Harmonic Convergence is only a year away. Korra has spent her life training with the Red Lotus, preparing for the day she will be able to restore balance to the world. But a dawning revolution, forged in the name of equality, threatens to spoil their plans. To learn more, Korra takes on a new name and infiltrates Future Industries...but what else awaits her in this brave new city? Eventual Korrasami.
The flames came hard and fast, striking at Korra from every direction.

It took all her training, all she’d been working at for years, merely to keep herself from getting burned to a crisp. Her master had commanded the others to hold nothing back, and she was expected to respond in kind.

Normally, she would combat firebending with careful use of water or earth – but this was an examination, and there were rules.

That didn’t mean she couldn’t have some fun with it, though.

Korra gave a great, joyful laugh before releasing a great torrent of her own fire from each fist. The concussive force easily broke through and neutralized those of her opponents, forcing the two robed men backward.

For an earthbender, now would be the time to sit still and wait for their reaction. A waterbender would enter a stance that was ready to turn any counterattacks back on themselves.

But fire was the element of passion, and drive. So Korra wasted little time in pressing the attack further, following two more jabs with a sweeping kick that sent a wide stream of flame toward her opponents, knocking them right off their feet.

“She’s strong,” her master said from the sidelines, not at all disapprovingly.

“She lacks restraint,” murmured another, his expression less certain.

Korra, for her part, was amply demonstrating the truth of both these observations. Sent sprawling to the ground, there was little the other firebenders could do but shield themselves from her continued assault. Blast after blast, each a near-perfect balance in controlled release of power and overwhelming ferocity, rained down upon them.

One of the men bravely attempted to provide cover for the other by spinning wildly, a tornado of flame coming to life and following his movements as he leapt to his feet. But Korra had been ready for this…and she’d positioned them both right where she wanted them.

A raised wall of flame easily broke through the tornado, allowing her a clear shot. She experienced the still-strange but utterly thrilling sensation of chi traveling up her body as she summoned a great amount of it to concentrate at her light chakra, twisting and turning and building until…

The explosion flowed naturally from her third eye, gouging a deep scar in the earth directly in front of her attacker.

Though she hadn’t been aiming to kill, or even injure significantly, the combustion reaction still caught the other firebender in mid-leap, sending him flying directly into his partner. He’d be singed, at minimum, from proximity to the blast – but nothing the Lotus’ healers couldn’t fix, Korra was sure.

Either way, she wasn’t going to let that faze her. Pulling off her training helmet and tossing it to the ground, the Avatar began to whoop and holler as she punched the air in triumph.

“Woo-hoo!” she called out, before running up to meet her two observers. Neither seemed to share
her enthusiasm, though her master was still smiling. “Hey, why all the doom and gloom, people? We should be celebrating! Three elements down, one to go!”

“Don’t be getting too far ahead of yourself, Korra,” said Master P’Li. “My grumpy-gills boyfriend hasn’t decided whether you’ve passed your firebending test yet.”

The statuesque woman hooked a thumb over her shoulder at Zaheer, who seemed to chafe a bit at the description. Still, he ultimately took it in stride as he turned to regard Korra.

“Ever since you were a little girl, you’ve excelled at the physical side of bending. But you’ve completely ignored the spiritual side,” he told her, his expression severe. “The Avatar must master both. You more than any other, since Wan.”

Korra bowed her head at this. It wasn’t exactly something she was proud of.

“I haven’t ignored it, it just doesn’t come as easy to me,” she replied, though her tone became significantly more upbeat as she leapt upon the opportunity he’d laid out. “But that’s why I should start airbending training with you immediately! I mean, you’re Mister Spiritual.”

“Be that as it may, you know I can only take you so far,” said the robed man, one eye on the other two instructors P’Li had selected, as their fellow Red Lotus members helped them limp to a healing tent. “Though I’ve dedicated my life to airbending culture and philosophy, only four individuals alive can manipulate the wind by their own hand. And none would be amenable to our cause.”

“Yeah, but…well, it’s better than nothing, isn’t it?” Korra asked, trying and failing not to sound too much like she was pleading. “I mean, we’ve talked about this, right? You could at least get me started. Show me the forms and see what sticks.”

Zaheer let out a very deep breath, as if steadying himself. When he spoke again, it was with the air of a man fully expecting to regret every single word he was about to say.

“Very well, then,” he finally responded. “We will commence your airbending training… Starting tomorrow, he finished, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Today, I will be needed in the Spirit World. Our contacts in Zaofu, the Northern Water Tribe, and Republic City all have reports I need to be party to. Many troubling things are brewing, and I need to ensure they won’t interfere with our plans for Harmonic Convergence.”

Korra gave a deep, disappointed sigh, but ultimately nodded. She knew how important those plans were – to Zaheer, to the Red Lotus, to the physical and spiritual planes as a whole.

And it was only one day, after all.

Still, since they were presently only a few hours out from sunrise and she was totally jazzed from her victory, Korra chanced to ask, “What should I do with the rest of the day, then?”

“If there are no objections from your other masters,” answered Zaheer, casting a sideways glance to P’Li, who simply shrugged her well-toned shoulders. “Then the rest of the day is yours, to do as you see fit. But if you would like my suggestion…”

“Please,” said Korra.

“Then I would suggest you grab a bite to eat,” continued the non-bender, actually cracking the
thinnest of smiles. “And after that, I think it would do you well to revisit each of your other instructors, for a few hours of review. Each element in the Avatar Cycle builds upon the last, after all. Your mind will be all the more receptive to learn the element of freedom, if it has first been firmly grounded in change, substance, and power.”

“I won’t let you down, Master Zaheer,” she declared quietly, placing one fist against her palm in her most respectful bow. “And if it’s convenient…I’ll see you again, Master P’Li, around sunset?”

“You know where to find me,” said the combustionbender with a wry smirk. “Dismissed, Avatar Korra.”

Korra maintained her dignified composure as she departed from the couple…but as soon as she – incorrectly – believed herself to be out of their eyeshot, she began leaping into the air again, releasing celebratory sparks with one hand and forming a great, victorious fist of ice with the other.

“She isn’t ready for this. For any of this,” whispered Zaheer, shaking his head. “And Harmonic Convergence is only a year away…”

“She will be,” P’Li told her boyfriend, her tone more confident than she actually felt. “I mean, she has to be, right? It’s not like we’ve got any other choice. She’s the Avatar. We’ve just got to deal with it.”

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Korra’s early lunch – or late breakfast, whatever you wanted to call it – was fairly light. One of the Red Lotus attendants had prepared some sort of pig-chicken stew, which was decent for what it was. He wasn’t a spectacular cook, but it wasn’t like they were awash in too many other options. The accommodations and resources available in these hideouts were necessarily sparse. The core group she belonged to – herself, Zaheer, P’Li, Ghazan, and Ming-Hua – moved about frequently to avoid detection, surrounding themselves with existing recruits in each new place they settled.

It was easier, given how numerous the lower-level members were and how unwieldy it’d be to transport so many at once, to simply assemble a new group of operatives each time. But while efficient, this made it fairly difficult to strike up any meaningful relationships.

She was on good terms with all four of her masters, of course – even Ming-Hua, who was pretty easy to get along with once you grasped her incredibly dark sense of humor. But they were all far older than she was, and the nature of the master-student relationship made it difficult to call them “friends.”

Friends…that was something she’d never really experienced, growing up within the Lotus. Recruiting as they did mostly from the disaffected ranks of their parent society, they tended not to pick up very many children or teenagers – Korra herself being an obvious exception, for equally obvious reasons.

And on those very few occasions their cause did acquire someone who was about her age, it would only be at most two or three weeks before they moved again. After that, it was a virtual certainty she’d never see them again.

There’d been this one boy…the son of a Fire Nation general, who was on the outs with Fire Lord
Izumi over suspected ties to the Kemurikage. Korra was embarrassed to say she didn’t even remember his name. But he’d been nice. Cute too, if she was being honest with herself.

But the eventual arrest of his father had made him a liability, and meant they’d needed to depart the Fire Nation that very night. He could be dead now, for all Korra knew.

Right now, they were deep in the forests in the northwestern Earth Kingdom, a few days’ drive from the Serpent’s Pass. Most of their time was spent in various places like this, as the sheer size of the continent made it difficult for the Earth Queen to assert her nominal control of all of it at a time.

Formally speaking, ever since King Bumi had abolished the royal house of Omashu on his deathbed, the Earth Kingdom outside Ba Sing Se had been devoid of any other monarchs. In practice, of course, a great variety of feudal lords and governors functioned as such in all but name, and Hou-Ting’s historically disastrous and self-indulgent rule had only exacerbated that fact.

Which led to a system where it was easy for a small, secretive group like the Lotus to slip quietly through the cracks.

These hideouts weren’t prisons, technically, but Korra almost never left them. The eyes of the White Lotus were everywhere, and so unless it was absolutely necessary for her training, she tended to avoid going to places where there’d be too many prying eyes.

Korra couldn’t help but clench a fist, as she thought about their most hated enemy. They’d already cost her so much, in their mad quest to control the Avatar for themselves – her family, her home.

It was in times like these that she felt, most acutely, how much else they’d stolen from her on the day they’d killed her parents. An entire future she could’ve had.

One where she wouldn’t have to feel this alone.

Korra sighed as she put down her chopsticks; suddenly, she didn’t really feel very hungry. She bowed her head to the attendant, who collected her bowl for washing, and left the dining area without another word.

She had some waterbending training to get to.

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“No, no, no! You know this, Korra! Now get the stance right this time!” Ming-Hua commanded harshly, bringing one of her water-arms down like a cracking whip to emphasize her point.

The Avatar gritted her teeth in frustration, but dutifully repositioned herself and started again. Using waterbending in place of her own limbs didn’t come nearly as easily to her as it did the armless woman – though she figured that was probably true of all other waterbenders – but it was a useful skill, especially once one mastered the ability to do it all with the mind.

In theory, it worked much the same way as P’Li’s combustionbending: mapping the pathways of the chi mentally, and then willing it to flow in the way she needed. Used perfectly, nearly any bending was possible without moving a single muscle.

Of course, that was far more easily said than done.
The Octopus Form, on which Ming-Hua’s signature style was a variant, normally operated by mirroring the movements of the limbs in the “tentacles” she created. Having two arms and two legs, Korra certainly could do it that way, and when under the knife it was what she defaulted to.

But it was still good to practice the “psychic” variant (as the newspapers had once coined, when describing similar feats by the crimelord Yakone forty years prior), just in case she was ever bound or paralyzed.

Taking a deep breath and relaxing her muscles, Korra again looked deep within herself and mentally pictured her chi flow. This sort of thing wouldn’t work if she was too tense, tried to force it. She was a guide for the energy, nothing more or less.

“Better,” said Ming-Hua, as a lengthy stream of water formed around Korra’s right arm, much stronger this time than the last. Experimentally, she moved it back and forth with a mere thought. “Now the left.”

This one was easier, as it was in the element’s nature to seek balance. A second stream came to life, moving in perfect harmony with the first.

“And the middle,” added the older waterbender, grinning slyly. “Scorpion Form.”

Finally, for the first time since her firebending test, a smile returned to Korra’s face. The Scorpion Form had been her own invention, the feat that’d originally completed her training with water and allowed her to move on to earth, and she was quite proud of it.

She’d reasoned, after a long time of trying and failing to match up to Ming-Hua’s sheer skill, that rather than pigeonholing herself into one or the other – the unparalleled style of her master, or the one used by virtually every other waterbender on the planet – why not combine both? She was perhaps the only person alive who could.

Thus, she relinquished full mental control of the streams currently surrounding her arms, letting them be extensions of the limbs they were attached to once more. And instead, she focused all her concentration on forming a third water-stream, attached to the base of her spine.

This one, when used in concert with the other two, resembled nothing if not the tail of a scorpion-bee, hence the name. And if utilized properly, the three together provided an extremely potent defense and offense.

One which her master was clearly eager to test.

Ming-Hua formed the tips of both her water-arms into scythes made of ice, and scraped the blades together for dramatic effect.

“Let’s see how much you’ve still got, Avatar,” she whispered, clearly relishing this. “Hopefully all the playing with rocks and sparks hasn’t made you too rusty.”

Korra would’ve cracked her knuckles, were they not currently encased in liquid. She settled for imagining it, in any event.

Because she was just as eager.

The two women lunged at each other, the five active streams of water clashing at each other like massive, fluid swords. The winner of this match, Korra knew from ample experience, would be the first one whose control over the element slipped for even a moment. That would be enough for the other to absorb their water into their own, depriving them of both their weapon and their only
The water moved blindingly fast, almost quicker than the naked eye could see. Twisting, grappling, fighting for dominance against the other. The element shifted states constantly, and near-instantaneously, going from liquid to ice to vapor and back again as the situation required; sometimes, all of the above in a manner of seconds.

Korra held a small advantage, in that she had access to three streams instead of two. This gave her a slight edge in mobility – letting her use her “tail” to swing from the ceiling while the other two continued to fight, for example – but all that really did was slightly level the playing field, given the wide gulf in their levels of experience.

Plus, she knew well that Ming-Hua could manifest far more “tentacles” than this, if she chose to. Her use of only two was a self-restriction for the purposes of making this interesting, more than anything.

Still, Korra felt absolutely exhilarated as she weaved and bobbed around her master’s attacks, trying to force her streams aside and launch a swift and final counteroffensive. There were small openings here and there, minute mistakes as the armless woman began to tire, but nothing large enough for the Avatar to actually strike at her body.

But if Ming-Hua was starting to make some slight errors in her form, Korra was making comparatively bigger ones, and the elder waterbender seized her moment just as her opponent landed from a leaping dodge of several thrown icicles.

One of her water-streams sliced through the one on Korra’s back, disrupting her concentration and collapsing the construct. The other swiftly grabbed the Avatar by the midriff and solidified into ice, lifting her up nearly effortlessly. The liquid surrounding Korra’s arms fell away into sad little puddles.

“I’ll admit, I’m impressed. You haven’t gotten nearly as soft as I thought you would,” said Ming-Hua, chuckling a bit. “But Avatar or not, the student’s still got nothing on the master.”

Though she was having difficulty breathing, however, Korra’s response to this was to don a wide smirk. “You…sure about that…?” she asked, her voice choked but confident.

A sound emerged directly behind the older woman, and she didn’t need to turn around to know what’d just happened; her waterbending senses told her the entire story.

The “tail” that she’d detached from Korra’s body had slunk quietly behind her, and solidified into ice. The bladed “stinger” now sat less than an inch from the back of her neck.

“Well played, Korra. Well played,” she admitted, as both the ice holding the Avatar and threatening her own life fell away in an instant. “You can control it psychically even when it’s not touching your body, now?”

“Only for a little while,” replied Korra, who was now cleaning up by bending all the excess water Ming-Hua wasn’t using into clay jars. “And I still can’t do it all the time. Firebending training helped, honestly. It’s not that different from growing or smothering a fire that’s burning on its own.”

“Really? Guess I owe P’Li five yuans, then,” said Ming-Hua, shaking her head and sighing. “I was teasing her the other day about how waterbending gave fire that whole ‘lightning redirection’ thing, but firebending hasn’t done jack for water. She bet she’d prove me wrong by the end of the week.”

“You should know by now not to bet Master P’Li at anything,” Korra told her teacher with a grin.
“She never loses. And when she does, she cheats.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the point,” grumbled the elder waterbender. “Don’t you have some pebbles to go throw around, or something?”

“Oof, right!” exclaimed Korra, slapping her forehead as she glanced at a nearby clock. “I told Master Ghazan I’d meet him at the canyon ten minutes ago! Err…hate to spar and dash, but…”

“Eh, just get going,” Ming-Hua responded, one of her water-arms moving in an approximation of a dismissive hand-wave. “I’ve had my fill of your sorry excuse for waterbending for the day.”

“Right back at ya!” the Avatar called back, and with that, she was gone.

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Though she was fond of all her teachers among the Red Lotus, in their own ways, Ghazan was far and away Korra’s favorite.

A distinct reminder of why was waiting for her at the bottom of a canyon near their hideout, one that locals called “The Great Divide,” where the mustached earthbender sat on a pile of stone and sipped a cup of piping-hot tea.

“Ah, there’s the girl,” he said fondly, offering her a second cup as she slid down the rocks to meet him. “Here, have some before we start.”

“Managed to heat it up without melting the pot this time, I see,” she quipped, smiling.

“Well, it was a near miss,” replied Ghazan with a chuckle. “Cooking with lava is…pretty unpredictable. It’s not like firebending where you can just stick your hand under it, turn up the juice, and – boom! Instant good eating. Man, if I could pick up just one trick from another element…”

“You ever gonna tell me where you came up with lavabending, anyway?” asked Korra, sipping as she did. Man this was good tea. Jasmine, she was pretty sure. “I mean, I’m the only other person on the planet who can do it. Seems like I should know.”

At this, Ghazan just reached over and ruffled her hair a bit. “Maybe when you’re older,” he said.

She rolled her eyes at him. “You’ve been saying that to me since I was five,” she responded. “I’m seventeen now, for the spirits’ sake. I get any older and I’ll start growing a mustache myself.”

“It’s still the only answer you’re getting. At least for now,” he told her, calmly putting away the tea set and stripping off the outer layers of his robes.

Korra couldn’t help but flush a bit at the earthbender’s shirtless body, which he flexed without an ounce of shame. Her other teachers always taught her in full training garb – she wasn’t sure Zaheer ever wore anything less than his traditional gray robes, even when he and P’Li were alone together – but Ghazan was everything but formal, and dressed accordingly.

Plus, when you were throwing around big chunks of lava all the time, long flowing robes tended to be a bit of a liability.

Taking a low, defensive stance, Ghazan then said, “Alright, Korra. We’ll start with the basics. No
For the next couple hours, Korra shifted through a number of forms – not only in the “traditional” style that most members of the Earth Kingdom used, but also the style the legendary Toph Beifong had pioneered, and passed onto both Republic City’s police force and Zaofu’s Metal Clan.

Ghazan couldn’t metalbend himself, though he understood the theory, and had passed it on dutifully to his prized pupil. Either way, the fundamentals of the style (rumored to come directly from the badger-moles themselves) were as applicable to “regular” earthbending as they were to iron and copper.

Wherever Ghazan had first learnt his craft, he was undeniably brilliant at it, blending both styles with a number of moves apparently of his own invention. It was these that she practiced next, because they were the easiest ones through which to make the transition to lavabending.

Earth was a stubborn element, and even though she’d been doing it for nearly five years now, changing its state was still an incredibly tricky prospect. In some ways her waterbending training helped, as on a very basic level the principle was the same, but in other ways it was a hindrance.

Chi didn’t flow naturally through rock, the way it did water or fire. With those elements, if you offered them the path of least resistance, the energy would travel right along that channel on its own.

To move earth, she needed to be like earth. It wouldn’t change to liquid with a mere breath, a subtle twist of the hand, the way water would. It needed her to show it, head-on, that she was its master, and loosen the bonds of energy within it by sheer force of will.

It was hard, every single time. Some of the hardest bending she’d ever had to do. But thankfully, Korra had the right personality to pull it off.

After all, more than one person had told her she was the most absolutely stubborn person they’d ever met in their lives.

With a great grunt of effort, Korra grounded herself, centered all her energy, and stomped upon the canyon floor, as hard as she possibly could.

The impact of the vibrations shook every loose rock in the area, and actually managed to knock Ghazan off-balance. But the main effect was much clearer. The ground in front of her, stretching for several yards in every direction, was molten and boiling.

“Nice! That’s the biggest one you’ve done yet!” exclaimed her teacher, laughing jubilantly and cracking his neck at the same time. “Now let’s see you send some my way. No holding back, y’hear?”

“Alright! But you asked for it!” Korra shouted back, palming one fist in anticipation. Then she struck.

This was a very different sort of duel than most earthbenders tended to get up to, the Avatar was fairly certain. Rocks were fairly blunt instruments, both for attacking and defending; the best non-bending metaphors would be weapons like shields, warhammers, and catapults. You threw them, and the opponent met them head-on, shattering them or at least weakening their impact before striking back.

A match between lavabenders was…not that. The closest thing, she supposed, might’ve been a sandbender fight, but those tended not to be seen much outside of the desert.
Just like in making lava, controlling it was about applying waterbending principles of turning the opponent’s energy against them to an element that resisted those principles with its very essence.

Lava she’d created would not remain “hers” for even a second longer than she could impress all her physical and mental strength upon it. Each punch or kick she used to direct it, or to counter Ghazan’s own, had to be a whole new statement that she was its master, and it would bow to her will.

The other difference, of course, was that ordinarily earthbending was easily the most “physical” of the bending disciplines. The vast majority of moves involved physically striking, grasping, or otherwise making direct contact with the element, to impart the bender’s own strength upon it as efficiently as possible.

Lava, however, could not be touched. It couldn’t even be approached without serious consequence. While it was true that bent lava was nowhere near as hot as the magma that dwelt in the Fire Nation’s volcanoes, it was still powerful enough to set things aflame by mere proximity.

As such, great care had to be taken to place some distance between herself and the element she controlled, and the ability to rapidly cool lava that was approaching her was just as important as heating it up in the first place.

It also made for an absolute spectacle for any potential observer, Korra was fairly certain, though of course she had bigger things to worry about in the moment. Still, she was glad the preponderance of canyon crawlers in this area made the chance of onlookers very low indeed.

Because they needed to keep their distance from their element, grand and massive floes of lava were their best means of attack – either for aiming directly at their opponent, or at the ground, in order to try and disrupt their footing.

Already there was barely any room to walk or run, as larger and larger portions of the canyon floor became a molten sea. But that only gave both of them more ammunition to draw from, for yet greater and more dramatic displays of power.

Finally, once the two of them were standing on the only small islands of walkable ground remaining in sight, Ghazan held up both hands, and Korra let the volley of lava she’d been preparing drop at a safe distance behind her.

The lavabender closed his eyes and took a deep breath, the sweat glistening across his heavily tattooed body. Then he slowly lowered both arms as he exhaled, and in turn, every single square inch of lava cooled back to rock.

“I think that’s enough for today,” he said, though he was smiling broadly. “Man am I proud of you, Korra. You’ve gotten farther in five years than I did in thirty.”

Though she tried not to, Korra’s cheeks went pink again at the compliment. “Well, y’know, I…I had a good teacher,” she mumbled, not meeting his gaze.

Alright, fine. Yes, she had the teeniest bit of a crush on the older man. Not one she was ever going to act on, but it was there.

But those feelings were normal at her age – at least she’d read they were, it wasn’t like anyone in the Lotus was gonna sit down and talk with her about it – and really, who else would they be centered on? P’Li still acted too much like the weapon she’d been raised to be for Korra to feel that way about her, and while it wasn’t exactly polite to say out loud, she just plain didn’t find Ming-Hua’s
missing arms attractive.

And as for Zaheer, well…he was Zaheer.

Thankfully, Ghazan either didn’t notice or didn’t question her blushing, and instead propelled them up out of the canyon with great pillars of earth. They didn’t have any food on them, and Korra doubted any scent from the tea was left after all the lava-slinging, but it couldn’t hurt to be careful.

As they landed back on the distinctly not melted ground overlooking the Great Divide, the mustached lavabender clapped her on the shoulder and smiled again.

“Ah, look at that sunset,” he stated quietly, gesturing at the horizon. “That’s really why we’re doing this, y’know? The natural world was in perfect balance before man came along – before Wan, before benders, before everything. Give them long enough, and the governments of the world will find some way to muck up the sunset somehow. The spirits know, they’ve mucked up everything else.”

“The sunset!” exclaimed Korra, suddenly remembering. “That’s right, I said…”

“You gotta get to P’Li?” asked Ghazan, to which she nodded. “Well, don’t let me hold you up. I’ll still be here when you get back. Until then, Korra.”

She bowed, lower than she had to any of her other teachers. “Until then, Master Ghazan,” she said, leaving before he could see her cheeks again.

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“Sorry I’m late, Master P’Li. I got held up a bit with…” Korra had started to say as she returned to the hideout, but her sentence petered off midway as she saw the expressions both P’Li and her boyfriend were wearing.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, after several silent beats. “Did something happen?”

“I completed my conference with Aiwei, Unalaq, and Jilu just a few minutes ago,” explained Zaheer. “A great deal of news, much of it…concerning. Gather the others, please. I want everyone here for this.”

These last few words were directed to a couple of attendants, who nodded and bowed themselves out.

As they waited for Ghazan and Ming-Hua to be fetched, Korra couldn’t help but speculate what her non-bending mentor had learned; he’d returned to meditation in the meantime, and if P’Li knew anything she was about as forthcoming as a brick wall.

The only name she recognized was Unalaq, the Chief of the Northern Water Tribe and her paternal uncle. She’d only met him once in her life, and she couldn’t help but shiver a bit at the memory. Senior member of the Lotus he might be, but he still gave her the creeps from head to toe.

In any event, the Avatar didn’t have long to speculate. “This had better be good,” said Ming-Hua, her water-arms crossed as the attendants led her and Ghazan in. Both slipped out of the room immediately after, leaving the five of them alone.
"I suppose that depends on your definition," replied Zaheer, his eyes opening into a severe expression. "Either way, it is something we’ll need to deal with."

“What’s going on, exactly?” Ghazan asked, one hand on his chin.

“As you all know, we planned to arrange the assassination, or abdication, of every world leader in the weeks leading up to Harmonic Convergence – the Fire Lord, Earth Queen, Water Tribe chieftains, and Council of Republic City,” he told the others. “The resultant chaos in the physical world should strengthen Vaatu, and allow him to escape his prison in the Tree of Time. But now, something threatens that goal.”

“Is something going wrong in the Spirit World?” P’Li wondered aloud.

“No. All our plans on that plane are going as well as can be expected,” said Zaheer. “Right now, it’s the material world that concerns me. For you see…”

He slapped a thin, worn flyer onto the table in front of him.

“It looks like someone else might be beating us to the punch,” he finished, frowning deeply.

All four of the others, Korra included, leaned in to read the text on the leaflet. It featured a picture of a masked face, and several broad statements of propaganda, under the title of…

“The…‘Equalists’…?” she read off, confused by the term.

“An anti-bender revolutionary faction, which has steadily been gaining ground across the United Republic,” Zaheer informed her. “We first became aware of them about a month ago, and I’ve been having our operatives collect intelligence ever since. They smuggled us this flyer last week, and Jilu just offered me a number of new details.”

Ghazan picked up the paper and scrutinized the portrait. “This supposed to be their leader?” he asked.

“He goes by the name ‘Amon.’ But we’re fairly certain that’s an alias,” said Zaheer. “So far, he’s been keeping to the shadows. We don’t know anything about his true identity, his abilities, or even his long-term goals. All we know is this: he’s been trying to stir up a movement against benders all throughout the Republic…and from what Jilu told me, it’s working.”

“Wait, why does this guy hate benders so much?” Korra demanded, her eyes narrowed at the drawing. The masked man’s own eyes, though she knew they were only a few dark brushstrokes, almost seemed to be following her around the room. “What’d we ever do to him?”

“That’s one of the things we need to find out,” he answered. “Which…is where you come in, Korra.”

“I don’t…wait, what?” responded the Avatar, looking utterly bewildered.

“Yeah, what’re you getting at, baldy?” Ming-Hua added darkly. “I’m not sure I like where this is going.”

“Neither do I, to tell the truth,” said Zaheer. “But be that as it may, I can think of no better alternative. Korra…”

He turned to stare intently at her, and only her. It struck Korra that his face suddenly seemed decades older, and when he spoke again, it was with the deepest, gravest tone he’d ever used with
the young Avatar.

“I’d like for you to go undercover in Republic City.”

[----------------------]

“Reports from the men who’ve been…interrogating the mole we found, sir,” said a masked man, holding a thick stack of papers covered with hasty, untidy scrawl. A bit of blood stained the one on top.

“Very good. You’re dismissed,” responded the Lieutenant, and the other Equalist slipped out of the room without another word.

It was strange, how he even used the term “Lieutenant” in his own thoughts now. As if it was the only name he had anymore.

But then, he supposed, perhaps in a sense it was. Names didn’t matter here.

Only the mission did.

“Is it as I suspected?” asked the only other person in the chamber, his booming baritone commanding the Lieutenant’s full attention, even if what he spoke was barely above a whisper.

“It is,” he answered, scrutinizing the handwritten notes. “The Red Lotus is aware of us. They’re watching…and waiting. What should we do about them?”

Slowly, the masked man turned from the map of the world he’d been studying intently, his dull blue eyes boring into the Lieutenant’s own.

“If they are content to watch, and wait…then for now, I think we should extend them the same courtesy,” said Amon. “For in time, Lieutenant…”

Beneath his mask, though of course the other man could not see it, Noatak’s lip curled.

“All roads lead to the Solution.”
“I…I don’t understand what you’re asking,” said Korra, still utterly floored by the words Zaheer had just spoken. “I mean…what about my airbending training?”

“It will have to be postponed, I’m afraid. At least for now,” replied her non-bending mentor. “Though depending on how things work out, this mission may wind up indirectly playing toward that goal. We can discuss that later, however.”

“Why her?” Ghazan asked the obvious question. “And why now?”

“The four of us are wanted criminals throughout the world,” stated Zaheer. “Even disguised, there’s too great a chance we’d be recognized and discovered. But most of the planet hasn’t seen the Avatar since she was five years old. Short of actively bending multiple elements in front of someone, the likelihood of her being found out is near zero. And besides…”

He placed one hand on Korra’s shoulder.

“I never intended the Red Lotus to be your prison, Korra,” he continued, his tones low and serious. “We’ve kept you close because we wanted to keep you safe, but every day, it broke my heart to see you chafe at it. How can we expect to stand for true freedom, when we don’t even allow one of our own to spread her wings and fly on the wind?”

“But I don’t know the first thing about the rest of the world!” exclaimed Korra, trying to keep distress and anxiety out of her voice and not altogether succeeding. “I mean, of course I’ve always wanted to go out there, find my own way, but…”

Zaheer held up a hand to interrupt her.

“Harmonic Convergence is only a year away,” he said. “To be perfectly honest, I’ve been looking for a place I could send you for some time now, to help prepare yourself. You can’t learn everything you need to know on that day, just by training with the four of us in these tiny little compounds. This just gives me a convenient excuse—one which will serve the Lotus on multiple other fronts, as well.”

“What kind of mission are we talking about, anyway?” asked P’Li. “And what does it have to do with those ‘Equalist’ people?”

“According to Jilu, he’s heard some rumors that Hiroshi Sato, the president of Future Industries, has financial ties with the Equalists,” Zaheer told his girlfriend. “It’ll be your job, Korra, to find out whether those rumors are true. Unalaq says that Future Industries is currently importing labor from the Northern Water Tribe, to assist with processing in their factories. It’s the perfect cover.”

“And if this Sato guy does turn out dirty?” demanded Ming-Hua, turning the end of one of her liquid appendages to ice and cupping her chin with it. “What then?”

“Then she uses him to get close to Amon,” he answered, gesturing at the masked face on the flyer again. “Either to see if he can be useful as an ally, to advance the cause of the Red Lotus. Or, if not…”

The waterbender brought the ice-tipped “arm,” now refashioned into a blade, near her throat, and made a single slicing motion.

“Exactly,” said Zaheer.
“If he’s really got such a big hate-on for benders, I can’t see how he’d like joining with a group like ours,” Korra pointed out. “Especially not if he knew who I am. Heck, he’s pretty much my exact opposite.”

“Precisely why I think you’re the best person to handle this,” Zaheer responded, locking his fingers together thoughtfully. “As I said, we have no idea what kinds of weapons or abilities Amon has at his disposal. Presumably he’s a non-bender himself, but that’s no reason to discount him as a threat – as I know well. Should it come to open confrontation, there’s no one I’d trust more than you, Korra.”

The teenaged Avatar looked askance and chuckled nervously at the compliment. While he wasn’t quite the drill sergeant Ming-Hua was, he didn’t exactly dole them out all that often.

“You said…err…that I’d be ‘serving on multiple fronts,’ right?” she asked, choosing to skirt around the issue. “What exactly did you mean by that?”

“Dealing with the Equalists is only one goal we have in operation within Republic City,” said Zaheer. “There are others you can assist with while you’re there. For example, while Jilu is well-placed for first strike against the Council, he is still only one man. Convincing or bribing other members of their staff – guards, clerks, even janitors – to look the other way when the time is right, will go a long way toward securing our success.”

The non-bender got to his feet and began pacing, twirling his staff – a genuine Air Nomad artifact they’d once recovered from the Eastern Air Temple – around in his hands, as he often did when he was deep in thought.

“The Republic City underworld, its police force, its communication systems…we know much, but there’s so much more we could know,” he went on, now talking to no one in particular. “Most of our people there are too…public to, say, stake out a meeting of the Triple-Threat Triads. You wouldn’t have that problem.”

“Maybe not…but she’d have others,” Ghazan cut in, his voice laced with concern. “I like the sound of this less and less the more I hear it. Sorry for how this is gonna sound, Korra, but he’s throwing you straight from the kiddie pool into the ocean. With no dry land in sight.”

“I’m not saying she wouldn’t have help,” declared Zaheer, his brow furrowed. “Jilu and our other operatives already in the city – nearly a hundred in total – can render whatever assistance she needs. And we wouldn’t be far. Going ahead with this plan would mean moving to a hideout just outside the United Republic’s borders. Worse comes to worse, we can sneak into the city and get her out.”

Ghazan still didn’t look fully convinced, but nodded once.

“I’ve got a question I can’t believe nobody’s asked yet,” said Ming-Hua in a snide voice, using a water-arm to slap lightly at Korra’s forehead. “Change of clothes, rougher hairstyle, that stuff’s easy. But what about this? Might as well have a big flashing sign with ‘I’m secretly a firebender’ written on it.”

Korra swallowed. Her waterbending master was right, of course; how could she have forgotten? Her tattoo was proof-positive that she could combustionbend, which was such a ridiculously rare ability that few things could possibly identify her quicker.

Ghazan shrugged his shoulders. “A headband, maybe?” he suggested.

Zaheer, however, shook his head.

“A headband could be removed in an instant, by anyone,” he replied. “Only an idiot would choose
such a flimsy disguise. No, we have something far more effective. P’Li?”

The statuesque firebender strode over and pulled a small tub of some kind of cream from her pocket.

“Back when I was a…weapon…for the warlord Du Jun, one of his shamans developed this,” she explained, surprising Korra. She didn’t bring up that chapter of her life very often. “It’s a mix of herbs that hides spiritual tattoos from the naked eye, until or unless a strong enough pulse of chi moves through. It was useful whenever he needed me to assassinate someone who’d…who’d never see it coming.”

Wordlessly, Zaheer placed a comforting arm around his girlfriend, and despite the difference in their heights she melted into him readily. Without being asked to – albeit with a groan and roll of the eyes in Ming-Hua’s case – the rest of them turned their heads away, allowing the couple a moment of privacy to kiss.

Once they parted and everyone else turned back around, Zaheer’s face resumed its grave expression, and once again he placed a hand on Korra’s shoulder.

“Do you have any questions, Korra?” he asked softly. “Do you think you’re ready for this?”

“I’m…not sure,” she said, speaking honestly. “It’s so much to take in, but…if the Red Lotus needs me, I guess that’s that. Isn’t it? You’ve given me so much…I couldn’t refuse you now.”

“You shouldn’t go because it’s an obligation,” Zaheer told her quietly. “You should go because you know it’s the right thing to do. The only way true freedom will ever be given a chance to return to this world.”

“I know. I…I want that too,” Korra whispered, sincerely. “And if this mission means I get us a few steps closer to that, then I say…”

For the first time in at least an hour, the Avatar cracked a smile, and cracked her knuckles too for good measure.

“…Bring it on,” she finished, nodding confidently toward her teachers.

P’Li made a thoughtful “hmmm” sound through closed lips. “I guess that only leaves one thing,” she murmured. “You’ll need a new name. One nobody would ever connect with the Avatar who was thought dead twelve years ago.”

“That decision needs to be fully up to you, Korra,” said Zaheer. “It’s what you’ll call yourself, day-in and day-out. Being slow to react to it could arouse suspicion.”

Now it was Korra’s turn to look pensive. She’d never really given that sort of thing a lot of thought before, mostly because the need for it had never come up.

The other core members of the Red Lotus all had multiple aliases, for use when they needed to head into towns for supplies or to meet with informants. Zaheer favored the name “Yorru,” for example – an obscure but pointed reference, since according to legend Yorru was the young, non-bending lover of Guru Laghima, whom her mentor idolized.

Perhaps she could think of something similar. But she wasn’t nearly as well-read as Zaheer, and choosing a name from something too popular probably wasn’t a good idea.

Unbidden, an image began to swim up from the back of her mind. When she’d been very young, only a couple years after her adoption by the Red Lotus, the five of them had once spent a few days
on Ember Island, searching for a royal artifact supposedly buried there.

She’d forgotten some of the details, but somehow, she’d managed to cajole the others – okay, mostly Ghazan – into allowing her to see Pu-on Tim’s legendary play, *The Boy in the Iceberg*. Misguided and short-sighted as he might’ve been, Aang was still her predecessor, and it could only help to know more about the adventures of his youth…right?

A decade hence, it didn’t seem like *his* spirit was interested in telling her anything, after all…

Zaheer had argued against it, but ultimately relented, under the logic that the house was packed and nobody was likely to notice five more hooded and cloaked faces. Plus, in all honesty, she suspected he was curious. Before being outed as a Red Lotus member in his early twenties, the non-bender had been a frequent patron of the arts, and Korra knew how much he sometimes missed that.

Unfortunately, there’d been problems backstage that day. From what Ming-Hua had overheard (and immediately headed back to share; the acerbic woman was a surprisingly eager gossip), about an hour before curtain was set to rise, the actresses playing Aang and Katara had come to blows over the actor playing Toph…who ultimately wound up rejecting both of them, and hooking up with the actor playing Zuko instead.

The end result was a cast where about half the primary players refused to be in the same *room* as the others, much less put on the play.

Panicking, the theater director had decided he had no choice to make a last-minute swap for a performance with a much smaller cast of characters: the classic, if perhaps a bit overdone, *Love Amongst the Dragons*.

The performance was, without the cloud of youthful enthusiasm hanging over her eyes…well, *awful*. The acting was stilted, the props clearly thrown together at the last second, and one of the stage-hands had gotten his black bodysuit burned during the earlier altercation, so many in the audience were left wondering what a fat, big-nosed man was doing skulking around the back of the set the whole time.

But at age seven, Korra had been *enthralled*. The story of *Lat-Dee* (as theater aficionados often called it) was simple and easy-to-follow, but it’d survived for so long for a reason.

There was a basic, appealing humanity to the plight of the transformed Dragon Emperor, made mortal and left to fend for himself so far from home, and it wasn’t uncommon for the final, climactic scene – where he breaks his curse and embraces the Empress, reunited once more – to reduce even the most critical onlooker to tears.

In total, there were only three primary roles in the play: the Dragon Emperor, his love the Dragon Empress, and the Dark Water Spirit who opposes them. Most fans saw themselves in the one of the former two, but they hadn’t been the characters who most captured *her* attention.

To Korra, the Dark Water Spirit, the supposed villain of the story, was by far the most sympathetic character. She’d just been minding her own business at the start, after all. It was only after the Emperor trespassed into her domain, burned the Spirit’s sacred tree, and then refused to apologize that the Spirit had decided to curse her tormentor.

And everything had worked out for him in the end, hadn’t it? His time as a mortal had taught him a valuable lesson in hubris and, ultimately, had brought him together with his true love. One could easily argue the Spirit was the true *hero* of the tale.
In his mortal guise, the Dragon Emperor went by Noren; his Empress took the name Noriko while in her own. The Dark Water Spirit typically went nameless, but this wasn’t true in all versions of the play. And in the performance she had gone to see, the one that’d so captured the young Avatar’s fascination, the Spirit had been called…

“You don’t need to decide right away,” said Zaheer after a while, once the silence had stretched to an uncomfortable length. “If you need a few hours to give it some more thought, please do so.”

“No…No, I think I’ve got one,” Korra responded quietly, knowing that once she took on the mask she’d picked out, there was no going back. “From now on, call me…”

She bowed her head, steeled herself, and finally, took the plunge.

“Mizore.”

[----------------------]

On the roof of the Red Lotus compound, the Avatar sat alone, restlessly kicking her legs over the side.

There’d been a great number of preparations to make before departure, though Korra had been happy to let the others handle most of them. It gave her more time to think.

They would be traveling separately, which’d momentarily panicked her, though she tried not to let it show. Much as she was eager to set out and find her own path in the world, she still had barely spent a single day of her life apart from her family.

Well…from either of her families.

Zaheer and the rest would be traveling on their own boat, expecting to arrive at the United Republic about three weeks hence. But that was too long a wait for Korra – or for “Mizore,“ rather. She needed to blend in with a shipment of new labor from the Northern Water Tribe…and since their ship was arriving in two weeks, so was she.

To that end, Zaheer had managed to secure the services of a band of pirates (“High-risk traders!”), leveraging his sheer force of personality and a lot of money. The Red Lotus had very deep coffers, when they needed it.

The pirates would be leaving port at dawn, which gave her a grand total of about ten hours to get used to the idea of leaving her old life behind forever.

“Wow. Looks like somebody’s out of spirits. Which is a doubly bad thing for the Avatar, if you think about it,” spoke a chuckling voice, and Korra turned to see Ghazan join her, his legs swinging over the edge in one swift motion to match hers.

Korra wasn’t sure what she was supposed to say here. Finally she muttered, “Thanks for…umm…y’know. Sticking up for me in there.”

“Hey, you’re a good kid,” said Ghazan with a smile. “Sometimes we still think of you as our little girl. And we worry, all of us. Yeah…even Ming-Hua.”
“I’m not a kid anymore,” she replied, a bit indignantly. Her waterbending master called her things like that about ten times a day, but it sounded a lot worse coming from him.

“No…No, I guess you’re not,” he admitted, shaking his head. “Spirits, you’ve grown up so fast. Seems like just yesterday when you were up to my knee, yelling and lisping and throwing around the elements like you owned the place.”


Ghazan nodded, chuckling again, and turned to stare off into the distance. The stars were bright and distinct tonight, contrasting sharply from the dull, waning moon.

“Why are you here, anyway?” she asked after a little while.

“Just wanted a chance to say goodbye. For now, anyway,” he said. “No telling how long it might be till we see each other again. And figured there might not be time in the morning, so I wanted to catch you before bed.”

“I won’t be sleeping tonight,” Korra told him, a bit hollowly. “There’s no way I could if I wanted to.”

“Nervous?” whispered Ghazan, his mouth upturned slightly.

She looked at him. “Wouldn’t you be?” she demanded, probably a bit more sharply than she’d been intending.

“Maybe. But then, I’m not the Avatar,” he answered. “Look, Korra…I’ve known you for almost your entire life. You’re ready for this. Republic City won’t know what hit it.”

Korra felt her cheeks redden slightly as she said, very quietly, “You always know the right thing to say.”

“Eh, I’m just pretty good at faking it,” responded Ghazan with a grin.

Her next words were strained, nervous, barely audible. “Umm…before I go…I wanted to…to say…” she began, looking resolutely away. After a long pause, however, she ultimately let out a deep sigh and turned her back to him. “Err…nevermind. I should, uh…go say bye to the others.”

She left without another word.

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Ming-Hua barely even acknowledged when she stopped by, waving one water-arm lazily as she reclined across a couch and calling out, “Try not to get yourself killed on the first day! After that, it’s your call.”

P’Li took a little longer.

The towering woman was alone in the kitchen, absently chopping at vegetables. Despite her severity in training and combat, the firebender was a surprisingly adept cook.
Though she’d obviously never asked, Korra got the sense it had to do with her past. From what she’d gathered over the years, Du Jun hadn’t just used her as a living weapon. While in his service, she’d been forced to do a number of other things for him, whenever the mood struck him.

“This is a big step, Korra,” she said, not looking up from her task. “I suppose everyone else has been saying they believe in you? That you’re ready for this?”

“Master Ghazan, yeah,” answered Korra, a bit awkwardly. “Ming-Hua…I’m sure she was thinking it. Probably. Maybe.”

“Well I’d like you to listen here, Avatar,” P’Li declared, putting down the knife and turning to face her young student. “This is going to sound harsh, because it’s supposed to. You’re not ready for this.”

“Excuse me?” asked Korra, raising an eyebrow.

“Fact of the matter is, that feeling in your gut? The one that’s telling you you’ve never faced anything like this, and you don’t know what to do? You should listen to it, because it’s got you pegged,” explained the firebender. “And you know what the big secret is? That’s okay.”

“Err…now I’m just feeling even more confused,” said Korra honestly.

“None of us get to choose what we face in life. We play the Pai Sho tiles we’re dealt and hope the board doesn’t get flipped,” P’Li continued. “After Harmonic Convergence, once everything has changed…maybe that’ll be different. I don’t know yet. But right now, that’s how it is.”

The statuesque combustionbender wasn’t typically one for displays of physical affection, her boyfriend aside. But for perhaps the third or fourth time in their entire lives, she pulled Korra in for a brief hug.

“That’s your greatest talent, Korra. More than anything any of us have ever taught you,” she murmured. “You get thrown in a situation you have no idea how to deal with, and somehow, you hold on. You survive. Just do that again here, and you’ll be fine.”

“Umm…thank you…” Korra whispered back, still knocked a little off-balance by the older woman’s words. Unable to help herself, she pressed forward, just a bit. “Was that how you felt…y’know…when you…”

She didn’t finish the sentence, but she didn’t need to.

“Yes…it was,” said P’Li, very softly.

That was the end of the conversation.

Zaheer caught up to her on the docks of the nearby town.

It hadn’t taken her more than a few minutes to pull together all the possessions she cared to take on her journey – just some clothes, a hefty sheaf of documents the Red Lotus attendants had provided, and a tangle of blue ribbon, used for braiding women’s hair in certain styles of the Southern Water
Tribe.

Korra’s fist briefly clenched the ribbon tight. It’d been her mother’s – the only thing the Red Lotus had ever managed to recover from that night.

Apart from her, she supposed.

“The ship will not depart for another five hours, Korra,” said Zaheer, leaping down onto the port from the nearest rooftop nearly soundlessly. The man was truly an acrobat of absurd skill, when he felt like using it.

“I just got tired of waiting,” she replied, her fingers absently bending a small patch of the sea back and forth. “And now’s when you try to teach me a lesson about patience being the path to inner peace, or something like that?”

Zaheer’s mouth actually curled upward at this – almost imperceptibly, but it was there.

“You’re right about one thing,” he told her, taking a stance upon the wooden planks. In the middle of the night, they were the only people anywhere near here. “It’s time for you to learn a lesson.”

Suddenly, he moved like a flash of lightning, his movements circular and tightly controlled. An instant later he was behind her, a flat palm pressed between her shoulder blades. “Before you go, I’m going to teach you just a little bit of airbending,” he finished, another circular motion bringing him back in front of her in the blink of an eye.

Korra’s glumness was forgotten as quickly as her master had moved. The prospect of learning an entirely new element for the first time in thirteen years – even just the basics – was exciting enough to wipe away every other thought in her head.

“Alright!” she exclaimed, assuming a stance as well. She wasn’t entirely sure what an airbending stance looked like, so she just took fire and spread her legs out a little more. “Born ready for this. Literally, in my case.”

Zaheer immediately began to circle around her again, this time much slower, so she could see. “Airbending is all about spiral movements. When you meet resistance, you must be able to switch direction at a moment’s notice,” he said.

To demonstrate, he held up a small leaf, taken from their compound, and released it into the air. The cold night winds easily picked it up, carrying it to-and-fro.

“The key is to be like the leaf,” continued Zaheer. As he spoke, he moved expertly around the leaf, always following its movements without getting any closer or farther to it. Were it a weapon, it wouldn’t have a chance at touching him. “Flow with the movement of the wind. Let your mind and your spirit be free, and the rest will come.”

The non-bender came to a graceful halt, and swiftly caught the leaf in gentle but determined fingers.

“Now, Korra,” he added after a moment’s pause. “It’s your turn.”

Zaheer released the leaf once more, letting it drift toward her. The drafty ocean air made this an ideal place to practice, and Korra worked to match his movements as best she could.

Her results were…mixed. No matter how hard she tried to dodge it, the leaf managed to touch her, many times over, drifting softly over her skin only to be swept up by a different current an instant later.
Her master continued to circle around her as she did, most of the time silent but occasionally offering a brief bit of advice. “Your stance is too firmly grounded. You must be light on your feet at all times,” he said at one point.

A few moments later, it was, “Don’t look to the enemy as something to be avoided. Look at them at a partner. Their movements influence your movements, but also vice-versa.”

Finally, when she’d succeeded – just barely – at dodging the leaf for five passes in a row, he concluded, “And most importantly, remember that airbending is an art primarily focused on negative jing. It does not respond to aggression, nor impatience. But that doesn’t make it a coward’s weapon. It simply means that your focus should be on forcing your opponent to keep moving forward. For them to overextend themselves. And when they do…”

“That’s when you strike,” Korra completed the sentence for him.

Zaheer gave a small smile. “More earthbending philosophy than air, in that case,” he said. “But yes, if you’re not going to commit yourself to pacifism – and the Avatar so rarely can – that’s ultimately the path you must walk.”

Korra had nothing to say to that, and ultimately found herself collapsing on the dock, breathing heavily from all the exertion she’d just put in.

Eventually, however, she thought of something else. “So…if I keep practicing stuff like this…” she muttered, only barely loud enough for him to hear. “Do you really think that’ll help me to airbend for real, someday?”

Her master, for his part, knelt beside her, his expression distant and contemplative.

“I’m afraid it’s as far as my guidance can take you,” he stated with a frown. “Which brings me to the original reason I came to find you, I suppose. There’s one more mission I’d like you to attempt while you are in the city.”

Korra lifted herself back to a sitting position, looking concerned. “What’s that?” she asked.

Zaheer couldn’t think of a way to phrase this delicately, so he was blunt. “If – and only if – the opportunity arises…” he said, still staring out onto the dark, distant waters. “I’d like you to try and kidnap one of Councilman Tenzin’s children.”

The Avatar’s eyes went wide. Whatever she’d been expecting from her mentor, it wasn’t that.

“Kidnapping?” she whispered, alarmed. “You can’t possibly mean…”

“I do,” Zaheer cut her off. “I wish there was another way, and I’ve thought long and hard to try and come up with one…but there isn’t. Let us face facts: you are the Avatar, and you need to learn airbending. Sozin’s folly means our options for a teacher are severely…limited.”

He folded his hands and shook his head.

“Tenzin himself would of course be ideal, being the only true airbending master alive…but he is tied too deeply with the White Lotus to ever consider it. And take no offense, but frankly, I’m unsure even you could capture him against his will,” he went on after a moment. “But his three children have been learning from him for their entire lives. According to my source on Air Temple Island, his eldest, Jinora, is at most a few years from mastery herself. They could certainly get you as far as you need to go.”
“I’m not doubting their abilities,” said Korra in a low voice. “But I couldn’t see myself just…just grabbing somebody’s kid!”

“You wouldn’t need to,” responded Zaheer. “Simply lure one of them off their island and to a pre-identified location, and our people can take care of the rest. Only once you’ve completed the primary mission with the Equalists, of course.”

“If it’s that simple, why haven’t you done it already?” Korra demanded shrewdly.

“Spies among the Air Acolytes are not easy to come by. They screen any applicants vigorously, and only take in a few new ones each year,” explained the non-bender. “Our last mole tried, you know. When the middle child, Ikki, was much younger. But he was caught halfway through. Thankfully they never connected him to our organization…but we still lost an invaluable source of information when he was arrested.”

He let out a deep breath. “It took years to install another operative in their ranks,” he continued. “And so far, she’s been much more…subtle. We shouldn’t risk her exposure unless it’s for an assignment that’s guaranteed to work. One that has the assistance of the Avatar, for example.”

Zaheer looked toward her now, his grayish-green eyes – signs of his mixed Earth Kingdom and Air Nomad heritage – gazing into her bright blue ones expectantly. He wouldn’t force this issue, she knew, if she simply refused to entertain it any further.

But he was hoping that wasn’t the case.

Finally, in a very small voice, Korra breathed out, “Is this really the only way?”

“Harmonic Convergence is but a year away,” he said, his tones hard and severe. “One way or another, you must learn airbending by then. If you can find a different path, then by all means, you have my blessing to attempt it. But either way, remember…”

Korra nodded solemnly, and repeated the words he’d taught her since she was very little. The words that defined everything her life was about – everything she was:

“Only the Avatar can master all four elements…and bring balance to the world.”

[-------------------]

Korra looked out onto the vast sea, a clear azure expanse stretching out as far as the eye could see.

They’d been sailing for…well, she wasn’t entirely sure, since there weren’t any clocks or even sundials here. For a few hours, at least.

Still, her fellow “sailors” seemed to have no trouble telling the time of day in spite of that.

She’d spent the first few hours, after waving goodbye to a cloaked Ghazan and P’Li and settling into the small cabin Zaheer’s money had bought her, intently studying the scrolls the Lotus members had provided. They contained detailed intelligence on Republic City, everything they knew or suspected about Amon and the Equalists, as well as background on her supposed cover identity.

It hadn’t taken long, though, before Korra realized she was reading most of it without taking in a
single ounce of information.

She just plain wasn’t good at this sort of thing. It wasn’t that she was stupid, mind. But she also couldn’t deny she preferred to solve problems with her fists over her brain.

Still, she had the basic stuff down, she thought. Not that it took very long for that to be tested.

One of the crewmen, apparently on break given the large snack-cake he was stuffing in his mouth, came over to join her as she leaned over the ship’s railing. He smacked his lips obnoxiously, then turned to look at her. His eyes went comically wide.

“Man, you are gorgeous!” he exclaimed, a hungry look in his eye that had little to do with the cake he’d just devoured. “Got a boyfriend back home, sweetheart?”

Korra, who’d been lost in thought, didn’t immediately register he was talking to her. “Wait…what?” she asked, looking around to see they were alone on this level of the deck.

“Eh, I’m just kiddin’ ya,” he said, snickering to himself as if he’d just told the most brilliant joke of all time. “We gettin’ paid way too much on this one to risk any foolin’ around. Ya got some real good friends, whoever ya are, sweetheart.”

“Quit calling me ‘sweetheart,’” she told him flatly. He just snickered again.

“Y’know, my family’s been sailin’ these seas for generations,” he added after a little while, ignoring her warning tone. “My pappy did it, an’ so did my granpappy, an’ his granpappy. Not my granpappy’s pappy, though. He was…uh…a tailor. We don’t talk ‘bout him much.”

“Really? That’s fascinating,” muttered Korra dryly. She usually wasn’t this sarcastic or rude to total strangers, but she was already nearing her last nerve and this guy pushed all her least favorite buttons.

Apparently oblivious to her disinterest, he continued on, “My granpappy’s the one with all the good stories, though. Ya wanna know who he met once? Go on, guess!”

Having absolutely no interest in this tale, Korra said in the most strained tone possible, “I dunno. Probably a dragon or something.”

“Heh! Closer than you might think, girly!” he yelped, pounding on the hull of the ship to emphasize his point. “Get this…it was the Avatar! An’ Fire Lord Zuko too! Well, I guess he wasn’t Fire Lord back then, but still…”

Korra tensed heavily at the word “Avatar.” Had she judged this man wrongly? Was his obvious idiocy just a front, and this rambling story, some kind of coded message?

And if so, did that make him an ally or an enemy? Both sides of the Lotus schism used the same codes…

Her worries were put to rest as she observed the man pick his nose with his right pinky, stare thoughtfully at the result, and ultimately, put the finger in his mouth.

Nobody faked stupidity that well.

“Anyway, this was back when Zuko was goin’ around, tryin’ to do that whole ‘capture the Avatar to regain his honor!’ thing,” explained the pirate, apparently oblivious to her brief panic. “He hired my granpappy’s crew to help him, but then he went an’ backstabbed ‘em right after! Or…maybe they
backstabbed him? I dunno. Eh, doesn’t matter. It was a long time ago.”

“Does this story have a point?” Korra demanded, resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

“Hey, I’m just makin’ small talk here!” he said, holding up his hands defensively. “Point is, I’m a guy who knows people. Been everywhere, seen everythin’. But I ain’t never seen a gal like you. Dunno what it is. Just somethin’ about your face, I guess.”

Korra just looked askance. She almost wished he was a spy for the White Lotus at this point. At least then she could end this conversation quickly by throwing him overboard.

“So…why’s a nice broad like you headin’ to a place like Republic City, anyway?” asked the pirate after a little while.

Her first instinct was to deliver another biting remark, but she suppressed the urge. This’d be a good, low-risk opportunity to test her cover story.

“The Future Industries Satomobile factories pay good money,” Korra recited, trying to make it sound as casual and natural as possible. “And I know they’re in need of skilled waterbenders. It’s cheaper than cleaning all the machines and processing the metals by hand.”

“Yeah, but if that was all ya wouldn’t need us to take ya,” he replied, confidently tapping his temple with his finger as if dazzled by his own cleverness. “There’s gotta be more to it than that. You left from an’ Earth Kingdom port, after all.”

“Not really,” said Korra. “It’s not a long story. Right now, Future Industries is only importing laborers from the Northern Tribe. I’m from the South. Went to Ba Sing Se to earn my fortune, but it didn’t work out. Now I’m trying to start over.”

The pirate seemed to be thinking this explanation over in his head for a while, before ultimately shrugging. Whether he believed her or not, he appeared to have lost interest in pressing her for details.

“Well then, girly…lemme give you one piece of advice,” he murmured, leaning forward and covering his mouth with his hand conspiratorially. “Beware of Republic City.”

Korra blinked in mild confusion. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“That city’s like this here coin, y’hear?” answered the pirate, fishing what appeared to be an ordinary gold coin – old-fashioned but still valid Earth Kingdom currency – out of his pocket. “Gleamin’ and glistenin’ on the outside, but under the surface…”

He bit into the coin, and his teeth went clean through. Showing the halves to Korra, it became clear that it was nothing but a disc of compressed dirt, painted to look golden.

“That city’s got one heckuva dark side. It’ll chew ya up and spit ya out, if ya aren’t careful,” he said, winking as he tossed the fake coin into the ocean. “Make sure ya don’t let it.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Korra responded in a low voice, more to herself than toward the irritating man. On the horizon, she thought she could just barely make out the hazy outline of her destination. “That’s not gonna happen.”

[----------------------]
Nothing could’ve prepared her for her first glimpse at Republic City.

She’d been in cities before, of course. Not for very long, but there were times when missions had required them to spend a few days in or around Ba Sing Se, or Omashu, or the Fire Nation capital of Yogan.

But this was something entirely different. Those other cities had existed since antiquity, and a great deal of their ancient architecture survived to this day, out of deference to tradition if nothing else. Where advances in technology had altered them – the addition of paved roads, for example – the new tended to work around the old, rather than in replacement.

Republic City, on the other hand, had been built with an eye toward the future, and this was reflected in every single brick and spire.

Towering buildings of stone and metal stood in every direction, hiking wares of every conceivable shape and size. An enormous bridge, extending longer than many small towns, loomed off in the distance. And just to their left, as the ship began to pull in close to the harbor…

Korra’s breath caught in her throat, briefly, as she gazed upon the massive statue that marked Avatar Aang Memorial Island – a gift of goodwill from the Fire Nation, to mark the end of the Hundred Year War and a period of, thus far, unparalleled peace and prosperity for the world.

She’d known it was coming, but still, she couldn’t entirely restrain the chill that ran down her spine at the image. It was one thing to see the statue in photographs or illustrations.

It was quite another to gaze upon the face of her predecessor, increased in size at least a hundredfold, and imagine those cold, stony eyes were looking down on her. Silently judging her.

What might he think about what she was doing now? She had no idea.

She was probably the first Avatar since Wan who didn’t.

“You’ll be getting off here, girl!” called the captain from the ship’s bow, startling her out of her reverie. “We have cargo to drop by the warehouse district right after, so make it quick!”

“Oh…right!” she said back, before rushing off to her cabin to grab her things.

True to his word, she was the only person to disembark the ship as it pulled in to port, and it left in a great cloud of steam only a few minutes after.

Looking around, though, nobody seemed to have thought this was odd. Indeed, no one seemed to be paying any attention to her at all. Hers was just one of dozens of ships docked in Yue Bay, and she was just one of thousands of people hustling and bustling around the port.

All in all, it was the perfect opportunity to lose herself in the crowd. Arrive completely and totally unnoticed, without standing out in any way.

That plan did not work out.

Korra didn’t exactly have a lot of experience with roads, and her years of instruction from the Lotus in history, spirituality, and the bending arts had never included the vital lesson “look both ways before crossing.”
As such, she didn’t see the moped coming until the second before it crashed into her at full speed.

“Ow…” the Avatar moaned, clutching her ribs as she slowly attempted to pull herself back up to her feet. She hadn’t hurt anything vital, and she could use waterbending to heal the worst of it, but she was still certain she’d be sore for days.

“Oh no!” exclaimed another voice, presumably the driver. Korra wasn’t entirely sure. Her ears were still ringing. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you!”

Korra gritted her teeth, ready to lay into whatever reckless idiot was responsible. Or any idiots in the vicinity, honestly. She was angry enough right now not to be picky.

“How could you not see me?!” she demanded, whirling around to face the driver, who was wearing a helmet and riding gear. “I mean, I was just…just…"

But she didn’t finish that sentence. Because in that moment the stranger removed their helmet, to reveal the most beautiful woman Korra had ever seen in her life.

That wasn’t rhetoric, or some attempt at poetry, either. Korra was terrible at both. It was just plain literally true.

What she was looking upon now was a person for whom stuff like “elegance” or “poise” were clearly second-nature. The way she moved, the way she spoke; even the breathtaking way she flipped her inky-black hair back into position as she shook it free from the helmet. All of it was something Korra was sure she couldn’t match if she practiced for a hundred years.

She’d have been certain the other girl – “girl,” perhaps, was more accurate than “woman,” as they looked to be about the same age – was putting on a show for her benefit, if not for the fact that the sheer casualness of her demeanor indicated she acted like this all the freaking time.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you? Ugh, I’m such an idiot!” said the other girl, rushing over to help her the rest of the way up. A bit reluctantly, she took the proffered arm.

“Nah, it’s…it’s fine,” muttered Korra, not meeting the gaze of her bright, piercing green eyes. She was acutely aware that she was blushing. “I’ve…err…had worse bruises in my life. I’ll manage.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” the other girl continued, shaking her head in shame. Eventually, however, she extended a gloved hand. “My name is Asami. Let me make this up to you somehow. Uh…how about I treat you to dinner? Tomorrow night, eight o’clock, Kwong’s Cuisine.”

Korra couldn’t even begin to think of all the reasons that was a terrible idea, though she couldn’t exactly lead with: I’m a member of a worldwide terrorist organization and I wasn’t really planning to work fancy dinners into the schedule.

As she politely but briefly accepted the other girl’s handshake and the silence began to grow awkward, however, she ultimately seized upon the easiest objection to articulate.

“I…don’t even know where that is,” she replied honestly. “I’m…umm…sort of new in town.”

“It’s right in the heart of downtown. The trolley has a stop right next to it – four stops west from here. You can’t miss it,” said Asami, gesturing at a passing railcar. “Come on, I’m not taking no for an answer. It’s the least I can do.”

“I…err…well, y’see…” Korra attempted to mumble another reason this wouldn’t work, any excuse to get out of there as quickly as possible. This’d already gone on way too long.
But for some reason, she was suddenly finding it rather difficult to string a coherent sentence together.

Asami, meanwhile, was refastening her helmet and goggles, not a single hair out of place from the experience.

“Well, I guess it's up to you in the end. But I really hope you can make it,” she added, a warm, genuine smile spreading across her ruby-red lips. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything. All you need to do is show up.”

When Korra gave her no response – she couldn’t even begin to think of one – Asami shrugged her shoulders and fired her moped back up. Another kindly wave, and she was gone.

Leaving the Avatar to wonder what in the heck had just happened.
The instructions Korra had received indicated that a number of things had already been arranged for her by Lotus agents in the city – first and foremost, a place to live.

Her apartment belonged to a not-particularly-successful merchant of cured meats. Or at least it had, until his untimely death in a boating accident. Because of the strategic location, the Red Lotus had chosen to keep it under his name, though it’d been vacant for the past several years.

Knowing this, Korra had been expecting the worst, but the place was mercifully clean and odor-free, if a little small. Clearly, whoever had prepared the single-room dwelling had also given it a good scrubbing.

Best of all, it was only about a ten-minute walk from the factory where she’d be working. Those arrangements had been made, as well: “Mizore” was on the list of new laborers from the Northern Water Tribe, and was scheduled to report in for work the following morning.

Which left her tonight to get settled in…and to think things over.

Try as she might, she hadn’t been able to get her encounter with that “Asami” girl out of her head. Whenever she closed her eyes, the odds were pretty good she’d see her the curls of her raven hair unfold as she slowly removed her helmet; the shimmering quality of her emerald eyes in the sun; the way her makeup, eyeshadow and blush and brilliant red lipstick alike, had framed her face so expertly.

The latter struck her particularly hard. Korra had never worn any kind of makeup in her life, and she’d never seen Ming-Hua or P’Li in it either. For the most part, she’d always dismissed it as a pointless distraction.

But seeing it on Asami…

Korra shook her head, vigorously. She wasn’t sure what direction those thoughts were heading in, but they weren’t anything good. She had a lot to get done in this city, and not much time to do it in. There was no room for distractions, of any kind.

Besides, odds were pretty good that – in a place as big as Republic City – she was probably never going to see her again. After all, while she wasn’t sure if the other girl had noticed, Korra had never even given her a name…fake or otherwise. Nor had she told her where she lived, or where she’d come from.

So literally all she needed to do, in order to avoid unnecessary complications, was not go out to dinner with her.

Which was an easy choice to make…right?

Desperate to do something besides linger over that afternoon’s chance encounter, Korra found herself fiddling with the only non-utilitarian piece of equipment in the apartment: an old but functional radio. Having never actually used one before, she simply turned the dial absently through the channels, hoping to find something to take her mind off things.

“And eastbound traffic is backed up all the way past Jet Boulevard, so those of you heading home tonight probably should think twice about taking the bridge...”
“Flameo’s Noodles will make you smile! The noodliest noodles all the while…”

“Public Health Commissioner Raiko confirmed today that the water shut-off is expected to last through the end of the week. When asked about…”

“So I’m gonna rock, rock, rock ya like an earthbender! Rock ya girl, with a love that’s so tender…!”

“And the Wolfbats take an early lead, as Tahno single-handedly sends the Badgermoles into Zone Two right out of the gate! Akemi is putting up a brave counterattack with her signature ‘Blades of Flame’ technique, but will it be enough, folks?”

Korra’s hand froze over the dial, struck rather intensely by what she was hearing. She’d heard of this, hadn’t she? Pro-bending, she was pretty sure it was called.

But she’d never heard, much less seen, a match like this…

“ Seems like things are looking bad for Miki, as Ming and Shaozu concentrate everything they’ve got on her! Poor girl has a bad record this season against earth-fire combos. Now she’s been pushed back into Zone Three! One more good shot and this could be curtains for – oh, wait! I don’t believe what I’m seeing! The Badgermoles’ own earthbender, Sakura, has just stepped in to defend her teammate! Not sure what she’s thinking, but this is sure making this one heckuva match to see!”

Korra leaned in closer, entranced.

“With his other two teammates occupied, looks like Akemi’s pushback on Tahno has started to gain a little ground! And…And is it…Yes it is! Tahno has just been forced back to Zone Two himself! That hasn’t happened once since last year’s season! Looks like the reporters who called this the Wolfbats’ toughest match yet were right on the money! But don’t count their captain out too soon, folks – now we get to see how he fights when he’s really serious!”

Korra’s ear was now pressed right up against the speaker, desperate not to miss a word.

“Sakura strikes once, twice, three times on Shaozu! Seems the Wolfbats’ firebender might be running a little low on steam. And…oof, that’s gotta hurt! With that unfortunate little trip, Ming’s the only member of the Wolfbats still left on the Badgermoles’ side of the ring! He’d better be careful, or the girls from Ba Sing Se will have them back to square one!”

Distantly, the Avatar thought she might’ve heard knocking. She ignored the sound.

“Miki’s doing her best to hold onto her position, but things are looking worse for her by the second! As I’m sure you know, folks, if she gets dunked in the drink she’s out for the round, no matter what happens next! Her only chance is that Ming goes back one Zone before his team can deliver the ringout! But with Sakura stuck defending her teammate, it’s all up to Akemi to…”

The collective groan of one half of the audience – and the raucous cheering of the other – were audible even through the dingy speakers.

“…To get blasted out of the ring herself. I guess that answers the age-old question of what happens when you corner a Wolfbat in a cave. Mind, where I come from that looked like a straight-up hosing violation, but I guess the ref doesn’t agree. Either way, Akemi is out, and with twenty seconds left in the round, the Badgermoles’ only chance is to run out the clock and start fresh! Odds are against them, folks, but if I’d believe it out of anyone it’s these lovely ladies!”

Korra’s own groan echoed the crowd’s. She didn’t know who any of these players were, but from
what little she’d heard it sounded like the Ba Sing Se Badgermoles were her kind of people. Whereas the White Falls Wolfbats were distinctly...not.

The knocking was growing louder.

“And those odds just got a lot shorter, folks, as Sakura takes a fall right into Zone Three! Now the Wolfbats all get to advance back into the heart of Badgermole territory! Miki and Sakura have their backs to the wall – or to the water, I guess you could say – and they’re right up against three of the toughest players in the league! With ten seconds left as we start back up again, this one’s a nail-biter right to the finish!”

There was no way she was imagining that knocking, now. It practically sounded as if someone was trying to bust through the door.

It occurred to Korra that it might just be someone important; one of her Lotus contacts in the city, for example. But she simply couldn’t tear herself away.

“I’ve gotta say, after commentating on this sport for years, I’ve never seen such a spirited Zone Three defense as what these girls are pulling off! Both of them are just one good hit away from taking a dip, but that’s only got the pair fighting harder! Still, the Wolfbats aren’t letting up in their assault. It looks like Shaozu is taking the lead on their offensive, while Tahno’s water and Ming’s discs box them in more and more. This’ll come down to the final seconds, folks! Five...four...three...two...!”

But the commentator stopped counting at two, as the crowd – both positively and negatively – went wild.

“And with that final surprise shot from Tahno, we’ve got ourselves a knockout! Our three-time defending champions, the White Falls Wolfbats, take the win, and nab the first slot in this year’s tournament! But before we find out who else will be advancing from the qualifying round, here’s a word from our sponsor: Varrick Global Industries! Varrick’s, maker of the Varri-cake – the tasty snack that’s got your back, whether you want it to or not!”

Korra gave a great sigh of frustration and stormed over to the door, which was still being pounded on like a hungry platypus-bear was on the other side.

“What?!” she demanded angrily, only to find herself facing an extremely short, extremely old lady.

“Don’t ‘what’ me, girl!” yelled the woman, shaking a broom furiously. “You turn that racket down this instant! My other tenants are trying to get some sleep! I don’t care if you’re the Earth Queen, the Avatar, or the head of Cabbage Corp – you do that again and you are out!”

Korra glanced back at the radio, which was currently playing a lengthy and incredibly confusing commercial for Varri-cakes, and grimaced guiltily. In her obsession, she hadn’t realized just how loud she’d turned it up.

“I’m so sorry, ma’am,” she said, bowing the way Zaheer had taught her. “It won’t happen again, I promise.”

“See that it doesn’t!” exclaimed the landlady, who then proceeded to leave in a huff, ranting about hoodlums and hooligans under her breath.

Korra, for her part, closed her door as quietly as she possibly could, then flopped back down on her bed with the radio held close, the volume knob turned way down.
And for the rest of the night, she listened.

She listened as the Bau Ling Buzzard Wasps trounced the Makapu Moose Lions, and the Red Sands Rabaroos rallied from behind to narrowly defeat the Ember Island Eel Hounds.

She listened to the commentator, who she now knew to be called Shiro Shinobi, wax poetic about the (literally) age-old returning champions, the Black Quarry Boar-q-pines, and how their resounding victory over the Harbor Town Hog Monkeys proved that wisdom and experience should never be discounted.

Finally, after she had no idea how many hours, she came to the last qualifying match of the night. Whoever won this one would go on to face the Rabaroos in the opening round of the tournament.

“And now, folks, for the one you’ve all been waiting for: experienced veterans, the Pinnacle Palace Platypus Bears, versus our own home-grown rookies, the Republic City Fire Ferrets! This’ll be one of the hottest matches of the season, folks, and I’m told betting is already shooting through the roof! Not literally, of course. The United Republic Pro-Bending Federation does not condone or endorse the damage or destruction of the arena.”

Korra chuckled, and chanced a glance at a nearby clock. The lateness of the hour briefly shocked her – she’d have to be up for work in less than five hours.

But she sure as heck couldn’t stop listening now.

“The Platypus Bears have taken their positions, but…wait, what’s this? Where are the Fire Ferrets?”

There was a scrambling sound inside the commentator’s booth, as if someone was shuffling a bunch of paper around.

“Hold on, folks, I’m just getting some new information. And…oh no. Oh, I can’t believe what I’m reading here. It looks like Hasook, waterbender for our little underdogs from the street, is – and I quote here from team captain Mako – a ‘no-good no-show.’ I knew he took a beating during the last match with the Tigerdillos, but that is one heck of a shame! Without a third player, the league will have no choice but to disqualify the Fire Ferrets. Unless they can get a replacement waterbender in uniform in the next…let’s see, I believe five minutes is the rule…then it looks like the Platypus Bears are in the tournament by default!”

Korra’s eyes went wide, and without thinking it through fully, they darted to her window.

Where what could only be the pro-bending arena could just barely be seen in the distance, its bright lights shining like a beacon in the night.

“[-------------------]

“I can’t believe Hasook would do this to us!” exclaimed Mako, tearing off his helmet and throwing it to the ground in exasperation.

“Well you did get on his case pretty bad after the last match,” Bolin said pointedly.

“Yeah, well, he deserved it,” Mako practically spat. “And if he had such a problem with me, he
could’ve just said it to my face! Or punched me, or something! Anything would be better than screwing us over like this.”

“He did not, indeed, leave us a lot of time to find a sub. That is true,” replied the earthbender, his tone remarkably matter-of-fact despite the gravity of the situation. “But hey, maybe we can try and grab someone from the audience? We’ve got fans, one of them’s got to be a waterbender.”

“And get them uniformed, prepped, and ready to go within a couple of minutes?” Mako asked dryly. “Plus, being able to splash some tap water around doesn’t mean you know the first thing about pro-bending. Might as well throw Pabu in and see how it goes.”

“I would be okay with that,” Bolin declared, holding his pet close. “Maybe he could beat them with sheer cute-bending.”

Mako pinched his brow and let out a long, drawn-out sigh.

“Alright, maybe your audience idea could work. Or at least, it’s better than just taking the forfeit,” he said. “Not like we’ve got a ton of other options. Unless a skilled waterbender just happens to walk through that door in the next ten seconds.”

The door immediately swung open.

Bolin leaned into his brother, a hand over his mouth. “Did you plan that?” he whispered, his eyes bulging for a second. “Because…well, I’m just saying. It’d be really impressive if you planned that.”

The person who entered, however, didn’t appear to be a waterbender – or at least, not one suited for a combat sport. He was a short, older man with graying hair and glasses. His dress was formal, though not extravagant, and he carried a clipboard that looked just a little too big for his thin hands.

“Oh, hi there, sirs! I work as a page for the Republic City Council,” he informed them, his voice high and squeaky. “I’m here on behalf of Chief Councilman Tarrlok.”

“Tarrlok? What does some bigshot politician want with us?” asked Mako, narrowing his eyes.

“He heard about your little predicament here, and he felt just awful about it,” said the page. “You and I both know you’d win in a fair fight against the Pinnacle Palace team. You shouldn’t be kept from competing in the tournament, just because of some silly technicality!”

“Don’t know what he expects to do about it. Unless he wants to sub in,” Mako responded, snorting a bit. “He is a waterbender, isn’t he?”

“Oh, no, sir. Nothing like that. Councilman Tarrlok isn’t even here tonight,” answered the page. The firebender raised an eyebrow. “Then how’d he know about our problem so quickly?” he demanded.

“I told him, sir. Gave him a ring on the phone as soon as I saw what was going on,” the page explained brightly. “I’m a big fan, you see. Gone to all your matches. Tarrlok always likes to hear about them when I’m serving his morning tea, so I figured it couldn’t hurt to ask…”

“None of that answers my question,” said Mako, cutting him off. “What does he think he can do about it?”

“Oh, that’s already taken care of, sir,” the page told them with a smile.
Mako was just about to ask what the heck he was talking about, when the booming voice of Shiro Shinobi returned to life over the speakers.

“And so, folks, in a stunning turn of events...the entire Pinnacle Palace team has just decided to forfeit the match! Even with victory right in their hands, it looks like the Platypus Bears have chosen to hand over their spot in the tournament! Team captain Yebuk is here in the booth with me now, with a statement.”

Yebuk’s voice was deep, and vaguely accented.

“First of all, I apologize to the people of Pinnacle Palace, for the shame my choice has brought them,” he said. “But there would be far more shame in accepting a victory without honor. We will be free to compete again in next year’s tournament, but the Fire Ferrets may not be. This opportunity rightfully belongs to them. Thank you, Republic City.”

Mako blinked, suddenly realizing. “You bought them off...” he murmured, his tone simultaneously awed and disgusted.

“That’s such an ugly way to put it!” exclaimed the page. “I mean...uh...yes, I suppose that’s technically true. But I was only following orders, don’t hurt me!"

His voice had, somehow, become even squeakier at those last words, his hands held in front of his face as if anticipating an attack. Just how in the spirits’ names did Tarrlok treat this guy?

“Okay, looks like your boss has proven two things,” Mako eventually said, once the page realized they weren’t going to hurt him. “One, that he’s a weasel-snake slimeball willing to do anything to gets what he wants. And two...that he gets results. What does he want in return?”

“Just to speak with you, sirs!” the page replied, holding up his hands in assurance. “An hour of your time, that’s all he’s asking.”

“And why do I not buy that for a minute,” hissed the firebender. He would have said more, likely less tactful things, had his brother not chosen that moment to elbow him in the ribs.

“Maybe we should at least hear this guy out, bro,” he muttered in Mako’s ear. “I mean, he did just do us a solid. He did it in a sneaky and underhanded and kinda sorta maybe illegal way, but still.”

Mako sighed again. He hated to admit it, but Bolin had a point. “Okay, okay. When does he want to see us?” he asked.

“How about tonight, around eight?” said the page, consulting his overlarge clipboard while brandishing an equally outsized pen. “Tarrlok would like to keep this meeting outside the council’s normal business hours, if at all possible.”

“Of course he does,” Mako murmured under his breath, but he nodded all the same. “We’ll be there.”

“Thank you very much, sirs,” the page squeaked out, bowing so low Mako was surprised his back wasn’t audibly cracking. “You shall not regret this!”

The page kept his body dipped the entire time as he made his exit, leaving the two brothers alone with their gear and equipment once more. Bolin, however, continued to stare at the closing door.

“I know I’m gonna regret saying this, but...what is it?” Mako asked, choosing to prepare a lengthy groan ahead of time.
He’d known his younger brother long enough to tell when he had a burning question on his mind… and also long enough to know those questions very rarely danced in the same general vicinity as logic or reason.

“I’ll just ask this one thing, and then I’ll shut up until we go see this Tarrlok dude tomorrow. Promise,” said Bolin, his neck still craned at the point the page had departed from. “Err…well…”

“Just spit it out already, bro,” Mako cut in.

Bolin blinked twice, then mumbled, very quietly, “Was…that a guy or a girl?”

That groan wound up being used rather quickly.

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Korra traipsed slowly along the road leading to the Satomobile factories, stifling yawns every few seconds.

She knew she should’ve gotten a lot more sleep last night, but the lure of listening to “just one more match” had proven impossible to resist. There was no dancing around the issue: she was obsessed, and as much as she should’ve been thinking about her cover and the assignment right now, part of her kept stealing glances at the arena off in the distance.

Maybe it wouldn’t hurt, just to go and see a match…once in a while…

Growing up with the Red Lotus, the mission had always come first. Korra was not, strictly speaking, banned from seeking entertainment in her spare time – freedom was, after all, the entire reason they were fighting – but the opportunities were few and far between. A light play here, a trashy novel there. Occasional outdoor sports with Ghazan or P’Li…or even Ming-Hua, when she was in one of her rare good moods.

The only game she had the opportunity to play frequently was Pai Sho, for obvious reasons. But Korra sucked turtle-duck eggs at it, so she rarely went out of her way to do so.

Pro-bending, though…that was something else. She couldn’t entirely express the sheer exhilaration, the indescribable thrill she felt deep in her gut as she imagined every move; every last punch or kick or flip used to toss around the elements in styles she’d never dreamed of.

One thing was for sure: she couldn’t wait to get back to her radio tonight. Maybe she could even buy a nicer one with her wages – Zaheer hadn’t told her what she was supposed to do with those.

But in the meantime, she supposed she’d have to go and earn those wages.

Korra heaved a great, heavy sigh, and continued the trudge to work.

There were four factories in all, spread across Republic City’s industrial district. Interspersed between them were a large number of spacious warehouses, loading and unloading areas, and administrative offices. Despite the earliness of the hour, trucks and forklifts were zipping all around her with great speed.

It was all more than a little daunting, and it didn’t take very long at all for Korra to find herself
hopelessly lost.

“Err…excuse me? Sir?” she asked of a passing employee, an engineer with a long mustache who was hunched over some paperwork. “Could you tell me where new employees are supposed to go?”

The engineer grunted and hooked his finger over his shoulder, indicating one of the small office buildings. On a second glance, it had a big sign hung over the door with a Water Tribe symbol and the words “New Hire Orientation,” making her feel rather embarrassed.

“Th…Thank you, sir!” she called back as she jogged toward the office. “Sorry about that!”

He just grunted again and continued on his way.

Shrugging, Korra raised her fist and knocked twice on the metal door. A moment later a slightly older woman, who looked to be in her mid-twenties, opened it with a smile.

“Here for orientation?” she said, to which Korra nodded. “Alright, come join in. We only just got started.”

There were about a dozen other waterbenders already in the room, most of them her age, both men and women. All of their clothes and hair were dressed in the Northern tradition, apart from one girl who’d shaved her head completely.

Korra’s own clothing was a reasonable facsimile, courtesy of supplies from her uncle. According to the Lotus attendants who’d helped pack her things, they were actually hand-me-downs from her cousin Eska, whom she’d never met.

Her hair, meanwhile, had been cut short in a bob. She normally wore it long, sometimes tied up in an ostrich-horse tail and sometimes not – but in addition to strengthening her disguise, she’d reasoned that shorter hair was probably a good idea when working around heavy machinery.

In any event, no one seemed to find her presence unusual, though a couple seemed to briefly glare at her for coming late.

“Alright, then…looks like there’s only one name on the list still unaccounted for,” stated the instructor, now consulting a hefty scroll. “Are you…Mizore?”

“Yes, that’s me,” Korra replied, swallowing deeply. It was the first time she’d had to respond to her chosen alias. “I apologize for my tardiness. It won’t happen again.”

“Ah, that’s alright. Most people get lost on their first day. I wound up getting to my orientation about three hours after it started,” said the older woman. “My name’s Miki, and I’ve been with Future Industries for just over three years now. I’m here to let you know all the wonderful things about being part of the F-I team.”

Well…supposed to be here for the tournament, I guess.”

It was impossible to miss the twinge of bitterness in her voice.
“You girls got conned,” the young man declared confidently. “I was there in the audience. The Wolfbats fouled at least four times without getting called! Hosing, an out-of-zone disc, off-sides twice…”

“Yes, well…nothing that can be done about that now,” said Miki, though her fists momentarily clenched. “In any event, I guess I can take solace in the fact that, unlike those glory goat-hounds, I have a great day job to fall back on. So let’s stay on topic, please?”

“Err, uh…yes, ma’am,” mumbled the man, looking sheepish.

The elder waterbender walked over to the opposite wall and unfurled a large map of the premises.

“You’ll all be working here, in Factory B,” she told them, gesturing to the map. “Though be prepared to go and help out at the others on busy days. Primary duties will be cleaning the machinery and helping process the raw ore.”

“Yeah, I was curious about that,” said the girl with the shaved head. “Don’t all these factories use automated assembly lines?”

“The Future Industries patented assembly line is largely automated, but that doesn’t mean human engineers aren’t important,” responded Miki. “Think of everything in these factories – including yourself and your fellow workers – as one, big machine. Each of you are cogs in that machine. It only works, keeps on moving, if you all work together. So be the cog.”

Korra, who’d been following her up until that last bit, slowly raised her hand. “So we’re just there to keep the machines running smoothly?” she asked.

“Exactly,” Miki confirmed with a nod. “Say the mechanism that moves the conveyor belt gets jammed. If we have someone right there who can fix it immediately, we minimize the amount of lost time. That means more production, and that means more money.”

She punctuated this point with a cute little wink.

The next couple hours were spent on paperwork, information regarding salaries and schedules, and an unintentionally hilarious presentation on workplace safety. Korra had to admit that she largely stopped paying attention after a while. She wasn’t a big fan of sitting still this long.

Eventually, however, Miki packed up her charts and scrolls and strode over to the door. “And now, the part I’m sure you’ve all been waiting for!” she said brightly. “An info session on tax law!”

She waited for a collective groan from the room before giggling to herself and adding, “Just kidding. Guided tour of the factory, people. I’ll show you where you’ll be working, and demonstrate a few of the ways you can use your waterbending to keep things on track.”

The factory was large enough to hold any three of the hideouts she’d grown up in…combined. Everywhere Korra turned, there were machines pumping out Satomobile parts at an alarming speed, as masked engineers hunched over the finished products with wrenches, drills, or tightly controlled firebending.

The sheer amount of motion was quite nearly overwhelming, as was the amount of noise. More than anything else, the prospect of working amongst this cacophony made her think twice about this mission for the first time since receiving it.

“It’s always easy to pick out the newbies. They’re the ones with their hands over their ears,” Miki teased the group, bending out a stream of water from a skin at her hip and using it to gesture.
“Anyway, *this* is the area you’ll be reporting to every day. Miss Sato will be your supervisor.”

“Wait, when you say *Miss Sato*, you mean…?” murmured one of the laborers, his eyes wide as saucers.

Miki smiled and nodded. “The daughter of Hiroshi Sato himself,” she said. “She took a special interest in the Northern Water Tribe labor initiative, and decided to oversee things personally. I’ll be turning things over to her once her schedule clears up a bit.”

“Actually, she *just* freed up her schedule for this,” came a lilting voice from deeper into the factory. A moment later, the speaker – presumably Miss Sato – stepped forward, and waved a hand in greeting.

Nobody else seemed to be surprised by her appearance, though the worker who’d just spoken looked like he was a few seconds away from drooling. But Korra silently gasped.

It was Asami.

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Asami – or Asami *Sato*, more precisely – seemed content to allow Miki to continue leading the tour, though she made herself available for any questions.

Instead, she took up position toward the rear of the group as they walked down the factory floor… not entirely coincidentally, putting herself directly next to Korra.

“I had no idea you worked here!” she whispered. “Sorry again for what happened yesterday. Can’t think of a worse way to introduce yourself to a new employee than running them over in the street.”

“No, uh…really, it’s fine,” said Korra in a quiet voice, not meeting her gaze. She was still trying to process all this. “And don’t worry, I haven’t…err…mentioned it to anyone.”

“I still feel awful,” replied Asami with a sigh. “But now that I know you’re part of the Future Industries family, my offer for dinner goes double. And no excuses, because now I know for a *fact* that you finish work at five, Miss…”

Suddenly, the green-eyed woman flushed. “*Aaaaaaaand* now I just realized I haven’t even asked you your name,” she added, one palm over her face in embarrassment. “Great job, Asami. Way to show you *really* care.”

To her own mild surprise, however, Korra’s gut reaction to this self-chastisement wasn’t annoyance or indignation…but amusement. A strange, inexplicable urge to *laugh* suddenly filled her, and the smallest of chuckles managed to sneak its way out.

“It’s okay. *Really*, it’s okay,” she told the other girl, one hand over her mouth to keep the rest of the tour group from noticing her slipping composure. “Anyway, you can, umm…call me Mizore.”

“Oh! Like the water spirit from *Love Amongst the Dragons*?” asked Asami, her face instantly brightening.

So much for obscurity. Still, she’d prepared a story for this eventuality, just in case.
“My parents were…uh…big fans of the play,” she said, the lie slipping off her tongue more easily than she’d expected it to. Or was it a lie? It wasn’t like she could know for sure one way or the other…

At this, however, an oddly somber expression fell over the other girl. “Yeah…my mom was too,” she murmured. “I remember this one performance she took me to when I was five. It was all in traditional Sun Warrior garb. I dunno whose idea that was, but it made everything so…so…”

“Unique?” guessed Korra.

“That too. But I was gonna say, it made it feel so right,” said Asami, her face growing increasingly downcast. “Not that I thought that at the time, of course. I mean, I was five. I was fidgeting in my seat and begging to leave the whole time.”

“Hey, you were a kid,” the Avatar responded with a shrug. “I’m sure she understood.”

“She did. But I still feel terrible about it,” Asami stated quietly. “That was the last play we ever went to see together. I wish I could’ve shared it with her more. I wish…I’d been a better daughter.”

Korra had no idea what to say here, and so she didn’t. She didn’t even know what she wanted to hear in moments like this – moments when she missed her parents so much it was like a sword stabbing her directly in the heart – much less someone she’d just barely met.

Asami, however, shook the slight dampness from her eyes and chuckled a bit, very softly. “Look at me, going off on a near-stranger about my personal problems,” she said in a small voice. “You should be learning about your job, not listening to me ramble on about my mom.”

The Avatar’s eyes darted to the front of the group, where Miki was rather impatiently explaining that, no, employees are not allowed to take home “free samples” from the assembly line.

“I…think I can survive missing this part,” she remarked, scratching the back of her head as she grinned bashfully.

“Well, anyway…” muttered Asami, her eyes turned forward as well now as they walked side-by-side. “Is that a yes or a no on the dinner? I don’t want it to feel like I’m pressuring you, or anything. I just…I really want to make it up to you. You seem like a really nice person, and I don’t want us to start off on the wrong foot.”

Korra found herself blushing slightly, distinctly uncomfortable with the compliment. Mostly because it was entirely untrue.

She knew she probably shouldn’t have, but she couldn’t resist asking, “What makes you think that? That I’m…nice?”

“I’m not sure. But with you, I can…can just tell, y’know?” said Asami. “I almost feel like I’ve met you before. Even though I know I haven’t. It’s hard to explain.”

Nevertheless, Korra found herself shivering slightly, because the other girl had just described exactly what she was feeling right now as well.

Still, she willed herself to think of this practically, casting all other thoughts and emotions away to the wind – just as Zaheer had always taught her to do.

Her number-one goal here, for the moment, was to learn more about Hiroshi Sato, so as to determine if the rumors of his being an Equalist were accurate. The opportunity for some private time with his
closest blood relative was too good to pass up.

Possibly...too too good to pass up?

The familiar chill of suspicion ran up her spine, and unlike with the pirate the other day, she couldn’t exactly dismiss this paranoia out of hand.

There was something suspiciously convenient about how the whole affair had unfolded. That the first person she (literally) ran into in the city, just happened to also be her boss? That within a few minutes of meeting, she’d invited Korra to a private location where they could be alone together? That she’d picked up on the origin of Korra’s alias immediately, and smoothly parleyed the conversation into a topic that invited her to share further?

No matter what kinds of weird, irrational, completely nonsensical feelings her heart was pumping out, Korra couldn’t deny the very real possibility that she was talking to a spy right now. For the White Lotus, the Equalists, the police, or someone else, she couldn’t be certain.

But there was only one way to know for sure.

“Alright,” Korra said with a nod, trying not to let her smiling face betray the thoughts swirling beneath it. “I guess I’m in.”

[S------------------------]

“Soongoooo...is this the place?” asked Bolin, glancing back and forth between the building they were approaching and the backside of a badly crumpled yuan.

Mako slapped himself on the forehead and sighed, for perhaps the thirtieth time that day. “For the last time, bro...yes, this is the place,” he said. “There’s only one City Hall, there’s nothing to mix it up with.”

“It just feels...weird, y’know?” added the young earthbender, his eyes wide in awe at the elaborate architecture. “I mean, just a couple years ago, if we were in a place like this it’d proooobably be because we were gonna rob it. Now, look at us! Invited guests! Well...sorta invited. They wanted us here, that’s the important thing.”

“Let’s just focus on why we’re here, Bolin,” Mako responded, his expression not nearly as impressed. “We get in, we hear what Tarrlok wants, we get out. Keep it simple.”

“What do you think he wants?” Bolin asked, though he was only half-listening for an answer. The rest of his focus was centered upon a massive golden statue of an unagi, with glittering jewels for eyes.

“I dunno, bro,” the firebender stated honestly. “But I guess we’re about to find out.”

The hallways of City Hall were nearly deserted at this hour, save the occasional janitor. Mako was surprised not to run into any security guards, and he wondered idly if Tarrlok had dismissed them for the night.

Whatever the councilman wanted to discuss, he clearly wasn’t trying to advertise it around.
Eventually, after getting lost at least three separate times, the two brothers managed to find the hall containing the councilmembers’ offices. A single desk was placed between the ornate doors, each decorated with the symbols of one of the Four Nations, and sitting at it was the page they’d spoken to the previous night.

It took a moment for the man to notice them, hunched over several precariously balanced mountains of paperwork, but as soon as he looked up he smiled and waved cheerily.

“Councilman Tarrlok is waiting for you in his office. Please, go on in,” he said, gesturing to one of the doors labeled with the rolling waves of the Water Tribe. Mako couldn’t help but notice it was significantly nicer than the one directly next to it, which presumably represented the South.

Without preamble, Mako and Bolin opened the door.

Tarrlok’s office was larger than many of Republic City’s best apartments, and decorated ostentatiously. On the opposite wall, a number of large glass windows displayed the clear night sky, while directly behind the councilman’s desk something like a waterfall was continuously cascading down the carved stone.

The chairman of the United Republic Council did not, to Mako’s initial judgment, appear to be a very powerful or intimidating man. His frame was lank, and his face was somewhat gaunt, as if he hadn’t been eating or sleeping enough lately. His hair was intricately braided, and his clothes were the height of Northern fashion, but it was immediately clear he hadn’t been maintaining either very well these days.

“Hello, young men,” Tarrlok spoke quietly, his voice the silky, practiced cadence of a politician. “Take a seat, if you would.”

Bolin looked to his brother, who nodded slightly, and the two of them did as they were asked.

“Have you boys been doing well?” asked the councilman, with all the air of someone who didn’t actually care about the answer. “I trust you’re pleased you’ll be able to compete in the tournament after all.”

“I’d prefer if we’d gotten in fair and square,” said Mako bluntly. “But thanks, I guess. Still not sure why you stuck yourself out for a couple of nobodies, though.”

“You’re selling yourselves short,” replied Tarrlok with a dismissive wave of the hand. “Surely you must realize what your pro-bending success means for the people of the United Republic. Our nation is in turmoil, and it needs its heroes. The story of a couple vagabond street spider-rats, picking themselves out of the gutter and competing for the gold… it’s a powerful one, and one I couldn’t bear to see end prematurely.”

“What do you mean by ‘nation is in turmoil’?” Bolin piped up. “Is something going on?”

“A perceptive young man, indeed. But then, that’s why I wanted to speak with you both,” answered the waterbender. Then, abruptly, his eyes narrowed, and his face darkened significantly. “Are you two familiar with a group calling themselves the Equalists?”

“Err… I think I’ve heard the name around before,” said Mako. “There’s some guy in Republic City Park who keeps raving about them, throwing flyers around. I never paid it much attention.”

“Oh, they’d like us to believe their activities are limited to handing out flyers,” Tarrlok murmured, his tones biting. “The truth is, the Equalists are building an army – one that could one day be strong enough to take down the United Republic. They despise all benders, and consider bending the
source of every problem in the world.”

He tipped his hand to them, before continuing, “Surely, as two men who make their livelihoods through bending, you must realize the grave threat they pose. Every day, more and more of our city’s non-benders are seduced by their propaganda, turned against their nation. And the rest of the Council refuses to even acknowledge they exist.”

“How do you know all this about them?” Mako asked shrewdly.

“I make it my business to pay attention to what’s going on in the streets, unlike some I could mention,” responded Tarrlok. He directed a glare at the door, and the other offices that lay beyond it. “But my ability to find out more, and to strike at the heart of their secret operations, is limited by my station.”

He placed his fingertips together, and rested his chin atop them, staring at the brothers coldly. “That’s where you two come in,” added the chairman.

Bolin blinked a couple of times. “Umm…I’m not sure exactly what you…err, sir?” he managed to stammer out.

“Let’s not be coy, boys. I know you used to run…errands…for the Triple Threat Triad,” said Tarrlok. “Don’t worry, I haven’t shared this with our esteemed Chief of Police…but it didn’t take a lot of digging, either. It’d be a shame if that information found itself on her desk – say, right on the day you’re due to take part in the tournament.”

“You’ve made your point,” snapped Mako, one hand protectively leaping to his brother’s shoulder out of instinct. “What is it that you want?”

“My sources indicate that various triad members have been slowly disappearing over the last couple weeks,” Tarrlok explained in a low voice. “I think the Equalists are targeting bending criminals as the first step of their agenda. I’d like to see if we can head them off, before they expand their attacks to the greater population.”

“And we come in because…” Mako demanded.

“Because the leaders of the Triple Threats, the Red Monsoon, the Agni Kais, and the Terras have called a summit, to figure out how to deal with the Equalist threat,” the waterbender went on, narrowing his eyes at being interrupted. “I need eyes and ears at that meeting, and they can’t be someone traceable to my office. Offer to hire on as extra muscle for your old gang, they’re all going to be desperate for it.”

“I dunno. This plan seems…kinda risky…” said Bolin, scratching his head nervously.

“Oh, there’s no doubt that it is. But I wouldn’t have approached you if I didn’t think the two of you could handle it,” Tarrlok told them, in a tone Mako was certain he thought was reassuring. Instead, it just gave him the creeps.

“So, is that the deal, then?” asked the firebender. “You blackmail us, and we do your dirty work for this summit gig?”

“I’d rather you not put it in such…ugly terms,” answered Tarrlok, a small smile spreading over his face nonetheless. “I see it as more of a ‘you scratch my back, I scratch yours’ sort of thing. I’ve already helped you out quite a bit, I think, by ensuring your spot in the tournament, but I can certainly do more.”
“For example?” said Mako.

“Well, were you aware that the buy-in for the tournament is thirty-thousand yuans?” Tarrlok asked, his smile expanding into a full-on smirk. “It doesn’t matter if you aced the qualifying rounds; if you can’t cough up the ante, you aren’t competing. And given your current...financial difficulties, I doubt you have that much lying around. Do this little job for me, and I’d be happy to cover the fee.”

Bolin, who’d clapped his hands over his mouth at the mention of thirty-thousand yuans – more money than they’d ever seen in their lives, or at least since the deaths of their parents – glanced over to his brother, his eyes questioning and pleading.

Mako knew the earthbender would defer to whatever he decided.

There was a lengthy, protracted silence. Finally, however, Mako sighed deeply and muttered, “Alright, fine. We’ve got a deal...on one more condition.”

Tarrlok slowly raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” he replied.

“Hasook’s gone, and probably never coming back. We need a new waterbender,” said Mako. “We’ll try our hardest to find a replacement ourselves, but if we can’t…”

The councilman held up a hand to stop him.

“Easily granted. I know a number of young, talented candidates,” he declared, consulting a sheaf of documents on his desk. “In fact...my patron, Chief Unalaq, just exported a new shipment of waterbenders for a temporary labor program with Future Industries. Surely one of them is interested a little fame and fortune.”

“Well, err...alright, then...” the firebender stated uncertainly. He’d been expecting to have to fight for that one a little more. “In that case, I guess...we’re good?”

“We are indeed,” said Tarrlok, rising to his feet and extending his hand. “The summit will be in three days’ time, so you have that long to get back in Lightning Bolt Zolt’s good graces. I’ll expect a full report from you the following evening.”

“Understood, sir,” Mako responded, accepting the handshake. He still didn’t exactly trust Tarrlok, but on the subject of the Equalists he was fairly certain the councilman’s feelings were sincere. “We won’t let you down.”

After Bolin had shook Tarrlok’s hand as well, rather more vigorously, and the two were heading out the door, the young earthbender leaned over to his brother and whispered, “Well, that went pretty good, didn’t it? We get a chance to play in the tournament, money, and a new teammate! And all we gotta do is play super-spies for a night!”

“It probably won’t be that simple, Bolin. But yeah...I guess that did turn out alright,” said Mako, smiling slightly in spite of himself. The more he thought about this, the more he definitely felt like that they’d come out ahead on this one.

His mood was improving so quickly that, when they passed the page’s desk in the hall, he stopped to offer the older man a grin and a thumb’s up.

“Thanks for everything you did for us,” he told the page. “I know Tarrlok wouldn’t have even gotten involved if not for you.”

“Oh, it was no trouble at all, sir!” exclaimed the small man. “Although, err...as long as you’re
He flushed a bit, and held out a promotional leaflet from the bending arena, along with his pen. It was an ad featuring the Fire Ferrets striking a dynamic pose.

Mako instantly understood, and didn’t hesitate to sign the picture with a flourish. As he handed it to his brother to add his autograph, he asked the older man, “Do you want me to personalize it? I feel bad for not asking your name until now.”

“Think nothing of it, sir! I’m not really very important,” the page said brightly. “But if you insist, sir, you can sign it to ‘Jilu.’ That’s my name.”
As Asami had indicated, the waterbenders finished work promptly at five o’clock. Not that she’d really done much actual work her first day, but still.

After the tour, they’d spent the last couple hours of the day learning the basics of their day-to-day tasks, including cleaning the machines and clearing jams. Miki was a patient teacher, and Asami seemed happy to defer to her knowledge on the subject, despite technically outranking her.

Since agreeing to her dinner request, Korra had kept her distance from the other girl, not trusting herself to avoid blurting out something stupid. If Asami was some kind of secret spy, the last thing the Avatar wanted to do was let her know she was onto her.

But now a steam-billowing whistle and the setting sun were letting them know that it was time to pack up and go home, and the number of other people in the immediate area was beginning to dwindle.

Korra hoped silently, for a moment, that the end of the workday might mean Asami would have to go attend to another part of the factory, but those hopes were dashed just as quickly as the green-eyed beauty strode over to meet her.

“You did a good job out there today, Mizore,” she said with a smile.

“What, me?” asked Korra, swallowing nervously. “I, err…well, I didn’t really do anything. Uh…did I?”

“You paid attention, and clearly understood what Miki was saying. So you’re ahead of Chun Cai, at least,” replied Asami, gesturing at the back of one of the departing workers. Korra noted that he was the one whose tongue had nearly fallen out of his mouth when he’d first seen “Miss Sato.”

The other girl shook her head and sighed. “I don’t know why Chief Unalaq picked that idiot for the program, but I guess I’ve gotta just grin and bear him for the first couple weeks,” she added, before a smile spread across her face again. “After that, I get to start firing people. My dad called it an early birthday present.”

Korra couldn’t help but laugh a little.

“Anyway, we’ve still got almost three hours to the dinner reservation, but we could…err…hang out, for a bit?” said Asami, somewhat awkwardly. “Hope I used that right. I haven’t exactly had a lot of people to ‘hang with’ most of my life.”

“Believe me, I am the wrong person to ask,” Korra responded, shrugging her shoulders. “But I, err…guess I don’t have anything better to do?”

This last part was framed as a question, though Korra wasn’t entirely sure what answer she was expecting. It was more that her brain was now, for some reason, turning into something that heavily resembled mush.

“Great! It’ll give us more time to chat,” Asami exclaimed cheerfully. “Just hold on one second – I want to tell my dad where we’re going. He worries if I don’t.”

“Wait, Hiroshi Sato was here today?” asked Korra, letting more of her shock into her voice than she’d have liked to. “I figured he’d be, I dunno…in some big fancy office building miles away.”
“Well, you’re half right,” said Asami with a chuckle. “Dad’s working from home today. I was just gonna call him with the phone in my office. Wait up for me, I’ll only be a couple minutes!”

The black-haired girl was off without another word, leaving Korra alone, standing awkwardly by an unmoving conveyor belt.

She only had a few seconds to begin wondering what she should do in the meantime, before her thoughts were rudely interrupted by the light slap of a water-whip to her face. Korra’s mind immediately jumped to Ming-Hua, for whom that was the preferred method of getting her attention (the “light” part was optional), but when she turned it was Miki’s grinning face she saw.

“Nice work so far, rookie. Happy to see not everyone coming out of the North these days is an over-pampered princess,” she told Korra, patting her on the shoulder for good measure. “And getting in close with the boss, smart tactic. Really easy to backfire, but for now, smart.”

Korra’s face turned bright pink. She was a bit naïve regarding this sort of thing, yes, but even she couldn’t miss out on what the older waterbender was implying.

“It’s nothing like that!” she protested in a hoarse whisper. “I’m just…umm…well…”

“Hey, tell yourself whatever you like. But this is an area I know a thing or two about,” said Miki. “Oh, and speaking of which…”

She’d turned her head to the open end of the factory, where another person was approaching at a casual gait. Korra had just enough time to recognize Sakura, earthbender for the Badgermoles, before the two women pulled each other close into a passionate kiss.

Korra’s blush deepened about a dozen shades. While she knew these sorts of relationships weren’t all that uncommon – Ming-Hua, for example, spoke of ex-boyfriends and ex-girlfriends with equal disdain – she’d never actually seen two people of the same sex doing…that, before.

“Akemi’s getting seriously up on my case,” the earthbender grumbled as they parted, just loud enough that Korra could overhear. “Thinks if I’d stayed on the offensive instead of rushing to defend you, we might’ve won last night.”

“To be fair, she’s probably right about that,” whispered Miki, though she was giggling.

“Hey, she can shove a sock in it,” said Sakura, waving her hand dismissively. “If her girlfriend was in the arena, I guarantee she wouldn’t leave her on her own for a second.”

“Kaname isn’t even a bender,” Miki pointed out.

“ Doesn’t mean I’m wrong,” Sakura replied, sticking out her tongue. “Anyway, who’s the chick staring at us?”

The earthbender seemed to have just noticed Korra was there, and the Avatar hastily cast her gaze downward as they both turned to her.

“This is Mizore. One of the new Northern employees,” answered Miki. “I’ve been showing her and a dozen others the ropes most of the day.”

“Ah, fresh off the boat. Gotcha,” said Sakura, pulling out an apple seemingly from nowhere and beginning to munch. “How you likin’ Republic City so far, kid? Pretty different from what you’re used to, I bet.”
“It’s…uh…alright. Haven’t really had much time to look around…” mumbled Korra, shuffling around a bit awkwardly.

She was feeling distinctly uncomfortable in the presence of the older women – not because of the kiss itself, exactly, but rather because watching it had caused another image to bubble up unbidden from the back of her brain, and lingering on said image for much longer was an unquestionably bad idea.

Reaching for another topic, she managed to stammer, “I…uh…I saw you guys…err…last night. I mean, not saw, umm…heard, you guys. Y’know…on the…err…the radio? You were really, uh…really…good?”

It would not go down in history as one of her most articulate moments.

The two pro-benders just laughed it off, however. “Glad to hear we’ve got a fan,” said Sakura, grinning cheekily. “Refreshing to meet a chick who isn’t a raging Tahno fangirl.”

Korra must’ve made a face, because the earthbender only proceeded to chuckle harder.

“I’d feel better about the loss if that guy wasn’t such a creep,” remarked Miki, shaking her head and sighing. “You know, he actually tried to proposition Akemi after the match? Talk about barking up the wrong tree.”

“Ooh, did she set fire to his pants?” Sakura asked, leaning forward with curiosity.

“Worse,” was all Miki was willing to reveal, though she added an overly emphatic wink.

“Oh, hi Sakura! Nice to see you again,” called out Asami, causing Korra to jump slightly. She hadn’t noticed her approaching at all. “What’re we talking about?”

“I genuinely have…no idea…” said Korra in a very small voice, burying her face in her hands and groaning.

It was times like this that it was very hard to remember what in the world she was doing in this crazy city.

[--------------------]

Thankfully, Miki and Sakura hadn’t lingered long. With their schedules unexpectedly clear for the next few weeks, the team apparently planned to spend some time taking in the sights.

The last Korra saw of them, they were rushing off in a great hurry – running late for a dinner with Akemi, her girlfriend, and the Badgermoles’ manager, and arguing vociferously over whose fault that was.

“They’re a lot of fun,” stated Asami, smiling fondly as they watched the pair leave. They were now the only two people left in this part of the factory, and Korra was acutely aware of it. “I’m gonna miss them when they return to Ba Sing Se. And it sucks I won’t get to see them in any more matches.”

She turned to Korra, her expression bright, and added, “Do you follow pro-bending at all, Mizore?”
“Err…kinda?” said Korra, shrugging her shoulders. “I mean, not until last night. Their match with the Wolfbats was actually my first one ever. Caught it on the radio, pretty much by accident. But…”

She couldn’t help but feel a big, goofy smile creep across her face. “I loved it,” she finished, meaning every word.

“Wow, it’s gotta be weird to take in your first game over the radio. You need to tell me what that was like,” responded Asami, returning the smile. “Come on, we can keep chatting while we walk. My car’s parked right outside. No sense in taking the trolley if we’re going there together, right?”

And chat they did, much more easily than Korra had been expecting. The subject of pro-bending carried them all the way to the car, and then some.

Korra was a little apprehensive about getting into a strange vehicle with Asami, alone, but ultimately dismissed the thought. If this was a trap, the other woman was unlikely to spring it while she was driving.

The Avatar had never actually driven a car before, though Ghazan had offered to teach her how on her sixteenth birthday. Unfortunately, the truck he’d meant to use had been parked dangerously close to her combustionbending lessons with P’Li, and…

Well, at that point, the story sort of wrote itself.

In any event, despite her own inexperience, it was immediately obvious that Asami was highly talented behind the wheel. She handled the Satomobile – itself easily the fanciest and sleekest one Korra had ever laid eyes on – with casual precision, taking turns smoothly and keeping her speed constant.

Mind, that speed was about double that of the other cars they were passing, but it was constant.

“Hope you don’t mind all my flagrant disregard for traffic laws,” said Asami after a little while, as they careened down a main street at a pace where any less-skilled driver would’ve surely lost control. “Sometimes I forget this city isn’t one big racetrack.”

“You race cars?” asked Korra, surprised. Though maybe she shouldn’t have been, considering the last few minutes.

“I was probably the first person to drive a racecar. Or at least pretty darn close,” Asami answered with a chuckle. “My dad lets me test a lot of his new prototypes. Probably because he knows if he didn’t, I’d just sneak out and jump behind the wheel anyway.”

“You must be so lucky,” Korra murmured quietly, momentarily forgetting to watch her words. “He obviously cares about you a lot.”

Asami looked somewhat sad at this, but ultimately a smile – albeit a much smaller one – returned to her face, and she nodded.

“I guess you’re right about that,” she said, her eyes on the road. “After my mom died, my dad could’ve shut me out, given up on life. I’ve seen that happen to people. But…he didn’t. It only made him more driven. He’s invented more in the last ten years than most people could in fifty.”

“I’ll admit, he sounds pretty amazing,” replied Korra. An enemy, perhaps, she noted mentally. But clearly a good father, if nothing else.
“Would you like to meet him?” Asami asked, causing Korra’s breath to briefly catch in her throat. She’d been hoping, dimly, to steer this conversation in that direction at some point, but hearing it so soon caught her off-guard.

Swallowing, and hoping Asami didn’t notice that she did, Korra decided to give a safe answer. “That sounds…pretty awesome, really,” she said. “But honestly, it makes me pretty nervous too. I mean, he’s my boss. My, uh…boss-boss.”

“Ah, don’t worry. He’s really a sweetheart underneath all the fancy suits,” Asami assured her. “And I’m sure he’d love to meet you. I was the one really pushing for the Water Tribe Labor Initiative, I’d get a real kick out of showing him how well it turned out.”

“Huh. So that was your idea?” asked the Avatar, her lips pursed. That was potentially relevant info.

“Dad and I met with Councilman Tarrlok a couple months ago. He let us know the Tribes were dealing with a surplus of young people without jobs,” she explained. “I wanted to expand the program to include the South, but that didn’t pan out. Y’know…politics.”

She wrinkled her nose at the word, and Korra couldn’t help but chuckle a bit.

“I just feel so bad, you know?” Asami added after a little while. “Twelve years later and they’re still reeling from the Southern Massacre. You’d think their sister tribe would’ve been the ones to help them rebuild, but…err, never mind. I shouldn’t badmouth your home.”

Korra just shook her head slowly, her expression distant; she was barely listening now.

The Southern Massacre…so that’s what the rest of the planet called it. She just knew it as the night her entire world had ended.

And the night a new one had been born from the ashes.

“Ah, looks like we’re here,” said Asami, breaking into her reverie. “Get ready for the best meal of your life.”

[----------------]

“You sure this is a good idea?” asked Bolin, struggling to keep pace with his longer-legged brother. “You know what happened last time we asked Skoochy.”

