Fragments of a conversation drifted through his cracked-open door. Lee's ears adjusted slowly, and his mind slower. Who was up having a conversation at this hour?

(*"-sister's a healer, but I don't know it'll work. The one she helped still had all of his other-"*
"-owe it to him to at least try-"
"-if they can't be recovered?")

It was Uncle, he realized belatedly. But the conversation required two people, and he knew that other voice, too. He croaked out its name and the conversation stopped. His door slid open and within seconds Lee was wrapped up in warm arms. It was a little *too* warm, actually, between the embrace and the coat and the blankets and the radiator dialed all the way up, and he was uncomfortably sweaty, and his legs had been lifted out of their cozy little twist, and he had to pee. All the heat and grossness notwithstanding. Lee smushed his face into his boyfriend's midsection.

"Sokka, what are you doing here? It's the middle of the night."

Those wonderful warm fingers carded through his dirty hair. "It's seven o'clock, duckling." Had he been in here more than a day? Or perhaps it had just been a few slow hours. It didn't matter, really. He twisted in Sokka's arms, finally ready to drink him in without his heart bursting, and took stock of Sokka's face: pretty blue eyes, gentle smile, and a couple dark freckles on his forehead. Check, check, check. But something was there that wasn't there before: a pale scar across his other cheek, long and faded. Lee frowned and scooted up in Sokka's arms to get a better look. It didn't make any sense- Sokka had only been gone one day, two days, max. No way had he gotten something so serious and had time for it to heal so well. Lee's eyes roved down the other boy's body, searching for anything else out of the ordinary. There was a stiff brown stain soiling the pale blue linen along his left shoulder, and what Lee could see of his chest was covered in dark bruises. Recoiling in horror, Lee pressed on Sokka's ribs and didn't miss the pained hiss it evoked.

"Sokka, you look-"

"Roguishly handsome?" Sokka tried. Lee ran the back of his hand along the scar, and Sokka frowned. "Damn. I can't get anyone to admit it."

Lee's finger skated up and down and up and down and up and down the pale mark until he knew its shape perfectly. "How?"

"Oh, you know. Wayward sword," Sokka said with a shrug, like this was just the sort of thing that happened to him all the time. The thought made Lee feel sick again. "Katara's a great healer, though. Barely even stings." Lee jerked his hand away, because stinging was hurting and he couldn't hurt his boyfriend again. "Really, honey, I'm fine."

Sokka didn't get it. He just didn't get it. It was somehow easy for him to dismiss his injuries like they were nothing, like he didn't know how singularly important he was, and Lee didn't know what he was supposed to say to it. He settled on, "Excuse me for a second," and pried himself out of the sweaty embrace. He picked up his pajamas and padded to the washroom, pausing for a second to look at Uncle, who was settled by the window with- *what else?*- a pot of tea. He looked strangely haggard, and Lee made a mental note to talk with him later. He deserved to know what was going on if he didn't already.

Lee took a few minutes to wash up and put himself in more kissable order. When he returned, Sokka was sat on the edge of his bed, toying anxiously with the wooden duck as he watched Lee deposit his parka by the door. They swapped tired smiles, and Lee climbed back into his boyfriend's arms, finally comfortable.

“I made a great joke today,” Sokka said as he sat back against the wall with Lee’s head cushioned against his shoulder. “There was this guy called Long Feng, right?” *It does sound familiar. Is he a patron at the shop, maybe?* “Well, he got arrested. No, no, don’t worry, baby, he’s a terrible guy. So he gets arrested, and they’re dragging him away, and I’m like, looks like Long Feng is *long gone!*” He let the joke hang in the stale room for a minute, raising his eyebrows expectantly. Lee blinked at him. It was kind of terrible, but Sokka wanted him to laugh, so he laughed. They settled into a calm silence and stayed there a while. “I have to leave,” Sokka said finally, unprompted.

Lee startled from his doze, noting with embarrassment that he’d left cold drool on his boyfriend’s shoulder. “But you just got here!” he said with a whine, cuddling closer. He wouldn’t have been so petulant, normally, but he’d been so miserable and sick and worried all day that he’d earned the right to cast aside his dignity for a little snuggle time.

Sokka laughed a sad, hollow little laugh. He pressed the duck into Lee’s hands. “No, love. I’m leaving Ba Sing Se.”

Chapter End Notes

yes i hate the ultra-vulnerable, helpless, super-soft-baby-boy!zuko trope. yes i wrote a ton of it in this fic to tear into it. yes i rewatched kikis delivery service and couldn’t stop thinking about the buff baker man all week. yes i listen to a lot of mitski. why do you ask

Chapter 14

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Notes

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

Lee's eyes cracked open, fixated on the little figurine in his hands. Its uneven, shallowly carved eyes stared past him. A new tension began to pull itself tight in his gut, something entirely different from his illness. Fear? Anger? Apprehension? "Leaving," he repeated, hoping Sokka would clarify. Surely he didn't mean he was actually going to *leave*. He meant- he had to mean-

"Woah, honey. Breathe." Sokka was rubbing his hands up and down Lee's back just, but now it felt less like comfort and more like suffocation. Lee balled his hands up and forced himself to stand.

"What do you mean, leaving?"

Sokka grimaced. "I'm going to Chameleon Bay to see my father. Just for a week, then Aang and I are coming back."

It should've been good enough. Lee should've been willing take whatever he got, and it was already more than he deserved, but the thought of being left alone was too much to bear.

"And after that?" he demanded. "Will you stay after that?" Sokka's silence was an answer on its own. "I can't be alone, Sokka! You can't just leave me here- you don't know what it's like!" He remembers how close he'd come to hurting Sokka, the look of apprehension in his eyes when he'd shared his issues. "But that's why, isn't it?"

"Honey, no. It's nothing you did," Sokka cooed. "It's just been a long time since I've seen my dad because of the war-" He kept speaking, but Lee didn't hear him. Something began to buzz violently in his head, and he had to fight to keep himself from lurching forward. If he did, then Sokka would catch him, and hold him, and Lee would lose the ability to be angry with him all over again. Somehow he didn't mind the anger so much when it was all his own. He screwed his eyes shut and shook his head to will that strange feeling away.

"That isn't true, Sokka," he insisted when he managed to get ahold of himself. "There is no war. Not inside the walls." The words spouted from him without his permission, but even if he didn't know where they came from, he knew they were the Truth. "There is no war in-"

"Outside, Lee," Sokka snapped. "In the real world. Do you understand that? I wouldn't leave you if I didn't have to, but there's a lot of people outside that wall. You were one of them, once." Sokka slapped a hand over his own mouth. All of Lee's protests died halfway out of his mouth.

"I was," Lee said softly, stuck somewhere halfway between agreement and confusion. That was right; he was new to Ba Sing Se. He'd said as much when he'd met Sokka, hadn't he?

Jin, too. She had asked him where he lived before, and even then he hadn't known how to answer. But if he was new, then he hadn't lived here before, and if he hadn't lived here before, he'd had to have come from somewhere. "I... I knew that. I just haven't thought about it much." There wasn't much to think about, and for the first time, Lee really, *actually* found himself willing to wonder why.

Had it never seemed strange to him before, that he had very little recollection of his life outside the walls? Lee rarely thought about it. He figured just hadn't had an eventful life, but that wasn't how it was supposed to be, was it? All the other unimportant people with uneventful lives- Uncle, Jin, the guys from the shop- they could all recall their lives without any effort. But Lee couldn't imagine what it would feel to have his past at his fingertips. When he looked back, he saw nothing besides the vaguest outline of a life. It'd never irked him so much before, but now that it was more than a passive thought, Lee thought he might suffocate under the realization.

"I don't think I was anything before I knew you," Lee admitted as the realization dawned. How had he not known?

What had his life been, before? What had his life been? Sixteen absolutely blank years spotted with fuzzy, indistinct memories; a vast frozen lake with only some thin spots here and there to hint at the dark water below. Lee could hear it cracking, now. The ice was breaking and he was going to drown.

"Tui, Lee, don't say that."

"It's true, though, isn't it? Do you know *anything* about my life before we met?" Sokka went absolutely still. "Me neither. Whenever I picture my life, you're always there, and I... I don't know what it's supposed to be like without you."

"That's not true, Lee. You're your own person." It was the second time he'd heard it, and this time he believed it even less.

"But I'm not- *it's always been about you!*" Lee's voice rose progressively louder until he realized he was yelling. He couldn't find it in him to care anymore. "*You can't-*" Sokka flinched away from him, fear in his eyes. "You can't just leave me behind."

Lee collapsed into tears on the floor with his fists curled up so tight he thought his nails might break right through the backs of his hands. Gently Sokka pulled him up by the shoulders and sat him up, wiping the tears (and snot, he realized with what little embarrassment he had left) from his face. Lee sat still and let him do what he liked; the fight had gone out of him, but he didn't find any comfort in the touch, either. He didn't know if he wanted to keep on begging Sokka to stay or yell at him to leave, so he just sat and stewed as he was embraced.

As it turned out, it wasn't a decision Lee had to make. A tap on the doorframe alerted him and Sokka to Mushi's presence. Lee didn't know what had been discussed before he woke up, or what the look Uncle gave Sokka now was supposed to communicate, but obviously Sokka did. With one last stroke of Lee's hair, he was gone and the apartment was still except for Lee's heaving frame.

“I don’t think he’s coming back,” Lee murmured without quite knowing why. “Not to me.”

“Your lives are intertwined in ways you can’t understand right now,” Uncle said in that soft, cryptic way of his. Lee looked away and said nothing, because he knew he would sound even more like a petulant child if he were to voice the one thought that had burrowed into his staticky brain: he didn’t want to understand. He didn’t think he ever would. All he wanted was for Sokka to be there when the ice began to crack.

Sokka’s coat was still folded on the edge of the bed.

Sokka poured all of his worried energy into packing. It almost worked. The more concentration he gave to the best way to organize his socks to optimize space, the easier it was to block Lee’s desperate, confused eyes from his mind.

“What did that sleeping bag ever do to you?” Katara asked. She was leaning against the doorframe of his room and acting as the sole spectator to his wrestling match with his bedroll. He’d finally found the buckle, but the move to clasp it was just enough to jostle the whole thing into another escape attempt.

Defeated, he flopped down onto his belly and spoke into his arms. “It’s this thing with Lee. Things kinda went south when I told him I was going. I’m really worried about him.”

Katara sighed. “Look. I’ll make sure he doesn’t get rushed by mobs or eaten by tigerdilloes or whatever it is you’re afraid is gonna happen, okay? Since he’s apparently so helpless.” She made quotation marks in the air, although Sokka had never actually said that. He pulled himself into a sitting position.

“That’s not it, though, it’s like... mentally. In his head, y’know? He seems really unstable, and I think I might’ve made it worse.”

“Sokka,” she groaned. “What did you say to him?”

“Just that I was going. And, um, where. I’m going.” Katara looked in danger of taking her eyes out with the heels of her palms. “Yeah, okay, and also-” Sokka took a deep breath and started to thrash his hands in front of himself as he realized what he had actually done.

“Imight’ve told him about the war and reminded him he has no memories and triggered a massive panic attack.”

Katara layed her steady hands over his own. “Okay, deep breaths. One thing at a time. You said more than you should’ve, he got upset. Then what?” Her eyes were calm and expectant, clearly ready to figure out a solution. Sokka felt sick.

“And then I... left?”

“And then you left,” Katara repeated back to him, voice scary-flat. For a moment she looked very thoughtful, finger to her lip like she was coming up with a fix. And then she wound up and gave him a sharp smack on the arm. “Sokka, what were you thinking?” she yelled, in hot pursuit as he tried to ducked around the main room trying to dodge her smacks.

Sokka yelled, "I wasn't! He put me on the spot and he was crying and I didn't know what to say and Iroh is kind of scary when he's so serious so I- *ouch! Katara!*" He dove into the nearest room- Aang's- and scrambled for something to use as a shield. The nearest object happened to be Momo, who squeaked in terror and flailed his tiny hands as Katara went in for the kill. He was saved from his fate when Aang threw himself between the two siblings.

"What are you guys- hey!" Aang snatched Momo away and let him crawl back onto him. "What are you guys doing?" The two of them slumped and lowered their hands, only for his sake. Katara took a deep breath.

"Aang, why don't you go find Toph so we can all say our goodbyes? Sokka and I need to have a *talk*," she said in her gentlest tone, and Aang reluctantly backed out (It was his own room, Sokka remembered), Momo chattering with indignation on his shoulder.

Sokka rubbed his aching arm. "We're gonna talk, or you're gonna hit me again?"

"We're gonna talk," Katara said, but the *If I don't like your response, you're getting beat* was implied in her tone. "We have to do something about Zuko. Clearly he's not stable."

"Yeah, but what?"

"I could try what I did with Jet," Katara pointed out, tossing water easily between her hands to demonstrate. "I know they didn't have the same results, but they probably went through the same process. We know it can be undone."