“Yeah, but this time we have enough money not to skimp on his bribe,” said Mako, trying to sound more sure than he felt. “He felt insulted that we gave him just three yuans. That’s why he gave us that bad tip.”

“Well, I’m just saying. If I made my cash giving people info, I wouldn’t lead any of my clients directly into a pile of hog-monkey manure,” Bolin continued to complain, though he ultimately shrugged his shoulders. “Guess we don’t have a choice, though. Not like Zolt has an office door we can just walk up and knock on.”

“Actually, he does. But just for his day job, not triad business,” Mako corrected his brother in a low voice.
“Huh. Sometimes I forget how close you guys used to be,” replied Bolin, sounding thoughtful. “He taught you firebending, didn’t he?”

His older brother stopped in his tracks, just for a second, before continuing onward. “That was a long time ago,” he murmured, and he left it at that.

Being a homeless runaway, keeping track of Skoochy was usually an exercise in futility. He went wherever he wanted, and disappeared as soon as he got what he came for – which was precisely what made him such a useful source of intel.

But at this time of night, it was a pretty safe bet where he’d be, and it didn’t take them long to spot him giving advice on a good place to eat to a couple tourists at Central City Station.

The couple, naturally, failed to notice their wallets disappearing into his pockets as they departed.

“All people never change, do they?” Mako asked in a carrying voice, as the two brothers strode over to meet him.

A sly grin spread across the street urchin’s face. “And some people change a lot,” he said. “Thanks for last night, by the way. Took a ton of bets on your match, and nobody predicted a forfeit. Cleaned up real good.”

“Well, it’s not like we planned it that way…” responded Bolin, his face falling a bit.

“Hey, you take the angles you get. That’s rule number-one on these streets. Don’t tell me the big fancy pro-benders have forgotten that much,” Skoochy told them with a snicker. “Anyway, what can little ol’ Skoochy do for ya?”

“We heard the triads are getting together about something big,” said Mako. “We need to know who to talk to if we want in.”

“All people never change, do they?” answered the boy, tapping at his chin in mock-thoughtfulness. “But I’m having a bit of trouble with my memory right now…”

Mako sighed and pressed a stack of bills into Skoochy’s waiting palm. Twenty yuans, in all. He made a mental note to bill Tarrlok once this was all done with.

The urchin smiled and tucked the bills into his shirt with a single, swift motion.

“Rumor going around is there’s a turf war coming up, but that’s just the cover story,” he immediately began to whisper. “Truth is, you’re right. Lightning Bolt Zolt wants a truce with the other three triad leaders. Something big’s going down, and he thinks the only way to survive is banding together.”

“We already know that much. And before you ask, no, how isn’t your business,” said Mako in hushed, impatient tones. “Where is it happening?”

Skoochy just turned his head aside and held out his palm again.

Mako gritted his teeth and let out a low growl, but added another ten yuans all the same.

“Talk to Shady Shin. He’s in charge of security for the meeting,” the boy continued, the moment he pocketed the money. “Try the docks around nine in the morning, that’s when he does his protection runs there.”
The firebender frowned, but nodded. “You better not be screwing with us again,” he muttered.

Skoochy took a step back and shrugged his shoulders in mock-offense.

“Hey, you get what you pay for. And you fellahs paid good today,” he said. “Anyway, pleasure doing business with you. But I see some businessmen coming home late from work, and tired eyes are an opportunity I just can’t let slip by. Hope you have a good time with Shin.”

And with that, the street urchin danced away, weaving his way through the crowd of travelers with practiced precision.

It was only a few minutes later, as the two brothers were leaving the station, that Bolin patted down his pockets. “Hey…is my wallet missing?” he asked innocently.

His brother slapped his forehead.

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Kwong’s Cuisine was, to put it mildly, the fanciest restaurant Korra had ever set foot in.

Life on the run didn’t lead to a whole lot of opportunities for fine dining. Most of the time, P’Li had made their meals, or else one of their various attendants. Simple soups or dumplings, maybe a cake if they were lucky.

And on the rare occasions they did eat out, it was usually somewhere on the seedier side of things – a place where you could wear a hooded cloak throughout your meal and no one would blink twice.

Kwong’s, by contrast, was decorated lavishly and expensively, with a trio of live musicians filling the place with a lilting melody. The waiters walked with posture so perfect it was almost off-putting, carrying glasses of sparkling liquid and plates laden with dishes Korra had never even heard of.

It also, as it turned out, had a dress code.

This was, apparently, part of Asami’s promise to “take care of everything else.” As soon as the two of them entered the restaurant, an attendant grabbed Korra by the wrist and yanked her into a side-room, wherein she was promptly measured, fitted, and shoved into a fancy new dress in the space of about ten minutes.

Korra wasn’t really the person to ask for the street value of things – she’d rarely if ever had need to handle money herself before now – but she was pretty sure that buying something like this would cost her entire salary.

For a month.

“Wow,” said Asami, as Korra emerged from the changing room. “You look…amazing.”

The Avatar, for her part, gaped slightly. Asami had clearly also gotten changed, and was now wearing a sleek, scarlet full-body dress that, in Korra’s humble opinion, put the one she was currently wearing to shame.

Which didn’t mean she disagreed with Asami’s judgment. She’d never imagined herself in something like this, but as she looked at their paired reflections in a mirror her cheeks couldn’t help
They looked, for all the world, like they \textit{belonged} here. Together.

“Oh, umm...thanks...” Korra stammered, finally finding her voice again. “Err...you too!”

“This shade of blue really suits you. It brings out your eyes,” muttered Asami, absentmindedly fingering one of her silk sleeves. “Though I guess you might’ve had your fill of blue clothes by this point. Umm...if that’s okay to say.”

If Korra was being honest, she’d have pointed out that she’d grown up mostly donning dull greens and browns, in order to blend in better in the rural Earth Kingdom.

But she hadn’t been honest about anything else so far, so why start now?

“Nah, I like it. It’s...nice,” she said delicately, and that part she really \textit{did} mean. “Though I admit, I could do without the torture devices on my feet. How do you \textit{walk around} in these things?”

Asami giggled, a sound that caused a strange sensation in Korra’s stomach. “Practice, mostly,” she replied. “But feel free to take them off once we get to our table. I won’t tell, promise.”

Even after the delay with Miki and Sakura, the drive here, and all the time spent playing dress-up, they’d still arrived over an hour early for their reservation. For Asami, however, changing the time was apparently as easy as giving them her full name, and in less than a minute they were already being seated.

Deciding not to look a gift ostrich-horse in the mouth, Korra shrugged off her lovely but utterly impractical footwear the first chance she got. If the waiter currently pouring them water noticed, it didn’t cause him to break his poised expression for an instant.

With her feet freed of those wicked, wicked things, Korra proceeded to unfold her menu and begin reading. It took her a few seconds to realize she had no idea what she was looking at.

“Help me out here, please?” she asked of Asami, giving an awkward little grin.

Asami returned the smile and pointed at a particular item near the top of the list. “If you’ve never tried it before, the elephant koi here is to \textit{die} for,” she said. “Or you could go for the sea slug, if you want something a little spicier.”

“The...err...elephant koi sounds fine,” Korra responded, shifting a bit in her almost ridiculously comfortable seat.

She’d been expecting individual chairs, but the tables here all appeared to be far more...\textit{intimate} in design. So she and Asami were currently sharing a single seat, wrapped around half of the small, circular table.

That seat also just happened to be shaped like a heart.

“Make that two, please!” Asami called out to the waiter, who’d been standing by patiently awaiting their order. There were so few customers tonight that it seemed each server was covering a single table.

The well-dressed man nodded, leaving Korra and Asami alone once more.

“So, Mizore,” said the other girl after a little while, leaning toward her slightly. “Tell me a bit more
about yourself. How’d you wind up deciding to join the labor program?”

“There’s, umm…not really much to tell,” Korra answered, a bit of sweat running down the back of her neck. Five minutes into dinner and she already had her back to the wall. “My parents…I lost them when I was really young. I barely remember them at all. Some…friends…took me in for a while, but they weren’t the types to find me a good, stable job. That’s why I volunteered.”

Covers worked best when they were just a shade away from the truth; Zaheer had taught her that. In that way, they became a lot harder to piece apart – and a lot easier to recite on the fly.

Technically, nothing she’d just said was a lie, apart from the implication that she’d grown up in the North. But even then, it was just that: an implication. Not her fault if Asami drew the wrong conclusions from her deliberately vague words.

Rationalization was fun.

“I’m so sorry,” whispered Asami, her head hung. “Like I said, it was hard enough just dealing with my mom’s death. I can’t imagine how I would’ve coped with losing my dad, too.”

“My friends helped a lot,” said Korra, choosing her words carefully. “They’re all older than me, so they sort of…raised me? They weren’t exactly parents, but they were the closest thing I’ve had in a long time. I dunno what I would’ve done without them.”

That, at least, was one-hundred-percent true.

“That’s good, at least,” Asami murmured, a strangely distant look in her eye. “I’ve never really had friends that close. Work friends, sure, but nobody I’ve ever been able to sit down and share things with. Maybe it’s the wealth, or the Sato name. I think it intimidates people.”

“It’s certainly, err…a lot to take in,” Korra replied, looking at their ostentatious surroundings rather than at the other girl as she did. “But you, umm…seem cool. Nothing like what I expected someone who eats at places like this to be.”

Asami smiled. “That’s the impression most people have of me at first. Even at the company,” she said. “But I’m not all fancy perfumes and pretty dresses. I can take care of myself. My dad’s had me in self-defense classes since I was six. I may not be a bender, but I can definitely hold my own.”

Another useful detail, although not unexpected. If Hiroshi was really an Equalist, it was doubtful that he or his closest relative would be benders themselves.

“Maybe we should spar some time,” suggested Korra; the sentence was out of her mouth before she’d really thought about it. There were a number of ways that could go seriously wrong, and yet she also couldn’t deny it sounded like a ton of fun.

The non-bender seemed to be thinking along the same lines, as the smile upon her face widened. “I’d like that,” she declared. “You’d probably wipe the floor with me, with muscles like that, but it sounds like fun.”

Korra found herself flushing again. She didn’t usually give a lot of thought to her physique – one which matched the lifetime of training she’d received in order to master the elements. She knew it wasn’t exactly the typical feminine ideal, though.

A thought only underscored by the fact that, right now, she was sitting beside what basically was that ideal.
“Err…if that came off as insulting, I apologize. I didn’t mean it that way at all,” said Asami, frowning at her reddened cheeks. “I actually think it’s really cool. You’ve obviously put a lot of work into your body, and it shows. I dunno how many people have ever told you this, but you’re really beautiful.”

That only deepened the heat in her face, to the point where a bead of sweat ran down from her brow.

“Literally no one has ever said that to me,” she couldn’t help but admit, looking askance. “But, err… thanks.”

Asami looked like she was about to say something else, but the two of them were interrupted in that moment by the arrival of dinner.

It did, indeed, turn out to be a strong contender for best meal of her life. The elephant koi was seared, spiced, and marinated to perfection, and the soft, flakey fish pretty much literally melted in her mouth. She couldn’t help but notice the portion sizes were remarkably small for something called “elephant koi,” but other than that she couldn’t find a single thing to complain about.

“How about this weekend?” Korra asked the other girl, as they shared a dessert Asami had also ordered. She wasn’t even entirely sure what it was, but it was good.

“More or less. We have a private chef at our mansion,” answered the non-bender, sounding almost as if she was embarrassed to admit it. “Oh! You should come by sometime! We have a swimming pool, a couple gyms…you could even try out a few rounds on the racetrack, if you wanted.”

“That sounds, err…really nice,” said Korra, tugging nervously on her hair. It was a lot harder now that she’d cut it short. “But you don’t need to feel like you gotta keep paying me back. This is… plenty.”

She gestured at the food they were finishing off, and then at the shining décor all around them.

“This has nothing to do with the accident,” Asami murmured in reply, one hand inching to the side to touch Korra’s, just for a second. Still, it was enough to return her blush in full force. “I just want to spend some more time with you. I think you’re a really great person, Mizore.”

“Umm…alright…then…” the Avatar managed to choke out; her throat was suddenly very dry.

“How about this weekend?” asked Asami. “I know you’re probably busy a lot right now – moving into a new city, starting a new job – but if you find some spare time…”

“Yeah…okay,” said Korra, a smile unconsciously beginning to form across her face. “Yeah, that sounds like a lot of fun. And maybe I can meet your dad then?”

“If we can’t find time during the work week, sure,” Asami responded with a nod. “He’ll love you, I’m certain of it.”

They were finished with their dessert at this point, so Asami waved over their waiter one more time and paid their bill, pulling out a fat stack of yuans from her purse like it was nothing. The tip she left was nothing to sneeze at, either.

As they got up to leave, however, another attendant moved in front of them. “Pardon me, Miss Mizore, but I believe you dropped something in the changing room,” he said. “If you would please follow me?”

Korra hadn’t the slightest idea what he was talking about, but before she could manage to say so, the
man pulled back his jacket slightly. There, on his lapel, was a pin shaped like a Pai Sho piece.

The White Lotus tile…but with the petals tinged crimson instead.

Just barely managing to keep herself from gaping, Korra turned to her companion and told her, “You should go on ahead without me. This might take a while.”

“Are you sure?” asked Asami, looking concerned. “I mean, I’m your ride.”

“Nah, that’s fine. I live pretty close to here,” Korra lied. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow?”

Asami still seemed uncertain, but ultimately nodded. “Have a good night, Mizore,” she said, placing one hand on Korra’s bare shoulder as she did. The hand lingered for just half a second longer than Korra expected it to. “I had a great time with you tonight.”

“Me too,” Korra stated quietly, and with that the non-bender turned away, her perfectly styled hair swaying behind her as she departed the restaurant.

The attendant beckoned Korra back into a side-room, and as soon as the two of them were completely alone, sank into a low bow.

“It is an honor to serve you, Avatar,” he spoke in hushed tones.

“As it is an honor to serve the Lotus,” she gave the response that’d been drilled into her from childhood. “What’s going on?”

“A camp has been established near the Su Oku River, in anticipation of Master Zaheer’s arrival,” he said. “Several members in the city are leaving tomorrow morning to provide them with staff and support, myself included. Are there any updates or messages you wish me to convey?”

Korra placed a finger to her chin. While there was much she suspected right now, there was very little she knew.

Eventually, however, she replied, “Just tell them I’m secure in my cover, and investigating the Sato lead now. I’ll find out what we need to know, and I will get to Amon. That’s a promise.”

“Well understood, Avatar,” the attendant whispered. “Now, there is one other thing…”

He handed her a scroll.

“We were going to arrange delivery of this to your apartment, but fortune has smiled on us this evening,” he continued. “It contains personal details regarding Nei Jian, a mole we’d placed within the ranks of the Equalists. He stopped reporting in a week ago. Jilu believes he might’ve been compromised.”

“Jilu…he’s the head of operations here?” asked Korra, recognizing the name from her conversations with Zaheer.

The attendant nodded. “He is the senior-most member of the Red Lotus in the entire United Republic,” he said. “His own cover makes it difficult for him to reach you directly, but he’s very concerned about Nei Jian. And truthfully…so am I.”

Korra gave the man a curious look, waiting to see if he’d explain further, until finally he added in a very low voice, “He is my little brother.”

“I’m so sorry…” was all Korra could think to say, but he waved her off.
“Do not do this for his sake, or mine. In the grand scheme of things, we are of little importance,” he went on. “The mission comes first, always. But…if you happen to have a chance…”

She clasped the arm of this man she didn’t know, and in all likelihood, would never see again. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll keep an eye out for your brother. But I won’t forget my priorities, either.”

“Thank you,” he muttered, bowing again. “It is good to finally have an Avatar who serves all the people. Even the ones who do not matter.”

He left her alone with those words, and with those thoughts.

[-----------------------]

Meanwhile, elsewhere in the city, its Chief of Police sat hunched over a massive stack of paperwork. Lin Beifong was not having a good night.

The bending triads were becoming increasingly active these days – more aggressive in their pushes for territory, less patient in their demands for protection money from the shops and restaurants.

Her cop’s intuition told her these weren’t acts of confidence, though; they’d stepped things up too hard and too fast for that to be the case. These were acts of desperation.

*Something* had them spooked.

Not for the first time that night, Lin pushed aside the disorganized mess of beat reports, court orders, and new hire applications and picked up a weathered, crumpled flyer.

What Tarrlok had spent the past couple weeks railing on about during Council meetings was beginning to sound less and less crazy.

On the face of it, of course, it sounded absurd. Masked chi-blockers leaping around and abducting people in the night? An entire, homegrown insurgency not only capable of doing without, but indeed set in direct *opposition* to, bending itself?

But if she considered *that* as the missing piece, then everything fell neatly into place. No one had more to lose from an anti-bending revolution than the criminals who’d used their bending to harass and oppress for *decades*. They’d be the first ones targeted, for sure.

Still, even if that *was* the case – if these “Equalists” truly *were* as big a threat as the chairman claimed – then that still begged the obvious question.

What was she supposed to *do* about it?

A knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” said Lin, in a tone sure to make whoever it was think twice about the idea.

“I see you’re burning the candle at both ends again, Chief,” remarked the deep voice of Captain Saikhan as he cautiously stepped in.
Lin’s expression softened slightly…with the emphasis on *slightly*. She didn’t enjoy being interrupted in her office under *any* circumstance, but if it *had* to happen, there were worse candidates than her best student and hand-picked lieutenant.

“What’s going on, Captain?” she asked of him. “You know I hate small talk. Especially at this time of night.”

“My apologies, Chief. But there’s someone here to see you,” he replied. “He, err…was quite insistent about it.”

Lin let out a long, frustrated sigh. “Oh, alright,” she told him, her armor clinking slightly as she got to her feet. She doubted any other police chief on the planet did paperwork in full-body armor, but then, most chiefs weren’t *her*. “It’s not like I’m getting much work done right now, anyway.”

Her guest was waiting for her in the adjacent room, eyes closed and hands folded. She’d almost have believed he was asleep, except that before she could take more than a single step toward him, he said, “Hello, Miss Beifong.”

“Chief,” she corrected automatically, narrowing her eyes at the man.

He wore glasses and a short beard, though the rest of his hair had mostly receded. His clothing was Earth Kingdom custom, long and flowing robes of green, with some sort of metal ornamentation hanging over the shoulders. His feet, however, were bare.

“Of course. I hope you’ll forgive me for lapsing into habit,” he responded, finally opening his eyes. He didn’t appear to be blind – or at least, he lacked the faded cataracts of Lin’s mother. Which left only one likely explanation.

“Who *are* you, exactly?” she demanded of the visitor.

The man took a moment’s pause, as if mulling over the question. Finally, however, he said, “My name is Aiwei. And I am here on behalf of your sister.”

[--------------------]

By the time that Korra left Kwong’s Cuisine, Mako and Bolin returned home to the pro-bending arena, and Lin Beifong sat down for a conference with her mysterious visitor, most of the rest of Republic City was fast asleep.

But in one part of the city, a broken-down factory that’d been abandoned for years, numerous citizens packed the hall from wall to wall, each of them wide-awake and waiting anxiously.

A makeshift stage had been prepared at one side of the room, with spotlights positioned to give as much emphasis as possible to its center. At the moment, no one stood atop the stage, though massive signs and banners flanked it on either side.

Finally, as the audience was just beginning to edge toward dangerous levels of excitement and impatience, a platform slowly rose from below the stage, bringing half a dozen masked men into view.
The crowd went wild.

One of the men, the one whose masked face was plastered all across the hall, permitted this for a moment, drinking in the near-religious adulation of his followers. Eventually, however, he raised a single, ungloved hand.

The audience immediately fell into silence.

“Citizens of Republic City,” Amon said into a microphone, his deep baritone reverberating all throughout the former factory. “I know you are all reasonable people. But you do not live in a reasonable world. For ten thousand years, a mere twist of fate has given your fellow man the power to bully, oppress, and end you, with nothing but a flick of the wrist.”

Jeers sounded across the auditorium.

“Think about that, my fellow Equalists,” he continued, now pacing slowly across the stage. “The so-called ‘gift’ of bending does not discriminate based on character, or creed. The wickedest, cruelest individual alive may receive its power, out of nothing more than random chance. Which he will, invariably, use to terrorize all those he sees as beneath him. The great masses not ‘blessed’ with his impurity.”

Amon raised one fist and clenched it in anger, and many in the crowd followed suit.

“When I was just a boy, a firebender came to my home and slaughtered my family,” he told them, reveling in the lie. The lie somehow so much less painful than the truth. “No hesitation. No mercy. He carried the ability to cut down any man or woman that crossed him, from the very day of his birth, and he used it. I learned, then, that the present situation could not stand. That a revolution would be needed!”

The audience members lit up in a great cry of support.

“I have spent the rest of my life honing my mind and body to their peak. Today, I can go toe-to-toe with virtually any bender,” said Amon. “Still, I knew I couldn’t accomplish my goals alone. I would need my armies of chi-blockers, trained specifically to disable and defeat benders of all stripes. I would need you, the common people of the United Republic – the silent majority who have spent too long under the heel of the bending elite! But even that wouldn’t be enough. I would need the aid of one other group.”

He paused here, for dramatic effect. It was incredible, sometimes, how often his most useful weapon was not his bloodbending…but rather, his talent for oration.

“Some claim that bending originally came from the spirits,” he went on after a moment. “I cannot say for certain whether or not that is true. But one thing is clear: they are displeased that humanity has so horribly misused its power. I know this, because I have communed with them! They have assured me that our path is righteous! And…they have gifted me with the ability to fight back!”

Suddenly, the trapdoor opened again, and the platform rose once more. Four men, all bound in heavy ropes and forced to their knees, sat atop it.

“Gaze upon these creatures, my brothers and sisters!” he exclaimed, placing his right palm across the scalp of the nearest one and pulling their head up by the hair, so that the crowd could see their face. “Here, we have members from each of the bending triads – monsters who have used their power to inflict untold horrors upon this city, without a shred of remorse. Now, it is time for them to face justice! Untie the first prisoner.”
That last order was directed at one of the masked Equalists flanking him on the stage, who hastened to obey.

The “prisoner” in question, an older man in a heavy furred coat, sputtered as a cloth gag was removed from his mouth.

“She’s this…?!” he demanded, his head twisted toward Amon. “Do you know who you’re messin’ with, mask-boy?!”

“An arrogant fool, too secure in his impurity to realize his own destruction,” said the bloodbender, assuming a fighting stance as he did. “But if you wish to prove me wrong, then go ahead. Defeat me in single combat, and you may go free.”

The other man, a high-ranking lieutenant in the Red Monsoon, let out a sharp bark of a laugh.

“If you’re that eager to get pounded into the floor, guess I’ll oblige,” he replied, cracking his knuckles and stretching his limbs. “But I warn ya, I learned waterbending from Yakone himself, way back in the day. Some punk too afraid to show his face don’t scare me.”

Noatak couldn’t help himself. He laughed as well, a far more commanding and booming sound. He knew nobody else in the room would realize why, but he also knew none of them would even think to question him about it.

And with that, the fight began.

The Red Monsoon member was painfully obvious in his technique. Even if he hadn’t just been told, he probably would’ve been able to guess at his father’s influence, as the man used the exact same style Noatak had himself been taught with basically zero variation.

For Amon, who’d grown up sparring against a far more talented waterbender in his brother, dodging the man’s attacks was almost literally child’s play. He weaved and bobbed around water-whips and spikes of ice, barely even having to use his bloodbending to throw off the gangster’s predictable stances.

After about half a minute of this, however, Amon grew tired of playing around, and forced the man off-balance with the subtlest application of his power. A moment later, he was in Amon’s iron grip, and the bloodbender was lowering one thumb to the man’s light chakra.

When he’d first learned to do it, the process had taken hours, as his bending ran down the victim’s body to detect all of the active chi paths, isolate their connections to the bloodstream, and summarily cut each and every one of them off.

But after repeating the technique for dozens, hundreds, thousands of benders, it was little more than second-nature now.

The Red Monsoon member fell back to his knees, utterly disoriented. That was a common side-effect.

“What…What the…?” he managed to choke out, instinctively trying to throw a stream of water at Amon to buy himself some distance. But to his horror, and the shock of most of the audience, nothing happened. “What…did you…??!”

“I have cleansed you of your impurity,” said Amon, returning to full height and striding back to the other three captives, the first man already forgotten. “As I shall do, in time, to every last bender on the face of this planet.”
He proceeded, over the next several minutes, to offer up the same deal to the rest of the gangsters in turn. None fared any better. Soon enough, four of the mightiest benders in the city were reduced to pitiful wrecks, allowed to leave in safety only because they were too pathetic to consider punishing any further.

Amon resumed his speech soon afterward, and indeed spoke for nearly half-an-hour more – about all the war, crime, and devastation bending had been responsible for over the centuries, and about all the things they could do to fight back.

Flyers with information on secret locations to practice chi-blocking were distributed. Masks, uniforms, and electrified weapons were given out by the crateful. Those volunteers in positions of power were encouraged to bring any intelligence to Amon’s trusted Lieutenant.

But one person at the back of the hall didn’t stay for that part. As soon as she’d seen the impossible and yet undeniable sight of Amon removing bending, she’d rushed out of there as quickly as she possibly could, without drawing undue attention from the crowd.

The moment she was free of the throngs of cheering non-benders, she let out a deep breath and rested her hands on her knees, just barely able to keep herself from collapsing.

There wasn’t much in this world that could spook her; indeed, there wasn’t much that could make her emote at all. She’d seen it all, and heard it all, in the course of her work.

Or so she’d thought.

She sighed, very deeply, and adjusted her glasses. By the time they were set, her face had returned to its normally impassive, businesslike mask.

Varrick needed to hear about this.
“Pick up the pace, Ming!”

The young waterbender struggled to rebalance the heavy yoke across her shoulders, succeeding only after an immense effort. Sweat matted all across her body, she slowly managed to return to her feet, swearing at the spirits under her breath all the while.

It was, after all, their fault her life was like this. Well, sort of.

The hunt lasted for hours, and yielded only a dozen possum-chickens for all their efforts. Unfortunately, that was hardly unusual. Their last hunt had stretched on for three days, and been just about as successful.

The swamp simply wasn’t providing nearly as much bounty as it used to.

When Ming-Hua was a little girl, her grandmother used to tell her stories about the old days: a time of peace, when Foggy Swamp stood an impregnable natural fortress, utterly immune to the chaos of the Hundred Year War.

But what the horrible destruction and devastation of warfare had failed to do for so long was being accomplished, slowly and gradually, by the simple ravages of time. The nearest city, Gaoling, had grown from a moderately sized town to a sprawling metropolis, and encroached further and further upon the swamp’s borders with each passing year.

The swamp could defend itself, of course. Few places on the material plane were closer to the Spirit World, more in-tune with its energies. The plants, the wildlife; the very waters themselves were all linked as one, and their tribe was simply one small part of that great whole. Together, they resisted any efforts by the outside world to change them.

Yet Ming-Hua had come to realize, over the years, that such a thing was ultimately futile. It was against the very nature of their element. Water, after all, was the element of change. The world around them would never cease the escalating march of progress, for good or ill.

And Foggy Swamp could only stand against that tide for so long.

She estimated that, over the past decade, perhaps ten percent of the trees on the outer rim of the swamp had been cleared away – mostly for the sake of farmland. Few others in her tribe paid attention to that sort of thing, but Ming-Hua had always been remarkably…savvy. She’d needed to be, to survive.

That still left an enormous amount of swampland remaining, of course. Which was probably why her fellow tribesmen stubbornly refused to acknowledge it.

But she knew. And the swamp knew. That’s why the game was beginning to dry up.

Ming-Hua let out a low groan, and continued to trudge forward, a dead possum-chicken in each basket on either side of her yoke.

This was really freaking hard without arms.
The disadvantage of being born to a tribe that deliberately eschewed all modern technology was that it made dealing with birth defects...challenging.

To be sure, the Foggy Swamp Tribe actually had remarkably skilled healers, for the most part. They’d learned over the centuries how best to take advantage of the swamp’s natural herbs and medicines, to cure everything from burns to upset stomachs.

But being born without certain limbs? There wasn’t exactly a plant for that.

There wasn’t much of a system set up to make allowances for her disability, either. The tribe had a structure, and each and every man or woman in it had their place. It was how they managed to function without any chiefs, unlike their distant sister tribes.

Ming-Hua was a waterbender, which meant she hunted. She healed. She helped propel their skiffs along the swamp’s numerous lakes and rivers.

That she could barely even do those things didn’t absolve her of responsibility.

Her mother had died in childbirth, which made things harder. She’d been raised by her father and paternal grandmother, and the latter was the only one who’d ever shown her any love or understanding.

Koya and her son, Huang-Ze, were both highly spiritual people. But while Koya, the tribe’s elder, took a relaxed and open-minded approach to enlightenment, Ming-Hua’s father was...considerably different in temperament.

Huang-Ze, like his daughter, recognized the gradual shrinkage of their home. But unlike her, he refused to acknowledge the outside forces at work, or the near-inevitability that it could one day threaten their way of life.

Instead, he looked inward. He blamed the laziness and complacency of the younger generation, whom he believed to have neglected their “spiritual duties.” He blamed the fact that they’d begun to occasionally trade with the “heathens” of the Earth Kingdom, following the end of the Hundred Year War.

And most of all, he blamed her.

Ming-Hua’s condition was, he claimed, a punishment on behalf of the spirits – a sign that she was weak and corrupt, and a warning to her fellow tribesmen against their current, destructive path.

She wasn’t sure whether she believed all that. But he did, wholeheartedly, which really wound up amounting to the same thing in the end.

Not once, had she ever seen him look at her with eyes of kindness, or compassion. Only cold, blistering contempt. Her disability was a blight on him, on the whole tribe. Every second they were together, it was obvious he was ashamed of her very presence.

So as much as she could, in such a tight-knit tribe, she learned to avoid him.

Koya, at least, had been close to her. Told her stories, played games with her; assured her that her condition was no curse, but something natural and wonderful.
Ming-Hua wasn’t sure she believed *that*, either, but it was nicer to hear.

But those years hadn’t lasted long. Koya had passed when she was only nine years old, from some sort of fever. The kind which their healers could’ve *easily* cured just a few years prior.

The necessary herb, though, had suddenly proven impossible to find at the moment they’d needed it. Another punishment from the swamp itself, Huang-Ze claimed.

That time, his daughter almost believed it.

She’d spent the intervening years throwing herself into her duties to the tribe, putting countless hours of blood, sweat, and toil into overcoming her deficiency. She’d eventually learned to waterbend passably with just her feet, though it lacked the fine control or finesse of the other benders in the tribe. Still, she made do with what she could.

Huang-Ze was now the closest thing the tribe had to a leader. They had no formal government, but age, experience, and wisdom all lent certain voices more authority than others. With the tribe elder dead, her son’s judgment carried great weight.

Today, on the day she turned sixteen – not that anyone else in the tribe acknowledged that, of course – he’d summoned her to his hut.

That, in itself, was unusual. He really only spoke to her when he needed something, and that was a rare occasion. Most of the time, he preferred to just leave her alone.

Ming-Hua found him in meditation, the flayed skin of a possum-chicken sitting atop his head rather than the traditional banyan leaf. Truthfully, she thought it made him look rather ridiculous, especially with his face screwed-up so seriously.

She didn’t tell *him* that, of course.

Huang-Ze didn’t break his meditation when she entered, so Ming-Hua slowly lowered herself to a sitting position to join him. Even that was a little difficult for her. *Normal* people didn’t even realize how much they unconsciously used their arms for balance when shifting positions.

After several minutes, her father’s eyes snapped open. “Daughter,” he said, as if the word itself felt mildly distasteful on his tongue. “You look thin.”

She glared at him. “Food has been scarce, father,” she told him, matching his tone. “For the entire tribe, not *just* for me.”

“And I think we both know who to blame for that,” he replied, folding his hands.

By the spirits, she *hated* when he was like this. Which was most of the time.

Still, she wasn’t sure when she’d get another opportunity like this, so she pressed on, “Father, we need to do something. Our tribe is dying. We *need* to adapt, or we’ll…!”

“Silence!” he cut across her, his voice low but biting. “Stay your tongue before you voice more blasphemy. Our people have been one with the swamp for hundreds of years. We are the *true* sons and daughters of water. *We* must hold *firmer* to our traditions, not *abandon* them as the savages do!”

*Savages*…it’s what he called the descendants of the tribesmen who’d fought in the Day of Black Sun. Some had elected to stay in the outside world, among the “heathens,” rather than return to
Foggy Swamp. They’d intermarried with people of other nations, assimilated into their cultures. Most had even started wearing pants.

There were few people in this world, if any, that Huang-Ze hated more.

“I’m not saying we leave the swamp!” she said heatedly. “Maybe just step up trade a bit…for food, medicine…”

Again, he cut her off with a glare. “Enough. I don’t want to hear another word on this, daughter,” he commanded. “I will lead this tribe to restore its former glory – to ensure the old ways are never forgotten. No matter what it takes.”

Ming-Hua blinked. “What?” she asked, confused by his words. “Our tribe doesn’t have leaders.”

“Incorrect. As of today, I am its first and only chief,” answered her father, his dull blue eyes staring coldly into hers. “The rest of the tribe declared it this morning. I will lead, until things have been returned to the way they once were.”

“That’s just self-satisfying garbage!” said Ming-Hua, practically snarling. “Listen to yourself. You want to keep us from changing with the world, but this is the biggest change we’ve ever made! What makes you any different?”

“We are all sinners, daughter. Some more…obviously…than others,” he responded, his eyes darting pointedly toward her shoulders. “The difference is that I acknowledge mine. I am no greater than any other man in the tribe. But I know what needs to be done, and I will achieve it.”

Suddenly, off in the distance, something like an explosion sounded. To be heard over all the ambient noise in the swamp, it must’ve been very loud indeed.

Ming-Hua’s eyes widened. “What did you do…?” she demanded in a hushed whisper.

“Gaoling is the source of the merchants who pollute our swamp’s sanctity,” said Huang-Ze, his expression burning with hatred. “I will correct our ancestors’ mistakes. Right now, our best benders are hard at work, leveling that heathen city to rubble.”

She froze, unable to bring herself to speak. She was far too horrified.

“This will be the end of their wicked presence on sacred ground,” he continued, unabated by her reaction. “And when the land runs red with their blood, I’ll offer it as tribute to the swamp. It will regain the ground those monsters stole from it. Surely, then, the spirits will bless us anew.”

“You’re insane,” Ming-Hua finally managed to murmur, shaking her head. “I always knew you were cruel…but this…”

She swallowed hard, and with difficulty, returned to a standing position. “Was that all you wished to tell me, father?” she asked.

Huang-Ze, too, rose to his feet. As he was more than a head taller than her, this was a rather more impressive move.

“No, daughter. It is not,” he said. “For as I always tell you, when assigning blame, one must look not only outward…but also, inward. To cull the swamp of the heathen trespassers will do little good on its own.”

His fists clenched as he again looked upon the empty skin at her sides, where arms should have been.
“From birth, you’ve carried the sign of a great and terrible curse,” he added, his tones vindictive and spiteful. “I thought I could ignore it, for a time, but now I see it’s a sign I should have heeded. One that cannot be allowed to persist.”

He took one step toward her, and instinctively, Ming-Hua took one step back.

“Today, you reach your sixteenth year at last,” whispered the would-be chief. “When I first saw your deformity, I thought of drowning you. I almost did. But then, I thought…why be so wasteful? The spirits work in mysterious ways. You could at least be married off, and serve some use to the tribe.”

“So what happened to that plan?” she demanded, absolute fury rapidly beginning to consume her entire being.

“I have spoken to each man of the tribe, in turn, in anticipation of this day,” said Huang-Ze. “And each and every one of them was absolutely disgusted. And who wouldn’t be? What man would wish his child to risk carrying on your taint?”

The man raised a fist and clenched it. The swampwaters around the hut rose in turn.

“You are my sin to bear, daughter. So I will make it quick,” he declared, and the frightening part was she knew he meant every word. “But it must be done. Our tribe cannot survive unless we purge it of the unworthy – those whose connections to the swamp and the spirits have wavered. And it will start with you.”

Ming-Hua gritted her teeth, and for a moment, all she saw was red.

“You can try!” she screamed, leaping to the air and twisting her legs in a series of kicks.

Blades of water rose from the bog and followed her movements, tearing her father’s hut apart in an instant. But he was far more experienced than she was. The bent liquid broke before it could reach him, and an immediate counterstrike on his part sent her sprawling to the ground, sputtering.

The teenaged girl attempted to recover, but before she could do more than struggle back to her feet she found them bound in heavy vines. She gaped at her father, for more reasons than one; plantbending was a sacred art, known only to a few, and its use on another member of the tribe was absolutely forbidden.

Another vine wrapped tightly around her torso, and then, one more around her neck. It suddenly became extremely hard to breathe.

There was some sort of sound in the distance. Crashing, breaking…the sounds of a battle. And someone was screaming…

That was the last thing she heard before she blacked out.

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When Ming-Hua awoke, she was in a clearing. Even after sixteen years in this swamp, she hadn’t come even close to seeing it all, but she was certain she was nowhere near the rest of her tribe.
She blinked. Daylight was streaming through the thinnest layer of trees. She’d gone to see her father shortly after sunset, so she’d been out for quite a while.

She blinked again when she realized she wasn’t alone.

The other woman in the clearing was, undoubtedly, not a member of the Foggy Swamp Tribe. She wore plain robes in the Earth Kingdom fashion, of green and pale yellow, and her dark hair was tied up in a large bun.

Her most distinctive trait, however, was her eyes. The colors within them were faded, muted somehow. In the shimmering light that reflected off the swampwaters, they did not shine.

“Well, took you long enough to get off your sorry butt,” she said, without turning to look at Ming-Hua.

The young waterbender arduously pulled herself into a sitting position, wishing she had hands to clutch her aching head.

“Who…?” she managed to choke out, coughing up droplets of water as she did. Her throat was burning.

“Not really important. That’s what I like about the swamp,” replied the older woman, who was perched on a rock formation and drumming her bare feet against it absently. “None of that namby-pamby obsession with names, or titles, or money…or power. Nice and simple.”

“That’s how it’s supposed to be,” Ming-Hua spat bitterly, talking mostly to herself. “But my father…”

“Seems like a real piece of work, won’t argue there,” she cut her off. The strange-eyed woman leaned back against the rock and let out a low sigh. “Here I am, fresh in retirement, come back to my hometown for the first time in three decades to see my own family…and what do I find? Some weak-tea swambenders throwing twigs around to try and muck it up.”

“What happened to them?” asked Ming-Hua, unsure if she really wanted to hear the answer.

“Eh, don’t worry. I put a good scare in ‘em, but nothing too permanent,” the woman said matter-of-factly. “They’ll think twice about messing with Gaoling again, I think. And if they don’t? Well…it is where I set up one of my first metalbending schools. The Dark One’s headmaster now, and he runs those lily-livers hard.”

The waterbender had no idea what she was talking about, but ultimately decided it might be better to stay that way.

Instead, she told the older woman, “You don’t know my father. He’ll try again. Nothing can stop him once he makes up his mind.”

“I kicked his butt once to save you, didn’t I?” she responded, waving a hand dismissively. “I’ll do it as many times as I have to.”

Ming-Hua grimaced as another sharp stab of pain shot through her head. “Is that what happened?” she asked. “I don’t remember anything after he…he grabbed me…”

“Aw, you missed the best part then!” exclaimed the woman, cracking her neck as she did. “Y’know, I knew the guy who invented plantbending. Your dad’s not nearly as inventive. A few pesky vines ain’t got nothing on the greatest earthbender in the world.”
“Is he…?” said Ming-Hua, unable to complete the sentence.

“I told you, no permanent damage. Apart from to his pride which, honestly, looks like it might’ve been more important to him,” answered the earthbender. “Couldn’t just sit by and let him kill a little girl, though. Didn’t know you were his daughter until later. Man, I’ve put away a lot of scumbags in my life, but that guy…”

Despite everything, the armless waterbender found herself getting incensed. “I’m…not…a little girl,” she muttered, her eyes narrowed.

“Hey, whatever floats your boat. Or whatever you call those silly little canoes you use here,” the woman tossed off dryly. “Anyway, what’s your deal, kid? Got any idea what you’re gonna do now?”

Ming-Hua leaned forward against her legs, resting her chin upon her knees.

“I don’t know…” she said honestly, her eyes slightly damp. “I can never go home again. They don’t want me. They’ve never wanted me.”

“Why, because of the whole ‘limbless wonder’ thing?” asked the earthbender in a loud, carrying voice. “As if you should let that stop you.”

“It’s never done anything but stop me,” she stated bitterly. “This…condition…it ruined my life. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Would I? There’s a whole lot you don’t know, girlie,” replied the older woman, sliding off the rock and striding forward. She gestured at her odd, faded eyes. “Blind as a wolf-bat from the day I was born. And as I just finished telling you, I am the greatest earthbender in the world.”

Ming-Hua blinked. “That…can’t be true,” she whispered, though she didn’t sound very certain. “How did you get over being a…a…”

“Freak?” guessed the earthbender, her voice shrewd and acerbic. “Or whatever other awful names your daddy has probably spent your whole life calling you? Well the answer is, I didn’t get over it. I used it. I made my weakness a strength, learned to use my bending in ways most people can’t even dream of.”

She leaned forward slightly and added, “You can do the same thing, if you just put in the work.”

Again, Ming-Hua felt white hot anger boiling up from her gut. “I have been putting in the work,” she said insistently. “More days than I can count, trying to find a way to waterbend that gets around this stupid deformity…”

“And that’s exactly your problem,” spoke the woman, quietly shaking her head. “Here’s some nice, friendly advice from an earthbender to a waterbender. You can’t ‘get around’ this kind of thing. You’ve gotta meet it head-on. Without arms to do all that pushy-pully junk, you need to find a new path. One that works for you, and for your body.”

Ming-Hua suddenly realized something. “Wait, if you’re blind…” she murmured, confused. “How do you even know I don’t have any arms?”

Instead of answering, the older woman assumed an earthbending stance, one foot raised slightly over the damp ground. Then, in one swift motion, she brought her foot down in a stomp.

“The original earthbenders were the badger-moles, and they’re just as blind as I am,” the woman
explained. “They ‘see’ with earthbending. Sensing vibrations in the ground, and getting an idea of everything that’s on it. I learned how to do the same thing, and I doubt I ever would’ve if my eyes worked like everyone else’s.”

The teenager looked up at the sky, squinting in the mid-day sun. “The first waterbender was the moon, if you believe the stories,” she said in a low voice.

“See? Exactly! And does the moon have arms?” asked the woman, her arms crossed as if that was the end of it.

“…don’t think that’s really the point…” mumbled Ming-Hua, kicking one foot awkwardly. The swampwaters moved slightly in time with her motion.

“So quit acting like it, and quit all this bellyaching. I haven’t heard so much whining since I taught Aang.”

“You taught the Avatar?!” demanded the waterbender, her eyes going wide. “So if you’re a metalbender…then that makes you…”

“Like I said, not important,” Toph Beifong cut her off, cracking her knuckles and grinning. “Now are we gonna keep screwing around, or are you ready to learn a thing or two?”

------------------------

Training with Toph was a grueling experience. Though it only wound up lasting five or six days, it felt like fifty.

The middle-aged woman appeared to either have no concept whatsoever of positive reinforcement, or else utter contempt for the notion. She shouted abuse the moment Ming-Hua got something wrong, which was often, and when she got it right the most she could ever hope to expect was a curt nod.

Still, it was surprising how much Toph’s earthbending philosophy managed to apply to Ming-Hua’s nascent control over water. The elements at first seemed to have nothing in common – water flowed by its very nature, seeking the path of least resistance, whereas earth was firm and unyielding.

But Toph had been right. Ming-Hua would never be able to bend like every other waterbender on the planet, and it didn’t help anything to pretend she could. She had to find another approach.

Her teacher had grown up traveling with one of the greatest waterbenders in history; even here, in Foggy Swamp, Master Katara’s strength was legendary. So while she knew none of the moves personally and indeed expressed unending disdain for “all that splashing around nonsense,” there were a couple of forms she could at least get the teenager started on.

The one she took to, immediately, was the Octopus Form. Used properly, it allowed a waterbender to surround themselves with numerous “tentacles” of liquid, theoretically giving them offense and defense in every direction.

Ming-Hua, of course, could not use it “properly.” Like most waterbending, the essence of the form was to mimic the motions of her nonexistent arms.
But when she came at it with the mindset of an earthbender, everything changed.

“Power in fire and airbending comes from the breath. For water, it’s the blood. The natural flow of chi,” said Toph, circling around her and occasionally assaulting her with a small cluster of rocks. “But earth is different. Earthbending is the body – the bones, the muscles. You need to make that water follow your orders, like any other part of your body. You need to show it who’s boss!”

She did as she was bidden; focused on the liquid surrounding her, and pushed, hard. As if it was a leg that’d fallen asleep, or a part of her face paralyzed by pain.

And to her surprise, it obeyed.

A stream of water rose at her side, moved by nothing more or less than her own will, and crashed down upon Toph’s latest volley of stone. The sheer pressure of the bent swampwater dissolved the rocks to dust.

“Alright, now that’s more like it!” exclaimed the metalbender. She then punched Ming-Hua rather hard on the shoulder, as if to make sure she didn’t get used to the compliment. “But still not good enough! The Sugar Queen used to surround her arms with watery…tentacle-y…thingies all the time. You can do her one better!”

It took her the better part of the week to figure it out, but eventually Ming-Hua was able to reproduce the variant form Toph was talking about.

Once she got used to treating water as a surrogate limb, the leap to actually using it that way wasn’t too great. Indeed, once she got the hang of it, that approach was actually easier – by connecting the water streams directly to her body, the chi flow from her heart to the liquid remained uninterrupted, increasing the speed and finesse of her bending.

And now that she’d hit upon the key to it all, the rest came fairly easily. Her water-arms were far more versatile than ones of flesh, able to reach as far as her eyes could see and strong enough to cut through solid iron. Given enough water, she could even produce ten or twelve of them at a time, though she was still having trouble controlling that many at once.

Toph, for her part, stepped up the intensity of her training every time Ming-Hua made even the slightest advance. If she could succeed in lifting three boulders with her streams, her teacher increased it to five. The moment she managed to change the state of one of her streams to ice, she made her do the same with vapor.

It was bitter work, on every conceivable level. But the results were worth it.

By the time her training was complete – or at least as complete as it could be, before Toph decided her interest had run its course – Ming-Hua couldn’t remember why she’d ever spent a single day being jealous of “normal” people.

In virtually every way, she was now superior to them all. She was stronger, faster, and vastly more mobile. She had the power to break a man in two, if she felt like it, and the fine control to grasp a falling leaf, as if she had the fingers she’d always dreamed of.

The two women had rarely exchanged words throughout their training sessions, apart from what was strictly necessary. As well as a steady stream of insults directed at Ming-Hua’s various fumbles, though Toph would’ve argued the two were one and the same.

Still, on the night that her teacher had – largely nonverbally, because being blind apparently didn’t diminish your ability to glare at people – made clear would be their last, Ming-Hua couldn’t help but
ask the question she’d had burning in her mind for the past week.

“Why’d you do this, anyway?” she said, as she slurped up some incredibly bad stewed frog-squirrel. For all her accomplishments as an earthbending legend, Toph had clearly never learned to cook properly. “You don’t have much of a reputation for taking charity cases.”

“Well, there gotta be some big fancy reason for everything?” Toph replied dismissively, messily devouring a big chunk of tail as she did. “Maybe I was just bored. Some people take up knitting, I help some random girl make arms out of swampwater.”

“There has to be more to it than that,” insisted Ming-Hua, her brow furrowed. “People don’t do nice things for me. Doesn’t happen. Never happened.”

The middle-aged earthbender just sighed and leaned back, staring up at the stars. Well…staring wasn’t the right word, but she was lying on her back in any event.

“Let’s just say I screwed up pretty hard with my last two…students,” she said in a low voice. “My life sucked so much from all my freedoms getting taken away, that I pretty much let them do whatever the heck they wanted. I thought that’d work. Convinced myself it’d work. Even when all the signs started pointing in the wrong directions, I just ignored them.”

“You gave them too much freedom?” demanded Ming-Hua, her tone skeptical. “That doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“That’s because you’re young,” Toph told her, sounding distant. “Sure, I may act sometimes like I haven’t matured since I was twelve, but I’ve bent around the block a few times. ‘No rules, no boundaries’ is the kind of thing that sounds good when you’re a kid, but when you try to apply it to real people…”

The metalbender didn’t finish her sentence. She just returned to eating in silence.

Eventually, after the quiet had stretched to an uncomfortable length, Ming-Hua found herself murmuring, “So what’re you going to do now?”

“Good question,” said Toph. “I came to Gaoling to try and make things right with Su…and with my folks. But your dear ol’ dad kinda threw a wrench in that. I’ll try again when the time is right.”

“And until then?” asked the waterbender.

The older woman stretched. “Maybe I’ll just stay here for a little while,” she answered quietly. “Give that whole spiritual enlightenment, path of peace mumbo-jumbo a try. Seems to have worked pretty well for Twinkle Toes.”

She turned to Ming-Hua, reflections of their campfire dancing in her blank eyes.

“What about you, then?” she added.

Ming-Hua rested her forehead against one of her water streams, losing herself for a moment in the cool sensation. It helped her to think better, she found.

Finally, after a lengthy pause, she said, “I don’t know. I’ve never been anywhere except Foggy Swamp. But I don’t think there’s a place for me here anymore.”

“So travel,” Toph suggested with a shrug. “See new places, go on epic adventures, overthrow a horrible tyrant or three. Pretty sure kids still do that stuff. And if they don’t, they should. Builds
Ming-Hua was surprised to hear herself responding, in a rather hollow voice, “What about my tribe?”

Again, the earthbender shrugged.

“They’re not going anywhere, are they? Your dad’s making sure of that,” she said. “Come back in a few years and see how it goes. Or don’t. It’s up to you. Either way, you know how to defend yourself now.”

Slowly, Ming-Hua picked up a branch from the ground with her water-arm, and with just a thought, snapped it in two.

“Yeah…” she whispered, her blue eyes alight with something Toph was probably fortunate she couldn’t see. “I guess I do.”

[------------------]

Those first few years, quietly traveling the Earth Kingdom, were at the same time eye-opening and utterly uneventful.

This was a time of great peace, and nobody thought twice of a waterbender passing through the average town – even one as distinct as her.

She’d needed to change her clothes, though. Wearing nothing but leaves and carved wood did provoke its fair share of stares.

(Some approving, admittedly.)

These days, her garb was largely in the Southern style – simple, padded robes of dark blue. That was common enough, these days, that she doubted anyone could guess her real origins without knowing them already.

She’d tied up her hair, as well, which in the swamp she’d always worn long. Copying an upper-class Earth Kingdom woman she’d once spotted in Gaoling, she used two pins to keep a bun in place, obscuring her ancestry even further.

Ming-Hua knew little of the outside world, but she learned quickly. She drifted from town to town, never spending more than two or three nights in the same place, always living simply and within her means.

Which, admittedly, wasn’t much of a life, since those “means” usually amounted to the clothes on her back and the water in her skins. With no formal education and no connections, opportunities for work were incredibly rare.

She did odd jobs, mostly, though even those tended to be hard to come by. Why hire someone with such a glaring disability, when there were a thousand others with perfectly working arms?

And on the occasions she did demonstrate that, in fact, her waterbent limbs were vastly superior to the fleshy kind…well, that usually scared prospective employers off pretty good on its own.
On the bright side, at least that was the worst kind of reaction she could expect to her missing limbs. She’d been surprised to find out that, for the most part, few people outside of Foggy Swamp cared about her condition. Not enough to call her a freak or a filthy abomination to her face, anyway.

She even got a few request for dates, here and there, from both guys and girls. She accepted every single one, mostly as a giant “screw you!” to her father. None of the relationships lasted more than a night or two at a time, but she was okay with that.

Ming-Hua really wasn’t all that big on most people, all things considered.

Still, after a couple of years spent in this way, drifting across the continent like a halfway-faded spirit, the inevitable began to occur.

She began to get bored.

The waterbender had been bored in the swamp too, if she was being honest with herself. The daily torment of being the most hated person in the tribe had simply overridden that. Hard to concentrate on how sucky life was when your home was slowly dying.

But here, without those distractions, she felt an indescribable yearning for something different. Toph had described “epic adventures,” no doubt drawing upon the legendary ones she’d taken part in as a girl – the stories even children in Foggy Swamp knew, from the fall of Ba Sing Se to the defeat of Fire Lord Ozai.

Yet these days, there seemed to be none of those left. Ming-Hua resented that, if she was being honest with herself. She had the skills, the temperament, and the will to fight. In truth, it was probably the only thing she was really good at.

She just needed the opportunity.

And it came far sooner than she’d ever expected.

[--------------------]

FILTH. FILTH.

The creature’s rumbling voice sounded across the land, shaking the rocks and the trees.

But what really caught Ming-Hua’s attention, what really made her breath catch in her throat, was the fact that, underneath the vibrating, pulsating echo…

It belonged, unquestionably, to her father.

CLEANSE.

MUST. CLEANSE.

CLEANSE…FILTH…

She wasn’t entirely sure what’d happened to Huang-Ze, but she could make a guess. Whatever his numerous faults, her father was the most spiritually attuned person she’d ever met, and as likely to budge on his convictions as he was to stop breathing.
Somehow, he must’ve communed with one of the great spirits of Foggy Swamp. Allowed it to possess him, so it could act through his mortal form.

And the result was…this.

It was a horrible, oozing, misshapen thing. A conglomeration of trees and vines and muck, as tall as ten elephant-mandrills and five times as broad. The shape was vaguely humanoid, but nothing remained of Huang-Ze in its monstrous features.

Features set in a terrifying, eternal rage as it sought to tear the city of Gaoling apart, brick by brick.

Ming-Hua wasn’t entirely sure why she’d returned here in the course of her journeys, though she rarely needed a reason to go most anywhere. There’d been, perhaps, a vague thought in the back of her head of stopping by the swamp, and trying to reconcile with her people.

Or to tear them all to tiny, bloody shreds. One of the two.

But instead, she’d found this. The sight of a creature of unmatchable might, with the voice of the man she hated most in this world, wreaking havoc upon the people she’d once been too weak to save.

Not that her motivation was any kind of noble heroism, of course. It was revenge, pure and simple.

Still…there were worse side-benefits.

Ming-Hua smirked, and launched herself at the monster.

It was a battle for the ages, though of course she hadn’t been thinking of that much at the time. It took every ounce of her concentration merely to stay alive.

She’d improved greatly in her waterbending skills, in the years since her instruction with Toph, but the spirit-creature still dwarfed her; both physically and in terms of sheer power. Its every movement smashed through solid stone and metal like they were paper, and the master waterbender she knew to dwell at its heart meant every plant in the area bent to its command.

It did not appear to recognize her – or, if it did, then it saw her as no different from the other humans it sought to slaughter.

FILTH.

WRETCHED. FILTH.

TIME…TO END…

But unlike them, she wasn’t going down without a fight.

She made her stand, fortunately, in the immediate vicinity of both a fountain and a well, and she took full advantage of both. Great torrents of water crashed into the monster, slicing and carving away pieces of its swamp-born body with blades and pikes of ice.

Ming-Hua had eight active streams of water going right now; she saw no point in holding anything back. Six battled continuously with the monster’s enormous limbs, while the other two kept her physical body constantly mobile, making her nearly impossible to hit. She swung from building to building, rarely even touching the ground, as she kept up her furious assault on the spirit.

Still, while she’d inflicted a good amount of damage so far, she knew she was fighting a losing
battle. The monster could reform parts of its physical body by absorbing the plant life around it, and there was no shortage of that supply. And no matter how much she seemed to be harming it, its advance never slowed for a moment.

There was only one way to end this, she was certain. And that was to tear away the spiritual exterior, and rip out the man at its core.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. Every wound she inflicted on the spirit-creature was repaired only seconds later, and no matter how hard she tried to find one, no weak points in its natural armor presented themselves.

Though it pained her to admit it, one fact soon became crystal-clear: she wouldn’t be able to win this one without some help.

And it was at just about that time when an explosion went off, directly in the center of the monster’s chest.

Ming-Hua froze in place, her mouth agape, as more explosions rocked the creature’s massive body, causing it to stumble. The source of the attack wasn’t immediately clear, but whoever was responsible was obviously adept at their craft. Each blast struck with pinpoint accuracy, catching the behemoth further and further off-balance, until finally, inevitably, it all came crashing down.

Furthermore, it soon became apparent that they weren’t acting alone. The ground seemed to open up to swallow the creature as it collapsed, the work of at least one extremely powerful earthbender.

But then, the stone began to do something Ming-Hua had never seen any earthbender manage before. It melted.

From its misshapen head to the grotesque stumps that served as its legs, the titan’s entire body was being encased in red-hot, molten rock, setting aflame the numerous swamp plants that made it up by sheer heat.

“Don’t let up, Ghazan! We have to burn away the entire body, or it’ll just regenerate!” a male voice suddenly shouted, his voice naturally soft and yet carrying a palpable sense of command. “P’Li, provide cover fire to keep him from breaking free!”

“Right!” two other voices exclaimed simultaneously, causing Ming-Hua to turn.

The source appeared to be three individuals on a nearby rooftop, who’d attacked the monster from just outside its field of vision. Hastily, Ming-Hua swung over to meet them.

All were fairly young, and yet all had the air of people who did stuff like this every other week. The first speaker, presumably their leader, was the oldest of the trio, though he still couldn’t have been above his early twenties. Still, his wild hair and small beard – not to mention a fresh battle-scar directly above one eye – made it difficult to tell for sure.

The earthbender, evident by his plain green robes and by the sheer amount of concentration he was putting into his hand and arm movements, looked to be about her age – give or take a couple years. Again, though, the issue was confused by his long, flowing hair and a truly epic mustache.

And the last, who could only be the source of the explosions, was…a little girl. Well, perhaps “little” was pushing it, but she could still only be thirteen or fourteen, tops. She was quite tall for her age, and wore her hair and clothes in a way few teenagers would find appealing, but there was no mistaking the sheer youth of her face.
Or the ceremonial tattoo upon her forehead, through which another explosion was soon channeled. This one blasted to bits a large patch of greenery the spirit-creature had been trying to summon, preventing it from refilling one of the rapidly growing holes in its body.

The first man noticed immediately as Ming-Hua touched down on the roof, and offered a brief bow.

“We were watching the battle prior to intervening. Your skills are extremely impressive,” he said. “I am called Zaheer.”

“Ming-Hua,” she answered automatically. “But what are you doing here?”

“I am a person who is…sensitive…to matters of the spirits,” Zaheer explained, his eyes returning to the monster below them, struggling to break free. “This fusion, between man and spirit – it’s unstable and unnatural. All in the Spirit World sensed their joining. And if we cannot separate them…the balance of both worlds may be threatened.”

“Is that what you three do?” asked the waterbender, her water-arms crossed. “Go around the world, righting wrongs and junk?”

“There are considerably more than three of us,” he replied. “But yes, that’s certainly part of it. We are a society dedicated to changing this world for the better. From one bound by war, strife, and the oppressive hand of tyrants, to one where peace and freedom can truly flourish. We…are the Red Lotus.”

“Well, if you stand for freedom…and against this…” said Ming-Hua, using a stream to gesture widely at the creature. “Then I say we work together. I just want one favor.”

Zaheer arched an eyebrow. “Oh?” he murmured.

“The man inside that abomination. The chief of the Foggy Swamp Tribe,” she added through pursed lips. “Leave him to me.”

In that moment, the monster managed to break free of its restraints, but Ming-Hua was no longer concerned; this battle was already won. Big, gaping holes all across its body remained unhealed, where the lava had burned clear through the dense vegetation, and its movements were unsteady and unbalanced, as if it could tip over again at any moment.

It wasn’t speaking anymore, either, but simply releasing deep, guttural roars as it tried in vain to fight back. But it was no use. Explosions, lava, and water were all assaulting it at once now, and more and more of its enormous form was being cleaved away by the second.

“Do you have any idea how to separate them?” called out Ming-Hua, as the fight continued to tip more and more in their favor – her question directed at Zaheer, who was perched atop a nearby pole. “Y’know, with you being so sensitive and all?”

“A colleague of ours developed a technique to pacify restless spirits,” he said, his face deep in thought as he observed the battle. “Unfortunately, it requires waterbending. And I doubt we have time now for you to try and learn it.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence!” she responded dryly, using five streams to bind one of the spirit-creature’s limbs and giving the younger girl a clear shot at its chest. “Any ideas that’d actually work, then?”

The earthbender let loose a laugh – a sharp, barking sound – in between volleys of molten rock.
“I dunno if P’Li and I get a vote in this…but if we do, I say we keep this one!” he told Zaheer. “She’s got the right attitude!”

Zaheer frowned, his expression one of a man whose mind was moving a mile a minute. “This is clearly a spirit of a tree, or other ancient plant,” he mused, puzzling it out aloud. “It holds itself together by its own power, but most likely, it moves via waterbending…”

He turned to Ming-Hua. “Do you know how to extract water from plants?” he asked her.

A sly grin slowly spread across her face. Despite everything, she was really beginning to have some fun with this. “Just leave it to me,” she said.

It wasn’t hard; the leaves and vines making up the brunt of the monster were already bone-dry from all the heat, and the small amount that remained flowed easily through her water-arms as soon as they made contact. Utterly drained of moisture, the portions of the titan that hadn’t yet been blown or burned away soon began to wilt and fall to pieces, unable to fight back any longer.

“The human the spirit possessed will likely be at the very heart of its body,” added Zaheer after a little while, assuming a stance Ming-Hua wasn’t familiar with. “As soon as P’Li and Ghazan manage to expose him, you must sever their connection with your waterbending. Then I’ll pull him out.”

Ming-Hua didn’t entirely understand this plan, but she obeyed all the same. Her water streams, all eight of them, stood at the ready, as the last vestiges of the creature’s dried-out husk began to fall away.

Finally, after two agonizing minutes, she caught a glimpse of the pale flesh and dark hair of her father, and Ming-Hua sprung into action. Each and every one of her water-arms moved in unison, penetrating the open cavity and forcing it wider.

At the same time, she got to work draining the liquid from the vines that held fast to Huang-Ze’s limbs and head, weakening their link. This was far more difficult, because unlike the plants on the “outside” layers, these ones pushed back when she tried to bend them.

But Ming-Hua didn’t quit. Over the last few years, she’d become a much more powerful waterbender than her father ever was. Now was the time to prove it.

With a great, primal scream, she pulled all ten streams back at once, and with a sickening, wrenching sound, the half-conscious man came free of the spirit.

Its connection to the physical plane terminated, the monster immediately began to fade away, its corpse of dried-out vegetation and swamp mud rapidly collapsing to dust.

In the midst of all this, however, Zaheer made his move. With reflexes like a circus acrobat, he leapt and flipped through the air toward the now-falling Huang-Ze, and caught him long before he could hit the ground.

The earthbender – Ghazan, she was pretty sure he’d been called – summoned a platform of rock to catch them, lowering both safely to ground level. He, Ming-Hua, and the explosion girl hastened to join them a moment later.

“So this is the guy who’s been causing all this trouble,” said the youngest of their group, finally speaking for the first time since they’d appeared. “Gotta say, not impressed.”

“Looks can be deceiving,” snapped Ming-Hua, her eyes never leaving the man Zaheer was holding.
The trauma of the last few minutes appeared to have knocked him out cold.

“You say that like you know this man,” Zaheer observed shrewdly.

Ming-Hua’s entire body, water-arms included, tensed. But ultimately, she muttered, “He’s my father.”

The Red Lotus trio were silent for a while, in the wake of these words. No one seemed sure what to do or say. Even Ming-Hua wasn’t certain what was going through her head at the time.

So it almost surprised even her when a water-arm snaked around Huang-Ze’s neck, lifting him into the air.

Zaheer’s voice was calm, but firm. “What do you think you’re doing?” he asked her, the question open and genuine, containing no judgment one way or the other.

“You have no idea what this man did to me…to my tribe,” she said, her voice a furious hiss. “He seized power and turned a people of peace into warmongers. He cast me out, tried to kill me, because I…embarrassed him! He needs to pay!”

“I set no store by notions of vengeance or retribution,” Zaheer declared quietly, his hands neatly folded. “But if he is, as you said before, a chief – the leader of a government, no matter how small – then he must die nonetheless. So we have no quarrel.”

He and his two fellows took a few steps back, silently permitting Ming-Hua to handle things as she saw fit. She raised her other stream, solidifying the tip into a blade of ice.

She’d never done this before; at least, not to anything larger than a possum-chicken. But if there was any person on the planet who deserved this fate, it was him.

Ming-Hua brought the blade to her father’s throat, and it rested there for several heavy seconds. Despite everything, she did hesitate.

But only for a moment.

The blood sprayed from the wound, splattering her clothes and face. She’d cut cleanly through, any lingering familial affection only going so far as to grant him a quick death.

He twitched for little while as he fell to the ground in a pathetic heap, and then he was still.

Ming-Hua turned back to the others, a stern expression across her bloodstained face.

“I’ve seen what happens when someone tries to make himself king, in a place there should never be a king,” she spoke in a deathly whisper. “If you’re fighting against that, then you can count me in. Y’know…if you’ll have me.”

There was a silent beat, and then Zaheer stepped forward, a hand extended. He seemed to realize his mistake a second later, but Ming-Hua just smiled, and wrapped one liquid “arm” around his.

“Welcome to the Red Lotus,” he said, and for the first time in her life, Ming-Hua felt something she’d never imagined she ever could. She felt like she was home.
The night that Tarrlok summoned Mako and Bolin to his office was spent by his fellow councilmembers in peaceful, uneventful slumber.

But as one of those politicians was a father of three, that peace didn’t last very long.

“Daddy! Daddy!” said Ikki excitedly, pulling on his beard for good measure as she sat atop his chest. This was, regrettably, not an unusual way for him to be woken up. “Come quick, the baby’s coming!”

The airbender sat bolt upright, immediately wide-awake. “What?!” he exclaimed. “But that doesn’t make any sense, she only got pregnant last…!”

Tenzin abruptly ceased his shouting as he saw the sly little grin on his youngest daughter’s face. She’d always been a terrible liar.

“Now, Ikki. What did I tell you the last time you did this?” he asked, pulling her off of him one-handed.

“That I shouldn’t kid around about such important matters and when I grow up I’ll understand the gravity of what bringing a life into this world means,” she chattered brightly, somehow managing to fit all that into a single breath.

Her father sighed wearily, his eyes rapidly blinking sleep away as he glanced around his bedroom. Pema had already gotten up, it seemed.

“So…what is so important, then?” said Tenzin, turning back to his daughter.

“Some guy’s at the door waiting for you,” she replied, placing a finger to her chin and taking on an uncharacteristically thoughtful expression. “At least, mommy said he’s a guy. Me and Meelo weren’t sure.”

“Meelo and I,” he corrected automatically, already pulling on his cape over his pajamas and sweeping out of the room.

It wasn’t quite “receiving guests” wear, but this early in the morning it’d have to do.

He pulled open the door with a bit more force than he’d been intending, though he otherwise chose not to vent his frustrations on the poor sap on the other side. He recognized the visitor immediately – the timid and bookish page who currently served the Council.

“Good morning, sir!” he said immediately, bowing almost comically low. “My apologies for the hour of my arrival, but Councilman Tarrlok said this was urgent.”

The page held out a sealed scroll, which Tenzin took.

“Thank you…Jilu,” responded Tenzin, slightly embarrassed that it’d taken him a second to place the name. “Err…can I get you anything before you go? Water, tea?”

“Oh, that’s very kind of you, sir. Air Nomad hospitality is truly second to none! But I’m alright, really,” he told the bearded councilman. “I should be getting back to City Hall right away. Busy day today, very busy day.”
“Well, if you’re sure…” said Tenzin, his tone slightly suspicious. He thought, for a second, he’d seen…*something* in the older man’s expression, but it was gone the moment he noticed.

Perhaps it really *was* just too early in the day.

“What does that weasel-snake want now?” his wife asked as soon as he closed the door, a frying pan in one hand while the other rested on her stomach. She had an impressive talent for managing to overhear every word of his conversations, *without* him realizing she was there. Until or unless she felt like it.

Well…“impressive” was *one* word for it.

Tenzin unfurled the scroll and read for a moment. The message was very short.

“Looks like Tarrlok is calling an emergency meeting of the Council,” answered the airbender, his expression pensive.

“What about?” said Pema.

Tenzin shook his head. “I’m not sure. Though I have my suspicions,” he muttered. “Either way, the meeting isn’t until noon. So at least the morning isn’t *completely* shot.”

“That’s a good thing,” she declared, smiling at her husband. “Because I think your daughter needs you right now.”

The councilman placed a palm over his face. “By the spirits, I think I’ve had enough of Ikki ‘needing’ me for one morning,” he replied with a groan.

Pema just shook her head slightly. “Wrong daughter,” she said.

Then she pointed out the window, at a distant outcropping near the docks of Air Temple Island. It would’ve been hard for anyone else to make out, but Tenzin recognized Jinora’s small, slender frame instantly.

“She’s been out there since before sunrise,” Pema explained, leaning slightly against her husband. “At first, I thought she was just meditating. But I went out that way a little while ago to grab some herbs, and…I think I heard crying. I’d climb up there myself, but…”

The Air Acolyte patted her swollen belly absently; neither of them needed to say out loud why her engaging in rock-climbing was a poor idea.

“I’ll go get her,” whispered Tenzin, and with that, he was quite literally off like the wind.

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Asami Sato, by contrast, awoke that morning to the warm, sweet scent of purified buzzard-wasp honey. In the kitchen, their personal chef was clearly experimenting.

She stretched out across her bed and smiled. Okay, she had to admit…sometimes it didn’t *suck* to be obscenely rich.

The non-bender checked the clock on the table next to her bed. Work didn’t start for another couple
hours, so she had a bit of time to kill.

Strictly speaking, it was true that Asami didn’t actually work at Future Industries; she didn’t draw a salary, at least. Not that she needed to, of course. But as far as she was concerned, the company was going to be hers eventually, one way or another. So why not get some hands-on training while she had the chance?

Her father, ever-passive and indulgent of his little girl, had allowed her to pick one program to implement and manage, to prove she had the skills and the smarts to be a successful businesswoman.

The Water Tribe Labor Initiative had been her choice. And right now, she couldn’t imagine having picked a better one.

Asami slowly pulled herself out of bed and sighed contentedly.

There were no two ways about it: Mizore fascinated her, in a way she couldn’t ever remember another person matching. They’d only known each other for a couple days now, but she was sure the other woman felt it too. Something seemed to be…drawing her to the waterbender, a feeling in the back of her head she couldn’t explain.

Right now, she felt somehow like she knew everything about her, and at the same time almost nothing.

Every word Mizore spoke about her past, her family, her mysterious friends, was vague and noncommittal. Asami didn’t get the sense she was lying to her, exactly, but she did think she wasn’t telling her the full truth.

There was something else there, just beneath the surface. And more than she’d ever felt around anyone else, Asami found herself wanting, needing to find out what it was. To understand.

It didn’t hurt, of course, that Mizore was also friendly, genial, and so adorably awkward in her evident inexperience with socializing. And…well, there wasn’t any point in trying to dance around it. She was also very easy on the eyes.

While Mizore had made it clear she didn’t recognize it herself, she was indisputably gorgeous. Strength was the thing Asami found most attractive in people – a desire to feel safe with someone, a feeling she hadn’t honestly experienced since the day she lost her mom – and Mizore was built like someone with a ton of it to spare.

Combine that with her perfectly toned skin, cute little bob haircut, and highly impressive...figure, and Asami was confident she could have half the men or women in Republic City, if she simply asked for it.

Asami shook her head as she dressed herself, pushing those thoughts from her mind. They were not appropriate things to be thinking about an employee – particularly an employee she was responsible for.

Still, the waterbender’s smiling, blushing face rested at the corner of her thoughts all the while as she went down for breakfast.

Hiroshi was already at the table, sipping tea and reading a newspaper. Asami leaned in and gave her father a kiss on the cheek.

“Morning, dad. Are you not going in today?” she asked.
He smiled and patted her hand as she sat down beside him. “Another day of working from home, I’m afraid,” he said.

“You’ve been doing that a lot, lately,” Asami pointed out, her brow creasing slightly. “Is something the matter?”

The inventor waved a hand airily. “Oh, no. I’ve just been busy,” he replied with a chuckle. “You know me when I get on a big new project. Can’t even spare the time to commute!”

*That* piqued Asami’s interest. “Ooh, can I get a hint?” murmured the teenager, her eyes popping. “Come on, you *can’t* leave me hanging like that.”

Hiroshi patted her hand again, more gently this time.

“You’ll find about it soon, don’t worry. Never forget, Asami…you’re the most precious thing in the world to me,” he said. “Anyway, enough about work! How’d it go yesterday? I hope your new…friend…had a nice time at Kwong’s.”

“Mizore clearly hasn’t had much experience with fine dining, that’s for sure,” answered Asami, unable to suppress a short giggle. “But really, it was great. We have a lot in common, and she’s super easy to talk to. Maybe a little guarded, but I can’t really blame her there. She didn’t exactly grow up around…err…*this.*”

The non-bender gestured around them in a wide arc, acutely aware of how dramatically oversized their dining hall was for just two people.

“This…*Mizore* person,” added Hiroshi after a long sip. “She’s a waterbender, I take it?”

“Well, considering she’s part of our *waterbender* initiative, I think that’s a safe bet,” she said, grinning. “And a pretty good one too, from the looks of things. If she got hand-picked by the chief, she kinda *has* to be, right?”

“That would be the logical conclusion,” her father stated evenly, his hands now folded. “Nevertheless…I just want you to be careful. This new friend may be…*exciting,* but you barely know anything about her. Try not to move too fast.”

“You worry too much, dad,” responded Asami, waving off his concerns. “All we did was have dinner. Err…although…”

Hiroshi raised an eyebrow. “Although…?” he repeated.

“Well, I…*kinda* asked her if she could visit here this weekend. And maybe meet…well, you. If that’s alright,” she eventually managed to explain, saying all of this very fast.

Her father frowned, just for a moment…but it melted into a warm smile so quickly she was almost sure she’d imagined it.

“Of course, if that’s what makes you happy,” he said, nodding. “In the meantime, though, I really *do* have to get back to my personal project. I’ll see you again at dinner?”

Asami kissed him on the cheek again. “Wouldn’t miss it,” she told him, before heading to the kitchen to get some of that honey.
“Been a long time, Shin,” said Mako, his arms crossed as he glared at the triad member.

Skoochy’s tip had been spot-on: the brothers found Shady Shin shuffling around the docks with his hands in his pockets, calmly reminding each restaurant or storeowner that today was “payday.” Without fail, each of them produced the protection money with nary a second glance. None of them even seemed scared of Shin.

By this point, they were simply resigned to the cost of doing business in Triple Threat turf.

Shin, for his part, barely looked surprised as he turned to face the two of them.

“Mako! Bolin! Well ain’t you boys a sight for sore eyes,” he replied, grinning cheekily. “Haven’t seen you around since…when was it? Ah, right. When you stabbed ol’ Zolt in the back and ran off to join the circus.”

“Pro-bending, actually,” interjected Bolin, one finger pointed upward.

“Eh, same difference from our end,” said Shin with a shrug. “But that’s water under the bridge now. All in the past. So what can I do for ya this fine day?”

“Has to do with that ‘circus work,’ actually,” Mako answered. “We need money, good money, for the championship ante. And we need it quick. I don’t suppose you know of any big jobs coming up?”

He decided to play dumb about the summit, at least for now. Shin would likely assume, semi-correctly, that Skoochy had told them about it, and he didn’t want to get the kid in trouble for blabbing.

Shin’s face lit up instantly.

“Listen up, ‘cuz I’m only gonna say this once,” he said in a carrying whisper. “All the triad bigwigs are getting’ together this weekend for a little powwow. And none other than yours truly is in charge of hirin’ security. I used to run with the Monsoons before I joined the Triple Threats, and my brother’s in the Agni Kais. Makes me a good, neutral choice, ya feel me?”

He emphasized this point by smirking and tugging at his collar, as if this made him the most important person on the face of the planet.

“What about the Terras?” Bolin couldn’t keep himself from adding.

The Triple Threat member made a scoffing noise with his tongue. “Terras are on their way out, and
everyone knows it. Even them,” he explained, shaking his head in derision. “They’re lucky Zolt even lets ‘em show up.”

Eager to keep things from getting too off-track, Mako cut in, “So what’ll we be making off of this, anyway?”

It would’ve been suspicious not to ask. And in any event, if Tarrlok decided not to follow through with his end of the bargain, it couldn’t hurt to have some extra cash on hand.

“Well I won’t lie to ya, boys,” responded Shin with a sigh. “I’m short on muscle – good, reliable, bendin’ muscle – and I’m short on time. So I’m willin’ to be generous. Five thousand yuans, each, provided the night goes smooth. Somethin’ goes wrong, and you guys step in to fix it…well, then we can talk a little bonus. But I’m hopin’ it won’t come to that.”

“We’re cool with those terms,” said Mako, nodding to his brother. “Just give us the time and location, and we’ll be there.”

“Two nights from now, eleven o’clock. Future Industries warehouse twelve,” Shin told them promptly, his smirk broadening. “My uncle’s a janitor there, got me the key. Get there at least an hour early, so we can make sure it’s all nice and secure.”

“Got it,” declared the firebender, clasping hands with the gangster as briefly as he could get away with. “Come on, Bolin.”

Finally, they had all the info they needed.

All that was left to do was wait.

[-------------------]

Jinora stared out at the surface of the ocean, as she’d been doing for the past three hours.

But no matter how long she looked, what she saw didn’t change.

She was vaguely aware of her father’s approach, but said nothing as he climbed up the rocks and – with some difficulty – took a seat beside her.

“Your grandfather used to sit in this very spot, you know?” he asked, letting his eyes seek out the horizon to match hers. “He could meditate out here for days. Once, he went nearly three weeks. No food, no water. I always wondered how he did it.”

His daughter remained silent, so Tenzin added quietly, “What’s the matter, Jinora? You’ve never been this…sullen, before.”

Still, she refused to say a word. Unsure what to do, he pressed on, “Now, dear, please. You know you can tell me any-”

“I hear them in my sleep,” she said suddenly, her voice somewhat hollow.

Now Tenzin was even more confused. “What exactly do you mean by…?” he began to ask, but Jinora cut him off again.
“The spirits. All around us, especially on this island,” explained the young girl. “They keep coming to me, in my dreams, even when I’m awake sometimes. And they’re…I dunno how to describe it. But there’s something really, really wrong.”

“With the Spirit World?” whispered Tenzin, his brow furrowed with concern.

“With everything!” she exclaimed, her eyes still set resolutely on the morning sun. “Something’s coming, really soon…something big. And things just aren’t the way they’re supposed to be when it does. They don’t tell me that in words, but…I can feel it.”

“I see…” said her father, now deep in thought. “I wasn’t aware you could see or hear spirits so readily. That’s a rare gift.”

“Only lately. And…only sometimes,” Jinora told him in a low voice. “Umm…dad?”

“Yes, Jinora?” he replied, leaning in a bit closer.

“There’s this one name I keep hearing from them. I think…it’s at the heart of everything,” she continued. “Have you ever heard of something called, uh…the Tree of Time?”

“I’ve read about it,” said Tenzin with a nod. “According to legend, it sits at the nexus of the material and Spirit Worlds. Part of both, yet neither. It’s the focal point for all the cosmic energy throughout the universe.”

“I think that’s what’s wrong,” Jinora declared earnestly. “Something’s in there that…that shouldn’t be in there. Something powerful. Something evil. Something…”

She closed her eyes, and when she spoke her next word she wasn’t entirely certain she was the one who’d come up with it.

“…Timeless.”

The two of them were silent for a while after that, though Tenzin wordlessly pulled his daughter into a one-armed hug. She didn’t resist, but leaned into his side, letting all her worries wash away for the moment.

They’d need to discuss this further, she knew. Whatever was coming, it was coming fast. And her father was one of the few people on the planet with the power and spiritual knowledge to, just maybe, do something about it.

But for now…

This was what she needed.

Just a little bit more time with her dad.

[--------------------------]

Korra was quickly beginning to realize that having a job was, well…

A lot of work.
She’d never been a stranger to physical labor growing up – spending your life on the run meant everyone had to pull their own weight, if they wanted to eat and sleep that night – but working at Future Industries was another story entirely.

Her job was repetitive, tiring…and frankly, rather boring. She spent most of the day moving a water stream back and forth across a conveyor belt, assisting the machines in breaking down raw ore.

The only break in the monotony came when the machines jammed or malfunction, in which case she and her fellow waterbenders would be tasked to help solve the problem. Or maybe it was more proper to say such a break would come, since it hadn’t actually happened yet.

Two hours in, and Korra was praying for something to go wrong, just so she’d be able to do something else for a while.

Asami wasn’t coming in until the afternoon shift, so Korra spent that first morning in the company of the Northerners who’d been selected for the initiative. Not that they were very interested in making conversation.

She probably should’ve realized it ahead of time, but obviously, if they’d all come together on a boat from the North Pole then they’d know she hadn’t been on it. None of them seemed willing to go so far as to elephant-rat her out, but they weren’t going out of their way to socialize either.

What she overheard as they finally broke for lunch didn’t help much.

“Look at that girl. The boss’ pet,” whispered a young woman to her friends, in what Korra was sure she thought was a quiet enough voice not to reach her. “Eating her noodles all alone.”

“What do you think she is, anyway?” asked a boy who was hanging off of her; they were clearly an item. “Southern? Maybe even swamp.”

“Long as she stays out of my way, I don’t care,” another girl said with a shrug.

Korra leaned lower over her meal, pretending as if she hadn’t heard that exchange. She tried to tell herself it didn’t bother her – she was, after all, one of the most trusted agents of the Red Lotus, not to mention the freaking Avatar. What a bunch of punks from the North said behind her back wasn’t a big deal.

Of course, there was little point in lying to herself when she already knew it was a lie. The truth was, Korra was acutely concerned of what people thought of her. This was the first time in twelve years when she’d been around a bunch of people her own age, and despite the risk it’d carry she couldn’t deny the part of her that yearned desperately for some friends.

It was that same part that was counting down the seconds until Asami was scheduled to arrive, despite all the risks that carried.

There was no denying that the non-bender was consuming a great number of her thoughts lately, and not in the “she could be an Equalist spy I must watch every single word I say” kind of way.

More of a “I really, really want her to keep thinking I’m a nice person I must watch every single word I say” sort of thing.

Well…at least part of it amounted to the same thing.

She wished she could say her interest in the girl was entirely for her utility, in helping her get closer to Hiroshi Sato and thus, possibly, Amon. But again, she saw little point in lying to herself.
Asami clearly wanted to be friends with her, which was something Korra couldn’t say about anyone else she’d ever met. Well, to be perfectly accurate…she wanted to be friends with Mizore. Which was part of the issue, of course.

The moment the beautiful girl realized that nearly every word they’d ever exchanged had been a lie, this was all going to come crashing down.

But until then…maybe…

Asami arrived a few minutes after their lunch break came to a close. She was dressed smartly, in a suit of dulled reds and blacks – a testament to the Sato family’s Fire Nation heritage. Her vibrant green eyes, however, made evident that she also shared Earth Kingdom blood.

She’d done something differently with her hair today, Korra couldn’t help but notice. It was tied into a neat bun and pinned in place, similar to how Ming-Hua usually wore hers. More practical than wearing it long, when working in a place like this.

As soon as she noticed Korra staring at her, the non-bender gave a smile and friendly wave. Korra thought about it for a second, shrugged, and then waved back.

If she was gonna be resented as the “boss’ pet,” she might as well at least own it.

“Huddle up, everyone, huddle up!” Asami called out, her voice ringing through the factory with the air of someone who’d practiced this quite often. “I know you’re all busy, but I just want a couple minutes to make some announcements.”

She held up a clipboard, her eyes roaming quickly over a few inches of thick paperwork.

“First off, just wanna say, your morning supervisor tells me you’ve all been doing a great job so far,” she said. “I know it’s not the most glamorous job in the world, but it’s vitally important to Future Industries and I appreciate you giving it your all.”

She gestured at her right, as another young woman – maybe five or six years older than Korra, with a severe face and tightly pressed green clothing – stepped forward.

“Secondly, this is Kinzoku. She’s joining us on loan from our Omashu branch,” Asami went on, as the other woman bowed her head to the assembled waterbenders. “She’s a metalbender of significant skill, and she’s agreed to help us out even further with the ore refining process. I’m hoping this can be a great partnership on all sides.”

“When’ll she be starting?” asked one of the Northerners, his tone less than entirely welcoming to the idea.

“Next week, with any luck,” answered Kinzoku. Her voice had a quality to it that was decidedly unique, though Korra had trouble coming up with any other word to describe it. “I still need to fill out some paperwork for the transfer.”

She then gestured to Asami for her to continue, and she did so.

“Finally…” said the non-bender. “I’ve been asked to share a huge opportunity with any of you that’re pro-bending fans.”

Korra’s attention perked up immediately.

“The Fire Ferrets, Republic City’s only homegrown team, is scouting for a new waterbender,”
Asami told them, flipping to a new page on her clipboard. “Don’t go spreading this around too much yet, but apparently, the Council has decided to sponsor them directly. And according to their page, they’ve recommended *you* folks as good candidates for the spot. Anyone who’s interested can take a flyer, and go for tryouts tonight.”

Several of the Northerners immediately stepped forward, and picked up some hastily scrawled flyers from Asami’s gloved hand. Korra hesitated for a few seconds, before grabbing one as well.

“I probably shouldn’t say this, but I’m a *big* Fire Ferrets fangirl,” added their supervisor, winking for good measure. “So *I really* hope one of you makes the cut. It’d be super-cool to see Future Industries represented in the arena.”

To emphasize the point, she clapped her hands together loudly, and then raised her voice again to exclaim, “Alright, that’s it for now! Back to your stations, wave me over anytime if you have a question!”

Korra did as she was bid, though one eye remained on Asami and Kinzoku as they returned to the former’s office. She had to repress a short pang of… something, as she couldn’t help but observe how absurdly beautiful the two of them were.

Well… Kinzoku would look a lot prettier if she stopped making a face like she had a metal rod up her butt, that was true. But even then, she was a nine out of ten at least.

The Avatar pushed those very strange, very unhelpful thoughts from her mind, however, and forced her eyes back down to the flyer in her hand. Nothing was written on it but a time and a location. She shouldn’t go, she knew. Under absolutely no circumstances were the potential benefits worth the risk.

And yet…

Korra returned to her workstation and resumed her menial task, her mind racing.

[-------------------]

Lin Beifong’s stewed silently as she drove to City Hall, the only noise out of her mouth being the occasional, rumbling growl.

Being woken up by a summons from her least-favorite Council member would’ve put her in a foul mood on the best of days, and she was not having one of those right now.

How dare he? How *dare* he…?!

“If you’re here for Su, you can save us both some time and get the heck out of here,” she said biting. “I’m not interested in anything she has to say.”

The man calling himself Aiwei didn’t budge, however. “Be that as it may, I take my duties seriously,” he replied in a low voice. “I’m simply here to deliver a message. What you do with it is your business.”
Lin grimaced, but ultimately nodded. Getting this over with quickly was probably the easiest way to deal with it.

“Just come out with it, then,” she muttered.

“Suyin recently became aware of certain...elements at work in this city,” explained Aiwei. “She was concerned about you. She thought perhaps you could use some help.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” said Lin with a roll of her eyes. “Little miss queenie looking down from her no-rules paradise and taking pity on her poor, actually-has-to-work-for-a-living sister. Well she can take that ‘concern’ and shove it.”

Aiwei folded his hands. “With all due respect, Chief Beifong, Suyin merely has Republic City’s best interests at heart,” he responded. “She wasn’t sure if she believed the reports when she heard them at first, but...”

Lin’s eyes narrowed even further than they already were, which was something of an accomplishment.

“Hold up there,” she interjected, jabbing a finger at the man’s chest. “Since when is Su the type of person who gets reports? She’s no leader, no kind of officer! All she did was run off, without facing the consequences for what she’d done, and set up some cozy little commune for other people who don’t want to face the consequences!”

“Suyin had a wide variety of connections, and many friends,” said Aiwei, now sounding a little less patient. “She hears many things, and when she heard about a secret group trying to subvert her sister’s city from within, she...”

Lin held her hand to cut him off again. “I know about the Equalists, and we’ve got them under control,” she snapped. “So thanks, but no thanks. You can leave now.”

But Aiwei shook his head. “The Equalist movement could indeed prove to be a grave threat to the world,” he told her. “But I am not talking about them.”

Lin shook her head vigorously as she parked her Satomobile and set the brake, trying to clear her mind. She had to forget about last night.

She had more important things to focus on right now.

When the Chief of Police entered the Council chamber, raised voices were already flying back and forth. Neither of the speakers seemed to have noticed her entrance, though the page recording it all gave her a nervous wave.

“If you think we can afford to sit idly by while this goes on, you’re living in a fantasy world!” shouted Tarrlok. “People are being abducted off the streets, Tenzin! We can’t let this stand!”

“You don’t have any proof of that,” the airbender said heatedly, his robes slightly disheveled. “And even if you did, this plan goes too far! Pushing too hard on the non-bending population could incite the very revolution you’re trying to prevent!”

“Much as I hate to say it, I have to agree with Tarrlok on this one. Or at least part of it,” Lin spoke up, causing the gathered councilmembers to notice her for the first time.
Tenzin looked somewhat conflicted, but recovered quickly. “What exactly do you mean, Lin?” he asked.

“The abductions,” she answered, taking up position next to Jitai, the Fire Nation councilwoman. “Took a little while for me to be sure, because they aren’t usually big on filing missing-person reports, but triad members have been vanishing off the records for weeks.”

“Couldn’t there be another explanation for that?” the Earth Kingdom councilor, Wei Yuan, piped up suddenly. “These are street criminals, surely they disappear all the time.”

Lin shook her head. “Not this many,” she said. “Obviously, it’s difficult to get hard numbers, but all four major triads are certainly acting like they’ve been taking heavy losses. And if it was because of a turf war or something, we’d have heard about it by now.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, Chief, but…are we sure this is such a bad thing?” asked I’Inka of the Southern Water Tribe. “The bending triads have been a menace to our city for years.”

“It starts with the triads, but it won’t stop there,” Tarrlok declared, his words firm and uncompromising. “If we sweep this under the rug and pretend it isn’t happening, it’ll only embolden the Equalist menace. I promise you, in a few weeks it’ll be civilians next! Men, women…children. And we aren’t even certain what these terrorists are doing to the people they target.”

“I’ll admit you make some good points, Tarrlok,” replied Tenzin, adopting a cautioning tone. “But nonetheless, we can’t just…”

“I know, I know,” Tarrlok murmured dangerously. “You’ll have your vaunted proof in two days’ time. At which point I will hold another vote, and hopefully you’ll all have learned to see some sense.”

And with that, he stormed out of the chamber, his fancy robes sweeping behind him.

Lin, for her part, sidled up to Tenzin. Speaking privately to her ex-boyfriend was always a little bit awkward, even in a professional setting, but she had to ask.

“What’d he propose?” she said in a low voice. “What was the vote on?”

“Tarrlok wanted to impose a curfew on all non-benders,” the airbender whispered back, wrinkling his nose in distaste for the notion.

“That’s a terrible idea,” stated Lin immediately. “It’s difficult to enforce, easy to circumvent, and it alienates the majority of the population for the sake of catching a tiny group.”

“Which is pretty much exactly what I said to him,” responded Tenzin with a sigh. “But he won’t listen. I think he sees the Equalists as an opportunity to grab the power he’s wanted for years.”

It was probably best Aiwei hadn’t come to him, then, Lin couldn’t help but think.

“The Red Lotus?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “I’ve never even heard of them.”

“Few have,” said Aiwei. “A splinter group from the Order of the White Lotus, their members operate in secret all over the world. Your mother has taken an…interest in them, ever since the Southern Massacre – which she believes them to be responsible for. She spoke of it to Suyin at length during her last visit.”
“Wait, wait. Back up a second,” Lin cut in, her face stern. “You’ve seen my mother? She visits you?!”

She left Zaofu some time ago, to find enlightenment,” explained the metalbender. “But yes, she returns on occasion. Typically only when she has business to attend, however...as was in this case.”

“And what’d she say, then?” demanded the police chief.

“That the Red Lotus have been setting up a base of operations, in or around Republic City,” he said. “If they didn’t have one already. The society is exceedingly crafty, and plays the long game. Anyone you meet could be one of their agents.”

Aiwei paused, closing his eyes briefly and frowning, as if deep in thought.

“You are correct, however, that the Equalists are not entirely an unrelated matter,” continued the bespectacled man. “Or at least, Master Toph doesn’t think so. She believes the Red Lotus are here either to ally with, or to destroy utterly, the Equalist threat.”

“Those two options really narrow it down,” Lin muttered dryly.

“She’s not certain they’ve made up their mind between the two,” replied Aiwei. “Of course, this is all speculation. Master Toph may be brilliant, but she isn’t all-knowing.”

At this, Lin loosed a derisive, snorting laugh. “Well isn’t that the news story of the century,” she whispered bitterly. “But fine, I’ll keep an eye out. Now will you please take a hint, and get the heck out of my office?”

“I’ll only trouble you a moment longer,” he said, again not rising to the bait of her obvious antagonism. “There is one other matter I’m certain you’d wish to know about.”

“In any event, there’s not much more we can do for it now,” Tenzin added after a little while, his tones low and weary. “We’ll see what Tarrlok has in store for us in the next couple days, and then decide from there.”

“I have a bad feeling his so-called ‘proof’ won’t be anything good,” Lin murmured back through pursed lips.

“I have a feeling you’re probably right about that,” said the airbender. “But whether we like it or not, he’s the legitimately appointed chairman of the United Republic Council. And as I said...he may not be entirely wrong.”

“The hardest part to admit,” responded Lin with a sigh. “Still, we don’t even know whether he’s going after the right threat.”

“What do you mean, Lin?” Tenzin asked, concern in his voice.

By the spirits. She hadn’t meant to let that slip out.

Hastily covering for herself, Lin stammered out, “Nothing. Just...Just a hunch, that’s all. Leave me to do my job, and I’ll leave you to yours.”

The councilman sighed as well. “If you insist,” he said, his arms folded and his head dipped pensively. “I’ll see you whenever Tarrlok sees fit to call a follow-up meeting.”
“Yeah…see you then,” she grumbled, already on her way out the door.

“She what?!” Lin yelled out, slamming her fist into the nearest wall. “I just told you, Su isn’t the leader of anything! Not elected, not even legally appointed! And she thinks she can just…!”

“Suyin meant no disrespect, Chief Beifong,” said Aiwei, his utter calm persisting in spite of her increasingly violent rage. “She only wished to help.”

“By placing one of her ‘people’ in my city?” she demanded at the top of her lungs. “By sending some…some…vigilante to run loose on a case she has no business butting in on?!”

“Suyin trusts her intimately,” Aiwei replied. “And I can vouch personally for her dedication and discretion. There is no chance of her engaging in any…improprieties, during her search. She will gather the intelligence you need, share it with the police department, and then return to Zaofu as silently as she came.”


But the Metal Clan member just shook his head.

“Even if I wished to comply, I could not. We undertook our tasks separately, and in secret, as Suyin requested,” he explained. “She is already under deep cover, chasing a lead. I can tell you nothing of her whereabouts, save that she is within the city limits.”

“And this was all to help, of course,” said Lin through gritted teeth. “All this going on, and she decides the one thing I need is another unknown.”

“You may do with this information what you will. My only purpose was to deliver the message,” responded Aiwei, now turning to leave. “I wish you a good evening, Chief Beifong.”

In both the past and present, Lin let loose a frustrated snarl and stormed away.

[-------------------]

The location on the flyer turned out to be, in what could only be described as the epitome of irony, the Southern Water Tribe Cultural Center.

Korra noted, with more than the slightest twinge of bitterness, that the magnificent blue-and-silver building could probably house more people than the actual population of the tribe it represented. The gleaming statue of Chief Sokka, holding his legendary boomerang in triumph, probably shined brighter than any of the snows he’d walked through in life.

The very existence of this place was a joke. A memorial to a “culture” that was all but dead.

Just like the two Southerners who’d brought her into it.

That it was about to serve as a staging ground for glory only Northerners were allowed to partake
in…*that* only made the joke all the crueler.

Korra took a deep breath, centering herself, and pushed forward. She *had* to remember what the Lotus had taught her. There was no point in dwelling on what’d already happened. The past could not be changed.

But the future *always* could be.

The cultural center’s posted closing time had passed over an hour ago, and all its lights had been snuffed out for the night, but Korra found the doors unlocked and slightly ajar. It creeped the Avatar out, just a little bit, but she pressed on nonetheless.

Crude signage directed her to a room toward the rear of the complex. It was, apparently, a reproduction of the courtroom within the Southern Water Tribe Royal Palace.

Except that *this* version hadn’t been reduced to a mound of slush, of course.

There were five others seated on the faux-ice benches – three she recognized from work, and two others she’d never seen before. She took a seat some distance away from them, grateful no one was trying to start any conversation.

One more person, another fellow employee, arrived before the clock struck the hour on the flyer. At that very moment, a small, elderly man entered from a side-room and bowed low.

“Thank you all *so* much for coming!” he said. His voice sounded oddly squeaky, like a rusty hinge. “I hope you all found the place okay.”

“Are you gonna be the one judging the tryouts?” asked one of the Northerners impatiently.

The man nodded. “I’m here representing Councilman Tarrlok. He regrets that he wasn’t able to attend personally, but he *is* a very busy man,” he answered. “Now, since there’s so few of us, I think we can do these one at a time. Would you like to start us off, miss?”

It took Korra a second to realize he’d directed those last words at her.

“Uh…um…sure!” she managed to sputter, grinning nervously. “Err…what do you want me to do?”

“Just follow me, good miss,” he said brightly, gesturing to the room he’d just come from. “I’ll see each of you one at a time, just to make sure no one has any unfair advantage over the others.”

Korra wasn’t sure how much sense that made, but she followed his instructions nonetheless. She was hardly prepared for what happened the moment the door closed behind them, however.

The tiny man let out a jubilant squeal, leaned forward, and *hugged* her.

“Oh, you’re so *clever!* I thought this was a longshot, but you pulled it off! You wonderful, *wonderful* girl!” he exclaimed.

Korra had absolutely no response to this. Her brain had pretty much completely shut down from overload of “whaaaaaaaahn…”? She knew she was missing *something*, but for the life of her, she hadn’t the slightest idea *what*.

Finally, after regaining enough mental faculties to realize she *should*, she awkwardly pushed the old man away from her midsection and demanded, “What the heck is going on here?”

His face fell a bit. “Wasn’t this your plan all along?” he asked, his eyebrows scrunched together.
“To find a way to meet that wouldn’t arouse suspicion, either from Hiroshi Sato or Tarrlok? I apologize, I’ve been wanting to debrief you myself ever since you came to the city, but…”

And suddenly, everything clicked.

“Jilu…?” Korra whispered, finally realizing who this unassuming little man must be.

Any trace of his prior joviality disappeared in an instant.

“So…you really didn’t know?” said Jilu, suddenly giving off an aura of menace that contrasted strongly with the squeaky quality of his voice. “You took on this risk to your cover, potentially jeopardized everything the Lotus has been working toward…just for the sake of being a pro-bender?”

A shiver went up the Avatar’s spine. “Err…no! No, of course not! I was…umm…just…you see…” she replied, scrambling hastily for an excuse. “I was, err…just testing you! Yeah, that’s it!”

“Testing me,” repeated the bespectacled man, his tones dripping with doubt.

An awkward, nervous grin she didn’t actually feel at all spread across her face.

“Well, uh…I mean, I’d never met you in person before, right?” she continued, unsure where she was going with this. “So, err…the thing is, you could’ve been an Equalist impersonating Jilu, couldn’t you? I’d, umm…never know the difference…”

Korra hadn’t really been expecting him to buy that hippo-cow manure, but to her abject surprise, the brightness immediately returned to his face.

“You know, I hadn’t even thought of that!” he said, briefly squeezing her around the waist once more. “I guess they don’t call you the Avatar for nothing! Not that anyone should be calling you that around here, kinda the point of being undercover, but still…”

“So is this your cover?” asked Korra, grateful for the chance to skate by her grievous error in judgment. “Zaheer was sort of vague about it.”

Jilu nodded. “Page to Republic City’s Council by day, senior member of the Red Lotus by night!” he told her. “It’s usually a pretty cushy gig. Tarrlok treats me like dirt, but that’s fine. Running around, doing all his errands gives me a chance to check in on all my contacts. And as long as I keep up the ‘squeaky-voiced coward’ act, he barely pays any attention to me. The perfect position for a spy.”

“I guess that makes sense…” Korra murmured quietly, trying to process all of this. When the others had spoken about their top operative in the city, placed within striking distance of the Council, this was not the sort of man she’d pictured. “Oh, speaking of which! I met another agent last night.”

“Yes, he handed me a report this morning, before leaving for our new base at Su Oku,” said Jilu. “He asked you to help rescue his brother, didn’t he?”

Korra could only give a small, quiet nod.

“It’s a shame what happened to poor Nei Jian,” added the old man, shaking his head sadly. “And if you get the chance, it’s a good idea. The kid doesn’t know much, but leaving any info in Amon’s hands is a liability. Still, I can’t call him a priority right now.”

“Of course,” responded Korra, unsure of what else to say.
“So how’s progress, otherwise?” he went on, without missing a beat.

Korra figured the attendant from Kwong’s had already related everything she’d told him, so she wracked her brain for anything new to add.

Finally, she said, “I guess you should know I’ve been invited to Hiroshi Sato’s home this weekend. I’m hoping I’ll be able to learn whether or not he’s connected to the Equalists then.”

“Any chance this invitation could be a trap?” asked Jilu. “The timing seems awfully suspicious.”

“I…don’t think so?” muttered Korra, looking askance. “I, err…haven’t ruled out his daughter being an Equalist spy herself. But I think her invitation was sincere.”


“I just do, okay!” she blurted out, a little more loudly than she’d been intending. “Err, I mean…can you just trust me to handle this part on my own? Master Zaheer gave this job to me, and I need to do it my own way.”

Jilu sighed deeply, but ultimately nodded. “Very well, Avatar Korra,” he said. “Or…what was your cover name, again? I guess I should get used to using it.”

“Mizore…” she answered, her voice quiet. Saying it still didn’t feel entirely natural.

“Well then, Mizore. It’s been good chatting with you. We’ll be in touch soon,” Jilu continued on, leaping to his feet and giving another bow. This one was far shorter.

“Wait…what about my audition?” asked Korra, surprised at the abruptness of her dismissal.

At this, however, the old man just laughed heartily.

“Well, obviously you’re going to be my choice,” he said after a moment, once he’d managed to stifle his guffaws. “I mean, we can’t just let an opportunity like this pass us by, right? A ready-made excuse to meet privately all the time? Sure, I’ll pretend to let the other kids have their shots, but there’s no way it’ll be anyone but you.”

“Err…gee, thanks…” mumbled the Avatar, now feeling distinctly wrong-footed. She knew she should be happy, but this wasn’t exactly how she’d been expecting to nail her tryouts.

If Jilu noticed her mixed reaction, however, he didn’t comment on it. Instead he donned a big, fat grin, and gestured to the door.

“Welcome, Mizore,” he added, his servile demeanor returning to his face like a glove over a hand. “Welcome to the Republic City Fire Ferrets.”

[------------------]

Tenzin clutched at his head as he disembarked from his glider, right in the center of Republic City Park, and groaned audibly.

He was really getting too old for this.
Gliding had been his favorite activity as a child, and in the years since it’d never failed to lift his
spirits. Until his death, it really and truly had been the one thing he and his father could always share
– and only them.

Whenever Bumi was picking on him, or Kya retreated into her room in her latest attempt to “find
erself” (yes, she’d been doing that since she was nine), Tenzin could always count on the skies to
take him away, far above what any non-airbender could possibly imagine.

But the cold night air and rushing headwinds were harsher on his middle-aged bones than they’d been as a child, and what should’ve been an energizing experience had only drained him further.

He knew he probably should’ve taken Oogi for a trip of this length, but the poor boy had been flying around with Ikki and Meelo all day, and Tenzin decided he could use the break. And in any event, he didn’t have much father to travel.

This was a route he’d taken a great many times in the past fifteen years, ever since she’d moved to join him and his family in the city. Republic City Park was the closest piece of wide, open space for landing, and her apartment was only about a five-minute walk away.

Perhaps, at his age, he should’ve outgrown the instinct to seek her out first. But little was certain right now, and even less was understood. That feeling wasn’t one he enjoyed experiencing.

In days gone by, when he’d felt similarly, his father had been the rock he’d tethered himself to – an ironic turn of phrase perhaps, given Aang’s infamous difficulties with earthbending, but an apt one in this case.

Which left only one option to turn to.

Her home was small, cozy; decorated intimately with skins and beads of southern origin, and eschewing all but the most basic appliances. Numerous photographs covered the walls nearly from head-to-toe: her and her husband; their children; any number of old friends and allies, both living and departed.

It looked, for all the world, like it belonged to a member of the lowest classes of the United Republic. Not to one of its most influential founders.

There was already a teapot on the stove, which she was tending, her back turned away from him. Of course there was. He hadn’t told her he’d be dropping by, but she knew.

Somehow, she always knew.

“Good evening, mother,” he said, bowing his head in deepest respect.

Slowly, with great care, Katara turned around, the warm smile on her face precisely the same as the one she’d worn on the day he was born.

“It’s good to see you, Tenzin,” she replied, returning the bow as deeply as her aged muscles would allow. “Please, sit down.”
“It’s…not bad,” Ming-Hua said tersely, her water-arms entwined.

Coming from her, it was a compliment of the highest order.

Their new base of operations along the Su Oku River was indeed impressive, for something that’d been thrown together in the space of three days. Thanks to their earthbenders expanding a small natural cave nearby, nearly the entire complex was underground, making detection all but impossible.

Ghazan was currently at work reinforcing all the walls and ceilings. He trusted the talents of the earthbenders they had here, largely, but it couldn’t hurt to be sure. And few benders shared the tattooed man’s sheer level of… finesse.

P’Li and Ming-Hua were both hard at work as well, if somewhat begrudgingly in the latter case. The combustionbender’s explosions were more hindrance than help down here, but she was still a talented firebender outside of that, and she was currently making sure they had enough fires to provide for warmth and cooking.

The waterbender, meanwhile, was using every last ounce of her skill and fine control to channel a portion of the river to flow underground. The Su Oku’s waters were potable, and had been used by a nearby village for centuries. It’d once even housed a world-class spa, of all things, close to their current location.

But the end of the Hundred Year War, and the consolidation of the Fire Nation colonies into the United Republic, had largely rendered the Su Oku village obsolete. That was not uncommon, for the colonies that existed on the outer rim of the new nation.

Its peoples invariably wanted to move inward, toward the big cities – and Republic City, in particular. The last seventy years had seen a huge swell of population growth in the urban areas, and the essential abandonment of dozens of smaller towns and villages which’d stood for centuries.

But the infrastructure and natural resources, which’d allowed some of these places to stand since the era of Avatar Bai, still remained. And now, they were being turned to greater purpose.

They had a total of nineteen support staff, most of them agents who’d been relocated from within or around Republic City. Among them were three waterbenders, five firebenders, and six earthbenders – two of them able to use metal as well.

All of them, bender and non-bender alike, deferred to Zaheer as a matter of principle. By definition, of course, the Red Lotus didn’t have leaders. Indeed, more than one senior member had warranted assassination in the past, for trying to grasp at power that wasn’t there.

Still, these people respected him, and within the Lotus that was enough. He didn’t need to give orders if no one here would even think to disobey his requests.

“A fine job, all of you,” he told them after a few hours, once the whirlwind of activity had begun to die down. “Barring unforeseen events, the Avatar’s mission will require us to remain within a day’s travel of Republic City, for at least the next few months. Those months will be difficult, for all of us. But I trust in your loyalty to the Red Lotus…and to our cause.”

Several of the attendants raised their fists in the air, and a great cry of support erupted across the
It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” murmured P’Li as she came up next to him, her two natural eyes shining. “What you’ve built. What we’ve built.”

“It is,” said Zaheer, his lips barely moving as he spoke. “But the mission is far from over.”

He waved over one of the non-benders, a florist named Hanaya. Her profession made her an invaluable asset in the city, as she could easily slip messages or other small objects into her deliveries.

As such, she’d been the last one to speak with their operative at Air Temple Island.

“It is an honor, Master Zaheer,” the old woman whispered, bowing her head. “How may I serve the Lotus?”

Zaheer held up a hand. “Please. No need for titles,” he replied quietly. “What can you tell me of our progress?”

“I delivered to Master Jilu, Mistress Haguru, and Mistress Chui prior to coming here,” said Hanaya. “I have reports from all three.”

“Then give them to me,” Zaheer declared immediately. “Time grows shorter and shorter still.”

Tenzin sipped from his tea cup, savoring the bitter yet subtle taste. Of course she’d made it just how he liked it.

She was his mother, after all.

Katara mirrored her son, though she added several spoonfuls of something that looked like honey into her own.

“These old tastebuds of mine aren’t what they used to be, you know,” she said as she caught him staring; Tenzin’s face instantly went red. “If I need to give them a little kick in the pants once in a while, I’m fine with that.”

“Of course, mother,” responded the airbender, before sighing deeply. “Thank you for seeing me so late. I…have a lot on my mind, these days. And incredibly few people with whom I can share any of it.”

She waved off his thanks. “Come now, Tenzin. We both know I don’t have much else to do, these days,” she told him. “Besides, you’re my son. I’ll always have time for you.”

Tenzin flushed slightly, but said nothing.

“Now…” continued the waterbending master, as she took a seat in a comfy armchair across from her youngest son. “How is it I can help you?”

“It’s…Jinora,” said Tenzin, his head bowed. “She spoke to me this morning of…visions she’s been having lately…”

She waved off his thanks. “Come now, Tenzin. We both know I don’t have much else to do, these days,” she told him. “Besides, you’re my son. I’ll always have time for you.”

Tenzin flushed slightly, but said nothing.

“Now…” continued the waterbending master, as she took a seat in a comfy armchair across from her youngest son. “How is it I can help you?”

“It’s…Jinora,” said Tenzin, his head bowed. “She spoke to me this morning of…visions she’s been having lately…”
He began to relate her granddaughter’s words in as much detail as he could recall. Katara listened on without interruption, simply drinking her tea as she took in his story.

Once he’d finished, however, she opened her lips slightly and whispered, “This is very grave news, Tenzin. If not entirely unexpected.”

“What do you mean, mother?” he asked.

“I cannot speak to the Tree of Time, or the ‘evil’ she senses,” explained the elderly waterbender. “But I’ve communed with the spirits more times than most – albeit, not as often since your father passed. Still, I can tell they’ve grown…restless, as of late. Why, I cannot say. But I doubt Jinora’s plight is unconnected.”

“I just feel so…helpless,” said Tenzin. “I want to do something for her, but all this is even beyond my depth. I’m supposed to be a spiritual leader, but…”

She placed a comforting hand on her son’s shoulder. “Even a leader can’t always have all the answers,” Katara replied. “I learned that the hard way, twelve years ago.”

Tenzin didn’t need to ask what she was alluding to. The Southern Massacre had claimed the lives of her brother, her friends, and about ninety percent of her tribe…not to mention, the young Avatar, discovered by the White Lotus less than a year prior.

All this time since, and the Order still hadn’t located that poor girl’s successor. The Earth Kingdom was a big place, admittedly, and Avatars born into it often took longer to identify as a result. But it still made for yet one more tragedy that night had inflicted upon the world.

“Does it ever get better?” he murmured, his eyes closed. “This feeling…that you’ve failed the ones closest to you…?”

“No…I can’t honestly say it does,” said Katara sadly. “But you haven’t failed, Tenzin. Not yet. Not until you stop looking for answers. Just because I can’t give them all to you, doesn’t mean they aren’t out there somewhere.”

She put down her now-empty cup and took a deep, rattling breath. “There is one thing I can tell you, however,” she added. “I’m not sure if it’s connected to the spiritual troubles, but either way, it’s something you’ll no doubt want to investigate.”

“Go on, mother,” Tenzin encouraged her, sensing her hesitancy.

“It took me a while to be certain…but there can no longer be any doubt,” she answered, her voice very quiet. “There’s a bloodbender in this city.”

Tenzin’s eyes immediately went wide. “How can you be sure?” he asked.

Katara hung her head as she spoke, her tones solemn and regretful.

“I have bloodbent three times in my life. And even though two of them were to save lives, part of me wishes I could take back every single one,” she said. “That’s why I pushed so hard to have it outlawed across the world. Why I had nothing but support when Aang removed the most powerful bloodbending ever to exist in a person.”

The waterbender folded her wrinkled hands to keep them from shaking. She’d never met Yakone personally – she’d been busy raising her children in the South during his reign of terror and subsequent trial – but Aang, Sokka, and Toph had all experienced his horrific bending firsthand, and
their stories had inevitably reached her.

“The most terrifying thing about bloodbending, perhaps, is how...easy it becomes, after you’ve done it once,” Katara went on, after a lengthy and uncomfortable pause. “You become acutely aware of the water in others’ bodies…and how simple it’d be to make it move one way, or another. Just one little push. Just one little pull.”

Despite everything, despite how deeply he loved her and how much he knew his mother would never act on what she was describing, a chill ran up Tenzin’s spine.

“My point is, if you have that sort of…‘blood sense,’ you might call it…it’s obvious when you feel blood moving in a way it shouldn’t,” she told her son. “I was walking home from the store the other night, and I’m sure that’s what I felt. Somewhere, within the range of my bending, someone was being bloodbent.”

“I’ll have the police look into this immediately,” Tenzin stated seriously. “We’ll need to know where you were at the time, of course. It might help us narrow down the search.”

“I’ve already submitted a police report, with all the details,” said Katara. “But you could still speak to Lin, perhaps, and make sure it doesn’t get lost on someone’s desk. Whoever is doing this, they need to be stopped, Tenzin. And quickly. Because...”

She leaned forward, her warm blue eyes burning with an intensity her son hadn’t seen in years.

“This bloodbender, whoever they are…” she concluded, her tones hard and grave. “They’re like Yakone. That night was a new moon.”

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“Are you sure this is the right place, bro?” asked Bolin, restlessly bouncing up and down on his heels.

“The note Jilu left said we’d be meeting the waterbender they found right here,” said Mako, though he consulted the brief letter again just to be sure. “The summit still isn’t until tomorrow night, so we’ve got nothing better to do in the meantime. I mean, they’re only ten minutes late. I say we give it another five before we pack it up.”

The two of them were standing at a side-entrance to the bending arena, by a statue of Chit Sang – one of the world’s first pro-benders, and the first firebender to participate in the infancy of the sport.

Lots of people were shuffling around the area, despite no matches being scheduled today, but none of them looked like waterbending athletes.

Suddenly, Bolin began to chuckle, and a bulge moving up his shirt indicated that Pabu was crawling over him. The little fire ferret soon emerged onto his owner’s head and made chirruping sounds, its ears perked up as it stared off in the distance.

Both brothers followed the path of his beady orange eyes, and saw a young, dark-skinned girl jogging toward them, waving enthusiastically.

At least, up until the point when she tripped on the uneven tiles, stumbled dramatically, and took a
dive straight into the water.

“Oof, sorry about that. Yeah, the ground here…hahahaasn’t really been retiled in, like, ten years. Maybe twenty?” was Bolin’s response, as he and Mako rushed over to give her some help.

She was, however, a waterbender of course, and emerged from the bay in a rising funnel of liquid, returning to dry land with a neat flip for good measure.

“Err…can we, uh, pretend you didn’t see that?” she said nervously, squeezing the water out of her hair as she did. “The fall part, I mean. I think the ‘getting back’ part was okay.”

“Done,” replied Mako, though he didn’t return her awkward grin. He brandished Jilu’s letter. “You’re ‘Mizore,’ I guess?”

“The one and only,” she declared, a bit of water – or possibly sweat – dripping down her cheek. “Which must make you…Mako, and Bolin, right? I’ve listened to you on the radio, but I’ve never seen you in person.”

“The two and only,” Bolin stated confidently, casually flexing one of his arms. “Nice to meet you.”

He accompanied this by directing both his pointer fingers toward her and winking, a gesture that did little but utterly confuse the disguised Avatar. Doing so seemed to agitate Pabu, however, as he began to dart along his back and chirrup again.

“Oh, and this friendly fellah is our adorable mascot, Pabu,” he said after a moment, his voice instantly losing that artificial tone of bravado. “Together, we are the…duh duh duh dun…Republic City Fire Ferrets! And I guess you’re the newest gal we’ll be welcoming aboard!”

“Assuming everything all works out,” Mako added hastily, his tones cool and cautioning. “Tell me, Mizore. I guess you wouldn’t have had a chance to play much, being from the North, but how long have you been following pro-bending? Are you good on the rules, the strategies?”

“Oh, uh…a while!” Korra exclaimed through her grin, determinably not making eye contact with him.

She figured the honest answer of “the last two days” probably wouldn’t win her much points with this guy.

“But, err…I mean, I could always use a refresher course,” she continued after a moment, trying to think on her feet. “Not that I exactly need one, but…well, listening isn’t the same as doing, right?”

The smallest flicker of amusement tugged at the firebender’s mouth.

“True enough,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Alright then, rookie. The ring should be free right now.”

He clenched a fist, and a burst of flame erupted from his fingers, before dissipating a moment later. Korra had to admit, the effect was really freaking cool.

“So let’s see what you’ve got.”

[-------------------]
“Zhu Li! Get ready, I can feel the ideas starting to flow! Like my bladder after a late night on Ember Island!”

The beleaguered assistant to one of the world’s leading industrialists sighed, but readied her pen and said “Yes, sir” in a deadpan voice nonetheless.

Some variant of this exchange happened approximately ten times a day, on average.

Iknik Blackstone Varrick, for his part, was currently suspended by his ankles from a lengthy metal rod and munching on hot peppers. This was, after all, his standard “equipment” for brainstorming.

She didn’t understand it. But then, she didn’t understand a lot of how his mind worked. The point was it did, and that was the important part.

“Alright…it’s coming to me!” Varrick cried out, hot tears streaming from his reddened face as he shouted. “Sugar…coated…sausages! Portable doors! Pillows that go under the bed! Wait…I’ve got it! Zhu Li, do the thing!”

Zhu Li Moon hastened to unfasten her boss and fetch him a deep glass of water, which he drained in about two seconds.

“I can see it now, Zhu Li!” he said, grabbing her by the shoulder and stretching out his arm dramatically. “The wave of the future! Those movers we’ve been working on…oh, they’re just the beginning! Someday, every family on the planet will own a little screen for interacting with the world! News, entertainment, exitainment…sky’s the limit! And it’ll be called…Varri-vision! Streaming anything and everything right off the Varri-net!”

“Brilliant as always, sir,” she replied tersely. “But wasn’t the point of all this to figure out how to deal with the Equalists?”

Varrick paused mid-sentence in his extolment of the virtues of the coming “Varri-tal Age” and placed a finger to his chin, looking quizzical.

“Y’know what? I think you’re right about that….” he muttered, partially to her but mostly to himself. “Any of what I just said still apply?”

Zhu Li slowly shook her head.

“Ahh, monkey feathers! Well, you can’t win ‘em all,” said Varrick, punctuating his point with a finger-snap. “Alright then, new strategy. This time, you say whatever randomly pops into your head, and I’ll interpret it into words of pure genius! That’s called teamwork, Zhu Li. I tried to trademark it but they gave me some hippo-bull about ‘common usage’…”

His assistant sighed again, but did as she was bidden.

“Our primary issue is lack of intelligence,” she stated matter-of-factly. “We need to learn more about Amon and his organization, so we can make sure he doesn’t affect your business.”

“Exactly!” exclaimed the industrialist. “I may not be a bender myself, but Varrick Global Industries does not take kindly to terrorists! Although…terror can be darn good for business. People always buy things when they’re scared, it’s a fact of life!”

A mischievous grin was rapidly spreading across the Southerner’s face.

“Zhu Li, scratch everything I just said. Except the doors idea, send that one to R&D,” he added,
drumming his fingers against one another. “I mean, what more do we really need to know about Amon? He’s big, he’s scary, he takes bending away! Most people don’t know that part yet, but they will. We’re in just the right position to get in on the ground floor of this baby.”

Snapping his fingers again, Varrick called out, “Zhu Li! Scrap everything to do with Ginger in Gray! I think I know exactly what our first big mover should really be.”

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Ghazan moved along the banks of the Su Oku River, expertly practicing each of his forms.

Lavabending was a volatile art at the best of times, and it was certainly hard to do without attracting attention. He knew his one and only student had never quite mastered the fine control necessary to do so.

In terms of raw power, she of course eclipsed him any day of the week. She was the Avatar, after all. On her best day, he felt confident she could take on an actual volcano – and win.

But Korra was also decidedly...unsuitable in her approach. She tended to strike fast and hard, no matter which bending discipline she was executing, and when it came to lavabending usually overcompensated with big, showy displays.

Unlike most other earthbending, it was actually often easier to bend large amounts of lava at a time, as opposed to smaller, discrete amounts. It was like the difference between pouring water from a jar all at once, or doing so a single, minute drop at a time.

Unfortunately, her favored style would do her little good in Republic City. Lavabending was an immensely rare skill, and using it in any kind of overt fashion would only attract attention. She needed to be subtle, if it was going to be of any use to her out there.

Maybe that’s why he was training like he was now – trying to melt the smallest amount of rock possible, and manipulate it without drawing wandering eyes. In the hopes she might be able to do the same.

That all he’d taught her would give her some protection in that spirits-begotten city.

Ghazan sighed, allowing the tiny globule of lava he’d been moving around to fall into the river, rapidly cooling back into earth as it was swept away.

This hadn’t been what he’d signed up for, all those years ago. The kidnapping of the Avatar had just been the latest in a long line of missions, and he’d approached it with the same level of cool, professional detachment he’d have done for any other.

Kidnapping, theft, assassination…they were all the same, at this point.

Except that you didn’t have to live with the results of a theft for twelve years.

Growing to...care for Korra, had never been part of the plan. She was nothing more or less than another tool for their goals – arguably their greatest tool, perhaps, but a tool nonetheless. Fit only to be used, and then discarded. Trained to accept she’d eventually be discarded.
The specter of Harmonic Convergence loomed ever closer with each passing moment, and on that
day, he knew that it’d all be over. Korra would be worse than dead, her very spirit consigned to a fate the lavabender scarcely even understood.

It’d be the dawn of a new era – an era of peace and freedom, that’d been denied to the world for nearly ten thousand years. But the price…

“Wow. Someone sure looks tense,” came a dry voice from behind him.

Ghazan didn’t turn around, instead sitting himself down by the water’s edge. “I’m busy, Ming-Hua,” he said.

The waterbender elected to ignore this completely, lowering herself beside him using her water-arms.

“Oh, sure. Certainly looks that way,” she drawled, playfully slapping a wave of liquid across his face. “Funny how Zaheer never seems to stick ‘sit around and brood’ on the chore list, though.”

He let out a deep, frustrated breath. “Taking a break from training. But at least I am training,” Ghazan replied. “All this water around here, you could at least do something. You shouldn’t let your skills get rusty.”

Ming-Hua’s brow perked up, and a grin began to spread across her face that wasn’t entirely rational.

“Is that a challenge, big boy?” she asked, the tips of both her streams solidifying into ice as she did. “I could go for a little sparring match right about now.”

Truthfully, Ghazan saw little point in it…but he also saw little point in denying her. He knew she’d just keep insisting until he gave in.

So instead, he shed the outer layers of his robes, leaving him completely naked from the waist up, and readied a stance.

“Let’s just keep this quiet, alright?” he said, his senses already reaching through the ground to find the earth with the lowest melting point. “I’m not getting railed at by Zaheer for giving away our location. Not for your sake, anyway.”

“Please. Captain Baldy and Sparky Sparky Boom Lady are a little…occupied right now,” responded Ming-Hua, making mock-gagging sounds to punctuate the point. “But fine, I’ll make sure to keep your beatdown on the down-low.”

Then, she began her attack.

It became clear very quickly that if the waterbender was holding back, it wasn’t by much. One water stream whipped at him after another, each moving so quickly his eyes could barely keep track.

Holding this sparring session right next to a river had clearly been a mistake, as it provided Ming-Hua with no shortage of ammunition. So while she kept her strikes low, presumably to make them harder to spot from a distance, she more than made up for it with sheer quantity.

Eight, nine, ten of those liquid limbs – she was expanding her arsenal every few moments, testing herself to see how many she could control at once, and before long Ghazan lost count. If he didn’t want to wind up a bruised pile of meat on the ground, he needed to hit her back. Hard.

He started out by melting parts of the riverbank, forcing a sizable amount of lava into the water and raising a great cloud of steam. Ghazan knew she’d be able to bend the steam away from her, but it’d
distract her for at least a little while, buying him precious time to counterattack.

His plan went off without a hitch. Ming-Hua was hardly stupid, but she also wasn’t exactly what one might call a “cerebral” fighter. That made her easy to predict…especially for someone who’d spent the last sixteen years in her company.

Once he was temporarily blocked from her view, Ghazan struck back with as much force as he could comfortably muster. He couldn’t melt too much of the ground here, for fear of destabilizing the base below them, but there were a number of medium-sized boulders lining the area, and those he could easily use.

A torrent of lava hurtled through the wall of steam, just as Ming-Hua managed to clear the brunt of it. Instinct took over at that point, and she sacrificed more than half of her active streams to stop it, redirecting its burning-hot intensity back toward the river.

From there, their sparring began to take on a steady rhythm. Her streams had returned to a more manageable four, and grappled easily with every rock – molten or otherwise – that he sent her way.

“So what has you so down in the dumps, anyway?” she said in a carrying voice, as their duel reached a comfortable pace.

Ghazan hesitated to answer…but only for a moment. Ming-Hua was hardly the ideal confidante, but he needed someone to talk to right now.

“Do you remember when Korra was eight?” he asked in reply, as he casually parried her latest attack. “That trip to Kyoshi Island?”

“Well, I dunno if I’d call it a trip. I think I still have some bruises from all those chi-blockers,” the waterbender recalled sourly. “Anyway, what about it?”

“Before we assassinated the mayor, and everything went south…” Ghazan continued, just loud enough for her to hear over their battle. “The night before, you know? Korra was begging to go swimming in the lake.”

“Oh, right!” exclaimed Ming-Hua, doubling up her offense as she did. “Then that…water-spitting eel thing…”

“The unagi,” he said.

“Yeah, that thing! Still can’t believe she managed to ride it,” she added, now joining him in smiling at the memory. “For a little while there, thought we’d need to start the plan over with the next Avat-tyke.”

“Zaheer thinks it has to do with ‘spiritual memory,’ or something like that. Aang did it once, so it comes easier to her,” he explained, his voice distant and detached from the intensity of his counterattacks. “Not that she realized that, I’m sure. She thought it was just another animal to play with.”

“He was so pissed about her blowing our cover there,” said Ming-Hua, her smile shifting into a taunting smirk as they continued to exchange blows, their rhythm steadily increasing in tempo. “Always fun when our fearless leader stops ‘being the wind’ or whatever and loses his cool. Y’know…like a normal person.”

Finally, with a furious burst of effort, one of her streams managed to break through his defenses, sending Ghazan staggering to the ground.
“But why’re you bringing this up, anyway?” she asked. “It’s a cool story for parties and all. But I’m not seeing the point.”

Ghazan lay there for a few moments, contemplating his answer, before releasing a deep breath and cooling all the remaining lava in the area. He knew when he was beaten.

“I…no reason,” murmured the earthbender. “Just…been thinking a lot about the past. Even more about the future.”

Despite everything, Ming-Hua mildly surprised him by solidifying one of her water-arms—now returned to the normal two—and helping him to his feet.

“Guess I can see that. A lot’s going on right now,” she said in a low voice, sounding uncharacteristically pensive. “Geez, we’ve been working toward it for over a decade now, and I still barely understand what Harmonic Convergence is. And now it’s practically here. Hard to really take in.”

“When it’s all said and done…when we’ve re-fused Raava and Vaatu within her body…” whispered Ghazan, his lips moving faster than his brain. “Have you…thought about what’ll happen to her? To Korra…?”

Ming-Hua’s brow furrowed, and her mouth became a thin line.

“So that’s what all this is about,” she responded flatly. “I mean, I like her too, in a way. She’s easier to get along with than most. But you can’t forget who she is, Ghazan. What she is.”

“I know that!” he spat, more anger seeping into his voice than he’d intended. “I…I do know that. And I’ve come to terms with it. Or at least…I thought I did…”

“Do I need to be concerned about this?” demanded Ming-Hua, her eyes narrowing. “I’m no snitch, you know that. And I like you better than anyone else in this stupid society. But if you’re having second thoughts about this…”

“I’m not,” he said firmly. More to convince himself than her. “I’m not, alright? I’ll push through this. Just…if you could just not mention this to Zaheer or P’Li? I don’t want to make things more complicated than they already are.”

“…Fine,” she muttered back, but there was something in her expression that made him sure this wasn’t over. “But that’s the only favor you get out of me for the year. Eh…for the next five years.”

“I think I’ll manage,” Ghazan told her, his lip curling. “Anyway…I lost the match, so I’ll clean up the mess.”

“Hey, no argument here,” she said flippantly, already turned away from him and walking back to the cave entrance. “If you need me, I think I’ll be taking a nice, long nap. So I advise you not to need me.”

Ghazan waved her goodbye, though he knew she wouldn’t bother to look back and see it. Ming-Hua pretty much never looked back, at anything. It was part of her, for lack of a better term, “charm.”

With that being said, he got to work using his earthbending to restore the riverbank as best as he could, removing all overt signs of their brief match. But all the while, his mind was racing.
“I still don’t get what I did wrong…” Korra said sadly, sniffling as they rode a small steamboat back to the Earth Kingdom mainland.

Her eyes were puffy, and tearstains matted her burnt-red cheeks. Zaheer hadn’t done anything physical to her; he never did. But she’d never seen him that mad before.

Ghazan suspected she might’ve preferred to get hit.

He looked uneasily at the non-bender, who was staring in the opposite direction, his expression sullen. He suspected Zaheer might already be regretting how harshly he’d yelled at her, but he was still too angry to say so out loud.

P’Li, as always, stood by her boyfriend. And sending Ming-Hua to comfort a young child was like sending a shirshu to guard a pig-chicken house. So as always, it fell to Ghazan to be the proverbial “good cop.”

He’d never admit, least of all to himself, how much he enjoyed fulfilling that role.

“This was a really important mission, Korra, and it depended on us staying hidden as long as possible,” he attempted to explain, bending down on one knee so he could look her directly in the eye. “We still succeeded, but only because we got lucky. And besides…”

Ghazan grasped onto her tiny shoulders, helping to steady them; she’d been shaking uncontrollably since her dressing down.

“You could’ve gotten seriously hurt today, Korra,” he continued, his voice steady and even. “I know the Avatar has a special connection to nature, and you want to play with any animal you see, but a creature like the unagi is dangerous.”

“It didn’t seem all that dangerous to me…” the little girl mumbled, averting her eyes and biting her lip.

“That’s often when something is most dangerous,” said Ghazan. “When you stop expecting it to be a threat, it becomes easy to get surprised. You’re strong, Korra, no question. But you need to know your limits, too. We can’t always be there to protect you, if things get bad.”

Korra closed her eyes, sniffling again, but ultimately nodded her understanding.

“Okay…” she whispered, directing her gaze upward at Zaheer, who was still looking out over the water. “I…I’m sorry…”

Zaheer’s expression didn’t change, but after a few seconds he nodded as well. “Your apology is accepted,” he stated in a quiet voice, before turning away to join Ming-Hua and P’Li below-deck.

Ghazan watched as the non-bender departed, but his attention was abruptly snatched back as Korra darted toward him, squeezing hard around his midsection.

“I dunno what to do,” she breathed, choking down on another sob. “It feels like I just keep messing everything up…”

The earthbender knew he probably shouldn’t. Zaheer had gone over, extensively, a list of protocol they were to follow, in order to walk a fine line between engendering the Avatar’s loyalty, and becoming too unduly attached to her as a person.

But in the three years since her kidnapping, Ghazan knew all four of them had broken those
protocols. And none more often than himself.

So slowly, in the way he’d never once had anyone do for him, the earthbender found himself wrapping his muscled arms around the girl. Holding on tight, and not letting go.

And in response, she looked up at him, with trembling eyes and quivering lips…but also the purest, sincerest smile he’d ever seen in his life.

There was no question. His real problem was that, when he thought of Avatar Korra these days, it wasn’t their grand schemes or carefully laden plans that came to mind.

It was that smile. A smile only a child could wear. A child who had no idea what the people she thought of as family had in store for her.

A smile that, in less than a year, he would never see again.

[--------------------]

The very first thing Tenzin did, the morning after visiting his mother, was head to the police station.

It was clearly a busy morning for them. No less than six men, all of them wearing the colors and symbols of the Agni Kais, were in various stages of the arrest process.

“They torched a bar called Dante’s last night. Screwed up their getaway,” said Captain Saikhan, sidling up next to the councilman and answering his unspoken question.

Tenzin nodded briefly. “Where’s Lin?” he asked without preamble, looking past the gangsters to see if he could spot the metalbender reading one of them the riot act. “Err…Chief Beifong, that is.”

“We might be in luck. The leader of these miscreants offered info on the triad for clemency,” answered Saikhan. “The Chief is interrogating him now. You can see her after she’s done, Councilman Tenzin.”

Tenzin was just about to object to this, but what happened next made his half-formed protest moot. The door to the interrogation room opened, and Republic City’s Chief of Police stormed out, wearing her perpetually sour expression.


As she said this, Lin grabbed the man she’d been leading, another Agni Kai member – albeit one with significantly nicer clothes than his fellows – and hauled him over by his fancy collar to Saikhan.

“Put this one in with the rest,” she added, barely sparing the gangster a second glance. “We’ll let the judge decide if his testimony is worth shaving off a couple months.”

The Agni Kai leader clearly didn’t approve of these terms. “That wasn’t the deal, you lyin’ elephant-rat!” he exclaimed. “You said you’d let me go if I squealed!”

“I said I might consider letting you go,” said Lin, her tone severe. “Which I did. And I decided
against it. Now get your butt in a cell like a good boy, before I have to kick it there myself.”

Then, without missing a beat, she turned back to Tenzin and demanded, “Alright, you’ve got ten seconds to tell me why you’re here, and more importantly, why I should care. As you can plainly see, you haven’t caught me on a great day.”

“I doubt you have very many of those in the first place,” the airbender stated quietly.

“Exactly my point. So out with it, already,” she replied, beginning to count off on her fingers. “Six seconds…five…four…”

“Police report number two-two-one-two-zero-five,” Tenzin interrupted her, his expression extremely serious. “Submitted by my mother two days ago. You’ll want to take a look at it.”

“By Katara? Well, I guess I can’t really hold your actions against her,” said Lin, though her tone indicated she was certainly tempted to. “Still, if it’s something such a venerated master thinks is important, I suppose I can’t argue.”

“Trust me, it is,” muttered Tenzin through pursed lips, not wanting anyone else to overhear. Instead, he did little more than mouth: bloodbending.

Instantly, Lin snarled some kind of oath under her breath, and though he couldn’t quite make it out he was certain it was something he wouldn’t want repeated in front of his children.

“This is clearly National Pile-It-All-On-Lin Week. And I didn’t even get a medal for it,” Lin declared dryly, one hand over her face and a low groan exiting her throat. “But fine, I’ll look into this too. I want a favor in return, though.”

One of Tenzin’s eyebrows rose slightly. “What kind of favor do you mean?” he asked.

She motioned him to come closer, and he did so. In an even lower voice than before, she said, “That Agni Kai member just tipped us off about a summit all the triad leaders are holding, tomorrow night. I want to run a sting, but we’d need council authorization to put together anything meaningful. And I don’t want to bring this to a public meeting.”

“Why not?” responded Tenzin, before realizing the answer to his own question. “Ah…I see. You’re trying to end-run around Tarrlok.”

“You know the law here better than I do,” Lin admitted with a sigh. “Can it be done?”

The airbender looked thoughtful for a moment. “Strictly speaking, there’s nothing illegal about me authorizing your operation, in my capacity as a councilmember,” he eventually told her, choosing his words carefully. “But Tarrlok sure wouldn’t be happy about it.”

“He can go to the lizard-crows, for all I care,” snapped the Chief of Police, fitting a rather impressive amount of venom into a line that was barely above a whisper. “I’ll get everything prepped. I just need you to sign off at the end.”

“Understood,” said Tenzin, nodding solemnly.

It took him several moments to speak again, but when he did, it was in a drastically different tone. An increased feeling of weight behind his words.

“I can’t help but think…that all this is connected, somehow,” he added. “There are too many things changing in this city, too quickly, for it all to be a coincidence.”
“I’m starting to think you might be right about that,” she murmured, shaking her head as she did.
“Either way, I know there’s a piece of the puzzle we’re missing. But what is it?”

------------------------

The Avatar was currently in the midst of getting her butt kicked.

She was used to bending only one element at a time, in a manner of speaking. Since the fact that
Avatar Korra still lived was a heavily guarded secret, it was something of a necessity whenever they
engaged in combat missions.

But in those cases, she’d at least been able to use all of her talents in whatever element she’d chosen
for the day: fire and combustion, earth and lava, “normal” waterbending and its ability to craft
artificial limbs.

Pro-bending, as it turned out, was a far different story.

This was a sport in which her typical style – favoring the overwhelming power of fire and the
rootedness of earth, even when she was using her native water alone – was of virtually no help at
all. As an increasingly frustrated Mako explained, she had to restrict herself to short bursts of no
more than a second each, and could only strike opponents head-on from the front.

Anything more intense than that was, apparently, liable to earn a foul. Knocking people over the
sides, also a foul.

Bending water from outside her zone? A foul.

Changing its state? Foul.

In short, pretty much anything that’d actually be fun was, probably, a foul.

A few hours spent practicing this heavily restricted form of waterbending had Korra inwardly
begging to shift to Scorpion Form and knock Mako’s smug face into the pool surrounding them.

Part of her knew that, if she were in his shoes, she’d probably be just as irritated as he was right
now. He’d been promised a talented waterbender who the Council themselves had vetted as the best
fit for his team, and instead he’d gotten…well, her. A stupid little girl who’d barely even heard of
this game a week ago.

Of course, it was a lot easier to take out her anger on him than on herself.

“I already told you, you need to be lighter on your feet! You’d be a sitting turtle-duck with a stance
like that,” he said, any trace of patience having long since evaporated over the course of their
prolonged training session. “I’m getting a little tired of drilling the same stuff over and over!”

“Well excuse me, princess. Didn’t realize I was making you late for your hot stones massage,”
responded Korra, emphasizing her point by spitting over the nearest railing.

“Hot stones! Ha!” exclaimed Bolin, who’d been watching this all with varying degrees of
amusement. “Y’see, that’s funny, because you bend fire, and I bend…”

He stopped talking when he saw the look on Mako’s face.
“Anyway…” the firebender added, shifting his glare back to Korra. “I won’t lie, you’ve got potential. You bend water differently than anyone I’ve ever seen in this ring. But that won’t matter if you don’t get your act together. The rules aren’t just a bunch of cute little suggestions.”

Korra gritted her teeth at this latest jibe…but ultimately, she released her clenched fists, and let out a deep sigh.

“Yeah…I know. I’m awful at this,” she said quietly. “But…urgh, I don’t get it. There’s never been a style of bending I didn’t pick up right away.”

A chill ran up her spine as she realized what she’d just said.

Thankfully, rather than look aghast at her monumental slip-up, Bolin just adopted a curious expression and, ticking them off on his fingers, asked, “How many styles of waterbending are there, anyway? North, South…are we counting those swamp guys?”

Still, Mako’s expression remained hardened and unreadable, so Korra fumbled for an explanation that wouldn’t arouse suspicion.

“I, err…grew up with a lot of different kinds of benders,” she muttered after a moment’s pause, somewhat awkwardly. Once again, she decided a small kernel of the truth was probably the best call. “That’s all I meant. They all kinda influenced my style.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” replied Bolin, a finger to his chin. “Now that I’m looking for it, you move more like an earthbender than I do. Or at least you stand like one. Here, let me show you.”

And suddenly, despite his broad body and hefty weight, the younger man was moving with all the lightness of a dancer. He weaved and bobbed around the arena in demonstration, as if avoiding invisible fire and water blasts.

Then, when it came time to strike, he planted his feet firmly to the ground for only a second – not one sliver more – summoned two discs from the compartments below, and tossed them in a wide arc, at the same moment as he resumed his rapid footwork.

“See? Simple!” he said, as he demonstrated the technique twice more. “Pro-bending is all about controlling territory. You don’t get a lot of space, so you gotta make the most of it.”

“Yeah…I think I’m starting to get it now!” Korra declared, grinning as she copied Bolin’s movements almost perfectly. A stream of water followed her feet as she leapt into the air, striking her imaginary opponent dead-center before she even hit the ground.

“Okay. Definite improvement,” Mako told her as she landed, as if impressed in spite of himself. “Maybe there’s something to that whole ‘positive reinforcement’ thing after all, bro.”

They continued to drill variants on that technique for another hour or so, until moving around the arena with grace and agility began to feel practically second-nature. Once Mako was satisfied with her progress, another couple hours were given over to practicing team formations, moving as a unit to defend against enemy attacks, or to press their own.

Finally, once all that was said and done, and all three of them were so tired and sweaty they felt liable to drop at any moment, Mako called it a day.

“I was skeptical at first,” said the firebender, as they led Korra to their locker room. “But you pick this stuff up ridiculously quick. I think this might actually work out, Mizore.”
Korra’s cheeks went slightly pink at the compliment.

Mako, meanwhile, was fishing something out of his locker, which he tossed to the Avatar. It was a small, but thick, cheaply bound book.

“The rulebook,” he stated, his face briefly hardening once more. “You wanna play with us in the tournament, fine. But that’s my condition. Read it backward and forward. Make sure you can’t sleep without naming all fifty-two possible fouls.”

“Err…right,” answered Korra, though inwardly, she suppressed a shudder.

This was exactly what she needed right now. *Homework.*

“I’ve gotta go talk to Butakha. See if he’ll hold off on our rent until Tarrlok pays up,” he added to his brother, already halfway out the door. “You can show Mizore out of here, right bro?”

“Yeah, no problem!” Bolin called back, stretching his back and neck as he peeled off his uniform. “Ahhhh, that’s more like it. Nothing like a good streeeeeeeetch after a day of training.”

Now that the two of them were alone, however, Korra’s mind was working on overdrive. Mako’s parting words had reminded her of something she found rather odd.

Seizing the opportunity, she walked over to the earthbender and asked, “So what’s the deal with you guys and Tarrlok, anyway? Why’s he taken such an interest in pro-bending?”

“Well…I probably shouldn’t say…” replied Bolin, though with all the air of someone who really wanted to. “I mean, Mako said not to tell anyone.”

“Well…I probably shouldn’t say…” replied Bolin, though with all the air of someone who really wanted to. “I mean, Mako said not to tell anyone.”

“Eh, come on,” said Korra, in what she hoped was an entirely casual tone of voice. Figuring it’d enhance the effect, she placed a friendly hand on his shoulder. “Just between you and me. He doesn’t have to know, does he?”

A bright flush suddenly spread across the earthbender’s face.

“Err, well, umm…I guess…” he murmured nervously, his voice an octave higher than it normally was.

He coughed, and when he spoke again, his voice was suddenly extremely deep, and brimming with confidence.

“I, uh…guess there’s no harm in it,” he continued, coughing one more time. “See, Tarrlok’s recruited Mako and me for a super-top-secret mission. We’re gonna be spying on some of the triads for him, if you can believe it!”

“Ahhhh, that’s more like it. Nothing like a good streeeeeeeetch after a day of training.”

“Yeah, they’re supposed to be having some big major meeting about how to deal with those Equalist guys,” Bolin said casually. “Or something like that.”

Korra had a harder time with that one. Her eyes went wide as saucers.

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“Huh. Really…” whispered Korra, trying to control her reaction. That wasn’t what she’d been expecting at all.

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“Ah, then I should probably warn you. The meeting’s gonna be over there, in warehouse…twelve, I think he said? Anyway, it’s tomorrow night,” he explained. “So you might wanna take work off early. These are some seriously bad dudes, you don’t wanna risk running into ‘em.”

“I'll, err...keep that in mind,” she said, her voice slightly hollow. She couldn’t believe her good fortune right now.

Or rather, how unbelievably stupid this guy was being. Almost suspiciously stupid…

Korra rapped her knuckles against her temple. Nope. She wasn’t going there again.

Besides, even if this somehow was a trap...it wasn’t one she could afford not to spring.

“Hey, I uh...just remembered something I’ve gotta do,” she told Bolin, peeling off the last bits of her own borrowed uniform as she did. “Seeya both tomorrow for practice again?”

“Looking forward to it!” exclaimed the earthbender, either completely oblivious or doing an excellent job at faking it.

And with that, Korra made her way out of the bending arena as quickly as possible.

As did the person who’d been listening in on their entire conversation from the rafters.

------------------------

The woman who called herself “Kinzoku” proceeded along rooftops, continuing to track the Avatar’s movements – just as she’d been doing all day.

At least, she was pretty sure the so-called “Mizore” was the Avatar. All the pieces fit. Avatar Korra, had she lived, would be seventeen years old right now, and would share the young woman’s basic features – dark skin, blue eyes, brown hair.

It hadn’t taken her long to figure it out. That the Red Lotus would send someone to investigate Hiroshi Sato was a natural conclusion, so she’d elected to do the same, faking references from Future Industries’ Ba Sing Se division so she could sneak in without incident.

From there, it’d been a simple matter of monitoring for suspicious behavior during her tour of the facility. Given the timeframe of Master Toph’s vision, she could eliminate everyone but the very most recent hires – a pool of at most two dozen people.

And then...serendipity.

The maka’ole berry, when properly diluted, could produce a paste that hid certain things on the body from view – specifically, tattoos. But mixing such a substance was incredibly dangerous. Undiluted, the berries tended to cause severe, even permanent blindness. It wasn’t something just anyone could whip up, or would wear without a very good reason.

More to the point, within that delicate mixture were – among a dozen other ingredients – several trace metals. Minute enough quantities that she doubted even most other metalbenders would’ve detected them.

But she had some of the finest metalbending senses on the planet. And so, when she came face-to-
face with a young woman with bits of those very same metals flecked across her forehead…

She knew.

In that moment, it’d all clicked. Master Toph suspected the Red Lotus had instigated the Southern Massacre. If the Avatar had survived, they would’ve been in a prime position to abduct, imprison – possibly even indoctrinate her.

Furthermore, one of their most well-known agents was a combustionbender, who’d murdered numerous people over the years with her third eye. A chi-channeling tattoo normally placed at the center of the forehead.

Of course, that’d all been conjecture, but it’d certainly warranted further investigation. And after a sleepless day spent shadowing the young waterbender, she’d only grown more and more certain.

“Mizore” always checked over her shoulder when walking out onto the street or turning a new corner, as if worried about being followed. She moved with a grace and precision that was at odds with her apparent backstory, but would be explained perfectly by a life spent engaging in do-or-die missions.

And most incriminating of all, in a drawer in her apartment – locks were a fairly minor obstacle for a sufficiently talented metalbender – were numerous documents outlining detailed, pointed intelligence on Republic City. The name and symbol of the Red Lotus never turned up within their pages, but she could think of very few other groups with both the ability and the inclination to put them together.

That “Mizore” was an undercover operative for the Red Lotus was, in short, all but guaranteed at this point. The only open question was who she was.

But she’d seen the girl waterbending, and so far as she knew, there was no reason for a waterbender to inscribe a tattoo over their light chakra. That was the mark of the rare person gifted with the art of combustionbending.

And only one individual on the planet could wield both.

In any event, her theory would likely be borne out, one way or another, by seeing what the girl did next.

“Mizore” took a long and winding route away from the bending arena, as if subconsciously aware that someone’s eyes were upon her. Unfortunately for the waterbender, she very rarely looked up.

Her pursuer realized where she was heading several minutes before she arrived, but for the life of her she couldn’t follow the girl’s thought process. What business did she have in this part of town?

Then “Mizore” began to draw nearer to one of the gleaming estates in particular, and suddenly, it all became clear.

Following her any further was going to be difficult, if not impossible – the mansion stood on its own, and was simply too far from her current position to reach without drawing attention to herself. But that was fine. She could see and hear everything from here.

She watched as the young girl rapped twice, nervously, upon the thick oak doors that were at least three times larger than she was.

She watched as a dapperly dressed servant answered the summons, bowed respectfully, and retreated
back into the manor.

And she watched as Asami Sato came to the door, dressed in the fanciest and most attractive housedress she’d ever seen.

“It’s sorry I didn’t make it here today,” she overheard the waterbender say, using an instrument Baatar had invented to amplify the distant sound. “Something… came up. And I know it’s late, but…”

It was, indeed, just a few minutes shy of sunset. Certainly too late for this visit to be perfectly polite.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. My invitation still stands,” Asami replied, the genuine warmth in her smile evident even from this far away. “You could even stay the night, if you want. Trust me, we’ve got plenty of room.”

She didn’t hear what “Mizore” said in response, or perhaps her reaction was entirely non-verbal. Either way, she followed the young heiress into the manor, and the heavy doors slammed closed behind them.

Kuvira stood up, and swore under her breath. But ultimately, she supposed it didn’t matter. Even if she didn’t know what the Avatar was doing here now…

She certainly knew where she was going to be.
Chief Unalaq was meditating.

Or at least, that’s what it looked like from the outside. He could also be sleeping sitting up, the twins supposed. They’d never quite learned how to tell the two apart.

Currently, both of them were standing at a distance, staring at their father’s unmoving body, and silently trying to determine whether it’d be worthwhile to approach him.

“Father does not appreciate disturbances while he meditates,” Desna finally said, after several minutes of standing around and doing nothing failed to achieve results.

“Yet mother asked that we summon him to dinner,” added Eska, her voice equally toneless as her brother’s. “This presents a conundrum.”

“Perhaps we can endeavor to rouse father in an indirect manner,” suggested Desna. “For example, we could make a loud noise in the other room. In that way, we could follow both of their edicts.”

“An impractical solution,” his sister pointed out. “Neither of us are very talented at making loud noises.”

“Or you could simply blather on within earshot of me for a few minutes,” their father said suddenly, without opening his eyes or turning around. “That would also work.”

The twins registered no visible reaction, though inwardly, both suppressed shudders. While his words contained some measure of levity, his tone had none.

“Tell Malina I won’t be along tonight. I’ll be in the Spirit World for the next few hours, and I want no more distractions,” Unalaq continued, in a voice that made it clear there would be no more words on the subject. “Are we understood?”

All three of them knew this was the fifth meal Unalaq had skipped in so many days, and the tribal chief was beginning to show signs of it in the increased gauntness of his face. But neither Eska nor Desna were even remotely willing to say so aloud.

Instead they both bowed their heads, and responded simultaneously, “Of course, father.”

And with that, they were gone. At least he couldn’t blame them for being slow to follow commands, Unalaq admitted.

He resumed his meditation without delay.

The Spirit World wasn’t like the physical one, in that it had only a single plane on which things could appear. It had…layers, he supposed might be the best term. Dimensions beyond the obvious, things that didn’t properly exist unless one knew to look for them.

When entering a new location in the material world, everything – the people, the buildings, the creatures – all came before the self all at once. Oh, certainly, one might not be able to see it all from the beginning. But it was there.

Coming to the Spirit World was different. With each moment, he pierced a little more of the veil; became increasingly aware of his new surroundings, which changed and shifted as fluidly as a
person’s thoughts.

No matter how many times he did it, he would forever be enchanted by the sheer beauty of it all.

Finally, once his own soul had fully adjusted to the plane it was now anchored to, Unalaq opened what were, in one sense of the term, his eyes.

Strictly speaking, they weren’t, any more than what he inhabited now was actually his body. But his spirit-self expected to experience the world by seeing through eyes, and so, that’s what it did.

“Instinct is a lie, told by a fearful body, hoping to be wrong,” said another voice, from the man who’d been waiting for him here.

“Guru Laghima again?” asked Unalaq, bemusement tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Though more relevant at the present moment than most, I’ll grant.”

The two of them were seated, side by side, beneath the dragon blood tree at the center of Xai Bau’s Grove.

It was a place of great importance to the both of them. It was here, as teenagers, where they’d first met – both fresh, young initiates to the Lotus. Where they’d learned the story of Avatar Wan, and the horrific injustice he’d inflicted upon the world ten thousand years prior.

And where they’d constructed their plan, all those years ago, to rectify that grievous error.

“Do you have any news?” Unalaq demanded of the other man. “Or are you just going to quote Air Nomad proverbs all day?”

At last, Zaheer opened his eyes, though he did not turn them toward the waterbender.

“A great deal,” he said, an air of distantness to his voice. “But primary among it all is this. The Avatar’s infiltration of Republic City has, according to my sources, been conducted successfully. Her cover identity is in place, and she’s made contact with Jilu.”

“I still think this was a bad idea, Zaheer,” replied Unalaq, scowling. “Korra is a unique and irreplaceable asset. Until the time comes when the portals are ready to be reopened, you shouldn’t have let her out of your sight.”

“At this point, Unalaq, I think I know your niece far better than you do,” Zaheer declared in a low voice. “She’s been growing more and more restless by the year. If we’d tried to tighten control of her any more, she might’ve balked. What if she’d decided to run off at the eleventh hour, like her predecessor?”

“And what if she dies in the process of this mission?” hissed the chief. “Harmonic Convergence is less than a year away. I doubt an infant could unseal the spirit portals, much less take the spirits of both Light and Dark within themselves.”

“Clearly, I trust in her capabilities far more than you do,” said Zaheer.

“It’s not a question of trust. But you’re a fool if you can’t see the potential for disaster here,” Unalaq told the non-bender, a glower upon his face. “Let’s say she survives. Let’s say she even succeeds – takes out Amon, and ensures the United Republic is ready for the Lotus. You’ve still left her to her own devices for months, at minimum. What if, in that time, she learns what you’ve been keeping from her? Everything you’ve been keeping from her?”
“She won’t,” Zaheer answered firmly. “She’s too well-watched right now; not just by Jilu, but by agents she isn’t even aware of. And besides…”

Finally, for the first time since they’d arrived on this plane, the non-bender turned to face him.

“Isn’t that what your little piece of…insurance is for?” he added, his mouth a thin line.

“I’d prefer not to play that tile until I absolutely need to,” said Unalaq, matching his expression. “You and I are the only ones aware of it – even my wife and children have been kept in ignorance. But once Korra knows, the only way to ensure her aid will be through coercion. Which is far less reliable than…subtler methods.”

There was a lengthy silence that followed these words, largely because Zaheer couldn’t come up with any particularly good arguments against them. Unalaq was, after all, speaking many of the same objections his own brain had come up with.

He did have his reasons for choosing this path, of course. But to explain them would require revealing a number of things he didn’t want the tribal chief to know.

Not yet, at least.

Eventually, with his jaw set stoically, the non-bender asked, “Can you believe how close we are? Sometimes I can scarcely comprehend it. The lifespan of the old order can now be measured in days.”

Unalaq considered the question for a long while before answering. At last, he said, “I’ll believe it when we stand on the precipice of Harmonic Convergence. No sooner.”

Zaheer nodded his acceptance of that response. It was probably the healthiest mindset to have, all told.

“Then until that day, old friend,” he murmured, extending a forearm.

Unalaq hesitated for a moment, as a number of thoughts he was unwilling to share swirled within his mind. Thoughts of the pact not a single other soul, in this world or the material one, knew of yet. Thoughts of the pact that would change everything, for both worlds, the moment it was fulfilled.

But then, he supposed, it might do well to take his own advice. And worry about that when he came to it.

He grasped the other man’s arm.

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“Are you hungry, Mizore?” asked Asami, as the two of them walked along the pristine floors of the mansion. “I just finished dinner, but I think they’ve still got some stuff laid out.”

Korra, for her part, was only half-paying attention to what the other girl was saying, as she was distracted far more by the sheer gulf of difference in their respective appearances.

Even in what was clearly a casual, wear-it-around-the-house sort of outfit, Asami looked indescribably stunning. Her carefully crafted hair and makeup were evidently not something she did
purely for others’ benefit, because they were out in full force right now, and Korra had to consciously force herself not to keep staring.

By contrast, she was still wearing the first thing she’d pulled on this morning – some ill-fitting, dark blue robes by way of her cousin Eska – which were in general disarray from the pieces of the Fire Ferret uniform she’d hastily yanked off of them.

And since she hadn’t thought to grab a shower before coming here, they were also matted with sweat. She probably smelt awful, and even if Asami was too nice to comment on it, she felt deathly embarrassed by the possibility.

Why had she decided to come here, anyway? She hadn’t really been planning on it.

Her first instinct, after learning about the triad summit, had been to head for City Hall. It’d give her a chance to brief Jilu and get his advice, not to mention introduce herself to Councilman Tarrlok. Perhaps a bit of a risky move, but one she needed to do sooner or later if this cover was to succeed.

Yet her feet had led her, instead, in this direction. And she had an uneasy feeling it had nothing to do with learning more about Hiroshi Sato and his possibly-a-spy daughter.

“I…uh…guess I could eat,” Korra answered quietly, tugging awkwardly at her bangs. “But if you don’t mind, the thing I could really use is…err…your shower. If that’s okay.”

Asami surprised her by donning a sly grin.

“Oh, I can do you one better,” she said.

Taking Korra by the hand – which, for obvious reasons, did little to alleviate her self-consciousness – she led the Avatar through the second floor of their manor, to what appeared to be a sliding door made of bamboo.

The non-bender wasted little time in pulling the door to the side, revealing a massive pool of water surrounded by carefully carved stones and flawless wood paneling. Steam filled the entire chamber, and Korra’s waterbending senses told her exactly why: the water was just shy of boiling.

“It’s designed to mimic the natural hot springs of the Fire Nation,” Asami explained, closing her eyes briefly and taking in a deep breath of the heated air. “Your timing was pretty good, actually. I was just about to take a bath myself.”

Korra blinked once, not fully comprehending what she was getting at. Then, a second later, her jaw practically dropped to the floor.

“Wait, wait!” she yelped, her voice a couple tones higher than normal. “You…You’re saying you want to…”

“What, are you embarrassed?” asked Asami, one shoulder already exposed. “Trust me, it’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

And with that, she shrugged off the remainder of her house-dress, leaving only the underwear beneath.

Korra could’ve blamed the heat for just about fainting, right then and there. But that would’ve been a lie.

The underwear too soon followed, and with that, Korra decided there was little point in preserving
her own modesty. Or at least...that pulling off her own, sweat-laden clothes would give her something to do besides descend into gibbering hysterics.

Getting naked in the bathtub with someone you half-suspected to be an enemy spy was something Zaheer had never specifically advised her against, but she very much doubted he’d approve. Still, seeing little alternative, she squirmed out of the baggy garments as quickly as she could, and followed Asami by slipping into the simulated hot spring.

The moment she immersed herself in the hot water, the idea that she shouldn’t have done this became as patently absurd as an idea to stop breathing.

Her muscles held in enough stress and tension to split the Earth Kingdom in two – possibly literally – and the sensation of the warm, soothing liquid upon them caused her to actually shiver with delight.

It’d been...well, she couldn’t even think of how long, since she’d had a chance to genuinely relax. And though she knew it was folly to completely release her guard in a situation like this, the temptation to do so was nigh-irresistible.

“By the spirits, that feels good,” said Asami after a little while, her eyes half-lidded and her expression serene. “There’s nothing like a hot bath at the end of the week.”

Korra didn’t really have the experience to judge such a claim, since virtually every bath she’d taken since childhood had been in rivers or cruddy motel bathrooms, but she nodded all the same.

“So what kept you all day?” the non-bender asked, leaning back so that her luxurious hair could soak in the steaming liquid. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

Korra hesitated for a moment, but she could feel her resistance waning in the face of how ridiculously comfortable she felt right now. And there didn’t seem to be much point in hiding this particular secret; she’d find out soon enough either way.

“I was, err...training with the Fire Ferrets,” she told the other woman, her voice quiet.

There was a loud splash, as Asami suddenly shot bolt upward at this news. Korra immediately found herself averting her eyes, her entire face a deep crimson, for this change in posture had placed certain...features...of the heiress’ body on full display.

“Get out of town!” exclaimed Asami, her demeanor ecstatic. “You got in? That’s incredible, Mizore!”

She looked as if she was about to rush forward and hug her, but seemed to remember where they were a second later, and settled for flashing a congratulatory smile.

“Uh...thanks...” muttered Korra, shifting awkwardly. “But...I dunno if it’s gonna work out. I don’t think I can really play at their level. Much less against guys like the Wolfbats or the Boar-q-pines.”

“Well, you’re just starting out. I’m sure things’ll get better the more you practice,” the non-bender said encouragingly. “And you’ll have one advantage they don’t have: the most devoted fangirl on the planet, cheering you on from the stands.”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure the Wolfbats have...” Korra started to respond, before realizing what Asami meant. “Ooooh...right. Nevermind.”

“Anyway, I can’t wait to see you out there,” the non-bender added after a moment’s pause, during
which she’d sunk back to a lying position. “You know, I’ve been following pro-bending since I was a little girl. My mom loved it.”

“How about your dad?” Korra ventured to ask, following her lead. While she didn’t have nearly as much hair as the other woman did – not at the moment, at least – the warm water still felt wondrous on her scalp.

Still on her back, Asami made her way closer to the Avatar by way of a lazy backstroke. She got close enough that Korra felt an instinctive urge to cross her arms across her chest, not wanting to draw attention to her significantly less…ample body.

She was also close enough, however, that Korra could see her make a face out the corner of her eye. “He’s never been quite as…into that sort of thing. At least since mom died,” she said in a low voice. “But that’s alright. He doesn’t need to share the stuff I’m interested in. He just needs to accept them.”

“Is there anything you like he doesn’t accept? I mean, it seems like you’ve got him around your finger,” murmured Korra, without thinking. The moment she said it, she regretted the question. It really wasn’t any of her business.

Rather than be offended, however, Asami adopted a look that was almost…pensive as she floated by again. “Not in so many words. It’s more that…well…” she answered, chewing over her words carefully. “I guess you could say…he just isn’t talking to me like he used to. About some things, at least. When I bring up certain topics, it’s not that he won’t talk about them, but he always seems like he wants the conversation to end as soon as possible. Err…do you know what I mean?”

Korra wanted, desperately, to ask what those “certain topics” were. But she was pretty sure she’d already overstepped the bounds of politeness, at least a little bit. If she kept pushing, Asami might finally lose her cool and clam up completely. And in any event, if her hunch was right, she was pretty sure she knew exactly which topics she meant.

So instead, Korra chanced to place a hand on the other woman’s pale, bare shoulder, as the two of them wordlessly returned to an erect position. She was acutely aware of how close their bodies were to each other now.

“I dunno how much it helps, but…I’m here, at least. If there’s anything you ever wanna talk about,” she found herself saying, though she was uncertain of precisely why. Like coming here, it hadn’t exactly been a conscious decision.

And though she wished she could say it was a calculated move on her part, a ploy to goad what could be an enemy agent into a position of vulnerability, the truth of the matter was her words were both spur of the moment and, to her own surprise…

Entirely sincere.

It struck Korra, in that moment, as the two of them sat beside each other, so close that she could feel every breath the non-bender took…that deep down, she didn’t want the Satos to be connected in any way to the Equalists.

Because even if Asami wasn’t a spy herself – even if she was completely in the dark about her
father’s alleged activities – the second Korra found what she’d been sent here to uncover, moments like this one would be over. There were simply no two ways about it.

She couldn’t risk going anywhere near the Equalists, unless it was on her own terms. They represented too many unknowns, and right now she was an asset the Lotus couldn’t afford to lose.

Of course, now that she thought about it…the second she found out either way, her days here were numbered, period. It was silly, stupid, to forge any relationships in this city beyond the professional. She’d be leaving it behind, leaving Mizore behind, and never looking back in – at most – a few months.

So why couldn’t she release her hand right now?

[------------------------]

With nothing left to do on the “Mizore” front until the following evening, Kuvira spent the rest of the night chasing other leads.

Mind, any normal person would probably have spent that intervening time getting some rest. She hadn’t slept in well over twenty-four hours, and hadn’t eaten in nearly ten.

But Kuvira was about as far from “normal” as any person could possibly be, and so after snatching up a meat-bun from a street vendor and remedying the “food” issue – all in the space of about two minutes – she was bounding along the rooftops of Republic City once more.

She was aware the police probably wouldn’t look kindly upon her, in essence, infringing upon their turf…both literally and figuratively. Her cables were of unique design, courtesy of Baatar, and indeed a significant improvement upon their own, but she doubted they’d be able to tell the difference at first glance. To all appearances, she’d look like a possessor of stolen property if caught.

Still, through a combination of immense skill and not the slightest amount of luck, she hadn’t run into any other metalbenders so far, and as much as possible she intended to keep it that way.

Funnily enough, it was her plentiful experience as a dancer that was proving most useful right now. If Lin were to hear that, based on Suyin’s numerous stories, she was probably liable to pitch a fit, but on a basic level there was very little difference between gliding through the air as part of a choreographed routine, and doing so like this.

Kuvira took very few pleasures in life – “serious” didn’t even begin to describe her, for which she was quite proud – but she enjoyed her dance troupe. Moving in rhythm with them, striking a perfect balance, centered her like nothing else could.

In this horrifically chaotic world, any semblance of order that could be found was an invaluable treasure.

Perhaps that was what’d drawn her to Baatar, she reflected idly. He would hardly be guilty of someone calling him adventurous, rash, or impulsive. But he was…stable, maybe was a good word. He built things that were meant to last, and anchored her accordingly.

They’d been seeing each other for just over three months now, though they hadn’t yet informed his parents about it. Somehow, whether rationally or not, Kuvira expected Suyin would see it as a
betrayal of her trust.

But even in secret, there was much they could…do…for one another. He was a good man, in more ways than one. And he…

The metalbender shook her head to clear it. Losing herself in sentimental idling while in the midst of a mission? She expected more from herself.

Her mind reset to a singular focus, she landed directly above her first target.

Lau Gan-Lan, the head of Cabbage Corp, was walking along the street just below, humming a merry tune. After some initial observation, she’d concluded that while he was unlikely to be connected to the Equalists himself, someone in his company definitely was.

She’d learned the principles of “seismic sense” from the best, and she’d surreptitiously tested it on the grounds of both Future Industries and Cabbage Corp. Large, underground tunnels ran beneath both of them, with passages leading to warehouses on the surface. Most likely, this was how the Equalists were managing to transport huge quantities of personnel and weapons without being noticed.

The need to maintain her cover as “Kinzoku” meant investigating the Future Industries tunnel would have to wait, but there was no similar need for caution at Cabbage Corp. She’d followed it straight down two nights ago, and discovered a bustle of activity. Dozens of masked men and women, and nearly a hundred crates full of materiel.

Whatever the Equalists were gearing up for, it had to be big.

Lau was meeting a younger man now, one with a thin, gaunt appearance and rather long mustache. They embraced, though with a lengthy pause in the movement – as if their relationship was familiar, but strained.

Kuvira took Baatar’s listening device back out and put it to her ear, setting the volume to maximum.

“Son, your mother’s been worried about you…” she heard Lau say, his face crestfallen.

“I’ve told you a million times, she’s not my mother,” hissed the mustached man. His voice was so deep it almost sent a chill down her spine. “Anyway, come on. I don’t want to have this discussion out in public.”

The two turned off to a side-street, walking quickly, and Kuvira struggled to keep up while still catching every word of their conversation.

“I still don’t see what you’ve got against Anae,” the older man spoke again after a while, once he deemed them sufficiently far from the market crowds. They were in a deserted alley now, dark and narrow, which made hiding herself a simple matter.

“How dare you. How dare you,” his son whispered venomously. “That you would remarry one of those…monsters…after everything they did to us? To me? To you??”

“Not a day goes by I forget what happened to Tsuma. Or to Tanim,” said Lau, his voice very low. “But you can’t blame all waterbenders for what a few…”

“Oh, don’t go dancing around it!” shouted the son. “They ripped them apart! Shredded them to pieces! Took their perverted ‘gifts’ and used them like animals! Animals that need to be put down!”

“Son…” Lau murmured, trying to cut in, but the other man wasn’t finished.
“Your wife! My sister!” he roared. “You weren’t there when those creatures…when they did it. You didn’t see the way their limbs moved. Didn’t see them split apart at the seams by their own blood! The way every single vessel popped…all at once…burst like a balloon, from the inside out!”

The mustached man struck the wall behind his father with his gloved fist, leaving an indentation in the heavy stone.

“And after all that…after everything…you let one of those animals into our home,” he continued, his voice much lower but not an ounce less spiteful. “Do you have any idea how it felt, every full moon? To know that witch could do the same thing to me, with just a wave of her hand? I never slept those nights, not even once.”

“I…I didn’t know…” said Lau, his eyes wide.

“You didn’t care,” the younger man snapped. “You were just busy with your spirits-begotten company, trying your whole life to catch up to the Satos. And what do you have to show for it? You’re useless…a disgrace. Grandfather would be ashamed of how far you’ve sunk. Your bender whore is just the cherry on top.”

The sound of the slap reverberated through the alley.

“After I lost Tsuma, I thought I’d never love again. Anae proved me wrong. You can say whatever the heck you want about me, but you will not speak about her that way,” Lau told his son. “Are we clear?”

When he spoke again, however, his tone immediately softened. “I…know I failed you, son,” he whispered. “I barely understand half of what you’re doing anymore. And maybe now, it’s too late to change things. But I…I hope there’s still time. Please…it’s been so long since you were home. Come back. I just want…to know my own son again…”

The mustached man, for his part, hadn’t retaliated against the physical strike, though he appeared far more physically fit than his gray-haired father. But he’d turned away during his heartfelt plea.

“You haven’t known me for almost thirty years,” he said, very quietly. Even with the device, Kuvira had to strain to hear him. “It was a mistake to come out here tonight. It was a mistake to think that could change.”

He began to walk away.

“Please…” Lau choked out, tears now streaming down his face. “Sho, please…”

His son stopped in his tracks, but just for a moment. Just long enough to utter one last, stinging rebuke toward his father.

“Sho Gan-Lan is dead,” he responded, his voice cool and calm and yet also dripping with venom. “Call me the Lieutenant. It’s the only name that means anything to me anymore.”

Then he left, and a moment later, so did their unseen observer.

Leaving Lau Gan-Lan alone, to break down and weep.
Hiroshi Sato exited the tunnel beneath his workshop, took a deep breath, and wiped the sweat from his brow.

The disadvantage of managing a secret factory completely underground – well, one of the disadvantages – was that it played havoc on his already subpar respiratory system.

During the Agni Kai attack on their estate twelve years ago – the same one that’d destroyed his entire world – he’d inhaled a significant amount of ash while trying, in vain, to save Yasuko. According to his physician, his lungs had never fully recovered from it.

By all means, it was certainly the least of what those monsters had taken from him that night. But that didn’t make dealing with the lingering aftereffects any more pleasant.

Lost in his bitterness and hatred, Hiroshi nearly forgot to reseal the tunnel before exiting his workshop, catching himself just in time. Afterwards, he let out a sigh of relief.

The last thing he needed right now was for Asami to stumble across it, and start asking questions. It wasn’t time to introduce this part of his life to her.

Not yet.

He knew he’d have to, of course – sooner rather than later. He’d known ever since the moment he’d met Amon, a little over six years prior, and seen that he could do so much more with his grief than merely wallow in it. That he could turn it into a weapon, and use it to strike down the vermin who’d taken everything from him.

Since that day, he’d done everything in his power to ensure Asami would be ready, when the time was right.

He’d spared no expense in hiring the most talented martial artists in the city, passing on to her every discipline a non-bender could possibly use to fight on equal footing with their oppressors. Several of her instructors, unbeknownst to her, had even been Equalists themselves. They hadn’t gotten around to teaching her chi-blocking yet, but the Lieutenant had assured him that would come soon.

Still, without fully intending to, Hiroshi had found himself pushing back the day when he’d have to explain himself, over and over again. He’d come close, so close, to telling her, enough time times that he’d stopped counting, and yet…

The industrialist sighed. Deep down, he knew she didn’t feel the same way he did. She missed her mother terribly, of course, but she saw the man responsible as just that – a man, singular and solitary.

She was blind, maybe even willfully so, to the wider picture he represented. A society that lauded, encouraged such brutality; that taught his ilk from birth that their “gift” was to be used without restraint, the ultimate expression of strength and willpower.

No matter how many people got hurt in the process.

One way or another, though, she would learn to see the truth. She needed to.

Because Amon was only a few short weeks away from his endgame. And on that day, anyone who wasn’t an ally…would be an enemy by default.

Before returning to the mansion, Hiroshi did his standard checks using his reflection in a window: no
platinum dust in his hair, no debris from the machines cranking out mecha-tanks at lightning speed marring his clothes. It was fine that they were a little unkempt – she knew he was working on a secret project, after all – but he didn’t want to give any hints about just what that project was.

More or less satisfied that he’d hidden all signs of how he’d spent the day, he slipped back into his home.

A servant informed him promptly that “Miss Sato, and guest” were using one of the washrooms on the second level. Alarm bells instantly began ringing in Hiroshi’s head. He could only think of one possible “guest” it could be, and if he was right…

He suppressed his instinct to simply rush in, however. In case there truly was nothing going on, her father bursting in on her while she was bathing could only lead to bad things.

Instead, he asked another servant – an elderly, female housekeeper – to “check in” on the pair. A few minutes later she returned, with two young women in fancy bathrobes following behind her. One was his daughter, which meant the other must be…

“Hi, dad,” said Asami, reaching over to give him a casual hug. Her hair was still damp. “I’d like to introduce you to my friend, Mizore.”

The girl in question, who had wide blue eyes and fine brown hair cropped short, waved awkwardly to him.

“It’s great to finally meet you, sir. I’m sorry it’s with me…uh, looking like this,” she told him, gesturing to her robes.

They were obviously borrowed, given how well they matched Asami’s. He tried not to think too hard through the implications. His only daughter being friends with a waterbender was bad enough, but to even consider that she might…

Hiroshi bit down on the bile already rising up his throat. For just a little bit longer, he needed to pretend.

Forcing a genial smile onto his face, the industrialist turned to the young woman and replied, “Think nothing of it. Why, I showed up to my first job interview in nothing but a pair of swimming trunks!”

His daughter’s eyebrows rose. “And you still got the job?” she asked.

Hiroshi just chuckled in response. “Oh, no. They threw me right out of the building,” he said. “I didn’t say it was my first successful job interview.”

Returning his eyes to Mizore, he then added, “Speaking of which, I hear you’re one of my new workers! How are you liking Future Industries so far?”

The girl grinned nervously. She did a lot of things nervously, he couldn’t help but notice. It was possible, even likely, that it was because of the difference in their status, but…

“It’s…a really wonderful job. I’m learning so much every day,” she answered, before hastily adding a bow. “Thank you very much for the opportunity. Oh! And for allowing me into your home. Err…thanks for that, too.”

A shame. If she wasn’t a bender, he might actually grow to like this girl.

Still, to keep up the mask, he waved off her gratitude with a flick of the wrist. “Again, think nothing
of it,” he said. “It warms my heart to see such…enterprise in young people. By all means, if there’s anything I can do for you, let me know.”

“In that case…would it be alright if Mizore spent the night?” asked Asami, so smoothly he was sure she’d rehearsed this in her head.

Hiroshi fought to keep a scowl away from his face.

“Of…Of course, dear,” he responded, every syllable careful and measured. “But separate rooms, alright? If I’m not at least a little overprotective, I’ve failed my duties as a father.”

His daughter giggled, and slung her arms around him once more. Apparently unsure how else to respond, Mizore just bowed again.

“In any event, I’m going to grab a bite to eat and then turn in early, myself,” said Hiroshi, feigning a yawn. He’d gotten very good at that, lately. “But I’ll see you girls in the morning.”

He kept up his warm, paternal smile as they waved him goodbye and took off at a jog toward the bedchambers upstairs. There were at least half a dozen unused guest rooms right now, so he’d have to trust his daughter to heed his edict.

But the moment they were out of sight, the expression on his face dropped away, like a light going out.

It’d been a long time, after all, that he’d really been able to trust anyone.

His face contorted in barely repressed rage, the wealthy businessman strode toward his study, his coat billowing behind him.

He had a call to make.

[--------------------]

Kuvira did wind up catching a bit of sleep that night, if only accidentally.

Staking out individuals like Lau Gan-Lan, Chief Beifong, or Councilman Tenzin was a simple matter. They had routines, schedules, and they adhered to them with only minor variation. Even with the short amount of time she had available, she already had a pretty good idea where each of the “major players” might be at any given moment.

This was most emphatically not the case, however, with Varrick.

Iknik Blackstone Varrick did what he wanted, went where he wanted, and picked his nose when he wanted, with seemingly no rhyme or reason or way to predict his actions. He’d declare in an emphatic voice, for all to hear, his intention to purchase this or that, only to forget he’d done so only minutes later. He’d change his mind at the drop of a hat and seemed to simply expect the world to go along with it.

She knew Suyin and the shipping magnate were old friends, but his very nature meant any intel she could’ve come into this mission with would be years out of date. Spirits, some of the intel she’d gathered on him yesterday felt years out of date.
Kuvira had better luck tailing the Southerner’s assistant, Zhu Li Moon. Comparatively speaking – which admittedly wasn’t saying much – she was calm, collected, and most importantly, a creature of routine. Three days of intermittent observation had convinced her he wouldn’t be able to dress himself without Zhu Li’s consistent and reliable aid.

Two nights prior, she’d spotted the woman leaving an Equalist rally; one Kuvira had cased externally, though she hadn’t been able to find a non-risky way to make her way inside.

She’d been ruminating over the implications ever since. True, both Varrick and his assistant were non-benders, but they still didn’t really seem the “type.” For all his eccentricities, Varrick was a cutthroat businessman, and there wasn’t much profit in the Equalist cause.

Which meant that either Zhu Li was sneaking around behind her boss’ back…or that he’d sent her, and was gathering info on his own.

Finding out which one was true was what’d brought her here.

Varrick Global Studios was a new subsidiary of his wider business empire, and so far, had been kept hush-hush from the world at large. Here, Varrick and a small crew of engineers were experimenting with cutting-edge technology, in order to – as far as Kuvira had been able to tell – project so many pictures in sequence that it actually appeared as if they were moving.

Despite herself, she couldn’t help but be impressed.

She’d overheard them make plans to meet back here, promptly at six in the morning. And true to her nature, Zhu Li had shown up a little before five.

But true to his nature, Varrick had turned up nearly three hours late, wandering in still dressed in his pajamas and stretching his arms dramatically.

Hence her own, entirely unplanned nap. She’d simply been unable to keep her eyes open, waiting in the rafters for the idiot to make his appearance. Fortunately, it didn’t seem as if Zhu Li had noticed.

Which was a good thing since, as she’d learned from Baatar…she snored, sometimes. Loudly.

Thankfully, Varrick hadn’t exactly been subtle on his entrance, so she had little trouble rousing herself.

Yawning with all the grace and volume of a platypus-bear, the business magnate exclaimed, “Zhu Li! There you are! Why in the name of Kyoshi’s hairy armpit weren’t you there to do the thing?”

From context, Kuvira could only assume he meant “to serve as my personal alarm clock.”

The other woman showed what Kuvira could only describe as remarkable restraint as she said, tonelessly, “Because I was already here, sir. Doing the other thing. As you asked me to.”

Varrick tapped at his chin, looking quizzical. “Other thing…other thing…” he muttered to himself. “Ah, right! Well then, what’re you just standing around her for?! Fire it up, and let’s make some of that Varrick Global Industries-trademarked magic happen!”

“Yes, sir,” stated Zhu Li, as she hurried over to darken the lights and activate a projector.

Kuvira’s eyes narrowed at the screen it was pointed toward, as she watched words slowly take form in a fancy, sprawling scrawl. A voice, which was clearly Zhu Li trying to sound – badly – like a deep-voiced man, began to read them out loud.
Long ago, in a distant land...

I, Amon, the shapeshifting master of darkness, unleashed an unspeakable evil!

But, a foooooolish schoolgirl in a sailor outfit, wielding a magic guitar, stepped forth to oppose me!

Before the final blow was struck, I used a pair of scissors to tear open a portal in time, and flung her into the future – where my giant, sky-surfing robots are law!

Now, the fool seeks to return to her past…and undo the future that is Amon!

Kuvira continued to stare at the screen, dumbfounded. She had…absolutely nothing to add to that.

The scene shifted to two people, both devoid of color. One was a pretty, if bored-looking, woman who was checking her nails. The other was Zhu Li again, in a boxy metal suit and wearing a mask.

“It is now time, princess,” she said, utterly deadpan, still using that ridiculously deep voice. “You shall lose your bending forever.”

The other woman instantly dropped her nail polish and, as if a switch had been flipped, instantly began to shriek in fear.

“Oh, great and terrible Amon! Aaaaaaanything but that!” she cried loudly. “For without my blessed lightbending powers, the Guitar of Ages shall never deem me worthy to wield her! I shall be…urgh, line!”

Someone handed her a small card from off-screen.

“Well, that’s right,” she added, before shifting back into character nearly seamlessly. “I shall be trapped in this accursed future…forever! And never again shall I lovingly be in the loving arms of my beloved Tatsuya!”

“That…” whispered Zhu Li. “Is where you are wrong. For you see…”

Then she flung away the mask, and the actress gasped in mock-horror.

“I…am Tatsuya,” said the assistant. She still sounded as emotionless as ever.

“Noooooooooooooo!” screamed the other woman, her face hidden from the camera. “That is not true! That is not possible!”

“You’re right, I was lying,” Zhu Li suddenly told her, shrugging her shoulders in indifference to the material. “In fact…none of this is real.”

Then she waved her hand, and the scene seemed to dissolve away. When it returned to focus, the other actress was alone, lying on her bed.

“Oh, what a relief!” she declared, in what might passably be mistaken for enthusiasm. “It was a dream all along! What a wonderful and brilliant twist ending! And it was all thanks to my Varri-pillow, the patented sweet dreams solution for the weary traveler!
Unable to process a particularly large number of coherent thoughts herself, Kuvira slowly directed her gaze down at Varrick, who was neither smiling nor frowning. He looked very deep in thought.

“That…was…” he began to say, enunciating each word carefully – before a massive, excited grin abruptly spread across his face. “Brilliant! One of a kind! Ooh, that was exactly how I pictured it in my head!”

“If I may, sir…” replied Zhu Li, not looking nearly as enthused. “Miss Ginger clearly needs some more time to study the script. And I’m not an actor. I don’t have the talent for it.”

“Yes, but, you’re a stone-cold war machine, and my team tells me that’s pretty much the same thing,” said Varrick, crossing his arms and winking confidently. “Besides, everyone knows nobody actually cares how good an actor is at…well, acting! Just that they look dynamite while doing it!”

Kuvira definitely wasn’t mistaking the flush that spread over the other woman’s face.

“That’s very kind of you to say, sir,” she murmured, careful to ensure he couldn’t see her blushing. It clashed spectacularly with her normal, unflappable demeanor. “But I still think you should recast Amon to an actual male actor.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’ll get to that,” Varrick responded airily, waving a hand back and forth to demonstrate how little this concerned him. “Deep-voiced guy who can growl, we can find that anywhere. The important thing is nailing down that script. Do you think we made it scary enough? We need to make every bender in this city pee their pants, make ‘em think Amon could be right around every dark corner!”

Kuvira’s eyes briefly went wide. Did that mean Amon being able to take bending away was true? Given the absurd tone of the whole thing, she’d mentally filed that away with the heroine being able to “lightbend” and use a “magic guitar.”

“Perhaps something a little less…humorous…might get the same point across quicker,” said Zhu Li, still not looking at her employer.

Varrick, for his part, looked honestly confused. “Humor-what-now?” he asked. “I didn’t write any jokes in that script! One-hundred-percent pure drama, that’s the Varrick signature! Literally, by the way, I put a trademark on that phrase. I can see it going places.”

There was a very long, very silent pause that followed these words.

Eventually, however, Zhu Li seemed to recognize the futility in pushing the issue, and simply told him, “Yes, sir. Still…you might want to run your next draft by another writer.”

“Eh, guess it can’t really hurt,” he eventually admitted with a shrug. Still, Kuvira got the distinct impression he wouldn’t have even gone that far for anyone else. “Anyway, we’ve had our demo, so let’s move on to phase two! Chop-chop, time is money! And money is time! And strawberries are delicious, make sure they’re in all my salads from now on! Now, Zhu Li…do the thing!”

Zhu Li did, indeed, do quite a few things over the course of the next several hours, but Kuvira didn’t stick around to watch them.
If even the tiniest sliver of what she’d just heard was true…

She needed to rethink all her plans completely.

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Korra was, to put it mildly, a heavy sleeper.

One would think, after years of resting in pitched tents or hastily constructed caves, constantly needing to wake up and flee the authorities at a moment’s notice, she’d have been cured of the habit. At least to some degree.

One would be wrong.

She’d never been able to help it – it was simply the way she was. Whether on an actual bed or simply laid out over the uneven ground, once she was out, she was out. She’d been told she tossed and turned, stretched her limbs out every which way, and had a snore comparable to a tsungi horn, but she pretty much never woke up before someone or something made her do so.

Which was how she’d managed to sleep in past noon the next day.

There were no clocks in the Satos’ guest bedroom, so it hadn’t immediately occurred to her just how late it was. It didn’t help that, even beyond her general “I’ll take any bed that’ll have me” attitude, this particular one was…well…

It was, for one thing, enormous – easily large enough to fit four of her, with room to spare. Used to cots and sleeping bags that emphasized practicality over comfort, she’d never thought of herself as the type for something so frilly and, for lack of a better term, puffy… but the instant she flopped down on the thing, losing herself in the sheer amount of pillows and cushioning, her body decided it pretty much never wanted to leave.

And whether she acknowledged it or not, it probably was also relevant to note that the entire room smelt unmistakably like Asami. Or like her perfume, at least.

In the back of her mind, Korra feebly attempted to convince herself it wasn’t weird at all she’d committed Asami’s scent to memory.

She’d had half-formed imaginings about sneaking out in the middle of the night, perhaps to break into Hiroshi’s office or workshop, and see if she could gather more intel that way. But that idea was clearly shot, given how much sun was currently streaming through the curtains.

And so, with a groan, she hauled herself off of the so-comfortable-it-should-be-illegal mattress and went to get dressed.

When she learned of the true time from a clock in the hall, Korra was briefly stricken with panic. She’d promised to meet Bolin and Mako for another practice at the same time as yesterday, which was around two in the afternoon, and if this one ran as long as the last they’d be going up until sundown.

That didn’t leave her with a whole lot of spare time. Coming here had been such a waste…
It was, however, difficult to continue that line of thought when she drifted by the kitchen and spotted Asami.

The other girl had changed her outfit again, opting for a sleek black number that looked more appropriate for a fancy gala than for wearing around the house. It certainly put Korra’s casual Northern robes to shame.

Mind, it probably put about ninety-nine percent of all the outfits in Republic City to shame.

More puzzling than what she was wearing, however, was what the non-bender was doing. She was bent over a hot stove, steam rising from a pan she held in her right hand, and she was…

*Cooking.*

“Don’t you…err…have your own chef for that?” Korra couldn’t help but ask.

Asami nearly dropped the pan in surprise. “Oh…Mizore! You’re finally up,” she said, not the slightest hint of judgment in her voice. “And yeah, I do. He could certainly do this a lot better than I could. I just…”

If Korra didn’t know better, she’d have sworn the other girl’s cheeks briefly went pink.

“I just…wanted to do this for you,” she finished, a bit lamely. “I guess, to prove I could. I barely ever get to do anything for myself, much less other people. Maybe that’s why I like doting on you so much.”

Whether or not she’d imagined Asami’s blush, she certainly didn’t imagine her own. In a very quiet voice, she found herself mumbling, “You…don’t have to think of it like that. The dinner, the dress, the bath, getting to stay the night…it’s all so…”

“I don’t want it to feel like I’m pushing any of this on you,” Asami replied kindly. “We have different lifestyles; that’s okay. But I’ve never had anyone to share mine with, before. Trust me, I get just as much out of all this as you do. Maybe even more.”

She flicked her wrist, sending the contents of the skillet flying up in the air, and catching them all on their way back down. But her eyes never left Korra’s.

“By all means, if I’m ever moving too fast or pushing too much…always feel free to let me know. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” she said, her smile warm and genuine. “But short of that… I want you to be part of my world. And I want to be part of yours.”

Korra’s blush deepened, by several distinct shades. By the spirits, why couldn’t she say anything?

Asami didn’t appear to have noticed, as she was still talking, though more to herself now than to the Avatar. “Wow…that probably sounded really lame,” she went on, chuckling awkwardly. “Sorry, I really don’t have any practice with this sort of thing.”

Korra found her lips moving without input from her brain. “I don’t mind…” she whispered, quietly surprised to realize just how much she meant it.

The two of them stood there for a little while longer, neither certain of what else to say. They were rather rudely interrupted, however, by a small column of fire that erupted from the stove.

“Oh, man! And I almost had the sear just right, too!” exclaimed Asami, pivoting back to the pan in mild panic. “That’s what I get for not listening to my mom. *First rule of the kitchen, Asami: never*
She grimaced as she quickly ladled what she could salvage of the meat onto a couple of plates. It didn’t smell nearly as appetizing as it had a couple minutes ago.

“I hope you like your turtle-duck, uh…*really* well-done?” she said with a nervous, embarrassed half-grin.

The meal was, as it soon turned out, still pretty decent. Nothing on what she’d had last night, which even as leftovers had been *phenomenal*…but somehow, she almost enjoyed this one *more*.

It wasn’t as if she was a stranger to people cooking for her. P’Li or her attendants had been taking care of that for as long as she could remember. But the *reason* was different, and the *reason* was what mattered.

This slightly burnt turtle-duck hadn’t been made for her because she was the Avatar, or a member of the Red Lotus. It’d been made because someone cared about *her*.

An ulterior motive for the quickly prepared lunch soon made itself clear, however. As soon as their plates were clean, Asami grabbed her by the hand and started off at a hurried pace.

“Chushi’s an *amazing* cook, but he’d take two hours to make a bowl of noodles. He always needs to get it *just* right,” she told Korra, grinning. “And I don’t want to waste another second.”

“Uh…*where* are we going, exactly?” asked the Avatar, nearly tripping over her own feet as she struggled to keep step with the other girl.

“We…” said Asami, her grin broadening with every second. “Are gonna take a spin around the track.”

[-------------------]

“This…was…a…terrible…ideeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaa!” screamed Korra, as she held on for dear life around Asami’s waist.

When the non-bender mentioned a track, Korra had assumed she meant racecars. She’d said she drove them all the time, after all.

And that would’ve been plenty terrifying, all on its own.

Instead, Avatar Korra – who’d never ridden in a vehicle faster than Ghazan’s beat-up old jeep, the other night excepted – was now careening down a long stretch of pavement, on the back of the first and last motorcycle she *ever* wanted to ride.

She’d seen pictures of the things in books before, and even caught glimpses of a handful on the city streets. And she couldn’t deny she thought they looked pretty cool. But being *on* one?

Korra silently wondered whether she should rethink the question of Asami being a spy, because she was quite clearly trying to kill her right now.
“Hold on tight! We’re gonna take this turn pretty sharp!” Asami exclaimed, giving Korra about three seconds of warning before dipping so far to the left that she could’ve reached out and touched the track.

Not that she did, of course. Her arms were too busy grasping on as tightly as possible to Asami’s slick riding suit.

And her mind, in-between screams of bloody terror, was too busy trying not to think too hard about the fact that her breasts were pressed tightly into the other girl’s back.

Still, there were upsides to the whole thing. They were racing against a few of the mansion’s other employees, who clearly hadn’t been instructed to take it easy on the boss’ daughter. And even scared out of her wits, if there was one thing Korra was always ready for…it was a challenge.

Soon enough, as they overtook each of the other riders in turn, Korra’s cries of terror slowly transformed into whoops and hollers of triumph. Whatever else she might be, Asami was clearly an expert at this, and she maneuvered around the circular track with all the precision and poise of a professional.

After they’d lapped all the others racers twice over, the non-bender finally saw fit to bring their death-defying ride to a halt. Korra dismounted first, shaking her sweat-matted hair free of her helmet.

“By the spirits, that was awesome!” she said jubilantly, a wide grin across her face. “I mean, I never ever wanna do it again, but man, that was a rush! We totally whooped those guys!”

“I probably should’ve started you out with something slower…but I’ll admit, I kinda wanted to show off,” responded Asami, releasing her own hair from the ostrich-horse-tail she’d tied it in for the race. “I hope it wasn’t too bad.”

“Eh, let’s just go for…medium amount of terrifying next time,” Korra stated in a high voice, holding her thumb and forefinger close together to emphasize the point. “And just to be on the safe side, let’s make ‘next time’ a loooooooong way off.”

Asami giggled into her gloved hand, then glanced at her watch. “Ugh, we should be getting back,” she added. “I said I’d have this bike back by two so they can refuel it.”

“It’s past two already?!” asked Korra in alarm, suddenly frantic. “Monkey feathers, monkey feathers, monkey feathers!”

“Did you have somewhere you needed to be?” said Asami.

Korra grimaced in embarrassment. “I’m, err…supposed to meet the other Fire Ferrets for practice again,” she answered, twiddling her thumbs as she did. “Didn’t realize it’d gotten so late.”

“Well, that sounds fun!” the non-bender exclaimed, looking honestly interested. “Do you think they’d mind if I came with? Just to watch, y’know. I promise I won’t leak any top-secret team strategies or anything.”

The Avatar hesitated to answer. After all, this was going to be a pretty important practice. Soon after, she’d need to follow Bolin and Mako to their appointment at Future Industries warehouse twelve, and Asami’s presence could only complicate that plan.

But as was becoming increasingly – and perhaps distressingly – common, the logical part of her mind was kicked straight to the curb by the part of her that reacted to more time with Asami like a
trained polar bear-dog being offered treats.

Besides…she’d just spent the past day watching on as, one way or another, Asami showed off just about everything she had in her corner.

Maybe it was time for Korra to return the favor.

------------------------

Amon stood before no less than five-dozen mecha-tanks, arranged in neat rows of six, his arms crossed in satisfaction.

“I’ve made several improvements to this model over the last. The engine is in far less danger of overheating, and ice from enemy waterbenders is no longer a concern,” said Hiroshi Sato, his tone businesslike and conversational.

“I would make sure to test that claim in the field. Thoroughly,” replied the bloodbender, narrowing his eyes beneath his mask. “I’Inka may be past his prime, but any tanks sent after Tarrlok must be prepared to deal with a master waterbender. And careful use of ice is his specialty.”

“You say that like you know him,” muttered Hiroshi, as he picked up a hefty clipboard delivered by another Equalist engineer. “Do you two have a history? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Amon stiffened. He didn’t think the other man noticed, but his lips were pursed as he eventually whispered, “…After a fashion.”

Hiroshi continued to scrawl out notes, double-checking that the diagnostic reports for each mecha-tank were all in order. Each one needed to be checked, daily, to ensure everything was working properly. These were very new tech, and it might only take the slightest defect to send them all crashing down.

After a while, however, he said in a low voice, “Thank you. For helping me last night.”

Amon turned to him, just by the slightest inch.

“We are…friends, Hiroshi,” he told the older man. “If you truly have need of me, I will always come.”

The thing was, the bloodbender reflected briefly, he was no longer sure himself just how much of that was naked manipulation…and how much was entirely sincere.

“It was a small matter, in the grand scheme of things,” Hiroshi continued to murmur. “ Barely a blip on the course of our glorious revolution. But it meant a great deal to me.”

Amon said nothing, merely nodding once. As both he and Hiroshi well knew, the industrialist was irreplaceable in the Equalist hierarchy. Without the man’s wealth and technical prowess, Noatak would still be practicing his “cleansing” one bender at a time, achieving absolutely nothing in the long run.

Amon would still just be the fever dream of a young boy, inches from death in the cold northern snows.
In light of that, a simple application of his “talent” seemed a small price to pay to keep the old man happy. What he’d learned as a consolation prize, of course, dwarfed the petty worries that’d led to the request completely.

But Hiroshi didn’t need to know about that. Not yet.

This was information to keep close to his breast, until the time was just right.

“Are preparations ready for tonight?” Hiroshi asked after another long pause, apparently satisfied with the results of his analysis.

Amon drummed his fingers along the railing, his eyes upon the mechanized army directly below them.

“My Lieutenant is already in position. In addition to twenty of my most skilled chi-blockers,” he said. “And I will be joining them myself within the hour. Too many of our enemies are gathering at once for us to ignore the opportunity.”

He reached his hand high, toward the artificial light, and watched in dim amazement as, without being bidden, every other Equalist working on the mecha-tanks did likewise.

“One way or another,” finished Amon, his voice a death-rasp in the dark, cold factory. “By tomorrow morning…”

A full hundred fists, Hiroshi Sato’s included, clenched as one.

“All the world will know of our Solution.”
Book One, Intermission: Earth

“It’s a long, long way to Ba Sing Se, but the girls in the city, we look so pretty! We kiss so sweet, that you’ve really got to meeeneeet – the girls from Ba Sing Se!”

Ghazan looked upon the row of dancers, each dressed and made up to be indistinguishable from the last, and dimly, almost as if on reflex, tried to figure out which one was his mother.

He wasn’t really sure how he’d expected to pick her out of the crowd; how he might’ve recognized a woman he hadn’t seen since the day he was born. Particularly given how much she must’ve changed in the intervening fourteen years.

Perhaps he’d been counting on some kind of… feeling, deep down inside. An instinctual connection to the woman whose blood he shared.

But if so, that’d failed pretty miserably. He felt nothing.

“Come on, Ghazan. Shift change,” spoke a hushed voice from behind him. A hand, sheathed in a glove of stone, came down on his shoulder, more than a little impatiently.

Pushing all other thoughts from his mind for a moment, Ghazan briefly dipped the sedge hat of his uniform in acknowledgment, and allowed the other Dai Li agent to take his place guarding the festival.

Many people tended to forget, with their political role having reached such primacy in recent history, but above all the Dai Li had been founded to preserve the Earth Kingdom’s cultural heritage. Parades, concerts, cultural festivals like these – all required the security only Ba Sing Se’s silent guardians could provide.

Being able to keep an eye out for his mother was just a convenient side-benefit.

His father and grandfather before him had worn the uniform as well, and so on, going back to the very first generation trained by Avatar Kyoshi herself. Admittedly, they really didn’t talk about his grandfather much, since he’d been one of the agents who, rather infamously, betrayed his nation to the Fire Princess.

But apart from that, his family’s history of service stood second to none in all of Earth Kingdom history.

There was, in short, little Ghazan could’ve done to avoid joining the Dai Li himself – whether or not he wanted to. While the formal age of induction was thirteen, he’d started his own training far earlier, and passed his admissions test with flying colors.

As a rule, the Dai Li generally discouraged its members from taking lovers or raising families. Their first and only loyalty, after all, was supposed to be to their monarch.

As was often the case with such rules, however, it was broken so frequently and so openly that few agents ever actually got in trouble for it. Generally, that only happened when a reason was needed for some other discipline to occur – for example, when a superior officer needed an excuse to fire a recruit who’d looked at him funny.
That was how Ghazan had slipped through the cracks. His father, who went by the name Jing Cha, had never really risen very high in the ranks, but he’d kept his head down and took orders without question for nearly fifty years, if only to compensate for his own father’s treachery. Under the watchful eye of Hou-Ting, that attitude was considered quite valuable indeed, and was more than worth overlooking such a small impropriety as a bastard.

His mother was a dancer – that was the beginning and the end of all Ghazan knew of her. She’d met his father on a night just like this one, in the course of “overseeing” a cultural festival. The way he told it, in a distinctly unromantic tone, he’d barely even remembered it the next morning.

Then, nine months later, she’d returned.

She was, she’d told him, extremely poor. The last few months of her pregnancy, when her swollen belly had forced her to forgo dancing entirely, had only made that worse. She hadn’t the resources nor the time to raise a child…or at least, not to raise him well.

Jing Cha wasn’t an exceedingly moral man. His duty to his Queen was his entire world, and all else – Ghazan included – was decidedly secondary. But responsibility was one thing he did understand, and after some cajoling, he’d accepted his son.

Ghazan supposed he should count himself fortunate. He’d never wanted for food, or shelter. Service to the Dai Li paid well, even for the freshest recruits, and provided a freedom of movement about the sprawling city that few citizens enjoyed.

Or, to put it another way…no Dai Li lived in the Lower Ring.

Every time he patrolled those streets – which was often, as the youngest agents naturally got the worst assignments – he caught glimpses of how his life could have been.

Children starving in the streets, begging for copper from every man or woman who passed through on their way to the Middle Ring. Homes so old and broken-down it was frankly shocking they hadn’t yet collapsed. Men slumped against the nearest wall, coughing violently or covered in sores, with nary the slightest chance of ever seeing a healer.

To be sure, not all of the Lower Ring was quite so awful. It housed millions of people, after all; over five times the population of the other two rings, combined.

But there was also no denying that the problems of Ba Sing Se’s most impoverished citizens had only grown worse and worse, under the current regime.

Still, Ghazan reflected as he slipped away from the bright lights and swelling music of the festival…that didn’t make dealing with his abandonment any easier. She might not’ve been able to take care of him on her own, but she was still his mother.

His father might’ve been distant and unaffectionate at the best of times, but at least he was there. At least he’d taken some responsibility for the child he’d accidentally created. Given him a home, an education, a chance at a life.

Sometimes, Ghazan wasn’t sure whether he was desperately searching for his mother in order to embrace her…

Or to punch her square in the jaw.
"You’re back late," Jing Cha said to his son, the moment he walked into their apartment in the Middle Ring. "I saw the duty schedule, you should’ve been relieved nearly an hour ago."

"Tizui was running behind," Ghazan lied easily. He’d had a lot of practice. "I think he’s been hitting the cactus juice again."

He had no idea if that was actually true or not, but it was a plausible enough excuse. While a talented agent otherwise, this wouldn’t be the first time Tizui had relapsed.

His father grunted in irritation.

"I’ll talk to his supervisor in the morning," he replied in a deep, rumbling voice. In the midst of saying so, he stifled a yawn. "Make sure you get up early, alright? The Queen is coming for inspection tomorrow, eight sharp."

"I’ll be there," Ghazan assured him with a parting wave. Those were the only kind of words they exchanged anymore.

The earthbender supposed it wasn’t unusual, in some ways. Plenty of children, from his age or even younger, were put to work at the “family business.” Children of farmers helped till the fields. Children of merchants helped man the shop.

He supposed, in short, he wasn’t the only teenager on the planet whose only real connection with their parent was the job they’d passed down to them.

But few other teenagers had ever had to do the kinds of things he did.

In just under a year of active service to the Dai Li, and throughout all the time he’d spent training under his father’s tutelage, he’d executed fourteen people. Personally. The number was no doubt far higher if one factored in all the things he’d done as part of a unit.

The reasons were myriad. Tax evasion, most frequently. Queen Hou-Ting had little patience for any subjects discovered not to be paying her the proper tribute, and there was only so much room in the debtors’ prisons.

So those cells were typically reserved for middle class merchants who could pay, and simply had managed to avoid doing so via one form of trickery or another. The poor saps who made so little they’d probably never generate meaningful revenue…

Well, the crown didn’t consider their loss much of a waste.

Others had died for more serious crimes: murder, rape, treason. And still others, for matters far more minor. He still remembered the face of the girl he’d been ordered to cut down for stealing a single head of cabbage.

She’d died screaming.

And there were so many other things he’d done, at the behest of his Queen or her representatives. He’d collapsed the homes of crying families, with a single stomp of his foot. He’d “sent a message” to farmers by decapitating their livestock with jagged stone. He’d stood before statues of monarchs ten dynasties past, and simply because the current ruler found them “tacky,” leveled them to rubble...
in an instant.
And not once, not once, had he ever stopped to think twice about what he was doing. He wasn’t sure he’d ever really learned how.

Ghazan slept fitfully that night.

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“Pathetic. Disgraceful. An insult to your Kingdom.”

The first part of their weekly inspection came in the form of the Earth Queen critiquing the states of their uniforms. There weren’t usually very many positive comments thrown around.

Perhaps in response to how thoroughly they’d betrayed her father, Hou-Ting took a very “hands-on” approach to managing the Dai Li. She personally looked over each of their duty schedules, doled out orders, and met individually with each new recruit for a session with a truth-seer. And the man who dealt with them day-to-day, Grand Secretariat Gun, was watched over by her like a messenger hawk.

The woman was vain, conniving, and utterly averse to anything resembling manual labor, but she wasn’t lazy. She’d seen the Kingdom nearly slip away from Kuei several times over, ever since she was a little girl, and she refused to let it happen to her.

Which meant, right now, that any member of the Dai Li with wrinkled or stained robes was in a very unfortunate position.

When she passed over Ghazan, she scowled and gave a brief nod – her signal that she could find nothing obvious to criticize. It was about the best he could possibly hope for.

Then her eyes moved over to Jing Cha, and she abruptly stopped.

“Agent,” she said, her voice hard. She never used any of their names, even though she’d met with every single one of them at one point or another. It was a constant reminder of the difference in their stations. “What, exactly, is that?”

Ghazan’s eyes flitted over to his father. It was just a quick glance, admittedly, but he couldn’t see anything wrong with his uniform at all.

“I apologize to the absolute depths of my heart, Your Majesty,” he whispered, entirely sincerely. This was a man who lived for nothing but service to the woman currently glaring daggers at him, after all. “But…I’m not quite sure what you mean…”

“Really?” asked the Queen, her tone cruel and mocking. “Because I see dirt smeared all over your robes.”

Jing Cha was stunned, speechless.

“Still don’t realize what I’m getting at, agent?” she added after a moment’s pause. “Pity…I thought they trained you worthless hog-monkeys better than this. Gun, explain it so that even this idiot can understand.”
The Grand Secretariat, a small man with an even smaller voice, bounded over and began to read off a scroll.

“Ahem…on seven separate occasions over the past two months, an agent of the Dai Li has been observed making unscheduled visits to the Wu Dao Dance Troupe,” he said. “Although the man’s face was never seen, it is known that Agent Jing Cha once took a lover amongst that troupe.”

“Pining for an old flame, in my service? On my time?” demanded Hou-Ting, her eyes narrowed dangerously. “I could forgive doing it once or twice. But this has disrespected me, and disrespected the crown. And you know the punishment for that.”

Ghazan, for his part, was frozen in fear. Obviously, they had the wrong culprit.

He thought he’d been careful, avoided being seen at all except on those nights – like the previous one – where he had an excuse to be there. He’d stayed to the shadows, never approaching the dancers, always keeping his distance. But clearly, that hadn’t been enough.

And his father was getting the blame.

Ghazan knew he had to speak up, and quickly. He opened his mouth, the words already half-formed in his throat…but no sound came out. He swallowed and tried again, but the result was the same.

Flailing, desperate, he glanced sideways to his father. Their eyes met, very briefly.

And then, before Ghazan could utter a single word, Jing Cha said, “Very well. I admit to my crime. Do with me as you will, my Queen.”

Ghazan’s mouth continued to hang wide as Hou-Ting replied, her eyes glinting, “Gladly. Guards, take him away.”

That was the last time Ghazan ever saw his father.

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The next few years passed the young earthbender by in a dull, unpleasant blur.

Trying to reconcile the lifetime of coldness and neglect his father had given him with his final, shocking sacrifice – for there was no way he couldn’t have deduced who the real culprit was – was an exercise in futility, and after a while Ghazan gave it up as a bad job.

Whatever their relationship was to each other, whatever it could have been; none of it really mattered anymore. Nor did it truly matter what’d happened to him, though Ghazan spent many sleepless nights awake, wondering. Dead, imprisoned, “reeducated”…

Either way, he was gone.

He never sought out his mother again after that night, either. On the one hand, it was simply a matter of pragmatism – he’d been seen before, and there was no guarantee it wouldn’t happen again.

But even setting that aside, the urge, the drive to meet her had been utterly snuffed out. It was attached to a life he no longer lived. Feelings he no longer shared.
All that was left to him was the Dai Li. And so, that duty became his entire world.

Ghazan had been good, before. An effective agent, given he was one of their youngest. But that wasn’t enough anymore.

He would be the best.

In a remarkably short time, he soon managed to pile up accomplishments that put to shame any other three agents combined. Besides his unyielding drive – itself hardly an inconsiderable skill – he had two things going for him in this self-imposed mission.

One was that his appearance belied his true age by quite a bit. His long, thick mustache had begun to grow in when he was ten, and he kept his hair cropped short in a military cut. Combine that with his rather impressive physique, the result of a lifetime of training at his father’s hands, and virtually no one would ever guess that he was still a teenager.

His other asset was his incredible prowess at earthbending.

All Dai Li agents needed to be potent earthbenders, of course. It was the very core of the job, and was second only to blind loyalty in the attributes the Queen recruited for. But Ghazan was in another league.

Whether it was his bloodline, or simply a random fluke of chance, the young man had a natural aptitude for the art that was almost terrifying.

The complaints the other young recruits sometimes vented in private, of difficulties lifting rocks above a certain size or deftly manipulating sand or mud, simply didn’t happen to him. He picked up new techniques like a turtle-duck took to water, and was even fairly adept at countering troublesome water or firebenders. Those still weren’t quite as common in Ba Sing Se as in the United Republic, but it never hurt to be prepared.

And he used those skills to bring fallow any and all enemies his Queen commanded.

Ghazan certainly didn’t like her, on any personal level. And to the degree he gave much thought to political matters – which in fairness, wasn’t often – he had little doubt her policies had hurt his Kingdom more than helped it.

But it wasn’t his role to question these things. It wasn’t his role to think. The Dai Li were the left hand of their rightful monarch…and when she wanted to clench that hand into a fist, they obeyed.

So he captured, and he brutalized, and he killed. Over and over and over. He intervened in a thousand different crimes – some of them things no one but Hou-Ting would call such, like wearing clashing colors in her presence – and meted out punishment as commanded.

And that’s precisely what he’d been doing on the night he met them.

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For most of its existence, Ba Sing Se had made due without any formal police. Soldiers protected the city from external threats, while royal guards and the Dai Li were judged sufficient to strike down internal ones.
But its occupation toward the end of the Hundred Year War had devastated the capital, and at the behest of the Avatar and the Fire Lord, King Kuei had instituted numerous reforms upon his return to the throne. One of those had been the institution of the Ba Sing Se Royal Police Force.

An independent organization that accepted recruits from all three Rings, Kuei had on his deathbed described the BSSRPF (there was a reason few people shortened it) as one of his proudest accomplishments. It was, he’d said, a necessary first step to help his people better seize control of their own lives.

So naturally, his daughter had wasted no time in dismantling the whole thing.

The police force still existed, but these days its independence from the crown was only nominal at best. Culled solely from sons and daughters of the Upper Ring – and the occasional Middle Ring family who were in good standing on their taxes – the officers were under strict orders to obey any Dai Li agents they met, and to defer to them in all things.

In effect, they were little more than a vast extension of the Dai Li’s influence; an acknowledgement that even they couldn’t be everywhere at once. Uniformed agents numbered less than a hundred, while the police were a force greater than ten thousand.

One consequence of this was that, when an “ordinary” officer stumbled across a case they thought the Queen might be interested in, it was common practice to call in a Dai Li agent to consult.

Tonight, that was the role Ghazan was fulfilling.

“Say that for me, one more time,” he said, as a young officer – just a few years above his own age of seventeen – blabbered on in decreasingly coherent tones. “What-bending?”

“Combustionbending, sir!” yelped the other man, a fresh recruit with bad acne named Imado. “I saw it with my own two eyes! Oh, man, it was just like that guy in The Boy in the Iceberg! The one that was half-robot!”

This wasn’t a strictly accurate description of the play, nor of the actual historical figure it depicted. But Ghazan ignored that for now.

“And so that’s what did…this?” he asked, gesturing to the massive holes blown into a government building and the surrounding streets. Mercifully, no one had died in the explosions, but the property damage was incalculable.

Imado nodded emphatically.

“It was a young girl, couldn’t have been more than…I dunno. Twelve or thirteen at the most,” he told the agent, his knobby hands trembling. “She didn’t even try to hide herself. That’s what was so scary. She just walked up, took a deep breath, and…boom.”

Ghazan tugged absently at his mustache, mulling this over.

“Did you see where she went after that?” he said quietly.

“Sorry, ‘fraid not. We were all pretty much in shock,” replied Imado. “Guess she must’ve slipped away in the confusion.”

Ghazan spent the next ten minutes taking down as much information as he could from the officer and his compatriots – a description of the perpetrator, whether they’d said anything, who they might’ve interacted with. Mercifully, it soon became clear the criminal was someone who’d definitely stand
out in a crowd: braided black hair, raggedy Fire Nation clothing, and most tellingly, a chi-focusing tattoo of a third eye.

Finally, once he was satisfied he’d heard everything even remotely useful about the attack – and quite a bit more that wasn’t – Ghazan stuffed his copious notes into his pocket and gave the men a terse bow.

“May the light of Her Majesty be with you,” he muttered, parroting words he’d both heard and spoken a thousand times over. It was like a reflex, at this point.

“May the light of Her Majesty be with you,” Imado and the rest repeated back, with a great deal more emotion.

By the time they said it, however, Ghazan was already gone.

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Strictly speaking, he should’ve reported this straight back to the palace. Someone assaulting government property with an incredibly rare firebending technique was the sort of thing you were supposed to call in backup for.

But Ghazan didn’t really work too well with others. And in any event, he had an intense, nagging feeling that this was something he needed to pursue himself.

He started by searching the streets – literally. While he’d never had any formal training in it, and he’d never quite worked out a knack for the associated skill of metalbending, he was quite adept at the technique commonly referred to as “seismic sense.”

A single step onto Ba Sing Se’s rough roadways gave him a clear picture of everyone walking upon it for nearly a mile in each direction. Interpreting that picture was a little harder, considering that “everyone” was currently in the neighborhood of a couple thousand people.

Still, firebenders tended to quite literally stand out in a crowd like this, their footsteps a little bit lighter than the average earth or non-bender. And a child would be even lighter still.

Unfortunately, his first few hours of searching were largely fruitless. He did catch a couple of people making trouble, and he dealt with them swiftly – a purse-snatcher, a group of boys trying to steal the radio out of a Satomobile – but none were his target.

The problem with trying to track someone down in Ba Sing Se was that the city was, by any conceivable measure, enormous. The mysterious girl had attacked nearly half a day prior, giving her plenty of time to gain some distance between them. Even his earthbending senses could only get him so far.

Even so, however – and Ghazan had to specifically remind himself of this – his bending wasn’t his only talent. He had a keen mind, as well…or at least, one adept at deducing the thought processes of lawbreakers.

He tried not to think too hard upon that.

It was, Ghazan reasoned, fairly unlikely that the girl had targeted a government building by accident.
Her bending was hardly a precision instrument, but it was still the only thing that’d gotten destroyed. The surrounding stores and alleyways were merely singed.

As such, it followed that she was someone with a grudge against the crown. And so, unless she was a complete idiot, she’d have to be expecting someone to come down hard on her.

Someone…who was an earthbender…

Ghazan’s eyes suddenly went wide, and they found what he was looking for almost immediately: an old, boarded-up theatre. All the other buildings on this street were made of brick or stone, but not that one.

It was made out of wood.

As quietly as he could, Ghazan pushed aside some rotting planks and snuck his way into the theatre. Dusty old posters for _Love Amongst the Dragons_ and _Waiting for Kuruk_ littered the walls, and he struggled not to cough at the musty odor that hung over the place.

This was the one place within walking distance of the target location, where the criminal might’ve been able to hide themselves from earthbending pursuers.

There was, of course, no guarantee they hadn’t fled the city entirely. It would’ve been the smart thing to do.

But this was no ordinary attack. This person had a _point_ to make, something to _prove_.

And they couldn’t well do that if they weren’t still close by.

These were only hunches, of course, but Ghazan had long since learned that his hunches tended to be better than most. And indeed, the hushed whispers he soon began to hear seemed to confirm his suspicions.

“That was foolish and reckless, P’Li,” said one of the voices, a young man. His voice was very quiet. “You know that.”

“I saw an opportunity, and I took it,” the other voice replied. It belonged, unmistakably, to a young girl. The _culprit_. “I won’t apologize for putting into action what you’ve always taught me, Zaheer.”

“I taught you to be careful. Or at least I thought I did,” the man called Zaheer chastised her. Meanwhile, his steps as light as he could make them, Ghazan drew closer to the pair. “The Earth Queen _will_ fall, in time. But that requires patience. Making ourselves a target in hostile territory won’t bring us closer to that goal.”

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of tip-toeing around the dilapidated theatre, Ghazan turned a corner, and caught the first glimpse of his enemies.

Zaheer was a man perhaps five or six years older than he was, though his youthful face was already marred by several light scars. Apart from his shaved head, however, there seemed to be little remarkable about him. With his dull gray robes and soft voice, he could easily blend into a crowd just about anywhere.

The girl called P’Li was a…_different_ story.

Imado had been telling the truth – she was clearly a few years younger than Ghazan, with plaied black hair that extended into a long braid. She was _tall_ too, especially given her apparent age;
Zaheer only had an inch or so over her.

The tattoo witnesses had described was also prominent, and Ghazan held in a deep breath as he considered what that implied. At this distance, were he to be discovered, that thing could end his life in the space of a second.

So the earthbender watched in silence as P’Li let out a lengthy sigh and, finally, spoke up again.

“You’re right, of course. You’re *always* right,” she said, and Ghazan was surprised to see there were actually *tears* welling up in her eyes. “By the spirits, I’m so *stupid*. No matter what I do…no matter how powerful I become…I’m still just a *burden* to you. A burden to the Lotus…”

The Lotus? She couldn’t possibly be talking about the White Lotus, could she?

Zaheer surprised him even more by reaching forward and grasping the girl around the shoulders.

“*Never* think that way,” he told her, his tones tender yet firm. “You’re more than just your power. You’re more than just what you can do for the Red Lotus. You’re a brilliant, talented, *beautiful* girl, all on your own. Never forget that.”

Now Ghazan was even more confused. The Red Lotus? He’d never even *heard* of such a thing…

P’Li melted into the hug, almost instantly, and for a second she looked far more her age than she otherwise did. Her next question was whispered, directly into Zaheer’s ear, but Ghazan was close enough—and skilled enough in the delicate art of eavesdropping—that he picked up every word.

“You know how I feel about you, right?” she asked him, grasping tighter onto the older man as she did.

Zaheer flinched uncomfortably…though not, Ghazan thought, in a way that looked like he wasn’t enjoying their closeness. Rather, he looked like someone who was enjoying it *far too much*, and felt extremely guilty about it.

“P’Li…we’ve been over this,” he murmured back.

“I know, I know,” she said, her two natural eyes closed tight. “You think I’m too young. Maybe I am. But I wasn’t too young to kill all those people. To lay waste to their villages. To do…everything else…that monster wanted me to…”

Even in their embrace, she shivered uncontrollably, and the first tear finally managed to escape her eye.

“I just want to be…*with* someone. And for it not to *hurt,*” she eventually added, her voice so small and feeble it was easy to forget she was a maniacal terrorist. “And I want that person to be *you*. Because of the way you make me *feel*. Because of the way you’ve *always* made me feel.”

Ghazan, for his part, felt his throat go completely dry, unable to fully process what he was seeing. This wasn’t how people like…like this…were supposed to act.

“When I’m with you…” finished P’Li, burying her face into Zaheer’s shoulder. “I’m *more* than just a weapon. I’m a *person*. You’re the first person who’s ever made me feel that way. The *only* person. How could I *not* love you?”

Criminals weren’t supposed to have loved ones. They weren’t *supposed* to speak so tenderly, or hold each other so close.
Sure, he knew – on an intellectual level – that most of the men and women he’d cut down or brought in over the years had families. That he’d separated countless children from their parents, the way he had lost his, purely because he’d been ordered to do so.

But he’d never had to deal with it, directly in front of him. Not like this.

Yet he knew his duty. Whoever these two were, whatever their reasons were for being here, they clearly intended to destabilize the careful balance that kept Ba Sing Se a peaceful, orderly utopia.

He’d sworn an oath to stomp people like this into the dirt – without questions, and without mercy. And he’d spent every last day of his entire life living up to it.

So… why couldn’t he act? The two of them were fully distracted right now, paying attention to nothing and no one, apart from each other. He’d never have a better opportunity to strike.

But the stones that encased his hands wouldn’t budge.

In the end, he left the criminals to their privacy and slipped out of that dark theatre, as silently as he’d entered.

[Ghazan spent the next few weekly inspections in a state of increasingly frantic paranoia.]

The eyes and the ears of the Dai Li were everywhere – that was the propaganda the crown always wished for the people of the Impenetrable City to believe. And as a member of the Dai Li, Ghazan knew well that, while exaggerated… this claim was far closer to fact than fiction.

He hadn’t made a secret of his meeting with Imado. As an official rule, no police officer was to keep a written record of conversations with the Dai Li, but any of the cops he’d talked to would be able to say the terrorist attack was now his case.

The entire point of handing matters over to the Dai Li was to wrap them up quickly and cleanly. Though he hadn’t told any of his fellow agents about the attack, sooner or later, his inaction would be noticed.

And at that point, he’d just have to pray they jumped to the conclusion of “incompetence” over “cowardice.”

Because that’s what this was, wasn’t it? If his father had taught him anything about life, it was that a heart as cold and unyielding as stone was the only thing that’d allow him to survive the world.

There wasn’t room for questioning orders in the life of a Dai Li agent. There wasn’t room for thinking. To do otherwise… to stay his hand when he could’ve easily rid his Kingdom of a grave and terrible threat…

No other word could describe that but cowardice. No kinder word, at least.

Yet no one – not his Queen, not Gun, not his fellow agents – ever brought this horrible betrayal to light, as he passed inspection after inspection with the closest thing their organization had to flying colors.
Was it truly possible no one had taken notice of his failure? He wasn’t convinced. His father, after all, hadn’t been accused after the first time Ghazan had been mistaken for him. They’d lulled “him” into a false sense of security, let “him” think that “he” was getting away with it. So that when the trap was sprung – albeit, on the wrong target – the wound would run that much deeper.

He feared, deep down, that just the same noose was slowly tightening around his own neck.

Eventually, Ghazan found he could only come to a single conclusion. He’d have to keep pursuing this case...one way or another.

Tracking Zaheer and P’Li down for a second time was easier said than done, however. By the time he returned to the theatre, they’d clearly abandoned it for another hideout, and he had only the barest hints of what their objective in the city actually was.

No more wanton destruction followed over the next few weeks, or at least he hadn’t heard of any, so it seemed the combustionbender had taken her partner’s advice and was laying low. He pulled on several of his connections, some seedier than others – nothing the Dai Li did was ever technically illegal, so long as the Queen didn’t overrule them – but none had seen the three-eyed girl or her bare-headed companion.

His big break came as a result of sheer dumb luck.

Every year, on the night of the Spring Equinox, an enormous parade was held in honor of the Earth Queen and her entire, sprawling dynasty. Representations of every monarch in Earth Kingdom history were painstakingly recreated in stone reliefs, and marched from one end of the city to the other.

Parades celebrating Hou-Ting were hardly an unusual sight; there was one approximately once a week. But this was the only one that stretched across all three Rings. Attendance, by at least one member of each household, was mandatory.

Unsurprisingly, then, the event required every last Dai Li agent, in addition to most of the police force, to ensure security. Ghazan was no exception.

He was stationed in the Lower Ring, a fair distance from the parade itself. Leaping between vantage points with all the reflexes of a cat-owl, he could get a fairly good look at a massive portion of the city at once, and clamp down on any suspicious activity with extreme prejudice.

But the suspicious activity he eventually did spot, a couple hours into the event, wasn’t on the city streets or across its rooftops. It was on one of the distant, rolling hills.

Where, just beneath a weathered tree...a pair of very familiar people were digging a hole.

There were no buildings near the hill in question, which was how he’d managed to spot their movement from so far away. Clearly, they knew this, given that they’d timed this operation so perfectly – when all the eyes of Ba Sing Se would be turned elsewhere.

Unfortunately, that fact also prevented Ghazan from getting closer without revealing himself.

So, a split-second later, he made a decision. And that’s exactly what he did.

“What do you two think you’re doing?” Ghazan demanded, landing some distance away from the tree, his stone gloves primed and ready.

P’Li immediately wheeled around to face him, her third eye pointed directly at his face. But Zaheer
placed a cautioning hand on her shoulder.

“I knew it was only a matter of time before we attracted an audience,” he said, as calmly as if he was discussing the weather. “Tell me, pawn of the Earth Queen. Are you familiar with the First Siege of Ba Sing Se?”

Ghazan stopped in his tracks for a moment, utterly dumbfounded by the question.

He couldn’t even begin to imagine how it was relevant to the matter at hand, and yet he found himself answering, “Only from history books. General Iroh of the Fire Nation led an assault on the outer wall for six hundred days, but abandoned it just after breaking through to the city. That failure caused him to be passed over for Fire Lord by his younger brother, Ozai.”

“Impressive. So Her Majesty does allow you to know a few stray facts,” replied Zaheer, turning to face Ghazan directly.

Though he carried no weapons and assumed no bending stance, he somehow still managed to be incredibly imposing. The fact that he stood at the top of the hill, the setting sun framed behind him, while Ghazan stared up at him from the bottom, only accentuated the effect.

“However, there are a few things missing from your version of the story,” Zaheer added after a moment, his arms folded. “Chiefly, the reason why Iroh abandoned his siege. On the six-hundredth day of conflict, his son Lu Ten – a lieutenant in the Fire Nation military – was killed by enemy soldiers. He broke, that day. Lost all passion or interest in pressing for victory.”

He then gestured to the hole behind him, as if inviting Ghazan to draw closer. Cautiously, ready to strike at any second, he did so.

As he neared the hole, however, an overpowering, gut-wrenching stench filled his nostrils, and Ghazan nearly doubled over in agony. He noticed for the first time that Zaheer and P’Li were both wearing nose-plugs.

“The number of dead from that assault, Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation alike, was incalculable,” said the man with the shaved head, his voice dispassionate and even. “For this reason, all of them were buried in a mass grave, with no marker or identification. And here they’ve been left to rot, all on top of each other, for nearly eighty years.”