Undone. "I don't know..."

Katara narrowed her eyes at him, and Sokka shuffled his feet in shame, feeling like a scolded child. "You don't know, or you're not willing to try?"

"It's complicated," Sokka said, but it wasn't in any way that mattered.

Obviously Katara knew as much. "You don't want to risk it because you like the way he is now," she said, and Sokka had to look away. It was true, and it was what he'd known from the first time Lee took his hand. He'd strung it out in long comparisons and lofty justifications, but compressed into one sentence, it became so selfish and unfair. *It's always been about you*, Lee had told him, and looking back he could see it clearly.

"He's isn't your pet, Sokka. You don't get to just keep him now that you like the way he is. I know this isn't the way you meant for this to go, and I *know* you had good intentions, but you can't keep going this way. People don't belong to each other. And- look, Sokka- I don't like him. I hate him. But don't you think he deserves to belong to himself?"

There wasn't anything he could say to that. He could stay with Lee, but it'd be fair to no one. There would be no excuse for him to, except that he *wanted*. Deep in him, the same thing that kept him from accepting Lee's advances cried out: *I want* didn't equal *I should have* or *I am owed*. No matter how desperately he wanted Lee, he couldn't restructure both of their lives to keep things the way they were. Lee deserved to be well. Sokka couldn't keep his eyes from straying to Aang's small bag of effects, packed neatly on the bed with his glider resting

across it, ready to go back on the run. He thought about Zuko and all the hell he'd put them through. Even then, Zuko deserved something, too: maybe he deserved to be.

The thought eel-hounded him out of Ba Sing Se and morphed into nausea as he and Aang whisked through the clouds. Sokka should've been thrilled. Everything was going to plan. Ba Sing Se was in the best of hands, the Dai Li dismantled, and the Kyoshi warriors en route, which meant he would be seeing Suki again soon. Even if they wouldn't be doing their usual kissy-smoochy schtick, (and he did feel sort of bad for never thinking of her when he fell in with Lee, but he'd seen how *close* she and her girls are, and she wasn't exactly on her lonesome). He'd be seeing Dad for the first time in years. He *was* excited. Enthusiastic, optimistic, all of the above. It did nothing to chase away the ball of guilt rolling around in his gut.

Somehow Aang, just a couple hours out from spiritual enlightenment, was less daunted. He perched easily on Appa's head with his dreamy smile, repeatedly brushing his hand against the cheek that Katara had kissed. Somehow he'd managed to procure a new saddle for Appa, but as always he preferred to perch on the bison's head and play with his fur until his arrow was lined with little brown-and-white braids. Sokka slumped forward against the front of the saddle and began his own braid. It came out lumpy.

"Aang, do you have any baller Avatar advice?" (Sokka knew his life was tough, but asking relationship advice from his twelve-year old friend who'd never even kissed a girl was a new low.) Aang hummed thoughtfully

"Uh, sometimes, when you love somebody, you gotta let 'em go. And if it's meant to be, they'll come back to you," Aang offered, snapping his fingers as if it had taken some effort to come up with the most generic slogan in the history of motivational speaking. Sokka buried his face in his hands.

"He's an amnesiac, not a polar dog. And he's very upset about being 'let go'."

Aang twisted in place to look at Sokka and just studied him for a second, eyes soft and amused and sort of sad all at once. "You know what I think, Sokka?"

"Yeah?"

"I think that you're gonna do the right thing."

The moment that faint knock came on the door was the moment Katara began to curse her *idiot, idiot, idiot* brother for shoving her into this. It was *idiot, idiot, idiot* as she carefully tucked away the plans General How gave her to look over and *idiot, idiot, idiot* as she pulled the door open, just a crack. Maybe she was cursing herself a little, too, because after all the only person she knew in Ba Sing Se who would be knocking so softly at the door was-

Zuko, who stood on the doorstep holding Sokka's anorak in his pale, shaky hands. He looked ridiculously helpless- Katara'd heard the expression "like a lost puppy" before, but she'd never seen it in action. It'd been so alien to her to see him calm and soft-spoken when Sokka brought him over; now, he was teary-eyed, flushed, and pouting. If he was a little delicate the

last time they met, he seemed dangerously fragile now. Against her better judgement, she opened the door a bit wider.

Somehow, Zuko looked even more skittish at the sight of her face. “Is Sokka still here?” he asked in a sad, quiet voice. Katara shook her head no, and the little lost puppy looked like he'd been kicked.

Damn her bleeding heart.

“Do you want to come in, *Lee*?” Katara asked. The name felt foreign to her, and so did the kindness, but she could hardly help it when he was just standing there looking so hurt and so terribly needy. It almost- *almost*!- easy to see how Sokka got so caught on him.

Zuko raised his eyes suddenly; clearly he hadn't come expecting any hospitality from her. “Oh, uh... only if you don't mind.” Katara gave him another look-over; she was probably staring more than was polite, but it was just so novel to look at him. Zuko used to look so imposing with his heavy armor and proud stance, but now he seemed determined to take up as little space as possible as he followed her into the living room. With his ever-growing dark hair and his soft frown and his sad eyes, there was so little about this Zuko, besides the obvious scar, that linked him to the one she hated so much.

“I came to give this back,” he said, referring to the parka that he still clutched to his chest. Katara eyed it. Either Sokka had forgotten it (not likely, with all his obsessive planning), or he'd left Zuko swaddled in his own coat while he went out to sea. *Idiot*. “I thought he might need it, wherever he's going. And we- we got in a fight, and I wanted to tell him I'm sorry.”

“He already left. But,” Katara said, speaking quickly before Zuko had the chance to start crying or pouting or anything else she couldn't bear to witness. “He's coming back next week, and you can give it to him then. He feels really bad about upsetting you, you know.” She wondered how much of an understatement *upsetting* was. Recognizing memory loss had to be terrifying, but Sokka hadn't gone into a lot of detail, so she had no way of knowing if Zuko had even grasped it yet.

“He shouldn't be sorry. I've leaned on him too much.” Zuko said. He spoke more softly than she ever would've thought him capable of, and his voice only had a bit its old dragging rasp.

“You shouldn't be, either. He was more than happy to let you.” Zuko didn't respond. Katara pursed her lips, and after a moment of deliberation reached for the water jug. “I think I might be able to help you, Lee.” She wanted to hate him for needing her after everything, but he met her eyes with this soft, hopeful gaze, and she found didn't have it in her. It was probably a terrible, *terrible* idea, but she really did want to help him.

With the same gentle movements one would use to avoid scaring a fussy child, Katara pulled water from the jug. Zuko watched entranced as she routed it between her fingers and drew it between her hands, eyes wide and curious like he had never seen waterbending before. “It's beautiful,” he whispered. Katara allowed herself a soft smile and a deep breath while she channeled energy through her body, and in the back of her mind she noted how Zuko's brow furrowed at the sight of the blue glow in her hands as she brought them towards his face.

She didn't have much time to dwell on it. Before Katara made contact, Zuko flinched away and seized her right wrist. His hand was unnaturally cold- it was a stupid thing to notice first, but it caught her attention nonetheless. The second, slightly less useless thing she noticed was that while his grip was firm, it wasn't forceful or even very insistent. It wasn't a gesture to capture or disarm, just to pause her. It had to be the first time he ever touched her without meaning to hurt her, and the first time she'd waterbent towards him without the same intent. There was something so tantalizing about that chance at a new beginning, she thought, and understood just a little better why Sokka wanted so badly to keep it. She resisted the instinct to snatch her hand back and defend herself. Instead she just held the water idle above her palms and wiggled her wrist to get his attention. Immediately he loosened his grip and wrung his own hands out in his lap.

"I- sorry. You know what you're doing."

"I do," Katara lied.

She brought the water again to his temples, and this time he took a long, shaky breath and leant into her hands. His eyes fell shut and his face lost its pained expression. Even at his most neutral, the scar pulled the skin on one side tighter and gave him a slight scowl. The brain was extremely delicate and incredibly complex, but it was also blood and tissue, just like any other organ. Even if she wasn't any type of expert on its workings, Katara could tell at a glance if there was something wrong with it.

And there was something very, very wrong with Zuko's brain.

When she helped Jet uncover his memories, it had been easy to single out what was blocked off, and to prod her energy at that part of the brain until it relaxed enough for him to reach it. Zuko's mind was completely the opposite: there was a handful of loose material, but by and large it was like that entire section of his brain had been sealed off. The difference in effort between the two of them was like thawing out a glass of water compared to trying to melt a glacier- but that wasn't anything she hadn't done before. She pushed as much energy as she safely could against that little spot in his brain, and in just a few moments she was able to make that first chink in the ice: she felt something unfurl within that wall of memory.

Zuko's eyes snapped open again, golder than gold and somehow clearer than they were just a minute ago. She could see a spark of... something in them. Katara didn't know him well enough to name the emotion. But for just one second, he looked so himself that she drew back with a gasp and took the water with her. Zuko seemed shaken, too, and scrambled backwards from her. They stared at each other like two frightened animals, not quite sure who had who cornered.

"Did that help at all?" Katara asked. Cautiously, she lowered her hands to look like they were resting in her lap but fingertips buzzed with the slight energy of keeping the water suspended just below the lip of the pitcher. Zuko could be as volatile as his element, and if she awakened any bit of that, she had to be ready.

Something cracked under his sweet little frown, and though he didn't cry or lash out he looked utterly broken. "No," he whispered, and dug his fingers even tighter into Sokka's coat. "I don't think it did."

Chapter End Notes

Good morning to Katara and Aang!! the rest of y'all... gm i guess :/

Eight days late, I know! Combination of personal stuff + other fics im working on + lying around thinking about spam musubi + me trying to take tighter control over the plot now that it's nearing the end. I wanna try sticking to the Sunday update schedule, though. I'm also gonna try getting back to all the comments on ch. 13!! I really love everyone's input, I just have trouble knowing what to say, especially right now when I could get too enthusiastic and end up spilling the whole plot. Promise I'll go back to them tho!!

and yall 🙄🙄🙄 i really kept meaning to bring up Suki I love her so much I feel like such a dick for waiting 14 chapters and then brushing her off but I really did forget to plan for her 🙄

Chapter 15

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Notes

hey again sorry about the delay (again)! Been really busy but my workload might be getting lighter from here on out, so hopefully i can get back on schedule. I was thinking of waiting for next Sunday to update, but I thought I'd make it a mid-week treat instead.

Also, this is where I decided the fic warranted a "graphic violence" warning. Content/trigger warnings are down in the end notes so you can go in blind if you want.

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

It took until he'd finished pitching his tent at Chameleon Bay for Sokka to realize how unbelievably stressed out he'd been this past month. He was always stressed, of course, and he still was. But their plans were underway, the Dai Li was taken care of, and Aang was taking the chance to master his crazy Avatar powers. Compared to their usual pace, things are a breeze. For once he could put survival and reconnaissance on the backburner. He was trying not to think of Lee, too, because there was nothing Sokka could do for him right now except *hurt*; every time Lee's shaking hands and sad eyes darted across his mind, he had to be satisfied with the promise that he would make things right when he got back.

Reuniting with his tribesmen was exactly what Sokka needed to distract himself from all that. Coming off of a streak of small victories and celebrating his arrival, they all seemed to be in high spirits. The atmosphere reminded him of hunting trips he tagged along on, when all he was really old enough to do was huddle at the campfire in between Dad and Bato while the men told exaggerated stories about their biggest catches.

But he was one of the men, now; they crowded in on him and slapped him on the back and offered him drinks and asked in booming voices if he'd managed to snag any girls yet. (That was the other thing: there was about ten times more masculine energy at camp than he was used to being around, even living with Toph and dating Lee. After all, there were no girls here, besides in the men's stories of the ones back home and in Earth Kingdom ports.) It felt good to hang with other guys again, but he'd forgotten what slob men could be when they didn't have wives and sisters and daughters looking after them. The company reminded him of home, and so did the food (although it tasted just a bit *off*; the men rarely cooked before they left- women's work- and some of the ingredients were Earth Kingdom substitutions).

None of those home comforts compared to seeing Dad again. He didn't tower over Sokka the way he used to, but his smile was just as warm as it'd always been. There were so many things Sokka wanted to say to him and to hear in return, but he decided to start with what absolutely couldn't wait.

Dad leaned back and listened carefully as Sokka layed out the plans for the Day of Black Sun. He was listening a bit too carefully, actually. His thoughtful silence through the entire thing ground on Sokka's confidence until he sputtered his last, "So, yeah..." and rolled up his maps, afraid to glance up from the table.

A heavy hand on his shoulder had him looking up. Dad looked back at him, beaming like he might burst with pride. He'd almost forgotten how much that look meant to him.

"I missed you," Sokka's mouth blurted out without consulting his brain. Aang's hammered it into him a million times that there was nothing bad or un-manly about feeling mushy or going red, but he felt stupid anyway.

Dad smiled and pulled him into another tight hug. He used to be able to press his face into Dad's chest when they hugged, but now Sokka's cheek bumped clumsily against his collarbone. It wasn't any less nice

"Katara misses you, too."

Dad squeezed him a little tighter, like that would get the message to Katara. "I've missed you both so much. Bato tells me she's really been improving her waterbending," he said, voice swollen with pride.

"*Mastered* is probably a better word for it." Sokka grinned. He was trying not to sound too boastful- it was Katara's achievements, after all- but he couldn't mask how proud he was of Katara's skill with her stupid magic water. "You should have seen her in the North! She fought this stuffy old master without any training." Dad's face fell into a grimace.

"I have to say I'm a little... apprehensive about you two being away from home. I know you're all capable and looking out for each other, but I worry. It gets dangerous out here, and Katara's only thirteen-

"Fourteen," Sokka corrected.

Dad groaned and sunk his face into one hand. (*Didn't his hands used to be bigger? Didn't he?*) "Fourteen? Tui and La, I've missed so much." Sokka didn't trust himself to reply without a note of bitterness in his voice, and that wasn't the tone he wanted to set right now. "Still, fourteen is young, and she's just a-

"Just a what?"

"Y'know." Dad said quietly, rubbing at the back of his neck. He probably hadn't meant anything by it, and Sokka didn't want to be too harsh on him- he was always encouraging of both of them, growing up, but he couldn't let it rest. Even without that same rigid, borderline-malicious attitude that they had in the North, it was clear that their tribe had different expectations for boys and girls.

"Look, I've travelled a lot. There's nothing only about it. Dad, all the girls I know could kick my ass twice over. Probably yours, too." "And even when I thought they couldn't, Katara didn't leave much room for argument. I left with her because I wanted to be there to keep her

safe, but also because earlier that day I watched her split a hundred-foot glacier clean down the middle because she was tired of being told what to do.

Dad stuck his hands up in acquiescence. “You’re right, you’re right. It’s wrong to underestimate her. It’s just hard to wrap my head around how fast everything’s changing. I mean, the Avatar’s back, for Tui’s sake! I have trouble believing it sometimes.”

“You better start believing. He’s a strong contender for your future son-in-law.”

Dad’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? You and the Avatar?”

Sokka choked on his own spit and took a good minute to recover amid Dad’s heavy thumps on his back. “I’m fine, I’m fine!” he wheezed, waving frantically. “I meant *Katara*, Dad. She and Aang are always making heart eyes at each other. It’s exhausting.”

“My little girl and the Avatar!” Dad laughed warmly. “Suppose I can’t complain. And what about you, Sokka? Have you found anyone special since you set out? Some lucky girl?” Sokka bit the inside of his cheek. “Lucky boy?”

“Look, it’s complicated.” He tangled his hands in his lap and took a deep breath, wondering if he was only imagining the faint scent of jasmine on his clothes. “Really complicated.”

“Love always is. Look, I don’t know what you and your *special person*-”

“Dad.”

“-Are going through, but I’m going to give you some advice that my father gave me when I was your age.” His dramatic pause was practically an invitation for interruption; within a second the tent flap opened, and one of the men rushed in with news of the Fire Nation fleet. In the space behind him, Sokka could see everybody prepping their armor and weapons, rushing to their positions.

His heart sank. Who knew how long a mission like that would take? He only had until Aang finished his time with the Guru, and that kid was like a sponge, which meant he’d probably get back here before the men did. Was that all he’d get- one hour, after three years? But Dad just looked back at his mopey face and laughed. “Aren’t you coming, soldier?”

It almost felt right when things began to go wrong.

Aang touched down just as just as he finished steeling himself to go on a real mission as a man, but like dad said: Sokka was a warrior now, and he had to be where he’s needed. And apparently that was back in Appa’s saddle, fidgeting with the straps of his bag as they hurtled back towards Ba Sing Se.

It’d been a lie, when the man had asked him his name, and he had said Lee. He had been lying.

He’d been afraid before Katara tried to heal him. It hadn’t mattered, though, since he was afraid already. He was still afraid, barely noticing when Katara took her brother’s still-folded

coat from his lap and draped it over his shoulders.

There wasn't anything so unpleasant about the healing process. That was- he didn't know how to describe the sensation. It wasn't like anything he'd ever felt before. It might not have even been a physical feeling, just his brain filling in the blanks as it was stimulated. It was like a water pump operating inside his head, sweeping around his head until he felt like his whole mind was in motion. There was the feeling, though, that something was stuck, refusing to be pulled from the muck.

And then something did unlodge itself and let itself float upwards back into his mind. It was... murky at best, like the water had slowed to dredge it from the depths of his mind before it thrust the memory at him and regained its momentum.

He sits in a dark room. A man asks his name, and he answers.

And he'd answered *Lee*, but now that he could remember it, he could also remember the moment of hesitation where he had to catch himself before his mouth went to form the sound of another name. He knew what it had to mean. There were a couple other things that stuck out in the scene: a hard pressure on his wrists, a cold smile and a smug voice, the feeling of relief and satisfaction when he was believed. The lie, however, was what he fixated on for its terrible implication: he'd gone into that room as someone else, some not-Lee person. And somehow he'd left without any memory of them. Himself. Whoever.

"I can try again," Katara offered. "It might help if I kept it up longer." There was this quiet little huffing emphasis she always seemed to put on that word, "help".

It hit him suddenly that she might not have known her methods were *effective*, even if they worsened his worry. "It um, it did work, actually. A little bit."

"Did you remember something?" she asked, eyes narrowing with suspicion or curiosity. He wished he could tell which.

"Sort of. Not a lot, it's more like... like I've realized I've forgotten something. A lot... Everything. I don't know what, I just know it's gone." Katara nodded silently. He couldn't blame her for not knowing what to say; he didn't even understand it, and he was the one saying it. "But you.... I guess you already knew that. I mean, since you offered."

Katara chewed on her cheek for a moment as his word-vomit concluded. "Right. That means your memories are probably intact. It's just a matter of getting to them." She pulled the water back from the jug, and when it came immediately he got the sense that she'd never really let go of it. Did he scare her? Was she guarding against him, too, under that cold face when they shared dinner a week or two prior? Why would she be scared of him, unless-

He drew a nervous breath. "Did you know me, before?" The ugly, quiet little question fell flat in the space between them and writhed around, daring them to touch it. Katara was avoiding his eyes now. As gently as he could, he reached for her hands; she got the message (*he would find out soon enough, wouldn't he?*) and let him lead them back to his temples, encompassed by the glow of her element. That water-pump feeling began to creep up on him again, but

before anything came to him, Katara took her hands away. She was staring at the water jug, which had begun to rattle in place.

“Are we having an earthquake?” Lee asked.

“No. Stay behind me,” Katara answered in a suddenly steely voice that left no room for arguments. She fell easily into some sort of combat stance facing the door- he recognized it from when Sokka had first brought him home. *Maybe she really is just like this with everyone.*

Katara, but when he spared a glance away, he noticed that the jug had stopped shaking. Only the furniture toward the back of the room was moving. He barely got in his “Um, Katara?” before a space opened in the back wall just as easily as if it were a sheet of wet clay. Half a dozen men filed through the new entrance in neat lines. They were earthbenders, no doubt, but they stalked towards him and Katara with an imposing silence. One of the men that faced him now looked strikingly familiar, but they were all so similar that it was hard to single him out.

Whoever they were, the men didn’t waste any time talking. Neither did Katara, who immediately went to strike at the three men closest to them. One was knocked back, but the other two dodged behind a hasty shield of stone and clay pulled from the floor. Katara repeated the attack with an intensity he hadn’t expected from her. Even if she’d been frosty at times, he hadn’t expected her to be so fierce.

He stumbled to his feet behind her. If he knew Katara... *before*, he hoped he hadn’t been on her bad side. She was kind of scary.

The men began to close in again. He cast about for something to throw or swing so she wasn’t pulling all their weight, but no sooner had his hand found the rim of a vase than a swift kick swept his legs out from under him and he found his arms in a vice grip behind his back. The vase shattered into pale shards at his feet.

“Don’t resist,” said the officer behind him, as if that was going to calm him down. He shoved an elbow backwards into the man’s rings, but all it got him was a tighter hold on his arms. Another agent caught him by the scruff of his neck; it was the one he thought he recognized when they stormed in.

The familiar officer leaned in to whisper to him, breath hot against the shell of his good ear. “Lee, the Earth King has invited you to Lake Laogai.” His vision went black around the edges. Katara was yelling something, but he only really heard the sound of waves in his mind.

His body stilled and his mind raced. He didn’t want to accept, but still he was going limp in the agent’s tight hold. “I’m honored to accept his invitation,” said his mouth.

“Don’t resist,” repeated the officer, and he didn’t. Black crept in around the edges of his vision, and the last thing he saw was Katara hitting the ground beside him.

He came to on his back, staring up into a grey sky dotted with blue stars. He could still hear the water moving in his mind; it kept up, even as his vision cleared and the throbbing in his head began to fade. Sitting up, he saw why: neatly irrigated pits wound around him, routing away from an impossibly high waterfall a good length away. It stretched to the sky- *no*, he realized, *the ceiling*. They were in some kind of enormous cave. There were scores of large, crumbling structures carved into the walls- primitive houses, maybe? The “stars” he’d seen before were just clusters of jagged, luminescent crystals that weren’t just above him but stuck out from the walls and floor. There was one just next to the spot where his head had been resting and he thanked the spirits that, if nothing else, they hadn’t let him get impaled on the way down. It would have breathtakingly beautiful, under different circumstances. Now, though, all Lee felt was fear. He wasn’t supposed to be here.

Wisps of red ran by in the water, and he looked up to see Katara performing her own healing on the side of her head. “All good,” she said when she caught his eye, but her smile was shaky at best, and her clothes were dirty and tattered in places. His had fared better on the way down; glancing over, he saw that Sokka’s anorak lay in the spot where he’d been, looking worse for wear. He went to reach for it, then paused.

Sokka had given that to Lee.

Maybe on some level he knew it was only a name. It wasn’t his name, though, and he wasn’t the person he- or Sokka- had thought he was. He could feel Katara’s eyes on him as he dropped his hand. The anorak didn’t move from its crumpled blue heap.

He descended into more practical worries: How long had they been down here? Had anyone noticed he was gone? He hadn’t said anything to Uncle before he left today. Was he worrying about him? Did- *oh, spirits, Uncle knew*. He’d known that Mushi- was he the only one lying about his name?- had figured out there was something wrong with him, but had he known the entire time what it was? If Uncle knew who he was before, why had he never said anything? Maybe Uncle preferred him to the person he was before. That was the only way he could really rationalize it. Spirits, he must’ve been terrible.

And Sokka. Sokka... How much *did* he know? Had he met him before, or was it just as new and terrifying? Either way, he didn’t think he could set things back to the way they had been if he came back. Sokka loved his sweet, docile Lee and all the easy smiles and laughs and blushes that came along with him. He didn’t know if he could ever be that again. How could he ever crawl back into Sokka’s lap after everything he’d said, after knowing that he might not be that person- that he never had been? (The answer was easily, gratefully.)

He felt ruined.

Katara stepped over the stream to sit beside him when he started to cry again. “Do you want to try again?” She asked, pursing her lips when he responded with something that was somehow both, and neither, a head shake and a nod. “Lee. I know you’re scared right now, but I think it might be better to face it head-on.”

“I don’t... I don’t think I was a good person, before.” She looked away. “If I go back...”

Katara gently pushed his hair back from his sweaty forehead with a soft sigh. “Will it matter? If you find something you don’t like about yourself, will it really change who you are now?”

“It is! It has!” he snapped. She flinched away. “Guess I’m no better like this.” Katara raised her eyebrows and he nodded back at her, and then her hands were back and his temples were wet again.

She was only at it for a second before she pulled away from him abruptly, *again*, and again he lost it before he could make much sense of it. All he managed to get a hold of was an angry voice (*His? Whose?*), something heavy in his hands, and force and adrenaline and intensity that didn’t fit at all with the life he’s been living. Up until now, at least. Images flashed behind his eyelids, barely-formed or blurred with motion, until he finally recognized the person standing across from him, and then rushing at him. He could hear the rustling of his layers and the sound of his heavy boots so clearly that he wondered if this was what a real, proper memory was like for everyone else. But even as he tried to tuck the memory away, the sounds seemed to get louder and closer.

When he looked up, Jet’s face was dark, just as handsome but far less friendly than he remembered it. “Hey, Katara. Who’s your friend?”

Oh, fuck off.

Katara was so much more vigilant than she’d been when they first met. Jet wondered if she’d grown out of her sweet, trusting nature, or if she just wasn’t the kind to trust twice. She stepped toward him now, acting as a barrier between himself and Lee. Behind her, the little snake got to his feet and began to wipe away tears.