Ghazan drew just close enough to catch a glimpse of what was inside the hole they’d dug, and just that glimpse was enough to desperately wish he could claw his eyes out. It was the most horrific, awful, nauseating thing he’d ever seen – an enormous mound of long-rotted flesh and bloodstained bones, stretching down deep into the darkness.

“What…could you possibly want with this…?” he asked hoarsely, his rock-covered hands pressed uselessly over his nose.

“There is a spirit we will need to deal with, if we wish to accomplish our goals. A spirit who was once a man,” responded Zaheer. “If we can identify Lu Ten’s remains from among all this carnage, it will be useful as…leverage.”

“You’re insane,” was all Ghazan could think to say, as his eyes watered from the noxious stench. “You’re a monster.”

“I’ve frequently been mistaken for both,” murmured the other man. “Perhaps if you knew of our mission, you’d think differently. Or perhaps not. I’m uncertain how much life as a puppet of a corrupt regime has brainwashed you, and we don’t have the time to find out. Move out of our way,
or P’Li will kill you.”

“I don’t think so!” yelled out Ghazan, sending one of his gloves forward with a sudden, blindingly fast punch.

But the combustionbender was ready, and the stones were instantly vaporized in an explosion that sent Ghazan flying off his feet. He knew immediately that she’d aimed for the air between them, rather directly at his body… because if she had, he’d be dead right now.

Still, the earthbender struggled back to his feet, sending tremors through the ground as he did. It was sick, but he knew now that this hill was hollow – and just what was buried several layers below their feet. If he could open up sinkholes underneath the pair, it was doubtful they’d survive.

But once again, looking upon the faces of the man and girl he was about to murder, he hesitated.

And once again, he paid for it dearly.

It all happened in an instant. Dozens upon dozens of stone gloves, just like the one he’d just fired, flew through the air, and a number of them reshaped themselves to wrap around P’Li’s head, leaving only her nose and mouth exposed. Several others quickly bound the both of them by the wrists and ankles.

Ghazan had just a moment to gape at this before a sharp, stinging pain shot down his entire body. Manacles wrapped around his own limbs, but these ones were made of smooth, cold metal.

Blurry images swam in front of his eyes, and as he struggled to blink through the haze, the smiling, wrinkled face of Ba Sing Se’s Grand Secretariat slowly came into focus.

“Lock up the traitor with the others,” Gun ordered the other Dai Li agents, his normally timid and passive voice speaking far more coldly than Ghazan had ever heard it. “Her Majesty should be quite pleased.”

There was another strike, harder this time, straight to the top of his head. Then everything went black.

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When Ghazan next awoke, he was surrounded on all sides by a small, metal box.

From what little he could make out from between the bars of a tiny window that served as his sole source of air, he was deep within the dungeons built out of the old Crystal Catacombs. The place where he’d sent more people than he could count, assuming they were even worth imprisoning.

The irony wasn’t lost on the earthbender.

Instinctively, he pounded his fists against the walls, straining his bending to the breaking point as he struggled to find some small flaw or vulnerability in the processed ore. He’d never quite been able to “crack” the secret of metalbending, but he figured it couldn’t hurt to at least try.

After all, this was pretty much how the technique had been invented, wasn’t it? Or something like that. He wasn’t entirely sure, and his head was still throbbing…
“That won’t be of any use. Even if you’re a metalbender, these boxes are solid platinum,” said a quiet voice, speaking from several yards away.

Even distorted by echoing, he instantly recognized Zaheer.

“What the heck is going on here…?” Ghazan heard himself ask, his own voice sounding foreign and distant in these cramped confines.

“You’ve been betrayed by your precious Queenie. Big surprise there,” P’Li snapped, sounding slightly farther away than her partner. “And of course, we got caught up in the middle.”

“We’re all in the same boat at this point, P’Li,” Zaheer told her, still sounding surprisingly calm given their current situation. “There’s no longer any point in being hostile.”

“Maybe not to you,” she responded bitterly. “But if he hadn’t stuck his stupid mustache into our business, we’d be halfway out of the city by now! That’s not something I’m about to take lightly.”

“The Dai Li responded in too great a number for us to counter. Even without any distractions, we would’ve been no match,” said Zaheer. “The only difference now is the number of prisoners.”

Ghazan punched at the wall of his cage again, a flash of anger coursing through him at this fresh reminder of the injustice.

“You’re wrong!” he cried out through gritted teeth. “This is all just some big misunderstanding. You’ll see…when Her Majesty finds out about this, it’ll all work out.”

“You can’t possibly think that…that witch cares about you,” the firebender replied, her tone incredulous.

“It’s not about ‘caring.’ I don’t especially like her, as a person or a queen, and I doubt she feels any different,” said Ghazan. “But I’ve been loyal. That’s what matters in the Dai Li. I’ve been loyal every single spirits-begotten day of my life. They have to know that. They have to.”

The memory of his father – just as mindlessly loyal, brought down for something he equally held no fault in – swam dimly into his brain, but Ghazan pushed it back down.

This would be different. He’d get a chance to explain himself, and he’d use it.

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That chance didn’t come for nearly three weeks.

Barely any guards ever stopped by their dark, secluded corner of the dungeons, content in the natural features of the cavern to hold them. A man stopped by once a day to deliver a tin of water and dried meat, through which they were expected to survive to the next one. They were constantly hungry.

The guard, a young agent whom Ghazan had seen in passing but didn’t know personally, never responded when the earthbender demanded to see someone about his release. Eventually, he stopped bothering to ask.

The platinum box somehow managed to be both freezing cold and oppressively stuffy, and was too small for Ghazan to assume anything resembling a comfortable sleeping position. And naturally, of
course, he had absolutely nothing to do with himself to pass the time.

His only conversation partners were the two criminals he was imprisoned alongside… and considering it was their fault he was in this mess in the first place, it was hard to summon up the inclination to chat.

So it was in that state – starving, exhausted, and utterly restless – that Ghazan finally came face to face with Queen Hou-Ting.

Her sneering face greeted him one morning as he drowsily came to consciousness within his tiny cage. At least, he thought it was morning; with no daylight down here whatsoever, it was hard to be sure.

“So. This is the traitor who’d sell out his Kingdom to a group of terrorist filth,” she said, glaring imperiously through the small, barred opening.

Surprised at her sudden appearance, Ghazan struggled to take on a more dignified stance and speak up through his parched throat. The bout of pained coughing that erupted instead probably wasn’t helping his case.

Finally, once he found some strained, hoarse approximation of his voice, the earthbender managed to answer, “Please, my Queen. This is all just a mistake. I…I was…”


“I didn’t say it was your mistake, my Queen!” exclaimed Ghazan, hastily throwing up his arms in submission. “Obviously, you received some bad intelligence. Nothing more than that. I was trying to arrest this scum, not join them!”

“Those plotting against the crown aren’t merely to be arrested,” said Hou-Ting, sneering contemptuously at the other two boxes. “There was no point in bringing riff-raff like this alive. If you were truly sincere, their corpses would’ve been proof of your loyalty.”

Ghazan’s blood suddenly ran cold. He might not’ve liked Zaheer or P’Li very much, but the latter was barely more than a child.

And…well, yes, he had killed children before, on order of the crown. Without ever giving it more than the dimmest of a second thought. But this felt…different, somehow.

“I suppose I could allow you a second chance to prove yourself,” she continued to muse, as if she could read his thoughts. “That is, if I was an idiot, of course. You’ll never see outside your little box, you hear me? You’ll rot there, knowing this is what you deserve.”

“It’s not,” Ghazan meekly tried to protest. If he had enough water in his body left for it, he thought he might be crying. “All I’ve ever done is give myself to my Kingdom. To the Dai Li. To you.”

“And perhaps that’s true,” said the Queen, steepling her long, spindly fingers together as she did. “But I cannot be certain, and a soldier whose loyalty I cannot be certain of is a liability. It’s not like there’s a shortage of new recruits to replace you.”

That white-hot anger surged back up within him again.

“Is this what you did to dad?” he demanded, his voice as loud and thundering as he could make it
under the circumstances. “Tossed him in a hole and threw away the key? Because you were wrong about him, too! Just like you’re wrong about me!”

Hou-Ting looked honestly confused by this, and turned to the Grand Secretariat, who was just barely at the edge of Ghazan’s range of vision.

“Gun, what is this fool blathering about now?” she asked.

The older man consulted a clipboard, leafing through a hefty stack of papers.

“It appears this agent’s father was also convicted of treason, three years ago. He was executed, of course,” he eventually informed his monarch. “Sincerest apologies, my Queen. This should’ve been brought to your attention earlier.”

“Hmm…I see. Clearly, this disease extends farther than I ever imagined,” said Hou-Ting, stroking her chin thoughtfully. “Just to be sure, I want you to find out if any of our other agents have such…unsavory ties. Execute any who do.”

Ghazan, for his part, could only gape, utterly speechless. This was how he finally found out about his father’s fate? Just like that? So matter-of-factly?

And then, on top of all that…the order his Queen, his Queen, had just given? Delivered so simply, so casually, with so little thought attached?

It’d mean the deaths of at least two-dozen agents he could name off the top of his head, depending on how broadly Gun decided to interpret “ties.” And they’d never know. Never suspect. Never see it coming, from the woman they’d pledged their lives to protect.

Just as he had.

“You can’t do this!” Ghazan suddenly roared, slamming both fists against the walls of his cage. The echoes of the impact rang in his ears. “The Dai Li love and defend our Kingdom! How can betray them?!”

“Don’t you dare lecture me about betrayal!” screamed the Earth Queen, her voice rising to dwarf his in both intensity and volume. “Because of the Dai Li, our capital fell for the first time in eight thousand years! Our great Kingdom was torn apart and handed to the Fire Nation in scraps! And to his dying day, my father never gained back all the land those barbarians stole! All because you worthless weasel-snakes made a fool out of him!”

As Hou-Ting paused to take a deep breath, Ghazan chanced a glance back up at her heavily lined face. She was seething.

“If there is one thing I will take no chances on, it is treachery,” she continued in much lower, though no less furious, tones. “No one has ever turned against me, and lived to tell the tale. No one ever will.”

“So if that’s really true…” Ghazan found himself saying, though he knew it wasn’t a good idea. “Why am I still alive, then? Why are we still alive?”

At this, the Earth Queen actually smiled, though there was no pleasure or humor in it. It was a smirk of pure, vicious cruelty.

“You and co-conspirators live, to set an example,” she whispered, actually licking her lips for the briefest moment. “I’ll be sending a different Dai Li agent down here every day to feed you. Just a
little less in each portion. They’ll be able to watch on as you slowly waste away to pathetic piles of skin and bones. And they’ll know what’ll happen if they ever disobey their Queen.”

“Someday…” murmured Ghazan, trying to sound defiant despite how utterly weak he felt right now. “Someday…I’ll show you…”

“Someday, you will be dead,” said Hou-Ting, a sadistic little chuckle in her voice. “And not one single person on this planet will remember you enough to mourn you. Let this sink in, agent…you are nothing special. Just a hapless elephant-rat in a uniform. A uniform that anyone can wear.”

The Earth Queen let those be her last words, as she and her escort left the three of them alone in the darkness once more.

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The next few weeks were spent largely the same as the last, but the knowledge that he’d wasted his one opportunity for freedom made them sting so much more.

He found himself playing back the argument over and over in his head, wondering if there was anything he could have said to make her realize he was telling the truth.

But more than that, he also found himself wondering whether it was the truth anymore.

Ghazan liked to think of his loyalty as a rock-solid pillar, but the truth of the matter was that it’d been wavering for quite some time now. As he’d said to P’Li, nothing about Hou-Ting’s policies or personality inspired the slightest bit of devotion in him.

Yet it was also the only thing he really knew. He’d never had anyone but his father to guide him, and Jing Cha had followed his loyalty straight into the jaws of his own demise. Life with the Dai Li, in the end, was simple. He received orders, and then he followed them. Any ideas more complicated than that…

They’d never even entered his world.

All the same, he couldn’t prevent himself from feeling a twinge of regret with every life he ended, every home he destroyed – even if he told himself he didn’t. He was very good at telling himself things. He just wasn’t so good at believing them.

And then, that order.

What made it the breaking point wasn’t so much that it’d surprised him. On the contrary, it was how much it didn’t. It fit perfectly well with the commands he’d carried out without question for over four years; over ten, if one counted his years of training under Jing Cha.

The only difference, here, was that it was directed against people he knew. People he’d grown up with, people he’d trained and worked and fought beside, since he was only a child.

And that’d made all the difference. Or rather, the fact that it shouldn’t – and yet it did – was what made it so.

Because when it came to crushing the lives and spirits of those the crown was pledged to protect,
simply because the woman wearing it now had delivered the command, there shouldn’t have been any difference between a fellow agent or a poor beggar in the Lower Ring.

He’d never learned such a thing; it certainly hadn’t come up during his training, which was all the education he’d ever known. Yet he felt it, instinctually. Deep down inside.

And “Her Majesty” had just removed every justification he had for burying it.

“Zaheer,” he suddenly said, after nearly a month of total, complete silence. “Please tell me about the Red Lotus.”

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In the days that followed, Ghazan learned a great deal of things the agents of the Dai Li were probably never supposed to know.

The story of Avatar Wan, Raava, and Vaatu was a revelation, in every sense of the word. It was hard to argue, after the life he’d lived, that a world where Order was ascendant over Chaos could be called a success.

He’d been complicit, all his life, in just the sort of corrupt tyranny Vaatu existed to destabilize. By sealing him away, the newly formed Avatar had proven themselves to be an agent of stagnation over change.

Even when that change could’ve alleviated the suffering of so many.

One needed only look so far as the forty-sixth Earth King, who’d been – if the history books were to be believed – even worse a despot than his great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter. Avatar Kyoshi had had the chance to do some real good, by siding with the peasants he’d oppressed for so long.

Instead, she’d been so obsessed with preserving the status quo that her “solution” wound up being the Dai Li. The check she’d installed against the monarchy had, in the end, only strengthened it.

He’d heard the tale of the Dai Li’s founding a hundred times over, but hearing it from another’s perspective finally made him realize just how screwed up a lesson it taught. Preserving cultural heritage, clearly, mattered more to the governments and Avatars of the world than justice, freedom, and equality.

Zaheer shared with him an old Air Nomad proverb: “When we hit our lowest point, we are open to the greatest change.” It was, without a doubt, a statement layered with a great deal of truth.

Because now that he’d lost everything – everything – that’d made him who he once was, Ghazan was both willing and ready to be remade by the philosophies these “terrorists” espoused. It was liberating, in a way he couldn’t quite describe, to imagine a life where he could put his talents toward making the world a better place, a freer place.

Instead of helping to mold it all toward one tyrant’s will.

Of course, there was a fairly deep level of irony in finally feeling so “liberated” while he was, for all intents and purposes, imprisoned.
“Remind me again why you can’t just break us out by throwing rocks around,” said P’Li one day, her voice expressing nothing more than total, abject boredom.

Ghazan scowled slightly. They’d been over this, at least a dozen times. He wasn’t sure whether she’d actually forgotten – they were down to remarkably small portions in their daily meals – or whether she simply wanted to stimulate conversation, and couldn’t muster the energy to think up a new topic.

Still, while his relationship with the young girl was still a little on the cool side – he couldn’t blame her for mistrusting his recent change of heart – he decided to indulge her. Unstoppable killing machine or not, she still was only thirteen.

“These parts of the Crystal Catacombs are ideal to hold earthbenders. I should know, I used to guard them,” he explained. “The walls and ceilings are incredibly unstable; the slightest tremor could bury us. Particularly under the crystals themselves, which aren’t easy to bend.”

He sighed deeply before adding, “Besides, even if we did manage to form a tunnel that way, we’re right under a massive underground river. This chamber isn’t very large. We’d flood ourselves going out that way, and none of us are waterbenders.”

“Let’s put that on the to-do list, then,” she said, presumably to Zaheer. “If we ever do get out of here, we need a crazy anarchist waterbender on the team. Gotta be a few of those hanging around.”

“One element at a time, P’Li,” muttered the older man, his voice distant. Ghazan had come to recognize that tone well; it meant he was meditating, trying to gain some aid from the Spirit World.

It hadn’t really worked so far, but it was the thought that counted.

“Alright, fair’s fair. How come your bending can’t get us out?” Ghazan asked conversationally, trying to keep some humor in his voice. He’d heard the answer nearly as many times before, but this was still the most conversation he’d had in days.

P’Li let out a low groan, but Ghazan thought he could hear her returning his good-natured tone on at least some level. It was heartening.

“Well, genius, as I’ve said a thousand times before, they’ve got me in a platinum full-face mask. If I try to combustionbend, I’ll just blow up my own head,” she said. “I suppose I could try and use regular firebending to burn through it. But platinum’s a ridiculously good conductor, so that’s more likely to melt my skin off than anything else.”

Suddenly, Ghazan’s eyes went wide. She’d never added that part before. Melting…melting. If he could melt away the rocks and crystals around them, that’d certainly solve all their problems. They wouldn’t be in danger of getting crushed in an avalanche, and the water above could be countered before it could drown them.

Of course, there were several problems with this plan, chief among them being that earthbenders couldn’t do that. Sure, waterbenders could change the state of their element easily enough, but the difference between the natures of their two elements was enormous.

When he told Zaheer this sometime later, however, the non-bender wasn’t so convinced.

“The separation of the four elements is but an illusion,” he responded from the adjacent box. “So spoke Guru Pathik, a spiritual mentor to Avatar Aang. Focus on what makes one element different from another, and that is all that you’ll see. But open your mind to new possibilities…and in time,
they’re certain to unfold before you.”

What he was saying was ludicrous, of course. Maybe the Avatar could do it, with his mastery of water and fire to aid his control of earth, but an ordinary earthbender like him?

“The Queen said it. There’s nothing special about me,” he found himself whispering aloud. “I was competent, sure. But clearly, I was just as replaceable. The Dai Li, the Earth Kingdom, the world… it’ll all go on without me.”

P’Li made a scoffing noise with her tongue, and when she spoke again – despite the doubled echo of her mask and her cage – it was with a harshness that defied her years.

“I thought you were done letting her tell you what you can and can’t do,” she said, with an air of finality.

Ghazan’s eyes snapped open, blinking away the bitter tears that’d formed at their edges.

Because, by the spirits. She was right.

He wasn’t quite sure, even years later, what’d done it. Whether it’d all been the result of the others’ words, or something… deeper. More primal. In some ways, perhaps, he’d been working his way up to this moment all of his life.

At that instant, just for an instant, nothing else in the world existed. Not the Red Lotus, not the Earth Queen, not the father he’d lost or the mother he’d never found. Just him, and the rocks and stones that surrounded his cage.

For months now – or at least it felt like months – unending thirst and hunger had dulled his earthbending senses, but right at this moment they felt stronger, more vibrant, than they ever had before.

He could feel every last pebble that made up the earth around them, down to its very core. It was like looking out into the sun, after spending months under a blindfold. How could he have never realized just how alive his element was? How it vibrated, constantly, like a magnificent, soaring song?

The earth wasn’t the staid, solid thing he’d always been taught. The blunt instrument of tyrants obsessed with order, to crush all who opposed them under slabs of granite. Just as much as the people who walked upon it did, the planet yearned to be free.

And once he became aware of the sweet symphony of the earth, became aware that he was a part of it, the next step became utterly, sublimely simple.

He urged it to sing faster.

Ghazan didn’t know all that much about science, but he’d overheard a few things during missions suppressing dissidents at Ba Sing Se University. Things changed state when they got really hot or really cold, and that was because they were vibrating at a certain speed. Or something along those lines.

What the former Dai Li agent was doing now was conducted under the same basic theory, just with more… poetry. It took a monumental amount of effort, but with enough force he was able to focus on each and every particle of the earth above them, and exert his will upon them all at once.

Those particles rattled and hummed more and more rapidly by the second, until even Zaheer and
P’Li could almost *hear* their vibrations. But though it was putting colossal strain on his weakened muscles, Ghazan didn’t let up, pouring all the power he had into his bending.

Louder and louder, faster and faster, *hotter and hotter*. By the sheer force of his will, he could feel it happening. The earth was changing.

P’Li was shouting encouragement at him now, and even Zaheer’s voice had been raised above its ordinary cadence once he realized what Ghazan was doing. He couldn’t make out their words – simply remaining conscious right now was taking all his concentration – but he appreciated the sentiment, and it spurred him onward all the more.

He himself was screaming now, though he could barely hear it over the din of the earth above them beginning to break down. No coherent thoughts escaped his lips; it was simply the raw fury of the planet, channeled through him, and being channeled by him.

And then, after what could’ve been two minutes or two months, it *happened*. The first droplet of lava cascaded down from the ceiling.

Strangely, the more of it that began to be produced, the easier Ghazan found it to manipulate. Exhilarated by his success, by the utter *impossibility* of what he’d just done, the earthbender forced the newly molten rock upward in a great torrent, merging it with the river that flowed just above their heads.

Great, billowing clouds of blistering hot steam was the result, but thankfully most of it followed the upward momentum of the still-flowing lava, forcing more and more of the superheated water into the caverns above. Any Dai Li standing guard there would be in for a *serious* awakening.

But that wouldn’t be enough to get them out, on its own. As carefully as he could, Ghazan permitted small amounts of the molten stone to fall onto their cages, where it instantly began to eat away at the thick platinum like it was paper. He stood as far away from the slowly expanding hole as possible, and could only hope that Zaheer and P’Li were doing the same.

Ultimately, the plan went off without a hitch – and how could it not, when he felt *this* unbelievably powerful? If he’d needed to, Ghazan was certain he could’ve moved a mountain that day. Or melted it.

Once large enough holes had been bored into all three boxes, Ghazan cooled all the lava he’d created to room temperature, simply by slowly and steadily releasing his breath. He wasn’t entirely sure how he’d known to *do* that, but he wasn’t about to question the results.

Then, for the first time in what felt like an *eternity*, he hauled himself out onto solid ground.

His fellow prisoners did the same, upon which time P’Li – and even Zaheer, to a degree – gaped open-mouthed at what stood before them. Purely on instinct, he’d solidified the flowing lava into a crude ramp, leading above them.

Leading to *freedom*.

“After you, then,” said Ghazan, waving them forward and grinning like an maniac.

[-------------------]
It was, of course, not going to be long before the Dai Li realized one of their securest prisons had been utterly demolished. Even if Ghazan wasn’t planning on leaving with the pair – and there was no question in his mind that he was – he needed to get out of the city, immediately.

But he had one stop to make, first.

The shop was one he’d passed a hundred times before on patrols through the Lower Ring, though he’d never gone inside. The customers were a bit on the seedy side, but the business itself was legit.

Ghazan smiled ruefully at the thought. Patrols…that felt like a word belonging to an entirely different life.

Which, in a sense, it did. That’s why he was here.

“You wanna explain to me again why we’re not halfway across the Earth Kingdom?” demanded P’Li in hushed tones, a hood up to block her third eye from view. “If we’re not going back for Lu Ten, I don’t see a reason to stick around.”

“He’s lived here all his life. We must permit him to achieve closure, in whatever fashion he sees fit,” said Zaheer. “Think how you would feel, if I hadn’t afforded you the same courtesy.”

These words seemed to cow the young firebender into acceptance, if a begrudging one. Ghazan made a mental note to ask about it sometime.

Well…when she was in a better mood, anyway.

The newly minted lavabender entered the building without knocking upon its worn, grimy door. As soon as it became clear just what service this place provided, Zaheer calmly whispered, “Ah. I see.”

“I’m gonna grow this out, I think. No need to stick to the regulation cut anymore,” Ghazan mused in a quiet voice, tugging at his short hair. “And I’m done with uniforms. Loose, comfortable robes from now on. Maybe I’ll even go shirtless.”

He frowned for a moment before adding, “I’m keeping the mustache, though. Proud of it.”

“And this place? It’s a tattoo parlor, isn’t it?” asked P’Li, sounding honestly curious. He supposed if there was one subject she wasn’t likely to give him grief over, it was this one.

As such, Ghazan nodded. “This is one thing the Dai Li would’ve never permitted,” he said. “I’m a new person, now, and I want a reminder of it. A reminder that’ll last forever.”

He sat down in front of the only artist with an open seat and told him, his voice firm, “Make me look like a free man.”
Ping was not a remarkable man, in any respect.

It was, more than anything else, why he’d joined the Equalists in the first place. Oh, sure, he believed in the cause itself. He’d been looked down on by just about everyone his entire life, in a way he knew they wouldn’t dare if he could toss fire or earth around.

But apart from that, the Equalist movement gave him a place where he could feel he belonged. He’d lost his father a few years back, and his mother was constantly harping on him to settle down and get married.

He’d grown up completely alone – friendless, unloved, and unwanted. He wasn’t particularly smart or good-looking; he was certainly no good at sports or any kind of talent. He had no family trade or craft to fall back on, and he couldn’t tell a joke to save his life.

There was, in short, nothing special about him.

And the children he’d grown up with hadn’t been shy to remind him of it. The shy, gangly, awkward-looking kid was an easy target, and he’d been picked on and bullied so many times he’d all but lost count.

Those bullies, of course, hadn’t hesitated to “enhance” his torment with their sick bending. Over the years he’d been set aflame, pelted with rocks, and nearly drowned on dry land. One particular earthbender had done it daily for a while.

Sure, there were non-benders among the bullies too, sometimes. But they simply couldn’t hurt him nearly as much as their counterparts.

A bad encounter with a non-bender might leave him with a black eye. A bad encounter with a firebender might leave him dead.

He’d tried to come to his parents about this, over and over, but they’d never listened. Not really. They’d given him meaningless platitudes about “finding inner peace” and “being the bigger man.”

The only practical advice they’d ever doled out was talking to a teacher about it, and that wasn’t likely to happen. Most of his teachers had been benders themselves. How could they be trusted to take his side?

As the years went by, the rift between them only widened. His parents, despite being non-benders themselves, were practically worshippers of Avatar Aang. Their home was decked out ceiling to floor with unofficial merchandise, from posters to teacups to disturbingly accurate figurines.

And accordingly, they’d also seen fit to mindlessly parrot his philosophy. Peace and love between non-benders and benders of all stripes, and other such garbage. It was enough to make Ping want to puke.

Because it was absurd. He’d studied economics at Republic City University, and any way you crunched the numbers, they all told the same story.

Despite making up only about thirty-five percent of the population, benders held approximately eighty percent of the world’s wealth. And that was hardly surprising, wasn’t it? All the world’s modern nations were either bending-based aristocracies, or had grown out of the same.
The same was true in the world of politics. The United Republic’s governing council was composed entirely of benders, and had been for over three decades now. Even the airbenders, who numbered at most four people, got more representation than the nation’s millions of non-benders.

The Chieftain of the Water Tribes was a waterbender of legendary ability. It was doubtful whether the Fire Nation’s royal family had ever produced a child who wasn’t a firebender. And the Earth Queen…okay, fine, she was the exception that proved the rule.

Especially considering she stayed in power largely because of the elite earthbenders she could send to crush opposition at a moment’s notice.

But his parents refused to listen, no matter how many times they argued. And they argued about it a lot.

Eventually, he’d gotten fed up. Stormed out of their house, and rented a cruddy apartment with what meager savings he had left after college.

He was still technically a graduate student with RCU, though he’d been stalled on his thesis for nearly five years now. Big surprise, his firebending professor wasn’t fond of his long, detailed, heavily cited paper that made it clear the only remedy for the injustices of the world was to ban all bending forever.

His mother still called, practically every day, if only for the sake of the whole “why are you still single” thing. Ping humored her, but that was it. With every passing day, he felt less and less connected to them and their fanatical devotion to the status quo.

When she told him his father had died in a Satomobile accident, he’d barely felt a thing. He’d put in his appearance at the funeral, acted the dutiful son, but inside meant none of it. It was as if a perfect stranger had passed.

And the reason for all that was the Equalists.

To make ends meet, he’d been working part-time at a bookstore for a while now. One day, distracted by the latest row with his mom, he’d accidentally placed a draft of his thesis in a pile of books for purchase.

Initially, he’d been distraught. It was his only copy, and the idea of writing out those one-hundred-thirteen pages all over again was enough to make him nauseous.

Imagine his surprise, then, when the pretty girl who’d inadvertently taken his masterwork returned it the next day…along with a note.

Contrary to his mother’s hopes, however, the note hadn’t been an invitation for a date. But it had been an invitation. One for a rally, held in secret.

That night, for the first time, he’d met Amon.

There were no words to describe that moment. Amon was everything Ping had ever wanted in a leader – someone who understood how brutally cruel and unfair the world was, and who was willing to do something about it. Who had the power to do something about it.

In the Equalists, at long last, Ping found allies and kindred souls. By the spirits, he’d even found friends.

No one in the movement insulted him, or hurt him, or made him feel like his feelings didn’t matter.
They listened with interest as he shared the statistics he’d put together over the years. Some of it’d even gotten worked into a few of Amon’s speeches, and needless to say that was an honor which he could scarcely describe.

Ever since then, he’d tried hard to do his part. Every day without fail, he could be found in Republic City Park with his megaphone, calling for the downfall of the bending establishment. Recruitment was the most vital objective for the Equalists right now, if they wanted their revolution to be more than just idle talk.

And they were certainly succeeding. With each rally that Ping attended – he never missed a single one – he watched as the audience swelled, from a few hundred to several thousand. Clearly, he and his fellow protesters were doing the job of spreading the word.

Still, Ping couldn’t help but be a little disappointed. What he was doing was important, in the general sense, but it didn’t feel like he was striking at the heart of the bending regime.

That’s why he’d started taking chi-blocking classes.

The trainings were held in secret, and never in the same place for too long. Technically, they were open to all Equalists, but usually only their most militant members actually stuck with it. The regiment was grueling, the techniques complicated and intricate, and even those most devoted to the cause tended not to be eager to physically fight their oppressors.

But Ping had practiced long, and hard, for months now. Drilled the forms and stances so many times he could practically do them in his sleep. He might not be the strongest or most agile Equalist around, but these days he could at least hold his own.

And now, tonight…finally, finally, he’d gotten his wish. Every single chi-blocker, whatever their level of mastery, had been called upon to serve.

He wouldn’t be anywhere near their glorious leader, whose own mission was a carefully guarded secret to all but a few. But that was okay. He’d still get to participate in the most important night the non-benders of the world had ever seen.

Plus, the chi-blocker uniform didn’t hurt. He’d never gotten to wear one before, but the heavily insulated and padded bodysuit gave him an incredible feeling of invincibility. And the mask…

Well, the mask was just plain cool.

That’s more or less what Ping was thinking about when a figure seized him from behind and dragged him into a dark alleyway.

A few minutes later, the poor graduate student was slumped over against a garbage can, out cold and stripped down to his underwear.

At the same time, his attacker finished pulling his mask onto their own face, tugging it down so that it fit snugly over their thick hair.

Then, as quickly as they’d struck, they were gone.

[-------------------]
It became exceedingly clear, within moments of arriving at the pro-bending arena, that bringing Asami here had been a mistake.

This wasn’t to say, of course, that either the heiress or the other Fire Ferrets were having trouble getting along – far from it. Asami was clearly ecstatic at getting to meet two of her pro-bending heroes, and Bolin just seemed happy to have a fan around, period.

The problem was Mako. And not for the reason Korra would’ve expected.

On the contrary, the two of them seemed to be getting on a little too well.

Ever since the start of practice, the pair had been chatting animatedly during every single break and pause in the action, laughing and joking and discussing at length all sorts of pro-bending minutiae. For Asami, this game was evidently far more than a casual hobby, and Mako was the only other person with the knowledge base to keep up.

“The Zebra Frogs are an interesting one, that’s for sure,” said the firebender, leaning casually against a railing while his brother ran off to use the restroom. “Not a lot of waterbending captains out there. Except the Wolfbats, of course.”

“Did you know they weren’t Xiao Yao’s first team?” Asami asked conversationally. “They’re the ones who made it big, sure, but for the first couple years it was the…”

“Flying Fishopotami! Yeah, I know,” he finished for her. “Big surprise they didn’t go anywhere.”

Asami giggled. Honest-to-the-spirits, she giggled. Korra suppressed a deep pang of…something as she looked on at the pair, utterly lost.

“Hey, to be fair, they have been riding those things for centuries. No wonder they’d make it their official animal,” said Asami. “Not their fault the name just doesn’t roll off the tongue.”

“I…err…don’t see how ‘zebra frogs’ sounds much better,” Korra suddenly blurted out, desperate to insert herself into the conversation. For some reason.

Asami blinked in surprise, as if she’d temporarily forgotten Korra was there. It certainly didn’t make her feel any better.

Mako was the one who answered. “Probably because they’re poisonous,” he told her with a shrug. “Small, camouflaged, could kill a man if they stepped on it with bare feet. It’s a decent name for a team that hits hard and fast.”

“Speaking of, how’d you come up with the ‘Fire Ferrets,’ anyway?” asked Asami.

The firebender was saved from having to explain by the timely return of Bolin, who was carrying Pabu across his shoulders. The furry creature immediately leaped over to Asami, poking around her long hair with his small, wet nose.

“Well I guess that answers that,” she said, chuckling as the fire ferret experimentally licked her ear. “This little guy just screams mascot. What’s his name?”

“His Most Esteemed Lord of All Things Cute, Pabu…the Grrrrreat and Poooowerful!” answered the earthbender, his voice vibrating overdramatically. “Or…just Pabu. For short.”

“Hey, Pabu,” Asami whispered to the creature, petting him across the head with two fingers and eliciting a purr. “Y’know, I can watch him, if you want. You three probably wanna get back to
training."

“Gee, thanks! Just make sure to keep a good eye on him,” replied Bolin. “He’s got a secret stash of fire-flakes around here I’ve never been able to find, and they are a nightmare on his constitution.”

Pabu chirruped, possibly in indignity, or possibly just because his owner had stated the name of a food item. Either way, he folded up in Asami’s lap as she took her seat once more.

“Well, team. We’re gonna try that River Formation one more time,” said Mako as they all refastened their helmets. “Mizore, your positioning was off when we did it earlier. You wanna be to Bolin’s left, not his right. That way the other team can’t block you off at the sides.”

Korra nodded dimly, but she was barely listening to what he had to say. She couldn’t help it; every few seconds, her eyes invariably drifted back to Asami.

She knew she should be focusing now – if not on the practice, then certainly on what she was planning to do after – but no matter how hard she tried, the image of Asami and Mako smiling and laughing together kept popping into her head.

And she wasn’t even sure why.

She’d felt the same thing, just for the briefest moment, when Asami had walked off with that Kinzoku woman. There was only one thing that both situations really had in common, and it was that Asami happened to be paying attention to someone who wasn’t her.

Someone who was a great deal better-looking than her.

Korra did a mental double-take. Where had that thought come from? It was entirely accurate, sure, but what did it have to do with anything?

Asami was her friend, sure…probably the first and last one Korra would ever get a chance to make. But she was perfectly at liberty to talk to whoever she liked. People who were a great deal prettier (or handsomer) than she could ever be. People who could talk back to her easily, without constantly dissolving into an awkward mess of nerves.

That shouldn’t in any way make her feel…well, anything. But specifically, whatever you called this emotion.

The Avatar was kidding herself, of course. She knew exactly what she was feeling, or at least she was pretty sure. She just couldn’t bear to admit it.

To admit that she was jealous.

Because that opened up a whole new can of beetle-worms that she really shouldn’t be going anywhere near. Especially right now. This was quite possibly the most important day of her mission since coming to this city. She couldn’t afford distractions.

Unfortunately, thinking that and actually acting on it were two entirely separate things.

“C’mon, Mizore! Get your head in the game!” growled Mako, gritting his teeth as she tripped over her own feet for the third time. “What’s with you today? You were picking this sorta stuff up in one or two tries yesterday.”

“Sorry…I’ve just…” Korra murmured, flushing with embarrassment as she stumbled back to a standing position. Her eyes flicked back to Asami, who was still watching intently; that only made
her feel worse. “I’ve just…got a lot on my mind right now.”

“Well then, clear it. At least until we’re done here,” said the firebender with a shake of his head. “None of us can afford to slip up right now. Not if we wanna make it anywhere in this tournament.”

Korra gritted her teeth, but nodded. He was entirely in the right here, which only made things harder.

The practice continued to grow more and more intense, as minutes stretched into hours. With less than a week remaining until the first round, Mako seemed borderline obsessed with making as much as possible out of the limited time available.

One upside to this was that the more serious their team captain grew, the more Korra’s body defaulted to what might be called “training mode.” She’d spent so many years in near-daily drills and practice runs that she barely even needed to think, once that switch was flipped. Distractions to her thought process became a moot point if she didn’t have one.

Of course, she couldn’t completely shut off her brain in a situation like this. Otherwise she might instinctively grasp for one of the other elements, and that would be…

Difficult to explain.

Regardless, their practice went on straight through sundown, and a good ways into the evening. When they finally stopped, it was only because Bolin loudly declared that his uniform was starting to look mighty tasty right about now.

“Allright, I guess we can call it a day,” his brother said, wiping the sweat from his brow. “I’m gonna take this guy out for noodles, and then we’ve got some, err… errands to run after. But we’ll see you same time tomorrow?”

“Oh…sure,” Korra replied, sounding somewhat queasy from all she’d just put her body through.

“Kay. It’s a plan, then,” stated Mako, picking his nearly collapsed brother off the floor with one hand and waving goodbye with the other. “Night, Mizore. And it was nice to meet you, Asami. Feel free to swing by whenever you like.”

Korra’s eyes snapped back at the young woman watching from the stands, whom she’d managed to avoid glancing at for the last half-hour. The look she shared with the firebender caused Korra’s stomach to turn over even more.

“That was incredible, Mizore!” she exclaimed, after returning Pabu to the arms of a sagging Bolin.

The Avatar took one last look at the departing boys, and released a great sigh.

“You mean Mako, right?” she asked miserably. “I mean, if you’re into that sorta thing, then I guess…”

“No, no. I’m talking about you,” said Asami, placing one hand on the other girl’s shoulder.

Korra made a scoffing noise with her tongue and looked askance, incredulous. “You’ve gotta be kidding me,” she responded in a low voice. “I was a mess out there. A total trainwreck.”

“Maybe at first. But you weren’t watching yourself,” the non-bender told her insistently. “Halfway through, your technique changed completely. I guess instinct took over, or something. Because you were doing things with water I’ve never even seen.”
The Avatar’s blood chilled slightly. Had she gone too far without realizing it? Using some of the techniques Ming-Hua had taught her, to their *fullest* extent, might draw undue suspicion…

“Anyway, my point is…you were good. *Really* good. I couldn’t take my eyes off,” added Asami after a moment, her cheeks turning a slight tinge of pink.

“Off of me…or off of *him*?” Korra whispered aloud, without even thinking about it. The moment she realized she’d vocalized that thought, however, her hands snapped over her mouth.

She hoped, for the slimmest moment, that Asami might not’ve heard her. She’d been speaking very quietly, after all. But the look the heiress was giving her now left little room for doubt.

For the first time since meeting her, Asami actually looked *hurt*.

“I dunno what you *think* is going on,” said Asami, very carefully. “But let me make something clear: I’m *not* interested in Mako. I mean, he’s hot, don’t get me wrong. Smart, seems like a nice guy. If I was in a different place, I might go for it. But I’m…well, I’m not, alright? Let’s just leave it at that.”

Her face was *burning* now, and Korra wasn’t sure whether that meant she should or shouldn’t believe her story.

If she took her words at face-value, however…well, what the heck did “if I was in a different place” mean, anyway? Did that indicate that she was already seeing someone else? Or just *interested* in someone else? Could…Could it *possibly* be that…

Korra stamped that stray thought into the ground, utterly terrified that she’d even had it. *Obviously,* Asami was talking about some other person. Kinzoku, maybe. Or someone Korra had never even met. They hadn’t exactly known each other long, after all.

It wasn’t *her*. That was the point.

Not that she *wanted* it to be, of course.

She didn’t.

She *didn’t*.

[--------------------]

“What the flameo are you doing here?” demanded Lin, as her ex-boyfriend dismounted his glider and touched down onto her disguised police boat.

She hadn’t needed to turn around. Despite his virtually silent landing – or perhaps *because* of it – she recognized him immediately. Those were the second-lightest footsteps she’d ever felt in her life.

Just behind his father.

Tenzin, for his part, smoothed out his robes and nodded curtly. “I was wondering if I could participate in tonight’s sting. Or at least sit in,” he said. “I promise, I won’t get in the way.”

“Little late for that. You’re just lucky none of the triads have shown up yet. A councilmember gliding onto a catering boat is a *bit* of a red flag,” she replied with a frown. “How’d you figure out
“this one was our cover, anyway?”

She chanced a glance back at him, and he at least had the courtesy to look somewhat embarrassed.

“I guess ‘The Eel-Hound Express’ works fine as a fake name for a caterer,” he told her, shifting uncomfortably. “But it was also…the restaurant we used to pretend we ran together. You know. When we were kids.”

Lin’s eyebrows scrunched together. “That’s right…I’d forgotten,” she muttered, turning away from him again. “I don’t like to dwell on the past much.”

“A good philosophy. But sometimes, the past seems to have other ideas,” Tenzin said quietly, moving up to join her as she leaned over the railing of the nondescript boat.

They stayed like that for several long, deeply uncomfortable moments, before Lin broke the silence by declaring, “You do know this is only gonna make it worse when Tarrlok finds out.”

“I’m not afraid of him,” responded the airbender. “And besides, he would’ve made a big stink just for authorizing this behind his back, whether I was part of it or not. At least this way I can keep an eye out for that bloodbender mother sensed.”

“You think they’re a triad member?” asked Lin.

Tenzin stroked his beard thoughtfully. “The last known bloodbender in Republic City ran the Red Monsoon for fifteen years,” he answered. “It’s not a guarantee they’re connected, but it’s certainly the best lead we’ve got right now.”

“I guess, if we make as many arrests tonight as I’m hoping…we’ll have plenty of opportunity to sit ‘em down and grill ‘em,” said the police chief. “Just…stay back until Saikhan or I say otherwise, alright? We don’t wanna give them a reason to disperse early.”

The airbending master nodded again. “This is your operation, I’m just observing,” he told her. “It’s no business of mine, to go around and tell you how to do your job.”

Lin let out a brief, humorless laugh. “Wow. That’s rich,” she murmured under her breath.

“What?” he asked. She was uncertain whether he’d actually heard her or not, and wasn’t going to bother to check.

Instead she chuckles bitterly again, even more quietly, and said, “Nothing.”

Then she left to get the latest update from Saikhan, desperate to be anywhere but here.

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“You can’t possibly still be hungry after that,” said Mako, his right hand cradling his forehead as he gestured to a half-dozen empty noodle bowls with his left.

Bolin, who was currently perusing the dessert menu, took on a tone of subdued offense. “Everyone knows growing boys have two stomachs. One for noodles, and one for…err…everything else,” he explained to his brother.
Mako just groaned.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be out of here before you know it!” Bolin assured him, as he passed back the menu to the waiter with three separate items circled. “I haven’t forgotten about the you-know-what that we’re doing at the you-know-where, tonight at you-know-when.”

He said that last part in a carrying whisper that was somehow even louder than speaking normally.

“Gee, bro, I think there might’ve been some guys in Ba Sing Se who didn’t catch that,” replied the firebender with a roll of his eyes. “C’mon, could you be any more suspicious if you tried?”

Bolin took on a thoughtful expression. “Hmm…probably. But I’d need Pabu. And about fifteen gallons of whipped cream,” he said.

His face broke out into a cheeky grin, and a moment later, so did his brother’s.

“You’re just messing with me now, aren’t you?” asked Mako, sounding almost impressed.

“Hey, hey. Turnabout is, indeed, fair play,” the earthbender responded, one finger held up in the air to emphasize the point. “Besides, you deserve a little ribbing. After hogging all the beautiful ladies to yourself like that.”

“Oh, come off it. I did not,” the older brother protested. “Mizore’s a teammate, and Asami was just someone I could swap pro-bending trivia with. We weren’t flirting or anything.”

“Yeeeeeeah. Riiiiiiiiiiiiight,” said Bolin, winking exaggeratedly. “C’mon, you didn’t see the way they were making eyes at you?”

Mako couldn’t help it. He broke out into a burst of full, unreserved laughter, to the point where several of the other patrons in the restaurant began to stare.

“I love you, bro, but sometimes…sometimes you are so dense,” he told the earthbender. “They weren’t making eyes at me, they were making eyes at each other. I just happened to sometimes be in the way.”

“Huh…really?” asked Bolin, trying to recall the exact details of their training. As he’d spent the last hour or so of it in a sweaty, starving, exhausted stupor, however, his memories were far from perfect. “I guess I never pegged Mizore as, err…well, y’know…”

“A lesbian? Or bisexual, maybe. You can say the words, bro,” said Mako. “Anyway, it’s not as rare as you might think, nowadays. Heck, I might be willing to give it a shot, if it was the right guy. And no, before you ask, whichever dude just popped into your head does not qualify.”

Bolin deflated slightly, taken aback by the preemptive rebuke, but he rebounded quickly.

“I’m not saying anything against it!” he exclaimed, throwing up his hands to make his position clear. “Hey, love is love, right? I just thought…eh, I dunno. I thought maybe I was getting somewhere with her, but I guess I was kidding myself. I should’ve never…”

The earthbender immediately stopped talking, his eyes going wide, but the damage was done.

“Bolin…what did you do…?” demanded Mako, just as the desserts his brother had ordered were slid between them.

Bolin chuckled nervously, shrunk back into his seat, and then immediately began wolfing down the
nearest dish, trying to stall for time. Mako didn’t let up his glare, however.

Finally, the younger brother let out a squeaking yelp and asked, “Promise you won’t get mad?”

Mako crossed his arms. “No promises until I hear it,” he said.

Pressing the tips of his forefingers together and swallowing hard, Bolin finally answered, “I, uh…may have told Mizore. Y’know. About…tonight…?”

“You what?!” shouted the firebender, and this time, virtually everyone else in the restaurant turned to them. He scowled and lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “Maybe this is pointless to ask, but what the heck were you thinking?”

“Hey, she works for Future Industries, doesn’t she?” Bolin pointed out. “I didn’t know whether she works night shifts or weekends or whatever! All I told her was the place and time. I just didn’t want her to go near there and risk getting hurt, alright?”

He then cast his eyes downward, before adding, very quietly, “And…okay, yeah. I’ll admit. I also was trying to sound all impressive and important and stuff. It was a stupid idea, I know.”

Mako let out another very long, very frustrated sigh…but ultimately nodded.

“I guess if that’s all you said to her, that’s not so bad,” he said, his brow furrowed intensely. “But next time you get the urge to do something this stupid, try thinking it over with your head, alright? Not with, err…anything else.”

Bolin’s face sunk even further, but eventually he nodded back. Shoveling the remainder of his dessert into his mouth without much enthusiasm, he asked between bites, “So is it time for us to get going, then?”

His brother glanced at a clock on the wall nearby. “Just about,” he replied. “Shady Shin wants us there in about an hour, and it’ll take us nearly that long to get there on foot.”

“We can’t take a cab?” muttered Bolin, looking even more dejected as he stared down at his nearly finished meal. It was clear he wasn’t looking forward to walking it off.

Mako shook his head. “Unfortunately, somebody just blew the last of the cash Tarrlok gave us on enough food for a small village,” he said, one eyebrow raised slightly. “And I doubt he’ll give us any more upfront. Not until we get this done.”

“Alright, geez, sorry. I get the picture,” the earthbender declared, just as he finished off the last of the desserts. “Hey, waiter dude! Check, please!”

Mako looked upon this scene, and let out one last sigh for good measure. He loved his brother dearly, there was no doubt of that. Would do anything for him. Lay down his own life, if it came down to that.

But not for the first time, he reconsidered the wisdom of choosing him as a partner for a covert spying mission.

Still…it was a little late to do anything about that now.

He’d just have to trust Bolin to come through in the end.
“Asami, look, I’m sorry!” Korra called after the other girl, her tone pleading. “It was a stupid thing to say. I don’t…I mean…”

The two of them were walking hurriedly along the Republic City docks, Korra struggling to keep up due to her slightly shorter stride.

She knew, though she didn’t have a watch or anything to check for sure, that time was wasting for her to catch up to the brothers and get into position for the summit. But she just couldn’t leave things like this.

Finally, she managed to grab onto Asami’s wrist. Instinctively, the non-bender wrenched out of her grip…but she also finally stopped moving, and turned back to face her.

The look in her eyes made Korra’s stomach do a turn.

“Look…I’m not mad, alright?” she said, exhaling deeply. “I just wanna know why you’re acting this way all of a sudden. I thought we were having a really nice day together.”

“We were!” exclaimed Korra, more loudly than she’d been intending. Reflexively, her eyes darted around the area, but it looked like they were the only ones out here right now. “I…I just…well…”

Asami crossed her arms, but said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

“I guess it’s…it’s just that…” she went on after a moment, averting her eyes toward the safety of the harbor. “Since last night, you’ve been showing me how…well, how incredible you are. You have this huge house, you can cook, you drive like a wild saber-toothed moose-lion…”

Compared to that? All I could do in front of you is suck at the one thing I’m good at. Bending…it’s all I’ve ever been good for.”

Asami’s response to this wasn’t anything Korra expected. A sudden burst of absolute, unmistakable fury flared up in her eyes.

“Don’t you ever say that!” she shouted, and Korra actually found herself taking a step back. “Don’t you ever…reduce yourself like that! You’re so much more than any one side of you. I can see it, even if you can’t!”

Again, Korra found it hard to meet her gaze. It was with her eyes firmly pressed toward the water that she said, very quietly, “You don’t really know me.”

Asami blinked, twice, and that look of impassioned anger faded from her deep-green eyes. They remained just as piercing, however.

“Maybe I don’t,” the non-bender admitted in a low voice. “But I want to. I want to know what’s going on with you right now – the good and the bad. Because you…you mean something to me. I know we haven’t known each other long, but it’s true.”

“You don’t get it,” Korra found herself responding, her mouth moving faster than her brain. She knew this wasn’t material it was smart to broach – especially not now – but she couldn’t help herself. “If you knew who I really am…what I really am…”
The other girl placed a hand on her arm, stopping her.

“It wouldn’t change a thing,” Asami declared confidently. “Mizore…I know there’re things you don’t feel comfortable telling me. That’s okay. I bet you’ve been bottling stuff up so long that it’s natural to you. But I’m here, now. You don’t have to feel like you’re alone anymore.”

For one brief, terrifying moment, Korra felt on the verge of doing it. Of telling her. Of telling her everything.

But the moment passed as quickly as it came. Whatever Asami claimed, it was only because she was picturing secrets she might imagine. Things within the realm of possibility.

“I’m the Avatar, and I’m on a secret mission to end the world” wasn’t going to factor into it.

Korra clenched her fists, her teeth gritted. Though she knew Asami meant well – she’d fully and completely abandoned any suspicions of ulterior motives last night – all this was only making her feel worse.

“I’ve…I’ve gotta go,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “I’m sorry, Asami.”

“Mizore, please,” pleaded Asami, and for the first time, the alias sounded like a stab through the heart. “Don’t leave things like this. Wherever you’re going…maybe I can come too? And we can…talk, a little more?”

A cold chill ran down Korra’s spine. “That…wouldn’t be a good idea,” she replied evasively.

“Why not?” asked the non-bender. There was nothing accusatory in her tone, but it was equally clear she wasn’t leaving without an answer.

Unable to think up a suitable lie on the spot, Korra ultimately decided on the truth…or part of it, at least.

“I think Bolin and Mako are getting up to something…shady tonight,” she explained, biting her lip. “I’m following them, making sure they don’t get in trouble. But it could be dangerous, so I’m going alone.”

“That seems like a good reason not to go alone,” said Asami pointedly. “Look, Mizore. We may have just met today, but I’d call those two my friends – and before we get started again, just friends. Point is, I don’t want them getting hurt any more than you do. So I’m going.”

Korra fumbled through her brain, trying to think of some excuse; any reason Asami’s logic didn’t make sense. But she’d never been able to think well on her feet, even at the top of her game, and she was far from that tonight.

“If you come…you’ve gotta promise to do what I say,” Korra finally told her, even as half of her brain screamed that she was insane just for considering this. “Stay close to me, and don’t make any noise if you don’t have to.”

“Got it,” answered Asami, nodding firmly. “So where are we going?”

Korra grimaced. This was, she suspected, going to go down as one of her stupidest ideas ever.

And, needless to say, that was a tough list to crack.

“To…well, to work,” she eventually said, signaling for the non-bender to follow.
“You’re late,” said Shady Shin, his mouth curled into a tight frown.

“You only by a couple minutes!” exclaimed Bolin, as he and his brother arrived onto the scene, huffing and puffing from all the walking they’d just done.

Shin shook his head, his expression uncharacteristically serious.

“You boys should know by now that ‘a couple minutes’ can be the difference between life an’ death in this biz,” he told them both. “You’re just lucky none of the big bosses are here yet. *I’ll* let it slide, but *they* probably wouldn’t be so generous, ya feel me?”

Mako frowned as well, but nodded all the same. They couldn’t afford to be antagonistic right now. So instead, he took to regarding the small group that’d been waiting for them, all of whom were staring straight at the brothers.

Gathered in front of Future Industries warehouse twelve, along with the waterbending gangster, were three others he assumed were rounding out the security staff. One wore the emblem of the Red Monsoon, another the Agni Kais, while the last – a thin, mustached man – wore none at all.

Assuming he and Bolin counted as part of the Triple Threats, only the Terras lacked representation. He rather doubted that was a coincidence.

“Anyway, first things first. We’re gonna split up and case the joint. Make double an’ triple sure there ain’t no…uh, surprises left by one triad for the others,” said Shin after a little while. “Zolt wants this one clean an’ fair. Only way we’re ever gonna get anythin’ done.”

He pointed to the Red Monsoon member and the man with the mustache.

“Eki, Zihu, you check out the area ‘round the rear exits,” he ordered, before gesturing to the boyish-faced representative of the Agni Kais. “Ketto, you’re with me. We’ll take the front.”

Finally, he turned to Mako and Bolin, his trademark smug grin returned to his face.

“And as for the wonder bros…I want *you* to take a look at some of the boats in the bay. ‘Specially that one,” he added, sticking out his arm toward a nondescript ship with *The Eel-Hound Express* printed in white paint. “It’s been hangin’ here for a couple hours now, not doin’ anything. It’s *probably* nothin’, but better to be safe than sorry, am I right?”

Mako nodded again, before Bolin could say anything. The sooner they finished this, the sooner they’d be able listen in on the summit itself. Which was what they were getting paid for, after all.

“Come on,” he whispered to his brother, eager to get this over with.

Most of the ships betrayed little of interest, beyond what must’ve been some crewman’s stash of long expired cabbages. Mako deliberately left “The Eel-Hound Express” for last. They couldn’t afford any complications at this stage, so in the very unlikely event it *did* contain spies, he wanted to give them a chance to flee.

At first, the catering boat seemed as empty and unremarkable as the others. No one above deck, and
nothing back around the stern save a few barrels of fish.

The moment they stepped below deck, however, that story changed rather abruptly.

First off, the metal hatch they’d used to access the inner hull slammed shut behind them, seemingly on its own, and left them stranded in total darkness. Then, before Mako could firebend a light, something thick and heavy wound its way around them both, binding their arms and forcing them to the ground.

A lamp was switched on, and the brothers got their first glimpse at their captors: no less than a dozen uniformed police officers, and the Chief of Police herself.

“I hope you boys have a really good story,” she said, her eyes narrowed in irritation.

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“So when am I gonna get some thanks, huh?” asked Eki, a smug grin across her heavily lined face as she walked with her compatriot. “If I hadn’t put in a good word for you with Shin, there’s no way you’d have gotten in on this gig.”

Her boyfriend grunted his ascent, and her smirk widened.

The man who called himself “Zihu” was at least twenty years her junior, had a sour disposition, and generally granted her very little interest or affection beyond the physical. They’d been dating for a couple weeks now, and it was very obvious the relationship wasn’t going anywhere.

Still, she could admit her weakness for the attentions of a much younger man. Particularly such an attractive one. While lean, his body was incredibly well-toned and muscular, and she found the mustache a particular turn-on. Very “manly.”

And that voice…oh, it still gave her shivers, late at night.

The fact was that she wasn’t getting any younger. The Red Monsoons prized waterbending prowess beyond everything else, and her own skills – once quite formidable – were beginning to wane. They weren’t sending her out on the streets anymore, and she knew the days before she was “quietly asked” to retire were numbered.

If she had to endure a bit of growling to keep this guy around, and stave off the creeping march of age a little while longer, that was fine by her.

Case in point: he was leaning into her now, out of the blue, holding her close by the small of her back. Eki was somewhat puzzled by his timing, but nonetheless, she yielded easily. Her eyes fluttered closed, her lips ready.

Then he shoved an electrified rod into her stomach, and with a single pulse, stunned her into unconsciousness.

“Alright, we’re clear. Move in,” said the Lieutenant, pulling on his mask and wiping his hands on his pants, eager to cleanse them.

This particular mission couldn’t possibly have ended quick enough. But at least he’d gotten what he
A couple of chi-blockers appeared from the shadows at their field leader’s call, carrying off the unconscious Eki to a waiting truck. By this time tomorrow, she’d be purified.

And with any luck, she wouldn’t be alone.

More chi-blockers followed shortly afterward, a much larger group – twenty or so in all. They moved with the utmost silence and precision, the result of drilling for this night for weeks. Each knowing (well, in one case, guessing) their roles by heart, they funneled into the warehouse through the back entrance, and took up position in each and every one of its dark corners.

Bringing up the rear of the group, however, was one individual who elected to hold back; one individual who, unlike the rest, was dressed rather distinctly.

“Hold any action until I give the signal,” ordered Amon, standing alongside his Lieutenant rather than turning to face him. “They’ve all been taught it, I trust?”

“Of course, sir,” replied the other man, his rumbling tones blending seamlessly with the night wind around them. “Only our most elite and experienced forces have been permitted to join us here. The rest are at the other sites.”

“Then I take it things are proceeding according to schedule?” Amon asked, in a tone that implied there was only one correct answer.

Mercifully then, for his own sake, the Lieutenant nodded. “Let’s get into position as well,” he said, and both of the masked men proceeded into Future Industries warehouse twelve, closing the door softly behind them.

Meanwhile, the two young women who’d been watching this entire scene play out took one last look at each other and then, by silent agreement, moved to follow.

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“What do you suggest we do with them, Chief?” asked Captain Saikhan, crossing his arms and glaring at their tied-up prisoners. His own metalbending ensured that their iron cords didn’t budge.

“Well first off, you could stop talking like we aren’t right here!” Mako exclaimed irritably, before once again attempting to struggle out of the bindings. He did not succeed.

Lin scowled, and after a few seconds’ thought, adopted a similar stance to her second-in-command.

“Quite the mouth on this one,” she said, her voice terse and impatient. “But we don’t have a choice. Leave a couple officers here to guard these two. We’ll take them into custody in the morning.”

“You don’t understand, ma’am!” responded Bolin, who’d been reaching back to scratch his neck when they’d been captured and, therefore, was stuck in a rather uncomfortable position. “We need to get back to that summit! The fate of the city – nay, the whole world – depends on it!”

The Chief of Police groaned and pinched her brow. “Like I don’t hear that five times a day,” she muttered. “Look, kid. Are you going to tell me you aren’t associated with the triads?”
“Well…I guess technically, we got hired by the Triple Threats…” answered the earthbender. Mako would’ve slapped himself if his hands were free. “Wait, no, no, don’t get the wrong idea! We only did it ‘cuz that Tarrlok guy asked us to!”

“Tarrlok?” asked Tenzin, speaking up for the first time since their capture. Mako did a double-take; he’d missed the airbender entirely. “What’s he got to do with this?”

“Wait a minute, I know you,” the firebender said after a moment. “You’re on the council too, right? The airbender guy. Sorry…I’m blanking on your name.”

“Tenzin,” he told the younger man, frowning slightly. “But let’s not change the subject. You’re saying Chairman Tarrlok sent you here?”

Seeing no other choice, Mako took a deep breath…and began to explain.

He left out a few details – namely his blackmailing them about their past with the triads – but laid out the rest of their deal as plainly as he could.

“So all this time, we’ve been worried about Tarrlok cracking down for doing this sting under the table…” Lin began, shaking her head wearily.

“While all along, he was planning to bribe civilians to do the same thing,” finished Tenzin, a low groan layered over his voice. “I guess this explains that ‘proof’ he was planning to show us tomorrow.”

The Chief of Police beckoned him over to a corner so they could conference privately. Then, her lips barely moving, she whispered, “Can we really trust this story of theirs? Not that I have any trouble believing Tarrlok is capable of it, of course. But we still need to consider the source.”

“I doubt anyone could, or would, make something like this up. It’s too crazy to be fiction,” said Tenzin, just as quietly. “Besides, whether it’s the truth or not, can we afford not to act on it?”

Lin sighed, but eventually nodded. “So what exactly are we supposed to do with them?” she asked.

The airbender chanced a brief glance back at their captives, mulling the question over for a moment, before replying, “I think we should let them go.”

“What?!” growled the Chief, more loudly than she’d been intending. “Are you even more out of your mind than usual?”

“Think about it, Lin. If these two don’t come back, the triads might begin to suspect something’s up,” Tenzin explained. “You said it yourself: we can’t afford to spook them yet. What if they decide to send more people to search the area?”

“Or, we let them return, they blab everything to Zolt, and thus guarantee they send more people to search,” hissed Lin, her eyes narrowed. “You’re discounting that very likely possibility.”

“Look, we’ve got nothing against the police. You wanna arrest everyone in that warehouse tonight, fine by us,” said Mako, interrupting their whispered conversation. Every eye in the room immediately snapped to him. “Err…sorry for overhearing, but you should know: we just wanna get paid so we can stay in the tournament. That’s all we’re here for.”

“And Tarrlok is offering us way more money than Shady Shin is,” added Bolin, trying to be helpful. “So we’ve got no reason to tell him anything. Badgermole Scout’s honor.”
“You were never in the Badgermole Scouts,” Mako couldn’t keep himself from pointing out.

“It’s an expression, bro,” the earthbender declared exasperatedly, as if that should’ve been obvious.

Lin clenched her teeth and let out another deep, rattling breath. It’d almost be worth it to go along with Tenzin’s plan, just so she wouldn’t have to listen to these two.

Finally, and already half-regretting the words the moment they left her mouth, she said, “If we do let you go – and I’m not saying we will – you need to follow my instructions exactly. Is that clear?”

“It is,” responded Mako, though his tone was mildly skeptical. “But which instructions do you mean?”

“ Mostly, you should just do what you would’ve done normally. Tenzin’s right, any deviation in your behavior could tip off the triads,” she told them. “But if and when we decide to move in, I want you kids to stay out of it. Back off, put your heads down, and wait it out. Can you at least do that much?”

“Yes, ma’am!” Bolin called out exuberantly. He attempted to snap a salute as well, before remembering that he couldn’t move his arms. “That is one thing we are really good at! Like…reeeeeeeally good. Point is, you can count on us.”

Lin continued to glare daggers at the brothers, still all but certain this was a terrible idea…but nonetheless, gave a single, firm nod to Saikhan. The intent was clear, and the police captain released his captives in one smooth, fluid motion.

“Don’t make me regret this more than I already do,” she said, gazing down at them with all the respect an exterminator might afford a spider-rat.

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The hiding spot Korra and Asami were currently wedged in was very tight, which presented something of a conundrum for the young Avatar.

It couldn’t be helped; spread everywhere throughout the warehouse were those mysterious masked men, who – given that their leader was a dead ringer for the flyer Zaheer had shown her – could only be the Equalists. Sneaking in and sequestering themselves in a small crawlspace of their own, without being seen, had been difficult enough on its own.

They certainly hadn’t had a lot of other options, was the point.

Still, the gap between a couple large crates was just large enough to hold the two of them, with no more than an inch or two to spare. Meaning that her bare arm was pressed right up against Asami’s own.

And oh-there-were-no-words for how little she needed that right now.

She couldn’t afford the slightest distraction right now, and Asami was a constant one. Their faces mere inches from each other, lying down on their stomachs side-by-side, Korra could feel every breath the non-bender took in, every last twitch or shiver of her lithe body. And with each of her own breaths, the Avatar inhaled a bit more of Asami’s perfume, subtle and delicate and by the spirits
why was she thinking about the way the other girl smelled?!

Furthermore, the physical closeness made it all but impossible to push their earlier confrontation out of her mind, despite how much she knew she needed to. Over and over again it played out in her mind, Korra’s subconscious running wild with alternative ways it could’ve ended, had she decided to tell Asami the truth.

Most of them went along the lines of the most likely scenario: the rich girl storming away from her in disgust, furious at how she’d been used and betrayed. Several even involved them coming to blows. Certainly, at minimum, she’d call the police.

But…a few others…

Korra tried to clamp down on it, but it was too late – her imagination was fully out of her control. Vague and…not so vague images swam through her mind, each more impossible than the last, and it took all her willpower to remain focused on the mission at hand.

Because really and truly, she could not afford for her head to be anywhere but in the moment, right now. With unseen enemies surrounding them in every direction, dozens of hardened criminals liable to arrive at any moment, and an all-out brawl certain to erupt the moment they did…

Well, this was not a time for daydreaming. No matter how wonderful those dreams might happen to be.

Korra had little time to dissect that stray thought, however, before the warehouse’s main door slid open, and a handful of figures stepped into the dark room. Several lights flickered on lazily at their arrival, but the lighting here clearly hadn’t been maintained well, as most of the warehouse remained shrouded in shadow.

Good news for them…and for all the Equalists presently lying in wait.

Having entered through the back and picked the first hiding spot they could find, the two girls were some distance away from the entrance, but the warehouse was so quiet otherwise that they had no trouble picking up the group’s conversation.

One man, a sleazy-looking guy in a blue suit, was lecturing the others about the schedule for the evening. It took Korra a few seconds to realize, with a slight jolt, that two of them were Bolin and Mako. She’d barely seen them out of their Fire Ferret uniforms before.

“The summit don’t start for another twenty minutes, but you should be ready any second. Zolt likes to come, uh…fashionably early,” he said, his voice so oily that Korra was half-convinced you could power a Satomobile with it. “Anyway, where the heck have you been? And where’s Eki?”

These words were directed at the man they’d seen knock out his partner. Another jolt, this one far more pronounced, went down Korra’s spine. The box to their right constituted a large blind spot, so she’d completely missed his near-silent approach.

Whoever the man was, he lied easily. “Afraid she hasn’t been feeling well lately. Thought she could push through it, but she had an attack as soon as we reached the door,” answered the spy. “Sorry, but I had to look out for my girl.”

Rather than be annoyed, however, the blue-clad gangster’s face twisted in sympathy.

“Hey, if she’s sick, she’s sick. Ain’t nobody’s fault,” he declared. “Eki was like a mother to me,
back when I rolled with the Monsoons. So you just make sure to treat her right, ya feel me?”

“Our course,” Amon’s lackey replied deftly. If the other man’s voice was like the oil in a machine, this guy was like two gears grinding against each other – smooth, yet almost terrifyingly resonant.

“Anyway, like I was sayin’ earlier, you should all get into position ‘round the table,’’ the blue-suited man said after a moment, indicating a large, round meeting table near the center of the room. “Oh, and first rule for tonight: you folks don’t speak. Consider yourselves pieces of furniture. Big pieces of furniture that can bend.”

“What if someone gets outta hand?” asked the one remaining stranger, a young man in red. “At what point are we allowed to step in?”

“Look to your boss for that, Ketto. He or she gives you the nod, you got permission to beat the crud outta whoever you like,” replied the first man with a wink. “Unless the guy’s a Terra, of course. Then you can skip straight to the last part.”

It was almost comical how every single person in the room – from Bolin and Mako, to Korra and Asami, to even the mustached Equalist – simultaneously raised an eyebrow in response to this, though none of them said anything about it.

None of them had a chance to say anything about it, because in that same moment, the warehouse door exploded.

Instinctively, Korra felt her body ready itself for a fight – at least, as much as it could from her current position – and she could see that she was far from the only one to do so. But no attack followed.

Instead, an older man in finely crafted, maroon-and-gold robes strode in, passing through the smoke as if it didn’t exist. Flanking him were a half-dozen other men and a single woman, their own clothing a mix of subdued blues, greens, and reds.

“Ah, sorry ’bout that. You know how I love to make an entrance,” he said, smirking smugly. “And hey…didn’t expect ol’ Moneybags Sato to cheap out on lightning-proofin’ this place. Baaaad call in this part o’ town.”

Korra felt a shudder course through Asami’s body at the mention of her father.

“Lightning Bolt Zolt! It’s an honor, sir!” exclaimed the man in blue, bowing so low it was almost pathetic. “I just finished makin’ sure the meetin’ place you picked out is all tight and secure. You’ll be happy to know there ain’t not one peep outta order.”

Once you parsed the truly atrocious grammar, Korra thought ruefully, you might arrive at something resembling the truth. There were, after all, a great many “peeps outta order” right now.

In any event, Zolt didn’t seem particularly impressed. “Shady Shin,” he responded, with a tone someone might use to describe a fire gummy stuck to their shoe. “I hope you pulled together somethin’ better than that sorry lot you had guard my daughter’s weddin’.”

Instantly, the younger gangster began to sweat bullets, and he swallowed so loudly that the girls could hear it.

“I…uh…know I messed up there, boss,” he said, pulling at his collar nervously. “But I promise you, this is different. I got nothin’ but the best, see for yourself!”
He gestured at the other four members of his group, already positioned in a circle around the meeting table. Zolt took a couple steps forward, his golden eyes narrowed as he examined each of the “security staff” in turn.

To the man called “Ketto,” he gave a stiff nod, which Korra took to mean he had no objections. She wondered idly, given that the colors of their clothing seemed to correspond with their elements, if it was because both were firebenders.

His expression turned more critical as he glared at the Equalist, and he looked to be on the verge of saying something. But just to the man’s right, Bolin was being extraordinarily conspicuous in his desire not to be conspicuous, and all matters of the spy in their midst were instantly forgotten.

“Well, well, well…” murmured Zolt, something halfway between a frown and a leer spreading across his face. “Look at what we have here.”

Bolin flinched, but the triad boss strode straight past him, and cupped Mako’s chin with his beefy hand.

“You got a lotta nerve, Mako. Showin’ your face in a place like this, after what you pulled,” he said, lifting his fingers and then slapping them lightly across the younger firebender’s cheek. Mako didn’t react. “You got somethin’ to say for yourself?”

“I’m just here to do my job and get paid,” the pro-bender answered tersely, still staring straight ahead.

“Always ‘bout the yuans with you, ain’t it?” asked Zolt, his voice low and dangerous. He took one step closer to the teenager, now fully within his personal space. “You get this far an’ your mind’s still so small. Sad.”

“Umm…no offense, sir, but…” Bolin spoke up timidly. “Isn’t that what being a gangster is, like… y’know, about?”

Zolt slowly shook his head, as if he was a schoolteacher and one of his students had just given an embarrassingly stupid answer.

“That’s only part of it, kid,” he said, frowning. Korra couldn’t help but notice that he used Mako’s given name, but not his brother’s. “The other part’s respect. And that’s what you’re missin’, Mako. Respect.”

He gestured backward with a flick of the wrist, at the hole he’d blown in the warehouse door.

“When the rest of the big bosses get here in a few minutes, we’re all gonna bow and make nice. And that’s ‘cuz of respect,” he continued. “We may not like each other, but we got respect, an’ that keeps this city stable.”

Then, without warning, Zolt seized Mako by his shirt and, with a single motion, threw him bodily to the ground.

“It was never ‘bout you leavin’. It was the way you did it,” he explained in a low voice, planting an expensive boot across the teenager’s chest to keep him from getting up. “Plenty of people quit the triads, that’s okay. This life ain’t for everyone. But you? You were my best, Mako.”

“I was just an accountant,” Mako pointed out, coughing a bit from the pressure on his chest.

“You know what I mean, ya ungrateful little…!” said Zolt, his teeth gritted. “You have any idea
how many other people I taught firebendin’ *personally?* You had a gift…still do. Whether or not you stayed with the Triple Threats, I didn’t want it goin’ to waste.”

He released his foot, letting Mako scramble to his feet, but continued to glare furiously all the while.

“I took you in. Gave you somethin’, *made* you somethin’,” he told his former protégé. “An’ when you left to go shack up with that Toza guy, did I ever hear a ‘thanks’? Did I ever get anythin’ back for all my trouble? You disrespected me, Mako, and I *ain’t* happy ‘bout that.”

Mako kept his eyes directed downward, but sighed and asked, very quietly, “What is it that you want from me?”

Again, that expression which was halfway like a sneer.

“Right now? Nothin’. I just wanted you to know where we stand,” he responded, finally stepping away from the younger man. “Later, we can talk a little more ‘bout, ahem…*reparation*. But for now…”

He glanced back at the warehouse entrance, where a couple dozen similarly clad individuals were slowly filing through the opening.

“Looks like we got some guests to entertain.”

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“Okay, hold up. The heck are you trying to pull, Zolt?” demanded Long Shi, pretty much from the moment the triad leaders took their seats.

Ever since the Terra Triad’s founding by escaped criminal Long Feng, the members of his family – adopted, as the disgraced Grand Secretariat had been a eunuch – had always been among its leaders. Long Shi, however, had not been in a position of power long; his older sister had run the triad for twelve long years, before finally being arrested just over a year ago.

Barely out of school and with a temper to match his age, Long Shi had spent that year systematically demolishing his own gang with one stupid decision after another. The Terras had already been in a weak period after a number of police crackdowns, but Long Shi’s boneheaded leadership threatened to slide them fully into irrelevance.

Which, all things considered, meant Lightning Bolt Zolt wasn’t particularly surprised he’d been the first one to start trouble.

“How sure what you’re talkin’ about,” he said, staring off to the side; not affording the youngest of their group the honor of eye contact.

That was a lie, of course. At minimum, he had a fairly good idea.

“These spineless lowlifes you got guarding us!” exclaimed the Terra boss, confirming Zolt’s suspicions. “I sent over half a dozen names to your guy, and what do I see? The only earthbender here is with you. What, am I supposed to take an insult like that lying down?”

“Yes, you are,” stated Gui of the Red Monsoon, his voice harsh despite its natural softness.
“There’re no waterbenders on the security staff at all, and I’m still whining less than you.”

Gui was outside his element, to put it mildly. Normally a bookkeeper, he’d been promoted very quickly thanks to the decimation of the Monsoons’ leadership by the Equalists. The oldest member of the summit by far, Zolt nonetheless showed him far more deference than the young earthbender.

“Can we stop with these petty squabbles and get onto the real issue?” asked the Agni Kai boss Niao, her tone severe. “I was under the impression this meeting was somewhat important.”

The sole woman at the table, Niao spoke through a half-face mask, hiding the ritual burn-scars that marked initiation into the Agni Kais’ upper ranks. Though the majority of the firebending triad were men, its leaders were always women, in reference to the Kemurikage they’d spawned from.

“I agree with Our Esteemed Sister of the Flame,” said Gui, using the most formal term of address possible. The lack of bad blood between them, which the Monsoons’ previous boss had held in abundance, was an encouraging sign. “No one’s suffered from these Equalists worse than the Red Monsoon.”

“We’ve all lost people,” retorted Long Shi, still sounding sore at his abrupt dismissal but apparently unwilling to argue the point. “Even if some of us have more to spare than others…”

This was directed, rather pointedly, at Zolt, though he didn’t rise to the bait.

Since they accepted all three kinds of benders, the Triple Threats – far and away the youngest of the triads, at only nine years old – had quickly grown to be its largest, by a factor of almost two-to-one. So, although they’d lost more than a dozen of their best enforcers to the Equalists, they’d felt the impact far less than most.

Zolt didn’t consider that a reason to grow complacent, however. If the Equalists weren’t stopped now, there was no telling how much damage they might eventually do.

“Let’s start by getting everythin’ we got on these guys out in the open,” Zolt told the other triad leaders, rapping the table with his knuckles for emphasis. “Maybe one of us knows somethin’ the rest don’t.”

There was a hint of accusation in his voice, but just a hint – not enough to start anything over.

Niao straightened a set of papers and cleared her throat. As usual, she’d come prepared.

“In point of fact, we actually know quite a bit. Just yesterday, one of my lieutenants returned from their captivity,” she said.

Expressions of shock spread across the room – not just on the faces of the other bosses, but their various underlings as well. None of them had ever heard of someone coming back from the Equalists.

Zolt said as much, and Niao nodded gravely. “If I were to hazard a guess…” she replied, her masked head dipped slightly. “Based on what he told me, our people aren’t failing to return because they cannot, but because they will not. They’re so ashamed of what’s become of them, that they’d rather leave the city than face their superiors.”

She paused for a moment, letting that declaration hang in the air, before finally adding, “He reports that the Equalists’ leader, Amon, has the power to remove people’s bending.”

The reaction was immediate and dramatic. A general outcry of skepticism and disbelief erupted
across the table, though none were nearly as vocal as Long Shi.

“Hippo-bull!” he shouted, sounding incensed even at the suggestion of such a thing. “No one can do that!”

“The Avatar can,” said Gui quietly. “I should know, I was there. On the day of Yakone’s trial.”

“Yeah, but…that Amon guy isn’t the Avatar!” sputtered Long Shi. “If the Avatar was reborn after the Southern Massacre, they’d be…what, twelve? That guy sure doesn’t look like a freaking kid!”

“I think what our friend is getting at is that if the Avatar could do it, it’s possible others could learn, too,” explained Niao, shaking her head in impatience. “It wouldn’t be the first time. Look at combustionbending. It’s an extremely rare talent, sure. But even if Avatar Weng was the first to use it, he’s far from the only one.”

“Guess you got a point there,” admitted Long Shi, albeit somewhat reluctantly. “What the heck can we do against something like that, though?”

Zolt slammed his fist down onto the table, as if he’d been anticipating the question.

“I’ll tell you what we gonna do. We gonna bring the fight to them,” he said, his voice a low growl. “Amon’s only been succeedin’ so far ’cuz he’s a coward, pickin’ off our guys one by one in the dead o’ night. Tell me, did your lieutenant say how he does this no-bendin’ thing?”

“According to his report, Amon takes hold of the victim and presses fingers to their neck and forehead,” Niao read out dispassionately. “What happens to them next is unclear.”

“Yeah, I figured it’d be somethin’ like that. Point is, he can only do it one at a time,” Zolt continued on, baring his teeth toward the other gangsters. “So if we gang up on him all at once…he’ll be sleepin’ with the skunk-fishies by mornin’.”

“That’s if we can even get to him,” Gui pointed out. “We have no idea how many Equalists there are in the city right now, or what sort of weapons they have. We don’t even know where their hideout is. How are we supposed to launch an attack without knowing where to go?”

“Easy. We capture one, and make ‘em squeal,” said Zolt, punctuating his point by clenching a raised fist. “They’re targetin’ us, so it’s only a matter of time before they show their faces again. Or…well, y’know what I mean.”

“Still seems like a bit of a risk to me,” responded the Red Monsoon leader, his wrinkled arms crossed sagely. “But I guess I can’t think of any better ideas.”

“I can,” Long Shi declared, crossing his own arms in a direct mirror of his elder rival. On him, however, the gesture came across as immature and petulant.

Niao gave a short, snorting laugh. “Alright, I’ll bite. What’s your plan, kid?” she asked.

A smug grin spread across the earthbender’s face.

“Pretty simple, isn’t it?” he answered, adjusting his tinted glasses unnecessarily. “Whoever these guys are, however many are out there, one thing’s obvious: they’re all non-benders. Useless little nobodies who’ve forgotten their place. Seems to me the easiest solution would be to…heh heh…remind them.”

Zolt frowned and slouched over in his chair slightly, but said nothing. Long Shi took this as an
invitation, if an unenthusiastic one, to keep speaking.

“You know… put more pressure on our territories. Step up ‘donations’ from non-bender businesses. Make an example out of any who refuse,” he went on, cracking his knuckles loudly. “Maybe blow up some of the Sokka or Suki statues. Send a message, y’know?”

“Hmmm. I think I gotcha,” said Zolt in a low voice. “Why don’t I show ya my opinion on that little plan o’ yours?”

Then, without any further preamble, he jabbed one fist forward and set the Terra boss’ chair on fire.

“What the heck, man?!” screamed Long Shi, raising dirt from the ground and using it to smother the flames on his coat. “You think you can treat a member of the Long family like this?!

Incensed, his eyes darted around wildly, looking for someone to back him up – but neither Gui nor Niao had even flinched at the attack, and he’d only brought two bodyguards of his own to the summit. With no one on the security staff on his side, he was forced to stand down.

Zolt waited for the younger man to take a seat on another chair before adding, “Look, I ain’t no bleedin’ heart. But I also ain’t gonna stand for stupid ideas. All you’d do is send more non-benders runnin’ for the Equalists. Figurin’ they might be able to protect ‘em.”

“Oh, and if we take down Amon, that’s suddenly gonna stop?” demanded the earthbender, his hands balled in fists. The sudden assault had clearly evaporated the miniscule amount of goodwill he’d entered the warehouse with. “Think, Zolt! This isn’t gonna stop with one guy! We don’t push back on this, hard, and we could lose everything!”

The lightningbender’s expression hardened even further.

“The Terras are free to do whatever they like,” he said. “But you go too far, an’ you make an enemy outta every other triad in this town.”

The other two leaders nodded their agreement, which only seemed to anger Long Shi further.

“You know, I’m tired of this,” he murmured, a dangerous edge to his voice. “You bossing me around…bossing any of us around! Some upstart little hog-monkey whose gang didn’t freaking exist ten years ago! And you get off treating me like I’m a kid? Well screw you, pal!”

“Brother of the Stone, please,” Gui tried to intercede, switching to the formal term in an effort to calm him down. “We shouldn’t let ourselves get sidetracked. The important thing here is…”

“The important thing is doing something about him!” roared Long Shi, jabbing a stubby finger toward Zolt. “As long as we’re letting him take the lead on this one, we’re finished! The Equalists will eat us for breakfast. And so if no one else’ll do anything about it, I will!”

The rock shot forth before anyone had quite realized he’d bent it. It wasn’t large, and the damage it inflicted was superficial at most.

But as a single droplet of blood trickled down the Triple Threat boss’ cheek, the entire mood of the room shifted noticeably.

“You wanna make a power play, kid?” said Zolt, slowly rising from his chair and cracking his neck, each movement careful and deliberate. “ Heckuva time to do it, but alright. If we can’t trust ya to watch our backs against Amon, then you’re a liability. And liabilities…”
He shrugged off the outer layer of his coat and took a stance, before finishing, “…Get turned to ash.”

A number of things happened in the next moment, each so quick it was easy to miss the rest.

In the blink of an eye, Lightning Bolt Zolt brought forth the element that gave him his name, firing it with speed and precision virtually unknown outside of the royal family.

Both Gui and Niao scrambled to get out of the way, as did everyone else surrounding the table – even the two other Terras that Long Shi had brought along. Right now, no one was particularly eager to stick their necks out for him.

At the same time, two quick sounds echoed from the rear of the warehouse, like something metallic being struck. The man called Zihu took a few steps away from the crowd, and returned the signal by tapping his heel against the floor.

The reaction was dramatic and immediate. Long Shi had just barely managed to raise a wall of earth to protect himself in time, and a cloud of dust erupted as the lightning shattered it.

And when that cloud dissipated, only a few seconds later, the gangsters were surrounded by Equalists.

“Amusing as this all has been,” said Amon, striding forward purposefully in the wake of the strike. Everyone present was too stunned by his sudden appearance to do anything but stand there agape at his approach.

“It is time to cleanse this city of its filth.”

[-------------------]

The next few minutes were utter chaos.

Korra watched on in horror as dozens of the most powerful benders in Republic City were systematically, brutally demolished. They were making a fight of it, of course, but in the long run there was no question.

This wasn’t a battle. It was a slaughter.

Long Shi went down first, being closest to the spy the Equalists had inserted into their ranks. The moment Amon made his presence known, the mustached man had drawn some electrified weapons and struck the Terra boss in the back, shocking him into a stupor.

Before he even had time to hit the ground, Amon was already upon him, swooping down like a man-sized wolfbat. A few seconds later, and Long Shi was collapsed upon the floor, soft and limp as a pile of noodles.

And so it was repeated, dozens of times over. The Equalists struck hard and fast, jabbing at joints and pressure points to disable their opponents long enough for Amon to strike. And not one his victims ever got up again after he was through.

The bending criminals would attempt to counterattack, of course, but Amon moved like smoke itself. Every burst of fire, earth, or water touched only air, and the Equalist leader darted in and out
of the shadows with the deftness of a carnival acrobat.

First Gui went down; he was far from a trained combat waterbender, after all. Then Niao fell as well, utterly abandoned by her right hand, Ketto, who fled for his life. The various lieutenants and enforcers the bosses had brought with them, meanwhile, were dropping like bumble-flies.

Soon enough, it was only Zolt, backed by four others – Bolin and Mako, Shady Shin, and one of the Triple Threat earthbenders – who were holding their own against the Equalist horde. Their ranks had been thinned somewhat, mostly by Niao, but they still outnumbered the benders by at least three-to-one.

Not for the first time, Korra felt a sharp pang of temptation – to intervene, to run away, to do something. She chanced a glance to the side, at Asami’s similarly stricken face, and knew she was feeling the same thing.

But no matter how much she willed it, her body remained frozen firmly in place. She wished she could say it was strategic considerations that were staying her hand…but the truth was far more shameful.

It was fear.

Though she knew it would benefit her none, that it was inessential to her mission, she wanted to help Mako and Bolin, whose fight against the Equalists grew more and more desperate by the moment. She hadn’t known them long, but they’d been good to her; taken her in and taught her all they could about their livelihood. Part of her, a large part, felt like she owed them.

Yet right now, Korra found she couldn’t move a muscle. She’d just seen, with her own two eyes, that Niao’s claims were far from flights of fancy. Several of Amon’s victims had attempted to recover from his attack, striking at him from a prone position with unsteady punches or kicks…but no elements had followed their movements.

There was no other explanation. Somehow, some way, this man could remove the bending of his enemies. With nothing but a couple of fingers.

How could she even begin to face him, knowing that? Knowing how easily, how effortlessly, he could rip away everything that made her…well, her. Avatar Korra. The world’s last remaining hope for balance.

Still, Asami was staring at her now, silently beseeching her to step in. The meaning of her expression was obvious, even if no words were exchanged: if Korra wasn’t willing to step up and help her friends, then she would.

In the next moment, however, all that was rendered moot.

Every single window to the warehouse was shattered in unison, as uniformed police officers descended from all directions on cables of iron. Unlike the bending criminals, they moved as a single unit, raining down upon the Equalists with organization and precision.

As they entered into combat with Equalists and triad members alike without missing a beat, it quickly became obvious that they hadn’t just arrived here. Korra supposed they must’ve been waiting outside for some time now, watching for the perfect moment to strike.

Letting the criminals thin each other’s ranks before swooping in wasn’t exactly honorable, but she couldn’t deny it was sound strategy.
In any event, however, one other thing was clear: their arrival presented the perfect distraction. As soon as Zolt, Shin, and the other earthbender were set upon by Republic City’s finest, Mako and Bolin had chosen to slip away into the shadows, and were slowly making their way toward the rear of the warehouse.

Korra glanced over at Asami once again, and the two girls exchanged a single, silent nod. Now was the time to move.

They stayed hunched over as they walked, letting the tall crates block them from view. Without needing to speak, the pair automatically positioned themselves back-to-back, allowing them to stay alert of all three warring parties.

The brothers were maneuvering in a similar fashion, slowly and carefully, so it didn’t take long for the girls to catch up to them.

Unsure of how best to approach this, Korra cautiously tapped Bolin on the shoulder. The earthbender very nearly let out a yelp, but his brother slapped a hand across his mouth just in time. Mako’s eyes briefly widened in surprise at their presence, but he seemed to decide that any questions he had could wait, and nodded as well.

And so with that, the four of them set off.

The mayhem in the warehouse was growing worse and worse by the second, but the teenagers stayed just out of sight of the fray, with Korra leading them through the winding aisles of oversized crates and boxes. If she remembered correctly from their harried arrival, the backdoor was only a few more rows away…

And indeed, when they turned the next corner, the door that’d be their escape came fully into view. Unfortunately, however, something else stood directly in front of it.

The Equalist spy, three of his masked minions…and…

Amon himself.

“Take them all,” he said coldly.

With no more benefit to stealth, all four of them sprung into action against their attackers, bending and – in Asami’s case – fighting back with furious punches and kicks as if their lives depended on it. Which, in a certain sense, they absolutely did.

Still, though they put their all into their struggle, it became clear fairly quickly that they were thoroughly outmatched.

The man who went by “Zihu,” in particular, fought with the ferocity of a man possessed, and it only took a couple of strikes from his electrified weapons to subdue both Bolin and Mako. With his last bit of strength, Mako managed to knock those weapons away from him with a quick fire blast, but all that meant was that the mustached man and another Equalist had to spend some time holding them down and binding their limbs.

The other two Equalist foot soldiers seemed to be holding back somewhat against Asami, which the first learned to regret very quickly, as she slammed him into the ground hard enough to shatter several bones. The other countered swiftly, however, and soon forced her into a tight hold.

Korra wanted desperately to rush to her side, but Amon had gone after her personally, and it was taking all her focus simply to stay out of his range. The masked man, already fast, was now moving
with agility bordering on *inhuman*, dodging and weaving around every single attack she threw.

Forced to rely solely on the water-skins she always kept at her sides, Korra had never so acutely felt the limitations of a single element. Waterbending depended on the “push and pull” between the bender and their opponent; the ability to turn the positive jing of an attacker against them.

But if Amon was going to rely *entirely* on negative jing, evading everything she could muster and refusing to counterattack on his own, she simply didn’t have anything to work with. Ice, vapor, water “tentacles”… not one of them came even *close* to their mark.

What Korra really needed right now was earthbending. Amon wasn’t an airbender, after all – he couldn’t simply stay floating. Though he was incredibly nimble on his feet, those feet still needed to touch the ground *eventually*.

If she could manage to trap his ankle with a raised bit of rock, even for a *second*, she was certain she could end this in a single shot. The rest of the Equalists were still occupied holding down her friends or fighting against the police, so if she could just take down their boss…

Then, it hit her. Why *couldn’t* she use a bit of earthbending? Between Bolin, the other Triple Threat earthbender back there, and the dozen or so still-conscious police officers, there was no shortage of earthbenders here.

If she was subtle about it, no one would jump to the conclusion that she was the Avatar. They’d all assume someone else had done it.

Carefully, making sure to maintain her waterbending for the sake of misdirection, she adjusted her stance to get ready for the move. She wouldn’t even need her hands for this. A single, strong tap of her foot would be enough.

Calling on all her training with Ghazan, Korra breathed deeply, watching Amon’s every movement with the eyes of a messenger hawk. Steadily, patiently, she waited for the right moment to strike.

Finally, it came. Her latest water-whip assault put Amon just slightly off balance, and he touched down firmly upon the ground to right himself. It lasted less than a second, but it was enough.

She brought down her foot, willing the ground to rise and swallow his heel.

And absolutely nothing happened.

Korra’s breath caught in her throat. Panicking slightly, she tried it again… but once more, no earth rose to her command. Abandoning all pretense, she repeated the gesture with her hands this time, putting her entire body into the motion…

And still, there was no response.

The water she’d been bending crashed to the floor, drenching her feet completely. Echoes of the booming splash reverberated through her mind.

Amon, too, came to a rest, his arms crossed behind his back and his posture immaculate. So confident, *so casual*. As if all this had been nothing more than an amusing game.

“I’m afraid that’s not going to work,” he told her, his voice a deathly, haunting whisper. But it wasn’t those words that sent a deep, soul-biting chill directly down her spine.

It was what he said *next*. 
“Isn’t that right…Avatar?”
“I appreciate this,” said Hiroshi Sato, his expression hard and cold. “More than you’ll ever know.”

Amon offered no reply, except to raise a single finger to the painted mouth of his mask. The meaning to the gesture was obvious: this was a situation that called for stealth and silence.

They were, after all, standing directly over their sleeping victim, who was liable to wake up at any moment.

The Equalist leader held nothing against the young waterbender who, at present, was curled up beneath altogether too many sheets and snoring obnoxiously. None beyond the general hatred he felt for all benders, at least.

But Hiroshi had it in his head that his precious daughter – the one thing he cared about almost as much as his vengeance – was smitten with this girl, and that’d been enough for the industrialist to call upon a personal favor for the first time since they’d met.

Truthfully, Amon suspected the supposed affections were little more than an overprotective father’s imagination, but the truth ultimately mattered very little. The fact was that they were rapidly approaching his endgame, and he couldn’t afford for his best engineer to be distracted by such a minor issue.

Hiroshi’s logic was simple: the girl had come to Republic City as part of a work-exchange program for waterbenders. So if she suddenly and inexplicably found herself without her bending...well, she’d be out of a job, wouldn’t she? With any luck, she’d be forced to return home to find new work.

And if not, that’d be the moment for her old boss to step in and, “out of the goodness of his heart,” offer her a transfer to one of their sites in Ba Sing Se or Omashu. Somewhere nice and far away from the beautiful Asami Sato.

Beneath his mask, Noatak sighed and rolled his eyes. He might as well get this over with.

With a soft cloth, the bloodbender lightly coated the most vital areas – the forehead and back of the neck – with a diluted form of shirshu venom. The toxin would numb the nerves and, with any luck, prevent her from even feeling his touch.

Still, there was always the chance she might awaken regardless: every person had a slightly different tolerance level for the venom, after all. He himself had long since developed an immunity.

All things considered, it was best he get this over with quickly.

And so, as he’d done with countless others, Amon pressed his fingers against the sleeping girl’s skin.

When he’d first been developing this technique, the first thing he’d needed to learn were the complex chi paths of each individual element. The way that energy flowed through the body for a waterbender was far different from someone who wielded earth or fire. To be able to cut them all off, in the same amount of time, had required years of practical study.

So when he made contact with his victim, he’d immediately sensed exactly what he’d been expecting: the paths that marked a talented and fully trained waterbender.

Except that wasn’t all he sensed.
At first, Amon was certain he must’ve been mistaken. He’d misread opponents before, in his early days – usually benders of one element who’d been trying to pass themselves off, in dress and mannerisms, for another.

But the more that his bloodbending senses became acclimated to this girl’s body, the surer he became. He wasn’t picking up a single active chi path.

He was picking up three.

Noatak’s breath caught in his throat, and his cold blue eyes went wide as saucers. Not for the first time, he was immensely grateful for his mask; grateful for the fact that Hiroshi couldn’t see his expression.

What were the odds of this? Was this fortune smiling upon him? A sign that there was truth in his lie – that the spirits did approve of his mission?

Either way…

This was going to change everything.

[-------------------]

“How…How did you…?” Korra choked out, too horrified to come up with any other words. Her eyes kept darting between Amon, his minions, Mako and Bolin, and…Asami.

All of whom were, though beaten down and injured, completely and totally conscious. And staring at her with wide, disbelieving eyes.

There was no way they hadn’t just heard everything.

“You know my power, Avatar. You have seen it demonstrated multiple times this very night,” said the Equalist leader, cutting through her panicked thoughts. “Some time ago, the two of us had a…chance encounter. You did not know it then, but I did. How could I not, when I tried to remove a single bending art and, instead, found three?”

He began to slowly approach her, his cold and methodical voice keeping perfect pace with his stride.

“I knew, then, that this knowledge was a weapon. One to be kept in reserve, until the moment it would most make you bleed,” he continued on. “That is why I left your native element alone – it would tip my hand too early. But your other gifts…?”

Terror and wild fury swallowed whole any considerations of subtlety, and Korra felt her body move on its own, desperate to prove him wrong in the deadliest, most devastating way possible.

With her fists and feet, she attempted to melt the ground beneath Amon, swallowing him whole in a torrent of burning earth. And with the rest of her body, she willed all the chi she could muster to flow through her forehead, and reduce the masked man to a pile of cinders.

But nothing happened.

“Gone, Avatar. Gone forever,” he finished, now a single step away from her, his unflinching stare bearing down. “And now…it’s time to finish the job.”
Korra willed herself to move, to fight back – she still had one element available to her, after all. But no matter how hard she willed it, her legs refused to obey. She was frozen, paralyzed, as his fingers inched closer and closer…

Her gaze darted, again, to the others, who were struggling harder than ever to free themselves. But with his limbs completely bound, Bolin’s bending was essentially useless, and Mako’s only slightly less so.

For one brief, hopeful moment, he seemed about to loosen a burst of flame from his mouth, but apparently Amon’s lieutenant had dealt with this before, because he had a countermove ready: an oil-covered cloth that he used to gag the young firebender. Now, any attempts to breath fire would only set his own head aflame.

And as for Asami…well, it wasn’t really nice to say, but with her own arms and legs held by the chi-blockers like vices, she truly was useless right now.

But then, Korra supposed she shouldn’t be one to talk. After all, she was going to be in the same boat any second now…

That was right about when the Equalist holding down Bolin reached over and shocked their mustached leader into unconsciousness.

It all happened in a flash. The masked chi-blocker turned their electrified glove onto the Equalist holding Asami in just the next moment, and at the same time, raised their other fist high and unclenched it.

The metal bindings used on the brothers came apart at once, and though they were clearly both surprised by the development, they wasted little time at leaping into action. Amon, who just seconds ago had been so close to Korra’s face that she could count the lines on his palm, was forced to retreat from the onslaught of fire and earth, using a spinning leap to duck behind a nearby crate.

Meanwhile, the momentary stunning of her guard was enough for Asami to wriggle herself free, knocking him out cold with a devastating pair of kicks. Immediately after, she rushed to Korra’s side.

“Come on, we’ve gotta go,” she said urgently, offering her hand to the speechless waterbender.

“I…uh…okay,” murmured Korra, too shocked by all of this to even consider refusing.

The Equalist who’d helped them made a motion to follow, and seeing no better alternative they all did so. Before they scrambled out through the warehouse’s back door, the traitorous chi-blocker unleashed one last, parting shot – a rising punch that sent tremors through the ceiling, and caused several of the girders hanging over them to vibrate intensely.

They were out the door just seconds before the girders fell, separating themselves from Amon by two tons of tempered iron.

Still, there was no point in taking chances, so the five of them continued to jog away at a brisk speed, eager to get as far from that warehouse as possible.

Mako was the first person to recover from the initial shock enough to ask the obvious question.

“Who the heck are you, anyway?” he demanded of the Equalist, his expression stern. “And why did you help us?”
In lieu of an explanation, they simply removed their mask. Both Korra and Asami gaped.

“Kinzoku…?” whispered the waterbender, but the other woman shook her head.

“My name is no more ‘Kinzoku’ than yours is ‘Mizore,’” she replied, her eyes still directed straight forward. “I am Kuvira, captain of the Zaofu city guard. And you, Avatar Korra…are going to answer my questions.”

[-----------------------]

“Well…” said Lin about an hour later, as she finally plopped herself down behind her desk. “That could’ve gone better.”

“But it certainly could’ve gone a lot worse, too,” Tenzin pointed out, taking the only other seat in the office and closing the door behind them. “Lightning Bolt Zolt may’ve gotten away, but we arrested the heads of all three other triads. Not to mention over two dozen of their rank and file. This could be the blow that ends their reigns of terror for good.”

“If we can make the charges stick,” responded Lin with a frown. “We held back because we hoped they might let something incriminating slip. Instead everything got ruined by those…those…”

“Equalists, yes. There’s no question I was wrong about them,” the airbender finished for her. “But isn’t that a good thing? True, we’ll have to eat a bit of lizard-crow next time we see Tarrlok. But not only do we have definitive proof of their existence…we managed to arrest seven of them. This is our chance to learn all we can.”

“Except those ‘Equalists’ aren’t talking,” declared the Chief of Police as she leaned back in her chair, looking about ready to collapse. “I was just in an interrogation room with one for the past hour. And you don’t understand these people at all.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tenzin.

Lin’s eyes, dulled by lack of food or sleep, narrowed in irritation, but she answered the question all the same.

“Most criminals aren’t the most…loyal bunch,” she said, and he knew from the way her fists clenched exactly what – or rather who – she was thinking about. “You offer them a better plea deal, or a bribe, and nine times out of ten they’ll sell their ‘friends’ up the river before you even finish the question.”

She let out a deep, exhausted yawn, though she tried to cover it up.

“But people like this? They’re different,” continued the metalbender in a low voice. “These are fanatics, Tenzin. Zealots. This cause they’ve come up with…they believe it, heart and soul. I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere without going for the man at the top.”

“That masked man. I believe the flyers called him ‘Amon,’ if I remember correctly,” murmured Tenzin, a pensive expression upon his face. “Unfortunately, it seems he got away as well.”

“We lost track of him after those boys Tarrlok hired made a run for it,” Lin explained. “Which we should talk about, by the way. Today’s meeting is going to be one heck of a fiasco.”
“Perhaps, but he really won’t have a leg to stand on,” replied Tenzin, sounding a little more confident than he actually felt. “He could have partnered with the police department for his investigation. Instead he acted on his own, outside the law. I can only imagine it’s because he wanted the glory for himself.”

“Or, it was because not a single one of you was taking my claims seriously,” the waterbender in question suddenly interjected, slamming open the door and striding into the room as if he owned the place. “Sorry…I was waiting for our most esteemed chief here, and I couldn’t help but overhear. You really should soundproof this door.”

“I’ll put it on my to-do list,” said Lin, while at the same time affixing the councilman with a look that could kill a platypus-bear. “Now, what the flameo do you want?”

“I’m wounded by your tone,” Tarrlok answered through a simpering smirk. “Especially when I’m just here to check on your little…off-the-books operation. And since the owl-cat’s out of the bag – to see where you’ve stashed my little Fire Ferrets. But I suppose now I know you haven’t the slightest idea.”

Tenzin let out a long, weary sigh. “I’m confident they’ll be coming to you fairly soon,” he told his fellow councilman, his tone vaguely accusatory. “You’re the one paying them, after all.”

“Well, I didn’t tell them to spill everything to you, and it’s fairly obvious they did,” noted the waterbender, tapping his chin quizzically. “I could use that as a reason not to pay, if I felt like it. I don’t think I’ll need to go that route, though. In comparison to my personal fortune, what they’re asking is chump’s change.”

“All gained perfectly legitimately, I’m sure,” Tenzin mumbled under his breath.

Tarrlok clearly hadn’t missed it, however, as his face hardened noticeably.

“I assure you that it absolutely is,” he said through clenched teeth. “I had to earn everything on my own, and I did all of it cleanly. It’s not like my family was…”

He stopped abruptly in the middle of his sentence, as if he’d been about to say something he shouldn’t have and caught himself just in time. Finally, he just added, “It’s not like my family was wealthy. Just poor fishermen in the North. I started from nothing, which is more than I can say for either of you.”

Lin snorted. “Trust me, if you wanna make this about who had the worst childhood, you’re not gonna win with me,” she declared with a roll of her eyes. “Anyway, we’re getting sidetracked. You wanted to know how the sting went? Well if you were eavesdropping, you already heard everything I care to share on the subject. You can wait for the police report for the rest.”

The corner of Tarrlok’s mouth twitched – though out of amusement, irritation, or a bit of both, Tenzin wasn’t entirely sure.

“Very well. Just one more question, then,” said the waterbender. “Amon’s power…is it as the rumors say? Is he truly able to…?”

“Rumors?” repeated Tenzin, his brow furrowing. “What rumors?”

“Oh, a little here, a little there,” Tarrlok responded evasively. “But how I found out is rather secondary, I feel, to whether or not it’s the truth. So…is it?”

“I suppose there’s no point in trying to hide it,” muttered Lin with a sigh. “From the Council, at least
– I’d rather the general public not find out yet. Anyway, it certainly looks like that’s the case. Twenty-nine triad members being processed right now, and not one has bent a thing since Amon’s attack.”

“I see…” whispered Tarrlok, folding his hands and adopting an impassive expression. “Well, I suppose we’ve finally found one thing we can agree upon. Informing the public right now would provoke mass panic. We need to find out exactly what Amon is doing to people, and how best to counter it. Covertly.”

Tenzin nodded his agreement as well. “Once every bender in the city finds out about this, there’ll be no going back,” he said. “It looks like Amon is trying to start a war with the United Republic. We can’t risk giving him what he wants.”

That was the moment Captain Saikhan chose to come bursting through the door.

“Chief!” he exclaimed, sweat running down his cheeks and forehead. “You need to…err…to see…”

His voice fell away as he took in the full scene of the office. Clearly, he hadn’t expected to run into two councilmen here.

The lines of Lin’s face deepened noticeably. “As you can see, Captain,” she cut across him, putting emphasis on the rank. “I’m a bit busy at the moment. Can it wait?”

Saikhan let out a deep breath, as if he’d been holding it in for several minutes, and shook his head. “I’m afraid it really can’t, Chief,” he said, his tone even more serious than usual – and that was saying something. “If you’re not going out there personally, you at least need to turn on your radio.”

Lin wasn’t really sure what he was getting at, but did as he asked nonetheless. Anything that had Saikhan this worked up merited her full attention.

She turned the dial to the news station.

“…ose just joining us, a repeat of our top story. Less than thirty minutes ago, explosive devices were detonated all across the city. Direct casualties number at least seventeen, with hundreds more injured.”

“Reports of seven individual bombings have been confirmed thus far. Targeted areas include City Hall, Republic City University, the Northern and Southern Water Tribe Cultural Centers, the Fire Nation Consulate, Ba Sing Se Bureaucratic Annex, and Avatar Aang Memorial Island.”

“United Daily News has verified that the bombings occurred nearly simultaneously, within a space of four or five minutes from each other. Additionally, each location received an anonymous call shortly before the devices went off, requesting that the building be evacuated.”

“Combined, these facts seem to suggest this was an organized, coordinated attack. No members of the government or police department have been made available for comment, however, as rescue efforts are still ongoing.”

“We will be bringing you more details as soon as they become available. Until then, this is Kuroi Shinobi with United Daily News, reporting to you live.”
News of the bombings spread quickly throughout Republic City, and as its people began to rise to the first rays of the dawning sun, it was the sole topic of discussion over any number of breakfast tables.

But there was at least one small tea shop, far away from the city’s hustle and bustle, where the news had not yet reached.

Their conversation was taking on something of a…different tenor.

“Don’t tell me you intend to deny it,” Kuvira demanded of her young charge, affixing her with a piercing glare. “You are the Avatar. You came to this city under a false name, for a secret purpose. I want to know what that purpose is.”

“I…” said Korra, her lips barely moving. Her eyes kept wandering between the four individuals staring expectantly at her from around the table, one after another…but always, without fail, they would end their journey upon Asami. “I…can’t say. I’m sorry.”

She blinked, several times, as hot, stinging tears began to flow, unbidden by her conscious mind.

“But the rest…” she continued to whisper, unable to meet their gazes, desperate to find some way out of this and finding absolutely none. “No…I won’t deny it. It’s all true. I am Avatar Korra.”

She chanced a brief glance up at the others, unable to help herself, needing to see their reactions. Kuvira, of course, displayed no surprise, having deduced this all herself; how, Korra still wasn’t quite sure.

Bolin’s mouth was hanging so low it was a wonder he hadn’t dislocated his jaw. Stunned into total silence, he could only manage to mouth, his lips contorting exaggeratedly, “The Avatar…”

Mako’s expression was the hardest to read. His arms were crossed in front of him, his face blank and stoic. Korra could only assume he was reserving judgment until he heard more.

Then, finally, the Avatar turned to the final face. The one she’d been dreading the most.

Asami’s face was not especially hard to read…but what Korra saw on it wasn’t anything like what she’d expected. She didn’t look hurt, or betrayed. Inexplicably, and yet unmistakably, the emotion it most resembled was…

Sympathy.

“You could’ve told me about this. But I understand why you didn’t,” the non-bender said in a quiet voice, reaching forward to place one hand atop her own. “I just wanna know…well, how. The whole world thinks you’ve been dead for twelve years.”

And there it was. The brief, uncontrolled swoop of elation that’d swept through her stomach at Asami’s words came crashing down just as quickly, because there was no easy answer to this question.

Obviously, the only reason Asami hadn’t rejected her was that she didn’t know the full story. In the
brief few hours since they’d escaped the warehouse, she’d no doubt concocted some elaborate, overly romantic scenario by which the Avatar had bravely escaped certain doom, and gone on to any number of wild, heroic adventures.

That was all, in a sense, true, but it was also far from the entire tale. How could one describe the Red Lotus to someone who hadn’t seen what she’d seen, lived what she’d lived?

What they were planning to do, what she was planning to do, would sound insane to an outsider’s ear. It was all but impossible for people who’d been inundated from birth with lies from blind leaders and corrupt governments to see the world for what it was.

She’d learned this more times than she could count, and it was always a harsh lesson.

It’d be a difficult enough case to make if she was in a calm and stable mindset, and she was about as far from that right now as she’d ever been. So much had happened over the course of the previous night and day; enough that she hadn’t even begun to deal with half of it.

On any other day, the revelation that she’d lost two-thirds of her bending abilities would’ve consumed every last corner of her mind. Now…it was almost an afterthought.

If only because she was intentionally trying not to think about it.

She’d been silent for an extremely long time now, and she was acutely aware of it. Finally, Kuvira seemed to lose what little patience she had, and seized hold of the front of Korra’s clothes.

“You will answer her question, Avatar,” she murmured dangerously, holding the waterbender up until their noses were practically touching. “Or I’ll see fit to share what you conveniently left out of your story.”

The older woman accompanied these words with a flick of her wrist, causing a metal Pai Sho tile to emerge from her sleeve. It lingered for less than a second before Kuvira hid it again, but Korra got the message. Her breath caught in her throat.

“How did you…?” she asked, her voice a strained whisper.

“I am very good at what I do,” said the metalbender, a hint of smugness in her expression. Her next words were spoken with a raised voice, ensuring the others could hear. “I know which masters you serve, Avatar. I see no need to make that knowledge common…should you be willing to fill in the rest of the pieces for me.”

Korra looked stricken, but eventually nodded, acceding to her terms. She didn’t see a lot of other options.

She could try to run, of course – she’d been thinking about it more or less constantly on their way to this nearly empty teashop – but with only one element, she didn’t fully trust herself against an opponent with so many unknown capabilities.

Particularly one who could bring down an entire building without breaking a sweat.

Before Korra could begin to explain, however, Bolin of all people chose to interject. “Hold on a second,” he declared, his expression uncharacteristically serious. “We’re asking an awful lotta questions of Mizore…err, I mean, Korra. But at least we know her. Umm…well, that is, we kinda do. Sorta.”

He swallowed, having stumbled a bit in his momentum, but attempted to recover swiftly. “My point
“is…” the earthbender continued on. “Well, what about you, ma’am? We only just met, and we barely even know your name! How come you get to take the lead on all this?”

Kuvira’s expression instantly turned far sterner, and Bolin visibly recoiled from her glare.

“Let us get one thing straight, you conniving little street urchin-crab,” she said, her tone brooking no room for dissent. “The only reason I’m letting you three sit in on my interrogation is because I hoped you might have some worthwhile information to add. The moment I have no more use for you, I will take immense pleasure in ejecting you far from my sight. Are we clear?”

Bolin trembled, suddenly looking ten years younger than he actually was. “Yes ma’am…” he squeaked, his voice positively tiny.

“Could you at least tell us who you are and why you’re here?” asked Mako, his voice even and reasonable. “You seem to know all about us. I think it’s only fair.”

“I have little interest in ‘fairness’ for its own sake. But…I suppose I can agree to that much, if only for expediency’s sake,” answered Kuvira, releasing a low, measured sigh. “As I already stated, my name is Kuvira, and I serve as captain of the guard for the Metal Clan of Zaofu. I’m on a mission on behalf of our city’s matriarch, Suyin Beifong.”

Bolin’s mouth immediately shot open, as if he was about to say something, but the metalbender cut him off preemptively.

“And before you ask, yes, that is ‘Beifong’ as in the youngest daughter of Master Toph, and the sister of your city’s Chief of Police,” she added in an annoyed tone. “She wished me to conduct an investigation of these ‘Equalist’ vermin, and that is precisely what I’ve done. It just so happened my investigations also stumbled across something…else.”

Her piercing green eyes snapped back to Korra. “Which brings us back to our original subject,” said the metalbender, without missing a beat. “You surely came to this city with agenda of your own. Tell them to me, in detail, before I decide there’s no longer any value in niceties.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, Korra found herself sharing a look with the others, and she could tell they were all thinking the same thing. This was her being nice?

“Well…the truth is…” the Avatar responded hesitantly. “The main reason I’m here…is the same one you are. Trying to look into the Equalists.”

“Hmmm. I suspected as much,” stated Kuvira, her arms folded. “They would present a potential threat to your plans. Even more so, now that their leader has rendered you…unwhole.”

Korra cast her gaze downward, blinking away tears she hadn’t realized were still there.

“Almost everything I’ve ever told you was a lie,” she said, looking askance. “I’m not from the North…I’ve never even been to the North. My documents are forged. All this…it was just to find out about Amon.”

She bit her lip, shaking from head to toe, before adding in a strained, barely audible whisper, “I’m sorry.”
“You may have lied to get your job, but that doesn’t mean you lied about everything,” replied Asami, her tone insistent. “There’s just one thing I don’t get. Why that job, specifically? Why come to Future Industries in the first place?”