Must’ve been some performance he was putting on; Lee wasn’t the crying type. It was a good act, though, Jet could admit. The Lee in front of him didn’t much resemble the wiry, gruff boy from the ferryboat, or the quick-tempered, showy one he’d fought in the lower ring. His face was a little rounder, his muscles less well-defined. His good eye had a red, puffy ring beneath it, and the cheek below it was ruddy. He didn’t look like a fighter anymore, more like a deserted ingenue or an abandoned runt huddled. No wonder Sokka got hooked.

“What are you doing here?” Katara asked. Her voice was a little stiff, but at least she wasn’t hurling a tsunami at him this time.

“I’ve been here for... uh, I don’t actually know how long it’s been. No sunlight down here. The Dai Li busted in on me last night. I guess the bastards are just locking people up now, with the lake compromised.” Something cloudy flickered across Lee’s face.

“Okay,” Katara said, spreading her hands in front of her. She and Sokka shared their little *I’m-making-a-very-important-plan* face. “Do you remember where they left you?” Jet gestured vaguely to the part of the cavern they stood in. He’d been a little disoriented on the fall and honestly couldn’t tell where he’d been tossed down from.

Katara cast her eyes around the space and seemed to think for a minute. Beside her, Lee was fidgeting and looking between her and Jet with knit brows. Maybe he was expecting a confrontation, too. "Right. If this is about where they dropped all of us off, then they must have a specific spot they use as an access point. If we figure out where, we have a chance of getting out when they open it up again."

She began to trail along the walls of the cavern, poking her head into the tunnels by the light of the glowing water in her hand. Jet wasn't really sure what she hoped to find- there probably was an access point, but it would never show after being closed. The Dai Li were the Earth Kingdom's best, as well as its worst.

One tunnel tilted upward- he knew, he'd already spent hours looking for an exit- and Katara flicked her fingers towards him in an *eyes-on-you* motion before disappearing into it. It was probably a waste of their time and energy to let her go roving through the cavern like that, but it got him what he needed: a minute alone with Lee. Just a minute.

"Lee," he said, "Come here and help me look." Lee's mouth fell open, maybe to protest, but Jet already had him by the arm and was dragging him towards one of the crumbling homes set into the cave wall. His expression went from uncertainty to panic when Jet's shadow blocked off the doorway and he realized he was more or less trapped.

The main room was illuminated by a cluster of glowing white and blue crystals, but there was a smaller, darker room right behind it, so poorly lit that everything turned into shades of grey and he didn't have to look at the sickening orange shade of Lee's eyes as he backed him into the corner. Jet wasn't planning on hurting him- or maybe he was. He hadn't made up his mind yet. It wasn't like Lee didn't deserve it- he was a firebender, after all. If nothing else, he wanted Lee to know that he knew. And he wanted to know, in return, that he was right- that he hadn't gone through all of this for nothing.

"You remember me, Lee?"

"Sort of. Sort of." Jet wondered if that wasn't true- he hadn't remembered their little altercation either, until Katara helped him to clear his mind. Clearly he remembered enough, because his eyes darted between Jet, the blades on his back, and the doorway. It didn't matter what Lee remembered- this wasn't personal. He was a firebender whether he knew Jet or not.

"Doesn't matter." *Not personal*, he reminded himself, and tried to keep the smugness out of his voice. "I know who you are."

"You do?" Lee asked, quiet and pleading, as if he expected Jet to fall for the innocent schtick. He didn't want to lose his temper after how it'd gone last time (and not with Katara so close by), but he could feel himself getting more agitated with every soft little word Lee spoke.

"You knew me?"

"Don't play coy." Lee's brow furrowed, and he looked a little more like how Jet remembered him as leant forward into Jet's space, strangely intense. The closeness reminded him of how close he had wanted to be to this boy on the ferry, how perfectly matched they'd seemed then. A new flash of anger and betrayal shot through him, and he grabbed a wide-eyed Lee by the front of his robe.

Lee narrowed his eyes, finally seeming to get the picture. “Who am I, Jet?” he asked. His voice was lower and softer than before, but Jet knew when he was being taunted.

“I’m asking the questions,” he growled, twisting the fabric in his hands until Lee’s breath hitched from the tightness at his collar. “Where are you from, *Lee*? Why are you really here?” Jet had him cornered now in between the half-collapsed stone bed and the shrine alcove in the wall.

“I-I don’t know,” Jet shoved him backwards and Lee made a panicked sound as his back hit the wall. Bits of brittle stone crumbled away behind him. Jet put a hand at his throat, not quite pressing down. It was nothing more than the implication of the act.

“Who are you, really?” he asked, and sunk his four fingers into the side of Lee’s slim neck. It was pale beneath his fingers, except for a fading lovebite just below the spot where the scar met his jawline. Jet pressed down on it hard with his pointer finger when Lee still hadn’t answered him, and was rewarded with a sharp gasp.

“I don’t know!” Lee repeated frantically. With some satisfaction Jet noted that his voice had started to take on its hard rasp again. He found the windpipe right there under the junction of his thumb and forefinger.

“Is that all you know how to say?”

“Please, Jet, I- *ach!*”

He pressed down, hard.

It wasn’t the first time Jet had had to do it this way. When soldiers caught him unaware, when he’d been disarmed, when someone was on the trail of one of his fighters and he had to take them out quickly and quietly, it came in handy to know the right spots to squeeze. It was a nasty way to kill- not messy or overly gruesome, but too hands-on, too personal. He had to watch until it was done. Usually he bore it the same way he did any killing: he was doing it to protect the other kids, to keep them safe, and it meant one less fire nation maggot in their country.

Lee didn’t give him that release. He didn’t even put up a fight. He was supposed to be *fierce*. He snarled when he spoke and was a good enough swordsman to kill most people twice over. Lee didn’t blush, he didn’t whimper, and he certainly didn’t beg.

He didn’t want to kill Lee- did he? No, he decided, he didn’t. But then, Jet never wanted to kill. He wasn’t like the fire nation, hunting his people for sport. (His hand closed in tighter on Lee’s pale neck, and the boy’s unscarred cheek began to darken.) The question was whether or not he would. He’d never hesitated, before. But it was different now. Every other time, Jet had been protecting his people from real threats. Urgent threats. Grown-ups and soldiers. Lee could be all of those things- or he could just be a closed-off boy, rough but innocent, and now Jet found himself trying to keep his hand from slipping as he bounced wildly between his choices. He could risk being wrong and hurting one of the people he’d sworn to protect- *he’d come here to stop, he’d come here to be better*- or the risk of being right and releasing a firebender back into the city.

Lee's eyes were becoming cloudy and unfocused.

The tears that had been threatening earlier spilled out now, pooling in the divet where his fingers dug into Lee's neck. His breaths became increasingly strained, each one a trial on his lungs. Lee brought one cold hand up to scrabble uselessly at Jet's wrist, and Jet caught it in his free one. Lee curled his fingers around Jet's.

"Come on, Lee. Don't make me..." Jet squeezed for emphasis, but his hand was already so tight that there wasn't much give left. Lee wheezed desperately, but the skin under Jet's fingers remained cold. Something ran down Lee's chin but in the dark room he wasn't sure what it was. "You're gonna make me?" he asked, but it didn't come out smug like he wanted it to. It was more of a plea. *Don't make me.* "Just bend. Just show me you can and I'll let it go. I'll let you go, just show me. I know you can. I need to know."

Finally Lee raised one shaking hand and touched his calloused fingertips softly Jet's face, and Jet readied himself to pull back from the inevitable burn. He just needed to feel the warmth, and he would know. It would be weak. *Lee didn't have much breath left.* He would pull away and put Lee down and go from there.

The touch grew a little harder, but the heat never came. Lee's desperate last resort was not to firebend, but to drag his nails down Jet's cheek in a barely-there scratch.

Not so much as a spark.

He circled back to that same thought: Lee wasn't putting up a fight, and Lee always put up a fight. What if he really couldn't bend? Maybe his uncle was the only bender in their family, or the rest of Lee's family was earth kingdom. That would make him one of Jet's own, that he's choking out in this dark little hovel. *What if he was wrong entirely? What if he had been from the start?*

No. He knew what he'd seen, and he had to act on it. But what he was seeing now... the confusion and terror in the boy's cloudy eyes were unreal. Anything he could've done to save himself, he would've done by now- Lee was a fighter, or he had been, once. He wasn't the way Jet remembered him. He wasn't who he was supposed to be. He wasn't a firebender.

And maybe it wasn't definitive proof, but it was just the excuse he needed to loosen the hand on Lee's neck. Lee sagged forward and he shifted the hand to cradle his head and brought his other up to press Lee's shoulder to the wall, keeping him steady as he took his first gasping breaths.

Normally there wasn't conversation after you choke someone out, so he wasn't sure what to say. *Sorry? Let's have Katara check you out? Don't mention this to Socks or the Kid?* He wished his fighters were here. Longshot would've known what to say.

"Okay, Lee. Just breathe." Contradictory fucking advice from the fucking Ba Sing Se Strangler. He couldn't tell if Lee had processed the tone shift. His eyes were still dull, his breaths tiny. Still, he seemed to lean into the touch, bringing his hands up and brushing softly at Jet's wrists with the backs of his fingers.

Jet gave a gentle squeeze to the side of Lee's neck. He meant it as a "*There you go, it's okay, let's never do that again,*" sort of squeeze, but halfway through he realized it was kind of tactless. And stupid.

Lee's aimless, soft hands clamped like vices around his wrists before he could pull his fingers back. Underneath them, Lee's neck suddenly seems to radiate heat- not just warmth or body heat but actual, burning heat. Jet didn't get the chance to think about what it meant, and he certainly didn't get the chance to pull away before flames ignited in the non-existent space between their skin.

For an instant he just stared at the white flames licking out between Lee's fingers and the way they dancered over his own skin. Then realization set in, and so did the pain, a thousandfold worse than anything he'd ever felt, and he was trying and failing to hold back a shriek of agony. Through his tears he saw Lee's eyes illuminated by his own flame, but they were still glazed- he looked like he was barely conscious. *Does he even know what he's doing? Does he even understand?* The flames got hotter, or maybe they'd reached down below his skin, and what parts of his skin didn't feel like hellfire had gone scarily numb below Lee's hands, which showed no signs of getting burnt, even for so long at such close range.

And he was just standing there. *Oh! Oh!* He was just- Jet tried to wrench his arms back, and to his amazement Lee yielded easily. His grip loosened enough for Jet to pull his wrists back with a sickening wet slide and a new wave of pain accompanied by a wildly dizzy feeling. He pulled back and kept going, going, going, until he was across the little room and pressed into the other corner, hand hovering erratically over the dark shining surface of his arm. The cool, damp air stung the wound and it took everything in him not to clutch at it.

Through bleary, weaving vision he thought to glance at Lee, who still wore that knocked-out expression and gasped in tiny, aborted breaths. Jet watched as he raised a hand to massage at his bruised neck. He seemed to realize at the same time as Jet did that his hands were hot and slick; what could've been blood or melted skin flew away from them as Lee thrust them away from himself. They were both hyperventilating now, which is not a great feeling if you've been recently burned or, if Jet had to guess, all but strangled.

Lee's eyes had found him now, hunched on the floor with his fists balled up to keep him from grabbing at his burns. Did he look angry, or was Lee looking down at a pathetic cowering mess of a man? He wouldn't give the firebender- *any firebender*- the satisfaction of seeing him like that, of even thinking of him that way. Jet tried to deepen his brows, tried to funnel every emotion that wasn't pain and regret into a seething glare. He probably looked more like a snarling, wounded animal than anything. But maybe Lee caught it anyway, or maybe he was catching sight of the furious wash of red, white and black on Jet's arms, because he gave a horrified rattle of a gasp that sent- *oh spirits, fuck*- sparks scattering from his lips, which sent his hands back to his throat. He repeated the cycle:

Throat. Blood. Jet. Burns. Gasp. Sparks. Throat. Blood. Jet. Burns. Gasp. Sparks.

In the tiny, scattered light from his bending, he could see Lee's eyes again. Honey brown, he remembered thinking on the ferry, when he'd finally gotten Lee alone. Fire Nation gold, he'd realized before Lee turned from him at the station. The color is the same as it ever was now, but he could see the fear in his eyes, and beneath it, confusion. Shock. As if he hadn't known.

As if he hadn't known.

Lee's words came back to him: *Who am I, Jet?*

He wasn't being sarcastic. He'd wanted to know. Out in the cave, Jet could hear Katara yelling for them; he looked between the burns on his arm and the other boy passed out against the wall and wondered what she would do. Her footsteps came nearer, and when her shadow darkened the doorway he finally dropped to the ground next to Lee.

They both got what they wanted.

Chapter End Notes

CW for: General Violence, Strangulation, Burning, some light blood. Usual action chapter fare.

what if i strangled you and then you gave me severe burns and we were holding hands the whole time and we're 🤞 both boys 🙏

-tried to keep jet's characterization simple in this one simple: desperate, angry, ☆☆☆fruity☆☆ jokes aside tho i feel like a lot of people either fall into seeing him as a saint/martyr (which i kinda get) or an irredeemable asshole/manipulator? And I really don't like either of those. I feel (and I don't want to be someone who goes deep into kids show lore but oh well) like he can't be solely defined as victim or villain, he's just a scared kid that turned into an angry teen and got stuck that way. Idk i think he's neat and I always like trying to get into his head.

-also (lots of notes huh) I know i like. teased a misogyny conversation with the SWT guys but I didn't go all that deep into it. I think it goes undiscussed a lot because what we see in the show is basically the same kind of casual, normalized misogyny we grew up with, and it gets talked about more in the Northern tribe because that kind of sexism is less familiar to us? idk

- I'm thinking of maybe sticking to every other Sunday? I've got a lot of material already written for the next couple chapters (only what? two, three left? holy SHIT) but there's also a lot to write and a ton of loose threads i have to tie up so thank you for bearing with me!! Love u guys :)

Chapter 16

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Notes

I know this has been on break far too long, especially for a chapter I had more or less outlined for at least a month. School and life have gotten kinda intense in the last month, and it's gotten hard just to pick up the metaphorical pen. But I never thought of abandoning it or anything- we're so close to the end and I've really loved telling this story so yeah :) thanks for all the support. And 20,000 hits!!! i can't believe that :')

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

“I’m sure she’s alright. Katara knows how to handle herself,” Aang said, even as he jostled Appa’s reins to pick up speed. Appa grumbled and soared a tiny bit faster.

“Yeah. Whatever it is, she’s probably already taken care of it.” Sokka didn’t want to voice his other worry, though surely Aang knew by now. God, he was predictable. It felt almost superficial to stress over Lee when his sister could be in trouble- and Katara *did* take absolute priority in his mind- but instead of driving away his worry for Lee, it all just compounded like layers of one big stress-filled sandwich that had been sitting out in the sun for a couple days. His stomach rumbled.

Sokka rolled over onto his back and stared out into the darkening sky. Yue was almost full and beginning her climb, veiled in fog. He felt foolish, all of the sudden, when he looked at her. She did the right thing instead of what she wanted. She’d wanted to stay, but she didn’t hesitate to do what was right. Why did he have to?

The touch down in Ba Sing Se was sort of precarious, but Appa was happy to rest in the small valley between their house and the next, munching on the grass and shrubs. They stalked up to the house, staff and boomerang at the ready. Ping across the street took a pause from trimming his hedges to wave at them. Aang waved back while Sokka waved him off. They stopped in front of the gold-trimmed door.

“Anyone could be in there,” Sokka whispered. “We need surprise on our side so they don’t slip away.”

“Right.” Aang held up three fingers. “One, two-”

With a triumphant cry, Sokka burst down the door. Well, he tried to. The damn thing didn’t budge, and all he managed to do was throw himself painfully against his elbow.

Aang looked back at him in alarm. “A pull! It’s a pull!”

Sokka tugged the door open with a far less triumphant cry.

Inside, there were no Dai Li hanging from the ceiling and no Fire Nation soldiers falling into attack formation. All there was was Toph loudly slurping tea across from Iroh, who was waving them in. They both looked sort of... rough. Toph, specifically, had dirt on her feet (although that was hardly uncommon), scrapes on her hands, and a twig in her hair. In between them was a sort of crude-looking iron teapot with several fingerprint-sized dents in it.

"Nice of you two to show up," she snarked, but there was an edge to her voice alongside her usual bravado.

"What happened to you? I thought you were going to see your mom."

"Yeah, she had me kidnapped," Toph said, like that wasn't the most wolfbatshit thing imaginable. "Check it out, though." She reached for the teapot's iron handle with both hands and bit her lip in concentration. With tense fingers, she bent the handle away and swirled it in between her palms.

"Metalbending!" Aang exclaimed, seemingly forgetting his panic for a second. "Toph, that's incredible!" Sokka muttered his praise too, although truthfully he had figured most earthbenders could do that already. Toph bent the handle back into shape and replaced it on the pot.

"Cool, right? Anyway, Katara's missing."

Sokka spluttered. "Katara's missing and you guys are here having *tea*?" Not to be hard on tea- he loved tea, but it had its time and place.

"We were actually about to start out, but I felt ten tons drop from the sky just now and figured we'd wait on you."

"And Uncle, what are you doing here? Did Toph come to get you?"

"I came looking for my nephew," Iroh began to explain, and Sokka wondered how his eyes managed to stay in their sockets just then.

"*Looking* for him? As in, he's gone?" Iroh nodded solemnly. "Did you- okay, did you ask Jin? Did you check the shop? Did you- You double checked?"

"He went out looking for you this morning-" And oh, didn't that make his stomach twist with guilt. *Thanks for that, Uncle.* "And when he didn't come back, I came here and found my young friend searching for your sister."

"The house was empty, so we figured that-"

"Wherever they went, they went together," Iroh finished for her.

"Well, it's good that they're together but that doesn't bring us any closer to actually *finding* them."

Toph tipped her head back and let out an exaggerated groan that seemed too big for her body. “I’m *getting* there, Snoozles! Okay, so at first I thought maybe they’d just gone out to get their nails done or something, but when we went in, we found-” Here, she pounded a fist against the wall and a closet sprung open, sending a bound man tumbling to the ground. The lack of injuries showed he hadn’t put up much of a fight against the two of them. “This little guy snooping around, doing some damage control. So we beat him up.” If things weren’t so dire, the image of Toph and Iroh beating a guy up together would be... not laughable, but certainly entertaining. She plucked the dark, domed hat from his head and threw it over her own, then bent the stone gag from his mouth like it was an afterthought.

He spoke up immediately, sounding. “What do you want to know? Anything, anything-” The man sounded every bit as panicked as he looked, and Sokka wondered if he was cowardly, helpful, or just afraid to be near Toph any longer.

“My sister!” Sokka demanded. “Where are they keeping her?”

“In the Crystal Catacombs of Old Ba Sing Se, deep below the palace.” It wasn’t a good answer, but at least it was close, and more accessible than the last time he’d had to break Katara out of prison.

“Is she safe?”

“As far as I know.” Sokka looked to Toph, who nodded. Relief flooded in.

“And my nephew?” Iroh pressed. The agent said nothing, and Iroh took another step towards him. There was something very deliberate and intimidating about him suddenly, despite his stoutness, and it forced Sokka to remember that for all of his kindness and good intentions, he was a very dangerous man.

The agent seemed to catch onto it, too. “Oh, him! He was a witness,” he yelped. Sokka and Iroh exchanged a loaded look- the Dai Li didn’t know who it was they had.

“What did you do with him?” he demanded.

“We tossed him in, too. All of our prisoners are down there until Laogai’s back in operation.”

Oh spirits, Sokka thought, Lee can’t handle prison. He’s sort of small and doesn’t remember any self-defense and it’s probably really cold down there-

“They’ll probably just wipe him again,” the agent offered, like that should console them, “and then return him to you.”

Sokka scowled. “*Return him?* He’s not a fucking lost dog!” He could feel everyone’s eyes go to him. If Katara were here, she’d probably be grinning in self-righteous delight. “I mean, um, they shouldn’t pass people around like that. They’ve got no right.” Iroh gave him a strange look he couldn’t really parse. “Anyway.”

“Anyway,” everyone echoed.

“So, should we leave now, then?” Aang asked, reaching again for his staff.

“It’s a trap,” interjected the agent. “Don’t you know? They’re bait. The plan is to ambush you as soon as you’re in the catacombs.” Everyone glared at him- they knew that already.

Sokka stalked towards him again. “What’s the Dai Li want with Aang, anyway? You guys are going against the Earth Kingdom’s interests!”

“The Dai Li never served the Earth King. We serve Long Feng, and he-” The agent abruptly swallowed the rest of his sentence, eyes falling to the ground.

“What?”

“Well, he more or less serves her, now.”

He was getting sick of the dramatics. “*Who?*”

“Princess Azula.” A beat of silence. Iroh heaved a long, tired sigh; Aang and Sokka shared a shiver. “Of the-”

“Yeah, we got it.” Toph interrupted. With a sharp wave, she took a chunk out of the wall to and to the back of his head. He collapsed forward. With him taken care of, Sokka turned to face his friends.

“Aang, it might be better for you to stay behind. I know we have a habit of walking into traps, but Azula is really bad news.”

“No way. Katara’s down there because of me!” Aang protested. He had the same look in his eye as when he’d decided to follow Jet’s lead to Lake Laogai.

“Yeah, twinkletoes can handle himself!” Toph chimed in. “Plus, he’s got the whole Avatar state-thing down pat.”

“Right.” Aang’s voice seemed... off.

“Aang... you *did* master the Avatar state, didn’t you?”

“I can do without it,” he grumbled, stuffing his little hands in his pockets. Sokka felt his heart drop.

“I know, Aang, but she’s really dangerous. Uncle and L-Zuko were kind of petty in comparison. No offense.”

Iroh shrugged. “None taken. I wasn’t really trying.” His expression grew serious, then. “But Azula will be. Having control over your abilities could be the difference between life and death when you fight someone of her ability and determination.”

“Maybe on my own,” Aang agreed, far too brightly. “But I’ve got you guys, plus Katara! And we might not even have to fight.”

Sokka certainly hoped so, but nothing ever seems to go off without a hitch where they were involved. It’s not like they had much of a choice, though, because there was no world in

which he'd leave Katara behind, danger or no danger. So he didn't voice his worry.

"What about him?" Aang asked with a thumb pointed at the passed-out agent.

Iroh hummed in consideration. "I'm sure someone will come looking for our friend here."

Toph groaned, already halfway out the door. "Who cares about him? Let's go! C'mon, I wanna do a prison break!"

Getting back onto palace grounds was actually pretty easy. They were the Avatar's party and everyone's favorite tea guy- why *wouldn't* they be heading up to the palace? Nobody blinked twice as they wove through the halls, led by Toph's seismic sense. Somehow managing to dodge nobles, guards, and royal bears, they made it to an empty courtyard.

Toph crouched low and put her hands to the ground in front of her. With her cheeks blown out in thought, she gave the appearance of a little white and green bullfrog. "Well, what'd you know? There *is* an ancient city down there. But it's deep."

Sokka looked around to make sure no one was looking in as Toph started shifting the earth in the courtyard. He couldn't see anyone, but he had the distinct feeling someone was watching. "We should split up," he suggested. "Iroh, Aang, and I should go down and find Katara and L-Zuko." Aang gave a big thumbs up. "Great. Toph, you need to warn the Earth King of the coup."

"Will you be alright on your own?" asked Iroh. Normally questions like that were a sure way to get Tophed, but his tone was genuinely concerned enough that she just gave a square nod. "There is a chance you will have to fight your way out."

Toph stood up and cracked her knuckles. "There'd better be."

Toph walked right on, as casually and confidently as if she hadn't left her friends behind digging their way into a prison keep. Hands in the pockets of her smock, she followed the path she'd blazed to the throne room when they broke in last time. Without anyone to distract her, her mind wandered to her parents.

She hadn't said much about it to anyone, even to Uncle. Her friends would have talked about it with her if she'd asked them too, but she didn't *want* to talk about it. Not now, anyway, while she felt so dumb. She really had believed her mother wanted to see her, and she had walked right into a trap. She'd know better now. Toph wouldn't go back to them as long as they refused to see her for who she is, but of course she missed them. She'd thought that maybe they were ready to accept that she needed her freedom. But then they literally had her trapped in a big metal box. Metaphors didn't get much more obvious than that.

Would they really stop loving her if she didn't become the person they wanted her to be? Love shouldn't be conditional, and she knew it, so why did she still sort of want it from them? She suddenly felt stupid for thinking this way and punched the wall beside her, only feeling a little better when the room shook. She was entirely too strong to worry about mushy

feminine stuff like a mother's love. (Again she punched the wall, because even thinking that brought her down.)

She only walked in on it by chance: one man struggling against a group out in the next hall over. Toph stood watching from around the corner, feet to the ground and hands to the wall. The Earth King was silly and out of touch, but she could at least appreciate the practicality of a stone palace. Great for seeing things she wasn't supposed to. Based on their stature and their silence as they apprehended the men, she guessed that they were Dai Li agents. They dragged the man kicking and hollering down the hall. The coup must've been starting, then.

She was supposed to get the King, *but* she was also sort of tempted to follow the Dai Li, *but* they would probably just lead back to Azula, possibly the only person in the world Toph wasn't sure she could beat up. Azula, after all, was more or less the *her* of firebending.

With a grimace, she continued on to the throne room. Not far out, two teenager-sized forms cross out into the hall in front of her, speaking in between themselves. Apparently noticing her, they came to an abrupt halt and shut up.

She knew them by their shapes and their voices and the weight of their steps on the palace floors. One glided in an elegant, disinterested manner, barely lifting from the ground; the other hopped and skipped around in a way that reminded her of Aang's little gymnastics. It was Mai and Ty Lee. They recognized her, beyond any shadow of a doubt, but spirits only knew if they could tell that she'd recognized *them*.