“Probably for the same reasons I did,” Kuvira interjected, before Korra could say anything. Not that she had the first clue what she would’ve said. “The Avatar appears too much of a coward to broach the subject, so I will. It’s highly probable your father is connected to the Equalists, Miss Sato.”

Asami was silent for several moments, staring at the metalbender unblinkingly. Then, in a very quiet voice, she muttered, “…What?”

“It hardly takes a genius to suspect him of a major role,” said Kuvira, betraying not even the slightest hint of sympathy. “The Equalists possess industrial capability beyond any mere terrorist organization. Clearly, they have moneyed interests involved – interests that, necessarily, would be non-benders. Hiroshi Sato fits all of these criteria.”

“And that’s enough for you to accuse him of something so…so horrible?” demanded Asami, her tones incredulous.

“I assure you, those are just a small sampling of my reasons to suspect him. Few of which I see any value whatsoever in sharing with you,” Kuvira declared contemptuously, before turning back to Korra. “But I will tell you this much. At this time two days ago, you still held the full range of your bending. I was tailing you as you made your way to the Sato residence, and I know you were surreptitiously using seismic sense.”

Korra didn’t try to deny it, though she suppressed a shiver at the implications. She thought she’d been careful, but clearly…

“And since that night – unless I’m very much mistaken – you’ve been cognizant of your surroundings the entire time,” the metalbender went on, her eyes boring into Korra’s. “Do you understand what that means? For Amon to have attacked you while you were unaware, there was only one potential opportunity.”

“When I was…asleep…” the Avatar whispered slowly, her eyes going wide with horror.

“Precisely,” said Kuvira. “Your visit to the Sato mansion was spontaneous and unannounced. For Amon to strike there that night by mere coincidence is simply impossible. Help from the inside would’ve been required.”

“I’m not hearing this,” Asami growled, her hands balled up in fists. “Even if what you’re saying is true, it’s no reason to suspect my father. It could’ve been anyone who works at our estate. Heck, it could’ve been me.”

“I haven’t completely placed you below suspicion, as of yet,” Kuvira stated harshly, her own body tensing reflexively. “But for now, my focus is upon Hiroshi Sato. It’ll be a little more difficult now that my cover as ‘Kinzoku’ has been blown…but I suppose that really can’t be helped.”

“Yeah, uh…I got a question about that,” Bolin cut in, speaking up for the first time since Kuvira had badgered him into silence. “How come you were there in the first place? And dressed up like one of those freaky mask guys!”

“Obviously, I was in disguise to infiltrate the summit,” said Kuvira, her tone dismissive, as if she was lecturing a five-year-old. “I’d hoped I could enter and leave under the cover of my stolen uniform, with Amon none the wiser. But I couldn’t stand back and allow the Avatar to be struck down.”
The metalbender’s eyes narrowed. These next words, though she said them with the same logical and matter-of-fact tone as she did everything else, were no doubt coming straight from the heart.

“Whatever she is, whatever she now…represents, she is too important to the world for it to lose,” she told them, her face impassive.

“Not again.”

Each of the gathered leaders of Republic City stared at the next in turn, unsure who should be the first to speak.

Finally, after the silence had stretched on to nearly three minutes, Lin more or less summed things up with a murmured, “By the spiritbegotten spirits of a spirit’s spirit and the spirit mother of a spirit spirit spirit…”

Several of those words were not actually “spirit,” but that was how Tenzin chose to interpret them.

“We have to get out there,” said Tenzin, already leaping to his feet with an accompanying flurry of wind. “Those people need our help.”

Saikhan held up a hand. “Our officers are deploying in full force to save lives and control the damage,” he explained. “With all due respect, Councilman, I don’t think rushing in right now would be a very good idea.”

“Listen to him, Tenzin,” added Tarrlok, his tones blunt and impatient. “While I can appreciate the urge to play the valiant hero, you can do a lot more good from here, determining how we catch those responsible.”

Tenzin sighed, but nodded softly. Much as he hated to admit it, Tarrlok was right.

Sitting back down, he turned back to the other two and asked, “I assume we’re all thinking the same thing?”

Tarrlok nodded as well. “The Equalists. This has their filthy hands written all over it,” he spat out. “I told you that if we didn’t clamp down on them early, they’d go after ordinary benders next. Looks like we didn’t have to wait long.”

Lin, however, seemed deep in thought, barely listening to what the chairman was saying in increasingly venomous tones. He shot her an inquisitive look, but she didn’t acknowledge it.

“In any event, they couldn’t have struck at a worse time,” said the airbender, deciding to bring it up later – once Tarrlok was no longer in the room. “With the majority of the police’s metalbenders deployed to the summit, our forces were severely stretched everywhere else.”

“Yes…” responded the waterbender, his eyes narrowed. “And I very much doubt that was a coincidence.”

*That* managed to shake Lin out of her reverie. “What exactly are you getting at, Tarrlok?” she demanded, a sharp edge to her voice.
“I’ll be blunt, Chief,” he replied, folding his fingers together in that smug, self-important way only he could pull off. “You’ve got a leak in your department. Only a very small contingent of your subordinates knew about the sting ahead of time. Even I didn’t find out until after the fact.”

“You think the Equalists have a mole amongst the police,” said Tenzin, mulling over the notion carefully. “I suppose it could be possible. We still know so little about their capabilities.”

“Ludicrous. I refuse to believe it,” declared Lin, her voice practically a growl. “There are bad cops here and there, sure. But none of them are on the take from terrorists in theatre masks.”

“Then what other explanation is there?” Tarrolok asked. He didn’t bother to wait for an answer. “Deal with the facts, Chief Beifong. Your elite metalbenders are above reproach—probably—but there are plenty of non-benders who work in your department as well. And we need to do something about them.”

“I’m not sure I like where this is going,” the airbender cut in, his brow furrowed.

“I expect you won’t. But that doesn’t make it any less necessary,” said the chairman. He extracted a sheaf of papers from his breast pocket. “Later today, I will again present this proposal to the Council—to render association with the Equalists illegal, and to institute a mandatory curfew for all non-benders. Both measures which are long overdue. But now, I’ll be joining them with one other.”

Tarrolok paused for a moment, his mouth a thin line, before finishing, “A formal inquisition will be opened into each and every non-bender in public service. Police, military, or civilian. It’s the only way to be certain.”

“Have you lost your mind, Tarrolok?!” exclaimed Tenzin, scrambling to his feet once again. “Didn’t I just say we shouldn’t let Amon turn this into a war between benders and non-benders? You’re practically sending this to him gift-wrapped!”

“You’ll have your say at the meeting, Tenzin…just as you always do,” the waterbender answered, his lip slightly curled. “Just don’t blame me if you find yourself in the…distinct minority. But then, I suppose you’d be used to that by now.”

“This is a rare sentence for me, but I agree with Tenzin,” said Lin. “Your proposal is going to do way more harm than good. Heck, we still aren’t even certain the Equalists are responsible for this one.”

“Oh, please. Who else could it be?” asked Tarrolok, rolling his eyes.

Throughout their meeting, the gathered councilmen and police officers had left the radio on, just in case it reported any updates. But no new information had come in the last twenty minutes or so, and with the same story repeating over and over, the dulcet tones of Kuroi Shinobi largely faded into the background.

Still, when those tones abruptly cut off, it drew the attentions of everyone in the room immediately.

Static blared over the speakers for several seconds, eerie and dissonant. Then, another voice began to speak.

A voice all but one of them had heard very recently.

“Good morning, people of Republic City. You may call me Amon.”
“By now, I’m sure that most of you have witnessed my handiwork. Our handiwork. Let it be known that the Equalist Movement claims full responsibility for the bombings that rocked your city today.”

“Some of you may have already heard of our cause. Many, I’m sure, have not. But either way, I think this a good time to establish what we stand for…and, what we demand.”

“For thousands of years, this world has known one, singular truth. That those fortunate enough to be born with power of bending were its natural rulers, and all the rest…fit only to be crushed beneath their heel.”

“We are here to expose that ‘truth’ for exactly what it is. History’s oldest, cruelest lie.”

“For those who have clung to this wretched, unnatural power as a way to subjugate your fellow man, know this: your time, your era, is over. Never again shall you rape or slaughter with impunity. Never again shall you escape judgment for your crimes. Never again shall you be safe.”

“All who have spent their lives bullied and downtrodden by the bending elites…you, the silent majority, may breathe easy. We will be your protectors. And we will create a world where no child will have to grow up alone…because of some bender punk.”

“Last night, I took another step toward that goal. No doubt, many of you have witnessed the atrocities of the bending triads firsthand. Perhaps you have a friend or a loved one who’s been burned, bludgeoned, or drowned on dry land. Perhaps you have been a victim of their monstrous attacks.”

“But now, for the first time in decades…this city’s innocents have nothing to fear. A few short hours ago, with my own hand, I ended the triads. Once and for all.”

“No doubt, some of you will be skeptical. But the truth of my power will become obvious in time. The spirits themselves have turned against the mortal world – and the way we have allowed bending to twist and pervert it. That is why they have granted me the ultimate weapon. The weapon I used to render the criminal filth of Republic City incapable of harming another.”

“I took their bending away.”

“It is a power I can, and will, use on any bender. Water, earth, fire, and air. None can stand against me. None are immune to our Solution.”

“Make no mistake – this is only the beginning. We will accept nothing less than the complete dissolution of the bending establishment. A purge of benders from all positions of power in government, business, and law. And the recognition of bending as the high crime it truly is…worthy of a sentence of life.”

“These changes can happen peacefully. Or…they can be taken by force.”

“The choice is yours, Republic City.”

The radio became static once more.

Tarrlok turned to the others. His face was set somewhere halfway between smug self-satisfaction…and a grim, subdued resignation.

“Any more doubts?” he asked quietly.
He didn’t bother to wait for an answer before picking up his papers and storming out the door.

“Did you hear that, Zhu Li?” said Varrick excitedly, practically dancing a jig as he turned off his own radio. “We might not even have to use the ad campaign for our mover! Amon’s the best pitchman I’ve ever seen!”

Zhu Li did not respond immediately, as she was currently buried underneath something in the neighborhood of four-thousand flyers, craning her neck around the enormous stack to try and see where she was going.

Each of the flyers was emblazoned with a cartoonishly exaggerated depiction of Amon’s grinning face – or grinning mask, rather – along with a headshot of Ginger in her princess costume, looking distraught and pretending to scream.

The title was printed above them in a sharp, messy font Varrick’s marketing team had assured him was sufficiently “spooky.”

The Curse of Amon, the Ancient and Almighty!

Last-minute rewrites had turned Amon of the film into a centuries-old immortal being seeking vengeance for his long-dead wife. Combined with Varrick’s general predilection for alliteration – second only to his insistence on prefixing as many things with “Varri-” as possible – the choice had seemed obvious.

Well…obvious to him, anyway.

In any event, Zhu Li was not exactly happy to hear that all her work designing, printing, and hauling around these ridiculous posters might be for naught. The best way to phrase this, however, eluded her.

Yet as he was wont to do, with an almost distressing level of frequency, Varrick seemed to read her mind, adding, “Of course, as long as we’ve got ‘em handy, we might as well stick to the original plan. No such thing as too much publicity! That’s a Verified Varri-fact.”

“Then I’ll get these mailed out right away, sir,” said his assistant, bowing her head.

“You see, Zhu Li, what everyone’s gonna be scrambling around for now is answers. Because the one thing everybody, and I mean everybody hates…is being kept in the dark. If you can sell people answers, you can sell ‘em anything.”

Varrick gestured casually to the radio. “All that big grand speechifying he just did? That’s gonna have people running scared all over town,” he continued. “They’re gonna be desperate for something, anything that’ll tell ‘em more about this guy. Who is he? Where’d he come from? Will buying a patented Varri-Armor Body Suit save me from his ancient undead wrath? When they see these flyers in their mailboxes tomorrow, it’ll feel like a spiritsend!”

“Except you made all those details up,” Zhu Li point out. “None of us actually know those things.”
“Well, yeah,” said Varrick, rolling his eyes and shrugging dramatically. “I’m creating art here, not a news broadcast. Not my fault if the audience takes it too seriously.”

Zhu Li was briefly tempted to reply that no, in fact, there was very little chance of anyone taking this mover seriously. She elected not to say so aloud, however.

“Turning our attentions to another topic,” she stated after a moment, pointing to another set of papers on his desk with her foot. Her hands were still busy putting postage on over four-thousand flyers. “Something’s been bothering me ever since the bombings. Are you aware that two nights ago, a shipment full of our proprietary explosives went missing?”

“Oh yeah, I know,” answered the Southerner, picking up a children’s toy from his desk and playing with it absently. “I’m the one who left the warehouse unlocked.”

Beneath her glasses, Zhu Li’s eyes went momentarily wide. “What…?” she asked quietly.

“Whoever was in charge of keeping a lookout, he was really bad at it,” said Varrick with a casual shrug. “Spotted him like three times. I figured they had to be after the bombs and detonators, so I just let ‘em take ‘em. Figured this was pretty much exactly what they’d do. And hey, I was right! One more win for the Varrick column!”

“But…But sir…” murmured his assistant, her normal, emotionless demeanor cracking slightly. “All those people…”

“Not saying I’m proud of it!” he exclaimed, throwing up his arms defensively. “But hey, this is war, Zhu Li. Great for business, not so good for the whole ‘people not dying’ thing. At least there weren’t too many this time.”

This time…Zhu Li wasn’t sure if he’d intended those words to sound so chilling.

Nevertheless, she couldn’t really think of a good counterargument. Nothing short of finally leaving him, anyway…and to be frank, even if he’d killed those seventeen people personally, she doubted she’d’ve been able to do that.

She was bound to this man, inextricably drawn to him, and had largely resigned herself to the idea that this would be the case for life.

Devoid of anything resembling morals he might be, but there was still no one on the planet who came close to matching his sheer genius. She couldn’t just walk away from that.

As such, though conflict continued to rage in her heart, outwardly Zhu Li affected her stoic mask once more and said with a nod, “Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?”

“Just you keep being you,” Varrick responded with a grin and a wink, as if he’d just said something intensely profound. “ Heck, after you’ve got those flyers sent out, why don’t you take the rest of the day off?”

That wasn’t a set of words she heard out of him very often. Or…ever, really. “Are you certain, sir?” she asked.

He waved his hand dismissively. “My breakfast’s been cooked and my bunions have been scraped. I think I can handle it from here,” he told her, before taking on a pensive look, as if thinking better of it. “Weeeeeell…I can handle it until dinner, anyway. Be back by then and we’re golden.”

The Southerner gave her a double thumbs-up and another wink.
“In the meantime, you go out and enjoy yourself,” he went on to add, smiling so wide his teeth glinted in the morning sun. “You’ve definitely earned it.”

Zhu Li wasn’t sure she deserved to blush right now. But she did, nonetheless.

Unable to think of anything else to say, she returned his smile, hesitantly, and then left the office.

It was all she trusted herself to be able to do right now.

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“So, uh…is anyone gonna deal with the elephant-mandrill in the room here?” asked Bolin, his voice small and tentative.

The others turned toward him, unsure of what he was getting at.

“Err…well, however or whenever he did it, Amon took away the Avatar’s bending! The Avatar!” he said, gesturing to Korra with both hands. “We’re not gonna just let him get away with that, are we?”

“Not really sure what you mean by that, bro,” replied Mako. “I don’t pretend to get how it happened, but it did. There’s nothing we can really do about it, is there?”

“We track him down, kick his butt, and make him give her bending back!” declared the earthbender. “I mean, it’s obvious, isn’t it? This is fate!”

“Umm… fate…?” Asami repeated, clearly just as lost as the rest of them.

“Well, look at us!” exclaimed Bolin, starting to become a bit exasperated that no one was on the same page as him. “An earthbender, a firebender, a metalbender, a non-bender, and the Avatar! And we all came together…err, well, kinda…after a big scary adventure! Didn’t you guys ever hear the stories of Team Avatar in their prime?”

“Of course. I mean, everyone has,” said Asami. “But what’s this gotta do with us?”

Mako, however, had cottoned to his brother’s meaning. And he groaned rather vocally.

“Bro, focus. We were there to get paid so we can enter the tournament,” the firebender reminded him. “Don’t go trying to turn this into…”

“There are things in this world more important than yuans!” Bolin called out, leaping to his feet and extending his pointer finger straight in the air. “Don’t you all see? We could be the New Team Avatar! Fighting to restore the Avatar to full power – righting wrongs and saving fair maidens along the way, of course – so she can save the whole world!”

“I cannot even begin to express how little the idea of being on a ‘team’ appeals to me,” Kuvira stated sharply. “But…”

Then, to the immense surprise of all gathered, her mouth suddenly twisted into a small but unmistakable smile.

“I concede there may be some value in…pooling our resources,” she continued, her hands folded
neatly. “Let me be clear: I do not particularly like any of you. But we each possess connections and information the others lack. If it helps to bring some semblance of order to this spiritforsaken city, I’d be…amenable to cooperation.”

Mako let out a lengthy sigh. “Gonna make me out to be the bad guy on this one, aren’t you?” he said to his brother, shaking his head as he did. “Alright, fine. Long as we get paid, I guess we can do this too. Let’s keep it on the down-low, though. We’ve already attracted enough attention as it is.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Asami turned to Korra and rested a hand on her drooping shoulder. “Whatever happens…” she whispered, her eyes staring forward intently. “I’m with you. Don’t forget that.”

And then, just like that, all eyes were on Avatar Korra. She directed her gaze downward once again, her face burning under the pressure. As she’d been pretty much since the moment they’d left the warehouse, she wished desperately that she could have some time alone.

Knowing they were expecting an answer, she hastily pushed herself to think this all through logically. Certainly, it’d be all but impossible to do what she needed to during Harmonic Convergence, without the power of a fully realized Avatar. And in any event, in order to complete her current mission, she had to confront Amon again. Either to hold a dialogue with him, or else…

Well, regardless, it followed that she should take any available opportunity to force such a confrontation. Sure, there were risks involved. But for better or worse, she’d already told these four so much. Her cover was hopelessly compromised either way.

She wasn’t sure whether what Amon did even was reversible – heck, she wasn’t really sure what he was doing, period – but didn’t she at least owe it to the Lotus to try?

“If…If you guys can help me…if you guys really wanna help me…” she finally managed to choke out, speaking through tightened lips. “Then okay. I’m in.”

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“Alright, I think I’ve done everything I can here. Time to get moving,” said Lin Beifong, neatly arranging a tall stack of reports and locking them in her desk drawer with her bending. She’d have to get around to them once things died down a bit.

If things ever died down a bit.

“I’ll make sure the other councilmembers are informed of the current situation,” Tenzin offered, leaping to his feet as well. “After that…I’d like to stop by Avatar Aang Memorial Island. Several of our acolytes work there part-time. I want to make sure they’re alright.”

Lin waved her hand airily. “Do whatever you want. It doesn’t concern me,” she told him, already halfway out the door.

“Lin…” he murmured, his face falling slightly at her tone.
“It wasn’t the worst thing in the world to team up last night. Like old times,” she found herself saying, for reasons she wasn’t fully capable of explaining. She was still facing resolutely away. “But the night’s over. And we’ve both got things to do.”

Before she could manage to slip away, however, the airbender raised his voice and called out, “There was something else you had to say. Something you didn’t want to tell Tarrlok.”

Lin stiffened for a moment. “What makes you think that?” she asked, her tone measured.

“Because I know you, Lin. There’s no sense in pretending I don’t,” answered Tenzin. “It was right after we heard the first news report.”

The Chief of Police let out a hefty sigh. “It was…probably nothing,” she said, placing one hand upon the doorknob.

“I’d still like to know,” he replied. “Your ‘probably nothings’ are better than most people’s best hunches.”

She could tell that he was crossing his arms without turning around, merely by his tone of voice. One of the many “skills” she’d picked up from her mom.

Lin sighed again. “Alright, fine,” she growled, her voice low. “It has to do with their targets. Admittedly, we don’t know much about the Equalists yet, but something about the attack seems…off.”

“What do you mean?” asked the councilman.

“No question, attacking City Hall makes sense. And there’s a certain poetry, I guess, in attacking places linked to all four elements,” she explained. “But if their pork-beef is with bending, the university’s the odd one out. Most of its students and staff are non-benders. It’s one of the places where discrimination against non-benders is least tolerated.”

“Perhaps Amon doesn’t know that,” said Tenzin. “It’s a target with a high amount of visibility. If his intention was to send a message, that might’ve been all he cared about.”

But Lin shook her head. “If he just wanted to put a scare into benders, there’re so many other places he could’ve attacked,” she continued. “Bending schools, the pro-bending arena…even a crowded street or an office building, if he doesn’t care about casualties. But he called in warnings beforehand, so that’s definitely not the case.”

“Well, the attacks certainly aren’t random, either,” responded Tenzin – stating the obvious, as usual. “So are you seeing a different connection?”

The metalbender scowled, though she knew he couldn’t see it.

“I am,” she muttered, her brow furrowed thoughtfully. “I just…don’t know what it means, yet.”

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Some people, while on the run from the law, would adopt as austere a lifestyle as possible, in order to minimize their profile.
Lightning Bolt Zolt, who was presently leaning back in his cushy armchair and sipping liberally from a glass of flaming baijiu, was clearly not one of those people.

So confident was he that the firebender was “laying low” in his very own office – a laundry service used to provide cover for his illicit “side businesses” and turn a healthy profit of its own.

“No two ways ‘bout it,” he said in between sips of his beverage, relishing the sensation of his insides being lightly singed. While traditionally an Earth Kingdom drink, Fire Nation settlers had long since discovered the advantages of lighting its rim aflame. “Last night was a bust.”

He drummed his fingers along the edge of his chair at he took another, lengthy draught.

“I call everybody together to see what we can do ‘bout those Equalist fellas, an’ what happens?!” the firebender went on, his every word slow and methodical. “Every other triad leader gets the bendin’ knocked right outta ‘em. Same with most o’ our guys. Only folks who got away unscathed were me, an’ a couple o’ my lieutenants. Y’know…s’almost as if…”

Zolt’s face suddenly twisted into a tight leer. “Somebody planned it that way,” he finished with a low, sadistic chuckle.

He raised what remained of his glass to meet his partner’s, which still remained full. Understandable, of course.

Zolt couldn’t well ask him to remove his mask in this sort of company, after all.

“Then I suppose all things went according to plan,” said Amon, accepting the toast.

“More o’ less. I lost a couple guys to the cops, but they’re small-fry. I know you had to make it look convincin’,” replied the firebender, downing the rest of his drink and immediately moving to refill it. “Besides, they’re more than worth eliminatin’ every bit o’ competition in a single night. As o’ today, this city belongs to the Triple Threats.”

“It was an elaborate scheme, indeed,” stated the masked man, his voice even.

Bolstered by his victory and giddy from the amount of alcohol he’d consumed, that was all the invitation Zolt needed to begin gloating.

“The tricky part was gettin’ the cops to show up at the right time,” he told the other man. “Paid off a guy I know in the Agni Kais to leak the time an’ place. Then I jus’ had to make sure I gave them – an’ you – a good openin’ to strike. Thankfully, Long Shi can always be counted on to be an idiot.”

“I see. And what are your plans, now that you control Republic City’s underworld?” asked Amon, his tones still betraying no emotion one way or another.

“Good question. Never thought it’d be this easy,” answered Zolt. “But hey, you see an opportunity…ya grab it. That’s always been my motto. An’ you, my friend, were one heckuva opportunity.”

The gangster began tapping at his broad chin, looking quizzical.

“Guess the first order o’ business will be gettin’ what remains o’ the other triads in line,” he eventually said. “The Terras an’ Monsoons should be easy; they’re on the brink o’ collapse already, an’ they know it. The Kais could be trickier…but I think my bein’ a firebender should help smooth things over. I may not be one o’ them smoky chicks, but I could bend circles ‘round Niao any day o’ the week. Not that that’s sayin’ much now, I guess…”
Amon didn’t reply except by leaning forward slightly, his painted grin ever-present.

“Anyway, I ain’t forgotten my end o’ the deal,” Zolt added hastily, downing another glass in a single gulp as he did. “We’ll lay off on harassin’ the districts we discussed, an’ we’ll keep outta the way o’ your guys if they ever run into each other.”

His smug, self-satisfied smirk returned. “Can’t get rid o’ bendin’ crime entirely,” he murmured, his tone amicable. This was clearly meant to be taken as some form of friendly advice. “But at least now you can make it work for you, instead o’ against.”

There was a single, silent beat. Then Amon said, “Oh? I’m not quite sure I agree.”

Zolt’s muscles tensed slightly, and one of his eyebrows rose. “What’re you gettin’ at?” he asked, very carefully.

“I mean to say that there’s at least one way the triads could be toppled,” whispered Amon, and though his voice was low the firebender had no trouble hearing every word. All other sound in the room seemed to have suddenly ceased. “For example, you could simply manipulate one of its heads into devouring all the others. Then, the entire system could be cut down…”

In a single blink, the masked man had leapt to his feet and crossed the distance between them.

“With a single stroke,” he concluded, his hand already outstretched.

Zolt’s face twitched slightly, his smirk not quite disappearing, as if he was half-convinced this was a joke.

“You think I didn’t see this comin’?” he said, a distinct edge to his voice that was just shy of genuine panic. “Shin, Viper, get yo’ lazy butts in here!”

But the door to his office remained closed.

“Their bending was already gone the moment you poured your first glass,” Amon informed him, flexing each of his fingers individually with an audible pop. “But don’t worry. Your impurity won’t plague you for much longer.”

Letting loose a furious roar, Zolt moved to unleash the power that lent him his moniker. But the very instant he leapt to his feet, one of his legs suddenly buckled beneath him, and he collapsed into a heap.

That was all the opening Amon needed.

It look less than a minute for the bloodbender to “equalize” the arrogant crimelord, signal the chi-blockers who’d covertly eliminated his security, and load him into one of his own laundry trucks.

Amon had been fine with leaving the other triad leaders in the police’s clutches, but Lightning Bolt Zolt was the face of bending tyranny for any number of Republic City’s most impoverished citizens. Trotting him out at some later date, beaten and humiliated, could make for valuable propaganda.

Once that was done with, Amon dismissed the rest of his forces, leaving him alone in Zolt’s spacious office. He hesitated for a moment, stretching out his bloodbending senses to make certain nobody else was near, before sitting down at the gangster’s desk, pulling off his mask, and reached for the bottle of baijiu.

Amon tended not to partake in any food or drink while out in the field, but on this particular day he
made an exception, downing glass after glass of the steaming beverage. It burned his tongue and the inside of his mouth, but that only spurred him to drink more quickly.

The pain was a useful reminder right now.

Things were progressing more rapidly than the bloodbender had ever imagined, and quiet moments like this were becoming fewer and farther between. That was the disadvantage of heading a cult of personality, after all. The mask could never come off – figuratively or literally.

Noatak was allowed to be human, just for a little while. Amon was not.

At any given time, a thousand different things were there to occupy his attentions. Writing speeches to rally fresh recruits and stalwart diehards alike; personal inspections of their weapons and mecha-tanks; “purification” of the latest batch of captives, and then deciding on what to do with them afterward.

The previous night had been no exception. For most people, an unplanned encounter with the Avatar would’ve been all they could think about, several hours later.

For Amon, she was just another factor to take into consideration.

Seconds after polishing off his eighth glass, the bloodbender became aware of another presence in the building. He’d missed their approach – alcohol dulled his “blood sense,” which was part of the reason he almost never partook – but at this range, even his weakened bending couldn’t possibly fail to notice them.

Hastily, Noatak slid his mask over his false scars, becoming Amon once more. Of course, one could certainly argue he never actually stopped these days.

The figure entered the office in a cloak, hood pulled down to hide all but the bottom half of his face, but Amon recognized him immediately. No disguise could change one’s blood.

“Should I be concerned you located me so quickly?” asked Amon, gesturing to the chair he’d been using during his meeting with Zolt. The hooded man dutifully sat down.

“Oh, please. Don’t try to pretend you don’t have just as many spies following me as I do you,” said the other man, pulling back his hood once his own senses – not bending ones, of course, but just as well-practiced – had convinced him they were alone.

The Republic City Council’s page, Jilu, grinned cheekily. “Frankly, if you didn’t, I’d feel kind of insulted,” he added, as he began folding his cloak into a neat pile.

“Still…talented spies, to have alerted you with such haste,” stated Amon, folding his hands upon the desk between them. “I suppose they’ve kept you abreast of what just transpired?”

“More or less,” Jilu replied airily. “And yes, the Lotus counts some of the world’s best among their membership. They’re not all like poor Nei Jian. Although…I suppose I should be grateful to the child. Without his capture as a catalyst, our partnership would’ve never blossomed.”

“I’d refrain from using the term ‘partnership,’ if you please,” said Amon, his tones low and warning. “Our goals, for the moment, align. That does not mean I’ll hesitate to destroy you, when the time comes.”

Jilu’s mouth twitched upward in bemusement. “The feeling’s mutual, I assure you,” he told the bloodbender.
“So why exactly are you here?” asked Amon after a moment’s pause, a subtle but distinct sharpness to his voice.

The older man shrugged his shoulders indifferently. “Just felt like checking in. I was the one who suggested we use Zolt’s ambitions to our own ends, after all,” he answered with a smile. “Last night was a big one, for both our causes.”

“I allowed you a measure of input on our targets. Nothing more,” Amon said quietly. “It just so happens that the bending elites and corrupt leaders of the world are, quite often, one and the same. Not a single government on this planet could persist without the power of bending to dominate and oppress.”

“Nevertheless, a vital blow has been struck to the adversaries of freedom,” responded Jilu, removing his glasses and beginning to wipe them diligently with a cloth. “Even if they don’t yet realize it. The Red Lotus is content to rise in the Equalists’ shadow. It will make it all the easier when we finally do step into the light.”

“Until the moment we build a truly equal government upon the ashes of the old,” the bloodbender reminded him. “Then, I trust, we shall become your prey.”

“Well, excepting that such a thing simply isn’t possible,” said Jilu, taking on a didactic tone. “Governments are unequal by definition. They determine what one person should have and another should not. No matter how grand your intentions, you can never escape that simple fact.”

He leaned back in his chair and replaced his glasses.

“But, I see no reason not to allow you to try and prove me wrong,” he continued, smirking knowingly. “You’ll fail, of course, but you can certainly try. It’s only at that point that we’ll become enemies.”

“Whereas you shall be our enemies for as long as you employ bending to your cause,” whispered Amon, leaning forward slightly to emphasize his severity. “Make no mistake: the Equalists see no more ‘good benders’ than you see good governments. My mission shall not be satisfied until every bender on this planet has been purified.”

He paused for a moment before finishing, his voice deathly cold, “And that includes your Avatar.”

The corners of Jilu’s smile twitched again. “She really belongs more to Zaheer’s group than the Lotus as a whole,” he said. “We allow them to do their own thing, for the most part.”

Beneath his mask, though it was hard to see, Amon’s beady eyes narrowed.

“He isn’t aware of this,” murmured the bloodbender, suddenly realizing.

“Zaheer is a fool. A valuable one, but a fool nonetheless,” explained Jilu. “His faction wastes time meddling with spirits we scarcely understand, let alone are able to control. His plans for Harmonic Convergence are doomed to failure, and will only set back our cause.”

Amon filed away that information for later. He doubted he’d get a straight answer if he asked directly, but whatever “Harmonic Convergence” was, anything to do with the spirits warranted further investigation.

Instead, he merely said, “So the Equalists represent a power play for you.”

“An apt way to put it, I suppose,” replied Jilu, pleased by the other man’s shrewdness. “Zaheer has
been a devotee to our cause since he was a teenager, but the success of his gambit for the Avatar…*emboldened* him. Caused him to seek grander and grander prizes that could jeopardize our very *existence*. I, and those like me, believe we should concentrate on toppling world leaders, rather than playing around with spiritual mumbo-jumbo.”

“Then…I suppose you’re not displeased by what I did to the Avatar?” Amon asked, deciding to keep things vague, wanting to know how well-informed his spies were *really* keeping him.

“Not at all!” Jilu exclaimed genially. “Although I’m *still* not sure why you’d leave the Avatar a single element in the first place, if you were just going to remove it anyway.”

Amon’s inner voice quietly swore. Clearly, they were keeping him *very* well-informed.

“You’re assuming I *ever* intended to follow through in that warehouse,” said the bloodbender. “I knew there was an interloper amongst my chi-blockers; disguises are useless trifles against me. I gambled that threatening the Avatar would force her to expose herself…and, quite evidently, I succeeded.”

Amon folded his arms. “Besides, there’d be little value in neutralizing the Avatar so…*cleanly,*” he went on. “So long as she possesses *one* of her weapons, she’ll never stop pursuing me for the rest. And with every confrontation, I will learn more. About this ‘Zaheer,’ and what he intends for me. And about the girl herself.”

“What’s there to learn?” Jilu tossed off, waving his hand dismissively. “I’ve met young Korra. She’s clever, for what she is. But she’s also naïve, sheltered, and in *way* over her head. I see no reason why my fellows place such faith in her.”

“Perhaps, old man…” said Amon, his lips tightly pursed. “That is precisely what you *should* learn.”

“Another thing I’m welcome to be proven wrong about,” responded Jilu, before standing up from his chair and making a deep bow. “In any event, I must be off. Tarrlok will be expecting me at this afternoon’s Council meeting.”

Amon slowly rose to his feet as well, and in his case, it made for a rather more impressive effect.

“Very well. But let me make one thing *perfectly* clear, before we part,” spoke the bloodbender, his voice barely above a whisper and yet cutting like a knife nonetheless. “The man who sat here earlier this morning thought he could use the Equalists as pawns to grab power. For that, he lost *everything.*”

He leaned forward slightly, towering over the older man.

“I choose to believe you are smarter than Lightning Bolt Zolt,” he said, his masked face less than a foot from Jilu’s own. He could see his reflection looming in the page’s glasses. “Don’t repeat his mistake.”

Those were the last words he chose to deliver before striding out of the office, exiting straight through the front door and onto a crowded street.

For a moment – *just* for a moment, for he knew he had no more than that – he stood still, basking in the morning sun.

This was a new dawn. A new day.

And with that, he disappeared into the shadows once more.
That morning, with the obvious exception of the Triple Threats – who hadn’t yet learned of Zolt’s fate – panic had rapidly set in amongst the various triad headquarters.

The Agni Kais, at least, had one advantage the others didn’t: one of their lieutenants, a young man who called himself Ketto, had managed to make it back from the disastrous summit. Since details were scarce at best on what exactly had occurred, he soon found himself besieged by desperate questions from the gang’s elders and newcomers alike.

He left out the part where he’d only gotten away by leaving their beloved leader to the mercies of the Equalists and police.

The Council of Smoke and Shadow was meeting now to select Niao’s successor; even if she was someday released from prison, a non-bender could never be permitted to lead. This left Ketto to his own devices, for the most part.

Which was how he’d managed to sneak away for a stroll through Republic City Park, searching ardently for an old friend.

Thankfully, the man wasn’t difficult to find. As he nearly always was at this time of the morning, he was illegally fishing from the park’s river and whistling a merry tune.

For a hobo with no way to tell the time, he kept an impeccable schedule.

“Hey, old buddy!” Gommu called out, waving him over with both hands and inadvertently dropping his fishing pole in the river. “Oh, dagnabbit. And that was my favorite rod, too!”

“It was…a stick,” said Ketto, sitting down upon the grass next to the homeless man and smoothing out his crimson robes.

“Ah, but a very good stick,” declared Gommu, as if that obviously settled the matter. “Anyway, what can I do ya for?”

“Would it be possible for you to send out another telegram?” asked the firebender, cutting right to the chase. “One that can’t be traced back to me.”

“The usual order, then?” Gommu replied with a grin. “And the usual payment, I trust?”

Ketto sighed, and placed a heavy satchel in the hobo’s waiting hand. Gommu immediately tore open the bag and licked his lips, mouth watering at the prize: two full pounds of spiced komodo-rhino meat.

“Alrighty, can do!” he exclaimed, sealing the satchel back up and tossing it over his shoulder. “I’ve got my setup in the sewers ready and rarin’ to go. You wanna come with, or just give me the message now?”

The firebender made a face. “As…tempting…as that sounds, I need to be getting back soon,” he said. “If I’m not there when they finish their meeting, the old ladies might start asking questions.”

Instead, he handed a folded piece of paper over to the homeless man, which he quickly opened and
read. A few seconds later, he nodded.

“This shouldn’t take me too long. I’ll get right on it, sir,” he told Ketto, already leaping to his feet. Albeit, that might’ve been because of the cop wandering dangerously nearby.

“You don’t have to call me ‘sir’ anymore. You know that, right?” asked the firebender in a low voice, but Gommu just shook his head.

“Old habits die hard,” he murmured, as the two of them walked quickly away from the park. “Neither of us may be in the United Forces anymore…but you’re still a general to me.”

“Just get that message to my grandfather, alright?” said Ketto, his mouth barely moving. “And quickly.”

Gommu tossed off a quick salute, and stuffed the message into the front pocket of his meat-satchel. As he swung around to face the other direction, the only decoration on the bag came into view: a stylized illustration of a white flower, its petals open in bloom.

Ketto watched on as the hobo hurried away, before disappearing through a manhole cover as casually as most would a door.

Underneath his breath, he found himself mouthing the words of his message, which he’d long since memorized. It wasn’t difficult, after all. There were only three lines.

To the Grand Lotus.

Avatar Korra is alive.

You are needed in Republic City.
Zaheer wandered the halls of the Spirit Library, his eyes poring over dozens of titles with every passing second.

Wan Shi Tong was allied with Unalaq more than anyone else, but the Water Tribe Chief had vouched for the entire Red Lotus when they’d first struck an accord. Consequently, they were the only humans still allowed to come and go through the spirit’s sanctum – provided they adhered to the “old rules.”

Thankfully, it wasn’t difficult for Zaheer to procure a new piece of knowledge each time he desired access to these halls. He’d traveled more across both worlds than, perhaps, any non-Avatar in history, and picked up a wealth of tomes and artifacts that’d make any human’s head spin.

To He-Who-Knows-Ten-Thousand-Things, of course, such knowledge was at best a drop in the bucket. But for simple entry, it was sufficient.

This time he’d gifted the owl spirit with a priceless stone calendar, used by the Air Nomads for thousands of years, before they’d adopted the Earth Kingdom system in the era of Avatar Bai. That was enough to buy him at least a few hours unmolested.

Zaheer turned a corner and found himself in a part of the Library that was intimately familiar. It was here, so long ago, that he and Unalaq had first discovered the secrets of Wan, Raava, and Vaatu – the first humans to learn the whole story in ten-thousand years. Human history may have buried the Avatar’s origins, but the spirits remembered, and they’d recorded it all.

Most useful had been a musty tome titled Beginnings, written by the aye-aye spirit who’d once befriended Wan. Zaheer had lost count of the number of times he’d perused it, each new review revealing details he’d missed in the last. The spirit’s prose was thorough and dense, even if his language was also somewhat…colorful.

But today, he wasn’t there for that particular book. He was there for the next.

A far narrower volume than its predecessor, Endings had been an addendum penned by the aye-aye spirit – who, like most spirits, was largely immortal – during one of humanity’s darkest hours: immediately following the Air Nomad Genocide.

The material and spiritual planes were reflections of one another, and so much death and destruction within the former had had profound effects on the latter. The aye-aye spirit described crumbling mountains and forests reduced to cinders in an instant, each snuffed-out life magnified tenfold in the horrors it caused.

Already resentful of most humans, and of the early firebenders in particular, the spirit hadn’t held back in his vicious, wrathful condemnation of the attack. He described wounds in the Spirit World which’d taken decades to heal…and in the case of those parts most intimately connected to the element of air, might never do so.

All hopes for humanity’s future, which’d tentatively begun to blossom in the pages of Beginnings, were nowhere to be found in its “sequel.” Ten millennia of observing the physical world had convinced the author that “Stinky” had failed in his quest.

Humans had been drifting apart from the spirits, and from their very own planet, ever since they’d
abandoned the lion-turtles and formed their own, united societies. They’d wiped out countless plants
and creatures, ruined the dirt and soil with their machines, and spilt each other’s blood for the pettiest
of reasons.

From the aye-aye spirit’s perspective, the Hundred Year War had simply been the last straw; one
final insult, capping off ten-thousand years of systematic betrayal.

His expression stoic and distant, Zaheer turned the book to its final pages.

It was here, once his screed against the human race’s myriad flaws was complete, that the spirit chose
to outline a plan. He lamented that things had been so much better, so much simpler, before
“Stinky” had ignorantly separated the Spirits of Light and Dark. And he wondered, idly, whether
it’d be possible to return to those bygone days.

Still, Zaheer very much doubted the aye-aye spirit had ever expected his plans might be discovered
by a pair of human boys…

Or that they might decide to implement them.

Finally, the non-bender flipped to the very last page, his dull green eyes intent upon the inside of the
back cover. This was what he’d come for.

He’d long since memorized every word of both tomes, but there was one thing basic recall simply
couldn’t substitute for. Because tucked in a small pocket was a weathered piece of paper, folded
neatly into a palm-sized square.

One which, when unfolded, displayed a map of Zaheer’s own planet.

A map of every weak point between the two worlds.

Memorizing the locations was pointless, since they changed constantly, affected by the emotions of
both spirits and humans in each particular area. The map, a truly ingenious piece of spiritual
craftsmanship, updated itself in real time to reflect these movements.

This was the Red Lotus’ secret weapon, and one of the reasons they’d managed to stay two steps
ahead of the White in recent years. Even their less spiritually adept members, like Aiwei or Jilu,
could easily meditate themselves into the Spirit World, should they situate themselves in a place
where the barriers were particularly fragile.

And as they were nearly always at their weakest in cities and other major centers of human activity,
that was rarely a problem.

There were other uses for that knowledge, too. Spirits were more liable to cross over when the walls
impeding them were thin, and the Lotus could react accordingly. Unalaq had once used the map to
locate a spiritual grove in the North and, through a complex web of machinations, managed to usurp
his brother’s birthright as a result.

Oh, what Zaheer wouldn’t give to be able to take the artifact home with him – but Wan Shi Tong
enforced a strict “no borrowing” policy, on penalty of a most strange and painful death. Besides, he
wasn’t entirely sure its unique properties would even work outside the Spirit World.

No, it was best simply to consult it on an as-needed basis, and plan from there. Which was exactly
what Zaheer was doing now.

One, two, three…there were a total of nine weak points spread throughout Republic City right now,
and another three just outside the city limits. One of those was a mere hour or two away from their current hideout.

The non-bender smiled. They could *use* information like that.

He would’ve spent more time perusing the map for the sake of their operations in the other nations, but at that moment he felt something like a sharp *tug* on his soul. It was a sensation he recognized immediately – someone was shaking his physical body, trying to rouse him.

Zaheer swore inwardly, but readied himself to return nonetheless. P’Li always guarded him during meditation, and he trusted her intimately. If *she* thought he needed to return to the material world without delay, it *had* to be something important.

He took one last, lingering look at the endless shelves surrounding him, and at the map he held between his spirit’s hands. Then, he went very still.

Unless he was very much mistaken, another weak point between the worlds had just appeared before his eyes. But…the *size* of this one…

Zaheer blinked, and when his eyelids flapped back open they had mass once more. The dusty halls of Wan Shi Tong’s Library had been replaced by P’Li’s face, her expression anxious.

“‘A message just arrived from one of our agents in the city,” she said, pulling her boyfriend to his feet with haste. “Ghazan and Ming-Hua are packing now.’”

“What’s going on?” asked Zaheer, though he too was already grabbing at supplies to throw into a nearby travel bag.

P’Li affixed him with a three-eyed stare, her face and tone unusually severe – even *by* her standards.

“It’s Korra,” she responded, slinging her own bag over her shoulders. “She needs our help.”

[------------------]

Never before in her *life* – not even the time she and Ghazan had staked out a governor’s estate, and she’d needed to remain awake for four days straight – had Korra so *desperately* desired rest.

She’d slept in past noon the previous day, of course, but it certainly didn’t *feel* like it. Falling asleep in the Sato’s guest bedroom seemed like a lifetime ago, and in a sense it *was*. After all, that’d been the last time she’d had all of her bending.

And without it…well, she wasn’t really *Avatar* Korra, was she?

It’d all happened so quickly. It was all but impossible to comprehend that less than twelve hours had passed between her pathetically embarrassing training session with the Fire Ferrets and their frantic escape from the warehouse, Amon himself right on their heels.

After all she’d seen, all she’d learned, all she’d *done*, Korra wanted nothing more than to crawl under the covers and block out the world. But Kuvira had made that an impossibility.

Kuvira…she still knew so little about the metalbender, apart from the fact that she was pants-wettingly terrifying. She *radiated* authority in a way even Ming-Hua and P’Li – the two strongest
women Korra had ever known – couldn’t quite match, despite being significantly younger.

She gave off the distinct sense that disobeysing her was simply not an option. And on a better day, Korra might’ve challenged it. But with her own head in such utter disarray, the waterbender had little doubt how a fight between them was likely to go.

So she’d remained still, and quiet, and submissive. She’d answered all their questions as best as she could, any hope for her cover’s survival thoroughly shattered – or almost all their questions, at least.

Kuvira had generously permitted her to keep one secret.

Korra said that sarcastically in her head, but the truth was that she had genuinely no idea how she would’ve dealt with the others learning of the Red Lotus, on top of everything else that’d occurred.

The boys were one thing, though she liked to think they’d been growing into something vaguely approaching “friends.” But Asami…

She knew she shouldn’t care what a single non-bender girl thought of her – she knew that. In the grand scheme of things, Asami Sato wasn’t particularly important, or even special.

But the fact remained that, wholly and desperately, Korra did hang on Asami’s opinion of her, recoiling viscerally at the notion that a rift might someday grow between them.

The two of them wouldn’t be able to stay together for much longer; that much was inevitable. She’d screwed things up about as much as she possibly could’ve, and she couldn’t imagine the Lotus was going to be pleased by that.

Even if she did succeed at reclaiming her bending and neutralizing Amon – which, again, she wasn’t even certain was possible – there was no way Zaheer would let her go on any more big missions after this. She’d probably spend every day between now and Harmonic Convergence locked in her room, twiddling away her thumbs until the end of the world.

And after that, well…she supposed it really wouldn’t matter.

The point was, though Korra knew it would pain her terribly, she’d resigned herself to the prospect of never seeing Asami again.

But being hated by the beautiful girl? To see anger and resentment well up in those brilliant, emerald eyes? Even imagining it made Korra sick to her stomach…

Something at the core of her being, something buried incredibly deep, was telling her unflinchingly that being hated by Asami Sato was simply…wrong, somehow. That they might have their disagreements and fight from time to time, but at the end of day they’d always be reconciled.

And it was a ridiculous thought, of course. In the long run, she barely knew Asami, and Asami knew even less about her. But it continued to press insistently upon the corners of her mind, refusing to let up.

Korra let out a deep, lasting sigh that eventually became an exhausted yawn. This was precisely why she needed her bed so badly right now.

Because in sleep, everything was simple. She wouldn’t have to think of everything that’d just occurred, or the numerous challenges lying before her in the future.

She wouldn’t have to think about how much of a failure she’d become.
The moment Korra opened the door to her apartment, however, it became fairly obvious she wouldn’t be catching up on sleep anytime soon.

For one thing, someone was already sitting on her bed.

“And now, Avatar Korra…” said Kuvira, idly revolving several metallic spheres above her palm. “You’re going to answer the questions you refused to in front of your friends.”

The good news was that no one had been killed by the explosion at Avatar Aang Memorial Island.

The bad news was that its staff and visitors accounted for forty-seven of the injuries reported on the radio. And unless several of those injured were moved to a hospital within the next few hours, the lack of casualties wasn’t likely to remain true for long.

As such, the rest of Tenzin’s morning was spent assisting with search and rescue. While he couldn’t carry the patients directly—needless to say, gliding around with a person in critical condition wasn’t especially wise—he bending played a necessary role in delivering supplies from the mainland, as they waited for a police airship to arrive.

To his surprise, when he arrived on the island, he found he wasn’t the only person to have the same idea. All three of his children were gliding about with food and medical supplies, while his wife tended to several of the wounded, offering them basic first aid and spiritual comfort.

Landing softly next to her, he asked in a quiet voice, “You brought the children here?”

Pema looked momentarily surprised, but recovered quickly.

“We were nearby, and they wanted to help. How could I say no?” she said, one hand on her swollen belly and the other wiping sweat from the brow of an elderly acolyte. “Even Meelo’s on his best behavior right now.”

“We’ll talk later. Once these people have all been taken to safety,” murmured Tenzin, his eyes upon the hovering forms of his daughters and son. “But I am…very proud.”

By the time the last of the injured had been evacuated by speedboat or airship, it was well past noon, and the airbending master was starting to feel rather famished. He hadn’t eaten since well before the sting, and all the bending he’d done recently hadn’t helped matters.

He was saved from having to admit this aloud, however, as the moment his two youngest landed they leapt into his arms, each firmly of a single mind.

“Daddy, can we go to Little Ba Sing Se? Ooh, can we, can we, can we?” demanded Ikki, excitedly shaking her father’s robes. “I wanna get a smoothie!”

Meelo, however, harrumphed loudly. “That place is not fit to shine my boots!” he exclaimed, in that quirky and protracted way no one could imitate. “Last time, they kicked me out of the throne-y thing!”

“That would be because you drooled on it. For five minutes straight,” Jinora pointed out, coming in
for a landing as well and sidling up next to her mother. “Nevertheless…I, too, wouldn’t mind going for some lunch right now. And, umm…perhaps a visit to the bookstore on the way back? It’s not far from the restaurant.”

Tenzin smiled indulgently. “I think you’ve all certainly earned a treat today,” he said to his kids, squeezing his two youngest around the midsection and then lowering them to the ground. “If that’s alright with you, Meelo?”

The young boy crossed his arms and frowned deeply, but eventually nodded.

“Very well. Let it never be said Meelo denied the happiness of a lady! Even when those ladies are his sisters,” he answered, punctuating his point by snorting a long line of snot back into his nose.

Lastly, Tenzin looked to his wife, and the pair of them shared a knowing nod. While they’d have preferred a…quieter location for lunch, they were also parents. That meant priorities needed to be in order.

The councilman knew he’d have to get back to work soon. For one thing, Tarrlok’s follow-up meeting was scheduled in less than three hours – and if Tenzin wanted to argue successfully against his insane plans, he’d need to prepare well ahead of time.

But for now…

His family came first.

[-------------------]

Asami was scheduled to come into work today, but to say she wasn’t feeling up to it was an understatement of almost laughable proportions.

The most she was able to muster, upon returning home to the Sato mansion, was to pick up the phone and call in sick. Just to be on the safe side, she did the same on behalf of “Mizore” and “Kinzu.” Miki, who was filling in as assistant supervisor until she returned to Ba Sing Se next week, hadn’t asked any further questions.

Sometimes it was good to be the boss.

Her father was working from home, again, but for once Asami was in no great hurry to see him. She wished she could say it had nothing to do with what Kuvira had told her.

It was ludicrous, insane to be giving into even the slightest sliver of doubt, but though that was enough to ease her conscious mind her subconscious wasn’t so easily placated.

Ironically, it’d been Hiroshi himself who’d cultivated that part of her brain. The part that automatically reached to analyze a problem from a logical and dispassionate point of view, unencumbered by emotion.

And purely from that perspective, Kuvira’s accusations made sense.

A little too much sense, in fact. Now that the thought was in her head, she couldn’t help herself from noting just how many things it’d manage to explain. His erratic work schedule, his increased
guardedness, his utter secrecy regarding his latest projects…

Asami practically slapped herself. How could she possibly be entertaining such a notion, even as a hypothetical? It felt like she was twisting a knife in the back of the one person who loved her most in the world.

And, she tried to convince herself, guilt over that feeling was the only reason she was avoiding her father.

Unfortunately, he clearly hadn’t gotten the memo on that. Just as she was about to slip into her room – to think, to sleep, to collapse into a heap and do absolutely nothing at all, she wasn’t quite sure – his heavy hand came down upon her shoulder.

It took all her willpower to suppress her years of training and not flip him to the ground out of instinct.

Still, her pulse had sped up to a mile a minute in an instant, and as she whirled around to face him she focused intently on getting it back under control.

“Hi, dad,” she said nervously, one hand still upon her doorknob.

“Where have you been, Asami?” he demanded, though his voice sounded more worried than stern. “At first I thought I’d just missed you, but the servants told me you went out with that…that waterbender girl…and never came back…”

Asami bit her lip. She couldn’t exactly tell him the truth about how – and where – she’d spent the previous night.

The irony of that thought, given her own nagging suspicions, was not lost on the non-bender.

“Err…do you remember that metalbender from Ba Sing Se I told you about? Kinzoku?” she decided to ask, before proceeding to invent wildly. “We went out to dinner, with Mizore and a couple of her friends. But we all got food poisoning…like, really bad food poisoning. I couldn’t even drive. So we stopped off at a motel to recover.”

“Oh, I…I see…” murmured Hiroshi, his expression unclear. “Are you alright now?”

“I’m, uh…getting there,” said Asami, making a sickened face to lend credence to her claim. She hated lying to her father, but she also didn’t see any other choice. “But I could still use a lie-down in my own bed, I think. Those motel pillows were hard as rocks. Actually…I think they might’ve been rocks.”

“Go rest, Asami. I’ll have the servants bring you some hot towels and…soup, maybe? Something easy to digest,” Hiroshi responded, before pulling his daughter into a loose embrace. “Don’t worry, I’m here. I’ll always be here.”

Asami returned the hug, pressing her face into his chest, hating herself for doubting him. And hating herself even more because those doubts still hadn’t gone away.

“Dad…” she whispered, as she slowly pulled away from him. “Could I ask you something? Please?”

“Of course, my dear. You should never have to hold anything back from me,” he told her.
Once again, Asami’s stomach turned at the part of her – the very small part – that couldn’t help but find the way he’d said that a tiny bit suspicious.

In any event, she inhaled a deep breath, and took the plunge. “I know you didn’t get to see her much, but…” she said in a small voice, leaning against her bedroom door. “What do you think of Mizore?”

She was imagining him stiffening, right? She must’ve. “In, err…in what context?” he asked, his words tumbling out messily.

“I mean, nothing much, we’ve just…just gotten close, lately,” Asami mumbled, sounding equally as articulate. “So I wanted to make sure it’d be alright if…well, if she came around here a little more. Maybe even…regularly.”

Now, there was no mistaking it. At those last few words, his entire body had gone completely rigid.

“Well, erm…that is, anything you want, sweetheart,” replied Hiroshi, wringing his hands. “But, if I may…I’d caution against getting…well, against getting too close. She’s your subordinate, after all. And she’s here for work. There…there’s no telling where that could take her.”

“That…seems like kind of an odd way to put it,” she said, her painted lips forming into a frown. “Even if she stopped working for Future Industries, that doesn’t mean we couldn’t still be friends.”

Hiroshi was still for several long, silent moments…before finally stepping back and nodding his head.

“You’re right, of course. How…how silly of me,” he stated, shuffling awkwardly and directing his gaze to the side. “I’ll just…get on with that soup. Go rest, Asami.”

And with that, he turned away from her, his waistcoat swaying behind him as he hurried down the main stairwell. He tripped twice, but didn’t slow down for a second.

Asami, for her part, watched her father until he disappeared into the side-hallway where the servants’ quarters were. Then, she finished turning her bedroom doorknob and slipped inside, panting slightly from the suppressed stress of that entire conversation.

One thing, and perhaps only one thing, was clear. If her goal had been to dispel her lingering doubts about her father…

Then she had failed miserably.

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Korra took a step back, feeling herself shrink slightly. “You mean…?” she muttered, looking askance.

“The Red Lotus. We’ll cut straight to the chase,” said Kuvira, clenching her fist to emphasize the point. The metal spheres she’d been playing with crumpled into scrap. “Tell me everything you know about them. Where they are, who is among their ranks, and…what they’ve done to you, to make you into their trained polar bear-dog.”
Instantly, Korra’s nervousness was overwhelmed by a surge of anger.

“They didn’t do anything to me. Apart from give me a home, and a family,” she snapped. “I wouldn’t expect someone like you to understand.”

“What exactly wouldn’t I understand?” asked Kuvira, her voice hard. “Losing everything you’ve ever known or loved when you were just a child? Being taken in by strangers, to a strange place, and raised like you were one of their own? You don’t know a single thing about me, Avatar. But I know you. And I know you’ve been lied to.”

“If you’re trying to turn me against the Lotus, it won’t work,” Korra declared confidently. “I’ve heard every story that people like you have tried to pull. None of it changes what they’ve done for me.”

“Have you heard that they killed your parents?” said Kuvira, her voice even. “Because they did.”

The water-whip was streaking toward her before Korra even realized she’d summoned it. Kuvira reacted just as quickly, however, using the scrap metal to cut through the majority of the liquid, so her face was only lightly splashed.

“How dare you?!” she screamed, another stream of water curling around her right arm in unconscious emulation of Ming-Hua. “They saved me! Saved me from the White Lotus!”

The metalbender folded her hands. “So that’s what they told you. It certainly explains a few things,” she replied with a frown. “Did they ever mention what reason the White Lotus might have in enacting the Southern Massacre?”

“I see where you’re going with this. And it won’t work,” said Korra, breathing heavily as she struggled to get herself back under control. “You think I’d be so sure if they’d just told me? I have proof.”

The liquid around her arm retreated back into its skin, for the moment.

“When I was old enough to know about it, old enough to understand, they showed me all the evidence they’d gathered after the Massacre,” she continued on, her head hung low. “Letters. Photos. They all told the same story.”

“Letters can be forged. Photographs can be falsified,” the metalbender pointed out.

Korra felt on the verge of tearing her own hair out. “Urrrrgh…you are impossible to argue with!” she growled. “But fine. You want to know who else I heard it from? The freaking Grand Lotus himself!”

“Fire Lord Zuko?” said Kuvira, making a scoffing noise with her tongue. She looked, to put it mildly, skeptical.


“Master Konsai. Waterbender, scholar, eighty-sixth Grandmaster of the White Lotus. Assassinated seven years ago in his own home,” Kuvira recited, almost automatically. A moment later, her expression shifted. “You were there?”

Korra’s eyes glinted in pure, unvarnished hatred. “I did it,” she whispered, her voice a quiet hiss.

She could tell Kuvira was doing the math in her head. “Then that means you were…” she said.
“Ten. And y’know what? I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” Korra cut her off, neither feeling nor
displaying the slightest shred of remorse. “He admitted everything. That scorpion-viper sat there
and spilled every single plan and scheme the Order ever cooked up, my knife at his throat. One of
my mentors taught me how to make one out of ice. It went in deep.”

Her teeth clenched down tight, her blood boiling to the point where it became hard to speak.

“I made that monster suffer. Like he made my parents suffer,” finished the waterbender. “My Tribe,
my family...everything. The White Lotus took them all away. I jumped at the chance to take
something away from them.”

“You still haven’t addressed the why,” stated Kuvira, who seemed to be taking this all quite in stride.
“If he told you ‘everything,’ he must’ve also told you their motive.”

Korra glared at her, again trying to master herself. At least enough for her to speak calmly.

“Power, of course. What else?” she said, shaking her head in dismay. “He said the White Lotus
were tired of being the Avatar’s puppets. Aang brought them from the shadows into the light,
allowed them to set up compounds and headquarters all over the planet. As far as they were
concerned, only he was stopping them from conquering the world’s nations.”

Her eyes darted downward, swimming with shame.

“But when the world needed him most...he died,” she added in a low voice. “And I was born.”

Kuvira crossed her arms. “Go on,” she ordered, her voice toneless.

“The White Lotus spent the next four years searching the Water Tribes for Aang’s successor,” Korra
continued to explain. “When they found me, a useless little girl who could barely defend herself...well, they saw their opportunity. They used me as an excuse to build a new compound, bigger than
any other, in the South Pole. Then, a little under a year later...they attacked.”

“It’s true that no firm reports exist of exactly how the Southern Massacre occurred,” said Kuvira.
“But that’s not how the history books have come to understand it.”

“I was there, okay!” exclaimed Korra, and before she knew it she’d punched the nearest wall at full
strength. A deep dent was gouged in it. “Those books are lies, written by cowards.”

“Be that as it may, numerous White Lotus corpses were discovered amongst the fallen. That fact is
indisputable,” the metalbender responded pointedly.

“I’m not denying that the Red Lotus clashed with the White that night. Or that people on both sides
lost their lives,” said Korra. “But ‘history’ is dead wrong about who the good guys were. I told you,
I was there. I didn’t just swallow a bunch of hippo-bull from a group of strange criminals. I saw it
all. I lived it!”

She paused for a moment, taking several deep, steadyng breaths before continuing on.

“They destroyed my tribe slowly, made me watch,” she murmured, struggling to keep herself from
drowning in the flood of horrific memories. “I didn’t understand it then, but I think they were trying
to push me into the Avatar State. Killing a child was their best chance to end the Cycle for good.”

“And then the Red Lotus rushed in, valiant and noble heroes, selflessly sacrificing themselves to save
an innocent little girl,” Kuvira interjected, rolling her eyes at the notion. “You’ll forgive me if I have
trouble picturing that.”
“They weren’t even there for me,” Korra said testily. “They’d come to investigate and sabotage the new compound. That was it. But yes, when they saw what the White Lotus were trying to do… they saved me. Sorry that I feel just a little bit grateful, for spirits’ sake.”

“You were five at the time, Avatar. And the night was clearly harried and chaotic. Isn’t it possible you could’ve misinterpreted some of the things you saw?” asked Kuvira.

“Maybe…Maybe some of the details,” admitted Korra, biting her lip for a moment. Within a few seconds, however, she managed to rally again. “But not the big picture. The White Lotus tried to destroy me, and the Red saved my life. And since my home was gone…they offered to take me in. I accepted. And here we are now.”

She affixed the metalbender with a burning, hateful glare.

“Get this through your head, captain,” she said, spitting out the rank like a vicious swear word. “You will never be able to turn me against the Lotus. Because I’ve lived with them nearly all of my life. I know them.”

In an instant, all the water in the apartment froze, perfectly in tune with the coldness of its master’s voice.

“I know my family.”

[-------------------]

Palace-Palooza was a family restaurant, in every sense of the word.

Modeled loosely – very loosely – upon the Earth Kingdom Royal Palace, it was the crown jewel of Little Ba Sing Se Fashion Mall. The food, highly processed and passable at best, was almost an afterthought; the focus was clearly on “atmosphere,” and that atmosphere skewed young.

The children of Republic City could take pictures upon a replica of the Earth Queen’s throne, ride around on a miniature version of its monorail, and cuddle with a life-sized statue of the previous monarch’s famously adorable bear, Bosco.

As an unofficial rule, telling the kids what’d wound up happening to Bosco was expressly verboten.

The majority of the restaurant was given over to a number of games and play areas, culled mostly from Earth Kingdom street fairs but with a few Fire Nation carnival attractions mixed in as well. Each purchased meal – and Tenzin used the word loosely – came with a handful of tokens used to play them, and more could be purchased for a “reasonable” amount of yuans.

In short, it was the sort of place that no person in their right mind would venture near without their children dragging them.

Which made the sight of a young, single woman sitting alone stand out rather starkly.

“Isn’t that weird, daddy? Like, super-super-super weird?” asked Ikki, who’d blown all her tokens in the first five minutes and had, until just a few seconds ago, been in the midst of begging her father for more.
Per the norm with Ikki, however, the sight of something unexpected – in this case, the bespectacled woman at the next table over, who was staring down at a tall cup of juice and not actually drinking a drop of it – had completely derailed any previous train of thought.

Tenzin sighed deeply. “Whether or not it is, how a stranger spends their time is none of our business,” he said. “And it’s not polite to stare, in any event.”

“I dunno. She looks kinda lonely,” replied the girl, craning her neck over his shoulder for a better look. “Maybe she just needs a friend!”

“Ikki, I know what you’re thinking, but please don’t…” he tried to tell her, but his youngest daughter was already dashing off with the speed only a hyperactive airbender could muster.

Tenzin groaned, not especially eager to chase after her but resigned to his fate nonetheless. However, before he could take another step, he heard Pema calling out his name in a mild panic, and the cause soon became obvious: Meelo had dived headfirst into a pit of rubber balls and was now, well…being Meelo.

This was not something the other children in the pit were especially happy about, particularly when you brought airbending into the mix.

The councilman groaned again, louder this time. He turned to the only one of his children not causing a scene; Jinora had already used her tokens to claim a stuffed otter-penguin from a contraption involving a large metal claw, and was now calmly eating her salad and reading a book.

“Jinora, can you keep an eye on your sister?” he asked of her, close to begging as he watched Pema attempt fruitlessly to coax their son down. “It looks like I’m needed…elsewhere.”

“Of course, daddy,” she said, nodding her head dutifully and marking her page. After that, she walked calmly over to the other table, where Ikki was already trying to engage the strange woman in conversation. So far, despite the girl’s best efforts, it hadn’t yet worked.

“Wow your hair is soooo pretty but why do you bundle it all up like that does that take a long time also how come you’re here alone I don’t see any kids with you or did you come to play the games yourself that’s okay I guess even grownups can like kid-stuff sometimes I saw daddy playing with some dollies once though he said they weren’t actually dollies they were mint condition fully articulated something-somethings but now that I think about it he kinda said not to tell anybody about that anyway what’s your favorite game mine’s the Whack-a-Badgermole ‘cuz I can pretend they’re my brother and sister I mean don’t get me wrong I love-love-love my siblings by like a bazillion but they annoy me sometimes mommy says that’s natural but I dunno Uncle Bumi and Aunty Kya still seem kinda hung-up on it they’re my dad’s siblings if I didn’t mention that already anyway that’s enough about me what’s your name?”

That was the first time she had to pause for breath.

Jinora took the opportunity to place a hand on her little sister’s shoulder. “Ikki, we should stop bothering this nice woman,” she whispered in her ear. “Look, I’ve still got two tokens left, you can have…”

“Zhu Li,” the woman said suddenly. The airbender girls turned to her in confusion, so she repeated herself. “My name is Zhu Li.”

Ikki seemed to take this murmured admission as an invitation to pull up a seat at the table. Zhu Li didn’t object, so hesitantly, Jinora did the same.
“I wasn’t aware this was an establishment for adolescents,” she continued, still staring down at her cup rather than at either of them. Her eyes were dim and unfocused. “I don’t go out very often. I’ll just take my food and go.”

“No, you should stay!” exclaimed Ikki, her tiny hands balled up into fists. “Stay and we can become bestest best friends and paint our nails and try on clothes and talk about cute boys and…!”

Jinora slapped a hand over her sister’s mouth.

“We’re so sorry, ma’am,” she said, bowing her head to Zhu Li for good measure. “My sister has… err…consumed a lot of sugar. But I hope you have a lovely day.”

There was a lengthy pause, and then the non-bender spoke again, just as tonelessly, “Remain here if you like. I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jinora.

“I do not normally take…days off, such as they are. My employer rarely grants them, and I never request them,” Zhu Li explained in a low voice. “I find I have little idea what to do with myself.”

“Well…what do you like to do?” responded Ikki. “I mean, for fun?”

“Fun?” repeated Zhu Li, as if the word felt strange on her tongue. “I suppose I’ve never really given it much thought. Most forms of entertainment do not interest me. I’m not fond of games or sports. I spent this morning sitting in the park, but that similarly failed to be engaging. At most, one could say I enjoy a good meal, but I doubt I’ll be getting one here.”

“If you don’t mind…could I ask you where you work?” said Jinora, now looking mildly alarmed. If this woman got so little time off that it was practically a foreign concept, she could only imagine what her employer must be like.

“I’m the personal aide to the most brilliant man on the face of the planet,” Zhu Li answered, some amount of color finally beginning to flow back into her voice. “That’s why I don’t need anything else in my life. Service to him is its own reward.”

Jinora was wracking her brain, trying to think of which politician or captain of industry she must be talking about, but Ikki had clearly only paid attention to the word “him” – and the way Zhu Li had said it.

“Ooooooh, so do you like him?” she asked, leaning forward so far that more than half her body was atop the table.

To Jinora’s surprise, however, the older woman’s response to this wasn’t to dispassionately ignore it, as she’d done to most of Ikki’s ranting so far. Nor was it to rebuke her for such a rude and deeply personal question.

Instead, the normally stoic non-bender turned a bright crimson. “Wh…What would give you that idea?” she demanded, her face twitching slightly.

Ikki shrugged her shoulders and smiled wide. “No reason. Just a hunch,” she said sweetly.

Zhu Li stared at the pair of them a moment, clearly deep in thought, before sighing and turning back to her untouched drink.

“I suppose there…there may be…some emotions I feel with regard to him, that venture into areas
“Beyond the platonic,” she replied, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “But I fail to see how that’s material. I have no intention of acting on them.”

“Why not?” murmured Jinora, her face falling slightly. The sheer amount of melancholy, of resignation, in the woman’s voice was proving to be infectious.

“My employer isn’t the most…romantic of sorts,” said Zhu Li, and while her voice returned to its prior tonelessness, Jinora could tell now that it was an affect. “He’s callous, insensitive, and utterly self-centered. He barks orders at me at all hours of the day, and never shows any particular interest in my life.”

“Then…why…?” Ikki started to ask, but Zhu Li cut her off.

“Because he’s so much more than that, too,” she told the girls, her mouth a thin line. “He did something for me once that I will...never...be able to pay back. And since then, I’ve been the luckiest woman on the planet. Because I get to be around the mind that’ll change the world, every single day. I get to be part of it.”

She looked down into the bright purple depths of her beverage and, barely even realizing she was doing so, added in a whisper, “Of course…I always thought that change would be positive…”

“Huh? What’s that mean?” said Ikki, trying to quizzically raise one eyebrow and failing rather spectacularly, so that she looked more like she was interrogating Zhu Li for a murder investigation.

The bespectacled woman bit her lip and looked askance, as if she’d let slip something she shouldn’t have.

“It’s…It’s nothing…” she muttered, not especially convincingly. “Come to think of it, why am I even telling you children all this in the first place? None of it is your business.”

“Sometimes it’s helpful to just talk these things out,” stated Jinora, smiling sympathetically at the older woman. “Have you ever considered seeing a therapist? With all respect, I think you’d really benefit from one.”

“I…don’t think I’d ever have the time,” Zhu Li responded hurriedly, clearly not comfortable with the subject. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I see my order is ready. Good day to you, children.”

And on that note, the non-bender tossed her completely full drink straight into the garbage, bowed her head slightly, and departed from the restaurant as quickly as she could. She never actually picked up her food.

Jinora turned to her sister, who shrugged so wide that it was almost comical. Then, simultaneously, they both looked over at the ball pit, where their father’s attempts to catch Meelo had rapidly descended into something resembling pandemonium.

“Come on,” said Jinora, grabbing her sister by the wrist. “Let’s give them a hand.”

[I--------------------]

“I dunno if he’s gonna be too happy when he finds out what happened,” Bolin told his brother, as the two of them entered the massive doors of City Hall.
Due to the bombings, there was a heavy police presence both inside and outside the building. They both ducked their heads to avoid lingering glances from the cops standing sentry by the doors.

“He’s not paying us to give him info he’ll be ‘happy’ about,” said Mako. “What happened, happened. And the cops made out pretty good last night, dunno what he has to complain about.”

“Are we gonna tell him about…?” Bolin started to ask, his voice low.

Mako looked around them a couple times, making certain they weren’t being watched, before answering, “About Korra? I don’t see the point. Tarrlok’s the guy who put her on our team in the first place, remember? There’s no way that’s a coincidence. He’s gotta be in on it.”

“But what if he isn’t?” Bolin demanded insistently, looking worried.

The firebender sighed. “Then we keep it to ourselves. Our job wasn’t to find the undercover Avatar, it was to report back about the summit,” he replied. “Either way, I don’t see any upside to blabbing.”

Bolin sighed as well, though in his case out of relief. “Alright, just wanted to get that off my chest,” he said. “And now…onward! To collect our just reward for services rendered!”

Mako just shook his head, as they made their way to the councilors’ chambers.

Here, it was hard to tell there’d been an attack on this place just this morning. The bombs had all gone off in the east wing of City Hall, but the Council worked and met on the west side. The worst-affected areas had been the public service centers, including the Department of Satomobile Registration and the Office of Refugee Affairs.

Here, staff members rushed to and fro throughout the halls, carrying memos and chatting animatedly with coworkers. In all the hustle and bustle, Mako and Bolin blended in rather well.

And in the midst of all this, Jilu remained crouched behind his too-small reception desk, arguing – or at least as much as the timid page was capable of arguing – with a muscular deliveryman.

“Look bub, I just bring what the form tells me to bring,” declared the second man, tapping his foot impatiently. “Ain’t my fault if someone else screwed up along the way.”

“But Councilman Tenzin is, like all members of the Air Nation, a vegetarian!” exclaimed Jilu, looking panicked. “That’s why I specifically asked the caterer for a vegetable platter! I can’t serve him these pig-chicken sandwiches!”

The deliveryman just shrugged his massive shoulders. “Go pick one up yourself, then,” he said, leaving Jilu very close to weeping openly.

His mood brightened considerably, however, the moment his eyes alighted upon the brothers. “Oh, my dear sweet Fire Ferrets!” he called out, waving them over. “I hope all has been going well with your new recruit.”

“Err…more or less,” Mako responded evasively. “She certainly brings something…unique to the table.”

“Glad to hear it, glad to hear it!” said Jilu, clapping his hands together and smiling brightly. “Councilman Tarrlok’s just finishing up another meeting, but he’s been expecting you. Can I get you anything while you wait? Tea, water?”
“Oh, you don’t need to bother,” Mako stated immediately, leaving Bolin slightly crestfallen; they hadn’t eaten or drank anything all day. “We’ll just sit over here and…”

But he was interrupted by the door to Tarrlok’s office swinging open, revealing both the waterbender and his partner for the aforementioned “meeting” – a bald man with thin glasses and a neatly trimmed beard.

“I thank you for bringing this matter to my attention,” Tarrlok told the other man, his expression severe. “Rest assured that it’ll be investigated to the fullest. If you come across anything else, by all means, you can contact me through my page, Jilu.”

Jilu and the visitor exchanged a look that, were Mako in a conspiratorial mood, he could almost swear lingered for a second longer than it had to. Then they shook hands and bowed to each other.

“You know how to contact me, if there is a need,” he said quietly to the page, before bowing again to Tarrlok and striding away. His footsteps were remarkably light.

With that out of the way, the chairman turned to the brothers, frowning slightly. “Let’s just get this over with,” murmured Tarrlok, holding open his office door and shutting it the moment they ventured through.

As soon as they were seated, Bolin couldn’t help but blurt out the obvious question. “Who was that guy?” he asked, without any kind of tact.

Tarrlok sighed. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I suppose since you asked…” he said, folding his hands as he did. “Have either of you boys ever heard of a city called Zaofu?”

Mako swallowed, hoping the councilman hadn’t noticed. “Afraid it, err…doesn’t ring a bell, sir,” he lied.

“It’s a commune in the southwestern Earth Kingdom. Designed for the promotion of free expression and enterprise, and populated mostly by metalbenders,” explained the councilman. “That man, Aiwei, is one of its highest-ranked officials. He reports to its leader, Suyin Beifong. The daughter of the legendary Toph Beifong.”

The corner of his mouth twitched slightly. “Which, yes, means she is the sister of our very own Chief of Police,” he added in oily tones. “A relation I understand she doesn’t like to publicize…and consequently, one I enjoy mentioning as much as possible.”

Mako and Bolin, who’d heard most of this from Kuvira already, dutifully attempted to look surprised, but the latter also took the opportunity to clarify something he still didn’t understand.

“Do you know why they don’t get along?” asked the earthbender, his expression almost hurt. “I mean…siblings are awesome! Did they get into a fight or something?”

Tarrlok’s face seemed to darken noticeably at the word “siblings,” but he was back to normal a second later, so Mako chalked it up to a trick of the light.

Still, it was a few seconds before the waterbender said, “Half-siblings, to be precise. And nobody quite knows what the reason is. Though if I had to hazard a guess, Suyin’s past…associations with the Terra Triad can’t have helped matters. But you boys didn’t hear that from me.”

Then, in far less amused tones, he went on, “In any event, you’re not here to gossip about the Chief’s personal life. You’re here – or should be, at least – to give me your reports from last night.”
“Well, sir…” Mako began, his lines well-rehearsed. He’d been going over in his head how best to articulate all of this since leaving the tea shop. “Lightning Bolt Zolt was the one who lead the meeting. He also invited Niao of the Agni Kais, Gui from the…”

Tarrlok cut him off with a wave. “Because of the police’s unexpected…involvement, I’m quite aware of the bigger picture,” he said. “What I need from you is to fill in the details.”

That threw the firebender off his game for a moment, but he recovered quickly. “Alright, then,” he replied. “I guess I’ll start with the other guys Shady Shin hired as security…”

Over the course of the next half-hour, Mako did his best to describe all the events that’d led up to the three-way brawl between the gangsters, police, and Equalists. Bolin piped up occasionally to add a few pertinent details, but largely allowed his brother to take the lead, per the usual.

They both left out any mention of Korra, Asami, or Kuvira, making it sound like they’d merely slipped away in all the confusion. Which was true, technically, even if it was far from the full story.

Tarrlok listened on with little commentary, beyond the occasional question. Mako could tell, much to his dismay, that the majority of their information had little effect on the chairman – a problem, given that their paycheck depended on holding his interest.

His attentions did perk up at the mention of Ketto, the Agni Kais’ representative for the security staff, running off and abandoning his boss. Why that particular piece of info struck such a chord with the councilman, Mako wasn’t sure, but he supposed he wasn’t being paid to speculate.

“…Anyway, we hightailed it out of there as soon as Amon was distracted by the cops,” the firebender finished some time later, once he’d shared everything else he could possibly imagine might be relevant. “Out of the criminals, I think only Zolt, Shin, and that Ketto guy managed to get out with their bending intact.”

“I see. All very interesting,” said Tarrlok quietly, before reaching into his desk and pulling out a thick envelope. “I’m satisfied with what I’ve heard. Your payment in full, gentlemen.”

He slid the envelope forward, and Mako accepted it. A quick peek inside had both brothers gaping; they’d never seen so many yuans, outside of the triads’ own stashes.

“I look forward to a resounding Fire Ferret victory at next week’s match,” the waterbender added after a moment, though his tone of voice didn’t exactly betray much enthusiasm for the subject. “The spirits know, the city could use something positive to cheer for. Especially now…”

“Do you, err…mean the bombings, sir?” Bolin asked carefully. “We only just heard, and we didn’t really get all the details.”

Tarrlok folded his hands and frowned. “You just allow me to worry about things like that. In my own way,” he said. “As for you, your part in all this has ended. I suggest you forget about the triads, and forget about the Equalists. Go, and enjoy your tournament. Make Republic City proud.”

Bolin still looked concerned, but Mako cut in with a terse, “We’ll do that, sir, thanks,” and grabbed his brother by the arm.

“We’re off the hook here, bro,” he whispered, as they exited hurriedly from Tarrlok’s office. “Let’s just leave it at that. We can round with the girls later and deal with it then.”
Kuvira crossed her arms and glared at the young Avatar, as if seeing her properly for the first time.

“Very well, Avatar Korra. For the sake of argument, we’ll accept your premise for now,” she said. “Supposing that the Red Lotus was the noble organization you claim, what business do they have with the Equalists? Like your supposed rescue, am I expected to believe this is simple altruism?”

“Amon is as much a danger to the Lotus as he is to its enemies,” responded Korra, consciously slowing her breath to once again get her temper – and her bending – back under control. “If I couldn’t make him see reason, I was supposed to take him out. Don’t tell me you’ve got a problem with that.”

“The Red Lotus and the Equalists both threaten the fragile balance of this city. I’ve no love lost for either,” Kuvira told her, her own expression unflappable. “I’m curious what ‘seeing reason’ in this context might mean, however.”

“I…err…didn’t exactly think that far in advance,” Korra admitted, flushing sheepishly. “I was mostly just concentrating on getting to him. Seeing him in the flesh last night, I…I wasn’t prepared for that.”

“Yet he was prepared for you,” said Kuvira. “Be honest with me, Avatar. What do you think of my theory?”

“About…About Hiroshi?” muttered the Avatar, her voice tepid. “I mean…you were right. About that being the reason the Lotus sent me undercover, I mean.”

She looked askance and bit her lip. Any reminder of what’d happened – or what’d allegedly happened, rather – while she’d let down her guard at the Sato estate was quick to turn her insides cold.

“But…well, I dunno. I met him the other night, and he seemed like a nice, normal old guy,” she continued after a moment. “Maybe a little overprotective of Asami, but that’s it. If he was secretly plotting to destroy me, he hid it really well.”

“Did Miss Sato ever tell you what happened to her mother?” Kuvira demanded bluntly, in lieu of actually answering her point.

Korra shrugged uneasily. “Only that she was dead,” she said, uncomfortable with the question. “I didn’t ask for more details.”

“Twelve years ago, Yasuko Sato was murdered by a member of the Agni Kai Triad,” the metalbender informed her, still demonstrating virtually no emotion. “Her widower withdrew from public life for some time after that, and none of his friends or business associates have been able to account for his whereabouts during much of that period.”

“You think that’s when he teamed up with Amon,” Korra stated shrewdly.
“It’s all speculation, of course. But motive and opportunity are at least half the story, and Hiroshi Sato has both in abundance,” replied Kuvira. “If nothing else, I’d say it all certainly warrants further investigation.”

“How are we supposed to do that, though?” asked the Avatar. “We can’t exactly just stroll up to his office and say ‘Hey, did you by any chance hire a big scary mask guy to attack me in bed?’”

“Much as I dislike admitting it, in this all the power rests with young Miss Sato,” said Kuvira. “Should she inform her father of our suspicions, he will likely go to ground…and we’ll lose any chance of pursuing the matter further. Right now, our respective covers survive only at her tender mercies.”

“Well, we’re supposed to meet up with her and the guys tomorrow,” Korra reminded her. “I guess we can bring it up then. But…carefully.”

Kuvira nodded, her motions rigid and purposeful. “Then that leaves just one more matter to attend to before we part, Avatar Korra,” she added, without missing a beat.

“What do you mean?” whispered Korra, unnerved by her sudden change in tone.

The older woman’s eyes narrowed. “I will be blunt,” she said. “Can you be trusted?”

Korra just gaped for a moment, unsure how to respond to that, so Kuvira continued to speak.

“The Red Lotus are predicated on the destruction of all world governments, and the dissolution of the Five Nations,” she explained, her tongue sharp. “For now, it seems we’re united against a common enemy. But should the Equalists fall…what would you do then? Would you seek to harm this city? Slaughter its leaders? Plunge it into chaos once more?”

“I don’t…” murmured Korra, shrinking beneath the metalbender’s harsh glare. “I don’t know, okay? But…this city, this world, is out of balance – you can’t deny that. It’s my job, as the Avatar, to bring it back.”

“I won’t deny it, no,” said Kuvira. “But I think you and I have very different ideas on who’s responsible for making it that way.”

“Then we’ll settle that when the time comes,” responded the Avatar, finally mustering the willpower to meet her glare with equal harshness. “But in the meantime, you have my word: my focus is on Amon. Just him.”

“I’m still not certain I can take that all on faith,” Kuvira spoke softly, waving her hand as she did. The scrap metal she’d been using earlier exploded into shards, embedding itself into the walls of the apartment.

Her meaning was clear – she knew where Korra lived, and would have no trouble finding her again.

And with that, the metalbender extended cables from a contraption at her hip and slipped effortlessly out the window, her parting words delivered coldly and without expectation of reply.

“But for now, Avatar…I’ll choose to.”

[-------------------]
Investigation of the Equalist bombings currently fell under Detectives Lu and Gang, which was another way of saying the investigation was going absolutely nowhere.

To be fair, Amon’s broadcast hadn’t left a lot of room for doubt over who was responsible. The only real question, then, was how they’d managed to get a hold of such high-tech explosives in the first place.

Remarkably, their current activities – namely, driving between the seven distinct crime scenes, pretending to jot down notes for the first few minutes, and then spending the rest of the time stuffing their faces with Varri-cakes – had brought them surprisingly close to the solution, though of course they failed to make the connection.

But with numerous other matters occupying the Chief’s attentions, they were conducting this investigation with virtually no oversight. So nobody was around to actually call them on it.

“Hey, Lu…” said Gang through a mouthful of pastry, as they looked upon the Ba Sing Se Bureaucratic Annex. It was the last of their stops for the day, and probably the worst affected. While large gashes had been blown into each of the other targets, this building had been reduced to little more than rubble.

The shorter detective paused to pick a dollop of icing out of his ample mustache, looked at it for a moment, then shrugged and tossed it into his mouth.

“What’s up, my friend?” he asked, once he’d finally swallowed.

“Ain’t it weird how bad they hit this place?” Gang stated slowly, looking almost surprised at his own daring. “I mean…if that masked freak just wanted to send a message, seems like he didn’t have to go this far.”

“Eh, come off it. Probably just went a little overboard with the booms,” replied Lu, waving his hand dismissively. “Or maybe he’s like most guys, an’ just thinks the Earth Queen’s a ragin’ b…”

“But look, man. The ground’s all different from the other places,” Gang interrupted him, gesturing to the ruins now that they were close enough. “Everywhere else, it was singed and ashy and stuff. Here, it kinda looks like it all…uh…well, melted…”

Lu flicked his partner in the forehead. “Get real. Whoever heard of a meltin’ building?” he said. “What’s gotten into ya, anyway?”

The taller man shrugged, running a wadded-up napkin through his own mustache. “Dunno, just thought it was kinda interesting,” he answered. “Anyway, we need something in the report besides ‘nobody saw nothing,’ or the Chief’ll be breathing down our necks.”

“Heh, good thinkin’,” Lu admitted with a chuckle. “Could always just make somethin’ up, though. S’not like she’s ever gonna come out here an’ check.”

“I dunno, she’s been out in the field a lot more lately,” said Gang. “Like, that strike team last night? The one that took out all those Equalist and triad goons? She didn’t have to lead it out personally, but she did.”

“Eh, that was jus’ so she could impress her ex,” Lu tossed off, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Gang just stared back at him in confusion, so after a beat he added, “What, you didn’t know? The
Chief an’ Councilman Tenzin…yeah, they used to be tight. *Real* tight, if ya catch my drift."

“I can’t imagine *that* woman dating…well, *anyone,*” responded Gang, his mouth still hanging open in shock.

The corners of his partner’s mouth turned upward as he stuffed yet another cake into it. “I expect…that’s why…they *ain’t*…together no more,” he said, in between bites. “Even Mister…Love an’ Peace…must’ve gotten tired…of the metal stick up her a…”

“Uh…Lu?” whispered Gang, once again cutting off the other detective.

“What’s the matter?” asked Lu, but his partner just pointed forward.

Gang’s eyes followed his arm, and even with his detective “skills” suppressed even further than usual by an oncoming sugar coma, it didn’t take long to realize what he was referring to.

A massive fountain, with a stone statue of Queen Hou-Ting sitting astride a badgermole – an obvious fiction, given her notorious distaste for animals – stood prominently before the once-proud annex. And it was *moving.*

Well, to be precise, the *water* within it was, but the enormous volume still made it a terrifying sight. Lu and Gang barely had time to let out a scream before the waves crashed into them and solidified into ice.

“You just *had* to get in your licks on this place, didn’t you? *I told* you it’d attract too much attention,” said a gaunt woman in faded blue robes as she emerged from her hiding place, behind a nearby tree.

It seemed natural to assume she was the waterbender currently holding them, except for one, rather disturbing detail: she had *no* arms.

“That woman made my life a living nightmare,” declared another man as he stepped out from the same spot. He bore green-and-gold clothing, and a mustache to rival Lu’s. “How would *you* feel if, everywhere we went, there was stuff that reminded you of your dad?”

“I’d probably rip them into tiny little pieces, and freeze those pieces solid just to be safe,” the woman hissed vindictively. “But you’re supposed to be *better* than me.”

“Oh, I am,” said the man, with a low guffaw of a laugh. Then he raised one foot up, slowly, and brought it down with a thunderous impact. “Just not about *this.*”

Lu and Gang watched on in horror as the Earth Queen’s statue turned to molten liquid right before their eyes.

“Anyway, if *these* idiots are the best Republic City’s police force has to send, I’m not worried about them figuring anything out,” the mustached man went on after a moment. “The Equalists still blew the place up, I just…*helped* it along, is all. And only because it happened to be on the way.”

“Hey, if Zaheer *buys* that hippo-bull, no skin off my back,” replied the woman with a shrug. Without arms, the motion looked distinctly odd. “But you’re the one who has to explain when we meet back up.”

“I think I’ll manage,” the man said confidently, his arms crossed as he leaned over, toward the frozen detectives. “And I think I’ll be able to sweeten my case with *this* little consolation prize. Idiots or not, they *are* still cops.”
Their mouths were both encased by the ice, so all they could do in response was mumble incoherently, their eyes wide with panic.

“So tell me, before my friend here really starts to lose her patience…” he continued, gesturing toward the woman.

Obligingly, she licked her lips, and that motion was enough to raise thick spikes out of the ice, each stopping less than an inch from their bloodshot eyeballs – the only parts of their bodies currently free to move.

“Would you be kind enough to give us a ride?”

Korra knew, the moment after Kuvira left, that she had a million other things she should be doing.

What’d started out as a relatively simple, if risky, operation had rapidly spiraled into something far above her head, and there was no question she was drowning in it. At least five individuals in this city already knew her identity, and one was a mortal enemy. Yet she still knew virtually nothing about him.

That she’d have to pursue him at such a crippling disadvantage, the equivalent for her of missing two limbs…just made it that much worse.

Research, reconnaissance, training – all of them were things she needed to do, in great abundance, if she was to have any hope of defeating Amon and reclaiming her full power.

But all of those required energy, and she had none right now. She might’ve expected her heated conversation with Kuvira to invigorate her exhausted mind, but if anything, it’d only drained her further.

Mostly because, if what they’d just engaged in could be called a contest…she had a sinking feeling she’d lost.

All this meant that the moment her head hit the pillow, it stayed there. The jumbled-up mess that was her mind soon slowed to the consistency of buzzard-wasp honey, and Korra welcomed on the coming bliss of oblivion. Content to forget, if only for a few hours, all the various miseries that plagued her waking thoughts…

Korra did not dream very often, and when she did, the images tended toward the…abstract. Sounds and smells and colors; a hazy outline of a distant figure, at the most.

She’d asked Zaheer about it once, and he’d voiced the theory that, as the Avatar, her unconscious might be picking up the stray thoughts of wayward spirits, the way a radio occasionally caught chatter from a different channel. Since spirits inherently thought differently than humans, it made sense their dreams would be different, too.

This time, however, her dreams were clear and vivid as crystal.
Before her, below her, stood the vast expanse of Republic City. Or...what remained of it.

Structures large and small – bridges and parks and office buildings alike – were indistinguishable now, reduced to piles of smoldering ash. Here and there, traces of the once-grand metropolis could be seen amongst the rubble, like singular blades of grass stubbornly poking out from a crack in the sidewalk.

She wasn’t sure how she’d gotten here. She wasn’t sure why she stood so tall above it that the distant Hu Xin Mountains seemed to be at eye level, nor why she could see no signs of life or movement in any direction.

Korra’s eyes darted around the valley, desperate to discover some clue as to what the heck was going on. After a few seconds, she happened to glance downward.

And her heart nearly stopped.

Her hands were massive, towering over what remained of the landscape like two great storm clouds. It was hard to tell, with so little left to compare them to, but she was pretty sure they could’ve crushed the bending arena with a single gesture.

Yet, despite her size, her entire body felt almost weightless. As she moved her limbs experimentally, it was like vapor moving through air – floating about with virtually no resistance.

And even then, that wasn’t the most disturbing thing she could see when she looked down.

She wasn’t wearing any clothes, but that was okay, because she didn’t appear to have any skin either. Her body was semi-translucent and glowed ethereally, like a spirit’s, the colors a chaotic kaleidoscope that shifted from moment to moment. The two most consistent, however, appeared to be a cool, bright blue and a dim, foreboding red.

“Why...Why am I...?” she opened her mouth to whisper, but that was all she could bring herself to say.

Because the sound that erupted from her throat was simply...wrong.

Her words sounded as if they came from a legion, as at least three disparate voices spoke them at once, each discordant and just slightly out of time with the last. Her own voice was among them, but it was tiny, and barely audible. Two more – one masculine, one feminine – drowned her out like crashing waves, as if fighting with each other to be heard.

Confused, desperate, and stricken, it didn’t take Korra long to notice something suddenly appear upon the horizon. Despite the distance, she found she could see him perfectly: billowing red and yellow robes, a neatly trimmed beard, that distinctive tattoo of an arrow upon his forehead...

Korra realized, with a shock, that she was looking directly upon her predecessor for the first time in her life.

He was looking upon her as well, but his eyes – like tiny dots from this far away, and which nonetheless she could read as if they were face to face – shown with sadness and disappointment. Shaking his head, he turned away.
“Wait…!” she cried out, in that horrific voice, her titanic arm outstretched. But already, he was gone.

More figures appeared around her, within the valley and atop the mountains. An old man bearing the headpiece of the Fire Nation Crown Prince, a woman garbed in the dress and paint of a Kyoshi Warrior, a stocky man clothed in the skin of a polar bear-dog…

She knew who they were, of course. Had seen the paintings, the scrolls, the carvings. Had even been taken into the Hall of Statues by Zaheer, during their secret pilgrimage to the Air Temples.

But it was still jarring to see all those who came before her in the Avatar Cycle – each as silent as Aang, and each just as clearly ashamed.

One by one, they faded as well, just as quickly as they’d come.

Korra wanted to cry. She wasn’t even sure she could cry anymore, but she couldn’t think of anything else to do. Everything was gone. Everyone was gone.

She was alone.

“You are never alone, Korra,” said a voice from behind her, kind and soft.

Slowly, like a battleship shifting to face the wind, she turned around.

What she saw was a spirit nearly as large as she. Glowing a warm, inviting gold, it had the body of a dragon and the features of a great, majestic bird. But the spirit wasn’t the one who’d spoken.

Atop its crown, between its enormous feathers, stood an old man. His skin was pale, his stark-white beard long and bushy. He wore plain green robes, the symbol of the Earth Kingdom upon them.

And he looked to her with the gentlest eyes she’d ever seen.

She thought, perhaps, that she might recognize him. But she wasn’t sure. Either way, she couldn’t quite place his face.

That hardly mattered right now, though. At this point, she would’ve been relieved to speak to anyone.

“You… know who I am…?” she asked slowly. In these words, the smallest of mercies, her own voice was ascendant; the others, dim whispers.

The old man sipped calmly from a steaming cup of tea.

“I know all that you are, Korra. All the pain you’ve suffered,” he said, his voice low and sad. “None of it was your fault. All of it, could’ve been prevented. If only…”

He paused, finishing his cup.

“I cannot stay long. I am so sorry,” he started again, hanging his head. “But there are things you must know. And you must come to the Spirit World to learn them. Before it’s too late. Before Harmonic Convergence is upon us.”

The dragon-bird, and its rider, were already fading from view, just the same as the previous Avatars.

“Hold on…!” she screamed, the panic in her voice bringing the others back to the forefront. The
resulting screech was terrifying. “What do you know about Harmonic Convergence…? Who are you…?!”

“We will meet again, Korra,” he said, his whispered words echoing across the ruined landscape.

Korra awoke with a jolt.
Chapter Notes

A/N: While I normally try to keep this series a fairly firm “T,” please note that the following piece dips into some rather heavy territory. For this chapter and this chapter alone, CONTENT WARNING for large amounts of child abuse, as well as explicit but non-graphic descriptions of the sexual assault of a minor.

If these are not your cup of tea, this Intermission can probably be skipped with minimal effect on the present-day narrative. Still, I hope I was able to deal with the subject matter in a relatively tasteful manner, without sugarcoating the seriously fucked-up nature of child slavery.

My thanks for your consideration.

“Next!”

The line proceeded forward an unsteady pace, unbalanced by the shackles that linked them together. But they kept moving, nevertheless.

They knew what’d happen to them if they didn’t.

“Alright, here we’ve got a pretty young thing from Chin Village!” called out the auctioneer, cupping the next girl’s cheeks and forcing them into a crude smile. She squirmed slightly, but otherwise didn’t resist. “Bit of a nasty scar on the neck, but you’re in luck! No throat means no backtalk. Shall we start the bidding at, oh…twenty gold pieces?”

Behind them, another girl watched on in silence as the various well-armored men in the audience placed their bids. A plump man with a receding hairline eventually won with forty-five gold pieces, pawing at the Chin girl like a piece of meat as he led her off the stage.

Despite that the girl couldn’t have been more than ten or eleven, there was little doubt in anyone’s mind what her new owner intended for her.

She herself was only eight. She didn’t have a name, or at least none that she could remember. She supposed she must’ve had parents, once, but that’d been a long time ago. For as far back as she could recall, this had been her life.

Places like this were the dirty little secret of the Earth Kingdom. Centuries of Ba Sing Se’s isolationist policies had left most of its provinces at least nominally independent, and though Kuei had worked in his twilight years to reach out to them, his daughter had only exacerbated the problem further.

There were no other “kings” or “queens” across the continent any longer, but there were numerous petty tyrants and warlords – most of them rogue veterans of the Earth Kingdom military who’d decided to conquer a small plot of land, and somehow managed to hold onto it since.

Avatar Aang had done his best to clamp down on the practice, and the jails of the United Republic were filled with the results. But despite the White Lotus’ best efforts to conceal the information,
most knew by now that the once-great airbender had taken gravely ill, and wasn’t expected to recover.

He had, at best, a few years left. Years that warlords like Du Jun were more than happy to take advantage of.

A former general before his discharge for taking bribes, Du Jun was the current owner of the territory she’d lived in for most of her life – a small village and the surrounding forests. A non-bender, he’d nonetheless managed to assemble a strong following out of sheer charisma and force of will.

His massive frame and nigh-incomparable skill with a bow didn’t hurt, either.

These auctions had been his idea. Periodically, he’d send raid parties out to neighboring provinces or villages, kidnap young girls – and occasionally, young boys – and sell them off to his most loyal men to “keep.”

In a purely mercenary sense, it was quite a brilliant scheme. He was able to enforce the loyalty of his troops and make a tidy sum, all at once.

Slavery had never been a fully sanctioned practice in the Earth Kingdom, but it was hardly unheard of, either. The continent was simply too big for the protections of the law to reach everywhere.

And, inevitably, places like this sprung up between the cracks.

This wasn’t the first time she’d been sold; not by a longshot. If she had to hazard a guess, going by the very limited information she had available, she’d have wagered she was from one of the outlying colonies on the very edge of the United Republic. Her family had either been slaughtered by Du Jun’s goons, or else simply abandoned her when they came.

Either way, it was at only age three or four when she’d first been chained.

Since then, she’d bounced her way between six different owners. While it wasn’t unusual for a girl to be returned to auction once their owner grew tired of them, usually this only happened once or twice across their lifetimes.

But she was a…special case. And not in a good way.

She was paraded onto the stage naked, of course; they all were. Their prospective buyers needed to be able to inspect the merchandise, after all.

In her case, however, that made her “flaw” extremely obvious.

“What’s with all the burns?” demanded the deep, rumbling tones of Du Jun himself, who was sitting in the front row. This in itself was rather unusual – it was generally thought that he had more than enough slaves of his own.

Indeed, covering her legs and torso were numerous scorch marks of varying sizes, some mild and others rather grotesque. She felt the heavy eyes of every man in the crowd pass over the scars, as well as the rest of her barely developed “features,” but felt no particular shame in it.

Probably because this’d happened to her so many times before.

The auctioneer gulped and cleared his throat, under the unflinching glare his boss was giving him.

“Ahem…according to her previous owner, this girl is a firebender, but her bending is somewhat…”
the man said nervously, reading off a thin scroll. “Err…unusual.”

“Unusual?” repeated the warlord, leaning forward slightly. “Explain.”

He coughed again. “Well, sir, the thing is…” he replied. “No one, uh…really knows. She’s been a problem case for a while now.”

“Has she, now?” he asked softly, though somehow that only made him sound more dangerous. Slowly, he rose from his seat. “You know, I don’t think I like problem cases.”

The warlord strode over to her, grasping her by her thick, unwashed mess of hair and forcing her head back, until they were eye-to-eye. She stifled a groan of pain.

“Show me,” he said, his teeth bared in a cruel, lopsided grin.

She blinked, unsure she’d just heard him correctly. This wasn’t what she’d been expecting at all.

“I said, show me,” Du Jun ordered again, less patiently this time. He tossed her to the ground and then took a step back, his arms crossed. He was clearly expecting a show.

The girl tensed up, uncertain what to do. She’d never been given an open invitation to cut loose with…well, whatever you wanted to call what she did. She’d always been told to press it back down, to hide it away, because it made her less “appealing” on the market.

This close to the former colonies, firebenders were hardly unheard of; even some of Du Jun’s men had the ability. But what she did…wasn’t firebending. At least, not of the sort she’d ever seen anyone else perform.

And it was dangerous. Very, very dangerous, for which her numerous burn marks were a testament. She couldn’t exactly control it, or at least not very well. And it didn’t always work.

Still, seeing no choice, she began to focus inward, hoping that this time, it might go a little better. She reached down, deep, for what little energy she had left in her fragile body – it wasn’t like she’d eaten or slept much recently, after all – and willed it to release itself.

The result was immediate, and explosive. Literally.

Du Jun swore loudly as he backed away, the blast having missed him by a factor of inches. Still, it’d singed the hairs on his broad forearms by sheer proximity.

She, meanwhile, fell to the ground, screeching in agony as she struggled to beat out a flame near her right shoulder. The embers died down quickly, but she could see the mark they’d left out of the corner of her eye. Having dealt with this for years, she recognized the signs of a new scar immediately. It wasn’t too large or deep, comparatively speaking, but she’d have it for the rest of her life.

Which, admittedly, might not be that long, given the look in Du Jun’s eyes.

“Combustion…” he whispered, leaving the girl utterly perplexed. She wasn’t familiar with the word. She wasn’t familiar with most words. “Hey, how long have we had this girl?”

“Some of her owners didn’t keep very good records, sir,” said the auctioneer timidly. “Perhaps four, five years? That’s my best estimate. If she didn’t sell today, I was just going to have her drowned.”

“Under my nose, all that time…” Du Jun continued to murmur, now rubbing his bearded chin.
thoughtfully. “Alright, I’ve seen enough. I’ll take her.”

The other man flinched slightly. “Her? Are you sure, sir?” he asked. “Because I’ve got a lovely refugee girl I’ve been saving for you. Bit of Water Tribe blood, I think, very exotic…”

Du Jun held up a calloused hand.

“I’m not paying you to question me,” he responded, his voice hard. “I’m paying you to obey. Are we understood?”

The auctioneer blanched and nodded, slowly. Then he extracted a key from his pocket and unlocked the shackles around her ankles with one, fluid motion.

The girl, for her part, still couldn’t quite believe what’d just happened. She’d heard of Du Jun, of course; all her owners up to this point, after all, had been soldiers under his command. But to be claimed by the man himself…

Not that she had much an opportunity to think about it, of course. The warlord wasted no time in grabbing her by the upper arm and forcibly dragging her behind him.

“What idiots…” he said under his breath as they walked, just loud enough that she could hear. “They had no idea what they had. You’re gonna make me a very happy man, girl.”

She chanced a single glance backward, before he pulled her into a banged-up Satomobile and locked the door.

Behind her, the auction continued on without delay.

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Du Jun’s estate was the largest building for miles around, and not by an inconsiderable margin.

Massive and sprawling, it took up an entire hilltop overlooking the village he controlled, visible from just about anywhere in his territory and towering over each and every one of “his” citizens. It’d been a daily sight for the girl, for as long as she could remember, but she’d never imagined actually entering it…

Yet as impressive as it was from a distance, as she approached closer the mansion seemed to take on a rather…different character. The warlord clearly put little effort into maintenance or upkeep, as overgrown weeds surrounded his property and cracks lined his walls, showing their age.

He hadn’t built this place, after all. Like everything else he owned…he’d simply swooped in and conquered.

The dual-nature of the manor only became more pronounced as they entered it.

Du Jun was an avid hunter, and his walls were lined with trophies. Sabre-toothed moose-lion antlers, komodo rhino tusks, and tiger-shark teeth were just a few of his more…impressive acquisitions, as well as a veritable menagerie of stuffed beasts, both large and small. She thought she even recognized the horns and skinned furs of a sky bison, meaning he had little issue trafficking in illegal goods.
But then, she supposed, she was rather obvious proof of that.

A few of the trophies might’ve made for an appealing atmosphere, but there were so many that the effect turned right around and became disturbing. Admittedly, the girl didn’t have a lot of experience with aesthetic design, but her first impression was that the environment seriously creeped her out.

Mind, it didn’t creep her out nearly half as much as what those walls contained.

It was immediately obvious, as Du Jun dragged her through his estate, that she was far from the only slave kept here. She counted at least a dozen as they passed by, cooking or cleaning or simply standing around, awaiting orders.

Each of the slaves she saw bore a few similarities. All were female, and none appeared over the age of twenty or so. Their clothing differed in color and pattern, but none of them were wearing very much of it. Most all of them had at least a few bruises, covered up partially but not entirely by makeup.

And not one of them looked like they’d experienced anything approaching a genuine smile in years.

“These’ll be your quarters, girl,” grunted the warlord, yanking open a small room the size of a broom closet and tossing her inside. “I’ve gotta go get some things prepared. Head up to the second floor and ask for Noudai. She’ll get you cleaned up and in some decent clothes.”

He waited a single second, during which she did nothing but stare up at him with small, amber eyes, before slapping her hard across the face.

It was the sort of strike that promised to be the first of many.

“Hurry up!” he shouted, grabbing her by the throat. “You may be more valuable than most, but I’ve no patience for a slave who won’t do what she’s told. If there’s one thing I’ll make sure to teach you, it’s to know your place.”

Du Jun dropped her to the ground and left it at that, storming away to his private study.

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Moving through the mansion on her own was, if anything, even more surreal than being yanked through it by Du Jun. Going at her own pace, everything seemed to loom quite a bit bigger than it had a few moments ago, and she suddenly found it hard to breathe.

None of her fellow slaves stopped to offer more than a single, lingering glance as she passed, despite the fact that she was a naked little girl covered up and down with burn scars. She supposed they’d all long since learned not to ask questions.

She found the stairs to be particularly daunting, towering over her and leading toward places unknown. In the semi-darkness Du Jun kept his entire estate in, it looked almost like an enormous maw, ready to swallow her whole.

Taking them one at a time with tiny, hesitant footsteps, she eventually managed to make her way up to the next floor. In a trembling voice, she asked the first slave she saw – a teenager with long bangs in a skimpy red robe – where she might be able to find Noudai.
The slave gestured lazily to a room at the far end of the hall, and then headed off on her way without a single word. She had the same sort of throat-scar as her predecessor at the auction, so the younger girl wondered briefly whether she even could've responded to her.

Noudai, as it turned out, was a woman of perhaps eighteen or nineteen years of age; older than most here, but still incredibly young and attractive. She was more conservatively dressed than the last slave, though that wasn’t exactly saying much, in a light violet shawl and skirt.

When the young girl entered her chambers, Noudai’s expression betrayed not even the slightest hint of surprise. The look in her eyes was obvious: this was a scene she’d seen far more than she could count.

“Oh, spirits, you’re so young…” she murmured, her voice remarkably hoarse and raspy for her age. “I always hate it when he takes the young ones. Do you have a name, dear?”

The younger slave slowly shook her head.

“We’ll come up with one, child. Something nice and sweet,” said Noudai. Despite the roughness of her tones, it was perhaps the most tender way anyone had spoken to the girl in her entire life. “But first, let’s get you cleaned up. Come now.”

The next half-hour was spent in a bathroom larger than some of the houses she’d been kept in, as Noudai systematically worked to scrub away eight years of dirt and grime from the firebender’s tiny body. She could tell Noudai was trying to be gentle around her scars, but there were so many of them that it was more or less impossible.

She just winced and bore it. She’d endured far worse over the years.

“You have such pretty hair,” Noudai told her after a while, as she ran through it with a heavy brush. Having never been cut even once, it was a wild and tangled mane, strewn with detritus from the forest.

Her last owner had kept her chained-up outside, like an animal.

“You…too…” mumbled the girl, trembling. She was staring forward with dull, unfocused eyes, but she could still see Noudai in a nearby mirror. Even with her bruises and saddened expression, she was undeniably breathtaking.

The older slave looked simultaneously touched and off-put by the compliment. “So you have a voice after all. It’s a lovely one,” she said quietly. “The Lord has a thing about voices. I wish I could say that will save you some pain, but…”

She shook her head, as if reconsidering how much else she should share.

“Well, I suppose that, all things considered, it’s…better than being put to the fields right away,” Noudai continued after a moment, sighing heavily. “That’s where he puts the girls he tires of. The ones he thinks are too old, too ugly, too…broken…”

The older slave suddenly reached forward and held her close in a warm, gentle embrace. This was also something the girl very much wasn’t used to.

“I won’t let that happen to you, though,” Noudai attempted to assure her. “It’s too late for me, and well, I’d rather you’d never come to this horrible place at all. But since we’re stuck here, we’ll make the most of it. I promise you.”
The girl wasn’t sure if she believed her. She’d heard promises before, mostly from her masters. They never lasted.

“Now, about what I said before…” said Noudai as she extracted the firebender from the tub and slowly, carefully, began to dry her off. “For a name…how does P’Li sound to you, dear?”

Tiny amber eyes rose to meet dazzling green ones, blinking uncomprehendingly.

“It was the name of a child I…attempted…to bear a year ago,” she explained through hot, stinging tears. Her voice, already weak, was suddenly close to breaking. “The Lord does not care for babies.”

She swallowed, hard. “But if you don’t like it, you can always…” she started to add, but she was interrupted by the child rushing forward and seizing her about the midsection.

“I’ll do it…” she choked out, crying openly as well. That was a rare thing – ordinarily, numbness was her body’s first response, not tears. “I’ll be P’Li. That’s my name.”

The realization hit the firebender like a speeding Satomobile.

“I…have a name…” she said, her eyes wide. “I have a name…”

Noudai continued to hold her for some time.

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After about a week at Du Jun’s estate, P’Li had begun to come to terms with exactly how things worked around here.

Most of the household duties were cycled between the slaves on a set rotation, purportedly to keep things “interesting.” One week, a given slave might help prepare his meals, or clean his trophies until they sparkled. The next, they’d be confined to his quarters for days on end, dedicated solely for his own…use.

P’Li, however, was only rarely ordered to perform such “normal” chores. Instead, she trained.

Her teacher, Hide, was a mercenary with a long history of bad luck. After dropping out of Fire Nation Preparatory Academy (he never shared the specifics, save for occasional grousing about “that girlfriend-stealing brat with a headband”), he’d joined the army at the age of sixteen…

Just in time to be deployed onto an airship during Sozin’s Comet. On his very first mission.

Needless to say, his military career hadn’t lasted long. His parents had been hardcore opponents of the new regime, with his father an active member of the New Ozai Society in its early days. Fire Lord Zuko had made it a policy not to punish children for their parents’ associations – a significant reversal from tradition – but Hide had seen little future in continuing to serve an “usurper,” and he’d mustered out less than a year later.

He’d been far from the only one; desertions from the Fire Nation military had skyrocketed after Zuko took the throne. Hundreds of young men and women, self-branded as ardent loyalists, departed for what they hoped to be warmer pastures in the colonies or outlying islands, renting out their skills at
bending or blade to the highest bidder.

Those mercenaries today made up a good portion of Du Jun’s private army, despite that he was both an Earth Kingdom national and a decade younger than most of them. Hide himself was now a wizened sixty-five, his boyish good looks long since faded to wrinkles and liver spots.

It was all the stranger, then, that he still seemed to act like a petulant teenager.

“Listen up, girlie. I heard you’re from the colonies, so I’ll say this slowly,” said the old master, glaring at her with contempt he didn’t even bother to disguise. “You…are…a piece of trash. I’m your only ticket to ever being more than that. Don’t forget it.”

P’Li might’ve pointed out the United Republic hadn’t been referred to as “the colonies” in over fifty years. But her barb probably would’ve rang somewhat hollow, given that he was currently grinding her skull into the dirt with his boot.

“Now, get up. And get it right this time!” he shouted, hauling her up by the hair and forcing her back into a stance.

The young slave girl, it would come to transpire, was in fact a firebender – and not an untalented one, at that. This was in spite of her teacher rather than because of him, as it soon became clear that he was truly awful at this, acting more the part of schoolyard bully than genuine instructor.

Rather than actually demonstrating the moves or at least explaining the theory, Hide preferred to insult and cajole her, mixing nearly constant verbal abuse with a hefty dose of physical. Over the next few weeks, P’Li got bruised up worse than she’d ever been in her life.

And that included her third master, an earthbender who’d regularly tied her up and tossed rocks at her for kicks.

Still, her improvement was rapid and remarkable, so she supposed he must’ve been doing something right. As weeks stretched into months, P’Li went from having no control over her bending whatsoever to tossing flames around in grand, sweeping arcs, her abilities far exceeding the mediocre skills of her mentor.

Soon enough, the older slaves who worked Du Jun’s fields learned to duck and take shelter whenever Hide dragged her outside to practice.

Her regimen only became more and more grueling as she improved, however. Even if he’d long since run out of new things to teach her, Hide was clearly under his lord’s orders to push her further to the limit each time, until the line between abusive teaching methods and outright torture became utterly blurred.