Toph, luckily, had plenty of practice pretending to be well-behaved and helpless. Maybe it could actually do her some good for once. With a deep internal sigh, she put on her best *Woe-is-me, I'm-blind-and-know-not-what-I-do* facade and proceeded on as if she hadn't seen them. And hey! She hadn't.

They were trailing her, she could tell. She would only have a small window of time alone with the king. And spirits above, she only had so much tact to spare.

Reaching the throne room, Toph flung the huge iron doors open with a boom and marched forward. Guards and warriors who remembered her last visit shuffled uncomfortably with pattering heartbeats but knew not to stop her just yet as she moved towards the King; only his immediate guard stepped inward.

The king jolted at her approach, his noise of surprise accompanied by the clacking of jade beads. "Ah, Lady Beifong! To what do I owe the-"

"Coup."

"Come again?" Bosco the bear stirred at his side, grumbling in annoyance.

"Dai Li's staging a coup." He still didn't move from his throne. She could feel the girls running down the hallway towards them now, could faintly hear the movement of their light armor, and in her periphery she sensed the neat, rhythmic steps of several men behind them. With a heavy stomp, she sent up a stone stopper at the door, and a small space in the wall behind the king. "*Helloooo*, did you hear me?" she barked. "I said, move it!"

The doors burst open behind her once more, sending shards of rock scattering everywhere. Guards shouted and rushed past her towards the entrance, boots thudding on the fancy tile. The forms by the doors became jumbled and chaotic in her sight, except for two which wove through the crowd and advanced on her. She didn't have to focus long to figure out who they were. The King's personal guard did nothing to stop them- idiots!- so apparently she had to take matters into her own hands.

"Come on!" She grabbed the King by a soft, ring-covered hand and tried to tug him towards the exit she'd made. For some reason, he dug his feet in and held himself back. "What's wrong with you?"

"I can't leave Bosco behind!" he replied, panicked.

She was running out of tired groans today. Wordlessly she shifted the tile under the bear and launched him through the space in the wall, not bothering to hold back her smirk at his distressed grunts.

"Okay, there! Bear's through, now GO!" The King rushed out after his pet just as the girls started to close in on them. Mai was shifting her arm back, likely for a weapon, and Ty Lee was tensing into a crouch like a predator about to leap on her prey. They were impressive, they really were, Toph thought. But- and here she shifted into a simple form- even *impressive* doesn't quite cut it against the greatest earthbender in the world. The two girls leapt backwards as an enormous ceiling tile plummeted down towards them, and with a wave and her most shitt-eating grin, Toph turned and raced out after the king. He hadn't gotten far, barely moving faster than his ambling pet, but at least he was moving.

"Is there something about 'move it' that you don't get?" There was something so wonderful about speaking down to royalty. He scoffed in indignation but picked up the pace. Noises of a pursuit echoed down the hallway, and they broke out into a full-blown run.

"Is there a way back into the city that they won't know about?" Toph demanded.

"Um, there's an old entrance in the Eastern Wing!" Kuei yelled, "But I think it's been sealed- ow! Spirits!" Something light landed behind them. She couldn't tell much about it, with her feet leaving the ground every other second, but if she had to guess she'd say it was a little silk shoe.

The path to the catacombs led them through a number of twisting halls, and with each turn they took Toph hoped to god Kuei knew where he was taking them. Their pursuers were getting closer now, "Hey highness, you know how to earthbend?" she asked as they ran. (Because she could handle it on her own, she was the *best*, but she'd be even best-er with someone covering her on one side).

Kuei, already completely out of breath, squeezed out a "Somewhat!" and created a pathetic little ripple in the earth behind them that did little more than send pebbles scattering and nearly interrupt her seismic senses. Poor guy.

"Nevermind. Just worry about the bear." Bosco let out a loud huff that almost sounded like laughter.

They skidded to a halt, suddenly. Here, at the end of the hall, was a great, blocked-off opening that led down, down, down, as far as her senses could reach. She concentrated for a moment on the blockage- it was a great iron door, thick, solid, and almost certainly locked.

“Oh, the end is here!” cried Kuei, collapsing to his knees in a flurry of silks and beads. “If nothing else, I’m glad to be going out with a friend...”

“Mhm.” Toph split a seam down the middle of the gate.

“And a truly noble friend at that!”

Planting her feet squarely in front of the part, she took a deep breath and bent it open, wide enough for a large man (or perhaps a small bear) to crawl through. “Right.”

“And that I may be remembered as- oh, how’d you do that?”

“Just get in.”

The catacombs weren’t hard to find once Toph pointed them in the right direction. Aang was left to do all the heavy lifting burrowing deep by the light of the flame Iroh carried in his hand. Sokka followed behind them, so wrapped up in his worries he barely realized they’d stopped until he nearly tumbled forward into the flame.

“It’s right in front of us,” Aang announced, and with a final movement swept the tunnel wall aside to reveal the catacomb.

It was no place for a prison, being far more fitting for a temple or a holy ground. Hell, *catacomb* didn’t really fit the bill, either. It was as if the Northern Lights had fallen to Earth and seeped into the ground; he almost felt serene taking in the cave.

Not far off, there was a figure huddled in green, small and somber in the radiant light- it was unmistakably his Lee. Sokka’s heart lurched with the urge to rush to his side, and then dropped as the boy swivelled to face them.

Lee looked like something straight out of his nightmares. His neck and chin were smeared with blood. There were dark bruises up and down his pale neck, right where Sokka had spent weeks pressing kisses and raspberries into his skin. His mouth hung open in a pant, baring his teeth in a terrible grimace. Braced on red and black hands under burned-away sleeves, he looked feral. He didn’t look like himself.

(Maybe he looked too much like himself. Maybe more than Sokka would like.)

Lee’s head swayed and then tilted up at them, eyes finding Iroh first, and then Aang, and finally Sokka. His face contorted with shame, horror, and sadness. Sokka stepped towards him with an *oh, baby* already on the edge of his tongue. Lee made this wounded little noise as he approached, looked straight at him, and curled in on himself. There were tears down his pallid face and the part of Sokka that wasn’t yearning to reach out and grab him and hold him

and keep him was fixated on the fact that even as battered as he was, Lee didn't seem to have any open wounds.

The blood wasn't his.

Katara was supposed to be down here.

"Where's-"

"Aang, Sokka!" He wasn't sure he'd ever whipped his head around so fast as he did just then. Katara crashed into his arms- or maybe he crashed into hers- and they opened just enough to pull Aang in. The relief from all of them was palpable, almost enough to push Lee from his mind.

"Come on, we have to get out of- Why'd you bring him?"

She was referring to Iroh, who had swept past them and grabbed his nephew up into a tight hug. A crop of dark hair, mid-length and messy poked just over his shoulder, and as badly as Sokka wanted to check on Lee now, he knew better than to interrupt.

Instead he took in his little sister. She was a little scuffed up but all in one piece, lively and alert as ever despite her obvious exhaustion. (He honestly wasn't sure how she managed.) The only thing of real concern was a blotch of dark on the skirt of her dress.

"Is that- are you good or is that like, a girl thing, or-" She rolled her eyes and jerked her head towards the back of the cave, where underneath the roaring waterfall crouched a tense, red-clad figure.

Sokka did the math in his head as he stalked towards Jet. He didn't know what had happened exactly, but he already knew he didn't like it. He liked it even less when he got close enough to see Jet's arm through the clear water. Katara had clearly been working on him for a while, and he didn't seem to be in pain, but the ragged stretch of raw new skin up his arm was just as condemning as a fresh burn.

His emotions twisted in on themselves- contempt, horror, pity, worry, and relief, and just a little more horror for good measure. He couldn't even tell who they're directed at anymore. Clearly Jet has tried to hurt Lee- his Lee, who was shy and defenseless and cried when he was left alone. It was inexcusable.

But clearly Lee hurt him back, and badly- with firebending, no less. That raised a whole new set of questions that he needed answers to but couldn't bring himself to ask.

"What... what happened?"

Jet glared up at him. His eyes were red, wet, and angry. "You know what happened."

"Jet, *what happened?*"

"Exactly what I told you was going to happen! I was right." He pulled his injured wrist to his chest and repeated, almost silently as if to himself, "I was right."

Sokka turned to see Lee clutching Iroh's sleeve, somehow looking both withdrawn and desperate at once. He couldn't hear their words, but the movements of Lee's twitching hands gave him a good enough idea. "Did he even know what he was doing?"

"Does it matter?" Jet growled back, then looked him over. "No. I don't think he did. But you do, don't you?"

"I'm going to talk to him. Just-" Sokka couldn't even bring himself to threaten Jet. As always, he sort of wanted to throttle the guy for laying one finger on Lee, but on some level he got it. "Just stay here."

Jet, for once, did as asked, pushing his arm back into the water as Sokka made his way to Lee and Iroh, finally stopping when he got within earshot. Lee was speaking in a low, desperate tone.

"Uncle, how long-" his eyes landed on Sokka and he wrenched away from Iroh. The old man watched him go with a tight expression which Sokka didn't even bother trying to decode because Lee was right in front of him now and he needed help.

"Sokka!" He sounded so shaky and panicked, and Sokka pushes down his apprehension. *He* was panicking, and he knew what was going on. Poor Lee must've been so scared and confused.

"It's gonna be fine, okay? I know you're probably scared, love."

"Sokka-" There was something else in his tone, something familiar he couldn't quite place.

"Oh, duckling," he cooed softly, careful not to broadcast the nickname beyond their ears. "We're going to-"

"**Sokka!**" Lee shouted, and grabbed him roughly by the neck of his tunic. His eyes were wide and angry in a way Sokka hadn't seen in a long time. It felt like a long time, at least. "No more! Call me by my name!"

Sokka froze. *Call me by my-* "Lee."

He narrowed his eyes. "You hesitated. Why did you hesitate?" Lee shook him, although his arms quivered and strained without their well-trained muscles. "Did you know?"

"Um, could you be more specific?" That wasn't very assuring.

"That I'm not me!" Lee twisted both fists, and Sokka winced as he felt the sharp heat against his chest. Almost on its own, his hand went creeping for Boomerang, which was slung at his hip. Lee's eyes flicked down along with it, then went wide, and, still holding tight, he crumpled into angry tears. It was not the soft, vague sadness he'd been holding onto for weeks; it was furious and messy and all there.

"It's not supposed to be like this," Lee grit out in a croaking, strained voice. His eyes were wild and they bore into Sokka's (maybe that's why they were burning). Sokka could smell the linen smouldering where Lee had it clutched in his fists. "It was supposed to be safe here."

He pulled Lee to him and just held him how he liked to be held until his back no longer heaved with the force of his sobs. Minutely, he nodded to Katara over the boy's shoulder; she returned it with sad, steely eyes.

Sokka pet his hair, peppered kisses over his head and whispered his love just loud enough for Lee to hear. Lee tilted his head up- Sokka couldn't put a name to the look in his eyes, wouldn't know how to describe it except deep and dark and sorry- and pressed their lips together in a weak, barely-there kiss. His lips were hot and he smelled like smoke. Something wet stayed behind on Sokka's lips when he pulled away- blood, tears, spit or soot, he couldn't say for sure.

Sokka kept his eyes trained on him, the way his face was illuminated and the way his sweet golden eyes widened, then snapped shut as Katara lifted her water to his head and began to work her magic.

There was a moment when he really thought everything might be alright. Sokka's arms were around him, just like they'd always been, and he slumped easily into that embrace without a second thought. For one blissful moment, he was nobody; no name, no memory, just a cold body surrounded by warmth. Then his blood began to pump, warm and alive again, carrying that heat away from his heart and sending it searing through his brain. He gasped and Sokka's arms clamped tighter around him.

His name was the first thing to wander back into his mind: U-oh, Ts-ko, Zuko. Zuko Zuko Zuko. *Prince* Zuko. It came to him mostly sneered, often shouted, and sometimes, *sometimes*, with so much tenderness and love it made him angry to remember. He didn't have it anymore. He wouldn't have it again. Light flashed behind his wet eyes, back and forth, back and forth. Memories followed not far behind. They rushed through his mind and then back out faster than he was able to grasp them, but they kept returning with the light, and he caught more on the rim of his mind each time.

Spirits- Spirit- Agni, did it hurt. It was worse than choking but better than burning. He stifled a pathetic (*pathetic, pathetic!*) whimper.

Perhaps he could pretend. He had always been good at playing pretend (he knew that now.) Quietly, Zuko pillowed his head on Sokka's shoulder. As long as he was here with Sokka it would be alright, because Sokka was never angry with him, because Sokka counted on him to need him, because Sokka knew-

Because Sokka knew.

Sokka knew him the whole time, and he knew him before. He'd known him when he followed him down through the lower ring and crowded him in against the wall. He'd known him for who he was when he let Zuko kiss him and hold his hand and spill his secrets. He felt sick at the thought of being known like that.