With Du Jun’s permission, Hide locked her in a contraption that’d freeze her to death if she didn’t constantly maintain her body temperature. He tossed her into a lake weighed down by heavy iron chains, so that the only way to avoid drowning was by superheating and shattering the metal. He surrounded her in a slowly shrinking ring of fire, forcing her to put all her energy into pushing back the encroaching wall of death.

And that was just the first day.

Still, no matter what fresh torment her teacher managed to come up with, P’Li took it all in silent dignity. She could see no other choice.

The one thing she always found herself wondering – in those rare moments of respite, between
countless training sessions that left her so exhausted she could hardly form words – was why the warlord had her training so hard. He’d never bothered to explain, and she doubted Hide even knew. The greedy firebender just did what his lord paid him to.

She suspected, perhaps, that it might have something to do with her explosions. They’d stayed away from the topic during their training, but it was clear her teacher wasn’t capable of it. None of Du Jun’s firebenders seemed to be.

P’Li wound up getting her answer sooner than she’d expected…

And she’d spend a good portion of her life wishing she hadn’t.

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Despite seeing him nearly daily, P’Li had barely heard a word out of her master since the day she’d come into his possession.

Each and every training session, he would be there without fail, glaring at her coldly and silently judging. Beyond that, however, he left oversight entirely up to Hide’s…less-than-tender mercies.

But as her progress with Hide began to slow, the warlord began to take more and more of an active interest. She was rapidly approaching the ceiling of what the old man could teach her, and all three of them knew it – even if they weren’t about to say it out loud.

“My scouts say there’s a family from Omashu vacationing out near the river. ‘Getting back to nature,’ or some garbage like that,” Du Jun said one day to his mercenary, as the setting sun marked the end to yet another day of training. “Kill the father, bring the mother and daughters to me.”

“Err…My Lord, don’t you still need me to…?” Hide asked carefully, gesturing awkwardly to P’Li in lieu of finishing his sentence.

The slave girl barely heard him, in any event; she was sprawled out on the ground and seconds away from passing out, after keeping the same enormous flame alight for more than twelve hours.

Du Jun held up a meaty hand. “I will be taking care of the girl’s training from now on,” he replied, his eyes narrowed in an imperious glare. “Personally.”

Hide seemed momentarily conflicted, but the look in his lord’s eyes brooked no room for argument.

“Make no mistake, Hide. This isn’t a punishment. You’ve done quite well, as a matter of fact,” added the warlord. “This next stage is simply too important to leave to anyone else.”

Her teacher swallowed and nodded hastily; while Du Jun’s tone was outwardly cool and collected, there was an edge to it that nobody in their right mind would dare to test.

Hide left it at that, bowing low and setting off in the direction of the river. The warlord waited until he vanished from sight before grasping P’Li by the arm and tossing her into the air like a ragdoll.

“Easy part’s over, girl,” he said coldly. “What you gotta learn next, no one can teach you. But that’s no excuse. You’re gonna learn it, and you’re gonna use it the way I tell you to. Don’t think you wanna find out what happens to slaves who…disappoint me.”
Then, without any further warning, he extracted an arrow from the heavy-looking quiver across his back and stabbed her through the shoulder.

That was the final limit her silence could withstand. P’Li screamed, wildly and helplessly, as she thrashed about in the dirt and mud. But Du Jun straddled her, keeping her pinned to the ground, blood trickling from her wound.

He cupped her cheeks with his hand and forced her to meet his gaze, their faces just a foot apart.

“Consider that a taste,” he murmured, his hot, vile breath washing over her face and stinging her eyes. He’d clearly been drinking recently. “Of what’ll happen if you fail to please me. Anyway, just remember this.”

The warlord leaned down a little and licked a bit of the blood streaming out of her shoulder, the arrow still wedged in the midst of it. She suppressed a mixture of a shudder and a wince as the pain briefly spiked.

“You belong to me, girl,” continued Du Jun, his voice now an ugly rasp. “You don’t obey me to get rewarded, or to avoid punishment. You obey, because that’s just what you are. And what you always will be. A slave. My slave.”

Suddenly, as quickly as he’d seized upon her, he was back to his feet. P’Li didn’t move from her position.

“Go get that taken care of. One of the girls who works the fields used to be a healer for that swamp tribe,” he said, his face twisting into a cruel sort of leer as he did. “We start tomorrow at dawn.”

“I don’t…I don’t understand, Master…” P’Li admitted in a tiny voice, knowing what was coming next.

Sure enough, Du Jun struck her hard across the cheek, sending her sprawling to the ground. The slap was almost perfunctory, with little emotion behind it, but that didn’t make it hurt any less.

The two of them were the only ones out here right now, in a secluded part of the forest some distance from the village, beyond a handful of goons for “security.” They were certainly the only ones allowed to speak, however – and as he’d just made crystal clear, even including her in that was pushing it.

“What, you want this non-bender to sit down and explain it to you?” asked the warlord, punctuating his point with a deep, snorting laugh. “Combustionbenders come around maybe once or twice in a generation, and they’re born, not made. My father was killed by an assassin with the power; that’s how I know how deadly it can be. But I don’t understand it, any more than you understand being anything but a useless, wretched waste of space.”

“I’m trying, okay?” she said in her tiny voice, shrinking back instinctually out of fear of another blow. “It just doesn’t…it doesn’t make sense, the way other firebending does…”

“You used to do it all the time. Your scars prove that much,” responded Du Jun, gesturing crudely at her bare, and heavily burned, midriff. The clothes he’d given her covered far less than most outfits
an eight-year-old might wear, and she was acutely aware of it. “By the spirits, you did it the day I bought your ungrateful ass.”

“Yes Master, but I can’t...I can’t control it!” she exclaimed, trying to will the stutter out of her voice and failing miserably. She’d be beaten soon, far worse this time, if she couldn’t come up with a better excuse. “Every time I try to make it come out, I...I think about what happened last time, and...”

“So that’s it. You’re scared,” the warlord cut her off, leaning into her personal space again. He did that often. “The memory of blowing yourself up appears in your mind, and you unconsciously hold back. Well, I’ve got a solution.”

Then, he grabbed her by the throat with one hand, and slowly began to squeeze.

“Think about what you’re really afraid of,” he said, his grip tightening a little bit more with each word. “A few more little burns...or me?”

His eyes flicked toward her bandaged shoulder, and hers followed. Despite the waterbending healing, that wound was in the process of leaving a scar worse than any of her burn marks.

Unable to speak, she nodded frantically, hoping he would accept that as a response. Du Jun, for his part, merely glared at her with piercing, dirt-brown eyes. Then, without a word, he released her.

P’Li sputtered and coughed, struggling to catch her breath, but there was no hint of sympathy whatsoever across her owner’s face.

“The one thing I do know is this,” he added after a little while, once she’d managed to pull herself back to her feet. “It seems like it’s a lot easier with a focal point. The assassin I was talking about, he...”

Suddenly, the warlord stopped speaking, as if realizing something. Then, he beckoned to a couple of his guards.

“Go grab Ci Ceng,” he ordered, gesturing vaguely in the direction of his home. “I have an idea.”

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Most of Du Jun’s slaves were, intentionally, women with very little connection to the world, outside their own towns or villages. Nobodies, who wouldn’t be missed if kidnapped.

There were a handful of exceptions, however, and Ci Ceng was one of them. A famed artist from Ba Sing Se, she’d made the same mistake as that poor family Hide had been sent after – most of whom now belonged to the elderly firebender, as a reward for his moderate success as a teacher – and ventured too close to Du Jun’s territory on a trip to “find herself.”

Like P’Li, her skills enabled her to escape the majority of the physical chores, but the tradeoff was that those skills were turned to the warlord’s benefit alone.

Constantly, without more than the barest modicum of rest, she was forced to churn out paintings and sculptures to adorn the estate, nestled haphazardly between or around his numerous trophies. Not being an especially erudite patron of the arts, Du Jun most commonly demanded depictions of
himself – usually in varying states of undress.

It made walking through the halls even less comfortable than it already was.

Today, however, her talents were being turned toward an entirely different direction.

“Apologies, Master, but this is…really not my area of expertise…” said the young artist. P’Li knew what was coming, and winced preemptively.

And indeed, it became clear rather quickly that Ci Ceng’s artistic abilities would no more spare her from the warlord’s wrath than P’Li’s bending. If anything, he was actually rougher with the elder slave, smacking her to the ground and following up with a few kicks to the gut for good measure.

“You paint on walls and paper, right?” he demanded of her, raising his foot again threateningly. “You can paint on skin, too.”

“There’s a lot more to tattooing than just…” Ci Ceng started to reply, but she stopped when she got a better look at her owner’s eyes. She swallowed, hard. “I mean…of course, I’ll do it for you, Master. I thank you for the generous opportunity.”

“That’s better,” said the warlord, smirking in self-satisfaction as he removed his foot and allowed her to dust herself off. “Now, what do you need?”

“Dye from the henna plant would probably be the most effective. And some sterile needles, of course,” the artist mused in a quiet voice, her demeanor briefly shifting back to the professional she’d once been. “The tricky thing will be getting the tattoo to function properly as a channel for chi. I’ll need a firebender to consult with, for sure. Preferably one experienced in spiritual matters.”

“Got a couple shamans in my army. Rejects who couldn’t hack it as Fire Sages,” Du Jun told her, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “I’ll send for them now.”

P’Li, however, hadn’t heard anything past the word “needles.” She’d seen tattoos, of course – they weren’t exactly uncommon amongst the warlord’s men – but she couldn’t help but cringe in fear as she imagined the process. Any kind of piercing sensation instantly provoked flashbacks to the wound in her shoulder.

It seemed silly, given everything else she’d been through so far, but she thought it might well be the most painful. If only for what it represented.

“Oh, and we’ll need something like shirshu venom, of course,” added Ci Ceng after a moment. “A numbing agent, so she won’t feel it when we do the operation.”

Du Jun, however, shook his head slowly, his eyes boring unblinkingly into P’Li’s.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said, his lips twisted into a tight leer. “Pain is useful. Pain teaches lessons.”

And with that, he grasped P’Li by the forehead, and slammed her headfirst into the ground.

“Now, slave…” he whispered, his head turned to Ci Ceng’s horrified face even as he rubbed P’Li’s across the rough tiles. She could taste her own blood.
“Mark her as mine.”

The operation was agony.

With nothing to numb her skin or relax her muscles, P’Li felt every single jab of the needle with full and utter acuity, and she clenched her teeth against each other in a desperate struggle not to scream.

Du Jun was watching from just a few feet away, and she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

It didn’t help that Ci Ceng was an amateur at this, using techniques and materials she’d never even touched before. She murmured apologies to P’Li throughout, clearly mortified that she was being forced to do this to a child…

But that hardly made it hurt any less.

All told, P’Li hadn’t the slightest idea how long the session wound up lasting. Her best guess was a few hours, but as far as her mind was concerned it might as well have been an eternity. The fragile organ had responded to the unceasing, abominable pain by more or less shutting down, and in the aftermath she was left lethargic and unresponsive.

They were talking now, the artist and the shamans. Dimly, she thought it might be something about the pattern. About how “the eye” was the ideal conduit for the Light Chakra, the mind’s center of insight.

Or something like that. She didn’t really know. Right now, she didn’t particularly care.

But she did understand the words “maybe four or five more sessions.”

She nearly vomited right then and there.

That was how the next month or so had unfolded. Upon the advice of the healer who’d treated her shoulder, Ci Ceng waited a week between each treatment, giving her skin time to heal before it was tormented anew. She’d actually recommended two or three, but Du Jun was impatient.

He wanted his…well, whatever this was turning her into.

As the weeks progressed, P’Li watched on in the mirror as the tattoo slowly began to take shape. An eye it was indeed, though none like she’d ever seen before. It was tall and slanted, its iris an even deeper shade of red than her own, natural ones. A small, inlet pair of circles rested at its bottom tip, and to each side were six hazy, wavelike lines.

The lines, reminiscent of spreading flames, underscored the connection to her element, but it was the number she knew had been chosen most carefully. Six was Du Jun’s favorite number, and everything from his army to his choice of bed partners was organized with that in mind.

This mark…it was a part of her now. Just as permanent as her scars. Perhaps even more so, because no amount of clothing would ever be able to hide it from view. She’d be displaying it to the world, her first and last feature of note, until the day she died.

Binding her to her master. Forever.
By the point of the final operation, P’Li wished she could say she’d become used to the pain. Well…she was used to all pain, in a general sense; she’d never known anything else to compare it to. But that didn’t make any individual experience any easier to withstand. Pain was pain.

Still, she resisted, as she always did, the temptation to cry out. It only encouraged Du Jun when she appeared weak in front of him, and beatings were always sure to follow.

Of course…they were even more likely when she appeared strong in front of him. This was a game she’d never been able to win.

And one she very much doubted she ever would.

Still, all her weeks of holding steadfast against this torture – and, truth be told, a lifetime of doing the same – were beginning to take their toll. As Ci Ceng placed the finished touches on her third eye’s pitch-black pupil, P’Li found herself clenching her fists so hard that her misshapen fingernails drew blood.

It was all too much. Too much pain, too much despair, too much…too much energy, bubbling up from just below the surface, threatening to burst…

She lost control.

The energy released all at once, the moment the tattoo was complete. The sensation was new, utterly unlike the explosions she’d generated before. Where previously they’d radiated outward, completely unpredictable in size or intensity, this blast fired along a straight line and detonated some distance away, sparing her from its effects.

But only her.

P’Li looked on, made speechless by sheer horror, at what remained of Ci Ceng. The artist had been directly in the path of the shot, and experienced the full brunt of the explosion. When the smoke cleared, little was left but a great deal of red.

On either side, the shamans struggled to their feet, gasping and screeching in pain. One was covered in severe burns, as bad as the worst of P’Li’s. The other was missing an arm.

Truthfully, P’Li wouldn’t have been able to summon much guilt over the men’s fate if she’d tried, but Ci Ceng was another story. As much pain as she’d caused her over the last several weeks, P’Li recognized in the back of her mind that it wasn’t her fault. They were both in the same, sinking boat. Or had been, at least, until this moment.

However, even as P’Li struggled to put two coherent thoughts together, overwhelmed by the nauseating scene before her, Du Jun – who’d been watching from behind the firebender and, therefore, escaped her unintentional slaughter – clapped his hands together and loosed a sharp bark of a laugh.

He wasn’t put off at all by the blood and offal that clung to his floor and walls. On the contrary, he looked ecstatic.

“That’s it, that’s it!” he exclaimed jovially, grabbing P’Li by the shoulder and pulling her close. It was one of the only times she’d ever been touched by him without a beating swiftly following.

She couldn’t help but notice, however, that he was forcing her head to face away from him
“Pack your things, girlie,” he said, laughing at his own, cruel joke. It wasn’t like she had any things to pack. “We’re going on a little trip.”

P’Li wasn’t sure where they were going, and she’d long since learned better than to ask.

They’d left the village three days ago, just the two of them – herself and Lord Du Jun. That, in itself, was unusual. Nearly everywhere he went, it was with at least two others for protection, and if anything he tended to increase that number when accompanying P’Li.

Now they were venturing alone, through woods with which the young girl was completely unfamiliar, for reasons she couldn’t even begin to guess.

Still, she was finding it difficult to muster very much curiosity. Her mind, as they traveled over rough terrain by Satomobile and even rougher terrain by foot, was decidedly elsewhere.

Every time she closed her eyes, she could see Ci Ceng – the horrific expression she’d worn in her final seconds of life, and the gutwrenching sight left in the aftermath. For as long as she could remember, P’Li had never experienced anything that might be called a pleasant dream, but she knew immediately that this would haunt her nightmares until her dying day.

It didn’t help that Du Jun kept forcing them to stop periodically, in order to test out her abilities a little more. Every explosion was a reminder of what the last had done…and what it’d cost.

But the warlord clearly didn’t care. All he wanted to see was her skills improving – so that’s what she gave him.

Each shot she fired off made the next just a little easier. She wasn’t sure she wanted it to be easier, but it wasn’t like she had much of a say in the matter.

When they finally reached their destination, nearly a week had passed in the course of their journey. P’Li was tired, and cold, and hungry, surviving only on the scraps her master deigned to throw to her, and so it took her a moment to realize said master was speaking to her.

“…has the stones to move into my territory? A lesson needs to be taught,” was what she heard when she started tuning in, as Du Jun gestured toward a man practicing combat earthbending in a nearby field. Hidden between the nearby trees, they were practically invisible to him.

P’Li realized, with a jolt, that he was staring at her impatiently, as if expecting something.

“Well? I won’t ask twice,” he growled. “Get it over with, already.”

“You…You want me to…” she said, her lip trembling. She hadn’t caught everything, but she had a sinking feeling that she knew exactly what he was asking.

“Spirits, you’re stupid. Why did you think I spent all that time and money getting you trained?” demanded the warlord. “You are my weapon, girlie. You always have been. Now…time to fire.”

P’Li looked over at the earthbender again. She hadn’t the slightest idea who he was, or what kind of
position he held. She didn’t even know what he’d done to arouse Du Jun’s ire in the first place, beyond some vague words she’d half-listened to about “territory.”

She didn’t know any of these things.

And still, they amounted to nothing more than a single second of hesitation before she fired.

Her ability, her “gift,” meant that the battle was over before it’d truly begun. The unknown earthbender was blown apart in an instant, and where so recently there had been a man, now there was merely a charred mass of body parts strewn across a field.

It was her first intentional kill. Her first murder.

And unlike with Ci Ceng…she felt nothing.

The thought disturbed her slightly, but it was true. It was also almost certainly intentional. Du Jun had given her so few details, hidden the purpose of their venture until this very moment, to all but ensure she’d feel no guilt when the time came.

Absent any other information, her mind had defaulted to the one, single truth more deeply ingrained in it than any other: that she was a slave, and he was her master.

“I think that sent the message,” said Du Jun, grinning as a great cry of alarm began to spread throughout the nearby village. Someone in the distance must’ve noticed the explosion. “Come along.”

Once again, P’Li didn’t hesitate. However she felt about it, she knew her place.

He gave the orders.

And she obeyed.

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It wasn’t long before these “outings” became a regular occurrence.

Du Jun was the sort of man who’d made a lot of enemies throughout his lifetime; he kept a list of them. And now that he had a reliable way to cull that list down to a more manageable number…he was taking full advantage of the opportunity.

Most were fellow warlords or mercenaries who’d crossed him in some way, or wealthy individuals whose treasure and women he wished to plunder. He treated the two virtually interchangeably.

P’Li’s role was pretty much the same, in any event. He’d bring her close enough to the target to fire, and she’d fulfill her role.

The element of surprise was often useful, but rarely necessary. Armor, shields, and fortifications all folded like paper against her combustionbending – as she now knew it to be called. And all other forms of bending she encountered could do little more than purchase a few extra seconds, before hers tore them to shreds.

Her skills improved rapidly, as the number of bodies she’d left behind steadily piled up. Targets who
hid behind one of the few materials that did block her attacks – typically some kind of thick, heavy metal – only managed to teach her to how to curve her shots. Targets who tried to strike back during the brief span between each blast only made her to realize she had no trouble using regular firebending at the same time.

In time, the assignments became more elaborate. The shamans who’d advised in the creation of her tattoo developed a salve that hid it from view, until the very moment she decided to use it.

Du Jun’s personal little killing machine was a nine-year-old girl, and the warlord took full advantage of that fact. More than once, a law enforcement officer or bounty hunter who’d sniffed a little too close for comfort had been approached by an unassuming child, turned their back to her…and died in an instant.

Once, he’d even assigned her to infiltrate a school in Garsai, where the officer who’d discharged him from the Earth Kingdom military now worked as a teacher. Just to be on the safe side, she’d been ordered to go ahead and blow up the entire building.

The one constant factor was that Lord Du Jun himself was always present at her side – and typically, no others. P’Li somehow doubted that was a coincidence. She may have learnt firebending under Hide, and received her tattoo from Ci Ceng, but the warlord had been there throughout, watching silently.

Clearly, he didn’t trust anyone else to be her “handler.” One way or another, he wanted her to associate his face with all the suffering she’d incurred since becoming his slave, and thus be cowed into blind obedience simply from his presence.

Unfortunately, knowing what he was doing didn’t make it any less effective.

He had other ways to reinforce the conditioning, as well. Whenever they traveled, just the two of them, it was expected that she’d take care of…well, virtually everything, apart from driving. The household chores she’d largely been given a reprieve on, in favor of training, became her entire world for days at a time, as she prepared his meals and ensured his armor, bow, and Satomobile gleamed like new.

And as for his…other needs…

Well, it hadn’t taken long for him to decide that, in the absence of the female attentions he’d become accustomed to at home, that she would “do” in a pinch.

She’d been…touched before, by several of her previous masters, but her petite frame and scarred body had usually kept them from going farther. Du Jun, however, was unfazed.

His calloused hands mashed at her barely formed breasts with all the roughness that he attacked Noudai’s enormous ones, and when he finally “took” her, he showed no more gentleness or care than he would toward someone twice her size.

There was no describing the pain of it all – even for her, a person who’d known virtually nothing but pain. She felt like she was being ripped in two, every single moment, except it didn’t stop. It just got worse, and worse, and worse. She would’ve blacked out, if she could, just to bring an end to the suffering, but the feeling of violation was so horrendous she doubted she’d ever felt more awake.

No pleasure whatsoever was derived from the act; certainly not for her and, she suspected, very little for him either. He had no shortage of older slaves for that sort of thing.

No…this was about control, not sex. About reminding her, in the most deeply scarring way
possible, of their respective places in the world.

She wished she could say it wasn’t working.

P’Li would look back on those moments, many years later, and wonder why her younger self had never thought of running. Her hesitance made sense back at Du Jun’s estate; even if she’d managed to escape him, she would’ve been deep in the midst of his territory, surrounded by dozens of his loyal men. She’d never get out alive.

But during their “hunting trips,” it was just the two of them. She was vastly more powerful than her master, and the nature of her ability made sneak-attacks simple and quick. By necessity, many of their missions put her close to towns and villages she could easily blend into, if she so chose.

The truth of the matter was that she probably could’ve escaped any time she wanted to. It would’ve been easy.

Yet the thought never even occurred to her. In nine years of life, she had no memories of freedom; no frame of reference to even comprehend such a thing existed. It would’ve been like expecting someone who’d never seen the ocean before to immediately begin swimming in it.

He didn’t need to shackle her body if he could shackle her mind. And hers had already come that way.

She served her master faithfully, obediently, and without question.

Because that was all she knew how to do.

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It’d started off as a mission like any other.

P’Li was older, now, though still a child – having recently attained the age of twelve. Well…she thought it was recent, at least. It wasn’t like she actually knew her birthday.

In any event, she’d spent the intervening years honing her skills as Du Jun’s greatest weapon. She took no pride in the position, but no shame either.

When she worked, it was important to feel nothing.

By now, the killings were essentially effortless. All she needed was a nudge in the right direction, a name or a face, and she’d take care of the rest. She doubted her master even needed to be there half the time, though of course he always was. He never dropped his guard for a second around her.

Resignation was, in some ways, a far more powerful motivator than acceptance. P’Li knew who she was, what she was – and she’d been conditioned quite thoroughly to understand she’d never have anything better.

If this was to be her lot in life, she supposed she might as well be good at it.

Dozens, hundreds of corpses lay behind her now; more than she could count. Which wasn’t saying much, since she could no more count than she could read or write. Regardless, the core of the matter was there were few who could stand against her for longer than a second or two.
And throughout it all, she continued to serve her lord in any and every way he desired. He’d begun taking her to his bedroom even at home, using his other slaves to “train” her more thoroughly.

Clearly, he had high hopes for her…potential…a few more years down the road.

Living weapon, chef, housekeeper, sex slave – she was the full package, and they both knew it. And she improved more and more at every one of those roles, with each passing day. She looked into Du Jun’s eyes, and she could see he was looking forward to the woman she’d soon become.

She had a heavy suspicion that once that occurred, she’d rapidly become one of his “favorites,” in more ways than one.

In any event, that was what’d been occupying her mind as they journeyed to a bar in the Senlin Forest. According to one of the warlord’s scouts, the once-legendary bounty hunter June, now in her eighties, had recently been brought out of quiet retirement by Ci Ceng’s brother.

While the Ba Sing Se police and the Dai Li had been content to drop the case after a few weeks, content with assuming she’d simply run off somewhere, her brother hadn’t been satisfied by that explanation. And clearly, neither had June.

She was using this bar, a favorite haunt before she’d given up drinking, as a hideout while she followed the trail of Ci Ceng’s disappearance. And with her newest shirshu companion – granddaughter of the original – there was a very real chance she might stumble across the truth.

While Du Jun didn’t especially fear an elderly, non-bender woman, June had friends in high places; the former Fire Lord, for example, had retained her more than once in his youth. She was, undoubtedly, a dangerous woman to have as an enemy.

That was where P’Li came in.

She was wearing the concealer now, so that she could more convincingly pull off “innocent little girl lost in the woods.” With any luck, that’d be enough to get her into the bar and within striking distance of June…

At which point, it’d already be over.

Du Jun, meanwhile, was hidden amongst the branches, bow drawn to its fullest extent. He didn’t ordinarily do more than supervise these little “excursions,” but he clearly wasn’t leaving this one up to chance.

The moment she entered the bar, P’Li could sense that something was wrong. At this time of the night, she’d have expected to see a fair number of patrons, but the place was virtually deserted. There was only a single cloaked figure sipping from a tall glass of water at the bar, and a large stack of hay to their side.

P’Li had just enough time to marvel at the strangeness of the whole scene before a barbed tongue shot out from the hay, striking her across her midriff. The toxin began its work immediately, as the young firebender felt her entire body go completely numb, before pitching forward and collapsing onto the wooden floor.

Her neck now twisted at an awkward angle, P’Li watched with difficulty as the figure tossed away their cloak. The woman underneath, with her wrinkled face and heavy makeup, could only be June.

“Heard the rumors that Du Jun’s personal killing machine was a little girl,” she said as she advanced. “Wasn’t sure I believed ’em until now…but I couldn’t afford not to plan for it, either.”
“H...How...?” was all P’Li managed to utter, through paralyzed lips.

She tried to fire a blast while June was still far enough away, but her muscles refused to cooperate. Evidently, something in the venom impeded the normal flow of her chi.

“Scara here got your scent after your last kill,” replied the bounty hunter, reaching into the pile of hay and slowly extracted her enormous pet shirshu, petting her softly across the snout. “I knew you were coming after me before you did. Now...you’re gonna tell me where Ci Ceng is. I know he has her.”

Despite being unable to move anything but her eyes, P’Li still managed to look askance.

“...I see,” said June after a moment, her tone muted. “Well, that probably wipes out my payment for this job.”

She managed a brief, humorless chuckle at her own skewed priorities.

“I’m curious, sweetheart...” she eventually added, now bending down to look P’Li in the eyes. “Did you do it?”

Her voice was pleasant, conversational, but there was an edge to it the firebender picked up on immediately. She couldn’t nod or shake her head, and she couldn’t think of anything she could say, so all that came out was a vaguely affirmative grunt.

The irony. She was being brought to task for the one death she hadn’t meant to cause.

“You know, you’re so young,” whispered June, her voice sympathetic. That edge, however, remained. “But then, I’ve met a lot of dangerous young people in my time.”

A heavy knife slipped out of the bounty hunter’s sleeve, with all the reflexes of a woman a quarter her age.

“I don’t want to hurt you. You look like you’ve been hurt enough as it is,” she continued, bending down over P’Li and examining the bruises on her face. Reminders of the last time she’d asked for more information about a target, and her master had interpreted it as backtalk. “But I know what you’ve done. Or at least, I’ve got some pretty good suspicions. The trail was there...I just had to follow it.”

June paused, carefully examining the scars visible through the girl’s scant attire. When she spoke again, her voice was softer, less harsh.

“I’ve solved too many problems through violence and killing. I’ve got a bad feeling we have that in common,” she said. “Please, give me a reason I shouldn’t do the same right now. Why I shouldn’t end all this madness while I have the chance.”

Again, P’Li didn’t have anything to say. What could she say?

“When I started off on this job, I had no idea how bad things had gotten around here,” the bounty hunter went on, her tones sad and reflective. “Everyone’s so obsessed with making things shiny and new that they miss all the people that get left behind. There’s no progress out here, no ‘glorious future.’ Just thugs like your boss, making everyone else suffer.”

“Not ‘boss.’ Master,” said a very low, very familiar voice.

The arrow sailed through the window from point-blank range, shattering the glass and impacting with the speed of a messenger hawk. It struck neither June nor her shirshu, however.
Instead, it sank directly into P’Li’s left leg.

The pain was excruciating, but that was clearly a matter of intent rather than accident. It jolted her paralyzed nerves back to activity in an instant, and her chi responded entirely out of instinct: flowing onward and outward through its suddenly cleared pathways, seeking the nearest point of release.

Half a second later, June and Scara were blown to smithereens.

P’Li looked up at her owner as he climbed through the broken window, heavy bow hanging limply from his hand. For a moment, despite everything, her eyes shined with something like gratitude.

That ended quickly, as he struck her so hard she sailed halfway across the bar.

“You pathetic, useless, worthless piece of gutter trash!” he roared, absolute fury rippling across his weathered face. “You screw up, and expect me – your lord and master – to come and bail you out? What use are you, if you can’t even do the one thing I keep you around for?!”

“S…Sorry…” P’Li choked out, still coming back into her de-paralyzed throat.

She knew it wasn’t exactly a helpful thing to say right now, but she was also far too frightened to think of anything better.

“Too late for apologies, girlie,” said Du Jun, a wrathful hiss to his voice as he bent down and began to beat her further. “I’ll be doubling your training from now on. And cutting your food rations in half. You get nothing, until you learn how to stop being such a miserable failure.”

“I…I won’t do it again…” she murmured, sobbing. She just wanted this all to stop.

“No. You won’t,” he sneered, his hot, liquor-soaked breath washing over her face as he pinned her to the ground with one hand. With the other, he tore clean through the front of her shirt.

P’Li had long since learned he enjoyed the sound of her screaming.

Not that she would’ve been able to stop herself if he didn’t.

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P’Li didn’t speak a word as they made the long drive back to the warlord’s estate.

She wasn’t particularly talkative in general – a learned behavior so thoroughly ingrained that it was basically instinctual. Du Jun didn’t like his slaves to speak unless spoken to, and it rarely took more than a week or two for the “new meat” to see the value in agreeing with him.

Still, today was…different. None of what’d happened over the past couple hours was unusual, though perhaps in a sense that was part of the problem: killing a woman in cold blood, getting beaten within half an inch of her life, being forced to the ground and…used…

Yet June’s words were sticking with her. The nature of her bending was such that her targets rarely stuck around long enough to exchange any words with her, but there was more to it than that.

She’d never really given thought to the wider effects of the orders Du Jun commanded her to carry out. She simply obeyed them, because the consequences of doing otherwise were so horrific.
It was easier to think of her targets as nameless, faceless entities. As something akin to wooden cut-outs in a shooting gallery...which, in the face of a power like hers, they more or less were.

Her own suffering was so acute, so overwhelming, that it left no time for the consideration of the pain she was causing. And why should she? Weapons didn’t care about who they killed. They just did.

Over and over and over, she’d done precisely that – fired on command, without a single second of thought or hesitation. Leaving in her wake a hideous mountain of corpses and blood, widows and orphans, extinguished hopes and shattered dreams...

She didn’t have a choice except not to think about it. She wouldn’t be able to go on living otherwise.

To the extent she was even “living” now.

The first sign of trouble came long before they reached the estate. Even in her present stupor, it was impossible to miss the plumes of smoke rising above the trees, giving away the position of the warlord’s hidden village.

Du Jun said nothing, but floored the car to maximum speed.

The closer they drew to the village, the more obvious it became that something was very, very wrong. Though a fire had clearly blazed through here – natural or bender-made, it wasn’t clear – it’d since died down to smolders, glinting like tiny sparks amongst the billowing smoke.

Yet despite this, the area was almost eerily silent. Not even the warbling calls of sparrowkeets, ubiquitous in this part of the Earth Kingdom, could be heard. It was as if every beast or insect in the forest had suddenly decided to declare this place off-limits.

Their Satomobile came to a grinding halt the moment they passed the first, burned-out building. The vehicle offered no warning for this, no sputtering or smoking from the engine; it simply stopped, and answered Du Jun’s furious attempts to restart it with all the responsiveness of a brick wall.

Swearing loudly, the warlord leapt out of the vehicle, dragging P’Li behind him by the shoulder.

“We’ll have to make the rest of the way on foot,” he said with a growl. “Come on.”

As they continued on toward the estate, Du Jun chanced a few glances into the smoked-out ruins that’d once been his territory. To his dismay, not a single one of his followers, nor their slaves, could be found amongst the devastated buildings and homes. The village appeared completely deserted.

The warlord quickened his pace.

Things did not improve as they grew closer and closer to the manor P’Li had called “home” for the past four years. The only change was that the silence was slowly replaced by a low-pitched hum, so quiet that it was easy to miss if one didn’t concentrate on it.

The closer they ventured, however, the more intense the sound became – never louder, exactly, but with greater frequency, like a buzzard-wasp beating its wings at double, then triple the speed. Despite still being about as quiet as a dim whisper, the sound became almost deafening in the sheer level of power it radiated.

Du Jun’s mansion came into view long before they reached it, thanks to its size and position. Strangely, it seemed to have escaped the fate of the rest of the village completely, standing just as tall and majestic as ever. Even more so, perhaps, if only out of sheer contrast.
“Whoever—or whatever did this…” murmured the non-bender, his lips tight. “They must be holed up in there. Using my home for their…their…”

Sheer fury cut short his ability to speak. His grip became far tighter as he continued to pull P’Li along, however.

The smart move would probably have been to scout around the estate and figure out a quieter way in…but Du Jun was far too angry for such patient thinking, and P’Li wasn’t exactly eager to contradict him.

As such, the warlord wasted no time in throwing open the front doors with a resounding slam, roaring as he did, “What spiritsucking elephant-rat thinks he can screw with Lord Du Jun?!”

“That would be me,” said a soft voice, its owner landing deftly from the rafters as he did.

He was a young man, in his late teens or early twenties at the most. Still, his features was nearly as weathered as the former general he now faced. A fresh wound, scabbed and still healing over, could be seen over his left eye, and he had a nasty case of cauliflower ear on either side of his long, flowing hair.

Yet despite these flaws, if P’Li were to describe him in a single word, she couldn’t help but pick…*Handsome.*

“And who the heck are you?” demanded Du Jun with a sneer, his eyes wandering up and down the intruder’s form in an attempt to size him up. Clearly, he wasn’t impressed.

“I’ve been called a number of names over the years. I wouldn’t say you’re worthy of hearing half of them,” the young man replied evenly. Then, unexpectedly, his olive-green eyes looked past the warlord, directly at P’Li. “But in deference to our young guest…you may call me Zaheer.”

“Never heard of you,” said Du Jun, drawing his bow as he did. Even with his movements so obviously telegraphed, at this distance, he was unlikely to miss. “So I doubt anyone’s gonna care when I mount your head on my wall.”

Then, with speed and dexterity that belied his enormous stature, the warlord fired off a shot.

Zaheer, however, turned out to be more than capable in *both* those areas. He flipped backward with all the agility of a circus acrobat, tossing a smoke bomb to cover his escape. When it cleared, he’d disappeared again into the nooks and crannies that littered the ceiling.

“Why did you do this?!” shouted the warlord, squinting in the half-darkness of his own home to try and get a bead on his new enemy. “*How* did you do this?!”

“The Red Lotus fights in the name of freedom, for *all* peoples. You, who keep your fellow man in bondage? There is nothing in this world that’s lower,” answered Zaheer, his voice echoing in such a way that it was difficult to tell which direction it was coming from.

Du Jun fired off another arrow nonetheless, but only succeeded in skewering one of his trophies.

“As for the ‘how’?” the younger man continued, speaking as if they were having a pleasant conversation over the dinner table. “We arranged for the hiring of the bounty huntress June, and fed her a steady supply of information. We knew that if she grew close enough, you’d have no choice but to abandon your territory to pursue her. With you out of the way, your men fell with barely any effort at all.”
“My army is made up of the best swordsmen and benders in the world,” Du Jun said coldly, another arrow readied. “What do you have that could stand against us?”

“I’ll show you. Just as soon as my brothers in arms have ferried your captives to safety,” responded Zaheer, appearing just long enough to affix the warlord with a small, taunting smile. By the time the arrow fired, of course, he was gone again.

“…What?” hissed Du Jun, uncertain if he’d heard the other man correctly.

“We took not a single slave’s life today. They certainly couldn’t be blamed for all this,” Zaheer told him. “We’ve already liberated every woman and girl whom your men kept enchained. And in a few minutes, the evacuation of the thirty-four poor souls you personally held captive will be completed as well.”

“You dare?!” screamed the warlord, now firing off the rest of his quiver as fast as his fingers could move. They were no more effective than his last few shots, however. “You dare steal my property?!”

“Human beings are not property. In this or any other world,” said the younger man. Though still cool and collected on the surface, there was an edge to his voice now, somewhat reminiscent of June’s. “A lesson you’re overdue to learn, Du Jun…and one I’m quite eager to teach you.”

Throughout all of this, P’Li had stood back silently, a few steps behind her master. She’d never seen him so unnerved before; angry, sure, but always in control, always certain he was three steps ahead of everyone else. She’d never witnessed someone get so deeply under his skin, and Zaheer was making it look effortless.

Nevertheless, she stood by, uncertain what to do. In his rage, her owner seemed to have momentarily forgotten she existed – so intent was he upon slaying his foe. Over and over he loosed the heavy shafts, but the unseen intruder avoided them all like it was child’s play.

After several moments of this, however, her nose perked up, catching a whiff of something approaching. Years of being little more than a hunting eel-hound had greatly refined that particular sense.

“Master…” she whispered, but he cut her off.

“Quiet, you idiot!” he snapped, glancing irritably back at his quiver. He was down to a single arrow.

“But…But Master, I think there’s…” P’Li kept trying to say. She received a sharp backhand for her trouble.

It wasn’t an action committed with any kind of malice of forethought; she doubted he’d given it any thought at all. It was simply his reflexive reaction to her speaking, when he wasn’t in the mood to listen.

Ultimately, though, even if he had allowed her to finish her warning, it probably wouldn’t have bought him more than a few seconds. That’s how long it took before the smoke was close enough that even his aged nose could pick it up, and within a few seconds more, the smell became a moot point.

Both of them could see the flames.

Except it wasn’t ordinary fire – any more than a dragon was an ordinary lizard-snake. It moved through Du Jun’s immaculate manor as if alive, simultaneously grander and subtler than any bent fire
P’Li had ever seen.

The warlord and his slave both watched on as the flames twisted and contorted through the halls of the mansion, devouring Du Jun’s treasure troves of trophies and artwork like a greedy child snapping up candy. Instinctually, the non-bender fired his final arrow into the inferno, but he might as well have tossed a handkerchief into it for all the good it did.

As soon as the fire reached the atrium they were currently occupying, however, a sharp voice rang through the room.

“Halt.”

Miraculously, the encroaching blaze did just that, stopping in its tracks like a pet brought to heel. At the same time, Zaheer slipped back down from above, moving with the grace and light steps of a dancer.

The young man held out an arm, and the fires convulsed, growing and shrinking rapidly until finally splitting apart. Great, canine forms slowly took shape, barking and growling, and a few moments later they became distinct: enormous, foxlike creatures, their entire bodies composed of scorching flame.

“Spirits of fire itself,” he explained softly, waving his hand as if absently petting one of them. Despite being at least twenty feet away, the nearest spirit keened contently. “A friend of mine has quite the…gift, with spirits. He persuaded them to join me in purging your evil from this world.”

Du Jun’s eyes twitched dangerously as they darted around the atrium – the only part of his magnificent paradise the spirits hadn’t yet consumed. Decades’ worth of conquest and domination had, in the past few minutes, quite literally gone up in smoke.

“I don’t know who you think you are…or what these ‘Red Lotus’ morons you mentioned want with me,” he said through gritted teeth. “But you’ve messed with the wrong man.”

Then, in one fluid motion, the warlord threw down his now-useless bow and drew a large hunting knife, rushing toward his enemy with the eyes of a man possessed.

Zaheer, however, merely placed his fingers to his mouth and whistled, and the fire spirits reacted accordingly. One transformed into an immense tendril of flame and struck Du Jun in the chest, causing the warlord to scream in pain as he was thrown backward into the opposite wall.

The other two spirits, meanwhile, leapt toward the nearest walls and ceiling, resuming the utter destruction of Du Jun’s twisted legacy. In a matter of minutes, there’d be nothing left.

The warlord had escaped injuries too severe thanks to his heavy armor, but his bones still cracked noticeably as he struggled to regain his footing. Still, the sight of the last of his precious treasures burning to ash spurred him back into action, and with a furious roar he barreled forward, grasping for a life-sized portrait of himself Ci Ceng had painted years ago.

But the third spirit didn’t let up in its assault, slamming into its target from behind and knocking him off-balance. P’Li saw what was about to happen a split-second before it did, but not quickly enough to shout a warning – the fires had significantly weakened the structure of the walls and rafters, and three hundred pounds of muscle and heavy armor collapsing into it was enough to bring it all crashing down.

P’Li looked away as her master released a bloodcurdling scream.
When she finally got up the courage to open her eyes again, the young firebender saw the man who owned her pinned under an immense amount of burning rubble, his body twisted and mangled and scorched almost beyond recognition.

But most of his head was free…and it was very much alive.

“Idiot brat! What do you think you’re doing, just standing around?” he demanded, straining his neck to acknowledge her for the first time since Zaheer’s arrival. Though he clearly meant to sound intimidating, the effect was ruined somewhat when he paused to cough up ash. “D…Defend me! Defend your master!”

P’Li froze in place, barely even able to comprehend what was going on. Everything she’d ever known, her entire life for the past four years, was collapsing around her in a fiery blaze. A decision needed to be made, and quickly…

And she was a person who’d never made a single choice since the day she was born.

A million different thoughts shot through her mind at once, vying for attention, and P’Li clutched at her head, willing them to stop. In the face of all this chaos, she could see only one option – one solitary way to force this all to make sense.

She’d do the thing her brain was hardwired for, so thoroughly that it was nearly automatic.

She would obey her master.

P’Li took a stance between the fire spirits and the fallen warlord, summoning up what miniscule reserves of energy remained within her. Then, with a deep breath, she fired.

The spirits might’ve been composed of the same element as her bending, but the sheer amount of force inherent in the explosion still succeeded at blowing them apart. It was too early to breathe a sigh of relief, however, as just a few seconds later the embers began to draw back toward each other, reconstituting the creatures as if nothing had happened.

Being a spirit rather than a physical being, it seemed, had its advantages.

P’Li fired off a few more blasts, and each time, the spirits took just a little bit more time to reform themselves. Still, she doubted she’d be able to beat them in a war of attrition. She was exhausted, starving, and seriously wounded…and even as a firebender, trying to fight inside a burning building was starting to get to her.

“Stupid girl! C…Can’t you do anything right?!” said Du Jun, in the midst of another coughing fit. “They’re like hunting hounds! Kill the master, and they’ll be useless!”

Her eyes flicked over to Zaheer, who was standing behind the spirits, his expression unreadable. She hesitated, suddenly stricken, for reasons she wouldn’t have been able to articulate.

But her owner didn’t let up. “Kill him!” he bellowed, his voice guttural and raw. “Kill him now!”

P’Li shrunk back, knowing that tone of voice. And the consequences it promised.

She had no choice.

Another explosion dispersed the spirits again, buying her several precious seconds. That would be enough. Her third eye rounded on the young man.
Zaheer immediately resumed his impressive acrobatics, but they were far less effective against her bending than they’d been against the arrows. Her combustions came out faster and had a much wider range, being able to appear nearly instantly at any point within her line of sight.

Additionally, the advantages he’d had earlier – ample darkness and various nooks and crannies to hide within – had been largely negated by the fire. Though he continued to dodge with a speed bordering on inhuman, it was only a matter of time before one of her shots struck true.

She’d counted on all of that.

What she hadn’t counted on were his words.

“Why are you still doing this?” he asked, his tone still remarkably pleasant despite the fact that he was seconds away from death. “There’s no longer any point.”

“Sh…Shut up!” she exclaimed, firing another explosion that missed him by inches. The force still managed to knock him off-balance, however, and it was only the timely reformation of the spirits that prevented her from ending things right there.

“That man is powerless, now. He can do nothing to you,” said Zaheer, as she blasted apart the flame-creatures for the dozenth time in the past few minutes. “You are the only person who gets to decide your fate.”

“You don’t get it!” P’Li found herself screaming, punctuating each sentence with another blast. Despite her body’s dehydration, she could feel small tears welling up in her eyes. “You haven’t lived the way I have! What do you know about me?!”

Then, to her immense surprise, Zaheer vaulted over and landed in the one safe place in the entire room: just a few inches in front of her.

“Not enough, I’m afraid,” he answered in a soft voice. “But I’d like the opportunity to find out more.”

P’Li shivered and recoiled on reflex. No man had ever gotten this close to her before, unless they…

And indeed, Zaheer reached forward, taking her by the shoulders.

But it wasn’t to bring her within striking distance. And it wasn’t to force her to the ground and “take” her, right then and there.

It was to pull her in close for an embrace.

P’Li hadn’t been hugged very much before, and the sensations this one produced were distinctly unfamiliar. Noudai had done it every once in a while, when she thought she could get away with it…but that’d happened less and less the more Du Jun monopolized her time for missions.

Isolating her from the other slaves had been a key part of turning her into the weapon she was today.

Zaheer was still speaking, his voice quiet and gentle.

“I don’t know everything this monster has done to you,” he said through pursed lips. “But I do know he won’t be doing them anymore. Look at him, now. He is broken, mangled, weak. You are the one who’s strong. He has no power over you. He never will again.”

Unbidden by conscious thought, P’Li’s eyes followed his instructions, setting themselves upon the
trapped and ashen-faced Du Jun. Snarling, he struggled to extricate himself from the smoldering rubble, but to no avail.

“D…Don’t you dare look at me that way!” he commanded her, locking eyes with his sole remaining slave and refusing to blink, despite all the soot in the air. “You belong to me! When I give you an order, you follow it! No questions! No exceptions! Now…do the one thing you were put on this planet to do! Obey!”

Once again, P’Li found herself attempting to navigate a swirling storm in her mind, struggling and clawing for an answer that simply wouldn’t come. Her shining, amber eyes darted around the room – from her Master, to Zaheer, to the reconstituted spirits, to the inferno that surrounded them all – as her thoughts grappled with each other, fighting for supremacy.

Then, abruptly…it all stopped. As if a curtain had been lifted, she could see the way forward.

P’Li took one last, long look at the face of the man who owned her. And then, for the first time in twelve years of life…

She came to a decision of her own.

“…Okay,” she whispered, extricating herself from Zaheer’s muscular arms.

Then, she turned directly toward Du Jun.

The warlord’s eyes narrowed. “What do you think you’re…?” he started to say, but she cut him off.

“I’m obeying your order, Master,” she replied, saying the last word in a way she never would’ve dared use before today. “What was it again? Ah, that’s right. Kill the master.”

She didn’t bother granting him the dignity of last words. Ci Ceng hadn’t gotten any, nor had June.

Nor had any of the men, women, or children he’d commanded her to slaughter.

A few hours later, once the fire had finally burned itself out, the only trace left of the mighty warlord Du Jun was a scattered, bloody smear.

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“Are the others gonna be alright?”

Those were the first words out of P’Li’s mouth, once she’d managed to regain enough of her bearings to speak.

Zaheer, who was sitting beside her, knew immediately what she was talking about.

“The Lotus will find them homes, places to stay. Somewhere far away from this place,” he said in a low voice. “It’s the least we can do.”

The two of them sat alone, atop the hill that’d once housed Du Jun’s estate – in the shadow of his once-grand manor, now a pile of smoldering ruins. Looking down over the burned-out remains of the village where she’d spent the majority of her life, P’Li couldn’t help but notice it all seemed so…small, from here.
Was this how the warlord had felt every day, looking out over his domain like a proud armadillo-lion?

Because all she felt, gazing upon the sight, was…

*Empty.*

“You saved us,” she murmured, not looking up at Zaheer. Both of them were staring forward with dim, unreadable eyes. “But you sound like you feel guilty.”

“We knew about this place – places like it – for *years,*” he explained dispassionately. “Even this attack took nearly seven months of planning. We could’ve stopped it sooner. Stopped him sooner.”

“If you’d just rushed in here, you would’ve been killed,” said P’Li. “Even with those…those things with you.”

The spirits had dissolved into embers the moment the fighting was done, for which she was immensely grateful. Despite the role they’d played in liberating all of her fellows, she wagered they probably wouldn’t be too fond of the girl who’d blown them up a dozen-odd times.

“We certainly couldn’t have done it without them,” remarked Zaheer, before making a face. “Which means I owe Unalaq more than a few favors. That should be fun.”

He’d dropped a lot of unfamiliar names and places over the past several minutes, though P’Li hadn’t bothered to ask any follow-up questions. Her world had already changed enough for one day.

There was one thing she *did* need to know, however.

“This ‘Red Lotus’ thing you were talking about…” she muttered, her lips barely moving. “What is it?”

A spark seemed to alight within the non-bender’s pale green eyes, though they still lacked any kind of luster. It gave his face a very haunted look, as he continued to stare out over the twilit horizon.

“For ten-thousand years, this world has existed in a perpetual state of imbalance,” he said. “Order and Chaos are opposing forces, meant to be equivalent in strength, so that *neither* might gain ascendancy over humanity’s souls. Yet, thanks to the influence of the Avatar, one has been permitted to dominate the other across the long arc of recorded history. And we have been made to believe this is good…the greatest lie *ever* told.”

Zaheer steepled his fingers in front of his mouth, narrowing his eyes at unseen enemies.

“For the sake of that lie, humanity has erected any number of unnatural constructions,” he continued on. “Nations, governments…the very notion of ‘civilization.’ We have pretended, as if playing upon an enormous stage, that these things make *sense;* that their innumerable, *inarguable* flaws are correctible. Another lie, told to comfort those in power.”

P’Li straightened her back, bringing herself up to fullest attention. There was something about the way Zaheer spoke that – even if she didn’t fully understand *every* detail of the content – was absolutely *enrapturing.*

“Every king or queen, every governor or magistrate, every elected representative…” added the young man, no longer staring off into the distance but now fully focused on *her,* and her alone. “No matter what costume they wear, in the end, they are all the same. Each, inevitably, turns toward tyranny when other methods fail. Even here, a place where no nation or government has managed to
reach – here, a single man seized power he’d neither earned nor deserved. And hundreds were made to suffer for it.”

P’Li blinked away stinging tears. He’d given her a skin of water after escaping the burning mansion, so they were coming far more easily now.

“The Red Lotus are a society founded upon the idea that these lies need not control our destinies,” said Zaheer. “Humanity has existed before the age of tyrants and despots, and it can again. But for that to happen, men like Du Jun must fall.”

The non-bender picked up a nearby stick, and began to inscribe a handful of markings upon the dirt in front of them. After a moment, P’Li recognized them: the symbols of the four elements.

“Change…Substance…Power…Freedom…” he whispered, upon the completion of each symbol in turn. “These are the only things in this world that are natural. All else must be purged. Only then will people like you or I be more than cogs in a faceless machine. Only then will we be able to live.”

That seemed as much as Zaheer was willing to say for now. Indeed, as he took another, lingering glance across her tiny features, she suspected he might be regretting how much he’d just told a twelve-year-old.

But P’Li was no ordinary twelve-year-old…not by a long shot. Her eyes – all three of them, somehow – were gleaming brightly.

“In any event…I’ve kept you too long,” he said, trying to get back on topic. “I’ll make sure you get taken somewhere safe, but I really need to get going to…”

The young man moved to stand up, his long hair flowing in the wind.

And P’Li, still new to such a thing, nevertheless found herself making a split-second decision. Gently but firmly, she seized Zaheer’s calloused fingers in her own.

“Let me go with you,” she asked of him, her voice stronger, more filled with conviction, than it’d ever been in the past twelve years. “Please.”

Zaheer blinked, a couple of times. When he spoke again, his own tones were soft and hesitant. “You don’t know what you’re asking,” he told her.

“Maybe I don’t. But it is what I want,” she replied insistently. She gestured at the burned-out village below them. “This…all of this…I’ve never known anything else. I don’t have any place to go, nobody to turn to. Except you.”

Zaheer’s frown deepened. “I have no regrets about the path I’ve taken,” he said. “But it is a lonely one. I wouldn’t dream of burdening another with it. Particularly one so…young.”

“You shouldn’t treat me like a child,” P’Li answered back, mirroring his frown perfectly. “I’m not sure I’ve ever really been one. I was raised as a weapon. I could be your weapon, if you asked me to. It…might be the only thing I know how to be.”

The young man was silent for a while, reading the expression on her face carefully. There was no trace of doubt in her deeply bruised features.

Finally, he sighed, as if resigning himself to something he suspected he’d wind up regretting.

“I can tell you’ve been used by far too many people,” he whispered, a genuineness to every word
she’d so rarely heard in her life. “I won’t even think about being another. But…you could help me. Just as long as I can help you in turn.”

“That seems fair,” said P’Li, very quickly. “But…what do you mean, exactly?”

“Well, I could teach you things. To start with,” Zaheer responded. “I’m sure there’re many things that…monster never bothered to show you. Great literature and art. Spirituality. Natural wonders all across this world. It’s been some time since I had a traveling companion…but I suppose it’s also been some time since I tried. As Guru Laghima once said, a journey not taken is like a thousand deaths, experienced all at once.”

He paused for a moment, looking down upon the precocious ex-slave, before adding quietly, “There’s just one thing I want to know, first. One thing I need to hear from you, with no ambiguity.”

“What is it?” she asked breathlessly.

“If you had other options in front of you…a warm bed, good clothes, a loving family willing to take you in…” he attempted to say, choosing every word with the utmost care. “Would you still make this choice? Are you latching onto me just because I’m here? Because you don’t see anything else?”

P’Li, too, tried to choose her next words carefully. She knew far fewer of them, so for her it was quite a bit more difficult.

“Maybe…that’s part of it,” she admitted, looking askance. “But not the main part. Look, what you were describing…I dunno how to put it. I’ve spent so long with my world closed off – with the world closed off for me – that I was blind to how many victims of people like Mas…like Du Jun…must still be out there. Other people in bondage. People wishing every spiritforsaken day, that someone could just come along and save them. Like you saved me.”

She swallowed, hard, before continuing.

“This world is broken. I may not know much, but I do know that,” she went on, her hands clutched into tiny fists. “So if you’re working on trying to fix it…I’ll do everything I can to help.”

P’Li strode forward, toward her savior, all three eyes directed resolutely toward him.

“Governments, nations, warlords…it doesn’t matter who’s holding the chain,” said the firebender. “Anyone who enslaves another…”

The blast curved perfectly around Zaheer, despite the distance between them being a matter of mere feet. A huge swathe of the ruined village was obliterated in an instant.

It made her point fairly well.

“…Will have to answer to me.”
“Ladies and gentlemen, you have my proposals in front of you. You’ve heard arguments from both sides,” said Tarrlok, offering a pointed glance toward Tenzin as he did. “If there are no objections, I move for a vote.”

“Seconded,” grunted I’Inka, his Southern counterpart.

“Then all in favor?” the chairman asked in a resounding voice, more appropriate for a massive crowd than the half-dozen he was addressing.

Tenzin suppressed a grimace as one, two, three hands slowly rose to join Tarrlok’s. It was as he’d feared – once again, his dissent stood alone.

A nasty leer spread across the waterbender’s face as he slowly turned to Lin. She looked no more happy than Tenzin did at this outcome, though she was doing a poorer job of hiding it.

“Then it seems you have your orders, Chief,” he added silkily, dipping his hand toward the door.

She returned him a look that Tenzin had only seen on her face once before; namely, during their breakup. But ultimately, she nodded. There wasn’t anything either of them could do about this now.

Except try to contain the horrific damage the city was about to inflict upon itself.

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“Martial law, ma’am? Can you clarify that, please?” called out Kuroi Shinobi, pointing a microphone toward the Chief of Police.

Lin resisted the urge to scowl once more. She hated dealing with the press in general, and being on the hook for Tarrlok’s idiocy didn’t help matters.

“First, we just want to make sure everyone remains calm,” she said, both her voice and her expression hardened. “This is a temporary measure while the police conduct a thorough investigation of the bombings that occurred early this morning. The Council has assured us that these measures will be lifted as soon as the culprits are apprehended.”

“But what ‘measures,’ exactly?” asked another reporter.

Lin winced slightly, but there was no other choice but to get this over with.

“By now, I’m sure most of you have heard the message broadcast by the terrorist calling himself Amon,” she responded. “Given the stated goals of his ‘Equalist’ group and the clear and present threat they pose to our citizenry, the following regulations are now in place.”

She began to read, verbatim, the long list of rules Tarrlok had managed to pass on the back of the bombings. There were eight in total.
• Membership or association with the Equalist Movement, through business, safe harbor, or any other relationship, is both henceforth and retroactively illegal.

• All non-benders are required to observe a strict, daily curfew. They must return to their domicile, place of employment, or other authorized dwelling (such as hospitals or hotels) before sunset, and remain there until dawn.

• Non-benders may not congregate in groups larger than five for periods exceeding half an hour, except in the course of verified business transactions or meetings. Any organization wishing to hold such an event must submit a written petition to City Hall at least twenty-four hours prior.

• The practice or teaching of the technique commonly called “chi-blocking” is both henceforth and retroactively illegal.

• All non-benders must, if ordered by a law enforcement officer, submit to random and unannounced searches at any time, up to and including body cavity searches.

• All non-benders in positions of public service – including government, law enforcement, and emergency services – must additionally submit to extensive personal interviews and background checks. Any and all information attained during this process may be grounds for immediate dismissal.

• The possession of electrified equipment and/or weaponry, except by manufacturing or disposal companies who have submitted a written petition for a special exception permit, is both henceforth and retroactively illegal.

• Any interference with the enforcement of these measures, such as by concealing knowledge of Equalist activities or obstructing the ongoing investigation, shall be considered a malicious act and a violation of Item #1.

Each of the regulations was punishable in the same manner: indefinite detention, without need for charges or access to a lawyer, “until such time as the Equalist crisis has passed.”

Needless to say, the list left the crowd of reporters – most of whom were non-benders themselves – momentarily dumbfounded. Only for a moment, though, as in the next they were all shouting over each other, clamoring for more details.

Lin, however, got a signal from Saikhan that they needed to get moving. Squinting in the face of three-dozen constantly flashing cameras, she said over the din, “I’m afraid that’s all the time we have for questions. Further inquiries can be directed to the Public Relations Office at City Hall. Or what’s left of it…”

She hadn’t meant to add that last part out loud, but the sheer amount of activity amongst the press crew was more than a little disorienting. She’d never dealt well with crowds at the best of times, and this was far from…

Suddenly, one voice managed to cut over the others – a smug, oily set of tones Lin recognized far too well. “Uwasa, Republic City Raconteur!” he shouted out, pen high in the air. “Any truth to the rumors Amon can remove people’s bending at will?”

She shouldn’t have said anything, shouldn’t have even reacted. The Raconteur was a sleazy gossip rag notable mostly for blurry photographs of bizarre creatures or long-dead celebrities…but they
stumbled upon something genuine on occasion, if only accidentally, and this was clearly one of those times.

And so, against her better judgment, Lin found herself demanding, “Rumors? What rumors?”

“C’mon, Chief! No need to play dumb,” said Uwasa, smirking in a way that made Lin wish quite desperately she could punch him in the face. “Not like any of us don’t know yet.”

He fished a crumbled-up, slightly damp piece of paper from his breast pocket and held it out for her. Again violating the basic principles of common sense, Lin took and unfolded it.

It was a flyer for a…well, she wasn’t sure exactly, but the flyer called it a “mover.” Some sort of entertainment show, it looked like, dated just over a month from now.

And it just so happened to be titled *The Curse of Amon, the Ancient and Almighty*!

The metalbender felt her blood run cold. There was no way someone would’ve had enough time to make something like this in the brief span of time since Amon’s broadcast. Whoever was behind this “mover” must’ve had advanced knowledge of the Equalist threat…and *accurate* knowledge, if the blurb at the bottom of the flyer could be believed.

*Feast your eyes on the evil Amon, shapeshifting master of darkness, as he preys upon the innocent with his wicked and unnatural powers! Cower in fear at his unholy ability to snatch away the bending of his victims! Can the Moon Princess vanquish his dastardly plot, and reunite with her beloved…or shall she be another casualty in his quest for undying vengeance?! Get ready for an experience you won’t soon forget – in never-before-seen “moving picture” technology!*

Well…*partially* accurate, at least. Certainly, more than was possible by sheer coincidence.

Lin took a moment to compose herself, trying not to betray any of the thoughts now racing through her mind. Instead she simply told the crowd, “The Republic City Police do not use fantasy stories as credible sources, and I suggest your papers do the same.”

Then she followed Saikhan into an armored vehicle, shut the door, and drove off.

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Korra lay upon her bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying to will herself back to sleep. Her body, she was pretty sure, had never *felt* more exhausted. But her mind was wide awake and racing.

This’d been going on for nearly *four hours* now.

The dream, of which she could still remember every detail like she’d *been* there, was the cherry on top of what’d almost certainly been the *worst* day of her life since the Massacre. Yet no matter how hard she tried to parse some meaning out of it – if there even *was* any – she repeatedly came up short.

Some random spirit wanted her to come to the Spirit World and meet him; a spirit who knew *way* more about her than seemed possible. But *why*?

She wished, not for the first time, that Zaheer was here with her. While far from her favorite mentor
in terms of personality, nobody knew spirits like he did. No doubt he’d be able to solve this one in the blink of an eye.

But right now, she was alone. In more ways than one. Korra found herself suppressing a sniff.

When it all came down to it…she missed her family.

Korra’s thoughts, as well as her entirely futile quest to fall back asleep, were interrupted by a sharp rapping at the door. The entrant didn’t bother to wait for her to open it, however, as they inserted and turned their own key.

As the door swung open, Korra recognized the short, heavily wrinkled face of her landlady, looking about as pleasant as the night she’d chastised her about the noise. She jabbed forward with an upturned broom, pointing it directly at her tenant.

“Call for you at the main desk, missy,” she said, in a tone suggesting that this interruption to her busy schedule was clearly all Korra’s fault. “Hurry up and take it, the phone company charges by the minute.”

“Oh! Err…thank you?” replied the Avatar, rather awkwardly. She’d never been in this sort of situation before, and hadn’t the slightest idea on the etiquette. “I’ll be there right away.”

The landlady scoffed loudly and stormed off, clearly not impressed with her manners. Korra, meanwhile, pulled on another layer of clothing, shook her hair to straighten it out a bit, and then rushed off to the only phone in the building.

Tentatively, not having had occasion to use one of these things much before, she brought the receiver to her ear with a muttered, “…Hello?”

There was a split-second of delay, during which Korra felt certain there must’ve been a mistake – after all, who would even have this number? – before she heard a very quiet, very familiar, “H… Hey.”

“Asami?” she said, her mouth dropping open slightly. “What, umm…I mean, how did you…?”

Her tongue tied up too quickly for her to finish the sentence, but Asami seemed to get the gist.

“Your address is listed in the company directory. I, err…got it this morning. When I called off work for you guys,” explained the non-bender. She wasn’t sounding all that much more articulate than Korra was right now.

The Avatar, meanwhile, scratched the back of her head, forgetting for a moment that the other girl couldn’t actually see the gesture. Once that realization came to her, she hastily replied, “Err…thanks for that. I, uh…didn’t even think about it. Not exactly a model employee, huh?”

“I think we all had bigger things on our minds at that point,” stated Asami. Korra wasn’t an expert at this sort of the thing, but she sounded almost…agitated. Distracted about something.

Her suspicions seemed to be confirmed as Asami swallowed audibly and added, “Listen, Miz… Korra. Can we meet up? Like…right now? I know we were all gonna get together tomorrow to compare notes, but…”

Another swallow, louder this time. Then, in an even lower voice, she said, “But…there’s some stuff I don’t really want to say in front of the others.”
Korra shivered slightly. What was that supposed to mean? Probably not what her treasonous, insolent subconscious had just decided to picture, but…

Either way, she found herself joining the other girl in the Game of the Gulps. Then, once she’d finally managed to scrounge up the necessary reserves of courage – or, at minimum, basic dignity – she asked, “Where do you wanna meet?”

“Somewhere out in the open, where we could just blend in…but where we wouldn’t likely be overheard,” Asami mused, clearly deep in thought on the other end. “How about Republic City Park? There’s this nice, quiet area along the river, next to the Dancing Dragons statue.”

“Sounds, uh…fine to me,” muttered Korra, her face an uneasy mix of a smile and a grimace.

“Alright, then. I’ll…see you there,” said Asami, just as nervously. Then the line switched off.

For the first time in her life, Avatar Korra hung up the receiver of a telephone.

Today wasn’t done with her, it seemed.

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“You guys did hear what Zaheer said, right?” demanded P’Li, glaring sideways at her companions from the backseat of a police truck. “You know…about keeping a low profile?”

“Yes. Exactly,” said Ming-Hua, her voice light and mock-cheerful. “Low profile. Profile that is low. That’s why I’m crouching.”

“While you hold a police officer’s neck at knifepoint,” the combustionbender growled, enunciating each syllable.

“Details, details,” replied the other woman with a smirk, before leaning in closer and brushing up against the back of said officer’s neck. “Besides, dear sweet Lu has become so very fond of me. He wouldn’t want to do anything to make me…unhappy. Would you, Lu?”

The detective swallowed, hard, his flesh rising to within a hair’s breadth of the ice-blade held against it. He shook his head vigorously.

“Gooooood. Then keep driving,” she ordered in a sultry whisper.

He complied.

There were five of them in the truck right now – Lu and his partner Gang in the front, and P’Li, Ming-Hua, and Ghazan in the back, a makeshift curtain hiding them from view. Both of the detectives had small, thin, and obscenely sharp blades of ice held just in front of their throats, courtesy of the mildly unhinged waterbender.

It went quite a long way toward encouraging their complete and total cooperation.

After ambushing the policemen at the Ba Sing Se Bureaucratic Annex, they’d driven straight to the secondary drop-zone to pick up P’Li and Zaheer. The non-bender hadn’t been there, however.

“He said he had something else he wanted to check on,” she’d explained to the others when asked.
“Something to do with ‘spiritual loci.’ You know how he is about that kinda stuff. He'll meet back up with us around sundown.”

“And in the meantime?” Ghazan had said in reply.

“We continue with the mission,” P’Li had answered, nodding firmly.

That was why they were currently careening down the highway in an attempt to beat rush-hour traffic.

Their main destination was Korra’s apartment, but they knew they wouldn’t be able to visit it until after dark. That was the reason they’d sent her in the first place, after all – all four of them had faces on wanted posters somewhere in the world, so going out in public wasn’t an especially good idea right now.

As such, in the meantime, they had a couple other…errands to run.

“First stop: the United Republic First National Bank,” said Ming-Hua, putting on her best exaggeratedly formal accent. “All passengers disembarking should make sure to watch their step. Or not, it might be funnier that way.”

“You’re fine to stay here with the hostages?” asked P’Li, as she cautiously popped open the truck’s rear doors.

The waterbender smirked, bending over so that she could lick the edge of one of the ice-blades.

“Hey, someone’s gotta keep the little piggy-chickies in line,” she whispered dangerously. “But hurry back. These two are so mind-bogglingly stupid that I can’t guarantee they won’t try anything…unwise.”

“W…We won’t! I swear!” Gang coughed out, his entire body shivering head-to-toe.

“Shhhhh. Piggy-chickies don’t talk,” she added, grinning in delight; she was clearly enjoying the heck out of this. A moment later, she turned back to her compatriots. “C’mon, get along now! That whatever-you-call-it isn’t going to steal itself.”

Ghazan sighed as soon as they exited the police truck. They’d parked in a back-alley behind the bank, and the vehicle blocked their view from the streets, but they still moved with abundant caution.

“Bank robberies? Really?” he murmured to P’Li, shaking his head in disbelief. “What, are we out of candy to steal from babies?”

“Hey, if Zaheer says he needs that artifact, then he needs that artifact,” said the firebender with a shrug. “Besides, it isn’t exactly a normal robbery. Not with your power.”

“Point taken,” responded the earthbender, taking a deep breath and then assuming a stance.

It only took a few seconds for the stone wall before them to begin melting away, following the movements of Ghazan’s hands as he spread them far apart and then, with an enormous effort, lowered them.

The result was a literal hole in the bank’s security, just wide enough for a single person to pass through.

Both of them did so without delay, emerging into a room that was pitch-black save for the light
streaming in from outside. P’Li formed a flame in her palm so they could at least see where they were going.

“Zaheer said it should be in one of the safety deposit boxes. Most likely belonging to Master Katara, the Avatar’s widow,” she said, peering over the names along the shelves. This was the most commonly used bank in the entire United Republic, and so there were a lot of names.

Several minutes passed in silence before Ghazan called out, “Found it. I think.”

P’Li hurried over and brought her fire close to the shelf in question. Sure enough, amongst the hundreds of metal boxes lining the walls was one with the characters for “Katara” – along with the symbol of the Water Tribe.

Given enough time, Ghazan might’ve been able to bend away this barrier as well; refined metals were harder to melt than raw ore, but with enough energy just about anything could melt. Still… sometimes the best solutions were the simplest.

Zaheer had taught P’Li a number of little “tricks” during their seventeen years on the run together, and picking locks had been among the first. With a little bit of wire and just the right set of turns, the safety deposit box clicked open.

Ghazan did the honors of extracting their prize, pulling it out carefully by the hilt. He released it from its sheath by a couple of inches, marveling at the unique shade of the metal.

“All this for a sword?” he said quietly, as P’Li refastened the lock on the box. Once he bent the earth he’d melted back into place, it would likely be some time before anyone realized there’d been a theft at all.

“It’s not just about the sword,” she told him, not looking up from her work. “It’s about what it represents.”

Then, as soon as the lock clicked once more, she got back to her feet and gestured to the hole with her plume of flame.

“C’mon. We shouldn’t dawdle here,” she muttered, adopting both the poise and tone that her boyfriend favored. “We have a couple more stops to make.”

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“You’d better have had a good reason to drag me over here,” Kuvira snapped, sipping at her tea as she did. “Besides…shouldn’t you have returned to Zaofu by now?”

Her companion, too, was drinking from a steaming cup, though far more calmly.

“Miss Beifong gave me wide discretion in pursuit of my mission here. I believe there is still aid I can provide her sister, whether or not she wishes to accept it,” said Aiwei. “Suyin trusts me to fulfill her wishes in the manner I see fit…just as she trusts you with the same.”

“Hence why we weren’t supposed to interfere with each other’s investigations,” Kuvira pointed out. “And why I’m a little puzzled you’re now violating those instructions.”
“Because circumstances have changed,” he replied with a frown. “Our respective missions have become significantly more urgent, as of this morning.”

“The bombgings,” she murmured, matching his expression.

“Precisely. The Equalists are growing bolder, and there’s no indication that the police are making any significant headway against them,” he said. “Besides…they don’t even seem to comprehend what’s really going on here.”

“You suspect the Red Lotus was involved with the attack as well, I take it?” asked Kuvira, before draining the remainder of her cup.

Aiwei nodded. “At very least, the targets chosen fit their history precisely,” he responded. “Of course, if that is true, then it leaves us with two possibilities. Either the Equalists took advantage of the situation by seizing credit…or the two organizations have already struck an accord, and are now working together.”

Kuvira’s face remained an impassionate mask, but inwardly, her mind raced like a well-oiled machine, processing and testing this theory.

The one piece of the puzzle Aiwei was missing – one that Kuvira had no interest in sharing – was Korra’s presence in the city. The Avatar was an admitted member of the Red Lotus, and the removal of her earth and firebending clearly unfeigned.

Somehow, Kuvira doubted that would’ve happened if she and Amon were secretly on the same side all along.

That did leave one other possibility, however. The Red Lotus were over fifty years old, and had experienced a period of largely unchecked growth ever since the Southern Massacre. Some amount of internal strife, even schism, was hardly out of the question.

Could this city’s present chaos be the result of two factions within the Lotus, clashing against each other? One with the Avatar as its ultimate pawn…and one with Amon?

At very least, it was worth looking into.

None of this, of course, Kuvira allowed to be reflected in either her tone or her demeanor. She’d known Aiwei for nearly her entire life, and disliked him almost as long.

She’d always been a reserved person, keeping things close to her chest unless forced otherwise, and the man who could instantly detect her every omission or falsehood had been her bane as a child. Learning to conceal her secrets from his senses had been an ongoing struggle throughout her adolescence.

And now that she could…Kuvira had no interest in sharing any more with him than she absolutely had to.

“Regardless, I don’t see how this changes our central objective,” she eventually said, hoping the delay in her speech hadn’t been too obvious. “In either case, we’ll discover the truth in time, should we continue to investigate. Separately, that is.”

“Based on the attack this morning, I rather doubt that ‘time’ is a resource we have in abundance,” stated the truth-seer. “I assure you, it will only be the first of many. The measures that were announced over the radio an hour ago will only embolden Amon. The Council, I think, vastly underestimates his capabilities, and will suffer for it.”
“For once, I believe we’re in full agreement. But I don’t suppose you’ve tried bringing this to them?” asked Kuvira, more than a little irritably.

“I did, actually,” he answered, adjusting his glasses. “Chief Beifong more or less brushed me off, so I brought my concerns to Councilman Tarlok this morning. He seemed amenable, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it influenced the measures he took to the Council. But those are too little, too late.”

“Martial law is ‘too little, too late’?” said Kuvira, raising an eyebrow. “I heard the same broadcast you did. Setting aside whether they are wise, if those rules are enforced to the letter, I cannot imagine how they’d fail to cripple the Equalist Movement.”

“Which is where the Red Lotus come in,” Aiwei declared pointedly. “If they are indeed working in conjunction with the Equalists – at least in part – then any measures taken against them may be compromised from the outset. Because…”

He leaned forward, staring at her over the rim of his glasses.

“I am almost certain the Lotus have a spy close to the Council,” he finished, his expression severe. “And I need your help to root them out.”

Tenzin breathed a heavy sigh as he plopped down into his favorite armchair. This had been one heck of a day.

He was alone in his home right now; he’d split away from the rest of the family after lunch, in order to attend Tarlok’s meeting, and evidently he’d beaten them all back to the island.

The airbending master had distinctly mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, warm hugs from his wife and children were about the best cure-all he knew.

On the other, it was probably a good thing they couldn’t see how miserably he’d just failed.

He’d tried to argue against Tarlok’s foolishness, to make him see reason, but it was only him and Lin against the most skillful politician in the United Republic and three people desperate to do something. And in the end, it wasn’t like Lin – hardly the most helpful ally even when she agreed with you – actually got a vote.

Tenzin had been in government long enough to know where those winds were likely to blow.

Fear was a powerful motivator, and honestly Tenzin couldn’t exactly blame his fellow councilors for being scared. The bombings had shaken this city to its core, causing massive property damage and a not-inconsiderable number of casualties. Tenzin shuddered to think how much worse it could’ve been if Amon hadn’t warned the targets ahead of time.

Their current path certainly hadn’t done much to rein in the Equalist threat, so it’d been hard to argue against trying out a new one. That his “solution” was only going to make the problem that much worse was a truth Tarlok was either unwilling or unable to hear.

Because while he was on the subject of things he couldn’t blame people for, non-benders responding…negatively to these new measures was certainly one of them.
In the name of catching a tiny – if admittedly very dangerous – few, Tarrlok was demanding that the majority of the population relinquish any hope of privacy or a normal life. To be treated as criminals for as long as the Council felt like remaining in “Crisis Mode.”

Who wouldn’t want to join the Equalists, if that was the face of the “bending establishment”? Unfortunately, at this point he was running short on other options. The Council had made its decision, and it was his duty and obligation to help enforce it to the best of his ability.

Perhaps the best course of action would be to wait for this all to, inevitably, blow up in Tarrlok’s face. The waterbender was turning the city into a powder keg filled with blasting jelly, and it’d only take a single spark for it all to go up in flames.

The only problem was all the innocents – benders and non-benders alike – who were liable to get caught in the crossfire.

Tenzin sighed again and reached for the phone. Idling clearly wasn’t a good idea right now. He needed to get back to work.

The airbender dialed the number for the Republic City Police Department’s non-emergency line. He could’ve called Lin directly and gotten the information quicker, he supposed, but he expected he was probably the last person she wanted to hear from right now.

Well…he was pretty much always the last person she wanted to hear from, but still.

Thankfully, there were perks to being a councilman. Once he’d managed to prove his identity to the young officer on the other line, accessing his mother’s case report was as simple as asking for it.

“Affraid it doesn’t look like anything’s been added since the initial complaint,” said the officer after a moment, his tone apologetic. “Sorry, sir.”

“What about all the Red Monsoon and Triple Threat Triad members who were arrested today?” asked Tenzin. “None of them said…?”

“Wait, wait, hold on…ah, there we go. Someone did leave a little note, sir,” the young man informed him politely. “Oh, uh…sorry again. I shouldn’t have gotten your hopes up. It just says they questioned every waterbender – err, well, former waterbender – they took in, but none of them knew anything about…umm, what’s a two-fifty-three? I’ve never seen that crime code before…”

“And pray you never do, son,” Tenzin murmured, shaking his head. Another dead-end. “Thank you very much for your time.”

The airbending master hung up the phone without another word, trying to piece everything together.

So the mysterious bloodbender in Republic City – the first known case since Yakone who could commit the crime without the benefit of the full moon – either wasn’t a member of the bending triads, or else had a throng of followers willing to lie on their behalf.

The latter possibility was, of course, infinitely more likely…but Tenzin could hardly discount the former, either. Could this be the work of a single, rogue criminal? Could the bloodbending Katara sensed really have nothing to do with everything else going on right now?

No…somehow, Tenzin didn’t think so. He was reminded of something his uncle had once said: coincidences existed, but they were like kiwi-zebras. If you heard hoof steps, you’d be better off expecting an ostrich-horse instead.
Uncle Sokka had been *full* of such kernels of “wisdom.”

Tenzin was saved from any further rumination on the subject, however, as the door slammed open with the sort of force that *only* accompanied a rambunctious airbender.

Sure enough, Meelo strutted into the house butt-first, followed swiftly by his mother and two sisters. Pema did not look amused.

“Next time I say, ‘Oh, everything’s fine honey, go off to work, I can handle the kids from here’…” she said, her voice low and flat. “Slap me. Please.”

Tenzin immediately rushed over and scooped up Meelo and Ikki into his arms, unsure which one was the primary cause of his wife’s travails and so grabbing both just to be certain. The two immediately resumed what must’ve been a lengthy earlier argument – something about who would win in a fight, Avatar Roku or Avatar Kyoshi – as Tenzin carried them off, exchanging a look with his wife that both understood to mean, “We’ll talk later.”

For now, whether or not they were tired, these two *desperately* needed to be put to bed.

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It took Korra a few minutes to find the statue in question, and a few minutes longer to stop gawking at it.

Built from or at least painted in gleaming gold, the sculpture depicted two enormous dragons intertwined with each other, as if the midst of an elegant dance. Live fire spewed from each of their maws, treated somehow so that it came out a magnificent rainbow of colors.

A plaque at the base of the statue, credited to the Sun Warrior Preservation Society, read:

*Dedicated to Fire Lord Zuko and Avatar Aang, who brought the miracle of First Fire to the masses.*

Below the plaque, a number of people – most likely of Fire Nation blood, based on the colors used – had left tributes, including flowers, offerings, and burning candles. A handsome boy in red robes was on his knees, silently praying.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” came a lilting voice from behind her. “This was my mom’s favorite spot in the city.”

Without thinking, Korra turned backward and muttered dreamily, “Yeah…beautiful…”

Then she realized what she’d just said, and who she’d just said it to, and her cheeks went crimson. Hastily, she averted her gaze, but couldn’t help but look back a moment later.

Even if she hadn’t meant to say it, there was no denying her blurted-out statement was true. Asami Sato was decked out like a model, an emerald-green dress clinging perfectly around her body, complementing her eyes and accentuating her curves. Her hair and makeup were impeccably crafted, straddling the fine line between subtle and eye-popping. A sparkling necklace, silver with gold trim, completed the effect.

Asami, too, blushed brightly. “I, uh…hope this is fine,” she said, gesturing to her ensemble. “I
know I probably overdressed for a meeting at the park, but I…never mind. Do you, err…like it?”

In lieu of answering, since her throat was suddenly \textit{very} dry, Korra found herself swallowing deeply.

“W…Wow…” was how she finally replied, once control of her voice was reestablished. “I…dunno what to say…”

Suddenly, she felt very self-conscious about her own outfit, another hand-me-down from her cousin. While she and Eska were clearly about the same size, the Northern girl seemed to favor very conservative and, for lack of a better term…\textit{dour} clothing.

With her short-cropped hair and pronounced muscle tone, Korra couldn’t help but think the style didn’t exactly complement her body very well. Not that that was something she should’ve cared much about, but…

Well, she was only human, wasn’t she?

Okay…human plus a couple hundred spirits. But still.

Regardless, Asami was speaking again, and Korra had to shake her head to jolt it back to reality.

“Anyway, is this…umm…a good time to talk?” she said delicately, gesturing to a bench directly in front of the statue. The pink tinge to her cheeks hadn’t disappeared. “I know I kinda called you here outta the blue, but…”

Instinctively, Korra’s eyes darted around the area. The praying boy appeared to have left, and no other residents of the park looked to be within hearing distance, so long as they kept their voices low. Satisfied – or as close to it as her naturally paranoid mind ever got – she nodded and sat down upon the bench.

Asami joined her a moment later, though unlike Korra she set herself down at an angle, facing the other girl. Her expression was warm and tender, but the Avatar thought she could see a little bit of pain in there too.

Korra had a good idea where the conflict in her face was stemming from. Not that she could exactly blame her for it.

“So, umm…” mumbled Korra, her all-consuming sense of awkwardness only increasing by the second. “What exactly \textit{did} you want to talk about?”

The non-bender took a few deep, steadying breaths before answering. Even in \textit{those}, she managed to look attractive.

“Well…a lot of things, I guess,” she said, after a lengthy pause. “We never really got to talk…\textit{really} talk…after everything that went down last night. We were too busy sharing intel, and working out our next move, and…well, you know. \textit{That} kinda stuff. So…I guess where I wanna start off is…”

Then she leaned forward, and took one of Korra’s hands in her own. The waterbender’s entire body shivered…but she didn’t pull away.

“Are you…\textit{okay}?” Asami finished, accompanying her words with a light squeeze.

Korra blinked a couple of times, scarcely believing what she was hearing. It’d been strange enough back at the tea shop, but she’d been \textit{certain} it wouldn’t remain the case after a few hours for the other girl to think on it…
“I don’t...I don’t get it, Asami,” she told the heiress, anguished voice passing through gritted teeth. “I’ve lied to you since the moment we met. I admitted that I’m still keeping secrets from you! You should be angry, furious, want nothing to do with me!”

A sudden burst of defiance spread across the non-bender’s face.

“And who says?” she demanded. “Look, maybe I’m gullible or naïve but that...that just doesn’t bother me, okay? At least not as much as you might think it would. I mean, it’s hard to explain, but...”

Asami took a deep, rattling breath.

“When I look at you, I see someone who...who I know I can trust,” she continued on. “It’s like there’s this voice, deep down inside, that’s telling me...that if I believe in you, everything will turn out alright. And whatever it is, however it works...I’m sure it’s the truth. Not a single doubt in my mind.”

“Well, that voice is wrong!” choked out Korra, her windpipe suddenly feeling very tight. “Because you can’t trust me, no one should! The things I’ve done, the...the people I’ve hurt...”

“Tell me about them, then,” said Asami, cutting her off. “Don’t try to push me away by keeping me in the dark, letting me imagine the worst. Because I’m not going away, Korra. Not without a fight.”

It was the first time the Avatar had ever heard her use her real name. She wished it didn’t feel so good.

Korra let out a lengthy sigh, shaking her head a fraction of an inch to each side. The almighty spirit of Peace and Light incarnated in human form, and this was where she met her match.

“I’m...still not ready to tell you everything,” she whispered, resolve slowly filling her voice. “But I will, someday. And that’s a promise.”

“And that’s okay with me,” Asami hastened to assure her. “Because whether or not you think I should, I do trust you...from the bottom of my heart. If you say you have a good reason to keep things from me, then I believe you. No questions asked.”

“But you do have questions,” said Korra, averting her eyes for a moment.

“Well, of course I do. That’s why I wanted...needed...to see you,” responded the other girl. “I mean, I just found out that you’re the Avatar! I don’t even know where to start...”

She paused, exhaling deeply. “But...I won’t ask you to share anything you’re not comfortable with,” she added quickly. “If you ever think I’m getting too personal, just say the word and I’ll stop.”

Korra was silent for a few moments, thinking this over as she looked out upon the river. A family of turtle-ducks swam past them, the babies nipping at each other playfully.

Eventually, wordlessly, she nodded once.

“How old were you when you found out?” asked Asami. “I can’t even imagine what it’d feel like...”

“Four. From the stories I’ve heard, I was one of the youngest ever to learn,” Korra answered, her voice toneless. “Nobody ever told me I couldn’t bend more than one element, so I thought nothing
of it. Not until I showed it to my folks.”

“Your parents…” said Asami, wincing slightly. She clearly knew this was a delicate subject. “They were…”

“Murdered. During the Southern Massacre,” Korra interjected, her eyes narrowed and dim. “Stolen from me, along with the rest of my Tribe. That’s why I can never forgive…”

She caught herself, just in time. No need to bring that up right now. She wouldn’t have gotten into it with Kuvira either, if she’d had a choice in the matter.

Taking a few, unsteady breaths to calm herself, Korra eventually murmured, “Sorry, but…I don’t want to talk about home anymore. There’s no way to bring it up without getting ‘too personal,’ okay?”

“Say no more,” Asami told her, nodding emphatically. “It’s not like I don’t understand. I can usually talk about mom these days without breaking down, but there’re times when…”

She didn’t complete the sentence. She didn’t need to.

“So…next question?” said Korra after a few moments, if only to break the silence.

Asami, however, looked even more anxious than before, shifting awkwardly upon the bench.

“This one isn’t really about you, Korra,” she replied, averting her eyes. “But…I can’t pretend it wasn’t one of the reasons I called you out here today. So, please…answer me honestly…”

There was a protracted pause, just long enough to grow uncomfortable, before she pursed her lips and asked, her voice barely audible, “Do you agree with Kuvira? About…About my dad?”

A bead of sweat traveled down Korra’s cheek. Of all the questions she’d been prepared for, that wasn’t one of them.

“Well, uh…I mean, like I said this morning, I don’t really know him all that well…” she said, her words tripping over each other. “But he doesn’t…seem like he’s the kind of person who’d…”

Asami held up a hand to cut her off. “I don’t mean on the surface,” she added softly. “Deep down inside, what does your gut tell you?”

“Hold on. It almost sounds like you want me to say he’s an Equalist conspirator,” declared the Avatar, raising an eyebrow in surprise.

“I want to be able to trust my father. To be able to say Kuvira’s accusations are nothing but a load of hot air,” said Asami. “But I can’t, and it’s tearing me up inside. And I…I can’t confront him about it. I just can’t.”

“In that case, maybe we could…y’know, investigate?” Korra asked, trying to make the suggestion sound as casual as possible. No question, this was precisely what she’d been sent here for in the first place, but at the same time the notion of taking advantage of Asami’s trust in order to do it felt…

Well, she wasn’t sure how it felt. But however misplaced that trust might be…Korra couldn’t say she much enjoyed the idea of breaking it.

Asami, for her part, let out a breathless sigh.

“I suppose it couldn’t hurt to look a little deeper into what he’s been doing lately,” she answered
belatedly. “Okay, that’s not true, it could hurt. But…not nearly as much as doing nothing. So…how about we take a look around tomorrow night? He’s going to the theatre with some business associates, so we should have the run of the house for a few hours. Just you and me…and maybe Kuvira. If only because I have a good feeling she’ll invite herself along regardless.”

“She does seem the type,” said Korra with a brief, humorless chuckle. After that, however, her expression turned downcast. “Spirits, how the heck did I even get to this point? With her, and the guys, and…you. Especially you…”

The waterbender hadn’t meant to add that last bit out loud, but it’d slipped out with her own, protracted sigh. From the look on Asami’s face, she hadn’t missed it.

“What does that mean?” she asked quietly. Her tone was genuine rather than accusatory, but she did sound a little hurt.

“Nothing!” exclaimed the Avatar, before realizing a second later how stupid a response that was. “I mean…yes, you’re different from them, but not in a…not in a bad way…”

Asami swallowed, her head dipped. “Okay…one more question,” she said, biting her lip. “And I dunno how this is gonna come out, but…”

Then, with a sudden burst of resolve, she met Korra’s gaze, brilliant green eyes piercing into warmest blue.

“What do you think about…well…” whispered the non-bender. “About…me?”

The breath caught in Korra’s throat.

“I…well, I mean…you see…” she sputtered wildly, feeling it in real time as her brain reduced to mush. How could she even answer a question like that? Did she have an answer?

“I know we haven’t known each other very long. And I know you’ve got this idea in your head that our time together somehow doesn’t count, just because you did it under a fake name,” continued Asami, her voice slightly strained. “But I don’t care about that, alright? I don’t care whether you’re called Mizore or Korra. I don’t care whether you’re just some random waterbender…or the person destined to save the world.”

Then, slowly, she began to lean forward. Korra became suddenly aware that, without her consciously noticing, the heiress had scooched over on the bench, so that their bodies were very nearly touching.

And right now, she was coming even closer.

“But I do know the one thing I do care about,” said the non-bender, her eyes half-lidded as the distance between them grew smaller by the second. “I care about you. I…care about you a lot.”

Korra’s mind hadn’t been working properly since she’d been asked the question, and if there was one thing she’d learned over the past week it was that she was abysmal at thinking under pressure.

So instead of making excuses, of weaving an intricate new lie, her brain defaulted to the one thing it always seemed to, whenever Asami managed to push her into a corner.

She told the truth.

“I…” murmured the Avatar, her face beginning to move forward as well, of its own accord. “I do
too…”

Their lips met.

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“This is what’s next on old baldy’s shopping list?” asked Ming-Hua, her tone incredulous. “Really?”

“Alright, I admit…I don’t much understand it either,” P’Li said, grimacing at the sight. “But when has Zaheer ever steered us wrong before?”

“To be perfectly fair, a bunch of times,” called out Ghazan, who was taking his turn guarding their captives. “I mean, remember when we took that trip to Whale Tail Island, and he…”

“That was one time!” the combustionbender interjected, a vein pulsing in her forehead. “Anyway, just keep an eye on those two. We’ll take care of things here.”

“Can do!” responded Ghazan with a cheerful chuckle, patting the detectives across the back and causing them both to jump about three miles.

While less…direct in his methods than his waterbending companion, he’d chosen what was possibly an even crueler method of restraint, surrounded their necks with collars of rough stone. Both men knew he could melt them down at any time, and neither was eager to give him an excuse.

“Alright, sparks. Hold on tight,” said Ming-Hua. Then, with the tips of her streams transformed into long picks, the two women began their descent into Republic City’s primary landfill.

It wasn’t particularly elaborate, as far as these things went – essentially just an enormous hole in the ground, formed by earthbenders, which the city garbage collectors could dump into with impunity. Once it got too full, those same earthbenders would cover it over with a thick layer of heavy sediment, and then move onto the next site.

The smell, already intense from their vantage point in the police truck, soon became nigh-unbearable. As a firebender, P’Li had been trained all her life in the fine art of breath control, but even she had her limits, and in any event Ming-Hua had no such advantage. Within moments, the waterbender was gasping for clean air.

“Tell…that boyfriend of yours…” she hissed between bouts of heavy wheezing. “That I’m gonna…freeze his balls off…when we’re through…”

“Sometimes I forget you’re older than me,” muttered P’Li, earning herself a patented death-glare in the process.

Eventually, they reached the bottom of the chasm and Ming-Hua released her hold on the wall, causing them to land feet-first in a pile of refuse. The trash went up almost to their knees, and both women exerted a considerable amount of energy trying to pretend this wasn’t the case.

Forming another pillar of flame in her palm, P’Li peered across the veritable mountains of garbage, blinking rapidly to keep the stinging vapors out of her eyes. The treasure in the midst of this disgusting trove was nowhere to be seen.
If they had to search this manually, it could take days, if not weeks, to make even the slightest headway. But Zaheer had indicated there would be a clue, somewhere...

And she’d never once gone wrong by trusting in the man she loved.

Newspapers strewn throughout the piles gave their search some direction, at least. According to Jilu’s intelligence, the object had been thrown away only a couple days ago; Councilman Tarrlok had personally overseen that it made it to the garbage truck.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours – though P’Li would readily admit the fumes might’ve warped her perception of time – the firebender felt a chill as a thin piece of ice prodded her on the shoulder. When she turned around, Ming-Hua directed the stream to their left.

Drawing closer, P’Li soon noticed what the waterbender had: a pile of fresh, if half-eaten, apples. In these conditions, it didn’t take long for fruit to start rotting, so their presence could only mean one thing.

They were getting close.

Unfortunately, their quarry wasn’t exactly large, and they only had a very general idea of what it might look like. Plus, there was no guarantee it’d even be near the surface of one of these piles, rather than buried deep. Neither of them were exactly eager to start sifting through trash with their bare hands.

Fortunately, however…one of them didn’t have “bare hands.” P’Li stared pleadingly at her friend, who took a moment to recognize her silent request. Once she did, the waterbender swore at the top of her lungs.

“You…owe me for this…princess…” growled Ming-Hua, as she nevertheless refashioned her streams into great shovels of ice. “Big…time…”

The next several minutes passed with the waterbender scooping up as much garbage as she could and then allowing it to slowly rain back down. P’Li’s sharply trained eyes – what would always and forever be the eyes of an assassin – darted about the cascading refuse, searching for the telltale blue-and-silver glint Zaheer had described to her.

Over and over this same process was repeated, Ming-Hua’s face growing less patient and more disgusted with each cycle. But P’Li couldn’t, wouldn’t let that deter her. Zaheer had given her a job to do and, even if he was willing to forgive her coming back empty-handed...

Her own conscience was far less forgiving.

P’Li became so engrossed in her task, watching thousands upon thousands of trashed objects pass by her with each passing second, that she almost missed her prize when it came into view.

But there was no mistaking those brilliant colors, even marred as they were by the filth of their surroundings, and the combustionbender dove forward to capture the treasure in mid-air, not caring about the deluge of garbage that came down upon her as she did.

“Spirits, girl…” said Ming-Hua, as the younger woman emerged from the pile, her plaited black hair all tangled up with wrappers and soggy noodles. “That thing better have been worth all this.”

“We won’t know for sure until Zaheer takes a look at it,” replied the firebender, squinting her eyes at the tiny little trinket. “But for the sake of my next hundred baths, I sure as heck hope so.”
The object in question was a locket on a chain, about the size of a pig-chicken egg. At one point, it must’ve been truly gorgeous – what looked to be pure silver, inlaid with tiny blue gemstones – but its time traveling through the municipal waste system had, unsurprisingly, diminished its luster.

Still, after all this, the temptation to open it was too great to ignore. What lay within seemed a matter of profound disappointment, however.

It was an almost *profoundly* ordinary picture of a small family, dressed in Water Tribe garb and gathered together around a fire. The father was tending to a chunk of meat upon a spit, his face turned away from the camera, while the mother held two young boys close to her chest. Both were smiling and laughing.

“Are you *kidding* me? We played hide-and-go-screw-yourself through ten tons of garbage and for… what? A reject from some family’s photo album?” demanded Ming-Hua.

“There must be some reason Tarrolok disposed of it the way he did,” said P’Li – though for the life of her, she couldn’t even imagine what it might be. “Anyway, when we take on the Council, having a little something extra in our back pocket could only be a good thing.”

Ming-Hua snorted.

“You can keep that thing outta my pockets, thank you very much,” she tossed off, before extending her streams once more for the return climb.

[----------------------]

“And that’s twenty-eight, twenty-nine…thirty. Yup, thirty-thousand yuans, right there,” said Butakha, chuckling to himself as he counted the bills. A satisfied smirk upon his face, he turned to Bolin and Mako, and offered his jewel-adorned hand. “Congrats, boys. Welcome to the big leagues.”

Bolin enthusiastically returned the handshake, his mouth wide open. “You won’t regret this, sir!” he exclaimed. “The Fire Ferrets will bring home the gold for Republic City! Or…err…whatever metal the trophy’s made out of.”

Butakha gave a great, exaggerated shrug, but he was still grinning. “Hey, all I care ‘bout is puttin’ on a good show,” he replied. “You boys deliver that an’ we’re good.”

“There’s definitely no chance of us letting you down there, sir,” added Mako quickly. “No one in the league puts in more work than we do.”

The non-bender’s smirk broadened by a fraction of an inch. “Glad to hear it,” he said. “I’m ‘specially interested in that new waterbender o’ yours. Know she hasn’t debuted yet, but I’ve heard ‘round that she’s somethin’ else.”

Mako’s smile turned slightly nervous, though he tried not to let it show. “She sure is…*unique*,” he answered carefully. “And I know she’s ready to get out there in the arena.”

“Then I’ll see you next week, boys,” called out Butakha, already turned away and striding out of the stadium like he owned the place. Which, to be fair, he did. “Don’t go disappointin’ me, now. People who disappoint me…*don’t* wind up lastin’ long in this biz.”
Bolin waited until the manager left the arena before declaring, “What a nice guy! He really knows how to brighten up a room.”

Out of anyone else, those words would’ve been dripping with sarcasm. Mako wasn’t sure whether to groan or smile, and wound up doing a little of both.

Then, with that out of the way, he pulled on his helmet and began stretching his limbs.

“Alright bro, we’ve only got five more days to train,” he said as he did his warmups. “And with the first round this close, some other teams will want to start practicing here. This might be our last day alone with the ring, so let’s make the most of it.”

“Err…in that case, shouldn’t we wait for Mizore?” asked the earthbender, his face sinking a bit. “I mean, Korra! I mean…Mizore! Oof…I’m not good at this…”

Mako shook his head. “Somehow, I doubt we’re gonna be seeing much of her at practice for a while,” he told his brother. “Probably should count ourselves lucky if she even shows up for the match.”

“Hey, just because she’s the Avatar doesn’t mean she won’t take her other responsibilities seriously!” Bolin declared. “And…err…well, if she doesn’t, then that just means she must’ve had a good reason!”

“You’re such an Avatar fanboy,” muttered Mako with a sigh.

Bolin, however, didn’t appear to be listening. “Huh, wait…can the Avatar even play pro-bending?” he said, now talking mostly to himself as he slowly pulled on his own gear. “You’d think that’d be against the rules. I mean…if you can bend all the elements you kinda break the game wide open, right?”

Another sigh, longer this time. “I don’t think, when they wrote the rulebook, that it ever even crossed their mind,” the firebender responded impatiently. “Besides…”

He paused and, despite being the only two people in the entire bending arena, lowered his voice before continuing, “Until we take care of Amon, she’s basically just a really powerful waterbender, anyway. So it’s not like anyone’s likely to find out.”

“She could go into the Avatar State,” Bolin pointed out, but his brother looked skeptical.

“In the middle of a sports match?” he asked, crossing his arms as they walked out into the ring. “There may be some jerks in the league, but no crazed Fire Lords or rampaging spirits. I think that’d be going a little overboard.”

By the time he finished speaking, the two of them were on opposite sides of the arena, instinctively taking stances. Without their third member, drilling on team formations would’ve been a waste of time…

Which just left good, old-fashioned sparring.

“Yeah, but from what we’ve seen of Korr…Miz…whatever!” said Bolin, punctuating his words by sending two stone discs flying at his brother. “I’m not sure she’s the type to hold back if you push her.”

Mako dodged one of the discs and broke through the other with a concentrated fire blast, following it up swiftly with two powerful, arcing kicks.
“You heard her in the tea shop,” he stated upon landing. “Her mission…whatever it is…is a lot more important to her than playing a game. She wouldn’t risk blowing her cover publically without a good reason.”

“Ooh, I like how you said that!” exclaimed the earthbender, as he raised a half-dozen more discs and sent them flying at once. A blatantly illegal move in a real match, but the best approximation he could give his brother of being assaulted three-on-one. “All gruff and grizzled and…and secret agent-y! Spirits, all this talk of covers and secret missions…it just feels so cool!”

“Slow down, little bro,” said Mako, bobbing and weaving expertly through the onslaught. Not a single one managed to strike their target. “I know you’re excited to be doing this kinda stuff, but this is serious. Amon is dangerous…I mean, really dangerous. This isn’t like those adventure scrolls you like to read. He’s already seen our faces, and he knows we’re allies of the Avatar. If he sees us again…we’ll be lucky just to lose our bending.”

Bolin’s throat emitted an audible gulp.

The firebender switched up tactics, targeting his brother’s feet with a series of brief but intense bursts of flame. It was a training regimen Toza had developed for them a long time ago, in order to train Bolin to be lighter on his feet.

Bouncing from toe to heel with grace and finesse that belied his stocky stature, the earthbender easily kept ahead of his brother’s attacks, operating almost purely on instinct.

“I am taking this seriously, you know. Even if I don’t look like it,” he told Mako, frowning slightly. “I know this could go…bad. Real bad. But I don’t think it will, either.”

Then, in a sudden and forceful demonstration of neutral jing, Bolin found his moment and counterattacked swiftly, his discs striking his brother directly in the abdomen. Mako doubled over, winded but largely uninjured.

“We’re working with some really incredible people, bro,” said Bolin, offering the older boy a hand up. “I know we haven’t been a team for very long…”

“Less than a day,” interrupted the firebender. “And I think ‘team’ is sort of pushing it…”

“But hey, nobody thought that much of the original Team Avatar, before they started kicking butt and taking names!” his brother continued on, undeterred. “They faced the odds, went against guys that were way out of their league…and they still came out on top, every time!”

In spite of himself, Mako found a small smile had appeared upon his face.

“Wish I could share your relentless optimism, Bolin,” he remarked quietly, stretching again as they took a short breather. “Either way, guess we’ll find out soon.”

“Nah, kid. Don’t think you’ll be finding out anything for a while,” said a rough voice from one of the arena exits.

Both brothers wheeled around at the sound, only to find five uniformed police officers, their metal cables at the ready. The one at the front, a badge on his armor denoting his rank, pulled out a thick scroll.

“Suspects Mako and Bolin,” he read off, enunciating loudly and dramatically. “You are hereby under arrest.”
Bolin’s mouth and eyes both went wide as saucers, but Mako was more angry than he was surprised. “Yeah? And what for?” he demanded.

The officer slowly lowered his scroll, glaring at the two without an ounce of sympathy or pity.

“For conspiracy to aid the Equalist Movement.”

[-----------------------]

She shouldn’t…

Spirits, she shouldn’t be doing this…

So why did it feel so good?

Korra had no idea how long she and Asami had been glued together; indeed, “time” wasn’t a concept she was very big on now, in general. She just knew, no matter how stupid an idea it was, that she never wanted this to stop.

It was like every square inch of her body, skin and hair and bones alike, was on fire…but in a good way. Like she was just close enough to a bolt of lightning to feel its tingling aftereffects, but not so close as to risk getting hurt.

She’d never felt anything less like hurting.

Asami’s demeanor, meanwhile, was – if anything – even more exhilarated than hers. Korra was far from an expert in tone of voice or body language, but even she could tell that this was a moment Asami had been building up in her head for quite a while, entirely uncertain what kind of response she’d receive.

The fact that her exuberance was being reciprocated in full clearly had the non-bender ecstatic, a passion that continued to magnify itself back and forth in a wonderful sort of feedback loop.

All of these, mind, were observations Korra managed to put together in retrospect, once she’d had some time to cool down. In the midst of the activity itself, her thought process could be better described as, “Uhhh…gguuuuhhh…bluhhh…”

When the two of them finally pulled apart, in what could’ve been days or weeks or millennia later, their eyes were level, despite the couple inches of difference in their heights. Asami soon, however, directed hers askance.

“I’m sorry…” she said quietly. Her eyes were wet.

“Wh…What do you mean?” asked Korra, alarm bells going off in her head. They sounded dim and muffled, however – as if she was awakening from a long sleep, and only had maybe half of her faculties back so far.

“I did that…forced that on you, without…” replied Asami, her breaths short and shallow. “I mean, without checking if you’re…y’know…even into…”

In lieu of finishing her sentence, the heiress gestured awkwardly at her chest.
It took a moment, but that hint was enough to get through even Korra’s legendary density. The Avatar immediately flushed scarlet.

“I guess I didn’t…well, I didn’t even know until now…” she said, matching the other girl blow for blow in stunning eloquence. “I haven’t…I mean, I’d never…”

Asami gasped, holding up her hands to her mouth. “You mean…” she whispered, verdant eyes wide and shining. “You mean…that was your first…?”

The pink in Korra’s cheeks deepened a shade. “You don’t have to rub it in,” she mumbled.

“No, that…that’s not what I meant at all!” Asami exclaimed quickly, holding up her hands. “I mean, it’s just that…you’re such an amazing person, Korra. Smart, and strong, and…gorgeous. I can’t believe no one ever…”

“Growing up the way I did…it didn’t leave a lot of room for dating,” Korra told her, trying and largely failing not to sound bitter about it. The image of Ghazan, shirtless and glistening in the sun, hazily swam up into her mind’s eye. “I mean, there was…is…one guy. But that was never gonna go anywhere. Just a stupid crush.”

She sighed, fidgeting against the park bench. “Wh…What about you?” she asked, unsure if she really wanted to hear the answer but desperate to take the pressure off her.

“Just…Just a few,” said Asami. “Two guys, and a girl. None of them really lasted long. I’ve…got a bad history of choosing these kinds of things.”

She let those words hang out in the air, not bothering to elaborate. Korra read her expression, and decided not to ask.

“But you, Korra, you’re…different. You feel different,” she added after a lengthy pause. A smile, albeit a small one, managed to creep back onto her face. “When I look at you, I see…spirits, I see so much. So much I could be. So much we could be. And I know I’m probably getting ahead of myself and making you uncomfortable and now I’m rambling, I’m rambling and I can’t…”

Korra shut her up the only way she could think to: by leaning forward and capturing her lips once again.

Their second kiss was much briefer, lasting only a couple of seconds, but the layers of unspoken meaning within it were nearly endless. Yet Korra could tell, somehow, as their faces slowly parted, that they were thinking the exact same thing.

“Where do go from here?” asked the Avatar in a small voice, after several moments of simultaneously blissful and terrifying silence. “Where can we go from here?”

“One day at a time,” was the non-bender’s simple answer. Those were the last words either of them spoke for quite a while.

Several hours passed as they sat together upon that bench, holding each other close. No more needed to be said; no more could be said. Instead, they remained still, Korra leaning into the crook of Asami’s arm as they lightly stroked each other’s hair and faces.

Occasionally, without preamble or hesitation, they found themselves kissing again, each embrace hungrier and more desperate than the last. The fact that they were in a public place kept them from going further – not that Korra expected her courage would’ve held on that far, even in private – but a couple of times she was pretty sure they straddled the line of the city ordinances on public affection.
A million times over, the rational part of her mind told Korra that this was a horrid waste of time at best, and the first step down a very bad road at worst. A million times over, Korra told her mind to shove it.

It just felt so good, so... freeing, to be here right now, like this. In a way she’d never felt before. She’d lived her life so reserved, so closed off, to make sure no one guessed the terrible secrets she held within, that to be so open with someone, even without words, was...

Korra couldn’t even begin to describe it. But it was like a horrible, awful, wonderful drug. She wouldn’t have been able to tear herself away even if she wanted to.

But eventually, inevitably...that was precisely what happened. Her senses were about as dull right now as they’d ever been, but she’d still been trained in secrecy and espionage since she was five, and it didn’t take her long to realize something.

She shifted her position slightly so that she could speak while barely moving her lips. “There’s someone watching us from behind that tree over there,” she said in a tight whisper.

Asami didn’t react noticeably, but her eyes flicked across the river, and soon enough she noticed what Korra had. Her mouth dipped into a tiny frown.

“Wow...” she muttered. “What a creep.”

The Avatar would’ve agreed...if not for one other, rather alarming factor. “Hold on,” she responded through tight lips. “I think I recognize him.”

Asami’s eyes narrowed, as the dim sense of understanding slowly spread across her face. Not only was the half-hidden boy the same one who’d been praying here earlier...but he was also one they’d gotten a pretty good look at last night.

“He’s with the Agni Kais,” said the heiress, just as quietly as her partner. “I think that Shin guy called him ‘Ketto,’ or something like that.”

The boy immediately took off like a rocket.

Korra swore under her breath as she worked to disentangle herself from the other girl, giving chase the moment her feet touched the ground. They’d been speaking too softly to possibly be heard from that distance, meaning the boy could most likely read lips.

And depending on how long he’d been doing so...

The waterbender shook her head and quickened her pace, Asami following right at her heel. Amon and his Equalists already knew her secret, but she sure as heck wasn’t going to let it spread any farther through the underworld.

Not if she could help it.

Even absent most of her bending abilities, Korra was still in peak physical shape, and Asami perhaps even more so. As such, it didn’t take long for the pair to catch up to their quarry, even given his own...ideal figure.

The non-bender reached him first, seizing him by the midsection and tackling him to the ground. Korra quickly opened up the skins on her hips and formed a water-whip, training its tip directly above the young man’s face.
Not exactly in the greatest of moods given what he’d just interrupted, Korra found herself snarling, “I don’t know how long you were watching, Ketto, or what you think you heard, but…”

The boy cut her off. “That’s not my name, Avatar Korra,” he said, not a hint of fear in his bright, golden eyes. “I wasn’t going to approach you for a little while yet, but I suppose circumstances have forced my hand.”

And with that, he expertly slipped out of Asami’s hold, managing to leap to his feet and brush himself off in the space of about two seconds. Both women stared at him, stunned.

“I am known as Iroh. Formerly a general with the United Forces,” he pronounced, his expression severe. “Prince of the Fire Nation, and second in line to her throne.”

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Deep in the heart of Republic City, overlooking its northern districts, stood one of the nation’s crown jewels: the Harmony Tower.

Built by Penga, one of the first metalbending students of the legendary Toph Beifong, it stretched to over eight-hundred feet and dazzled the night sky with its resplendent lights. Even now, in the midst of broad daylight, it cut a figure matched only by the statue on Avatar Aang Memorial Island.

And right now, Zaheer was ascending it like it was a piece of playground equipment.

He had no guarantee this was truly the locus of spiritual energy he’d detected on the map, but all signs certainly pointed that way. Weak points in the spatial barriers often appeared at foci of human emotion, and this tower – a shining symbol of the Harmony Restoration Movement that’d eventually led to the United Republic – certainly fit the bill.

Thankfully, the very reason he was here was also the reason he was able to climb it without detection. The closer the two planes grew to each other, the more one began to intrude upon the other, and the Spirit World was far more a matter of the mind than one of substance.

In a place like this, then, it was easy to see things that weren’t really there…but just as easy to miss things that were. Most people didn’t expect to see a grown man leaping and vaulting his way to the top of the tallest structure in Republic City, and so their eyes followed suit.

He probably could’ve just used the stairs or elevator, but this was quicker than the former and more reliable than the latter. Large amounts of spiritual energy tended to do strange things to motors and engines.

It only took him about ten minutes to reach the tower’s topmost platform, pushing his body in a spectacular series of acrobatics even he wouldn’t normally be sure he was capable of. But the non-bender was motivated.

If he was right…

His eyes narrowed as he landed deftly upon the summit, stowing the Air Nomad staff he’d used to assist his ascent. The figure before him was wreathed in shadow; nothing more than a hazy mass of black, exuding a dim aura of intense violet.
But there was still no mistaking that silhouette.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

The figure twitched slightly, and though no mouth was visible, Zaheer could tell it was smiling.

“Oh, nothing special,” said the spirit, though the gleeful laughter that escaped its maw seemed to suggest otherwise. It was a scratching, wheezing, ugly sound. “Merely…testing the waters, I believe they say.”

Zaheer was not amused.

“We had an agreement. You were not to breach the barrier between worlds until Harmonic Convergence,” he responded with a frown. “If anyone were to see you…”

“Ah, but they haven’t. And they won’t,” it stated firmly. “Here, far from the Eyes of Raava, I am all but invisible. Even you wouldn’t have known I was here, if not for that accursed map.”

The non-bender grimaced. He had to admit, the spirit had a point.

Instead, Zaheer tried a different tack. “Nevertheless, I urge you to be patient,” he said, trying to sound reassuring. “Harmonic Convergence is less than a year away. Once that happens, you both will be…”

But the spirit cut him off there, its nebulous form pulsing with rage.

“You dare to lecture me on patience!” it screeched. “I grow tired of waiting for your precious machinations! I fulfilled my end of the bargain twelve years ago!”

“You fulfilled most of it,” he reminded the spirit, his expression now cross. “But the most difficult part still remains. And no amount of idle whining will make Harmonic Convergence come any faster.”

The figure shifted again, protruding a bit of itself forward, apart from the mass. Zaheer thought it must be attempting to point at him.

“Know this, Zaheer. I have been the making of your present victory, and I can unmake it just as easily,” declared the spirit warningly. “I will have vengeance. I will have restoration. Attempt to deny me one more time…and you will suffer the consequences.”

Then, bit by bit, like ash being slowly blown away by a light wind, the figure began to vanish.

Before it did, however, it had a few last, parting words.

“The Era of the Avatar is over,” it said, its voice a venomous, spiteful rasp. “The Red Lotus can be part of the new world built in its wake…”

Zaheer tightened his grip around his staff.

“Or…they can perish alongside her.”
Mr. Chung hummed to himself as he polished the last of his phonographs, getting ready to reopen the store for the afternoon shift.

He hoped the business might be at least a little better than the morning.

Phonographs were a niche product, used by many but rarely needing to be replaced, but he still usually managed at least five or six sales a day. At minimum, he should have gotten someone in by now asking for spare parts or extra cylinders.

The non-bender had no illusions about why the morning had been so barren, of course.

There was panic in the streets, all throughout the city, as every family or business owner wondered if they might be next. The sheer amount of what people didn’t know about the Equalists – from their motives to their numbers to where they’d gotten such powerful bombs – only increased their fears, as wild rumors abounded to fill the vacuum.

By noontime, Amon was apparently a seven-foot-tall professional Pai Sho player who was also a gay space alien.

The point was, however, that most people weren’t daring to go about their business today except for the most necessary items, and phonographs definitely didn’t qualify.

Still, Mr. Chung couldn’t help but feel a little pleased. It’d been relegated to page two thanks to the bombings, but apparently the bending triads had experienced a raid and mass-arrest last night.

He’d spent the better part of the last three years being harassed by the Triple Threats, on the not-uncommon occasions when his meager earnings failed to cover their protection fee, and the thought of never having to deal with Viper or his goons again…

Well, he couldn’t say it didn’t put a smile on his face.

That smile turned out to be somewhat short-lived, however. Less than an hour after he reopened the shop, he received his first “customer” of the day – which, unfortunately, turned out to be Captain Saikhan of the Republic City Police.

Saikhan was a regular face here, both because this was part of his beat but also because the metalbender was an avid music lover, who placed high value on fidelity of sound. One look at his face and uniform, however, informed Mr. Chung quite plainly that this wasn’t a social call.

“Ta-Ri Chung, owner and proprietor of Chung’s Emporium of Sound,” he read off from a small scroll. “I’m afraid I have to put you under arrest.”

“W…What?!” exclaimed the storeowner, as another officer forced his hands behind him and enclosed them in cuffs. “Saikhan, what is the meaning of this?!”

“In accordance with the emergency powers granted by the Council, all non-benders who have made bender-related complaints three or more times in the past six months are to be taken in for questioning,” said the metalbender. “I’m sorry, but that’s the decision that’s been made.”

“I only made…complaints…because the Triple Threats keep robbing and vandalizing my shop!” protested Mr. Chung, struggling against his restraints. As he was an old man with brittle bones,
however, this was about as effective as attempting to bend.

Saikhan’s expression with sympathetic, but firm.

“Unfortunately, it’s precisely that fact which gives you a ready motive to join or abet the Equalist Movement. We need to ensure that isn’t the case,” he replied. “Please keep calm, Ta-Ri. You have nothing to fear if you’ve got nothing to hide.”

And with that, the other officer marched him out onto the street, where a large police truck stood waiting. Mr. Chung couldn’t help but notice how many of his fellow merchants were already loaded up into it – this street was prime Triple Threat territory, after all.

The non-bender took one glance up the street, where dozens of other business owners and customers alike were being hauled out in shackles, and then another, at the police officers marching in lockstep behind them.

Maybe that Amon feller had a point, after all.

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Tarrlok sat alone in his office, drumming his fingers idly against the arm of his chair. The only nearby sound was the soft, steady flow of the water cascading behind him.

He’d accomplished more today than he had in over fifteen years of public service, but the victory felt…hollow, somehow. He supposed he wouldn’t really believe it until it was right in front of his eyes.

There was so much he still didn’t know. So many things that could go wrong…

Any minute now, the first of his mass arrests would begin to pour into the police station. He’d painted with a wide brush, intentionally. Most of the people on his list probably weren’t Equalists…but there was a good chance they’d lead him to people who were.

Take those boys, for example. Tarrlok hadn’t been happy to sign off on that order, but it was a necessary step. Now that he’d paid them fairly for their services – for a match they’d likely never get to play, admittedly – he’d be in a prime position to plead ignorance regarding the reason for their arrest.

Thus, they’d likely be amenable to him purchasing their eyes and ears once again; an invaluable resource in the coming days. There were some things the criminal scum they were bringing in might refuse to say to a cop, which they would admit to someone who was “in the same boat.”

It wasn’t a pleasant or honorable tactic. But if it got results, he wasn’t about to hesitate.

That was the philosophy that’d gotten him this far in life, after all. If there was one thing he’d learned from his fath…from Yakone’s example, it was that half-measures only produced half-results. The crime boss had been willing to go to extremes to get what he wanted, and as a result he’d controlled Republic City’s underworld for over fifteen years.

And it wasn’t like the Council hadn’t known about him. True, his bloodbending hadn’t come out until the trial, but the newspapers of the time were absolutely filled with horror stories of his iron-
fisted reign over the Red Monsoons.

Murder, assault and battery, destruction of property...there were very few things Yakone and his underlings hadn’t gotten up to. They were the open secret, the festering wound, of Republic City’s early days; even more so than the Triple Threats were now.

Yet despite this, arrests of his top men had been shockingly rare. Yakone had made sure to grease the hands of judges, prosecutors, and police officers at every level of operation, and the Council of the day – under the pleasant but ineffectual guidance of Chairman Sokka – had responded with nothing but weakness and feckless cowardice.

Only when the evidence became overwhelming, and with the backing of the Avatar himself, had they worked up the courage to act decisively.

But that’d been little comfort to all the people Yakone managed to kill or brutalize in the meantime. Those sorts of challenges only came about once in a generation. Chief Sokka had failed the test.

In the face of Amon, Tarrlok would not.

A rap came upon the councilman’s chamber door. “Enter,” he called out, his face tightening back into the mask he showed the public. That he had to show the public.

His page quietly slipped in, balancing a heavy stack of papers and binders in his scrawny arms.

“Sir, there’s a lot of paperwork still left to do for the new...ahem...initiatives,” said Jilu, struggling to keep it all from dropping with only the barest modicum of success. “Since you lead the taskforce that’s implementing them, all the arrest warrants need to bear your signature, and as for the background checks...”

But Tarrlok waved off his concerns before he could finish speaking.

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know,” he replied irritably. “And I already told you to take care of it. That’s what the Council pays you for, doesn’t it? To handle the bureaucracy so that we are free to take actions that actually mean something.”

“Of course, sir, of course. You’re right, as always,” declared the page, his demeanor instantly turning obsequious and pleading. It was the sort of personality that disgusted Tarrlok, even if it made the man quite useful.

“And while you’re at it, clear my afternoon,” the waterbender added after a moment, his eyes directed at the noonday sun visible through his wide-paned windows. It was a beautiful day...which only made Tarrlok angrier.

“I’ll be going out.”

“But sir!” said Jilu, a stutter in his voice. “The first round of arrestees should be arriving quite soon! Didn’t you want to be there, in order to...”

Again, Tarrlok cut him off. “Beifong and Saikhan can handle the grunt work themselves,” he answered. “They know which way the wind is blowing...whether or not they agree with it. I’ll step in when the time is right.”

And with that, the chairman pulled on his coat and fastened a couple of water skins to his belt, stalking out of his office without another word.

He didn’t bother to lock or even close the door behind him. That was how little he acknowledged
Jilu as worth an active thought.

The page, thus, had no trouble “borrowing” his boss’ telephone. A private line not observed by the city’s switchboard, it was often useful for the sorts of calls he’d rather not make at his own desk.

“Aiwei, it’s me,” he said after a moment. “Everything’s going smoothly. Time for Phase Two.”

[-----------------------------]

“You. You…are the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation,” repeated Asami, her eyebrows raised skeptically.

“Well, technically my sister is Crown Princess. She’s the eldest, after all,” said Iroh. “But I am a prince, yes. If Nazrin became incapacitated or abdicated the throne without producing an heir, I’d be next in line.”

“Hmmph,” the two girls hummed at the same time.

The three of them were sitting together on the grass now, rather than straddling the young man with weapons pointed at his face, but both Korra and Asami were ready to react at a moment’s notice should he attempt to escape again.

“Look, I’ve had…reasons…to keep up to date with all the world leaders,” Korra stated after a moment. “And it is true that the Fire Nation royal family has a son named Iroh. But last I checked… he looks nothing like you.”

The firebender sighed. “Plastic surgery,” he explained, touching his cheek absently. “When I left the military, I realized there were…other things I could do. More important things. But I couldn’t do them with a face that was plastered on every newspaper and magazine cover in the Fire Nation.”

“I’m still not buying it,” said Asami. “Plastic surgery’s come a long way in recent years, but it’s not that good. I’ve seen pictures of Prince Iroh too, and about all you’ve got in common is your hair and eye color. Even your skin is darker.”

Indeed, the young man before them had a light brown complexion, and a much more rounded face than was typical of the royal family. Copious stubble clung to his chin and upper lip, and his hairstyle more fit the image of a rough-and-tumble musician than a glamorous prince.

Iroh chuckled humorlessly. “Well, I didn’t say the surgery came from science,” he responded. “Not entirely, at least. I had the help of a spirit that’s been close to my family for a long time. She’s called the Mother of Faces.”

“Mother of Faces?” asked Korra, her face scrunched up a bit. “I’ve never heard of her.”

“Not surprising. My grandfather doesn’t like to talk about that particular adventure much. He even kept it out of his autobiography,” Iroh told them calmly. “Basically, she’s the spirit of individuality and identity. Supposedly, every face – worn by human or beast alike – has been crafted by her, since the beginning of time.”

“Except that’s not true,” interjected Asami, frowning slightly. “Faces, like all physical traits, are inherited from parents. There’s a brilliant scientist in Omashu who’s working on this new field
“called ‘genetics’…”

“Maybe both are true, in a sense,” said Iroh. “Either way, the Mother is real. And once a season, she may grant an additional boon. She can actually change a person’s face.”

“I…guess that would make going undercover a lot easier,” Korra admitted, after a moment of stunned silence. “But why the Agni Kais?”

“I’ve only been with them since about five months ago,” he replied. “That was when my grandfather heard the first rumblings of trouble in Republic City. He needed someone who could infiltrate and report on its underworld…and I volunteered.”

“Just to make sure, when you say ‘grandfather,’ you mean…?” Asami muttered slowly.

Iroh nodded. “Fire Lord Zuko,” he said. “Right now, he’s the only one who knows about my life as ‘Ketto.’ Even my mother and sister are in the dark.”

Both girls continued to stare at him for several moments, processing the story they’d just been told. And both, silently, came to the same conclusion: this was all too insane to be made up.

“So…what kind of ‘trouble’ was he talking about, exactly?” asked Korra eventually. “The Equalists?”

“Well, they’re certainly part of it,” answered the firebender. “They’ve been around for a while, boiling under the surface, but they’ve really stepped up operations in the last few months. They’re obviously planning something a lot worse than those bombings, and I intend to do everything I can to stop them.”

Then, unexpectedly, his expression shifted, becoming harder and more severe. Suddenly, it wasn’t hard at all to see the shadow of the general he’d once been.

“But they’re only half the story, at the most,” he said, staring at them both with piercing, golden eyes. “Have either of you ever heard of the Red Lotus?”

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“This is an outrage, you hear me? An absolute outrage! I demand to see my lawyer, my accountant, and my aromatherapist, in that order!”

There was only one person in all of Republic City who would shout that while being arrested, and Lin Beifong had the utmost misfortune to be performing the job personally.

“Oh, put a sock in it, Varrick,” she snapped irritably, as three officers forced the industrialist – who was struggling and flailing so much he looked like he was having a nervous fit – into a pair of cuffs.

Only one was needed to secure his assistant, who was going quietly and seemingly of her own volition – despite not actually being on Tarrlok’s “list.”

Once the Southerner was finally secured, Lin sighed deeply and said, “You’re about the only person I’m supposed to arrest today who actually deserves it. This ‘mover’ of yours demonstrates detailed knowledge of Amon, well in advance of his broadcast to the city. I am going to plop you down in
an interrogation room, and you will tell me where you got your information.”

“Wait, is that all this is about? Well, you could’ve just asked!” exclaimed Varrick, his face indignant. “It’s nothing sinister. I just sent Zhu Li here to observe some of their rallies. Totally above board!”

Lin hadn’t been expecting that kind of answer. She cocked an eyebrow, unsure if she could – or should – believe a single word she was hearing.

“And why exactly did you send her to these ‘rallies,’ Varrick?” she ventured to ask.

At this, Varrick’s normally suave and slick demeanor turned back on like a light switch.

“Just did what I’ve always done, Chief. Saw an opportunity to cash in on the big new thing, and I seized it,” said the non-bender, shrugging his shoulders and making a dramatic grabbing motion to emphasize his point – which was an admittedly impressive feat, given his handcuffs. “Look, you may not like what I’m doing, but nothing about it’s illegal.”

Lin, however, was not smiling. “Even if that were true, the Council’s new rules mean it amounts to jack-squat,” she told him. “I can hold you in detention, without formal charges or an attorney, for as long as I darn well please.”

She paused for a moment, taking a bit of pleasure as the self-satisfied expression slowly slid off his face, before adding, “But…just because I can do something, doesn’t mean I should. Before I toss a man in lock-up, I want a little proof it’s the right thing to do. Fortunately…”

Then, without warning, she pulled out a small device and tossed it at his feet.

“This is all the proof I need,” finished the metalbender, crossing her arms and scowling.

What little color remaining in Varrick’s face drained from it instantly. “Where did you get that?” he demanded in a low, serious voice.

“I had a hunch, so I stopped by one of your warehouses on the way here,” said Lin. “State of the art detonator for explosives, isn’t it? Not something you could pick up just anywhere.”

Varrick glared at her, his expression livid. When he spoke again, however, it was with a tone of almost painfully controlled calmness.

“I don’t think I should say anything else right now,” he responded through tight lips.

Lin rolled her eyes. “Oh, how I wish that were true,” she muttered to herself. “Anyway, we’ll see if you change your tune at the station. Officers, take them away.”

Both of the non-benders were led into the back of a police truck, Varrick staring daggers at the policemen all the while. Zhu Li just kept her head down, remaining silent.

“I don’t get it, Zhu Li,” he whispered to her as soon as the doors were closed. They had only a handful of seconds alone together before their captors piled in the front and took off. “Her story’s as full of holes as my floorboards after a night of Extreme Tapdancing! How do you jump from ‘giant kabooms’ to ‘search Varrick’ in less than a day?”

Zhu Li continued to cast her head downward, avoiding his gaze. “I guess we’ll never know, sir,” she said, her voice low and even.
Kuvira crawled through the vent system of City Hall, wondering how in the world she’d wound up with this assignment of all things.

Admittedly, Aiwei’s evidence that the Red Lotus, the Equalists, or both had a spy operating close to the Council – while all circumstantial at present – was too compelling to simply ignore. It filled in a lot of the pieces to the puzzle, and presented a range of complications to the very idea of cracking down on either one.

But was there really no better way to investigate this further?

The metalbender stifled a groan and she continued to creep forward, one hand over her mouth to keep from inhaling the copious amount of dust in the air.

At least she was close. Kuvira had long since memorized the layout of the most important buildings in Republic City, and her metalbending senses gave her an acute mental picture of the entire vent network. As such, even from this…unique vantage point, she could tell from the ceiling grates she passed that she was heading straight for the Council chambers.

While City Hall had well over three-hundred support staff – albeit, with far fewer active at present due to the recent bombing – only a handful had regular contact with the Council, so she’d start her search there. No one was above suspicion; secretaries, janitors, and food service workers alike.

In any event, whoever they were, Kuvira felt confident she’d be able to root them out. She’d uncovered the Red Lotus’ last spy within a matter of days, after all, and they’d been the Avatar.

On the other hand, whoever’d managed to infiltrate the Council was probably going to have superior foresight and judgment compared to a sheltered, seventeen-year-old girl. But that was something to worry about at a later point.

First, she had to actually find them.

The councilors’ private offices were arranged in a spoke-and-wheel sort of formation around a central chamber, where their page and several undersecretaries performed clerical work. This would be her first stop. Even if the spy didn’t work here, it was accessible to the public, making it an ideal hub for drop-spots and passing messages to contacts.

Peering down through the nearest grate, it didn’t surprise her to see the desks here were severely understaffed. Only the Council page and one other secretary were present, processing paperwork like their lives depended on it. Kuvira supposed that most people, if a terrorist attack occurred at their workplace, probably wouldn’t be eager to show up that same day.

What did surprise her was the sight of Councilman Tarrlok looking furtively around himself, before slipping quietly out of the chamber.

Kuvira hesitated for a moment, before changing course and scrambling back the direction she’d came. Rooting out the spy could wait.

Right now, she was far more interested in learning where the most powerful man in Republic City was off to in such a hurry.
The waterbender took a winding route through City Hall, choosing the pathways where he’d be least likely to run into other people rather than the quickest one to the exit. This made keeping up with him something of a challenge, given that she was still crawling on her hands and knees, but Kuvira pushed on, her adrenaline pumping.

She had a strong feeling she was about to hit upon something big.

Tarrlok stopped in his tracks so abruptly that she almost continued straight past him. Looking down through the slats of another grate, she saw him again stand rigid and whip his head around, checking every direction for onlookers.

Well…every direction except up.

Once he was satisfied the hallway was empty, the chairman pulled an oil painting of Avatar Kuruk aside, and pressed his palm against a panel behind it.

Kuvira tried to quell her surprise as a segment of the wall slid open, and Tarrlok disappeared into it.

The metalbender hesitated for a moment, debating internally about what she should do next. It didn’t take her long at all, however, to come to a decision.

Using her bending, the screws holding the grate in place flew out like they were greased with butter, and she slid down to the tile floor nearly soundlessly. She waited about half a minute longer, just in case Tarrlok was watching his secret entrance, and then repeated the process.

The wall opened once more, and Kuvira slipped inside.

Once the wall slid back into place, she found herself trapped in total darkness – save for a very distant glow, which Kuvira guessed was Tarrlok holding a lantern or torch.

This barely fazed the metalbender, however, as she simply removed her shoes, assumed a stance, and stomped down. Her “seismic sense” immediately filled her mind with new information, outlining the room even better than if she could see it.

Sometimes, there were advantages to practicing a style invented by a blind woman.

It was a very narrow passageway, she could tell, with room for nothing but a single set of stairs, leading downward. Kuvira followed behind by a few hundred feet, her footsteps light and barely audible as she struggled to keep pace with the enigmatic waterbender.

What could he possibly be hiding down here?

The answer turned out to be surprisingly simple…but also, nothing like what she’d been expecting.

At the foot of the massive stairwell – leading down so deep that they had to be three or four stories below ground – stood a very small chamber, lit by candles whose flames burnt a cold blue.

Pressing up against the wall so that the darkness continued to hide her, Kuvira peered into the perfectly circular room, barely wider in diameter than the average Satomobile. It had no door, so she had little trouble making out Tarrlok.

And to realize that he was kneeling.

Before him were a number of flowers and photographs, each carefully preserved in a jewel-encrusted frame. And as the center of it all, raised by a dais and bearing the mark of the Water Tribe…
Was a gleaming, silver coffin.

“Hello, mother,” the councilman said softly, a distinct catch in his voice. “I’ve… got a lot to tell you about.”

[----------------------]

“Just for… y’know, for clarification…” stammered Korra, her mouth working a few steps ahead of her panicked brain, per the usual. “Wh… Why exactly are you asking?”

“Because they’re the common thread that links this all together,” Iroh answered. “My current theory is that the reason the Equalists have stepped up their game so much… is because the two groups have joined forces. The Equalist Movement is still limited to the United Republic, but the Red Lotus extend all over the world. They’d be an invaluable ally for resources and intelligence.”

“That… That’s just not possible,” said Korra, before she could stop herself. “I mean… well, that is…”

“She obviously knows what this whole ‘Red Lotus’ thing is, but I’ve never heard of them,” Asami cut in, placing what she must’ ve thought was a comforting hand on the Avatar’s shoulder. “Could you start from the top?”

Alarm bells were ringing at maximum volume inside Korra’s head, but she couldn’t think of a plausible way to derail the conversation without making her intentions obvious.

Still, of all people, she couldn’t let Asami learn the full truth. Not now, not after…

Unfortunately, while she’d been crippled by indecision, Iroh had already begun to explain, “Alright, to put it simply, the Red Lotus are a splinter group from the Order of the White Lotus. And in the interests of full disclosure… I’ll tell you that I’m a member of the latter group, sent to keep tabs on the former.”

Instantly, Korra saw red, all her worries and trepidations drowned out by a wave of absolute fury. She did her best to push it back down, though. If she wanted to deny her connection to the Red Lotus, or to argue that whatever the firebender was about to say about them was a big pack of lies…

Well, brutally murdering him probably wouldn’t help her case.

“I mean, I know who the White Lotus are, of course,” said Asami. “But why the split? I always thought of them as… well, as a bunch of cool old guys playing Pai Sho.”

Iroh cracked a small smile. “That’s part of it, definitely,” he replied. “For hundreds of years, the Order was hidden in the shadows, secretly forging ties between the Four Nations. But then came the Hundred Year War. By the end of it, the Order saw no choice but to come out into the open, allying with Avatar Aang in his quest to restore balance to the world.”

Korra couldn’t help herself. A derisive snort escaped her throat, letting the firebender know in everything but words what she thought of that hippo-bull. He raised a questioning eyebrow, but she refused to elaborate, and eventually he turned back to Asami.

“Anyway, some members of the White Lotus saw that as a betrayal of their values,” he continued to
explain. “They wanted to remain independent from the Avatar and world governments. In time, their views radicalized, until all governments and state systems became their enemy. They split off, forming their own society, and have been striking back ever since.”

“I think you’re leaving out a few details there,” hissed Korra. Again, she was unable to stop herself. The longer she listened to this drivel, the more pissed-off she became.

Kuvira hadn’t helped matters, bringing all these emotions back to the surface just a few short hours ago…but at least she’d been a third party, ignorant to what she was speaking of.

This pawn of theirs, this brainwashed puppet, was actively deluded.

“The Order has blood on their hands. Innocent blood,” she said, her sharp tongue wrestling free of its self-imposed restraints. “Don’t try to deny it. Don’t try to pretend this is all just some big, happy game, or that the Red Lotus didn’t have a freaking good reason to leave.”

“I won’t tell you the White Lotus has always been perfect,” Iroh responded evenly. “But I don’t know what ‘blood’ you’re talking about.”

“Then you’re either a liar, or a fool,” Korra snapped, losing less and less of her cool by the second. Deep down, she knew this was a bad idea, that she should just be keeping her big mouth shut right now…but said mouth wasn’t in the mood to listen. “Look up the Southern Massacre sometime. And not the propaganda they put in the history books – the real story.”

“I don’t need to look it up. My grandfather was there,” he told her, his frown deepening.

“So was I!” shouted Korra, suddenly in his face. “And you…you…spoiled…pampered…useless excuse for a prince! You have no idea what I went through that night! What I lost! Who I lost!”

There was a moment’s pause, in which all three of them went very still. Then, Iroh’s golden eyes widened.

“That’s the piece I was missing,” he whispered. “That’s why you must’ve…”

Korra wasn’t sure why she did it. Maybe to keep him from saying those last few words, and revealing her deepest, most awful secrets right in front of Asami. Or maybe simply because he’d finally pushed her past her limit.

Either way, before she knew it, a huge wave was surging from the river and slamming into the firebender, sending him flying into the Dancing Dragon statue with a bone-crushing impact.

“Korra!” exclaimed Asami, hands placed over her mouth, clearly horrified. “Wh…Why did you…?”

The Avatar was saved from having to provide an answer she didn’t have by Iroh’s loud groan, as he rubbed his head and slowly pulled himself back to his feet.

“I have no interest in fighting you, Avatar,” he said through gritted teeth, coughing and spitting out a mouthful of blood. “But if my suspicions are correct, it may turn out to be inevitable. Still…I’d rather we come to some kind of understanding.”

“If you’re part of the White Lotus, then that’s never gonna happen,” Korra shot back, encasing one arm in a javelin of ice and pointing it toward him. “I’ll give you one chance to walk away. Go off and tell your masters that they will face justice. Maybe not today…maybe not tomorrow. But the Avatar is coming for them.”
Iroh just continued to stare her down silently, as if seeing her in an entirely different light. After a while, he slowly shook his head.

“Till have faith,” he spoke softly, placing his hands back into his scarlet coat rather than wreathing them in flames. “My mother and grandfather always chose to put their trust in the Avatar, and so will I. When we meet again…I hope we can find a way to work together.”

“When we meet again, I hope you drop dead,” said Korra, her eyes burning.

He took one last, lingering glance at the both of them. Then, quite literally, he took off – using concentrated jets of flame to propel himself into the air. It was a highly advanced technique, with the only known practitioners being members of the royal family. Those were the sorts of things you knew offhand…

When you’d been training all your life to kill those people.

As soon as he left their sight, Asami rushed over, grasping Korra gently but firmly by the arm.

“Korra…” she whispered breathlessly. “Do you…wanna talk about…?”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Korra cut her off, wrenching herself out of the non-bender’s grip.

Then, slowly, she walked off as well.

[Sooooooo…what’re ya in for?] Bolin asked the man sitting next to them, grinning cheekily. The man growled and walked over to another part of the detention cell – the sixth such instance in the past half-hour.

Mako, for his part, buried his face in his hands. His brother was having way too much fun with this.

The prisoners, around thirty in all, had been thrown together in an enormous iron cage, watched from all sides by police officers to ensure any metalbenders among them couldn’t escape. It was sometimes used as a temporary measure when sorting out large groups – such as the mass arrest at the triad summit – but right now it held a motley assortment of street criminals, open advocates for the Equalists, and ordinary citizens who’d been labeled “persons of interest.”

Mako wasn’t sure which category they belonged in. Somewhere between the first and third, he supposed.

They’d been held for about three hours now, and had spent that entire time being completely and utterly ignored. It certainly wasn’t personal, though; the guards didn’t interact with any of their captives. Occasionally they’d open the cell door to throw in another couple detainees, but beyond that they were left to their own devices.

Bolin, of course, had taken that as an invitation to hover around their fellow arrestees like an excited buzzard-wasp. The earthbender had never been adept at sitting still for any length of time, and Mako supposed he couldn’t exactly fault the man for trying to make the most out of their current situation.

That being said, he was pretty sure his brother was barking up the wrong tree right now. He’d asked that same inane question to a girl in a low-brimmed hat, a pin resembling Amon’s mask placed
prominently upon it, and she’d immediately launched into a rant that Mako could follow about as well as he could fly.

“…And furthermore, the bending establishment’s favored tactic has always been to promote a sense of shared, irrational pride between benders of higher and lower economic strata, so as to preserve a social order that ultimately benefits them and only them,” she said. “I believe it was political philosopher Zhe-Xue who observed that the lowest-born bender will allow you to pick his pockets and shackle his wrists, if only you permit him to believe he is superior to his fellows.”

Bolin smiled and nodded throughout this entire lecture, though Mako suspected he wasn’t taking in a word of it. His eyes were too focused on the girl’s pretty face.

Sighing, the firebender rose to his feet, deciding to stretch his legs as well. He was gonna go crazy if he just kept waiting for something to happen.

As he walked around, Mako recognized a handful of their fellow captives – from that annoying protestor who was always shouting slogans at the park, to none other than Lau Gan-Lan, the president of Cabbage Corp.

He almost had to whistle at the sight of the latter, sunken to his knees and weeping openly. If Tarrlok had enough pull to bring in the second-biggest captain of industry in Republic City, then he definitely wasn’t screwing around right now.

One of the detainees, however, was making an even bigger scene than that. A brown-skinned man with a thin mustache and expensive-looking fur clothing was stomping around a corner of the cell, ranting and raving to no one in particular – though a young woman next to him appeared to be taking careful notes.

“Not only do they bring in Iknik Blackstone Varrick on a bunch of trumped-up, not-in-any-way-provable-in-court charges…!” he exclaimed, gesticulating wildly with his arms as he did. “But then they throw me in here with all the non-visionaries, and leave me hanging without so much as a how-do-you-do! Where’s the hot sponge-bath I ordered, huh? And not even one white dragon-scented candle!”

“I will resubmit your requests with the next available guard, sir,” the woman said tonelessly.

“There’s a reason I had a cell custom-designed for us when I built that stupid prison!” he continued on, shaking his fist in indignation. “But what’s the point if they don’t actually throw me in there?!”

“I believe we are still technically in holding, sir,” she explained to her incensed superior. “We won’t be transferred to the prison facility proper until we’re charged with an actual crime. Something that, based on the new regulations passed this morning…is in no way guaranteed.”

“I see…” murmured Varrick, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “So what you’re saying is that I should confess to being an Equalist conspirator, if I want to get these bunions attended to pronto. Got it!”

“W…Wait, sir, I didn’t mean…” she attempted to interject, but he was already banging on the bars to get the nearest guard’s attention.

“Hey, you! Yeah, you with the glasses and the two-yuan haircut!” he said, causing the metalbender’s expression to turn sour extraordinarily quickly. “If I wanna dish a little bit about my ol’ pal Amon, who can I talk to?”

Absolute silence fell over the entire cell, with remarkable suddenness.
A sharp intake of breath could be heard amongst the row of policemen. Eventually, after a prolonged pause, one of them stepped forward.

“Prep an interrogation room,” she ordered another, lower-ranked officer. “Dunno if he’s just pulling our chain, but I’m not taking any chances until we see the Chief or Councilman Tarrlok.”

Evidently, however, he wasn’t the only person to take that attitude. The moment the second officer turned around to comply, the girl from earlier – the Equalist Bolin had been attempting to flirt with – rushed forward, her expression fierce. As she drew closer, Mako caught a glimpse of something sharp in her hand.

The firebender’s eyes went wide.

But before he could shout a warning, seemingly from out of nowhere, Bolin dived in, seizing the Equalist girl around the midriff and tackling her to the ground. The knife flew out of her hand and straight through the cell bars, imbedding itself in the opposite wall.

“I…uh…guess this probably means that’s a ‘no’ on the date?” he asked her, looking sheepish.

She simply made a guttural, furious sound, and pushed him off of her. An officer rushed in a moment later, slapping metal cuffs over her wrists and hauling her back to her feet.

“I’ll take this one into solitary. Anyone else who feels like being a troublemaker is free to join her,” he said, not bothering to be gentle as he dragged her by the arm.

The higher-ranking officer, meanwhile – the one who’d responded to Varrick – walked forward to examine the knife.

“Hmmph…wooden. That’s why we didn’t sense it,” she observed, turning it over in her hand. After a moment, she turned back to her subordinates. “Do another search of the prisoners, priority on the ones closest to Mr. Varrick. Make them strip if you have to. I do not want a repeat of what just happened.”

No one – not the detainees and definitely not the officers – looked very happy about this instruction, but after a token murmur of resistance most of them proceeded to comply. But there was at least one person who didn’t look put out in the slightest.

“What a moving…uh…movement!” cried out Varrick, striding over and wrapping his arm around Bolin’s shoulder like they were close, personal friends. “Never seen anything like it! What’s your name, son?”

“Erm…Bolin?” said the earthbender in a squeaky voice, awkwardly attempting to return his smile. Even for Bolin, this sort of greeting was a little too familiar. “And…umm…yours, sir…?”

The man went slack-jawed. “Do you actually mean to tell me you don’t recognize the greatest financial and technological genius of our time?!” he demanded. “And that’s not me bragging, by the way. Just quoting the featured article in last week’s Yuan News.”

“That wasn’t an article, sir. It was a full-page advertisement,” his companion pointed out. “That you paid for.”

There was a beat. Then, Varrick’s grin widened.

“And whose brilliant idea was it to take out that ad?” he asked, waggling his eyebrows.
At this, the bespectacled woman had no choice but to answer, “Yours, sir.”

“You got that right, Zhu Li! Remember, there’s no such thing as bad publicity – especially if you’re the one buying it!” he said with a brief, sharp laugh, before wheeling back to his savior on the very heels of his shoes. “Better keep that in mind too, Bulblin, if we’re gonna make this work.”

“Actually, err…it’s…” Bolin tried to tell him, but Varrick had already stopped listening.

“Anywho, my friend, you’ve got the pleasure this day of holding the debt of Iknik Blackstone Varrick! President and sole owner of Varrick Global Industries, the world’s leader in shipping, manufacturing, and cremation of deceased pets. Surprisingly lucrative market, that one,” explained the mustached man. “And let me tell you something, son – Varrick always repays his debts.”

“That’s, uh…very generous, sir,” Bolin replied, trying his best to return Varrick’s ear-to-ear grin. “But what exactly do you…?”

Once again, however, the earthbender wasn’t permitted to finish his point, as Varrick grabbed him lightly but firmly by the shoulder and steered him away from the crowd currently being strip-searched.

Mako tried to follow after, but he was halted by one of the officers, who wordlessly demanded his shirt. Seeing no other choice, he began to comply – but kept his amber eyes upon Bolin, Varrick, and the latter’s assistant the entire time. He was close enough to hear every word.

“Now, my dear Bulblin…” said Varrick, his lip curled in a conspiratorial grin. “If you could have one thing in the world…what would it be?”

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Kuvira had never exactly been a champion of personal privacy – for other people, at least – but even by her standards, this seemed…invasive.

Still, trying to disappear back up the stairs now might draw more attention than remaining hidden. And in any event...well, she’d come this far.

Might as well see what Republic City’s premier politician chose to talk about when he thought no one was watching.

“There’s…one thing…I keep coming back to,” Tarrlok muttered, now taking a seat on the ground beside the coffin. His back was still to the shadowed staircase. “I’ve come so far…made so much progress. Republic City is safer today than it’s ever been. But still…I wonder.”

He let out a shallow, breathless sigh. “Would you be…proud, of me?” he asked the empty air. “And…would Noatak?”

Kuvira made a mental note of the name. It wasn’t one she was familiar with – but then, her preliminary research had turned up almost no information regarding Tarrlok’s background.

“I’d like to think so. But…I guess I’ll never be sure,” said the waterbender in a low voice. “What our father did to him, to me…to you…I didn’t want any other family to suffer like that. That’s why I’ve spent my life putting away men like him. Why I’m willing to go to any extreme, if it means that
madman Amon faces justice.”

The picture was starting to come together – slowly, but steadily. Just a little further, and he just might…

“They spent so long not taking him seriously, and now…now, it might just be too late,” he continued on, gathering steam. “I was the only one who saw. Who knew that if I didn’t attack this at the source, it’d only grow, like a festering wound. That’s what happened with the triads. Avatar Aang, Chief Sokka, Toph Beifong – they were there, when it was just a few rowdy street gangs. They could’ve purged that infection long before it spread.”

Kuvira couldn’t see his face, but she could tell his teeth were gritted as he whispered, “Instead, the names of countless thugs and murderers are written into Republic City’s history. Written in blood. Zolt, Long Zha, Shao-Shang…Yakone…”

The metalbender’s expression froze in place. There was something about the way he’d said that last name. But…no, it couldn’t be…

Yakone was, of course, a figure she was familiar with, given his immense historical import. The feared and deadly leader of the Red Monsoon triad for over fifteen years, he’d eventually been convicted for bloodbending and sentenced to life – as well as lost his bending to Avatar Aang, during an ill-fated attempt at escape.

Now, it was true that, less than six months into his sentence, several of the most loyal Monsoons had engineered a prison break, enabling their former boss to slip quietly out of their city. For years after, every last report of bloodbending in the world came with hushed rumors that Yakone was responsible…despite no longer being a bender himself.

But in time, with no more news to fuel them, those rumors had fallen by the wayside. If Yakone was still alive out there, most now agreed, he was a shriveled-up old man bunkered down in the middle of nowhere, paranoid that every knock on his door would be the law finally closing in on him.

A fitting punishment, in its own right.

Yet, if Kuvira’s deductions were correct…this changed everything.

“But no matter how much I achieve, I…I keep looking back. To the good days,” said Tarrlok after a lengthy pause. “Before Noatak and I discovered our abilities. Before we were just…weapons…to him. Tools of revenge. When we were a family.”

He swallowed, hard.

“I found the locket the other day, you know. Looked at it for the first time in over ten years,” the councilman added, his voice rough and hollow. “Then…I came to my senses, and threw it away. I’m sorry. I know it’s all I have left of you but I…I couldn’t look at it. Even here. It hurts too much.”

His breaths were heavy, rattling now, his shoulders rising and falling unevenly.

“And I…can’t…risk anyone seeing me like this,” declared the waterbender, firmly and definitively. “Republic City needs a strong leader to guide her now. Someone who brings us into the future, instead of wallowing in the past. That’s why I have to let this go. To leave it all behind.”

And with that, Tarrlok raised his arms, spreading them wide and gesturing toward a pair of fixtures on the wall. For a moment, nothing happened.
Then the fixtures exploded, and furious torrents of water began to spew forth from the exposed openings.

“"I can’t tell you how sorry I am, mother,” he said, and though she still couldn’t see it she was certain there were tears streaming down his face. "I brought you here because I couldn’t bear you to be buried next to that…that monster. And now…I’m going to do so much worse. Ruin the last thing in this entire world I have left to love.”

There was a protracted silence, in which the only sound that could be heard was the steady, pulsing stream of water as it slowly flooded the memorial chamber.

When Tarrlok ultimately broke it, however, the sorrowful croak in his voice had disappeared – replaced by grim, steadfast determination.

“But I cast aside ‘love’ a long time ago,” he murmured, using his bending to gradually increase the pressure of the water spouts. “That locket was a risk I couldn’t accept, and that meant it had to go. And right now, dear mother…you’re the same.”

The councilman brought the sleeve of his coat – one of the only parts of it that was still dry – to his face, presumably to clear away any lingering tears.

“You might’ve never known who he was…but you’re the start of a trail others could follow,” finished Tarrlok, finally lowering his arms. The water was already at knee-height and had swallowed up the first two stairs, forcing Kuvira to retreat back slightly. “And I will never let that happen. You deserve so much more than…this. But you also don’t deserve to go down in history as Yakone’s wife.”

Kuvira was perhaps the most controlled and disciplined person she’d ever known, up to and including members of the actual Earth Kingdom military. But even she had her limits, and the confirmation of her suspicions elicited a small, muted gasp from her lips.

It wasn’t much; barely even audible to the human ear. But in the utter silence of the chamber, it was enough.

Tarrlok wheeled around with the speed of a man possessed, preemptively raising a shield of ice out of the floodwater. The metalbender spent a split-second weighing her options, then fired off one of her jacket’s fasteners with the force of an arrow.

The improvised projectile sailed straight through the ice and embedded itself in Tarrlok’s right thigh, eliciting a scream of pain. Had she aimed for his head or heart, she probably could’ve killed him right then and there – but assassinating a member of the Council was precisely the opposite of what she was here to do.

And in any event, explaining it to the police might prove…messy.

So instead, Kuvira used the opportunity to turn tail and rush back up the stairs. She was still just outside of his line of sight, and his injury would slow him down significantly if he tried to give chase. With luck, she’d escape without him being any the wiser to her identity.

But she only made it two or three steps before she froze completely in place.

Grunting, the metalbender tried again to resume her escape, but her limbs simply refused to follow her brain’s commands. Instead, and to her utter horror, her legs slowly began to move backward, seemingly of their own volition. One by one she took the steps back down, until she was standing almost waist-deep in the memorial chamber.
It took a great deal to rattle Kuvira, but as she stood there in the rising waters, every muscle and sinew locked in place, she couldn’t help but begin to sweat. Her eyes, the only part of her head not rigidly pointed forward, darted around the room, and out of their corners she could just barely see Tarrlok.

The waterbender looked haggard, miserable, and furious, a trickle of blood flowing freely from the wound in his leg. Despite his unsteady gait, however, his hands moved with expert precision, palms directed downward and fingers fully extended.

Like a puppetmaster manipulating strings.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place. If he was truly Yakone’s son, then that meant…

“I don’t know who you are, or how you found this place,” said Tarrlok, his voice a terrifying whisper. “But I do know one thing, girl.”

He raised his hands upward, and Kuvira gritted her teeth in pain as the fluids in her body reacted accordingly, lifting her helplessly into the air.

“Say goodbye to Republic City. You’ll never see it again.”

[--------------------]

Asami spent the better part of the next couple hours struggling to catch up with the Avatar.

Korra wasn’t moving fast, exactly, but her stronger legs took her just a little farther with each stride. And whenever Asami picked up her own pace slightly, the waterbender would do the same, so that the distance between them remained largely fixed.

They were in the middle of the city now, so she wagered Korra was trying to avoid making a scene by breaking out into a run, relying on the twisting roads and roving pedestrians to cover her escape.

If so, she’d seriously underestimated the tenacity of one Asami Sato.

A small part of her was whispering, with quiet but steady insistency, that if Korra wanted to get away from her so badly then it was probably best to respect her wishes. But the non-bender simply…couldn’t…accept that.

She wouldn’t have been able to explain exactly why, if pressed. But she couldn’t.

Things had been going so well just a few short hours ago, hadn’t they? She’d been attracted to “Mizore” from the very moment they’d first met, and that attraction had only deepened as they’d gotten to know each other more and more.

This past week had been the best of her life, far and away, since she’d lost her mother, and nearly every single reason why was connected to Korra. Even the worst part of it all – having to doubt, even for a moment, that she might not be able to trust her father – had been assuaged somewhat by what’d happened today.

As she’d told Korra, she’d “been with” three others in some capacity throughout her life. Her first kiss had been at age eleven, with a boy at one of her dad’s fancy dinner parties. An experiment, kid
Neither of them had had a clue what they were doing, and they hadn’t met back up since.

The other two – one male, one female – had been more serious. The girl had come first, a classmate of sorts. Asami had never actually gone to a proper “school,” instead being educated by a series of highly paid tutors, but at one point her mathematics teacher had been short on time and requested he be allowed to teach a couple of his clients at once for a couple of weeks.

Her father had, after some cajoling, agreed, and that’s how she’d first met Nu Sheng.

Heir to an Earth Kingdom mining empire and an earthbending prodigy besides, Nu Sheng’s rough-and-tumble attitude and quiet beauty had quickly entranced her. Fourteen at the time, she’d developed a quick and obvious crush on the girl.

(In retrospect, it was probably fair to say she had a type.)

Nu Sheng, just as repressed and generally miserable as she was, didn’t take long to reciprocate. They’d steal away in a side room whenever there was a break in their lessons, kissing and touching in ways that made her very glad her father wasn’t paying close attention.

But once their classes together came to an end, it became harder and harder to see each other, and after a couple of months Nu Sheng’s family moved to manage a new mine out in the Si Wong Desert. They’d never seen each other again.

Her most serious relationship, however, had been with a boy her dad had never even heard of. A non-bender and assistant at a local bakery, Mian had been sweet and gentle and absurdly handsome.

They’d met when she was sixteen, as she was picking up some pastries for a work function. Even at that age, she’d been desperate to contribute in at least the slightest way to her family’s company, and at the time that was as far as her father was willing to relent.

It wasn’t quite “love” at first sight, but they’d certainly noticed each other quickly. His easygoing and joking manner were also plusses, and when he eventually asked her out to dinner she couldn’t imagine saying anything other than “yes.”

The two of them had wound up dating, largely in secret, for about six months. Looking back, it’d been a very pleasant relationship, overall. It gave her a chance to do all the normal “couple’s stuff” for the first time – flowers, sweets, carnival games, the whole shebang – and it’d excited her tremendously.

It’d also been her most…physical relationship, to date. She and Nu Sheng had touched each other freely, but always with their clothes still on, terrified at being discovered “in the act.” Mian had been the first person, outside of her family or servants, to see her naked. And though they’d stopped short of going “all the way,” they’d been able to do things to each other that could still make Asami squirm.

But the difference in their respective classes – he was an orphan, and his minimally paying job was the only thing keeping him out of total poverty – made Asami worried to take him home, and ultimately that’d sank any chance at a real relationship.

She was ashamed to admit it now, but it was true. All she could imagine her dad would see if she introduced Mian as her boyfriend was a street elephant-rat trying to make a grab at their fortune, and at the time Asami simply hadn’t been able to take that prospect.

It was an awful reason to end what could’ve been a truly good thing, but she couldn’t exactly blame him for walking away. The only thing she could do now was resolve not to make the same mistake,
if she ever again dated someone of a “lower station."

Which brought things neatly back around to Korra.

Korra certainly wasn’t rich – though, as the Avatar, she was arguably of a much greater “class” than the Satos could ever hope to be – but this was one relationship she wasn’t about to let slip through her fingers.

*If it could even be called a relationship,* that same small part of her noted snidely.

She’d thought everything was going fine, wasn’t it? Sure, they’d argued; Korra’s insistence on tearing herself down over every last thing made that inevitable. But when that argument had led into the best kiss Asami had ever experienced in her life?

Well…Korra certainly hadn’t pulled away. Indeed, of her own volition, the waterbender had returned to that well over and over again, seeming just as hungry and desperate for Asami’s touch as she was for hers.

But they hadn’t had a chance to talk, really talk, before Iroh’s presence had thrown a hog-monkey wrench into things. She couldn’t help but resent him a bit for that, even if she bore him no personal animosity.

What did they mean to each other? What future, if any, stood before them now?

And…would they ever get a chance to find out, together?

Asami became more determined than ever to catch up to Korra…

So that she could learn the answer.

She’d been following after the waterbender for so long that they’d shot straight through the afternoon and into twilight. The last vestiges of sunlight were only minutes away from fading, replaced one by one by flickering electric and gas lamps.

Her big break came as Korra attempted to cross a busy street. The traffic signal began to blink rapidly as she approached, and though the Avatar quickly sped up to a jog, she was unable to make the crosswalk before a hundred or so waiting Satomobiles started racing across the intersection.

Glancing backward and meeting Asami’s eyes for just the slightest moment – the first direct acknowledgement she’d received in nearly two hours – Korra moved to try crossing parallel to the traffic instead, but found herself blocked by a band of what looked to be singing nomads.

Seeing her opportunity, Asami broke nearly into a run herself, pushing every last ounce of energy she had into closing the distance between them.

*Hark, the herald spirits cry!*

*The Avatar shall never die!*

*Air, Water, then Earth, then Fire!*

*Love and peace, the world entire!*
The nomads’ notes rang through her mind as Asami sprang forward, the world moving around her as if in slow-motion. Nothing else mattered in that moment, except what she was about to do.

She took the startled waterbender by the hand…

Pulled her in close…

And kissed her once more.

Seconds drifted into blissful minutes, as the two of them stood there, allowing the nomads and other pedestrians to pass by on either side. After a moment’s shock, Korra had responded by pulling her closer, tighter, glued wholly to the non-bender with her face and her body.

The fact that they were out in public, in the middle of an extremely crowded street, was the farthest thing from either of their minds.

It was only once the two of them had fully and truly exhausted their supply of oxygen that they broke apart, gasping and panting out of sheer, insatiable need for one another. Dimly, Asami realized that it must’ve started raining during their kiss, as a light drizzle matted her hair against her shoulders and face.

Somehow, she simply hadn’t noticed until now.

Korra, blushing furiously, occupied herself by waving her hand through the air, coalescing a number of raindrops into a shield to block away the others. She extended her makeshift umbrella over Asami, quite literally setting the two of them apart from their surroundings.

“I…I’m sorry for running from you like that,” said the Avatar quietly, once she’d managed to find her voice again. “I know that wasn’t fair. But that guy, he just got me so…so mad, and I…”

“Shhhh…” whispered Asami, stroking the Southerner’s own, damp hair. “You don’t need to justify anything to me. Nothing you say…and nothing you don’t say. If you’re willing to have me, then…that’s my promise to you. That I won’t leave your side. No matter what.”

Something that suspiciously didn’t look like rain was running down Korra’s cheeks, now. “Th… Thank you,” she murmured in reply, clutching the non-bender close. “But…well…”

Her words were coming up slowly, one-by-one, as if she was thinking long and hard about each. The catch in her throat and the look in her eyes made it clear – she was on the verge of making a decision that would affect her life for years to come.

“I…I think I’m ready,” she said after an extended pause, leaning into the other girl and placing their cheeks together, so that she was speaking directly into Asami’s left ear. “Or, at least…I don’t see any point in hiding it any longer. Not from you.”

“What do you mean?” asked Asami, just as mutedly. “Ready for what?”

“Let’s…go somewhere more private,” she told the non-bender, her eyes glancing about the street. There were, if anything, more people out now than when they’d started. “Like…my place, maybe? Or…Or, umm…a hotel…?”

She looked like she barely comprehended what she’d just said, struck dumb by her own nerve. Asami, for her part, felt a chill go up her spine as she thought about that last word…and what it suggested…
Still, she was a practical woman before she was anything else, and she found herself responding evenly, “The Four Elements isn’t too far from here. If I wave the Sato name around, I could probably get us at least a junior suite. If…that works for you?”

Korra flushed again and averted her eyes, but nodded once. “Alright. Okay, we’ll go there and…and then…” she said, her voice somehow both hollow and firm. “And then…I’ll tell you.”

She swallowed deeply.

“I’ll tell you everything.”

[---------------------]

“Golly gee gopher-bears, baldy. You sure took your sweet time getting here,” remarked Ming-Hua, as Zaheer slipped inside the back of their commandeered police truck. “What, did you stop to buy some hair extensions on the way?”

“As I know you’re already aware, Ming-Hua, I am not naturally bald. I shave my head daily to emulate the Air Nomads who are, however distantly, part of my ancestry,” he said with a frown. “Absent that practice, my hair and beard actually grow quite generously. P’Li can vouch for that much.”

“He’s right, you know,” the combustionbender chimed in, without turning around. It was her turn to “keep an eye on” the two detectives they were using as hostages – a task she took to quite literally. Albeit, not with either of her natural eyes. “When we met, he was totally sporting that whole ‘wild man’ look. Gotta say, though…much prefer it this way.”

She winked and blew him a kiss, before facing forward again, causing fresh beads of sweat to run down Lu’s and Gang’s faces. Ming-Hua mimed gagging on one of her water-streams.

“Anyway,” Ghazan cut in, very eager to change the subject. “We picked up everything on your ‘shopping list.’ Did you accomplish whatever mysterious spirit mumbo-jumbo you needed to?”

Zaheer closed the back of the truck and sat down beside the lavabender, before nodding.

“Everything’s been taken care of, to the degree it can be this day,” he replied enigmatically. “All that remains is to rendezvous with Korra.”

“You heard that, boys?” P’Li asked of their captives, lightly slapping each of them across the cheek. “Dragon Flats Borough, on the double. Let’s get moving.”

They didn’t need telling twice.

As they raced down the streets of Republic City, Zaheer opened up a satchel at Ghazan’s feet and silently began to examine the day’s “acquisitions.” None of them would necessarily be game-changing, but Zaheer had been fighting corrupt leaders and governments since he was a teenager, and he knew well that those battles usually came down far more to psychology than simple brute force.

And when hearts and minds were your battleground…a single grain of rice could often tip the scale.
“I noticed the Equalists have provoked something of a crackdown lately. Even while staying out of sight, it’s impossible to miss the mass-arrests and suppression of protest,” he said after a lengthy silence, as he turned a jet-black sword over and over in his hands. “That will likely make them more dangerous, whichever side they turn out to be on. A cornered elephant-rat will bite a catgator.”

“You and your stupid proverbs,” hissed Ming-Hua, with a roll of her eyes.

“Still, that could work out well for us, couldn’t it?” asked Ghazan, ignoring the waterbender. “If they’re desperate, they might be more willing to take on allies. And we do both have the same enemy, in this case.”

“Perhaps…” muttered Zaheer, tapping his chin musingly. He’d stolen a newspaper on his way back from the Harmony Tower, and was now scribbling notes atop the article on the bombings. “Something simply doesn’t seem right about the whole picture. But I’m having trouble figuring out precisely what it…”

He was interrupted in that train of thought, however, as the lavabender suddenly stood up and shouted, “Stop the car!”

Not wanting to be melted into a flesh-tinged puddle, Lu immediately slammed on the brakes, sending the Red Lotus members flying out of their seats.

“What…in the name of my non-existent left armpit…was that for?” demanded Ming-Hua, attaching two streams to her shoulders and using them to push herself back up.

“Look,” said Ghazan simply, gesturing out of one of the truck’s tinted windows.

The other five occupants of the vehicle scrambled to follow his direction – although the small size of the window made this difficult without piling onto each other.

There was a short beat, and then Gang asked, “Uh…wait, what’re we looking at?” Lu replied with a bewildered shrug.

For the other three, however, it didn’t take long to realize what’d shocked the lavabender so deeply.

Across the street, at the foot of the grand Four Elements hotel, stood two young women, one using waterbending to shield the other from the pouring rain. One, a black-haired beauty in a damp green dress, the Red Lotus didn’t recognize.

But the other…

The other was Korra.

“Get us a little closer,” ordered P’Li, to which Lu hastened to comply. The two girls appeared to be chatting animatedly, and though Zaheer and P’Li were skilled at reading lips, the darkness and the rain made that difficult from a distance.

As they slowly and carefully approached the pair, parking behind a large catering truck to keep their profile low, Zaheer climbed into one of the front seats in order to get a better angle on their conversation.

“She just called the other girl ‘Asami.’ And they appear to be discussing…payment,” he relayed to the others after a moment.

“I recognize that name. It came up in our research on Future Industries,” said Ghazan. “Asami Sato
The name of Hiroshi’s daughter. She must be trying to get information out of her.”

“I’m not so sure that’s…” Zaheer started to respond, but his jaw snapped closed as he noticed something farther up the street. “Hmm…that could complicate things.”

“What is it?” asked Ming-Hua irritably. “If you’re going to hog the window, at least give us the play-by-play.”

“A pair of police officers has just approached them,” explained the non-bender. “One of them is talking about a ‘curfew.’ Demanding that the Sato girl demonstrate bending, or be arrested on the spot.”

P’Li nodded. “We heard about that on the radio earlier today,” she told her boyfriend. “The Council just passed a bunch of ridiculous new laws as part of that ‘crackdown’ you mentioned. One of them is that non-benders aren’t allowed on the streets after dark.”

“The Satos aren’t benders. It’s part of why we suspected Hiroshi,” added Ghazan. “This could be bad.”

“And rapidly growing worse,” said Zaheer with a frown. “Korra was visibly waterbending, so they didn’t bother accosting her. But…oh, spirits. Now she’s getting in their faces. Shouting and threatening them.”

“Being Korra, in other words,” Ming-Hua quipped, her lip curled. She was the only person in the truck who looked even vaguely amused.

“This isn’t good. The radio announcement said obstructing the cops would be treated the same as any of the other crimes,” declared P’Li. “The last thing we need is Korra in a jail cell.”

“Indeed. We have no other choice,” Zaheer murmured, before suddenly grabbing both of their captives by the collar and pulling them close, so that he could whisper into both of their ears at once. Sweating and shivering after everything they’d been through today, Lu and Gang both flashed terrified smiles and thumbs-ups the moment he was done, before unlocking the driver’s side door and tumbling out of it.

“Come up here with me, P’Li,” said Zaheer after a moment, gesturing to the driver’s seat. “Keep both of them in your sights…just in case.”

[------------------]

The first thought that ran through the minds of both detectives, of course, was that they should seize this opportunity to run for their freaking lives.

But any hope of escape died a quick, miserable death the moment they turned around and saw the Red Lotus’ combustionbender with her head out the window, continuing to track their every movement.

They’d seen her power in action during their last “errand,” and they knew it’d only take her an instant to blow them into bloody little chunks, if they gave her an excuse.
Better just to go along with the bald guy’s plan.

“E…Excuse me, officers,” said Gang, flashing his badge and trying to keep the pants-wetting terror he was feeling out of his voice. “Nice work, but we’ll take it from here.”

“What’s going on?” asked one of the metalbenders, turning away from the furious waterbender who looked seconds away from freezing him solid. “This is way outside your jurisdiction, detective.”

“They ain’t bein’ strict on stuff like ‘jurisdiction’ when it comes to the Equalists right now,” Lu answered, taking out his badge as well. “Anyway, the Chief asked for these two by name. They’re, whadayacallit…persons o’ interest. We don’t bring ’em to her pronto, and it’s all our butts on the line.”

The cop turned to his partner, who shrugged her shoulders. Sighing, he eventually said, “Well, if it’s what the Chief wants. But this is all on your department now.”

“Gotchya, officers. Don’t worry, we’ll take care of things from here,” Gang attempted to assure them, grinning awkwardly. He took hold of Asami, who’d already been placed in restraints by the metalbenders. She shot him a viciously dirty look in return.

Lu tried to do the same to Korra, but she was having none of it. “I’m not ‘going quietly’ with you anymore than I was gonna with them!” she exclaimed, wrenching her way out of the shorter detective’s grip.

“Psssst…” he leaned in and whispered. “Jus’ play along, alright? It’ll be worth your while, trus’ me.”

Korra still looked furious, but with Asami in cuffs there was a limit to the number of ways she could try to flee. Reluctantly, she fell into step with the detectives as they approached their parked police van.

Gang leaned forward and unlocked the back doors, throwing them open with shaking hands. And the Avatar’s eyes went wide.

“Long time no see, princess,” said Ming-Hua, using both her liquid limbs to urge all four of them to pile into the vehicle.

“Korra, what’s…what’s going on…?” muttered Asami, looking around confusedly.

The waterbender returned the other girl’s frightened gaze, her mouth going thick and dry. Then, she turned to the four people who mattered most to her in the world, blinking several times, as if trying to assure herself that she wasn’t just dreaming.

Her eyes snapped between the two, several times over, her mind whirring like a grinding, badly oiled machine. Eventually, finally, she sighed.

“Guess the owl-cat’s out of the bag,” she replied – knowing that whatever happened next, nothing was going to be the same. “Asami…say hello to the Red Lotus.”

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Sho Gan-Lan tested the settings on his kali sticks, ensuring that the current was flowing properly. A couple of expertly executed test-strikes at a practice dummy proved that quite handily.

Satisfied, he nodded to his chief engineer.

“You’ll want to be careful fighting waterbenders,” said Hiroshi Sato, pulling off his workman’s gloves and, after a moment’s hesitation, replacing them with an electrified one. There was no such thing as too careful, at this stage of the game. “That’s how the original damage to the circuitry came about. Now, I’ve insulated the core better this time, but that doesn’t mean you should be taking any unnecessary…”

“I think he gets the point, Hiroshi,” spoke the voice to which all assembled – nearly one hundred Equalists in all – paid instant and total heed. Amon carried no weapons but he still adjusted his armor slightly, so that the three of them could present a united front to their followers. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

The bloodbender stepped forward and picked up a microphone, preparing to address his most skilled and loyal followers.

“Our gambit against the triads and police was a complete success,” he declared resoundingly, his every word taking command of the underground factory which served as their base. “Our bravest brothers and sisters sacrificed their freedom in the name of equality – to ensure the Council would play straight into our hands!”

The Lieutenant stepped forward, taking his place at Amon’s left. Hiroshi did likewise to his right.

“Now is the moment you have all been waiting for!” he continued to exclaim, rallying the assembled chi-blockers, martial artists, and mecha-tank pilots with every booming, charismatic breath. “The dawn of a new era! The dawn of revolution!”

The crowd roared, a mixture of righteous fury and zealous hope.

“This city’s bending tyranny has seen its last sunset!” he said, tossing his microphone to the side and shattering it against a wall. These last few words, he’d speak with his own voice. “Tomorrow, a new chapter will be written! Its pages, birthed in sweat and toil! Its ink, in blood! And its message…!”

In this, he was joined by every last man and woman in the room, their shared scream rising in a bursting, triumphant crescendo.

“Equality!”
Korra had never been particularly good at social niceties like “introductions.” It had, to be fair, not come up very much during her years as a fugitive, but regardless she found herself without a single clue what to say at a time like this.

“Uh…hi, everyone…” said Korra, shifting awkwardly as she plopped herself down on a seat next to P’Li. “This is…This is Asami Sato. Asami, meet…uh…everyone. Zaheer, P’Li, Ghazan, and Ming-Hua. And, err…a couple of guys I’ve never seen before.”

“H…Hey!” Lu and Gang called out nervously as they climbed back into the front seat, taking the police truck out of park and directing it per Zaheer’s whispered instructions.

“These…are the people who raised you, aren’t they?” asked the non-bender, her mouth agape as she looked upon the motley crew she’d just climbed into a locked vehicle with. “The ones you never want to talk about. This ‘Red Lotus’ group…you’re one of them.”

“Yes, but…but it’s not what you think!” exclaimed the Avatar, her voice straining slightly. “That Iroh guy was spewing a ton of hot garbage. They’re…We’re not…”

But Asami just placed a comforting hand upon hers, cutting her off. “It’s alright, Korra,” she whispered, as she sat down across from her, next to Ghazan. “I mean, who do you think I’m going to believe? Someone I just met this afternoon…or you?”

Korra’s heart almost cracked in two at the way she said that last word.

“I’d like to know why this girl knows your real name,” said Zaheer, frowning deeply. “It hasn’t even been two weeks since you arrived in this city, Korra. How severely has your cover been compromised?”

The waterbender’s face flushed with shame. “I won’t lie, I…I’ve screwed up pretty badly,” she told her surrogate family, a catch in her voice. “There’s two other guys in the city, plus an agent from Zaofu, and…”

She swallowed, hard. “And Amon,” she finished, barely able to squeak the words out.

“We came to Republic City because of a report from one of our spies,” explained P’Li. “A plant we have in the Red Monsoons said you’d been involved in some kind of…scuffle. Involving the triads, the Equalists, and the police.”

“They’ve got that pretty close to right,” admitted Korra through tight lips. “I just wanted to sneak in and observe. But…I underestimated Amon. He…He’d already…”

She couldn’t bring herself to say anymore, so Asami stepped in. “It’s all my fault,” she said. “Somehow, while she was staying over at my place, he snuck in and…and did it. He stole her bending.”

There was a moment’s pause, as those words were allowed to sink in. Then a – thankfully non-literal, in P’Li’s case – explosion erupted throughout the truck.

“I’d heard the rumors, but…I never thought…” murmured Ghazan, disbelief etched all over his face.

“Hold on, princess. We saw you waterbending out there, just a few minutes ago,” Ming-Hua
pointed out.

Korra didn’t meet any of their eyes, but instead stared downward at her empty hands – her mind racing with all the things they were no longer able to do.

“He left me one element. To bait me, I think. To taunt me,” she practically spat. “But my earth, and my fire…they’re gone. Just…gone. I’m…I’m so sorry…”

Asami moved to place an arm around the shaking Avatar, but Ghazan beat her to it, clutching hold of the teenaged girl as tightly as he could. No longer caring whether it was a good idea – for any number of reasons – she leaned into his muscular chest.

“This is certainly a…complication,” said Zaheer. “I’ll need to hear every last detail when we have time to debrief. That’s the only way we can start looking for a cure.”

“Do you…think there even is one?” Korra asked hoarsely.

The non-bender nodded. “Anything in this world that has been made, can also be unmade. The converse is equally true,” he replied. “That is one of the fundamental truths embodied by the spirits. And you, Korra…house the second-most powerful spirit of all time.”

“Who’s the first?” the obvious question tumbled from Asami’s lips, before she could stop herself.

Zaheer affixed her with a cold, impatient glare.

“We don’t have time for this,” he said, turning back to Korra. “Who is this girl to you, exactly? You haven’t explained why she knows who you really are. Every second she’s here could jeopardize our plans further.”

Korra and Asami exchanged a look. How could they explain what they were to one another? Not even they knew that for certain.

“Don’t be so harsh on the girl,” P’Li cautioned her boyfriend, curling an arm around his neck and kissing him gently on the cheek. “It’s nice that she’s got a friend. Heaven knows, most of us didn’t have that luxury growing up.”

Ming-Hua snorted. “Friend? Seriously? I’m the least-mature one here and even I can see it,” she declared. “Ah, young love. Excuse me while I make a spoon out of ice and gag myself with it.”

Both of the teenagers’ faces immediately went pink, and Korra abruptly jumped out of Ghazan’s grip, sputtering and coughing.

“L…L…Love?!” stammered the Avatar, her funk entirely forgotten in the face of sheer, overwhelming embarrassment. “Wh…Why would you…?”

“Not a lotta ‘friends’ go to hotels together after dark,” said the elder waterbender. “And were you, or were you not, macking it recently? Little hint, princess…you’ve got her lipstick on your face.”

Korra’s cheeks turned an even deeper shade of crimson, but she didn’t deny it.

Ghazan, for his part, looked utterly floored. “I…I’m happy for you, don’t get me wrong…” he stated carefully. “But when did this happen? How did this happen?”

He looked every bit the concerned father, and seemed determined to act the part. Korra supposed that, in a sense, he was the closest thing she’d ever had.
It fell to Asami to try to explain, since Korra’s brain was working about as effectively as a snail-sloth right now. “We’re not exactly…together,” she told them. “Just…trying to figure things out, you know? But whatever happens…I will stand by Korra. And that’s a promise.”

“Impressive words. But without action to lend them meaning, that’s all they are,” said Zaheer, before sighing deeply. “You are a free agent, Korra, and I won’t dictate how you conduct your private affairs. But as your mentor, I advise against this. No good can come from personal attachments…given what is coming.”

“What does he mean?” asked Asami, very quietly.

“I…I’ll tell you later,” Korra whispered back, grimacing. There was no simple way to explain Harmonic Convergence. “Anyway…I think I’ve answered enough questions for now. Before we go any further, can I ask a couple?”

Zaheer stiffened slightly, but ultimately nodded.

“What’re we doing in a cop car?” she demanded, gesturing to the two detectives seated in front of them. “And where exactly are we going?”

“We hijacked it to get around the city easier. Thankfully, these guys value their own skins a heck of a lot more than bringing in some deadly fugitives,” answered Ghazan, not bothering to lower his voice even though the men in question were just a few feet away. “Always nice to meet people who’ve got their priorities in order.”

“As for your second question, our main purpose for coming here was to ascertain your current status,” said Zaheer. “Now that we’ve rendezvoused, only one matter of import remains. You can expound on recent events on the way.”

“And…what exactly is that?” asked Korra.

“What else?” the non-bender responded mutedly. “We’re going to witness the end of the Republic City Council.”

[-------------------]

Darkness. Absolute, crushing, suffocating. It was all she could see, all she could hear – all she could feel…

Kuvira awoke with a jolt.

As her brain slowly swam back toward consciousness, the metalbender found that the waking world wasn’t much better than her hazy, indistinct dreams. She appeared to be in some kind of box, not much larger around than she was, with barely enough room to even sit down.

Experimental strikes against her container made it clear it was made of some kind of thick metal, but attempts to bend it failed to yield even an inch. Platinum, then. Tarrlok obviously knew what he was doing.

Kuvira’s insides burned with rage at the thought of the man. She’d never felt so used, so violated, as when he’d seized control of her veins and sinew with a gesture. It was almost a mercy she’d blacked
out amidst the bloodbending, simply so she wouldn’t have to continue feeling the sheer wrongness of her own blood betraying her.

With no one else to see, the metalbender clutched at her shoulders, clenching so tight that she would’ve drawn blood if her hands weren’t gloved.

There was nothing she hated worse in the world – hated – than being made to feel weak. Yet, in the face of something as monstrously, cruelly invasive as bloodbending?

It made her sick to her stomach to admit, but it was true: she had no defense against it. She wasn’t even sure there was one.

With no other alternative, Kuvira tried to take in every detail she could about her surroundings. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much to go on.

The room the box had been placed in was pitch-black, without even a window. Kuvira couldn’t sense any nearby earth or other metals, so odds were good she was on the second story or greater, and most likely in a wooden building.

If, of course…she was even still in Republic City. The last words she remembered, after all, had been Tarrlok jeering that she should bid it farewell. The lack of available earth could just as easily mean she was traveling by sea, or even air.

Learning her bending from the Beifong family, however, meant that Kuvira could function just fine without any visual markers. Hadn’t it been in just such a situation, after all, that Master Toph had invented metalbending?

Relying on her other senses, Kuvira searched for the slightest clue that might be helpful in ascertaining her location. But her ears met with utter silence, and her nose turned up nothing useful either.

Then, suddenly, she caught a whiff of something.

It was faint, but distinct; perfume, she was fairly certain. The type that probably cost more per bottle than Kuvira made in a month.

For a moment, she wondered what in the world such a scent was doing at a place like this. A few seconds later, however, it all became crystal-clear.

“So, girl,” said Tarrlok, speaking from what sounded like four or five feet away. “How are you liking your new accommodations?”

“This is a blunder you’ll live to regret, Tarrlok,” she snapped back, cracking her knuckles audibly. “Unless, of course, I’m mistaken about the ‘living’ part.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t just leave you to drown when I destroyed that passage. As I easily could have,” replied the bloodbender.

She imagined, based on his tone, that he was scowling. Not that she could actually tell, of course – the box lacked any openings apart from a single, narrow slat near the top for air.

“But I’ve never ended a life with my own hands, and I won’t let scum like you take that away from me,” he continued after a pause. “Besides… I need to know how you found that chamber. As well as how much you heard.”
“If you’re not willing to kill me, then why should I answer a single question you ask?” said Kuvira. Most would probably say that, given her present situation, taunting her captor might not be wise. But she had him angry now, and the more emotional he grew the more likely he was to let something slip. “You cannot fear someone you don’t respect. And I don’t respect any man without the balls to act decisively.”

Kuvira couldn’t help but curl her lip a bit. Maybe it was petty and immature, but she was a little proud of that one.

Rather than exploding, however, Tarrlok’s voice responded to the jibe by growing lower and crueler.

“Oh…I don’t need to threaten your life to make you talk,” he whispered coldly. “I can do so, so, so much worse. As they say…you’d be surprised what you can live through.”

Then, without warning, her left arm twisted behind her, bending so far back that it threatened to break the bone. Kuvira gritted her teeth, putting all her effort into forcing herself not to scream out in pain.

“The sooner you tell me what I want to know, the sooner this can stop,” said Tarrlok, as his bending forced her to her knees, amplifying the strain on her body further. “So why don’t you just save us both the trouble, and give up?!”

Despite everything, the cold, analytical part of Kuvira’s mind cut through the cloud of agony. There was stress in his voice, she noted. He genuinely didn’t want to do this.

His prior moralizing had been neither cowardice, nor a front. This was a man with principles – even if they were ones he’d found himself violating more and more as the years went by.

Good. She could use principles.

“Urgh…another proposal, then,” she managed to gasp out, fighting through the pain to keep her voice level. “I’ll answer your questions, if you answer mine.”

Her other arm twisted back as well, and a low groan finally escaped her lips.

“I don’t think you have the leverage to make demands, girl,” said Tarrlok, his tones sharp and biting.

But Kuvira had been prepared for that one. “What if I told you the police knew exactly where I was going?” she asked. “They’re probably searching for me right now. Meaning you don’t have unlimited time.”

“Y…You’re lying,” stammered the bloodbender. Which was entirely true, of course – but he wasn’t sure, and therein lay her opening.

“I’ll even give you a free piece of information, to prove my good faith,” she added, speaking over him. “My name is Kuvira, captain of the guard in Zaofu. And I work directly under Suyin Beifong.”

She placed emphasis on that last name, hoping it would be the clinching move. Unfortunately, it actually seemed to calm down the man’s nerves, based on the tenor of his voice.

“Now I know you’re lying,” he said. “Chief Beifong hates her sister. There’s no way she’d work with any agent Suyin sent along.”

Inwardly, Kuvira swore. He clearly knew more than she was giving him credit for. “Perhaps,” she
responded quickly. “But whatever grudges she might hold, Lin isn’t stupid. She wasn’t prepared to reject a promising lead when I brought it to her.”

More lies, but they seemed to hit their mark. “And what kind of ‘lead’ would that be?” demanded Tarrlok.

Within her platinum confines, the metalbender quietly smirked. “Should I take that to mean you’ve accepted my terms?” she asked, her voice toneless and casual.

Tarrlok growled, a guttural and disturbing sound, but ultimately seemed to decide he had no other choice. The sick, unnatural feeling in her veins abruptly faded away, and her arms returned to her brain’s control.

“…Very well. First question, then,” the councilman eventually said. “How did you find me there?”

“You’ve met Aiwei, correct? We have in him a mutual…acquaintance,” answered Kuvira, substituting the final word at the last moment. She’d been about to say “friend,” but she doubted that was true in either of their cases. “He came to me with suspicions of a mole near the Council. I infiltrated City Hall to investigate…and happened to see the most powerful man in the city, slinking off like an eel-hound with its tail between its legs. Who wouldn’t have followed you?”

“Someone who appreciates the value of their own life,” Tarrlok sneered, clearly off-put by her – partially but not entirely feigned – nonchalance. “Anyway, get your own idiotic question over with.”

Kuvira paused to consider this for a moment. There were a great number of things she still wanted to know, some quite desperately, though she was presumably limited to the ones Tarrlok would find innocuous enough to bother answering.

It didn’t take long for it to hit her. While it might not be the most useful question, right now the most important thing was to knock him off-balance, and keep him that way.

And based on the way he’d said the name…there was no better way than this.

“Who is Noatak?”

[-------------------]

Lin Beifong was in a foul mood.

Of course, that was hardly anything special, but there was usually at least a moment of calm in the midst of her generally chaotic days. A little break she could take with a cup of tea, or a good book.

But “breaks” had been the first thing she’d been forced to cut back since the bombings, and the Chief couldn’t well set different rules for herself than she expected from her officers.

The police were hardly the group most inconvenienced by Tarrlok’s new rules, but it was wreaking havoc on their schedules. The need to keep up patrols over every district at once, scouring the streets for troublemakers and curfew-breakers, had every officer in the city pulling a double-shift at least, and she could tell they were all just as on-edge as she was.

It’d be one thing if they were accomplishing something concrete, but after a full day of arrests,
shakedowns, and heated interrogations, so far as she was aware they were no closer to Amon than they’d been yesterday.

And that was a problem, because the only thing that sometimes – and only sometimes – justified such extreme measures…was extreme results.

Lin had overseen the entire, systematic process of rounding up every individual or group on Tarrlok’s “list,” even handling the arrests of a handful of the VIPs personally, including Iknik Varrick and Lau Gan-Lan.

In total, over the course of about twelve hours they’d rounded up close to eighty persons of interest, and more were still coming as Republic City reached its first night under curfew. An impressive accomplishment…were it not such a slap in the face to the principles the United Republic had been founded on.

Of all the citizens currently being held at the increasingly cramped police station, Lin doubted if more than ten percent were genuinely connected to the Equalists – and that was being generous. Yet thanks to a Council that was running scared, any or all of them could be held there indefinitely, their fates solely at the whim of a single man.

And there wasn’t a thing Lin could do about it.

Having been out there in the field today, the Chief couldn’t even say that they were improving public peace of mind. People were already terrified, and the image of legions of armored officers swarming over what were often the poorest and most broken-down neighborhoods, knocking down doors and seizing ordinary civilians by the dozens…

Surprise, surprise, it wasn’t making people feel very secure.

Well…most people, at least. That was really the sad part, here. The only people this move benefited, the only ones it comforted, were those so thoroughly shielded by privilege that they didn’t see the consequences of what they’d signed onto.

Which, unfortunately, pretty well described four-fifths of the current Council. And the other one was Tenzin, so…basically a wash, overall.

Lin sighed, audibly, as she signed off on the paperwork for the latest batch of detainees, stuffing it into an envelope that’d soon go to Tarrlok for final approval. It hadn’t used to be this way.

The Council’s first chairman, after all, had been arguably the most famous and celebrated non-bender of the modern era: the Southern Water Tribe’s Chief Sokka. Air Acolytes, all of them by definition non-benders, had held the one of the slots since the city’s inception, until Tenzin had taken the position himself at age forty-five.

But now, not only were all five councilmembers benders, but wealthy and well-connected benders as well.

Tarrlok boasted a sizable personal fortune, and lavish homes in both Republic City and the North. Jitai was the heir to the Earthen Fire Manufacturing Corporation, after her family had bought out the shares from Lin’s own grandfather, while Wei Yuan had always been set for life, simply by virtue of being third-cousins with the Earth Queen. Even I’Inka, who represented a territory that barely even existed anymore, had made himself filthy rich by investing early in electric lights.

Again, it was only Tenzin – hardly one to be considered “wealthy,” though he and his family had never exactly lacked for anything – who broke this trend, though arguably he was the exception that
proved the rule.

After all, when you were the son of the Avatar and the undisputed leader of an entire nation, you sort of had to surrender to the title of “elite.”

In any event, though she condemned their tactics and was prepared to do everything in her power to crush them before they hurt anyone else…Lin couldn’t deny that the Equalists had a point, at least with regard to the Council. If they ever wanted to restore good relations with the non-bender community, they’d have to make some concessions.

But under Tarrlok’s thumb, that was about as likely as pig-sheep flying.

A knock sounded on her office door. “Come in,” she said, trying to keep her recent frustrations out of her voice.

Saikhan entered and made a brief salute. Strictly speaking, he didn’t have to, but Lin guessed their present operation was bringing out the old United Forces training in him.

“Report, Chief, on the status of the detainees,” he stated, his voice crisp and professional.

Lin took a deep breath, steeling herself, before responding, “Go on.”

“So far, six suspected Equalists or Equalist sympathizers have been caught with wooden weapons. All were confiscated, and the perpetrators placed in solitary for the protection of others,” explained the captain. “But to be frank, Chief…well, we’re running out of holding cells. Especially with Mr. Varrick practically begging to be taken in for interrogation. Says he’s close, personal friends with Amon and wants to talk.”

“Probably a lie, but he still might know something. His little ‘mover’ suggests at least that much,” said Lin. “Prep room three. I’ll take care of this one personally.”

Gathering up her completed paperwork and handing it to the copyboy for delivery, she scowled and added, “By the way…any word yet on where the flameo Tarrlok’s gotten off to?”

“That’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about, Chief,” Saikhan answered, pulling out an official-looking envelope from his pocket. “Came directly addressed to you from City Hall. Didn’t want to open it in case it was sensitive material.”

Lin’s scowl deepened, but she lifted a letter opener from her desk with a flick of her finger and, with another, tore open the envelope. She held the letter within up close, reading it a couple of time over just to be certain, before she murmured, “He cannot be serious.”

Without another word, she handed the letter over to Saikhan, who quickly perused it as well. After a few moments, he cleared his throat.

“I…don’t suppose we have a choice, do we?” he asked in a low voice. “I mean, it comes directly from Chairman Tarrlok. Has the stamp of the Council page and everything.”

“This is a horrible idea,” she said with a lengthy, weary groan. “But…yes, I suppose you’re right. We don’t have a choice. We’ll just have to cross our fingers and hope that any of the million things that could go wrong…don’t.”

The captain shook his head slowly, a rare gesture of anything other than utter professionalism on his part.
“Hope’s never been one of my strong suits, Chief,” he told her.

She matched him in both body language and tone. “Same for me,” she admitted to her right-hand, sighing once more. “But given everything that’s gone on today…maybe it’s time we both learned.”

[-------------------]

“Wait, wait. Hold on a minute,” demanded Asami, her eyes wide with sudden alarm. “You mean everything Iroh said about you being a bunch of crazed, anti-government revolutionaries was true?”

“True and accurate are two entirely separate matters,” Zaheer said coolly, his arms crossed. He was clearly losing more and more patience with their unwelcome “guest” by the second.

It fell to Korra, who looked more than a little distraught by the other girl’s sudden change in tone, to try and interpret.

“I mean…yes, that’s one way I guess you could put it, but…” she stammered, somewhat frenetically. “But it’s a lot more complicated than just that, okay? Asami, you…you haven’t seen the things I have. All the evils that’ve been done in the name of the current world order. That’s why we’re trying to build a new one. A better one.”

“But…well, that doesn’t mean you have to destroy the old one, does it?” Asami tried to argue, though she was becoming more and more acutely aware, from the stares she was earning, that in this truck she had no allies on that point.

“How many times have you seen governments – your government – take from those who were suffering the most?” asked Ghazan. “Hurt them, imprison them…slaughter them, by the thousands, in any number of pointless wars? No leader in the history of the world has been an exception. Small, large, well-meaning or not…all become tyrants, in the end.”

“Or, if you want some more recent evidence…” said P’Li, handing over a partially crumpled piece of paper to the younger woman.

With slightly trembling fingers, Asami unfolded the page. Written across it in untidy scrawl were notes, taken by the firebender during the radio broadcast earlier that day.

Slowly, she read off the list of new “emergency measures” passed by the officials in charge of the city she loved. Asami couldn’t help it; she felt so sick, her stomach nearly bottomed out.

The Equalists needed to be stopped, of course, but this was…

Still, Asami shook her head, forcing her to keep perspective. “Sure…pretty much every government does awful stuff sometimes,” she declared, after she’d fully digested the grave injustice recorded on the paper. “That doesn’t mean the answer is to throw them out completely. They’ve done a lot of good things, too.”

“None of which couldn’t have been accomplished better, and easier, without all the paperwork and ceremonies and crap,” piped up Ming-Hua, her expression a callous sneer. “But what’re we doing, debating politics in a stupid truck? The only real question, Li’l Miss Prim…is whether you’re gonna do anything to stop us.”
Asami swallowed, as it slowly hit her that she had no guarantee of getting out of this vehicle alive. This answer was crucial.

With nothing else left to guide her, Asami found herself turning instinctively to Korra, whose expression was no doubt a mirror of her own right now – conflicted, torn, and stricken.

Finally, after nearly half a minute of silence, Asami found herself saying, “Is…Is anyone going to get hurt?”

The heiress had been hoping, deeply and desperately, that Korra would answer with an automatic and emphatic “no.” Instead, she looked expectantly to Zaheer.

As if she wasn’t sure.

As if missions where “people got hurt” were, for the Red Lotus, expected.

“It…is a possibility, if things go awry,” he answered after a pause, as if he’d been chewing over his words for some time before choosing them. “But if all proceeds smoothly, no lives will be lost tonight. Indeed, we shall likely save more than a few, in the long run.”

Asami considered this for some time, her eyes never leaving Korra’s as she attempted to process all this. After everything else that’d happened in the past forty-eight hours – not to mention the distinct lack of sleep she’d gotten across that timeframe – it was all too much.

Eventually, seeing no other path forward, she asked in a very small voice, “You…really do trust these people, right?”

Korra looked rather shocked by the question.

“That’s right,” she said immediately, her face scanning across the four others who surrounded them – all of whom were staring back at them in turn. “I mean, they may not come across at their best when they’re, y’know…talking business, but…”

She took a deep breath to steady herself. “But these are the people who raised me. They’re my family,” the Avatar went on, a distinct catch in her throat. “If I can’t trust them…who can I trust?”

That same catch, or one very much like it, suddenly appeared in Asami’s throat at well. That was a question that’d been on her own mind quite a bit lately.

Still, if she wanted Korra to give her father the benefit of the doubt…she supposed she owed her the same courtesy.

“We…should talk more about this, when we get the chance,” she told the other girl, biting her lip. “But in the meantime, I won’t stand in your way. Would…you prefer I leave? According to those new rules, I should be fine as long as I find a building to stay in until morning.”

Zaheer nodded softly. “I think that would be best,” he said. He began to turn around, presumably to order the detectives to pull over.

“No!” Korra suddenly exclaimed, surprising everyone – including herself, it seemed. All eyes turned to the Avatar once again, and her cheeks tinged pink with embarrassment. “I…err, I mean…”

Ming-Hua waved a “hand” made of liquid. “Oh, just let the love reptile-birds be, already,” she remarked dismissively. “She’s already seen and heard this much. And if our wittle baby Awataw, is carrying that much of a torch for Miss Rich Girl…well, keeping her out of the loop just seems
doomed to fail.”

Zaheer seemed to consider this, his eyes closed meditatively, before finally nodding again.

“A point I cannot argue with, I suppose,” he said. “Very well, Miss Sato. You will remain with us, and under our protection, until the break of dawn. In the meantime, you and Korra can both describe to me, in full detail, what occurred last night.”

The girls looked to each other, silent and still, for several moments. Then, without needing to communicate it…both of their right hands reached forward at once, to grasp the other’s.

“Just…one more question, before we start,” Asami muttered, turning back to face Zaheer full-on. He still intimidated her, and she very much doubted that was going to change anytime soon – but with her skin in contact with Korra’s, any feelings of anxiety were dulled to almost nothing.

Zaheer’s frown deepened, but he replied, “Go ahead.”

“I know you won’t tell me exactly what your plan is. I guess that’s fair,” she continued, though she wasn’t really sure that was fair at all. “But…can I at least ask where we’re going?”

The older man turned to peer out the window, watching as the streets and sidewalks passed by at blurring speed.

“To the warzone,” he said simply.

“Warzone? Wait, what warzone?” demanded Ghazan, looking confused. This seemed to surprise Korra, too. Apparently, Zaheer hadn’t told anyone about the full extent of his plan.

“It doesn’t exist yet. But it will very soon,” the non-bender responded, folding his hands together. “The worst in Republic City’s history.”

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Kuvira had struck a nerve with that one. That much was obvious.

Though she still couldn’t see Tarrlok’s expression through the half-foot-thick platinum, there were low growls and grunts of frustration escaping his lips every couple of seconds, which she wasn’t sure even he realized he was making.

Another advantage of growing up an “honorary member” of the Beifong family: wickedly good hearing.

“You shouldn’t be poking into things that’re none of your business,” snarled the bloodbender, once he’d managed to regain control of his voice. “Ask something else.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” said Kuvira. “I answered your question honestly. Now you do the same for me.”

There was the sound of a booming impact, echoing throughout her tiny prison, and she could tell he’d punched the box in anger.

“Noatak was…” he began, choosing his words carefully. “My maternal uncle. We were close. He
died of frostbite when I was nine.”

Kuvira didn’t need to be a truth-seer to recognize that was a big, fat lie.

She decided not to call him on it, though. She’d accomplished her main goal, which was rattling the councilman up; actually gaining the information would’ve simply been a nice side-bonus.

“My turn again,” added Tarlof after a moment, every word he spoke seeming to grow just a little gruffer and less polished. “Obviously, you heard more than you should’ve. But when did you start listening?”

“From the very start,” said Kuvira, smiling confidently. Once again, she decided the truth would be her most effective weapon. “I heard everything you said to the dear, late Mrs. Yakone.”

His fist struck the box once more, harder this time.

“Don’t you dare call her that!” he screamed, the volume of his voice jumping ten levels in an instant. “Mother was like a spirit of light. That…That creature didn’t deserve her!”

“Oh, trust me. If I’d gotten the chance, I would’ve drowned Yakone in molten iron myself,” Kuvira told him, calmly and honestly. “We’re really not too dissimilar, you and I. At least, in the lengths we’ll go to preserve order. It’s a shame things have gotten to this point.”

“Is that what this little game of yours has been about?” asked Tarlof, his tone simpering. “Trying to forge some sense of camaraderie, to persuade me to let you go? Well, forget it. I desecrated the remains of my own mother – threw aside the only reminders I have left of happier times – to preserve my secret. You think I’d take even the slightest risk of you exposing it?”

“Well, I think that brings up a good question on my side,” said the metalbender, pouncing on the opportunity. “What do you intend to do with me, after you’ve gotten all the information you need?”

There was a pause, as if Tarlof was considering whether or not that was something he could risk telling her. Apparently, he decided the risk was minimal, because he eventually replied, “I have a nice, secluded, unmarked cabin in the mountains. You’re going to live there for the rest of your life. In a little padded cell – with no earth, and no metal.”

Kuvira released a short, snorting laugh. “All this, because you refuse to kill me?” she scoffed, her voice dripping with condescension.

But Tarlof’s own tones were almost disturbingly cool and even as he whispered back, “I will not be like him.”

“In that case…” said Kuvira, the smile on her face slowly widening. This was it. At last, she had him. “Why are you bloodbending?”

On the other side of the platinum wall, Tarlof went completely and utterly silent.

“Yakone is arguably the most famous bloodbender of all time. It was the foundation of his criminal empire,” she continued on, pressing her advantage. “Every time you use that power, it just makes it more and more obvious. You’re his son, and you always will be.”

“Shut up!” roared the councilman. “You don’t know a thing about me! Everything I’ve lost, everything I’ve sacrificed! All for this city, and her people! You…You…”

He seemed to be clenching his teeth, judging by the way his voice changed. “You think I want to
“use this disgusting ability?” he asked, his voice growing quiet again. “I hate it. I hate everything about bloodbending. Yakone’s bloodline is a curse, and if I had a way to purge it away I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“Yet you still use it when it suits your goals,” said Kuvira, her tones biting and accusing. “You’re quite the hypocrite.”

“Perhaps that’s true,” Tarrlok admitted with a low sigh. “But if hypocrisy can save this city from itself, then I’ll gladly bear that burden.”

Kuvira’s lip curled, a look of bemusement upon her face. Even after all this, he still tried to justify himself with such high-minded rhetoric?

Still, he’d already let slip far more than he’d probably meant to. If she kept him off his toes, more opportunities were bound to present themselves. As such, she simply murmured, “I believe it’s your turn now.”

“Your overconfidence is… cute. But utterly misplaced,” he said coldly. “Very well, however. The next thing I want to know is…”

But Tarrlok never got a chance to finish that question. Because in that moment, an uproar began to erupt somewhere in the distance – loud enough that it almost seemed to be coming from the next room.

It was a sound Kuvira had heard numerous times in her life, though of course no two instances were ever precisely the same. The heavy din of voices talking over each other, men and woman and children alike, all fighting so hard to be heard that it blended into a single, unintelligible mass.

Wherever Tarrlok was keeping her, right outside, a riot had gathered.

The bloodbender didn’t bother with any parting words before sweeping out of the room.

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Tarrlok’s eyes went wide the moment he exited the door of his Republic City estate.

Just outside the front gate, just shy of a hundred shabbily dressed prisoners were corralled in a tightly packed mass. Each was restrained by heavy metal cuffs, and they were surrounded on all sides by what looked like two-thirds of the entire Republic City police force.

On the opposite side of the street, kept at a distance by metalbending officers but growing exponentially by the moment, was an enormous crowd of onlookers, straining their necks to catch a glimpse of the scene. A number of them were reporters, struggling to get closer to the front and flashing their cameras madly.

Tarrlok looked around wildly for someone to demand an explanation from, and soon spotted his page Jilu, standing by the gates and chewing his nails in fright.

“What in the spiritforsaken world is going on here?” he hissed at the tiny man, grasping him by the shoulder and forcibly wheeling him around. “Answer me, you sniveling coward!”
“Th…These are all the people who’ve been arrested under the Council’s new measures, sir,” said Jilu, stammering nervously.

“I can see that!” exclaimed Tarrlok, though his voice never managed to go above a whisper. “What I don’t understand is what they’re doing at my doorstep.”

“I…I was just following orders, sir!” the non-bender squealed. “I got an official message from the Council, ordering me to bring them to you, since you weren’t able to get out to them! I thought it was a little strange, but…”

“Someone set me up,” Tarrlok muttered to himself, fists clenched. “Tenzin has the motive, but…no, I can’t see him doing something like this. Maybe I’Inka. I wouldn’t put it past that crafty old fox-antelope, if he thought he could get away with it.”

The waterbender shook his head after a moment. “I suppose it really doesn’t matter now,” he added, turning back to Jilu. “I’ll just need to pretend this was my idea, and make the most of it.”

And with that, his demeanor changed in an instant, taking on the mask of Republic City’s most confident and charismatic politician once more as he strode toward the prisoners. His eyes, however, were on the hundreds-strong crowd of civilians and press.

“Citizens of Republic City!” he said, his voice booming. “Witness how much your Council has managed to accomplish in the space of a single day! Less than twenty-four hours after granting us the power to crack down on these Equalist vermin…well, see for yourself. Every one of these men and women is a confirmed member or co-conspirator of the terrorists who attacked our fair city last night!”

That was nowhere near true, but with the cameras flashing it didn’t really matter. He could always quietly release the innocents once the heat died down. For now, their numbers were useful in padding out the shots for tomorrow’s front page.

Still, there was a great uproar from the eighty or ninety detainees, some of whom were just a few yards away from the chairman. He ignored them skillfully.

“Councilman Tarrlok!” Kuroi Shinobi shouted over the din, struggling to make herself heard over the prisoners, the mass of police officers handling crowd control, and her fellow reporters. The fact that she succeeded was a considerable accomplishment. “If these prisoners are so dangerous, why have you chosen to take them out into public? In one of the city’s most affluent residential areas?”

Inwardly, Tarrlok grimaced, as she’d voiced more or less exactly what he’d been thinking. On the outside, however, his best smile remained plastered on.

“I felt it important to…demystify this threat our city faces,” he said, reaching for the first explanation that jumped to mind. “Clearly, Amon wants us to cower in fear, but he is the real coward! Refusing to show his face, hiding behind his followers like human shields! But I implore you all now to look, and see! These are his followers, and they are nothing more or less than simple criminals. And so is Amon!”

“Criminal, perhaps,” a voice suddenly reverberated throughout the cold night air, silencing the councilman – as well as, seemingly, every other man or woman in the area. “But simple? It seems a lesson must be taught.”

Tarrlok’s eyes went wide with horror as he – and several hundred others – directed their gaze to the rooftop of his enormous manor. Standing there, perched atop an elegant rain spout and framed by
the light of the crescent moon…

Was Amon.

“I thank you for bringing together the eyes and ears of the world, waterbender,” he called out, uttering the last word like a vicious curse. “Now they can all bear witness as the era of bending comes to an end!”

Motors began to rev in all directions, though the police had long since blocked off any traffic to the area. A moment later, however, it became clear there was a sizable flaw in their blockade, as sections of the road proceeded to open, revealing secret tunnels underneath.

And out of them streamed dozens and dozens of mechanized weapons, each vaguely humanoid and operating on industrial-strength treads, which wasted no time in engaging the city’s police force. Bolts of electricity and enormous bolas fired rapidly from their cannons, immobilizing nearly a third of the gathered officers before they’d even realized what was happening.

From there, things only went from bad to worse. As the crowd’s mood quickly turned from intrigue to screaming panic, dozens found themselves shocked into unconsciousness as they tried to flee. Equalists among them donned crude masks and gloves, spreading out in well-rehearsed formation to escalate the chaos.

Meanwhile, fully uniformed chi-blockers rained down from a number of nearby rooftops, using heavy cables to rappel themselves to the ground and assist their fellows. Any officer that stopped to defend against them made themselves an enormous target for the tanks, and very soon the metalbenders were dropping like spiderflies.

A number of the prisoners, Equalists and non-Equalists alike, had tried to use the confusion to escape, but they were bound together by iron cables which linked their cuffs, making this a futile endeavor.

That was until, without any apparent explanation, every single metal binding upon them dropped away in unison.

“See this, Republic City! Where your own government enchains and enslaves you, I offer freedom!” said Amon, somehow having no trouble being heard despite the battle raging on below him. “Those of you who’ve already accepted my Solution, lend aid to your brothers and sisters! And the many more of you who are innocent, treated as scum by your very own government…I offer you a choice. The choice they never extended.”

The hood of a demolished Satomobile flew at the masked man, the last desperate act of a nameless metalbender, but Amon dodged it easily, not breaking his stride for a moment.

“If you choose to flee, we have no quarrel. I give you my oath my chi-blockers and mecha-tanks will allow you safe passage,” he continued in a booming voice. “But for those who wish to strike back at the ones who’ve imprisoned and maligned you…join me! Join the Equalists!”

Several of the prisoners immediately turned to run – mostly the handful of benders who’d been at the wrong place at the wrong time – but many more of them cheered, moving to stand alongside the ones who were outright and emphatic believers.

Tarrlok watched all this unfold in stunned, horrified silence. The illusion of safety, of security, he’d so carefully crafted in response to the Equalist threat was crumbling before his eyes.

If anything, as he watched the police lose and more and more ground against the insurgents and the
remaining onlookers descend into mass hysteria, it seemed as if his actions had only made things worse.

“Please! Everybody keep calm!” he pleaded, his voice straining to be heard over the screams of the crowd as the freed prisoners swarmed over them en-masse. “Follow me, and we can still evacuate from here! Follow me, and we can…we can…”

But those were the last words he spoke, before blood began to stream from his mouth.

Tarrlok’s entire body went rigid, and slowly, he looked down, seeing the tip of the dagger protruding through his stomach.

There was a single moment in which his entire world became utterly silent. Where the panicked cries of the citizens and roar of the battle alike became a distant hum, and where everything around him became a blur.

Then he collapsed in a heap.

The last thing he saw, his head twisted awkwardly amidst his mass of hair, was Jilu raising a bloodstained fist in triumph.

“For Equality!” he shouted jubilantly, eliciting an ecstatic response from the nearest Equalists. Then, briefly, his gaze turned downward.

And he offered Tarrlok the most terrifying smile he’d ever seen in his life.

After that…

There was only darkness.

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“Shouldn’t we be out there?” demanded Korra, as they crept through the cramped halls of Tarrlok’s mansion. “There has to be…something we can do.”

“You said no one’d get hurt,” said Asami, her tone accusatory. Nonetheless, she continued to follow. “You said no one would die today, if everything went like you planned it. So was this your plan?”

She gestured out a wide-paned window as they passed it. Even from a distance, the “warzone” Zaheer had described was evident and horrific.

The non-bender shook his head once in reply. “So far as I’m aware, no one has died this day,” he told them both quietly. “The Equalists, ultimately, wish to win hearts and minds. While their methods are extreme, they tend to fall short of actually killing their enemies. They don’t want martyrs.”

“But they’re fine – you’re fine – if this city burns itself to the ground?” asked Asami, her eyes narrowed. “It’s madness out there!”

Zaheer stopped short, his head slowly twisting back to regard the heiress. It was obvious his opinion of her hadn’t improved in the last hour.
“Revolution is never bloodless,” he said, his tone making it clear he expected that to be the final word.

Korra fell back a step, so that she was side-by-side with the other girl. “Let’s just get this over with,” she whispered, her expression unreadable. “Like you said in the truck, we can talk about everything…else…later.”

Outwardly, Asami reluctantly nodded. Inwardly, she found herself wondering how often Korra had worn a face like that growing up.

In any event, the two teenagers continued to follow after Zaheer, their footsteps nearly silent as they peered into one empty room after another. He’d decided to take advantage of the “distraction” to search Tarrlok’s home, and both Korra and Asami had insisted on coming along. Korra, because waiting around in the getaway car while a battle raged on would’ve only gotten her antsy.

And Asami…because she had a bad feeling that if she let Korra out of her sight, in a place like this…She might not ever see her again.

The non-bender wasn’t exactly comfortable with what they were doing here, and even less with Zaheer himself. She had mixed feelings about the Red Lotus as a whole – though out of respect for Korra, she was at least trying to keep an open mind – but the man leading them right now? She couldn’t claim his obvious enmity toward her was anything but mutual.

Still, again for Korra’s sake, she kept her feelings to herself, and helped out with the search as best she could. The three of them scoured hall after hall of Tarrlok’s luxurious, three-story estate, opening drawers and thumbing through papers, but so far whatever elusive prize Zaheer was searching for had failed to reveal itself.

After about fifteen minutes of this, as they wrapped up a thorough examination of his kitchen that revealed only a secret, shameful stash of Varri-cakes, the revolutionary held up a hand to halt them.

“That’s all the time we can afford to spend here,” he said, not turning back to look at them as he spoke. “I didn’t really expect Tarrlok to leave anything useful lying around…but nor could I forgo such a rare opportunity. In any event, it’s unlikely he’ll be a significant factor after tonight.”

“What does that…?” Asami started to ask, but he extended his palm again, cutting her off. He twisted his head from side to side, his eyes closed, as if listening for something.

Eventually, his eyelids flicked open again. “Korra,” he murmured, his gaze now directed at a plain stretch of wall near the spiral stairwell. “Do you hear that?”

The Avatar went rigid and silent as well, before gasping in recognition. “I think so,” she responded, just as quietly. “Some kind of…banging?”

Asami strained her ears as much as she could, but she still couldn’t hear anything. Then again, she supposed, they’d been training their senses a lot longer than she had.

Zaheer walked over to that same wall, rapping his knuckles against the wood every few feet. After several repetitions of this, the sound changed – subtly, but noticeably.

“The wall here is fake,” he said, rubbing his finger against his chin musingly. “There’s likely a mechanism to open it. But where…”
Korra loosed a frustrated, impatient noise. “No time,” she declared, opening the skins at her waist and adopting a stance Asami had never even seen before. “If Tarrlok is as finished as you say, he won’t mind a little redecorating.”

And with that, she turned the water she’d brought into ice, and crushed the wooden wall into splinters.

It took only a single glance for the source of the noise to become obvious. The fake wall had been concealing a single small, dark room, which was completely barren save for what looked for all the world like an upright, metallic coffin.

“Who’s there?” demanded a muffled – and fairly irate – female voice. “From the sound I just heard, I’m guessing you’re not Tarrlok.”

Both Korra’s and Asami’s eyes widened in recognition. “Kuvira?” the waterbender asked, mouth popping open slightly.

“Is that…of course it is. Perfectly in keeping with my luck today,” said Kuvira, her sigh audible even through the thick metal. “Well, I suppose you can’t look a gift ostrich-horse in the mouth. This box is pure platinum – unbendable. But I’m sure Tarrlok has a key.”

“No need,” Asami cut in, already running her fingers across the top of the container. She had to stand on her tip-toes to reach. “My dad designed these for Republic City’s prison system, to contain metalbender criminals. All of them have an emergency latch in case the prisoner starts to suffocate or overheat, right about…”

The front panel of the box fell away without resistance, and Kuvira tumbled out, falling to her knees. “…Here,” finished the heiress, unable to keep a small grin from flitting briefly across her face.

Kuvira, however, was certainly not smiling as she leapt to her feet and dusted herself off, regarding her rescuers with cold detachment.

“Asami Sato as well, I see,” she said, nodding once. She had a feeling that was as close to a “thank you” as she was likely to get. “And…hmm. I can’t say I approve of the company you’re keeping.”

Though she directed her words to Asami, her eyes were on Zaheer the entire time, and the glint within them was not a pleasant one. Zaheer, for his part, returned the glare in kind.

“I assume this is the ‘agent from Zaofu’ you said had discovered your identity?” he asked, as an aside to Korra. Flushing again at the fresh reminder, she nodded.

“In that case, then…the Red Lotus has no quarrel with the Metal Clan,” continued Zaheer, taking on a tone and posture that were neither offensive nor defensive. “I will state that upfront. Though Suyin Beifong holds a leadership position, it is without title or legal authority. Until or unless that changes, I see no reason for the two of us to come to blows.”

“Oh, trust me. The only reason I’m not placing you in cuffs right now is complete and utter exhaustion,” said Kuvira, lip curled. “And, I suppose…because it’d be a poor expression of gratitude. But being in your debt doesn’t stop you from being terrorist scum.”

Suddenly, her eyes widened a fraction of an inch. “And speaking of terrorist scum…” she added in a whisper, her expression growing tight.

Then, without warning, she sped past them, out of the hidden room and up the stairs.
After the first couple seconds of initial shock, Korra, Asami, and Zaheer were right on the metalbender’s heels, despite having no idea why she was racing to the top floor of Tarrlok’s manor.

The moment the trio caught up to her, Asami cut straight to the chase and demanded, “What’s going on?”

“My senses inside that box were…dulled,” said Kuvira, not breaking her stride as she took the stairs two at a time. “Once I was released, I could feel every last speck of dirt or metal in this place.”

They’d reached the top floor now, and Kuvira wasted no time stomping into what looked like Tarrlok’s personal bedroom – immaculately decorated in rich whites and blues, with fancy imported fabrics and expensive artwork lining the walls.

The guard captain walked straight past all this and assumed a stance, raising both arms and then sharply lowering them. A large portion of the ceiling immediately collapsed under the weight of its own metal plumbing, spraying both them and the room with a thick layer of dust.

“Though the interior of this building is mostly wood, the outer walls and roof are all pressed stone,” Kuvira went on, wiping her face clean with her sleeve before using Tarrlok’s now-ruined bed to propel herself up through the hole she’d created. “And I could feel the weight of someone upon it. Someone whose footsteps seemed very…”

All three of them followed her lead, emerging onto the rooftop and blinking in the face of the surprisingly intense moonlight. Just in time for Kuvira to point forward and whisper, “…Familiar.”

Amon, perched at the far edge of the roof like a reptile-bird of prey about to pounce, slowly turned his hooded head backward. The painted-on smile of his mask seemed to taunt them.

“Well, well. Hello, Avatar,” he said, his voice seeming to capture every ounce of their attention even as pandemonium reigned in the streets below. “And…friends.”

He moved his once to each side, his neck cracking audibly.

“I’d love to stay and catch up. The stories you each have to tell are surely fascinating,” he called out to them, even as he returned his gaze forward. “But I’m afraid you’ve caught me at a bad time. Another day, Avatar.”

And with that, he splayed his arms akimbo, and dived headfirst off the three-story building.

Naturally, all four of them rushed to close the distance, unsure what to expect as they peered out over the edge. The means for his dramatic leap of faith soon became clear, as Amon tumbled out of a cartful of hay he’d used to break his fall. And in the next moment, his motive revealed itself as well, as the masked revolutionary dashed hastily toward Tarrlok’s prone form.

Tarrlok…who was lying bleeding on the ground.

What happened next came as a shock to nearly everyone watching – both to those on the roof, and to the numerous officers, Equalists, and journalists embroiled in conflict on the ground.
Amon reached down, took the waterbender in his arms, and lifted him to chest-level. Perhaps it was Korra’s imagination, but his mannerisms seemed almost…tender.

“My fellow Equalists,” he said, raising his voice so that all could hear, above the war that raged on as far as the eye could see. “I understand the satisfaction you feel, in dealing bloody retribution to one of our greatest foes. But our Movement must be careful to produce no martyrs. We cannot repeat the mistakes of our oppressors. We must be better.”

It was close – close – to his usual pattern of speech, but there was definitely something different about it this time. About him.

And judging by the expressions of those few Equalists whose faces she could see, she wasn’t the only person who’d noticed.

When they’d confronted each other in the warehouse, Amon had been perfectly calm and collected, his orders carried out without the slightest hesitation. And though his tone remained the same, as cool and level as if he was a professor lecturing a class, there was an indefinable “edge” to it that hadn’t been there the previous night.

“In place of this broken fool, I believe the highest ranking official on this battlefield is Chief Beifong,” continued Amon, striding forward purposefully, still all but cradling Tarrlok’s limp body in his arms. “Bring her to me.”

The response were nearly instantaneous. Asami let out a shocked gasp, and Kuvira a stoic hmmph, as the disguised Lieutenant from the warehouse battle – now bedecked in full Equalist gear and flanked by half a dozen others – tossed Republic City’s Chief of Police at their leader’s feet.

She was bound at the wrists and ankles, and had been stripped of the upper plates of her armor, presumably for the sake of blocking her chi. And though she could barely move, she was glaring up at Amon as if he was a particularly nasty spider-rat.

“What the flameo do you want?” asked the metalbender, jerking her head forward several times to no apparent effect. Based on her movements, Korra guessed that she was probably attempting to bend with her face, but if so the chi-blocking had done its work.

“First thing’s first,” said Amon, as his Lieutenant forced her into a kneeling position. Then, with Tarrlok’s body still carefully balanced in his arms, he reached forward with his right hand, and placed a thumb to her forehead.

And just like that, Lin Beifong was a binder no more.

“She has been purified. Undo her restraints,” he proceeded to order, and though it seemed to take the Lieutenant somewhat aback – it was hard to read his expression from this distance – the command was swiftly obeyed. “And now, Chief. I offer you a proposition.”

The moment her hands were free, Lin tossed a punch straight at his mask. It seemed she’d struck wild, however, as her fist just barely failed to connect.

Still, it was enough for the Lieutenant to prod her with an electrified rod, eliciting an involuntary grunt of pain. Nevertheless, Lin remained conscious and standing, drawing herself to face Amon directly through the eyeholes of his mask.

“I did not come here to conquer this city. Or, to destroy it,” he told her. “Perhaps, one day. But this night was about sending a message. I think you’ll agree that message has been received.”
“Get to the point, already,” the Chief snarled.

“Very well,” said Amon. Then, in lieu of answering further, he reached forward.

Offering Tarrlok’s bloodstained, shivering body from his arms to her own.

“In less than an hour of open conflict, there has been too much bloodshed already. On both sides,” he added, his voice low and yet resounding all across the street. “In this one’s case, I believe he’ll live. So long as he’s taken to a healer immediately.”

Despite everything, Lin let loose a sharp, humorless laugh as she took hold of the body of the councilman.

“You do see the irony, don’t you?” she asked. “In you asking for the services of a waterbender?”

Amon ignored that completely, instead crossing his arms and turning away, so that she faced the back of his hood.

“I offer you an unconditional, temporary ceasefire. Long enough for us both to collect our wounded, and go,” he said. “I suggest you take this deal. It’s the best one you’re likely to get.”

His words, clearly, weren’t what the Equalists had been expecting. They were winning right now, and though many had stopped in their tracks to listen to their leader parlay, many more were in the process of wearing down the police’s last, lingering resistance. Korra guessed it’d only be ten or fifteen minutes before they won the day completely.

Still, none of them seemed willing to openly question or contradict their leader. One by one those mechanical monstrosities whirred to a stop, their function switching to defense as they blocked off large portions of the street from view, allowing chi-blockers to swoop in and collect their fallen comrades.

Lin seemed to have been struck speechless, but she recovered quickly, dashing over to a parked police car and extracting a radio from it.

“Dispatch, this is the Chief. Need…Need as many emergency vehicles as you can spare. Phoenix Towers borough, corner of Giacomo and Nova,” she spoke, her voice strained. Korra recognized her tone of voice well; it was the same one she’d used, as she forced herself not to think about the fact that she’d lost her bending. “I’ve got two-thirds of my officers down, and plenty of civilians needing evac. No casualties so far, but…”

She lay Tarrlok down delicately in the backseat of the Satomobile. His breathing was evident, but ragged.

“But don’t dawdle,” she eventually finished, before rushing over to help support another officer being dragged to safety by his partner.

Meanwhile, on the roof of Tarrlok’s sprawling mansion, four individuals who came from very different worlds looked upon the scene with dim, uncertain horror.

Or…three of them did, at least.

Korra shook her head, averting her eyes from the scene as more than a hundred Equalists – their numbers swelled by the prisoners Amon had managed to rally to their cause – disappeared down alleyways and through manholes, as quickly and untraceably as they’d first arrived.
Instead, she turned to the others, distress and confusion etched in every corner of her face. “Does anyone know what just happened?” she asked.

Zaheer just continued to stare forward, standing in the same place where Amon had been perched. Mutedly, he nodded his head once.

“I believe…” he said, extracting a small silver locket from his robes and clutching it in his fist. “I have a fairly good suspicion.”

Halfway across the city, a limousine – the first one of its kind ever designed – careened around a corner at a decidedly unsafe speed. The driver didn’t seem concerned, however.

No cops were available to enforce traffic regulations this night.

“Not that we don’t appreciate the help, Mr. Varrick…” mumbled Mako, though he was looking mildly queasy as they sailed over yet another pothole. “But whose car is this, again?”

“Search me, m’boy!” exclaimed the non-bender, as he reclined against the luxurious, hippo-cow leather seats. “Anonymous benefactor had this baby waiting for me right outside the station. That sort of thing just kinda happens when you’ve got a lot of moolah.”

“Err…moolah, sir?” Bolin said, scratching his head.

“You know! Bank, cheddar, lettuce, platypus-bear droppings! Okay I might’ve just made that last one up, but write it down Zhu Li, I’m getting ideas,” he replied. His assistant, who was sitting a foot to his left, nodded silently, pulling out a writing pad and beginning to take notes. “Anyway, I’m talking money, dear boy! It may not come across much, since I’m such a humble man-of-the-people, but my net worth is bigger than Kyoshi’s shoe size.”

“And is this same ‘anonymous benefactor’ the reason you were able to walk us straight out of the station?” asked Mako, one eyebrow raised.

“That, and, good ol’ fashioned audacity,” Varrick declared with a wide, mildly unsettling grin. “Ninety percent of going anywhere is looking like you should. That’s a free piece of advice, kid, try and get some mileage out of it.”

“That…doesn’t explain very much,” the firebender pointed out.

“Look…I dunno to tell you, okay?” said Varrick. “One minute, they’re taking the three of us to the interrogation rooms. The next, half the cops in the station run out, along with what looks like every other lowlife, highlife, and mediumlife we had to share that cell with.”

“None of this is new information,” responded Mako, groaning briefly in irritation. Why couldn’t Bolin have gotten them embroiled with a nice, normal person for once? “We were there, remember?”

“Anyway, after sitting there twiddling my pinkie toes for about ten bazillion hours – or minutes, maybe, I wasn’t really paying attention – the door to the room popped right on open. All on its own, I swear!” the businessman went on to explain, emphasizing the word “popped” with a loud sound
effect. “The skeleton crew manning the station wasn’t in a mood to watch over their bosses’ canned leftovers, so I strolled right on by, sprung you two, and marched out on my merry way.”

“That still seems pretty darn suspicious to me,” muttered Mako, though he nodded his acceptance. “But…thank you. We appreciate the help.”

Varrick waved him off. “Think nothing of it,” he said. “Least I could do after Bulblin here…”

“…Bolin…” the earthbender corrected weakly, for the fifth time that night.