The arms around him were much too tight, and Katara was far too heavy on his back. *Katara was on his back*. He'd felt cradled moments ago, but the feeling was souring fast. He and Katara- and Sokka for that matter, *fuck*- had been enemies since they first laid eyes on each

other. They had accepted him as Lee, but now he was- well, he was him, wasn't he? The switch had been flipped as he lay between them.

He'd been here before. He knew how it went. The arms were not arms but straps binding him in place, and the soft blue eyes were the roving lantern drawing him in as he was told what to be.

But he could get out this time. Maybe he could get out this time.

Uncle had always told him (always, he could remember his *always's* now) that he needed to work on keeping a level head, but it was just impossible. He was teetering on the edge of himself, not sure which way to fall. He couldn't just be Lee, not knowing what he did. Lee was a what-if, a best case scenario. But Sokka wouldn't want him if he changed. Sokka would hate him, like he did before.

Zuko wanted to shrink crying into the embrace. He wanted to rip himself away, snarling with bared, bloody teeth. He wanted... What did *he* want?

He wanted to find out.

He wrenched out of the siblings' hold and tried his best to quash the stab of guilt as Katara tumbled down behind him. Zuko backed away from the two of them, horrified, betrayed, apologetic, and angry all at once. He couldn't tell the difference between what he feels for them, for himself, for the person he thought he was. Feeling was almost as painful as remembering.

Behind them, at the far end of the cave, he could still see Jet kneeling with his arms in the water, and though he was too far away to make it out with his vision being what it is, Zuko would have bet anything he was still wearing his dark glare. In the space between them, Uncle stood beside A- beside the avatar.

Sokka got up and opened his mouth to speak, and Zuko wanted more than anything to hear what he had to say- love or hate, he would latch onto it either way. He had enough anger and sadness for both. But then the cave rumbled- and Agni, was he tired of rumbling walls, nothing good had come of them yet- and he turned from Sokka as the rocks parted and fell away. From the dark tunnel came the sound of heavy boots, in a rhythm so suddenly and sickeningly familiar that he felt his blood freeze straight back up.

Azula marched into the cave as easily and self-assured as she used to be walking into his bedroom to torment him. If she was as surprised to see him here as he was to see her, she didn't show it; the only indication of shock was a quirked eyebrow as she took in his filthy state. Zuko realized how he must look. He was bloody, bruised, tearstained, and out of breath. He was also standing yards from the Avatar and his compatriots. At best, he was a dirty fugitive; at worst, a traitor.

"Oh, Zuzu," tutted Azula. She checked under her nails while she spoke, as if anything would dare to dirty her skin. Her eyes were cold and they flickered over the scene. "You always make such a mess of things."

Chapter End Notes

teehee

Chapter 17

Chapter by [backatpatrickpark](#)

Chapter Notes

I really went off my updating schedule this past week, so if you didn't read chap 16 on Wednesday, make sure to do that first! ok love you besides x

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

With one snap of Azula's manicured fingers, the Dai Li sprung into action and engaged the others.

Uncle was fighting his way towards them, and was in the process of knocking out one agent when another attacked from behind. The crystals at his feet shot up around him before Zuko could warn him, trapping him in place halfway through a movement. Zuko gasped, frozen to the spot. Shaking, silent, shrinking.

He couldn't remember feeling like this. He was impulsive, but he had no impulse to act on. It was all too much. Everything was happening too fast.

"Let him go!" Zuko demanded, but his voice sounded soft and sad and was clearly laced with tears. Azula smirked and he repeated himself, harsher and louder. "I said, release him!" It came out firm this time- a command. Nothing less would do. "Immediately!"

"Now, now, Zuzu. You're in no place to be barking orders. You're nobody's prince anymore, remember?" Azula taunted, her lips curled upward, her fingernails clicking together. Her eyes flashed. "But you could be."

"Father doesn't want me. You said it yourself." What a wonderful thing memory was.

"Of course he doesn't. You've been a miserable failure. *But* when he hears about how you helped to capture the Earth Kingdom for the glory of our family and our nation, well... He'd love you for that."

For that, and for nothing else. Out of the corner of his eyes, he glanced towards Sokka and Uncle. What did they love him for?

"Come on! What other choices do you have? What, would you like to come back in chains? Maybe you could share a cell with that senile old traitor!" She pointed towards Iroh, who stared back at him. Zuko turned to the right to block him from sight. "Or do you think you're going to run off and play hero with the Avatar? Ha! Even that sad little group wouldn't have you like this!"

Even after so much time apart, Azula hadn't lost her ability to work her way into his head. Perhaps she was right. He would be going against his family, against his nation, against the goal he'd spent years pursuing. He could have it *now*. And after everything.... Sokka wouldn't want him. He lowered his head and his hands and heard her out. Perhaps she was right.

"Zuko, what she offers you is not redemption. Think of what you truly want," Iroh pled. Zuko chewed his lip and tried not to look him in the eye. "I beg of you. Choose your own destiny and bring balance back to our world."

Azula leaned in towards him and dropped her voice. "That's no way to live. Help me win, and you'll get your life back. You can feed your ducks, see your people, see *Father*. Help me, and you get to come home."

Home. When she said it, his mind first brought him somewhere soft and sunlit and painted green. Only after a beat did he remember where home really was, where it was supposed to be. Long halls, red silk, black steel. It's what he'd been chasing for how many years- three? Three years.

And now he could go back, if he wanted. Now would be a really good time to know what he wanted.

He was spared from having to answer to Azula when Katara attacked her. Azula deflected her first effort easily, dissolving it into steam at her side, but Katara just surged forward and kept pounding at her, actually driving her backwards. Zuko stumbled back with her, but under his alarm, he was impressed. There's not a lot of people who could match Azula. Katara spared him a glance, and he looked back at her. He wonders what she saw. His inner flame sputtered a little stronger.

The whole thing was sort of jumbled. He wasn't sure who was on whose side anymore, least of all himself. Azula had always tormented him, had always been the first to put him down, but here she was offering a lifeline. She always lied, but so did everyone else. And Uncle, and Sokka, and all of his friends, he wanted to trust them. He *did*. Zuko didn't know much for sure right now, but he knew he loved them.

But wouldn't they fight him, if he gave him a reason? Would Sokka? Would *Uncle*? Iroh had gone against their nation before, so wouldn't he go against Zuko for changing his alliance? God, he probably resented him for even considering it.

He felt the fire forming in his palms but had no idea who it was meant for. It started to burn him.

The air was thick and he was tired. His head hurt. Feeling too young and too slow, Zuko staggered to his sister's side; she gave him a condescending smile. (He'd never been good at thinking things through. He remembered everyone saying that, now.) He threw his flames down in front of Katara's feet, sending her dancing backwards on her toes, and hoped he hadn't burned her. He just wanted to get her off of Azula for a moment. This he tried to communicate when she locked eyes with him again, but her eyes were steely and furious. Her

water comes for him next, and whatever tenuous connection they had burned to ash and steam between them.

This was around the time everything started going south.

Sokka was fighting off earthbenders and firebenders left and right and wishing he hadn't sent Toph off alone. For one, he could really have used her help here, and for another, he was starting to worry for her. The palace was probably crawling with Dai Li; what had they been thinking, separating?

Beyond just fending for himself, he was trying to keep an eye out for Katara, Aang, and Zuko to make sure they were alright. Zuko especially, because Sokka wasn't sure he could handle himself in his state. Or at all. He was trying to figure out if he could logistically go back for Iroh and break him out; Sokka'd been encased in crystal before and he knew it wasn't fun.

Azula and Katara were fighting each other fiercely. Zuko was near them, but he wasn't helping or stopping either of them. Nobody around him seemed to know whether to attack him or not; he staggered near his sister, looking horribly out of place. Sokka began moving in towards him- someone needed to get him out of harm's way- and stumbled over something soft that his foot had gotten caught in. It was his anorak thrown to the ground in a heap. He looked up from it just as Zuko threw a ball of fire towards Katara, and felt his heart shatter. *No.*

Katara and Zuko began fighting in earnest, and while Sokka noticed Zuko's moves were all defensive, and hoped that it meant something, it was still upsetting. He only heard snippets of what they were yelling at one another- it was about *trust* and *change* and *heart* and *aargh!* (That one came from Zuko).

Stepping forward and taking over from him, Azula began to drive Katara backwards with blasts of fire, towards Aang who was defending himself against soldiers back by the waterfall. Soldiers and agents began to close in on the two like a pack of wolves. Sokka was trying to fight his way in towards them, too, but it was difficult and he couldn't make much progress, mostly trying to defend himself from the larger, stronger men swarming the cavern. He has to turn away to clobber a soldier that'd almost snuck up on him.

When he turned back to them, Aang had burst from crystal formation, and now hovered above the ground, eyes and tattoos aglow. Sokka could've cried with relief. He wasn't a very spiritual person, most days, but seeing that kind of power was just unbelievable, humbling, and more than a little scary. Especially when it was his best friend up there, protecting all of them with no one to protect him. Earth and water pried itself into the air around him, joining in a vortex of wind and sparks. Sokka wasn't sure whether to dive for Katara or Toph or Lee (or Zuko, or Lee, or Zuko?).

He had lost track of Azula somewhere in the commotion. Where was she? Where'd she gone? Someone stumbled backwards and into him as he was swiveling his head around, and on instinct he drew his jawbone knife.

Zuko flinched back from him, wide-eyed. Sokka really hated to keep thinking it, but he still looked like a scared, wounded animal. Quickly he sheathed his knife but didn't let go of the handle.

All the energy in the room seemed to be centered on Aang, and it pulled the air tight around them. A little too tight. The dark hair on his arms pricked and his palms grew slick until boomerang started to slide from his grip. His tongue tasted of metal. Sokka glanced back to Zuko, whose eyes were sharp and aware, clear in a way Lee's weren't. Zuko stared back at him.

"Zuko," he whispered. The name felt foreign and sticky in his mouth. "It's okay, you don't have to go with her. You can-"

Zuko lowered his head. "Sokka," he murmured in a low, laden voice. The wisps of soft black hair around his ears began to raise. Sokka reached out for him, and for a moment he began to reach out, too.

"It's okay," he repeated in the same soft voice he would use to calm him down before. Zuko raised his eyes, soft and surprised, back to Sokka. "I don't blame you. It's okay." Sokka went to reach for his hand.

Zuko's head turned his head to the side for half a second, his one eyebrow shooting up, and quickly stepped back. He flinched as Sokka went to follow him, making a motion to stay back.

"Please," he whispered, eyes flashing with something Sokka finally had a name for: desperation. The air between them was... crackling. Thick. Sokka couldn't breathe. The second he stepped backward- and of course he did, just like he was asked, how could he not?- the air pulled taut and finally snapped with a deafening crack.

Lightning leapt forward in the space between the two of them. Actual *lighting*. Sokka's mouth formed around a shout, but he had no idea whose name was coming out, if anything came out at all. If he'd been one pace closer than he was, he would've been fried. The energy sprung right past them instead, faster than his eyes could follow it, bounding over itself in its race to its target-

Aang. Aang, who was still suspended in midair, all aglow, all-powerful and terrifyingly vulnerable. The lightning convened on its target and before Sokka could shout a warning- what good would that have done, anyway?- it hit him dead in the chest. He never had a chance.

His small body remained in the air, convulsing in place, and then the light of his tattoos pulsed and rushed inward towards the center of his back. Aang dropped to the ground below, lifeless and dull.

Dead.

Just like that.

Sokka watched as Katara caught his body. That's all Aang really was now: a body, still and tiny, missing both of its spirits. She cradled it to her, strangely silent. The streams started moving backwards.

For a moment, the entire cavern went silent. Then Azula gave a triumphant laugh, and the place erupted into shouts. Everyone was yelling, cheering, crying out, but he couldn't register the din. His world was zeroed in on the kids. It wasn't supposed to go this way. There was no balance, no justice, no honor in this. The story wasn't supposed to end here. If Sokka had taken one step further, the lightning would've hit him, and Aang would've had the extra moment he needed. He would still be alive. If the lightning had hit him...

Slowly he turned his head to where Zuko still crouched, sharp-faced and smeared with ash, with his blind side towards Sokka. He was staring at his own sister, who stood with a triumphant smirk and one arm extended towards where Aang had been hovering. Smoke streamed away from her and leftover energy danced around her fingers, but she gave no indication of feeling it.

Sokka had thought he was trying to keep him safe by warning him back. Now, he wasn't so sure. Zuko was tensed like a crouching tiger, and Sokka's hand tightened around boomerang. Just minutes ago he had held that boy. Maybe he had just been holding the same body.

Burning hot anger rushed through him and he wheeled on Zuko and Azula. They were both responsible, as far as he was concerned, for every loss he'd suffered tonight. He slid his fingers along his boomerang's cold handle and took aim for Zuko.

He was bowled over before he could strike- as were they, and all of their henchmen, by a strong and sudden wave that surged out from the waterfall. That Katara was a strong waterbender was no secret, but the force of it disturbed him. It felt angry and dark, rushing over him freezing cold with a force that pinned him down.

Around him, everyone was grunting and struggling to be the first on their feet, but 15 years in a seaside village weren't for nothing. Sokka got up easily and ran for his family. Azula recovered next and stepped forward, and Zuko stood behind her. Sokka still couldn't read the emotion in his eyes. It didn't matter anymore.

He caught Katara in a tight embrace, trying to whisper comfort to her that he could barely hear over her sobs and the roar of the waterfall. Water began to lift around them, pulling them towards its mouth Azula barked orders at her men below them.

Sokka looked down into the cave. Everyone got smaller until they looked like little toy soldiers strewn. Jet was being dragged off, limp and unmoving, by a pair of soldiers, while others were approaching Iroh, ready to take him in. Zuko did nothing, just stood and watched, but wasn't inaction an action in itself? He could do nothing all he wanted, but he was still to blame. Sokka kept his eyes on him the whole way up. There wasn't anything else he could do.

The spirits provided them nothing tonight, except that when they emerged, unsure of their next step, Appa was there waiting. Toph leaned against him, cracking her knuckles. It hit him then that she couldn't see what had happened.

“Toph,” he started, and then paused, because he didn’t know what else he could say.

“I gotcher King right here.” She grinned and pointed back at the Earth King, who sat in the saddle, staring pale-faced at Aang’s body. “How’d you guys do?”

Neither of them responded. Katara was trying to step up on Appa’s back but couldn’t get a hold with Aang in her arms. Sokka treached for him, but she only held him tighter. “Give him to me. Come on, we need to leave.” Finally she relented and handed Aang over; gently Sokka hoisted him into the saddle, and then stooped down to lift her in by the legs.

Toph frowned. “Where’s Zuko and Uncle?” Wordlessly, Sokka hoisted her onto Appa’s back and climbed up after her. “Are they still down there? How can you leave them behind?”

He grit his teeth. “Zuko made his choice. Appa, *yip yip*.” Beneath them, Appa moaned sadly and shook his head. “I know, buddy, but we can’t stay here any longer. *Yip yip*.” Slower and weaker than usual, Appa pushed himself off the ground and into the air.

It was slow goings, but they were away. Sokka explained to Toph what happened in the catacomb, trying to keep his voice steady, trying to be strong so she doesn’t have to. She listened to him and made no reply. He thought for a minute she might explode in rage as she was prone to do, but she just clenched her jaw tight shut and began to shake.

King Keui had his arms looped around his beloved pet, the only thing he’d thought to bring with him. He looked down over his city as soldiers poured through streets he’d probably never seen before, face drawn and sad. He was thinking he could’ve done so much more to protect his people; Sokka knew he was thinking it, because he felt the same way.

Nothing was how it should be. Toph sat silent and clung to him, and wetness gathered in the crook of his arm where she pressed her face. Katara sobbed wildly, clutching Aang to her breast. His eyes were not white but grey and fading and milky; Sokka reached in and gently shut them before Katara pushed his hand away. Aang’s skin was cold when he touched it. Sokka hated cold skin.

What would they do with him? And without him? Sokka began sketching frantic, half-formed plans in his head, anything to distract from his grief. Should he bring Toph and Katara home? Do they hide out? Keep fighting? Can they go forward with the invasion without Aang?

Katara’s gasp interrupted his racing thoughts. “I can heal him!”

He laid a hand on her head, trying to soothe her as best he could. “Katara.”

“My water, I still have it-” Her hands flew around her neck, her belts, her pockets, frantically searching for something. Her waterskin rested at her hip. *She’s delirious.*

“It isn’t your fault.”

“I have to help him.” She was going to blame herself. Katara could hold a grudge like no one’s business, especially against herself. If she thought she had let Aang die, she would

never forgive herself. He couldn't let her go through that. He'd bear it if he couldn't shift the blame, but not her.

"He's gone, 'Tara-"

"*I have to help him!*" she shouted. Sokka flinched back; Toph sniffled and held tighter to his arm. Finally, from some pocket, Katara drew out a pale vial that he only vaguely recognized. He could tell something was special about it, but *special* couldn't reverse death. Nothing could. Still sobbing, Katara turned Aang over like a ragdoll in her lap. She pulled the glowing water from its vial and pressed it through the back of his shirt.

Nothing happened.

Katara hiccuped with tears, her hands clenched hard in the fabric. The tears lifted from her face and swirled around them, before she brushed the shirt smooth again with shaking fingers. Sokka wondered if his heart could break any further, if the Universe could take anything more from him tonight. (He quickly knocked on Appa's saddle, just in case it got any ideas.)

Then, for just a second, Aang's tattoos pulsed with light. His eyes blinked open and he smiled at Katara, soft and bright as if nothing was wrong. The whole thing was achingly familiar and Sokka let out a wet, relieved laugh as the boy shifted in Katara's grasp. He picked Toph's hand off of his arm and placed it over the pulse point at Aang's wrist; she squeezed tightly and finally let out a little sob.

Within a minute, Aang had passed out again. But at least he was alive. It was one less loss to mourn tonight.

As they flew into the cloudless night, Sokka took his dirtied, trampled anorak from his back. Shivering in the frigid, thin air, he dusted it off and draped it over Katara and Aang.

Hours on, Iroh's face was burned into the back of Zuko's eyes. Anger, disappointment, shame. All his doing. It was nothing new, except that it had come from his uncle.

"What will they do to him?" he asked, looking pointedly away from Azula. He knew there would be amusement in her eyes.

"Still quite attached, aren't we? Don't worry. Father will probably just lock him up and stop him from dishonoring us any further. Whatever he sees fit to do will be the right thing. He's not an unfair man." When he did look over at her, she just tapped her face to mirror his own. "Remember?"

The throne room was a wreck and he was exhausted beyond words, but his adrenaline rush hadn't quite worn off yet, so he'd stayed up with his sister in the palace. Azula's first action as temporary ruler of Ba Sing Se was to kick her feet up in the King's throne and order his servants around (she must have already burned through his higher-ups). Some of them he recognized; they used to stop in at the shop on their way home to the middle ring. Their orders ran through his head automatically.

“You there!” Azula barked towards Ginseng-with-Honey. He and Lychee-Sweetened-Over-Ice both looked up at the dias in fear. Zuko could feel their eyes on him. They knew him, and they were judging him. He felt it. Everyone would know what he’d done, soon. He would hide his face, but his hands were still coated in Jet’s blood. “Get some rooms ready for me and my women!” Zuko glanced at her, eyebrow raised. “And him.”

“Yes, my lady,” they replied in unison before scurrying from the room.

“If we were home,” Azula remarked, tapping her nails in sequence on the throne’s armrest, “They’d be out on their asses and missing a hand for calling their princess for such a lowly title. But these people are so backwards. You just can’t hold them to the same standard.” He said nothing. The servants said nothing.

Her nails kept *tic-tic-ticing*. Hadn’t she made a dent by now? Gold was malleable, or so he remembered. He hadn’t held gold in a long time. Darjeeling-with-Milk-and-Honey was staring at him darkly.

Zuko turned to his left and leant his back against the throne in an effort to hide his most identifying feature. He gazed out the window from this new angle and looked down into the streets. The city was red beneath the rising sun; the city was red with soldiers. They streamed through its streets like a river of blood. He wondered if any had reached the upper ring yet, if they’d made it to the shop. Was everyone still there, watching just like he was, wondering if Lee and Mushi were all right? Had Jin made it home safely?

His heart twisted in on itself, thinking of her. She knew him so well. All of his shame, all of his *tendencies*- it had seemed perfectly natural to share them with her. It had *been* perfectly natural. Of course he remembered now that it wasn’t.

“Mai came here with me, you know.” *Mai*. Now that was a name he hadn’t heard in a long time.

“She is?”

“That got you talking. She’s off somewhere helping herself to the Earth King’s pastries. Or his pastry chef.” Oh, that was right. He was supposed to be in love with her. He gave a disinterested hum, decidedly less hurt than he knew Azula was hoping for. “Oh, you’re no fun.”

She pushed herself out of the throne and crossed the dias, smirk firmly in place. “Long day? Tell me, which of those filthy peasants tried to strangle you?” She needled, making a squeezing motion with her hand. Zuko raised a hand vaguely upward, not quite reaching his neck. He must’ve sweated away some of the blood, for the bruises to be visible. Or perhaps she just had an eye for these things. “Oooh, I bet was that hotheaded little water tribe girl. Did you get a little too close down there?” Zuko felt himself flushing, even though it wasn’t true.

“Why do you care?” he deflected. “You’ve tried to kill me plenty of times.”

She let out a crowish sound that almost passed for a laugh and poked two sharp nails into his pulse point. “Yes, but it’s *our* thing.”

Zuko tried not to be too obvious in squirming away from her. The hateful, detached Azula had been one thing, easy to hate after three years’ detachment. But this Azula was aggressive yet sisterly, condescending but somehow affectionate. He had no idea how to approach her. He had too much on his mind to figure it out now.

“Are the rooms ready? I’m going to bed.”

“Yes, I suppose we deserve a little rest, don’t we?” Azula clapped for a servant.

“We,” she kept saying. *We’ve brought our nation honor. We’ve as good as won the war. We’ve killed the Avatar.* That made him uneasy, too. It wasn’t like her to share credit.

“You!” She snapped in the direction of some servants, not bothering to look their way. They shuffled for a moment before thrusting one Zuko didn’t recognize towards the dias. “Show my brother to a room.”

Fortunately, retreating to a private chamber gave him a break from Azula’s taunting. Unfortunately, it left him alone with himself. He waves the young man who escorted him away. Now that he knew himself for what he is, he’d almost prefer Azula’s needling.

He sat now in the bedchamber of some young noblewoman- where’d she been forced to? *Maybe she’s fled the city with her lover and left her life behind*, supplied the stupid, romantic part of his brain that he’d been unable to quash for the last three years. Stupid plays. *She’s probably stuffed in a cell somewhere*, corrected the more grisled part of his brain. He pushed her from his mind and sat down in front of the vanity mirror. The basin was full and the toiletries were laid out- jewel-laden combs and crystalline bottles. Things he hadn’t seen the likes of in years. He almost laughed at the absurdity of it, but it came out as a sob instead. He rubbed at his heavy eyes.

What choice did he have? None at all, he assured himself. He could’ve stayed and been Lee, sick and ignorant, or he could go home and be the dutiful son he never was. One path closed, one open, neither his. He didn’t think so. Zuko wasn’t either of those people now; he wasn’t quite sure he was a person at all. He floated somewhere in between himself. In this moment all he could do was put his hair up, powder over the bruises and bites on his neck, and wash the blood from his hands. Honor was supposed to pulse through him like gold in his veins, but his whole body felt like it was full of lead.

He thought of Sokka. He’d been ready to forgive Zuko right up until the end. But Azula had been one step ahead of them. If they’d only been five feet to the left... no, he supposed that wouldn’t have been any better. They could have stood right beside each other, but it wouldn’t have changed the fact that Azula killed the Avatar. He had no right to delude himself. If Sokka hated him it wasn’t because he didn’t reach out and take his hand, it was because he had given- no, as good as *taken*- Aang’s life to return home. To flit in between overdecorated, shining rooms and be miserable and speak down to servants whose names he didn’t know.

A guttural cry on his lips, he hurled the powder compact across the room. It crashed into a backgammon table and shattered into a shimmering white cloud. Agni, what had he done? He had only been twelve years old!

How quick he'd been to accept Zuko as a friend. How sweet, how warm. Zuko's blood simmered. He scrubbed his hands raw in the basin until fresh red stained the water. Katara had been right not to trust him, Uncle had been right to keep him from himself, and Sokka was right not to want him like this. Zuko collapsed in front of the vanity, all there and more lost than ever before.

Chapter End Notes

you guys 🙄🙄🙄 holy shit. I can't believe this is finished.... like, WOW. I've got a couple pieces underway right now (1 adventure/romance + a one-shot or two, and possibly a retroactive filler chapter that'll either go in earlier in the fic or on its own) but like this was my first big undertaking and I've been at it for half a year and I can't believe how much you guys all supported it.... like i know this is mushy and its not a big deal, but it's meant a lot to me :')

There IS a part 2 in production, don't worry, but I'm not the one writing it. I don't really know what the customary thing to do is when youre wrapping up a big project like this is, so I guess come yell at me on tumblr, leave writing suggestions (doesn't have to be atla), AMA, etc. :)

Special thanks to andy (andyboy, @augecheek on tumblr, check him out) for creating this whole thing with me, listening to my incessant ramblings about it for the last 6 months, and doing part 2!!! And to Auden (sepiaparrish) for beta-ing a couple chapters and being unbelievably supportive!! love u besties!!

End Notes

Kudos and comments are very much appreciated! My tumblr is @mekammin if you wanna hit me up and talk about this fic, atla, or anything really :). Thanks for reading!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!