“…Saved this pretty face from getting tarnished! Knife wounds really do a number on your complexion, let me tell ya,” continued Varrick, as if he hadn’t been interrupted at all. “Sure I can’t offer you boys anything else? Smarts, skills, ingenuity…I could use people like you in my organization.”

“Thanks for the offer, but we like where we are,” Mako answered, his tone polite but firm. “You can drop us off anywhere on the south side of town, by the way.”

Varrick looked skeptical. “You do know you’re both still technically fugitives, right?” he asked.

“We’re planning to lay low until the match next week. If the police wanna arrest us again, they’ll have to do it in front of ten thousand screaming fans,” said Mako. “My guess is, they won’t think the bad publicity is worth it. The original charges were completely false and trumped-up, so I doubt they want a spotlight flashed on this.”

“Besides, we have plenty of experience hiding from the cops!” Bolin added brightly, causing his brother to elbow him in the ribs.

“Well…if you’re sure…” murmured Varrick, shrugging his shoulders in a grand, exaggerated motion. “Driver-guy, let’s give it another four or five blocks, and then let these fine gentlemen be on their way!”

The “driver-guy” did as instructed, parking by a broken-down gambling parlor and allowing the two young brothers to disappear into the shadows. Varrick waved merrily goodbye until the moment they disappeared from view.

“Think they bought it?” asked the shipping magnate, the same goofy grin plastered across his face as he slowly lowered his hand.

The driver let out a deep, coughing grunt as he removed his disguise, swapping oversized sunglasses for his regular bifocals and pulling a scraggly fake beard from over his real, much neater one.

It was all very simple, but it was enough to successfully hide from the boys that they’d been in a car with two of Republic City’s captains of industry.

“A scientist in the southern Earth Kingdom has been doing some fascinating new research,” said Hiroshi Sato, as he restarted the car. The windows of the limousine were tinted, but it was better not to take chances in this part of town. “By comparing the size and shape of their skulls, he concluded that non-benders are actually physically more intelligent than benders. The use of that sick perversion sucks away over ten percent of their brainpower.”

The engine roared back to life, the most glorious sound in all the world, and the two businessmen – and silent assistant – sped off to its next destination.

“Which is all a roundabout way of saying…” he stated, his lip curling. “That no, I don’t think those
“They do bring up a good question, though,” Varrick remarked after some time had passed, meeting the other man’s gaze via the rearview mirror. “Why did you go through all this for little ol’ me? You’re probably the one person on the planet I wouldn’t believe is after my wallet.”

“As you said before…think nothing of it,” replied Hiroshi, his tone genial but his expression anything but. “You and I are a lot alike, after all. Even without the benefit of being able to cheat our way to the top, we both worked ourselves up from nothing, all on our own. And now we’re among the most powerful people in the world.”

“Which also makes us competitors,” Varrick said shrewdly, his fingers steepled.

“Perhaps. But it doesn’t have to,” Hiroshi told the other man. “The one area where our companies overlap – mechanical manufacturing – is a relatively small part of your portfolio, and a very large part of mine. It’s the rest of your empire that interests me.”

“Ah, ah. I can see where this is going,” responded the Southerner, bracing as they took another corner at almost double the posted speed limit. For such an apparently mellow, middle-aged man, Hiroshi sure didn’t drive like one. “But my company is like my baby…only, y’know, bigger, and I have to pay property tax on it. Point is, it’s not for sale.”

The corner of the older man’s mouth twitched slightly. “I’m not talking about some kind of…oh, hostile takeover, or anything like that. For one thing, I couldn’t afford it,” he explained. “I’m talking about a partnership. One I think could be quite lucrative…on all sides.”

Varrick leaned back again, either deliberately ignoring or else simply oblivious to the warning look Zhu Li had just flashed him.

“You’ve got my attention,” he said.

With his left hand still on the wheel, Hiroshi used his right to dig around in the glove compartment, before tossing a thin leaflet into the passenger compartment. After a couple fumbled attempts, Varrick managed to catch it.

It was something the magnate recognized well; he had written it, after all. The flyer for *The Curse of Amon, the Ancient and Almighty!*

“This ‘mover’ of yours. We see great potential in it,” declared Hiroshi. “But wouldn’t it be even more effective if it was a little more…accurate?”

Varrick crossed his arms haughtily. “Dunno what you’re trying to insinuate there, buddy, but I’ll have you know Varrick Global Studios prides itself on getting the story right, ninety-seven percent of the time!” he exclaimed. “You won’t see this guy backing down from the truth, just because Amon and his cronies have a few bombs!”

“Bombs that you provided us,” said Hiroshi, cutting through the other man’s bravado like a hot knife. The Southerner’s demeanor shifted in an instant, tugging at his collar as sweat began to run down his forehead. Without even the requisite “Do the thing,” Zhu Li immediately reached over to wipe it clean with a handkerchief.

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he muttered through tight lips. “Just like I’m sure you’ve got no idea why you keep using words like ‘we’ and ‘us.’”
Hiroshi chuckled lightly. “Well, I really wasn’t trying to keep it a secret. That’d defeat the entire point of this pitch,” he said. “But I’ll cut straight to the chase, since I know we’re both very busy men. How would you like a face-to-face interview with Amon? Or…face-to-mask, I suppose.”

Varrick went bug-eyed, his inner voice already salivating at the idea, but he still had the presence of mind to ask, “What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” replied the bearded man. “We truly do want this ‘moving picture’ of yours to be a success. And we want it to showcase as much of our Movement as possible.”

The younger magnate’s jaw dropped open by nearly an inch, as realization finally dawned on him. “You want this to be…your mover,” he whispered. “A recruitment tool.”

“An apt way to put it, I suppose,” said Hiroshi, grinning slightly. “But the mover’s just the start. The Equalists are ready to expand beyond the United Republic. We know our Movement has allies and sympathizers in every nation; we just need to reach them. And no company has a greater reach across this planet than yours. You’re called Varrick Global Industries for a reason.”

Varrick’s frown deepened. “What exactly are we talking about here?” he demanded. “Smuggling of tools and equipment? Human trafficking? Building you new and better weapons?”

“All of the above, and more,” answered the older man. “All completely below board, of course. Though I suppose wiring it through legal trades between our companies might be the best way to avoid suspicion. In any event, however…”

Suddenly, he jammed the wheel hard to the right, sending them straight for a dilapidated wooden wall. Varrick barely had time to brace himself for impact, however, before they passed straight through the fake barrier, the wood revolving upward on an axel to allow them passage.

“I can promise very generous profit margins,” finished Hiroshi, smiling into the rearview mirror as they drove down the hidden passageway, deeper and deeper underground.

Varrick’s half-formed reply died in his throat at the sights that greeted him outside the limousine windows: what looked like the largest factory he’d ever seen, with uniformed personnel milling about by the hundreds, maintaining equipment or practicing chi-blocking or simply sitting down for a meal together.

“It’s only a start. But with your help, it can be more,” Hiroshi continued on. “And what do you have to lose, really? The bending establishment threw you in chains merely on suspicion of being connected to us. Might as well be what they expect you to be. And once we overthrow the Council, I can promise very favorable treatment.”

“All true,” said Varrick, his eyes darting all around them as the vehicle finally came to a stop. “But in fairness, you guys did try to kill me a few hours ago.”

“One minor member took things into her own hands, and made a mistake,” Hiroshi tossed off dismissively. “Rest assured, she will be disciplined.”

Applying the parking brake and turning off the engine, the older businessman finally turned around to face his competitor directly. Varrick had never been especially talented at hiding his true emotions – at least, not without some prep time – and written all over his face was the conflict raging on within him.

To her utter surprise, the first place his eyes alighted on was Zhu Li, who was still jotting down
copious notes, her outward expression unchanged since the moment they’d dropped off Bolin and Mako. Though she was directly within Hiroshi’s field of vision, he didn’t seem to be paying an iota of attention to her, so she chanced offering her boss a single, brief shake of the head.

“Think about it, Varrick. You don’t owe anything to those people,” added the Future Industries CEO, his tone imploring. “You belong with us. With your help, we can finally escape the oppression we’ve fought against all our lives. With your help…we could be unstoppable.”

A few silent, uncomfortable beats passed. Then Varrick held up a hand, to keep him from going on any further.

“You can stop with the speechifying. Sorry, but I’m never gonna be on board with any big, fancy cause. Just not in the Varrick playbook,” he said. Slowly, he lifted himself out of his seat and made his way to the front of the limousine, so that the two magnates were only a couple feet apart. “I’m not big on ‘solidarity with my fellow non-benders’ or ‘striking back against the evil elites’ or any of that. Heck, I don’t even really care they tried to throw me in jail! Bound to happen sooner or later.”

For just a second, Zhu Li dared a glimmer of hope to spread across her face. That the treacherous move she’d been regretting all day – anonymously tipping the police off about the detonator theft – might’ve finally jolted to life what small sliver of a conscience he had in his heart.

But that bit of hope died just as quickly as it came, as her employer’s smile shifted into a dark, twisted leer.

“But you really didn’t need to go into all of that,” he murmured, his eyes still darting around the secret factory. But now she recognized the look in them – and she knew he was seeing yuan signs on every shock-glove or mecha-tank. “Because you had me at ‘profit margins,’ my friend.”

He offered his hand forward, and Hiroshi Sato accepted it enthusiastically. Then, with an easily deducible “Do the thing!” Zhu Li found herself holding open doors for the both of them…allowing the one person she cared about in this world to, quite literally, step into a new one.

“Zhu Li, scrounge up some cameras!” he called out jubilantly, standing arm in arm with his now-former competitor. “Hope Amon is ready for his close-up.”

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It took nearly three hours, following Amon’s ceasefire, for the wreckage of battle to be fully cleared from the Phoenix Towers borough.

Korra almost had to marvel at how quickly the Equalists had managed to disappear without a trace, but the same could hardly be said for the effects of their attack. Enormous wounds were gouged in the roads and nearby buildings, either from the crossfire or from being used as last-ditch weapons by desperate officers, panicking as they found their metalbending to be completely useless.

About a dozen of those crazy, manlike tanks had been strewn around the area – the small fraction the outnumbered and outgunned police had managed to bring down. Some had been blasted into sm ithereens, their remains embedded in brick or stone as much as twenty yards away, while others were still basically intact, if nonfunctional.

In any event, it was taking nearly a third of the officers still capable of standing just to control the
crowd, to keep them from gawking or stealing pieces for themselves.

The rest of the cops were occupied with overseeing the civilian evacuation, assisting their injured fellows into waiting ambulances, or using earthbending to repair the damaged infrastructure as best they could. Thankfully, Amon’s late entrance into the battle meant that – with one glaring exception – none of the officers had lost their bending this time around.

And no one was interested in bringing up that “exception” to her face, as she worked doubly as hard directing the disaster triage on all fronts.

All this meant that the Red Lotus were having a surprisingly easy time moving about the area. With emergency vehicles pouring in and out of the streets by the dozens, nobody stopped to question a single additional police truck.

Nobody stopped to question when they picked up an unassuming, bespectacled man not too far from the epicenter, his hands folded upon themselves as he climbed into the back of the vehicle.

His eyebrow rose slightly, however, as he noticed one of the people waiting for him there.

“Ah…Lady Kuvira,” Aiwei said calmly. “Yours certainly wasn’t a face I expected to see here.”

The guard captain, however, narrowed her eyes and glared at her fellow metalbender. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it before,” she spat, scowling. “You’re…with these people. You’re the mole.”

“An apt, if ugly, way to put it,” he admitted, as he stepped inside the vehicle and bent the doors closed behind him. “Let’s get moving, Zaheer.”

The drive out of the blockade zone was not an especially comfortable one. The increasingly cramped quarters of the police truck – which was now accommodating two detectives, six members of the Red Lotus, a Zaofu city guardswoman, and the Sato family heiress – forced the two metalbenders to sit together on the floor, curled up and holding their knees to conserve space.

It would’ve been an almost comical scene, in any other circumstance.

Several minutes passed before P’Li chose to break the uncomfortable silence. “We’re not going to pick up Jilu as well?” she asked.

But Aiwei shook his head.

“He’s already been taken into custody,” he said, adjusting his glasses as the van hit a bump in the road and knocked them loose. “He knew the risks of his part in the plan, and he accepted them fully. His shout was deliberate, so that he’ll be judged a spy for the Equalists and none other. In time, he may even prove a useful agent in Republic City’s prison system.”

Asami, however, was already several steps ahead of him. “This…all of this…you planned it from the start,” she whispered, realizing aloud. “You’re a metalbender – you’re the one who opened all their cuffs.”

“Their freedom had been unlawfully revoked. I was justified in returning it to them…whatever might’ve occurred afterward,” he declared, his voice even. “And in any event, this was the least-bloody option to remove the Council from the equation. With public order so thoroughly demolished, on the chairman’s very doorstep, public confidence will erode. Republic City’s government took one step into the grave today, and not one single life had to be lost.”

After a moment, he turned to Zaheer. “Incidentally, who is this girl?” he demanded. “And what are
Ming-Hua placed a liquid appendage upon the balding man’s shoulder. “It’s a long story, honey,” she said, running the stream up his face and gradually making it colder as she did. “Trust me and just roll with it.”

“Regardless, if you’ve violated your oath of loyalty to Zaofu, then I am fully justified in taking you in,” hissed Kuvira, still facing resolutely toward the doors rather than to his face. Still, it was obvious from her tone and demeanor that she could tell every eye in the truck was on her.

“But…” she added after a moment, fists clenching tight. “I expect most of you would probably have a problem with that, correct? And I can’t say I like those odds. I’m confident in my abilities, but I’m not stupid.”

“Your assumption is accurate,” replied Zaheer, one arm around P’Li and the other curled tightly around a duffel bag. The one containing all the “spoils” of their recent adventures. “One way or another, we’re leaving this city tonight. And we’re taking Aiwei and Korra with us.”

“Wait, what?!” exclaimed both Korra and Asami, at the same time.

Ghazan frowned. “No offense, Korra, but…well, the original mission is kind of a bust at this point, isn’t it?” he said. “Amon knows who you are, and he’s, err…not exactly friendly about it. We’ll need to start over with him. Hopefully make a deal that gets you your bending back…or else take down his whole operation, and force him to reverse what he did to you.”

Korra swallowed, hard. This was what she’d been afraid of, in the back of her mind – the sinking feeling of it kept at bay only by the flurry of activity they’d engaged in over the past twenty-four hours.

She’d failed the Lotus; failed her family. She’d lost it all, without anything to show in return. And now…

They didn’t even trust her to get it back.

“You…You can’t…” she sputtered, suddenly feeling like a twelve-year-old again, stubbornly insisting to her favorite teacher that she was ready for lava when she’d barely even gotten a handle on earth. “You can’t just…cut me out of this! I…I…”

She took a deep breath, steadying herself. Almost automatically, despite her own obvious distress, Asami reached over to touch her shoulder.

Somehow, it helped.

“This…needs to be something I do,” she finally managed to say, her breaths coming out rattling but firm. “Maybe not alone, but…but I have to be involved. I can’t sit back and let the grown-ups handle this for me. Otherwise, I’ll never get it back.”

“Get what back?” asked P’Li. “Your bending?”

But Korra just shook her head. Then, a few moments later, her lips opened just enough to murmur, “My honor.”

There was a brief pause, as these words hung in the air over them all, before Aiwei made a scoffing sound.
“Don’t be stupid, girl,” he told her. “Accept your failure and move on. The stakes here are far too important to…”

But Zaheer held up a hand, forestalling him further.

“We must allow the Avatar to choose her own path. That is the very essence of our mission,” he said. “We will render as much or as little assistance as she is comfortable with. But at the end of the day, this decision must belong to her, and no other.”

Ghazan turned to Korra, his brow furrowed with concern.

“When do you have a path set out?” he asked of her, leaning forward. “A plan…or at least some idea of what you’ll do next?”

The waterbender hesitated, looking around herself. At the motley group gathered here in this truck, all from diverse walks of life…and all of whom were staring at her expectantly, waiting for an answer.

Finally, she responded quietly, “I have…allies. At least I think I do. Bolin and Mako – they’re the other two I mentioned – and Asami, and…”

She hesitated, looking directly at Kuvira. The metalbender crossed her arms and snorted derisively.

“Nothing has changed between us, Avatar,” she said. “I knew from the very start that you were a member of the Red Lotus, and that this would likely make us enemies one day. But for now, your incapacitation represents a vital threat to world order. Until you are restored to full strength, and the Equalists are crushed into the dirt they crawled out from, our interests remain…aligned.”

Ghazan looked torn. “Then…I’ll stay here with you,” he offered, his voice slightly strained.

But it fell to Ming-Hua, of all people, to be the voice of reason.

“Don’t forget…the entire reason we sent her is because we can’t afford to be seen,” she reminded the lavabender, one liquid limb resting lightly upon his shoulder. “Coming here for a day or two is one thing, but this could take months.”

“Ming-Hua is quite correct,” said Zaheer, though his tone made it clear those weren’t words he spoke very often. “Now that our business in the city is concluded, our priority must be to fall back to our base, and ensure Aiwei’s safe passage. If Korra wishes to remain here…she must do so alone.”

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Asami suddenly cut in, drawing an inch closer to the Avatar. “She is never alone.”

“Uh…guys? Hate to break this up, but…err…” mumbled Lu from the front seat. Korra jolted slightly; she’d almost forgotten the cowardly detectives were even here.

He didn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t need to. All of them noticed immediately what’d caused him to speak up.

Out of the window, directly in front of them, stood the Kyoshi Bridge, stretching majestically below the crescent moonlight. The way out of the city.

One way or another, if they were going to make a decision…it was time to make it now.

“Park near those food stands over there,” ordered Zaheer, gesturing to an area that was mercifully
empty this late at night. “We still have a few things to discuss before we part.”

With most of the city’s law enforcement occupied with cleanup and evacuation efforts, the Red Lotus chanced a short break from the cramped confines of the truck in order to say their goodbyes.

“If you have any trouble – anything at all – send a messenger our way, and I will come running,” Ghazan said quietly, holding the Avatar close. “If it’s really important, then I don’t care if I get recognized. I don’t care if I get executed, or thrown in a cell for the rest of my life. It’ll be worth it.”

Despite herself, Korra found that her eyes were misting over. “You can’t mean that,” she replied, her voice just as low. She knew, even if she’d never been given the full story as to why, that he considered imprisonment a fate worse than death.

But Ghazan just shook his head. “I mean it more than you know,” was all he could bring himself to add, before stepping back, to allow the others to say their piece.

Unsurprisingly, Aiwei had no words to offer; he was clearly quite impatient to get back on the road, and complete his escape from the city. Ming-Hua, meanwhile, simply tossed her a heavy wallet stuffed with yuans – one that, Korra wagered, she’d pocketed from the detectives without them being any the wiser – placed the icy tip of one of her streams against her lips conspiratorially, then bounded off with a heady cackle.

Kuvira glared at her, but after a moment’s hesitation, Korra stuffed the wallet into her own pocket. A little extra cash couldn’t hurt in the months to come.

P’Li had a bit more to say. “This may be the last time we see each other for some time,” she told the younger girl, placing both of her hands upon the waterbender’s shoulders. Given that Korra was more than a full head shorter than her, the effect this has was not inconsiderable. “We’ll still be within a day’s travel, should another crisis arise…but I’m afraid that’s all we can offer. I wish we could do more.”

“It’s not your fault my stupid pride is getting in the way again,” said Korra, her face halfway between an awkward grin and an embarrassed grimace. “I’m still not sure I made the right call there, but…I think it’s the call I need to make. Does that make any sense?”

P’Li sighed, but eventually nodded. “To me? It makes way too much sense,” she whispered, somewhat distantly. “You’re like me in a lot of ways, Korra. Not all of them good or bad.”

And she left it at that, switching off with Zaheer in guarding their hostages.

The non-bender strode over a moment later, his expression perfectly neutral. Without preamble, he asked, “I trust you’ve made no progress on your secondary mission?”

It took Korra a moment to realize what he was getting at, but once she did she blanched and glanced around her, acutely aware that Asami and Kuvira were standing on either side. The former was unlikely to approve of kidnapping a young child, and the latter would probably try to throw her to the ground and arrest her on the spot.
“I…haven’t had a chance, no,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

He held up a hand. “That’s quite alright. I suppose it’s a moot point until you deal with Amon, in any event,” he responded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Just keep in mind that the timescale grows shorter and shorter by the day.”

Korra swallowed hard, but nodded. Again, he’d avoided using the specific words “Harmonic Convergence” due to their mixed company, but the message was the same. She’d not only wasted a full week, out of the precious few they had remaining, but also dealt herself and the Lotus an enormous setback in turn. Purely out of her own carelessness.

She’d have to work all the harder to make up for lost time.

“Though I might not say it often enough…” Zaheer continued on, after a lengthy pause. His tone was different now, subtly but distinctly. “I do believe in you, Korra. I’ve dedicated my entire life to the fact that I do.”

And just like that, her eyes were swimming again. He was quite correct – those were words she didn’t hear out of her mentor often.

“I love you,” she found herself saying, feeling her throat getting choked up. She raised her voice, so that all could hear her. “I love you all. Don’t forget that.”

“Not a chance,” Ghazan called out, his voice sounding just as hoarse. Then, the five adult members of the Red Lotus, as well as their two “trusty chauffeurs,” piled back into the police truck, moving with the precision of people who’d made hasty getaways a million times before.

And with that, they drove off.

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Zaheer wasted no time, since they had so little to begin with.

The moment they were far enough away from the city that it wouldn’t be noticed, he ordered the detectives to pull off to one side of the deserted dirt road. With Ming-Hua’s dagger-like streams of ice pressed against their throats, they didn’t hesitate to obey.

The non-bender waited until Lu had firmly applied the brake, before giving a hand signal to his subordinate.

Both cuts were quick, clean, and simultaneous. Blood spurted for just a moment, as the pressure in their veins was suddenly released, splattering the windshield and dashboard with a hundred small flecks of red. Soon enough, however, the blood flow slowed to a steady drip, as the two detectives drew their last few ragged, panicked breaths.

Ghazan and Aiwei handled the burial, as the earth quite literally rose to swallow up their bodies, right by a nearby grove of trees. They’d serve as precious nutrients for the next generation of saplings, and Zaheer couldn’t think of a more fitting end than that.

Loose ends fully tied up, Ming-Hua climbed into the driver’s seat (why the only one of them without arms insisted on being their driver, Zaheer would never understand, but he’d also learned better than
to question it), ran a stream across the windshield to clean it, and released the brake, all without a word.

The stop only delayed them about two minutes.

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Kuvira was still staring out across Kyoshi Bridge, though the police truck had vanished completely from view some time ago.

No emotion was evident upon her face, but both her fists were clenched tight, and her entire body was standing rigid – even more so than she usually was, which was saying something.

As such, it took several minutes before Korra would even chance asking, “Umm…Kuvira, is there…?”

“What will you do now, Avatar Korra?” she said sharply, cutting her off.

Her confusion must’ve shown on her face, because Kuvira quickly added, “You’ve rejected the aid of your senior compatriots. The fate of your mission rests, ultimately, in your hands alone. So what will be your next step?”

“I…I guess I’m not too sure. I didn’t really think that far in advance,” Korra was eventually forced to admit. “But…well, we’ve got that meeting with the guys tomorrow, don’t we? Now we’ve at least got some stuff to talk about. Compare notes, come up with ideas…I mean, you’ll be there, right?”

Kuvira crossed her arms and frowned, but nodded tersely.

“I see no reason not to be,” she replied. “But if you – and it must be you – cannot devise an overarching plan or strategy, then when all is said and done there’ll be no point. No point in any of this.”

The guard captain slowly lifted her hand, summoning a large piece of scrap metal from the side of the street. In time with her fingers, it molded and twisted, its shape becoming strange and monstrous.

“The enemy you face is like a hydra-leviathan. Sprawling, enormous, and all but invincible,” said the metalbender, allowing the ever-changing scrap to emphasize her words. “You cut off a limb, and two more take its place. Unless you can act decisively, with purpose, and strike for its very heart…”

“You mean Amon,” Asami interjected, her eyes narrowed slightly.

“Indeed. But that may be easier said than done,” stated Kuvira, before again directing her words toward Korra. “You must be prepared to accept, Avatar, that there is some measure of connection between your two organizations. That much was made clear today. Through Aiwei, and through that ‘Jilu’ person they mentioned, at minimum.”

“If there’re parts of the Red Lotus not living up to its values…then they’re my enemies as surely as they’re yours,” Korra declared, her face set with determination. “But I can tell you that my faction is clean. My family is clean.”
“Believe what you wish,” said Kuvira, her expression shifting into something like pity. “It’ll only cause you more suffering when you realize the truth.”

“So what about you, huh?” Korra demanded, tempering down a sudden burst of ire. If there was one thing guaranteed to get her blood boiling, it was being talked down to. “What’s your next step gonna be?”

“A few things jump to mind,” responded the metalbender, as she carefully returned the scrap back to its original state. “Even if your ‘family’ prevented me from bringing him to justice, I can at least inform Suyin of Aiwei’s treachery. I expect he won’t be stupid enough to return to Zaofu, after I learned his secret, but it cannot hurt to be sure.”

More or less satisfied with her handiwork, she tossed the hunk of scrap metal aside, then turned back to regard the other two girls directly.

“I’ll also be certain to provide Chief Beifong with an anonymous tip, regarding a missing police truck,” continued Kuvira. “A shame I didn’t catch those detectives’ names, but they’ll face judgment soon enough for abetting known criminals. Cowardice is no excuse.”

For a second, Korra was tempted to mention a certain someone who’d just hitched a ride with, and permitted the escape of, those very same criminals, precisely because she acknowledged she was out of her league. She thought better of it, however.

“And finally…” said the guard captain, flexing and stretching her arms as she did. “I’ve got a few more leads to follow up on, before we next meet. Some things are starting to make a lot more sense, and I don’t want to lose the trail while it’s warm.”

“Does this have anything to do with why you were locked in a box in Tarrlok’s house?” Asami asked shrewdly.

In the face of everything else going on at the time, it hadn’t seemed quite as important, but now that some time had passed Korra realized this was a very good question.

Kuvira’s lip curled upward, just slightly.

“I suppose that’s something you’ll find out tomorrow,” she told them, before stretching out her arms wide to either side. Cables at her hips followed her movements, spreading out and latching onto the nearest rooftop.

Then, without another word, she propelled herself into the sky.

Both Korra and Asami spent some time watching her admittedly spectacular departure, their eyes glued to the metalbender as she darted from one building to the next. Within just a few seconds, she was nothing but a tiny blur on the horizon.

Eventually, after enough time had passed that the very first rays of dawn were poking their way through the moonlit night, the Avatar turned to her last remaining companion, uncertain what to say.

Asami beat her to it, however. “I know I said I wanted to talk more about…well, about everything. Once it all quieted down, y’know?” she said. “But I’m just so…tired. I want this all to be over, even…even if it’s just for a little while.”

Korra shrunk back a bit, feeling uncomfortable. “I dunno if it ever really…can be ‘over.’ Not while you’re around me,” she mumbled, looking askance. “My life’s always been like this. It’s always gonna be like this. And…spirits…”
She swallowed, unsure if she should say what just popped into her head. But unsure if she could live with not saying it, either.

“I…I don’t think…” Korra went on, clutching onto herself; putting some distance, consciously or not, between the two of them. “I don’t think it’s fair, to you. For you to be put in the middle of all this…just because of me…”

The heiress cut her off with another deep, sensual kiss.

“Let me decide what is or isn’t fair to me,” she whispered, as she pulled away slightly – but only slightly. She still had her arms wrapped around the other girl’s neck, and their faces remained just inches apart.

Since Korra’s brain had just entered one of its scheduled, Asami-fueled shutdowns, the non-bender continued to fill the silence.

“Look, I…I won’t pretend some of the stuff I heard tonight didn’t bother me,” she said, exhaling deeply. This close, the scent of her breath – a rich, minty flavor – was intoxicating. “That what I saw didn’t bother me. But whatever questions I have…whatever you might’ve done in the past…none of that really changes the most important thing.”

She leaned in for another, briefer kiss, ruby-red lips ghosting over soft brown ones.

“And that’s that I wanna be by your side,” the words continued to escape those full, wonderful lips, as Asami held onto her tightly, as if she was a lifesaver in the midst of a vast ocean. “I wanna see where…this…leads. I wanna be…with you. Whatever it takes.”

There would be plenty of very rough road ahead of them. Bitter truths still left to share; actions she had to take, for the sake of the mission, that’d be certain to drive a wedge between them.

Still, Korra pushed all those off to the side, for now. She knew she wouldn’t be able to do it for long – not in the face of the Lotus, and Kuvira, and Amon. But…well, maybe it was selfish…

But didn’t she deserve just a little more time, like this?

In the wake of the rising sun, the two girls kissed one more time.
He’d been meditating for over one hundred and sixty hours.

It was a record, far and away, for any practicing Air Acolyte. Without the fine breath control that airbending granted their forbearers, the achievement of perfect stillness and arrestment of metabolic processes was a much more complicated task.

Not impossible, of course. But still, Thubten had never expected to meet a non-bender with this much…

Dedication.

He’d come to them about five years ago, at the Eastern Air Temple, as a little boy. No more than four or five. He was not talkative, and the number of things he’d ever mentioned about his upbringing or family could be counted on one hand.

But the Air Acolytes were always open to new students, no questions asked. To do otherwise would besmirch everything Avatar Aang stood for.

In fact, taciturn as he was by nature, that was the one, solitary desire the boy had always expressed: to meet the Avatar. Like many children, he’d grown up reading stories of the legendary Aang’s adventures, and even witnessed him once from afar – saving the Temple from a rampaging hydra-leviathan.

Unfortunately, it was not to be. Aang, now a wizened fifty-five, had at one point visited each of the temples with great regularity, offering a little of his time individually to each and every Acolyte.

But while few men his age – particularly ones as spiritual as he – could lay claim to being called “wizened,” Aang’s case was…unique. Starting from middle age, each passing year had seemed to age his hair and skin by three. Now his beard was a staid, stark white, and wrinkles clung to once-youthful features.

The cause had never been officially reported, but anyone who’d seen The Boy in the Iceberg could put two and two together. His hundred years in stasis had burned up most of his chi reserves, and time was rapidly catching up to him.

Coupled with his increasingly prominent role in guiding Republic City and training the first new airbender in decades, his young son Tenzin, it was little surprise he’d cut back on traveling so drastically.

Still, there was hope. After over a year of silence, Aang was preparing to make another pilgrimage to the temples, this time with son in tow. The Eastern Temple would be the second stop on their journey.

“You heard that, my child?” asked Thubten, knowing that he shouldn’t disturb the boy’s trance but unable to help himself. “Your fondest wish will soon be realized.”

The boy didn’t respond aloud. Indeed, for quite some time, he failed to acknowledge he’d heard anything at all. Eventually, however, his head moved for the first time in nearly a week – in the form of a slow, tiny nod.

“Young boy, this is a great honor. You, of all the Air Acolytes, will meet the most legendary of all.”

“Thank you, Master Thubten.”

“You had the grace to meditate for days on end. It speaks volumes to your dedication.”

“Indeed, Master Thubten. But I should have practiced longer.”

“I think not. These things have a way of working themselves out. You will meet the Avatar. He will be enthused to meet you. Even at such a young age, you’re a model Acolyte,” said Thubten
the old master, smiling as a sense of vaguely paternalistic pride swelled within him. “Do us well and do us true…my dear Syed.”

[-----------------------]

Thanks to the tireless work of the Avatar, his friends and allies, and the first “class” of initiates, all four Air Temples gleamed as brightly as they ever had before the Hundred Year War. The Eastern Temple was no exception.

Surrounded on all sides by the majestic mountains that lined the Earth Kingdom coast, the interconnected facilities of the temple stretched across three peaks, towering far past the clouds. In terms of sheer surface area, this made it the largest of the four – now five, including the newly built Air Temple Island – by far.

From flying bison stables to meditation chambers to the grandest airball arena in the world (Aang had been quite particular on getting that part reconstructed), it was doubtful there was a single place on the planet more dedicated to the preservation of Air Nomad culture.

That was, after all, the very essence of the Acolytes. While their counterparts in Republic City had a more overtly political role, dedicated to advancing the interests of the only two airbenders currently alive, here in the east they had nothing to distract from their spiritual mission.

In practices, in lifestyle, in diet; in every conceivable facet of their lives, absent airbending itself, the Air Nomads of old were reborn in their every deed and every breath. And even in that case, for meditative purposes if nothing else, there were a number of Acolytes who could successfully reproduce many airbending movements, though the element itself eluded them.

About the only aspect of the culture they hadn’t brought forward was the separation of genders between the temples, out of practicality if nothing else. Each temple was staffed by volunteers from the neighboring provinces, and telling people they’d have to move halfway around the world and barely ever interact with the opposite sex again would make a hard sell even harder.

That was how Syed had come to live in a place one scholar had famously called “the nun capital of the world.”

The majority of the Eastern Air Temple’s denizens were still female, though the ratio was evening out with each passing year. At the moment, there were perhaps two girls to every boy.

Syed didn’t especially pay attention to his peers, however. All the goofy nonsense and childish games the other young Acolytes got up to…it all just seemed so silly.

Nothing like the pure, unending bliss of meditation. Of practicing his forms. Of studying the histories of the numerous artifacts and statues that lined each of the walls here.

He’d only lived on this planet for a little over ten years, but Syed had already seen enough of its darkness to last fifty. For as long as he’d known, it had just been the two of them – himself and his brother. Parents, if they’d ever existed, were a distant memory.

And since his brother was about as grown-up and mature as…well, as a child…it fell to Syed to become the adult. Very, very quickly.
The pair had been found, he was told, in the Si Wong Desert, by a band of traveling sandbenders. Abandoned, most likely. Money had changed hands several times over at the Misty Palms Oasis, and ultimately they’d wound up in an Earth Kingdom orphanage.

Life in the orphanage was…*unpleasant*. The matron had been kindly enough, Syed supposed, but also way in over her head, taking in twice the mouths she had the time or money to feed. Stringent taxes from the newly crowned Earth Queen hadn’t helped matters.

They’d done their best to get by, but ultimately, too many nights spent with groaning stomachs took their toll. It was a rare occasion where the two brothers, opposites in so many ways it was baffling, actually *agreed* on something, but they both knew one thing.

They *couldn’t* stay there.

Unfortunately, they couldn’t find any way to agree on what they should do *next*. His brother, in his typical, immature idiocy, had suggested they run off to join the circus. And ultimately, as Syed tried and failed to convince him that the life of a scholar and devotee was much safer and more fulfilling…

That was exactly what he’d done.

Their differences irreconcilable, the brothers had separated for the first time in their entire lives. And in the five years since, neither had laid a single eye on the other.

But even so…Syed’s life was about to change dramatically. Avatar Aang’s visit was a chance to finally prove himself as *more* than just a little kid with a talent for meditation. As a full-fledged Acolyte, he could *be* somebody; do *real* good for his adoptive culture.

And his brother deserved to be by his side when that happened.

Syed swallowed his pride and whistled. Acolytes didn’t normally get their own bison, but there was one young calf that seemed to have taken a shine to him. He’d nicknamed her “Ata.”

The young initiate allowed her to lick him thoroughly, before taking a seat directly behind her overly fluffy head.

It was time to pay a visit to his least-favorite place in the world.

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He dismounted Ata some distance away from the circus fairgrounds themselves. The sight of fellow animals in cages wasn’t one she needed to see. Making sure she had a ready source of water and berries, he snuck his way through the woods and toward the main tent.

The modern “circus” was predominately a Fire Nation invention, though it hadn’t taken long for multiple Earth Kingdom towns to throw together their own spin on the concept. This one, while not the largest or most extravagant, was widely regarded as one of the best.

All around the tent were stands featuring games, confections, and various pay-to-see oddities, like a turtle-duck without a shell. And within it…well…

“Laaaaaaaadies and gentlemen! Welcome to another explosive evening at Zaji’s Wooooorld of
Woooooooooonder!”

Right on cue, there was ringmaster Zaji, putting on his most dramatic voice to announce the beginning of that night’s performances. If everything kept on-schedule, this meant his brother would be on in about two hours.

Someone who was capable of reading his thoughts at the time might’ve asked Syed how he knew all this. It wasn’t like he’d ever snuck out here before, then pig-chickened out before actually seeing his brother perform, after all.

Certainly not fifteen or twenty times.

Syed took a deep breath and pulled aside the entrance flap, following behind a rowdy group of clearly intoxicated workmen. Their boisterous laughter covered for him well as he took a seat, as far from center stage as possible.

Most of the next couple hours’ entertainment was, he was forced to admit, fairly exciting. A male earthbender and female firebender, apparently a couple, performed an astounding array of tricks through a combination of their talents, after which a group of trained sparrowkeets performed an aerial dance that defied description.

There were musicians and clowns, saber-toothed moose lion tamers and rakugo storytellers. Even a waterbender who specialized in elaborate ice sculptures.

But the ringmaster clearly considered it all to be a warm-up for the real headline act. And finally, after a strongman capable of lifting an elephant-mandrill took his leave from the stage, the spotlight switched to an elaborate trapeze, high up near the ceiling.

“And now, folks…the moment you’ve all been waiting for! We’ve saved the absolute best for last! Prepare to be dazzled and amazed at the death-defying stunts of our incredible acrobat!”

“You know him as the Young Master of the Air…the Kid Without Fear…!”

“The astounding…the spectacular…the sensational…!”

Zaji and Syed said the name at once. But where the ringmaster shouted the title of his headliner with all the exuberance her could muster, Syed merely whispered it under his breath. It was all he could manage, as he looked upon the face of the brother he hadn’t seen in five years.

A face that, after all this time…still matched his own.

“Sajjad…” he said, his voice barely audible, as the crowd around him went wild.

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Try as he might, Syed found himself unable to look away. In more ways than one.

For nearly twenty minutes, Sajjad flew through the air like a swooping wolfbat, his limbs twisting so smoothly and so effortlessly that he almost seemed to lack bones. Dives, leaps, pirouetting spins; each stunt was more daring and jaw-dropping than the last, and his twin showed no sign of slowing down.
And all this, he did without the aid of a net, or indeed any visible safety apparatus. The first few times he took a dive straight to the ground, the crowd gasped in horrified anticipation, but soon enough they came to accept there was nothing to worry about.

Sajjad had them in the palm of his tiny, knobby hand.

There was near-total silence in the tent during the act, beyond the reactions of the audience. Zaji had obviously decided this performance could speak for itself, and though Sajjad frequently engaged the audience with playful winks and smiles, he never once uttered a word.

It all culminated in an explosive finale – literally – wherein the benders from before combined their talents to form an impromptu, deadly obstacle course, which Sajjad made his way through without missing a beat. He used two great rings of stone and ice to propel himself upward just as the firebender ignited a barrel of specially treated blasting jelly, raining down sparks of wild colors amidst his descent.

The audience reacted accordingly, whooping and hollering as Sajjad touched the ground for the first time since the act began. He offered them a single, magnanimous bow, and then disappeared from the stage, yielding it to Zaji once more.

But Syed didn’t wait to hear the ringmaster’s closing speech. Instead, he slipped deftly out of his seat and, while the audience was distracted, followed after his brother.

It didn’t take him long to track down Sajjad, once he made his way backstage. There was enough space toward the rear of the tent to store a wide array of heavy equipment, as well as to give each performer their own small dressing room.

But Sajjad, as was typical, wasn’t doing something practical like packing up equipment or getting ready for the next show. Instead, he was laughing up a storm in a common area, surrounded by a troupe of young female dancers and basking in their ample…

Presence.

“So then I say to ol’ Zaji, ‘Now that’s a katana!’” he exclaimed, causing most of the girls to break down into a fit of giggles alongside him.

“Ooh, and what’d he say to that?” asked one of the dancers, apparently the youngest of the group. Her body was remarkably close to Sajjad’s.

His brother’s lip curled smugly. “Well, after he finally pulled his butt off the floor…” he started to say, but the words caught in his throat.

For the first time in half a decade, his eyes were meeting ones identical to his.

“Girls, I…gotta go…” he mumbled awkwardly, his mask of false bravado slipping away in an instant. Slowly, he walked up to face Syed, his mouth slightly open.

“Let’s, err…Let’s go to my room,” he eventually managed to add, gesturing for his twin to follow.

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The moment they were alone, Sajjad pulled him into a tight, warm hug.

“By the spirits! Dude, I… I can’t even believe it!” he cried out, hugging Syed a few extra times for good measure. “Zaji never thought you’d come to your senses, but I always knew!”

That raised alarm bells in Syed’s head. “Hold on…” he said, pulling away from his brother. “Why do you think I’m here, exactly?”

Sajjad’s jubilant smile melted into a confused frown.

“Y’know… to join up,” he answered. “Figured you must be getting tired of those stupid monks torturing you over and over again.”

“They’re not stupid, and they’re not torturing anyone,” snapped Syed. “But I guess if you’ve never had an ounce of it in your life, discipline and torture must be so hard to tell apart.”

The moment he said them, he regretted the words, especially as Sajjad glanced aside, looking hurt. Wonderful… five years apart, and it hadn’t even taken five minutes to sink back into the same argument that’d separated them in the first place.

“Look, you… you were really cool out there. I can’t deny that,” he said after a lengthy silence. “You’re… happy here, right?”

“More than anything,” Sajjad declared, his grin rejuvenated in an instant. “Here, I’m finally free! Zaji lets me do what I want, when I want. I can stay up all night if I feel like it. Eat cookies and fire flakes for every meal. I even got to try flaming baijiu the other day!”

“Just so long as you keep performing for him like a trained hog-monkey,” Syed couldn’t help but remark.

The acrobat scowled briefly, but recovered more quickly this time. “He does give me food and a place to sleep,” he told his brother. “It’d be ungrateful not to help out a little bit.”

Syed sighed. He supposed the other boy did have a point there.

“Besides…” said Sajjad, his expression turning mischievous. “There are other perks. Everyone else in the show is really fun to hang with. Especially the ladies…”

His eyes flicked toward the door, in the direction of the pretty dancers he’d been “hanging with” a few minutes ago.

His twin, in turn, made a face. “C’mon, Sajjad. We’re ten,” he muttered, sticking out his tongue.

“Just six years from being of age, most places in the world,” responded Sajjad, with a knowing wink. “Never too early to get a head start on… y’know. Unless those monks of yours have sticks up their butts about that, too?”

Syed closed his eyes for a moment, centering himself. He could get through this. He just needed to… rise above.

“I don’t expect you to understand,” he said after a moment. “Just as I don’t understand how you could be happy in a place like… this. But I will accept it. Can’t you do the same for me?”

Sajjad sighed as well, but nodded. “Anything my bro’s into can’t be all bad. Even stuffy temples and fuddy-duddy old people,” he answered, his tone somewhere halfway between teasing and
sincere. “Just leave me out of it.”

The young Acolyte bristled a bit at the way he’d said that last bit. Still, he pressed on.

“It’s really not all like that,” he tried to explain. “The temple’s super-clean and refurbished, and there’re a lot of other Acolytes our age. Plus we get to play with the bison sometimes, and there’s airball…”

“How the heck can you play airball?” asked Sajjad, chuckling a bit. “You can’t even bend!”

A vein in Syed’s forehead began to pulse dangerously, though he made a conscious effort to hold back an outburst. This was a predictable sore spot for many of the Air Acolytes, and Syed was no exception.

“We…make do with what we can,” he said, after taking a deep breath. “Probably makes the game a little more interesting. At least in some ways.”

Sajjad, however, was beginning to frown once more. “Hey, I see where you’re going with this,” he murmured, crossing his arms – more muscular than Syed’s due to exercise, but otherwise identical. “But if I can’t pitch the World of Wonder, you can’t do the same thing right back.”

“I’m not trying to make you join up as an Acolyte,” replied Syed. A flash of skepticism flitted over his brother’s face, however, and he felt compelled to rephrase. “Okay…maybe a little bit. But that’s not the main reason I’m here.”

He swallowed, waiting for a response, but Sajjad just gestured for him to continue, his stance cool and guarded.

“You’ve chosen your path, and I’ve chosen mine. And…they both lead in opposite directions,” continued the Acolyte, wishing the dressing room was a little bigger so he could put more distance between them. This was harder than he’d been expecting. “Sometimes I wish that wasn’t the case, but…I guess that’s just the way things are. But still…”

The acrobat tilted his head slightly. “Still…?” he repeated.

“I ventured out today…to live a bit of time in your world. Even if it was just a few hours,” said Syed. “Would you be willing to do the same for me?”

He shifted slightly, uncomfortable. “If not for your sake…then for mine,” he added, his eyes now pointed resolutely at the ground. “Because next week, I’m gonna have either the best or the worst day of my life. And I’d like you to be there. I…think I need you to be there…”

There was enough raw feeling in his voice to compel even the stubborn-faced Sajjad to take a second look.

“What exactly is so important, that it’d make you go out and track me down?” he asked, scrutinizing his brother’s face closer.

Finally, Syed looked back up and met his eyes again. Like two, olive-green mirrors of his own.

“It’s not what, Sajjad. It’s who.”

[---------------------------]
If there was one thing capable of changing Sajjad’s tune on the subject of the Acolytes, Syed appeared to have stumbled across it.

All throughout their journey back to the temple, his twin was practically bouncing up and down on Ata’s back. Eventually, Syed had to loudly snap at him to quit it.

The young bison was only barely able to support the weight of two people, without adding on all the unnecessary movement.

Sajjad, for his part, had never actually seen the Eastern Air Temple outside of some blurry photographs. When they finally rose above the clouds, and its three gleaming spires burst resplendently into view…

Well, he had to make a concerted effort to remind himself he wasn’t supposed to look impressed.

Still, as they made a looping descent around the rightmost peak, toward the bison stables below, Sajjad was forced to admit he did get what his brother saw in this place. Even repeating the same mantra a thousand times over might be tolerable, if this was the view awaiting you when you opened your eyes.

Okay…that was still pushing it. But it certainly didn’t hurt.

Nevertheless, it was difficult to contain himself. As Syed led him through an “abridged” tour of the temple, pointing out this or that random artifact or statue of some old fart guru, all Sajjad could think of was the opportunity that lay before him.

An opportunity that meant far more to Syed, of course; after all, Aang was for all intents and purposes the leader of the reborn Air Nation, and impressing him could undoubtedly take his brother far. Sajjad had no interest in taking that away from him.

But even for a “normal” kid like Sajjad…well, it was still the Avatar. This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

They stopped at Syed’s room on their way toward the inner temple. It was slightly larger than his dressing room at the circus, where space was at a premium, but also far more barren. His own living space was crammed wall-to-wall with props, training equipment, and mementos from previous shows, leaving barely enough room for even a bed.

Syed, by contrast, had a single cot and a small closet to hang his clothes. And that was…pretty much it.

“Spirits, bro. They must be really strict about…uh…” said Sajjad, his eyes scanning around the room, searching for the right words. “Err…having a life?”

Syed slowly turned his head back, shot his brother a nasty glare, then faced forward again.

“There’re few limitations to the things we may keep, for decoration or pleasure. Just so long as we never become too attached to them,” he explained after a moment, as he began rummaging through his closet. “I live this way by choice.”

The acrobat was about to ask him how he didn’t go out of his mind with boredom after three minutes in this place, but was interrupted by Syed thrusting a set of red-and-yellow robes in his face with a terse, “Put these on.”
Sajjad cocked an eyebrow. “You’ve gotta be joking,” he muttered.

“We have new initiates here all the time. Keep your head down and no one’ll notice one more,” said Syed, again gesturing toward the robes.

His brother frowned, but seeing little other choice, breathed a heavy sigh and began pulling the ugly things over his head.

“You…ugh, these are all poufy…you do realize, right, that this isn’t gonna work?” asked Sajjad, taking advantage of the brief moment where his face was hidden to blow a raspberry at the Acolyte. “Maybe they wouldn’t spot one extra face normally, buuuuuuut…”

Then, once his head reemerged, he gestured exaggeratedly between the both of them, waiting for Syed to get the message.

His twin, however, seemed unfazed. “I planned for that, too,” he said.

Then, he pulled out one more object from his closet: a thin, gleaming razor blade.

It took a couple seconds before Sajjad realized his meaning, and his eyes went wide. “Ooooooooh no. You’re the monk, here!” he exclaimed. “I mean, isn’t being bald, like…their thing?”

“Many Acolytes voluntarily shave their heads, but it isn’t required,” Syed told his brother, placing emphasis on the word. “And that might work if the point was to disguise me – which it isn’t. As it is, even with the similarity in our faces, I doubt anyone’ll make the connection if our hair is different enough.”

Unconsciously, he ran his fingers through his ample black mane, which reached nearly past his shoulders. Sajjad was forced to admit – inwardly – that it certainly was his brother’s most distinctive feature.

He, by contrast, kept his hair cropped short and tied back, so as not to get in his face during performances. Growing it back wouldn’t take him nearly as long, comparatively.

Eventually, once again, he found himself sighing in resignation.

“No girl wants a boy who’s bald before he hits puberty,” he mumbled, pouting.

Syed just rolled his eyes, and set to work with the razor.

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The plan went off with only a couple minor hitches.

Aang and his son wouldn’t be arriving until the following week, so the brothers had a bit of time to kill before the big day. Thankfully, classes and training had been cancelled in anticipation of the special occasion, so Sajjad found blending in far easier than he’d expected.

No one stopped him in the halls to quiz him about some old geezer who’d been around a thousand years ago, or make him perform a stupid chant to “center himself.” Indeed, it wasn’t difficult to get by simply by smiling and nodding and talking to no one – admittedly a little harder for him, the life of any and all parties, but he made do.
Syed had decided they should keep apart from each other as much as possible, however; the risk of someone connecting the dots if they were standing side-by-side was too great. His twin always remained within his line of sight, but the two kept their distance and avoided speaking to one another.

Which, admittedly…wasn’t a whole lot different from how they’d spent the past five years.

The only exception was at night, when Syed allowed him to camp out in his room. Thankfully, the head monk’s star pupil didn’t have to share his living space with anyone, so hiding an extra body wasn’t difficult.

They’d hit their first snag at breakfast on the second day, when he’d – very loudly and very dramatically – vomited up an entire bowl of string pea porridge. All over the robes of a passing senior Acolyte.

In his defense, it did taste like the sweaty armpit of a goat-gorilla.

Still, he’d been able to keep his exhortations of how deeply and how desperately he wanted a big hunk of meat contained…so far, at least. And admittedly, most of the time the vegetarian diet at the temple was at least tolerable. Even genuinely good, once in a while.

Which didn’t mean he was gonna eat it a second longer than he had to.

He’d also had a bit of trouble with the sleep schedule. He’d gotten used to keeping weird hours at the circus, staying up deep into the night when shows ran long and catching up by snoozing throughout the day.

The Air Acolytes, however – for reasons that baffled him, considering they’d already canceled everything they had to get up for – were clearly the “early to bed, early to rise” types, and while there was nothing expressly forbidding him from sleeping in, it was clear doing so could only draw unnecessary attention.

Besides…Syed definitely subscribed to that same philosophy, and right now the two brothers were sharing a bed designed only for one.

Nevertheless, once those small hurdles were cleared, Sajjad found that the next week simply flew by. He’d never have said it aloud to his brother in a million years, but he’d even had fun a couple of times.

Still, he was not sorry to wake up on the morning of the visit, yawning and stretching loudly. The chance to meet the most famous man on the face of the planet – and to finally be done with this musty old place – had him bursting with energy and vigor.

Unfortunately, he was the only one.

The moment Sajjad heard the first cough, he could tell it was something more serious. Working in show business, you learned to tell the difference between a minor bug and something that’d require canceling a performance, and as he listened to his brother hack harder and louder, unable to control himself, he knew this was definitely the latter.

As Sajjad pulled himself hastily out of bed, he took note of a number of other worrying details. Syed’s skin was ghastly pale, and cold sweat matted his face and arms. In between coughs, his breaths were ragged and uneven, and every few seconds his body erupted in a fit of shivers.

Tentatively, Sajjad touched his twin on the forehead. He was burning up.
The skin-to-skin contact seemed to have jolted Syed out of his fitful slumber, and with bleary eyes he slowly looked up to face his brother.

“Wh…What’s going on…?” he asked weakly. His voice was rough and dry.

“You’re sick, bro,” said Sajjad without preamble. He didn’t see any use in sugarcoating this. “Haven’t seen a guy this bad since that roustabout we picked up from White Falls.”

What little color remained in Syed’s face drained from it instantly. “N…No…” he choked out. “I… I can’t…not today…”

Already, he was trying to struggle his way out of bed, but he only succeeded at provoking another, even harsher coughing fit. Gently but forcefully, Sajjad pushed him back down.

“You’re in no condition to be going anywhere, Syed,” the acrobat declared, pulling the blanket back over his shivering brother.

“B…But…” murmured Syed, his lip quivering. The sheer vulnerability in his voice was deeply shocking, if only for how much it contrasted from his usual demeanor. “But…Aang…”

Sajjad looked upon his twin, trying not to let sympathy break through the sternness on his face. For once, he needed to be the mature one, and look out for his brother.

After a moment, however, he snapped his fingers. He’d just had an idea.

“Can’t believe I didn’t think of it before. Avatar Aang – he’s the answer!” he said. “I mean, he’s a waterbender too, right? Maybe he can heal you!”

“D…Don’t want…” Syed mumbled, his head lolling upon his shoulders. “Him to…see me…like this…”

“Better he sees you this way and cures you, than he misses you altogether,” responded Sajjad. “Then once you’re all better, you can impress him with that big ol’ brain of yours. It’ll work out, you’ll see!”

And with that, he raced off.

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All thought of keeping a low profile was forgotten, or at least was no longer a priority. So what if their little ruse was discovered?

Either way, he’d at least get to meet the Avatar, and then he’d be back to the circus – never to be seen by any of these air geeks again. And at the same time, he’d be able to help his brother’s dreams come true.

He might not’ve understood it, or at least not fully, but over the past week he’d come to respect how much this life meant to Syed. And that was enough.

Still, Sajjad couldn’t help but close his eyes and snicker to himself a bit. It was a good thing the young Acolyte had asked him to come along in the first place. Otherwise he’d be really and truly fuc…
That was how he’d wound up walking straight into another man’s back.

“Oh, my word! Are you alright?” the man asked hurriedly, turning around and offering his hand in a single motion. Sajjad, meanwhile, rubbed at the part of his butt where he’d landed, before eventually looking up at the face of the other party.

For one single, breathtaking moment, Sajjad thought he was staring at Avatar Aang. And it was easy to see why, given what was easily the man’s most striking feature: a shaved head, upon which an azure arrow was tattooed.

A second glance, however, made his folly clear. This man couldn’t have been older than his early twenties, if that, with light blue eyes and a few paltry wisps of facial hair.

Sajjad held in a gasp. He knew who this guy had to be. He just couldn’t place the name…

“Ah, Tenzin! There you are, my boy!” an older voice suddenly exclaimed, as the temple’s head monk – Thubten, he was pretty sure Syed had called him – emerged into the hallway as well. “Oh, and I see you’ve already run into just the boy I wanted to introduce. Meet Syed, my most promising and dedicated student.”

The acrobat’s eyes went wide as saucers. “No, wait, I’m not…” he began to protest, but Thubten wasn’t listening.

“So where is the Avatar, if you don’t mind me asking?” he said, patting Tenzin genially upon the shoulder.

“Oh, he’ll be along in a little while,” replied the airbender. “He wanted a few minutes alone to visit Appa’s grave. Father had him buried in the same place he was born, after his passing.”

“Twenty-five years ago. Yes, I still remember. My sister handled the service, actually,” Thubten remarked conversationally. “He was truly a magnificent creature – even among sky bison. It was obvious the Avatar considered him a true hero…and a dear friend.”

Tenzin sighed wistfully. “I wish I’d gotten a chance to meet him,” he whispered. “Bumi was the only one of us who had the opportunity.”

“Ah, yes. The Avatar’s…other children,” said Thubten, sounding like he was trying and utterly failing not to make the word come off as an insult. “How are they doing?”

“Bumi just made lieutenant in the United Forces. And, err…certainly made a big show of it,” Tenzin explained, his expression making it clear he didn’t intend to give any further details. “And Kya is…Kya. No one’s seen her in over three months and that’s completely normal. No doubt she’ll turn up under some waterfall in the western Earth Kingdom. Or as part of a traveling circus.”

At this, Sajjad twitched involuntarily. This seemed to remind the two older men that he was still there, and they both turned at once.

“Look at you, my boy. So dedicated, you even shaved your head for the occasion!” he told the young acrobat, clutching at his chest out of pride. “Honestly, I didn’t want to say it before, but…I never much cared for your old hairstyle. More ‘wild artist’ than ‘devoted Acolyte,’ if you ask me. This is much nicer.”

“I, err…” stammered Sajjad, still reeling from the rather extreme case of mistaken identity. He had a bad feeling he’d already passed the point where correcting their error was “proper,” and now his tongue seemed to have completely locked up. “I mean…thank you, but…”
“Quiet and modest, too. Rare qualities in a child his age,” said Thubten, talking over his random sputtering once again. “I tell you, Tenzin. I’ve taught many initiates in my day – even gave you a few pointers when you were a child – but there’s something special about this one.”

“Really, now? Then we might be in luck,” Tenzin mused, stroking his miniscule beard. “Father’s actually been looking for a few more Acolytes to help staff Air Temple Island. You’re a little young, son, but if you’re as impressive as Master Thubten claims then I’m sure you’d be a good fit.”

“Is that something you’d be interested in, Syed?” asked Thubten, smiling warmly. “It’s a wonderful opportunity, you know! You’d be working alongside Tenzin and Avatar Aang to help rebuild our nation as a coequal world power. Probably a lot more fast-paced than here, but I know you can handle it.”

Sajjad’s jaw hung open for several minutes, unsure what to say. He had no doubt Syed would leap at this offer, were he presently conscious. Pursuing his studies, dedicating himself to his adoptive nation, serving the Avatar – they were all he’d ever dreamed of.

On the other hand…Republic City was so far. He’d only just reconnected with his brother, after all these years, and even if he’d intended for them to go their separate ways after all was said and done…

Well, the Eastern Air Temple and the World of Wonder were less than an hour apart.

The acrobat’s blood ran cold as a single, stray thought zipped through his mind. Syed would never have to know the offer was made…

But the impulse lingered for only a moment before Sajjad shook his head, trying determinedly to clear it away. That thought was as monstrous as it was tempting.

Whatever their differences, he did love his brother. And that meant his future came first.

Whether or not Sajjad was a part of it.

“I…think that sounds really cool,” he finally said, trying to imitate his brother’s more formal tone. At this point, he didn’t see much choice but to roll with their mistake. “When would I be going?”

“Because the Avatar’s family lives on the island, they vet their Acolytes a bit more thoroughly than ours,” answered the old master. “But that shouldn’t take more than two or three weeks. A few tests, some interviews – nothing you haven’t dealt with before. We could even get started now, if you like.”

“No!” Sajjad blurted out, before he could stop himself. He flushed and swallowed under the look the two men gave him. “Err, I mean…that’s okay. I just, umm…yeah, y’see…”

He wracked his brain for some worthwhile excuse, but none jumped to mind.

“It’s alright to be nervous. This is probably a lot to take in for someone your age,” said Tenzin, nodding gently to the young man. “The spirits know, even Avatar Bai didn’t restore balance to the world in a day.”

Both Tenzin and Thubten broke into a hearty chuckle, and after a moment Sajjad awkwardly joined them. “Yeah…he, uh…definitely didn’t…” he muttered, scratching at the back of his head.

Abruptly, both of the older men stopped laughing.
“Avatar Bai was…a woman. One of the most important Avatars in all of history,” Tenzin stated, a deep frown upon his face. “How could you not know that?”

For a moment, Sajjad went just as pale as his bedridden brother. “Oh, umm…well, I did, but…” the words came tumbling out of his mouth, bypassing his sluggish brain entirely. “I mean…y’know, you said it yourself. Just…nerves?”

Thubten seemed ready to accept this explanation, or at least not question it, but Tenzin’s eyes narrowed further.

“Very well, then. But in that case…you should have no trouble explaining why Avatar Bai is so famous,” he said, crossing his arms.

Sweat matted Sajjad’s brow, only further increasing his resemblance to his incredibly ill twin. Taking a stab in the dark, he mumbled out, “Cuz she…umm…built, like…a temple, or something?”

Unsurprisingly, that didn’t remove the skeptical look from the airbender’s face.

“Bai was an earthbender, and the one-hundredth Avatar,” Tenzin explained with a sigh. “Her predecessor had tried and failed to stop the Earth King from picking a fight with a powerful spirit. By the time Bai was born, their two worlds were on the brink of war.”

“But Avatar Bai stood up against her own monarch, and successfully managed to broker peace. All when she was only nine years old,” added Thubten.

“Every schoolchild knows that story,” said Tenzin, his frown growing deeper and more pronounced by the moment. “I can’t honestly say that it’s a good sign you don’t.”

Sajjad had no response to that. His face burned with shame.

Over the next several minutes, Tenzin gave him a number of chances to prove himself and salvage his honor…and each and every time, he failed.

To the question of “Who was the guru who wrote the poem Enter the Void?” he answered “Istva,” a name he’d heard Syed cite once or twice before; turned out it was some guy named “Laghima.” And he knew he didn’t do himself any favors by claiming that the main export of the Air Nomads was sky-bison milk. Apparently, the stuff tasted rancid to humans.

Even on the subject of “Which Air Temple was built first?” where, theoretically, he had at least a one-in-four shot at getting it right by sheer dumb luck, he’d somehow managed to pick the one built last: the Western Temple, constructed nearly a century after the others.

Several times, Thubten tried to subtly – and later, not-so-subtly – remind him of when “they” had gone over this material. But of course, that didn’t help.

He wasn’t Syed, and no matter how many times he urged himself to just say those three little words, they simply refused to come. It was too late, and he was in too deep, for “I’m actually Syed’s identical twin brother he never talked about” to sound like anything but a ridiculous excuse for his piss-poor performance.

Eventually, Tenzin seemed to decide he’d had enough.

“I do apologize for all this intense questioning,” he said, his expression softening a bit. “And I don’t doubt your dedication. But I’m afraid that, based on this…I can’t recommend you for the position. I simply don’t think you’d be able to keep up with the other Acolytes.”
Sajjad’s heart nearly splintered in two.

Tenzin checked a pocket watch he’d fished out of his robes. “Father should be back any minute now. I think it’s best we’re both there to greet him, before he’s swallowed up by his…fans,” continued the airbender, shivering at the word.

Even amongst the most prim and proper nuns, the Acolytes’ origins as the Official Avatar Aang Fan Club still showed through with many of the older women – and some of the men, too.

Thubten simply stood there frozen, his mouth hanging open slightly, reaction delayed by several seconds. Finally, he opened his lips slightly and whispered, “Alright…let’s go.”

He cast one last, lingering look back at Sajjad, disappointment etched in every corner of his face. Then he followed after the young airbender.

Sajjad wanted nothing more than to call out to the man; to let him know about the colossal mistake they’d all just made. But urgency didn’t make the words flow any easier.

There were so many things he could have said. So many things he could’ve done. If he’d managed to convince them to visit Syed’s room, to see the two of them side-by-side, he might even have been believed.

But Sajjad didn’t do that. Instead, with a lump in his throat and hot tears in his eyes, the acrobat did something he’d regret every single day for the rest of his life.

He ran.

The brothers wouldn’t see each other again for two more years.

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Even more than he had for the last five, Sajjad spent the next two years losing himself in his act. The more he pushed himself, the more intense and dangerous the stunts, the easier it was to forget.

To forget the Eastern Temple…and the brother he’d betrayed.

More than once, he considered going back, to try and explain himself. But he knew there’d be little point. The damage was already done – Syed had surely spent the Avatar’s entire visit confined to his bed, waiting for a healing that would never come. And once he finally did recover…once he’d gotten a chance to compare notes with Thubten, and put two and two together about what must’ve occurred…

There was no way he’d believe Sajjad hadn’t sabotaged him intentionally.

And even if he did give him the benefit of the doubt, it wouldn’t really change anything. Syed’s future would still be ruined. And the rift between the brothers would still be wider than ever before.

Sajjad chuckled humorlessly when he realized, belatedly, that he hadn’t even gotten to do the one thing he’d visited the temple for in the first place: meet Aang. A small matter in the grand scheme of things…but one which only underlined how badly he’d screwed up.

In the back of his mind, he knew he was only making things worse by staying away; by not offering
up any kind of explanation.

But he was too much of a coward to do otherwise.

So instead, he leapt and dived and twirled his way to blissful ignorance, letting each performance consume him mind, body, and soul. If nothing else, it resulted in a marked improvement in the quality of his act. Even Zaji commented on how much more focused and intense he seemed, after his “unannounced vacation.”

Still, Sajjad felt he had little choice. Allow his thoughts to idle long enough and, like clockwork, they always turned to Syed.

Occupying his mind with flips and tricks was the only way for him to stay sane.

It was after just such a performance – easily one of the best of his life – that Zaji took him aside one night. Concern was etched into every corner of the middle-aged ringmaster’s face.

“Great work out there tonight, son. Wanna get that out there, before we go any further,” he said, pulling him behind a curtain into a space of relative privacy. “But something’s been getting you down, boy, and don’t try to tell me otherwise.”

Sajjad sighed heavily. Unlike his twin, he’d never been good at hiding his emotions.

“I…don’t really wanna talk about it,” he eventually replied, his eyes averted.

Zaji nodded slowly. “If that’s how you feel, I won’t force you,” he told the young acrobat. “But lemme tell you one thing from experience: that’s usually when you most need to talk about it.”

Sajjad tried, but bottling things up and keeping quiet was about as anathema to his nature as one could get. It hadn’t taken much to open up the floodgates.

And so, with that, Sajjad found himself spilling out the entire, sordid tale. Zaji, for his part, merely sat back and listened, occasionally nodding or frowning but never speaking a word.

“And…that’s when I took off,” the boy eventually finished, holding himself and shaking. Tears marred the corners of his eyes. “I never came back. I…I never…”

His throat dried up completely, and he stopped there. It felt uncomfortably similar to how he’d withered under Tenzin’s questioning.

Zaji closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, before pulling Sajjad into a brief but tender hug.

“I think you already know what you should do, son,” he said after a moment, as he slowly released the boy. “Your brother deserves an apology…or at least an explanation. Tell him everything you just told me, and he’ll forgive you. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow…but eventually, he will.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Sajjad, lip trembling. “I didn’t mean to, but…but I hurt him so bad.”

And you’ll hurt him worse if he never sees you again,” the ringmaster answered softly. “Trust me. I know.”

Zaji didn’t look like he wanted to elaborate, and Sajjad didn’t ask him to. But it occurred to him in that moment just how little he knew about the man who’d taken him in.
Nevertheless, Sajjad found himself shaking his head. “I’m sorry, but I… I can’t face him. At least not yet,” he murmured, gazing downward. “I wish I was that brave. I know he’d be, in my shoes. But…”

“I told you I wasn’t going to push you, and I meant it. I’ve said my piece and given you my advice, but if you want to leave it at that I will,” said Zaji. “Besides… I might have one other way to help you.”

Sajjad blinked away another set of tears. “Name it,” he pleaded. “Please.”

“It sounds like you’ve been throwing yourself into your acrobatics, to try and distract your head,” the ringmaster continued on. “And don’t get me wrong, that’s worked out really well on my end. But I bet, for you… the benefit’s starting to wear thin.”

The young acrobat nodded glumly. “It sounds weird, but the stunts have gotten… too easy,” he responded after a pause. “I don’t have to think about them anymore. And that leaves my thoughts free to get stuck on… other stuff.”

“So you need something to take your mind off things. Something you can truly dedicate yourself to,” said Zaji. “Something that won’t remind you at all of your brother.”

He folded his hands, looking at Sajjad with an expression the young man had never quite seen, before adding quietly, “I was going to wait until you were older for this, but… perhaps it is time…”

Then, he asked the boy a question.

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That very same night, two years to the day from Avatar Aang’s visit to the Eastern Air Temple, Syed sat upon his bed, sulking.

This was hardly unusual; he tended to spend about half of all his waking hours sulking, these days. It’d led to a number of rather unflattering nicknames from his fellow Acolytes, though Syed didn’t pay them much attention.

He didn’t pay much attention to anything, lately.

He’d been discovered in his room about three hours after Aang and Tenzin departed, coughing and groaning and occasionally vomiting. One look at his still-full head of hair and Thubten realized he’d missed a big chunk of the picture.

The head monk had nursed him back to health himself, and gradually, as his heavily weakened voice allowed, Syed had told him the story. He wasn’t sure how much he’d been believed, but it filled too many gaps in his master’s confusion for the Acolyte to be completely dismissed.

Within a few weeks, all was forgiven; all was back to normal. Except that it wasn’t.

Syed had still lost the greatest thing that would ever happen to him. Lost it before he’d ever even known about it.

And in the course of it all, also lost…
But every time his mind wandered in that direction, Syed pointed it resolutely—and forcefully—toward another. He wouldn’t dignify that…that person, with a single spare thought.

Not after what he’d done to his own flesh and blood.

Part of him was quick to point out that he didn’t know the whole story; that Sajjad had no rational reason to do something so horrid; that it all could’ve been some huge mistake or misunderstanding. Syed always pushed that part down just as quickly.

After all, whose fault was it that he was missing out on so many details?

And so, it was with heavy thoughts and a darkened visage that he’d endured the last two years, slinking around the temple with nary a word from his lips. He’d always been more intent on his studies and his duties than on talking or socializing, but these days he was virtually silent.

He could remember multiple occasions where the only words he spoke from waking to sleep were a mumbled “Thank you” to the monk who served him food in the dining hall.

Thubten had tried to reach out to his most-prized student on more than one occasion, but Syed always pretended he hadn’t noticed. Eventually, the old master just stopped trying.

Until tonight.

“Syed, listen to me. Your heart has been out of balance for two full years,” he said, as he threw open the door to the twelve-year-old initiate’s room. His voice was harder and sterner than Syed has ever heard from him before. “So unless you can master it…you will be banished from the temple by the morning.”

That got the Acolyte’s attention. “W…Wh…What?!” he shouted, bolting out of the bed he’d been moping upon for the past five hours. “Master, you can’t…!”

“You haven’t responded to kindness and restraint, so I’m switching to brute force,” Thubten declared, his arms crossed. “You bring no honor to your people by abandoning them like this.”

“I’m not abandoning anyone,” snapped Syed, in a way he’d never have imagined speaking to his teacher just a few years ago. “The Air Acolytes mean more to me than anything in the world. All I’ve ever wanted to do is serve my nation. It’s the only place that’s ever made me feel useful, or wanted. The only place…that’s ever felt like home.”

“But it hasn’t felt like that for some time,” said the monk, suddenly far quieter. “Has it?”

Syed thought about that question for a moment…and then hung his head, all the energy washing out of him. “No,” he admitted. “It hasn’t.”

“You have so much potential, my dear boy,” Thubten told him, as he crossed the room in a couple broad strides and sat down beside him. “I hate to see you wasting it like this. Pining away for a glory you can never regain.”

“What’s the point in doing anything else?” the younger boy demanded. “I had one chance at everything I’d ever dreamed of. And now, it’s gone. Those kinds of things only come about once in a lifetime.”

Thubten folded his fingers together, looking pensive. “Oh, I don’t know about that,” he replied, lips barely moving. “As Guru Laghima once said…we all have our own stories to tell. And they are rarely the breadth of a single chapter.”
Syed let out a deep breath as his teacher placed a comforting hand upon his shoulder.

“I wish I could believe that,” the boy said miserably. “But what else is there? I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but I always thought…thought I’d be…”

“More than a regular monk? More than someone who sweeps the floors of the temple until his dying day?” asked Thubten, guessing the words his disciple was too ashamed to say.

His cheeks burned, but eventually, he nodded. Thubten’s lip curled in response, as if amused.

“Don’t worry about sounding vain or selfish. I thought the very same thing…and I still do,” he informed his young charge, smiling indulgently. “You see, there’s something I was waiting to tell you until after you’d secured your place on Air Temple Island. That would’ve been ideal, of course…but I suppose now there’s no point in delaying. And I think it’ll change your perspective completely.”

Syed slowly looked up at the old monk, wiping away tears he didn’t realize he had.

“What is it?” he whispered.

In that moment, Thubten’s lips formed the very same question that Zaji’s did, hundreds of miles away.

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“What do you know of the White Lotus?”
Syed used part of his robes to shield his face from the rain, wishing – not for the first time – that he had some form of control over the elements, instead of being constantly at their mercy.

It was, without a doubt, one of the worst storms he’d ever experienced. Coal-gray clouds spread across the sky in every direction, blocking out even the slightest sliver of moonlight, while rain poured down in a pounding, neverending torrent. Below them, the turbulent seas were a mirror of the sky above, choppy and chaotic and nearly pitch-black.

And through all this he and Thubten flew, the only two passengers atop the head monk’s enormous sky-bison, Nyima.

How his master was managing to fly through this maelstrom when Syed could barely see three feet from his own face, the boy wasn’t certain, but he also couldn’t especially muster up the energy to care. There were bigger concerns right now.

“You still haven’t told me where we’re going!” he shouted at the top of his lungs – the only way to be heard over the roaring rain and periodic explosion of thunder.

“All will become clear quite soon, my son!” Thubten called out, not looking back as he adjusted his hold on the reins, urging Nyima still faster. “Should only be about half an hour more!”

Syed suppressed a heavy groan, at the notion of staying out in this for thirty minutes longer.

Still, especially given that they were flying into a headwind, the Acolytes made good time, and it wasn’t too long before they were approaching a small cave in a cliff side overlooking the ocean, its mouth just wide enough to accommodate the sky-bison.

“Forty-five years ago, Avatar Aang used this cave to take shelter from a storm just like this one,” said Thubten as they dismounted. “Now it serves a greater purpose.”

While the cave entrance was small and dark enough that it was nearly invisible in the night air, now that they were shaking off their drenched clothes and moving closer, Syed noticed the warm glow of a fire burning deep within the cave. For a multitude of reasons, it proved an irresistible beacon, drawing all three of them closer.

Thubten wasn’t offering any further explanations, but as Syed walked on his surroundings began to shift dramatically. While the cavern’s mouth was cold and bare, the deeper they went the more the rock walls were covered with maps and plans and banners – the latter bearing a striking symbol of a blooming, crimson flower.

Eventually, they found their way blocked by a set of curtains, the same red mark emblazoned upon them. Standing before it was a willowy young man with chocolate-brown hair and undersized glasses, who grinned wide.

“Brothers!” he yelped, sounding simultaneously startled and jubilant. “Please, go on in. You’re the last ones to arrive.”

“Thank you, Jilu,” Thubten said, bowing briefly to the man, before beckoning Syed to follow him through the curtains.

A moment later, he stopped cold.
“What is he doing here?” two brothers simultaneously demanded, albeit with very different inflections. Fury burned on Syed’s face, while Sajjad – standing beside a man the Acolyte vaguely recognized as ringmaster Zaji – averted his eyes, looking as if he wished to be anywhere but here.

There was a pause, before Syed snapped, “The only reason I even came here was to try to forget that backstabbing little brat. Is this the universe playing tricks on me? Or was this your doing, master?”

He snarled the last word, as if it was a violent and ugly slur.

“Bro, I…I mean, I don’t…” mumbled Sajjad, withering under his piercing glare.

“Save it,” said Syed, cutting across him. “I’m not interested in hearing any excuses or explanations out of you. Oh…and don’t call me ‘bro.’”

“I told you they’d react this way,” Zaji told Thubten with a low, rumbling chuckle. “Looks like you owe me two gold pieces.”

“Alas, I’m afraid there is little I can do for you at present, my good friend,” replied Thubten, turning his pockets inside-out and shrugging his shoulders.

“Yeah, tip for next time, Zee,” said a woman in a hooded robe and full-face mask. “Maybe when you make a bet, you don’t do it with the guy whose culture doesn’t use currency.”

Syed’s eyes briefly snapped away from his brother to boggle at the scene. He’d never seen his master acting so…casually before.

All told, there were eight people seated around the fire in a rough sort of semicircle – nine, once that “Jilu” guy joined them, daintily brushing dust from his crisp, neat robes. Once he did, the man at the head of the formation – a pudgy gentleman in a strange headdress and rather scant attire – held up a hand, silencing all other conversation with but a look.

“We will have no more of this petty squabbling,” he spoke in a deep, slightly raspy voice. “Not when so many matters of import remain. For those of you who are not familiar with our cause…”

At this, his eyes moved between the two brothers, lingering just half a second on each. Still, it was enough to send a chill up both their spines.

“I will now introduce myself,” continued the man, his gaze returning forward, to the symbol plastered over the opposite wall. The symbol of an open flower, its petals the color of blood. “I am called Xai Bau. And I welcome you to the Red Lotus.”

Sajjad had no idea what was going on, and right now he’d rather tear off his own arm than ask.

With Syed here, he’d honestly be lucky if he was able to string together a complete sentence.

Every few seconds, his eyes snapped back to Zaji, their olive-green depths shimmering with a vague sense of betrayal and hurt. The ringmaster had promised a way to forget about what he’d done to his brother; not be shoved headfirst back into it.

Still, since he wasn’t exactly in a position to leave – Zaji had the keys to the boat they’d used to get
here – the acrobat listened on as the man calling himself “Xai Bau” bid the other gathered parties to introduce themselves.

“I am Zhi-Yan, of the Kemurikage,” said the masked woman. Jilu, who was apparently a mail courier in Republic City, went next.

“Sasori, at your service,” added another man, as he used a single finger to stroke a scorpion-bee perched on his shoulder. He was covered head-to-toe with multiple layers of loose-fitting clothing, leaving only his eyes and mouth exposed – one which was curled into a grin so wide it didn’t look entirely sane.

“Ryoku,” a muscular person who was neither clearly male nor female stated curtly, their arms crossed over a royal blue uniform. “Now, can we get down to business already? Some of us have work to be getting back to.”

At this, they shot a dirty look toward the late arrivals. If Thubten noticed this, however, he didn’t react, delivering his name and rank without skipping a beat.

And with that, all eyes in the room turned to Syed…though his own still had only one target, who received the full force of his unblinking ire. “My name is Syed,” he said. “And I haven’t a clue what I’m still doing here.”

“S…Same here,” Sajjad managed to murmur, shrinking back from his brother’s glare. “I’m, err… Sajjad, by the way…”

“And I am Zaji. Though I expect even the few of you I haven’t yet met require no introduction,” the ringmaster finished in a loud voice, saving Sajjad from a retort by his furious twin.

“Indeed,” responded Sasori, punctuating the word with a gleeful chuckle. “Even amongst the sandbender tribes, the hero who put down the Mo Ce Rebellions is legendary.”

That was enough to jolt Sajjad’s voice back to life. “I didn’t know you used to be in the military,” he whispered aside to his employer.

“There are a lot of things you don’t yet know about me,” said Zaji, just as quietly. “Now, pay attention…and you might just learn a few of them.”

“I’m pleased to have you all here tonight. This is the first time so many of our brothers and sisters have been in the same place at once,” Xai Bau declared, his expression pensive. “Though we all come from different walks of life, we share a singular vision. A vision of a better world.”

Jilu nodded. “A shame Aiwei couldn’t make it here,” he lamented with a drawn-out sigh. “He’d have wanted some input on all this. And on a personal level, I’ve always found pleasure in his…company.”

“Aiwei’s current mission – ingratiating himself to the Beifong family – is far too valuable to risk extracting him early,” explained Xai Bau. “But I will commune with him in the Spirit World next week. And in any event…the nine of us should suffice.”

Sajjad didn’t miss that he and his brother were included in that number.

“I will begin with some basic history, out of deference for our…newest recruits,” he said, and this time, he nodded directly to the twins. “Around a thousand years ago, in the wake of her victory over a wicked king, Avatar Bai faced a conundrum. The world was nearly torn asunder…and despite all her power, she was still only nine years old. How could she bring the nations back into balance,
when most of their leaders refused to take her seriously?"

He held up his palm, and a plume of flame appeared upon it.

“Her solution was simple, but elegant,” Xai Bau went on, twirling his hand and twisting the flames into a number of familiar patterns – the symbols of the Four Nations. Sajjad, who’d never seen firebending so beautiful even from trained performers, gaped. “She brought together the wisest and most open-minded men and women from across the world. Scholars, warriors, and politicians alike.”

“And they formed the Order of the White Lotus, stabilized the world, ushered in an unprecedented era of peace, yada yada,” Ryoku cut in, tapping their foot impatiently. “We’ve all heard the story, and those of us who haven’t can figure it out along the way. Let’s get to the point already.”

“Shhh. Patience, patience, my dear,” said Zhi-Yan, placing a gloved hand on their arm. Sajjad could just hear the smirk underneath her mask. “Xai is many things, but he doesn’t waste time.”

“Thank you, Sister of Smoke and Shadow,” Xai Bau told the masked woman, bowing his head to her briefly. “Still, I’ll endeavor to be brief. You see, though she was the one who’d brought them together, Bai recognized it was important the Order remain independent. They were beholden to no government, no nation, and no Avatar – and as a result, were able to act for the betterment of the world, not just a handful of selfish masters.”

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“And that was the way they remained,” added Thubten. “Until the Hundred Year War.”

“Precisely. Several years after it liberated Ba Sing Se under Grandmaster Iroh, the White Lotus decided they could do more good from the light than the shadows,” continued the firebender. “I was a young recruit to the Order at the time, and I knew at once it was a mistake. One my very own people had made just a year prior. As you can likely tell from my attire, I am of the Sun Warriors.”

The Sun Warrior scowled deeply. “The results were as tragic as they were predictable,” he muttered. “Our people, who were once so close, scattered to the four winds. With each generation, more and more of our children seek fortune in the cities, abandoning the old ways. Now we exist as little more than extensions of the Fire Sages. Just as the White Lotus has debased itself into puppets for the Avatar.”

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Everyone else nodded, either because they knew this already or because this apparently explained everything, but Sajjad was completely lost.

“This might be a stupid question, but…what exactly are the Sun Warriors?” he asked in a small voice.

Syed immediately elbowed him, though mercifully, didn’t say anything scathing. Sajjad was torn between wincing at the pain and keeping a smile off his face – because that was just what Syed would’ve done to him before their relationship split in two.

“They were the very first human firebenders, taught by the dragons of old,” said Zaji. “Their society was long-since thought extinct, along with the dragons they protected.”

“In fact, we’d survived to the present day precisely because we kept to the shadows,” Xai Bau replied, his tone muted. “Away from the watchful eyes of the world, we could raise our children and preserve our way of life without interference. But when Avatar Aang and Fire Lord Zuko decided to share the lessons of First Fire, our chief…agreed to come out of hiding, and teach our secrets directly to the masses.”

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“But what’s so wrong with that?” Sajjad couldn’t help but ask. “I mean…Avatar Aang’s really cool,
isn’t he? He’s saved the world, like…five or six times!”

“Closer to eight, depending on whether you count his defeat of the Maker,” answered Syed, his need to dispense random historical trivia apparently enough to make him forget he was supposed to be mad right now. “For once, though, I agree with my brother. Avatar Aang has been a boon for the physical and spiritual planes.”

“I’ll grant that Aang has been an…exemplary Avatar. But who’s to say the next will follow his example?” said Xai Bau. “Will the Order follow a cruel Avatar just as obediently? A vicious, warmongering Avatar? An Avatar who rejects their connection to the spirits? When you place your loyalty at the mercy of a system rather than a person, then what happens when that system becomes corrupted?”

“That’s why we all – each one of us – rejected the Order’s decision,” Jilu piped up, his voice soft and squeaky but determined. “But until Xai Bau came along, we were all just…quietly rebelling. He showed us we could do something more, together. He showed us we could fight back.”

“Those systems are the source of all true evil in the world,” agreed Thubten. “Whether it be the Avatar or the Fire Lord or the Republic City Council. In the end, they do nothing but divide and control people. Freedom and equality are unattainable dreams, so long as they stand in the way. Governments, nations…and yes, even the Avatar.”

“People starve because some bureaucrat decides there aren’t enough resources to go around,” growled Zaji, joining in. “Monsters cut people down and escape justice, because they’re more skilled at manipulating the system than the average man. Petty squabbles between world leaders turn into catastrophic wars, slaughtering thousands who never asked to be part of it!”

“The White Lotus used to understand all this,” Xai Bau said, his voice quiet again. “But no longer. That’s why the Red Lotus exists – to remind them. At the point of a blade, if necessary.”

The Sun Warrior went silent, tipping his hand to the others, as if encouraging them to add their own stories to the mix. One by one, they obliged.

“We of the Kemurikage have been the silent power behind the throne, since the early days of Fire Lord Zuko’s reign,” declared Zhi-Yan. “Princess Azula created us as an enemy to harden him, to make him stronger. It wasn’t until I saw what he did with that strength that I realized what a mistake that was. What a mistake we were.”

She hung her masked face, her hood drooping slightly.

“Now my sisters resort to petty thuggery in Republic City,” the firebender went on. “And all the while, Zuko readies his daughter to continue his sins – expanding the Fire Nation’s empire far beyond what his grandfather would’ve ever dreamed. Simply with gold rather than warships.”

“Everything he just said about the Sun Warriors, Si Wong’s been experiencing for decades,” said Sasori, the moment her words came to an end. “For once, the lively smirk was gone from his face. “The Earth King’s never had a good relationship with the sandbender tribes…but ever since Hou-Ting took the throne, she’s refused to even acknowledge we exist. Encroaching on our territory, stealing our land, hunting our beasts to extinction.”

The sandbender clenched his fist and gritted his teeth. His pet scorpion-bee, sensing its master’s rage, buzzed dangerously.

“The desert used to belong to everyone. She just sees it as another thing to be taxed,” he hissed.
“And so I’ll do whatever it takes to remove spoiled, pampered wolfbats like that from power.”

There was a momentary pause after Sasori’s voice faded, where the eyes of everyone in the room turned expectantly to Ryoku, who merely shrugged.

“Not much to tell, compared to most of you lot,” they said. “I invented the telegraph, you know. Made our modern communication system possible. But did I ever see a single yuan for it? No, the Republic City Council seized all my hard work as a ‘public utility.’ Didn’t even give me a place in the history books for my trouble.”

They gestured to their androgynous features, hand moving down their body. When they reached their chest, though, they hesitated, their acerbic and dismissive demeanor flaking away slightly.

“No one ever expects this kind of stuff out of…well, someone like me. Always wondered if that was the reason it was so easy to…” muttered Ryoku, their expression sullen. They didn’t finish the sentence. “Well, anyway…I tried to fight it in court, but they pretty much laughed me out of the building. Nothing but a big joke to them.”

Zhi-Yan again offered a hand, drawing closer this time. “You know I don’t think you’re a joke, right?” she asked softly. “None of us do.”

Reflexively, Ryoku yanked their arm from the masked woman’s grip, scowling – but in a perfunctory sort of way, as if they were simply trying to preserve their image. It didn’t prevent them from leaning against the firebender a moment later, exhaling deeply.

“My point is, you can’t trust some stuffy-faced bureaucrat or senile old judge to protect those of us who don’t fit into their precious social order,” they said. “Cut out the middleman, I say, and let every person own the sweat off their brow. And since they’re never gonna step aside by choice…”

Ryoku clenched their fist, and at the same time a nearby canteen of water exploded, its contents solidified into a spiky ball of ice.

Jilu, who’d yelped and dived away from the explosion in a manner most undignified, slowly extricated himself from a tangled ball of robes and smiled at Zaji.

“How about you, dear friend?” he asked, the term of address surprising Sajjad. He’d seen Zaji almost every day for the past seven years, and he’d never even heard of this guy – of any of these guys – before today.

The ringmaster crossed his arms and exhaled deeply, a frown upon his face. “Let’s just say that when you serve in the Earth King’s army, you do some things that…stick with you,” he eventually said. “During my tour of duty in the west, my commanding officer was a man named Du Jun. Expert tactician, crack shot with a bow…but his heart was like a gaping hole. Nothing resembling morals, or a sense of honor.”

He paused for a moment, looking down at his rough, calloused hands. Sajjad had always assumed them to be the result of a lifetime hauling heavy equipment, but now…

“Everyone remembers the Mo Ce Rebellions as a violent uprising of farmers and fishermen. One that took the life of the war hero Haru,” Zaji continued to explain. “And that’s true…up to a point. Du Jun and I both got big fancy medals for putting it down, and Kuei’s power was secured for another generation.”

“I’m sensing a big fat ‘but’ coming…” Sasori interjected, before snickering at his own – for lack of a better term – joke. Ryoku shot him a dirty look.
“But what most people don’t realize is the rebellions only started after mercenary raiders invaded the harbor town. In a single night, they burned crops, chopped up nets, slaughtered livestock – left the people of Mo Ce no way to feed themselves,” said Zaji, acting as if he hadn’t been interrupted at all.

“Du Jun hired those mercenaries, to force the peasants into firing the first shot. Once Haru was killed while trying to negotiate peace, Du Jun had all the excuse he needed to move in and decimate the populace. Now that monster’s a general.”

The ringmaster paused and hung his head, as Thubten offered a firm hand upon his shoulder.

“I accused him, publically, but I could never pull together enough proof,” he told them after a moment. “In military court, I had about as much success as Ryoku did in civil. Eventually, I just quit. I couldn’t be a part of something like…like that. And I never looked back.”

He blinked at the monk whose comforting hand still rested upon his arm, his voice level as he added, “That just leaves you, my love.”

The twins each choked on their own spit.

“I didn’t join the Red Lotus because of any kind of personal suffering. All things considered, the Air Nation has blessed me with a cherished life,” spoke Thubten, his voice low and sedate. “But they are also why I fight. Because I will not allow the legacy of our forbearers to be perverted.”

Syed hadn’t spoken in quite some time, but suddenly his mentor turned to him, his eyes glinting. “Can you tell me, son, what separated the government of the Air Nomads from those of the other nations?” he asked, quizzing his prized pupil.

Sajjad watched his brother struggle with the question for a moment, trying to figure out which of the many possible answers the head monk wanted to hear.

Eventually, however, he replied, “The Air Temples never really had a formal government. Each was administered by a council of elders, but their power was limited. Without a military, currency, or justice system, it wasn’t like there was much for them to do.”

“Excellent, excellent. As sharp as ever, my boy,” said Thubten. Sajjad wasn’t sure whether that was intended as a subtle dig at him. “And naturally, we Acolytes have strode to emulate their example as much as possible. In all but one case.”

It was, remarkably, the far slower of the brothers who put two and two together first. “Air Temple Island…” he murmured.

The corner of the monk’s mouth twitched slightly. “One of the reasons an operative there would’ve been quite…valuable. But the past is the past,” he answered, his hands folded across his lap. “Nevertheless, it is true that our ‘brothers’ in Republic City have chosen to, shall we say…play by different rules. Ever since Avatar Aang installed its ruling Council, and insisted the Air Acolytes get a seat.”

“No doubt he intended it as a noble gesture,” stated Xai Bau, his tone acidic. “But Aang’s greatest flaw has always been his failure to think his actions through. Like the Sun Warriors, the sandbenders – even the waterbenders of the Foggy Swamp Tribe – the Air Nomad culture remained pure and unstained for so long, precisely because they stayed out of world affairs.”

“In every war in history, the Temples remained neutral,” Thubten went on to say. “Trade with other nations was kept to a minimum, and their remote geography made visitors a rarity. Foreign Avatars would come to learn airbending, of course, but otherwise their autonomy was their greatest strength.”
The monk tensed, gripping at his robes.

“But now, after all the work we’ve done to resurrect our culture from the brink of death…Aang and his mewling brat seem intent on tearing it all back down!” he exclaimed, a sudden burst of emotion erupting from his throat. “Their Acolytes spend their time debating traffic regulations and tax reform. They use money, listen to the radio, cast votes. On my last trip to Republic City, I even saw one testing out a new invention she called a ‘car.’ And it gets worse every single day.”

Thubten sighed deeply, placing an arm around Zaji’s shoulders. Almost reflexively, the ringmaster raised one hand to lightly stroke the Acolyte’s thick, gray beard.

“Let me be clear: I don’t object to technology, on its own. Nor to the melding of cultures. There never should’ve been a separation between the nations, to begin with,” muttered the monk. “But political power changes a person. The more the Air Acolytes embroil themselves in the mess and minutiae of government, the more we become like them. I won’t let that happen. Not to the nation I love so much.”

“And now, children…you have heard our tales. You have seen that there are many different paths one might take to reach the same destination – perhaps the most valuable lesson of them all,” said Xai Bau. “Do you have any thoughts of your own to offer?”

Syed was entirely silent. Sajjad, however, couldn’t help but ask, “Err…he didn’t really get to go yet, did he?”

His finger pointed to Jilu, calmly tending the fire and humming a merry tune. The non-bender looked up in surprise at being addressed.

“Oh…I don’t have a very interesting story, I’m afraid,” he responded with a small smile. “Let’s just say I agree with Xai Bau completely. He’s the one who opened my eyes.”

“Every person you see here was once a member of the White Lotus. Just like I was,” added the Sun Warrior. “When I knew the time had come to walk a new path, I sought out those who saw the truth as I did – and who recognized all that must be done, all that must be sacrificed, if the world is to be brought back into balance. For as the great Guru Laghima once said…”

He, Zaji, and Thubten spoke the next words in unison: “New growth cannot exist without first the destruction of the old.”

The ringmaster smirked a moment later, before whispering aside to Sajjad, “These two geek out over the guy so much, I’m never gonna forget his quotes.”

“Today, the world stands at a crossroads. One that will change its fate forevermore,” said Xai Bau. “And for that…we will need your help. Both of you.”

The twins glanced at each other, just for a moment. “What do you mean by that?” demanded Syed.

“You think it a coincidence that both of your mentors are among my circle?” the firebender asked right back. “When Sasori’s tribe found you abandoned in the desert, they brought you to me first. The orphanage where you grew up? Owned by another of my associates. Your leaving there was unexpected, but not unplanned for. I made sure literature relating to Zaji’s circus and the Eastern Air Temple was readily available in your room – so that I could still watch over you in either case. Although I didn’t anticipate you’d splinter into both.”

He drew himself up to full height and stared at the two boys, his expression hard and stoic.
“My people believe that within the fires of a child’s eyes dwells the vast expanse of their destiny,” he said. “One look at the two of you, even as infants, and I knew. I knew that I was seeing something special. Something that could change the world.”

There was a lengthy beat of silence, where the only sound in the entire cave was the soft crackle of the fire, before Syed mumbled, “I gotta go,” and leapt to his feet, striding away without a single look back.

Hurriedly, without even thinking about it, Sajjad followed after him.

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They’d spent enough time within the cavern for most of the storm to clear away, and for the first few rays of the morning sun to poke through the enormous mass of gray. When Sajjad found his brother, legs dangling over the edge of a small cliff overlooking the sea, it’d been reduced to a light drizzle.

“I don’t want to see you,” said the young Acolyte, almost automatically.

“I don’t think I really want you to see me, either,” replied Sajjad, shifting awkwardly. “But it doesn’t look like anyone gave us much of a choice.”

“Which is what gets me as much as anything,” Syed snapped, though his words were directed forward rather than directly at his twin. “Here’s some guy we barely know, saying he’s been manipulating our lives since we were babies…I mean, does he think that’ll make us more likely to do what he says?”

“I…I dunno,” mumbled the acrobat, deciding to test the waters and sit down beside his brother, about two feet away. Mercifully, Syed didn’t object. “But I think it’s clear he brought us back together for a reason. Maybe we should make the most of it.”

“And maybe I should push you right off this cliff,” said Syed, but there was no real malice to it. Both brothers knew at once it was an empty threat. “Look…I appreciate what you’re trying to do here. But you and I are done. Far as I’m concerned, I don’t have a brother anymore.”

Sajjad scrutinized him for a moment, his eyes narrowed, before slowly shaking his head.

“No…I don’t buy it, bro,” he told the other boy. “Maybe that’s what your head wants to say, but your heart’s a different story. We can still…”

He was interrupted, however, by a fist sailing straight into his cheek.

“Don’t give me that hippo-bull!” yelled Syed, face twisted and eyes wet. “Not after what you pulled! What, you get to ruin my life and I just…I just have to sit there and take it? Try to pretend it never even happened?”

“I didn’t say that, okay?” Sajjad tried to argue back as he rubbed at his cheek, though his heart wasn’t fully in it. For the first time, it occurred to him that he probably should’ve come out here with some kind of plan. “Look, I…it’s not like I meant to…”

Again, however, Syed cut him off. “Is that what you think this is about?” he said. “Sajjad, I’ve always known it was an accident. Or at least I was pretty sure. It’s what happened after I can’t
He blinked away small, stinging tears.

“I was the one who reached out to you,” continued Syed after a moment. “I brought you into my world, even gave you the chance to meet your hero. And what’d I get in return? You ran away. You abandoned me.”

Sajjad blinked as well, several times in quick succession. This wasn’t where he’d expected this conversation to go at all.

“We could’ve had this conversation two years ago. Instead, you screwed up, and then left me to pick up the pieces,” his brother murmured, looking sullen. “What am I supposed to say to that? Just… forgive? Forget? Sorry, but I can’t.”

“I…I knew it was a mistake, the moment I ran,” said Sajjad, scrambling to pull together a coherent string of words. Unfortunately, that’d never been his strong suit. “And I kept wanting to go back, to explain things, but…I was too much of a coward. Too scared of what you might say, of what you might think. I know that’s no excuse, but…”

Syed didn’t say anything for a long time, instead staring forward at the slowly rising sun. After more than a minute, however, he finally whispered, “Where do we go from here?”

“I…dunno,” Sajjad answered honestly. “We used to be so close, didn’t we? I’m not imagining that, right? It’s…It’s been so long…”

“At this point, we’ve spent more of our lives apart than we have together,” his twin reminded him, his own tones muted and solemn. “Fact of the matter is, in every aspect that counts we’re basically strangers. An aspiring Acolyte and a circus performer. We live in completely different worlds, and it was a mistake to think that could change.”

Sajjad turned to him. “Not every aspect,” he choked out, his throat tight.

For the first time since their arrival, Syed fully and completely met his brother’s eyes. Slowly, with almost agonizing effort, Sajjad placed a hand on the other boy’s chest.

“I still love you, bro,” he said, tears streaming.

Syed reflexively pulled away, shaking his head. “You think that changes anything?” he asked quietly.

“I think it’s a start,” responded his twin. “That’s all these guys have given us – a start. I just don’t want to throw it away without giving it a fair shot.”

The Acolyte stared at him for a moment, his face looking as if it wasn’t sure which expression to wear, before sighing wearily.

“Guess I can’t think of any better options,” said Syed, his voice heavy with resignation. “No way I could go back to the Temple now and be a ‘normal’ student again. Not after everything I’ve just heard.”

“Same here,” the acrobat admitted. “I mean, I miss my act, but…but this is big, y’know? I’m not sure I buy everything they’re selling, but these guys have gotten a pretty rotten deal. And a lot of what that Xai Bau guy said makes sense.”
“Maybe. Doesn’t mean I have to like him, though,” muttered Syed, gritting his teeth. “Y’know… there’s one thing I still don’t get.”

Sajjad tilted his head, looking curious.

“If they were keeping track of both of us all along, how’d the mix-up even happen?” said the Acolyte. “They had to have known what was going on.”

“That one was my mistake, I’m afraid,” came a deep voice from behind them. A moment later, Thubten emerged from the depths of the cavern, with Zaji following right on his heels.

“The moment you started to answer such basic questions wrongly, I suspected it was you I was speaking to, Sajjad. But I couldn’t think of a way to intervene without tipping off Tenzin,” continued the monk, bowing his head in shame. “Tenzin may not be a member of the White Lotus, but he’s worked alongside them since he was a child. I couldn’t risk blowing my cover as head monk. I am truly sorry.”

“As am I,” Zaji added with a frown. “Every week, Thubten and I would meet to discuss how you two were progressing. I knew everything about your brother – how he was doing, what he was studying, which foods he was eating – and I never said a word. Even though I could see in your eyes how much you missed him. If we’d told the truth earlier, all this might’ve been avoided.”

“Was that all we really were to you?” Syed demanded of his master, hurt in his voice. “A couple projects you had to keep an eye on?”

The old monk looked briefly shocked at the accusation…before abruptly pulling his best pupil into a hug. A moment later, Zaji did the same, while also throwing one arm around Thubten’s shoulder – so that all four of them were linked in an awkward, lopsided embrace.

“Only so far as he wanted you kept safe,” Thubten said softly, an uncommon amount of emotion in his normally stoic demeanor. “The rest was us. Just us. You’re not merely my student anymore, Syed.”

“Nor I to you, Sajjad,” murmured Zaji, his scarred lips barely moving.

“Whatever you think of his methods…Xai Bau recognizes that there is no greater power in this world than love,” the monk went on, tightening the hug. Tears fell down the ringmaster’s hooked nose as he nodded his agreement. The next words, the two men spoke at once.

“The kind of love shared by a family.”

[--------------------]

In the end, the two brothers agreed to at least consider Xai Bau’s plan for them. Admittedly, they might’ve thought twice had they known exactly what that meant.

For the next three months or so, the boys’ days were crammed full of intense, uninterrupted training. From sunrise to sunset, the members of the Red Lotus taught them everything they knew, from
armed and unarmed combat to the long and storied history of their enemies.

They were staying at a remote mountain retreat Zaji’s family had owned for generations, though it’d been abandoned for well over three decades before the Lotus members took up residence. While their relationship was still icy at best, the two brothers consented to sharing living quarters once more – on the condition that both their mentors remain close, to help defuse any lingering tensions.

Ultimately, Thubten had announced a temporary sabbatical from his position from head monk, and Zaji had turned over ringmaster duties to his most experienced clown. Neither seemed especially torn up about the change, however – if the way they openly kissed and cuddled all over the place was any indication.

Not that Syed spent a whole lot of time watching his master’s romantic rendezvous, of course. He was a little too busy getting the stuffing worked out of him.

From the various benders assembled within their party, the twins learned all four different bending arts – not the elements themselves, of course, but the forms, as best as their bodies could reproduce them. For the first few weeks, Thubten instructed them in the basic principles of airbending, after which Ryoku led them through water, Sasori through earth, and Zhi-Yan through fire.

Syed had already learned the airbending moves as part of his Air Acolyte training, of course, but he was surprised to see his brother take to them so quickly – and ultimately to surpass him, once their studies turned to the three other elements.

When asked, the acrobat just mentioned offhandedly that the benders in his circus troupe had “given him some tips” here and there…leading Syed to wonder idly just how long the Lotus had been actively working to prepare them.

Sajjad excelled equally in their combat and sparring lessons, though that was less of a shock, given that Zaji led them. Day after day the former soldier drilled them to build strength, stamina, and agility, first with fists and later with blunted swords, lances, and arrows. Usually he was their opponent, calmly dodging as they fought harder and harder to strike through, but when he wanted to truly test their mettle he had them battle each other.

The young Acolyte probably shouldn’t have enjoyed those opportunities as much as he did.

One area where Syed still far surpassed his twin was in the history and geography lessons. Jilu led these for the most part, though the other Lotus members frequently stopped by to lend their own perspectives.

The soft-spoken mailman proved to be an adept historian, expertly summarizing hundreds of years’ worth of conflicts, alliances, and ruined dinner parties in a matter of hours. Syed, whose education up to that point had centered solely on the Air Nomads and the Avatar, found the experience eye-opening.

Sajjad quite clearly did not, given how many times his twin found him drifting off during “class.”

Most importantly, from its founding under Avatar Bai to its current administration under Grandmaster Tyro, the brothers learned of the organization their teachers had sworn their lives to destroy. Syed had no doubt it was biased information, but thankfully Jilu was quick to provide firsthand accounts, supporting documents, and visual aids whenever possible, trusting his students to separate truth from fiction.

Even a biased perspective wasn’t necessarily wrong, if the facts lined up accordingly.
And over time, in the face of those facts – of the stories of hundreds of tyrannical kings, failed states, and rampaging armies – Syed came to find his own perspective shifting. Words that’d once meant nothing to him, from “government” to “bureaucracy” to “queen,” now filled his heart with a deep and instinctual revulsion, as he remembered the litany of crimes associated with each throughout the millennia.

It helped, of course, that it was easy to reconcile with the teachings he’d been submerged in for the past seven years. Air was the element of freedom, after all – the very same freedom both the Air Nomads and White Lotus had been founded to protect.

So it was hard to deny that, in joining openly with the Avatar and becoming subject – like he was – to the feckless laws and despotic rulers of the world, the Order had betrayed its very purpose. Syed prided himself on his logical mind, and he could see no other logical conclusion.

For the world to return to balance, all the artificial systems imposed upon it…the very notion of a rigid, unchanging order…

Needed to die.

Syed wasn’t sure if his brother shared in his gradually ballooning zeal – not that he asked Sajjad such questions very often, though he at least no longer felt like strangling him every time they met – but his elusive attention span did perk up whenever they broached the bloodier details, so he hoped the acrobat was at least getting something out of it.

Strangely, he was a far more attentive pupil during the lessons that ended every single day of instruction: spiritual training with Xai Bau himself. For two hours after dinner, the pair of them sat side-by-side and meditated, while the Sun Warrior repeated chants and mantras for the benefit of the spirits surrounding them.

The young Acolyte was certain his brother would hate the idea of sitting still for so long, and indeed he was noticeably fidgeting after only a few minutes. But he seemed to master the impulse on his own, without any input from Syed or Xai Bau, and remained utterly silent throughout.

Even for Syed, however, it was meditation like he’d never before experienced. While Thubten had usually left him alone at the Temple, or else acted the quiet and dispassionate observer, Xai Bau surrounded them on all sides by flames of his own making, the patterns rising and falling and swirling in ways that defied description.

Fire, he said, was at the core of every heart and every soul, and Sun Warrior culture was dedicated to bringing it to the surface. Ultimately, that was the purpose of all this training in the first place.

Multiple times, following these sessions, Syed would ask the obvious question: what in the world they were spending so much time training them for. But Xai Bau never offered a straight answer in return.

Only a riddle.

“What can the world not live without, and yet, cannot help but abhor? What does man’s very nature both instinctually yearn for and reject? And what, in achieving it, becomes yet so much harder to obtain?”

Syed liked to think he was a fairly astute person – especially for his age. But even he couldn’t make heads or tails of the clue.

Which was what made it such a shock when he heard the riddle once more, for the first time in the
presence of Sajjad, and his twin immediately said, “Balance.”

Syed’s head wheeled backward, his wild mane of hair whipping after it. “What’d you just say?” he asked, his voice slightly hollow.

“Well, it’s just like Jilu was talking about the other day, right?” replied the acrobat. “Things like governments exist to impose a sense of order in the world. But the natural order is disorder. That’s why they always fail, in time. People seek balance between all sorts of things – good and evil, light and darkness, humans and spirits – but it’s only when those systems are destroyed that true balance can rise from the ashes.”

His brother turned back to Xai Bau, who was beaming. Then, slowly, he faced Sajjad once more, as if seeing him properly for the very first time.

“I guess you’ve been paying a lot closer attention than I gave you credit for,” he murmured, quietly astonished.

“Always the tone of surprise,” said Sajjad, though he was smiling too.

For the first time in over two years, they both were.

[S--------------------]

Sajjad’s own “conversion,” such as it was, took place gradually, but was ultimately all the stronger for it.

While he’d never had much of an interest in politics or world affairs, the acrobat would have described himself as holding a strong sense of justice. As much as possible, he wanted everyone to be treated fairly and equally, and a lot of the stories Jilu told – from the horrific atrocities committed by Chin the Conqueror to the expansionist ambitions of Fire Lord Sozin, which’d ignited the Hundred Year War – left a nauseous feeling in the pit of his stomach.

It became clear fairly quickly that “justice” wasn’t high on the priority list of most world leaders.

Neither was freedom, which was also something Sajjad cared deeply about – if, perhaps, mostly selfishly. Much of what he loved about the circus was the lack of rules, telling him what he couldn’t say or do or eat, and he didn’t see why everyone else should miss out on the same experience.

True, there’d always be people like his brother, who chose to submit themselves to a bunch of stuffy rules and patterns. Sajjad could respect that, even if he couldn’t understand it. But it would still be their choice, and that made all the difference.

In any event, the young acrobat found the Red Lotus’ philosophies did more than open his eyes; they actively gave him purpose, one he’d always found sorely lacking in what he increasingly thought of as his “old life.”

Syed had always been the one who knew what he wanted out of his life: to serve his nation, to be a good pupil for his master, to seek some greater destiny – whatever form that might take. By contrast, Sajjad was content to live fully in the moment, treating every performance as if it was his last.

Or at least…he’d been content. Now the world he’d been living in for most of his life seemed so
small, so petty, compared to the grand truths he was being exposed to.

For the first time, he finally felt as if he understood the devotion Syed held toward the Air Acolytes – not toward the same target, of course, but just as intense.

Part of that, he was fairly certain, was because of the unquestionably familial atmosphere of the people gathered here, beyond even what he’d experienced at the World of Wonder. There, he might know a handful of acts for months or years at a time, but the majority only joined for a particular set of shows, and then traveled off on their merry way.

Here, every single person was fully and completely committed to supporting and protecting the two of them. Even Ryoku, as acerbic as they were, clearly wanted the twins to succeed…if only so they’d finally get out of their hair.

Zaji and Thubten, meanwhile – who’d always acted separately, whether or not the brothers acknowledged it, as surrogate fathers – now did so in concert. With no more secrets to hold them back, the four of them settled into a daily rhythm that could’ve almost been called domestic.

Well, if not for the heavy-duty combat training that accompanied the home-cooked meals and games of bending-free airball (which, Sajjad was forced to acknowledge, was pretty awesome).

But hey…no family was really “normal,” right?

For no one was this effect more evident than with Syed, however. Seeing the once-sullen boy smile, even laugh, was becoming a commonplace occurrence, and there were no words to describe how weird that was.

Still, as the two of them honed their bodies, minds, and spirits to the apex, old arguments and tired grudges seemed to feel less and less important. Sajjad had never quite apologized and Syed had never quite forgiven him, but his twin hadn’t broached the subject for quite some time, and that was probably for the best.

Nevertheless, there came one evening – the very same evening upon which Sajjad had deduced their teacher’s riddle – that Syed seemed in such good spirits, that he couldn’t help himself.

“I’m sorry,” the acrobat suddenly said, causing his twin to jump. He’d been engrossed in a tome of Air Nomad poetry, and evidently hadn’t heard Sajjad come into their room. “I never said that, and I should’ve. A real long time ago.”

Syed blinked, uncomprehending. After a moment, however, he realized what his brother was getting at, and slowly set his book aside.

“Do you really want to get into this now?” he asked in a low voice.

“I dunno how much longer I can stand not getting into it,” insisted Sajjad, sitting down next to his brother. Even though they were perched over the edge of a bed rather than a sheer cliff this time around, it reminded him inexorably of their last heartfelt conversation. “I’m not sure how much use I’d be to the Lotus with this hanging over me.”

Syed turned to him. “Is that what you want, now?” he responded. “To serve the Lotus?”

“They’ve done so much for me. So much for us,” said Sajjad. “Maybe their motives were a little shady, but they’ve been looking out for the two of us all this time. And the cause…I do believe in it, now. More than anything I’ve believed in my whole life.”
“I still want to know why Xai Bau set us on this path as infants,” Syed declared, his arms crossed guardedly. “But...you’re right. Nothing changes the fact that this world is rotten. And the Red Lotus might be the only group with a plan to set things right.”

He sighed, glancing back at the face that so precisely matched his own.

“But let’s not get sidetracked,” he added after a moment. “Okay, you apologized. Thanks for that, I guess. But it doesn’t actually change anything.”

Sajjad opened his mouth to say something, but Syed cut him off. “If you’re serious about advancing the Lotus, then you do realize how horribly you screwed things up, right?” he demanded of his twin. “They could’ve had me right there beside the Avatar – an agent inside. How long do you think it’ll take before another opportunity like that comes along? If it comes along?”

“I...I didn’t mean...” mumbled the acrobat, though he didn’t have a good idea how to finish that sentence.

“Come on, Sajjad. You pretty much already admitted it. You apologized because you wanted to feel better. Not because of me,” said Syed, his tone biting. “Look, you don’t think I feel awful about how that all turned out? But I was willing to put it all in the past and move on. You’re the one who brought it back up. Because working out your guilt is more important than any of my feelings.”

“N...No! You’re taking this all wrong!” Sajjad exclaimed, flailing helplessly for the right thing to say. “Okay, I probably could’ve put that better...but I really do wanna make things right. Just tell me what that’ll take, and I’ll do it! No questions asked.”

Syed was silent for a few moments, his expression tight. Eventually, he sighed again – this time far more deeply.

“You don’t get it, do you? It’s not about...ugh, never mind,” he muttered. “Anyway, you’re right about one thing. What the Lotus is doing here...it’s bigger than the two of us. Way bigger. So tomorrow, we pretend like this conversation never happened. Got it?”

“What’s, err...going on tomorrow?” Sajjad found himself asking, his voice very small.

His twin made a vague, shrugging motion. “I’m not sure,” he said. “Xai Bau just told me tomorrow is a very important day. Guess we’ll find out in the morning. Good night.”

The words were clipped, perfunctory, and followed only a few seconds later by the only light being snuffed out. Syed fell asleep almost immediately, but Sajjad remained sitting for several minutes in the darkness, utterly cold.

Because above everything else – the politics, the philosophy, the principles, the camaraderie – the real reason he’d developed such a zealous attachment to the Red Lotus...the reason why he could see himself willing to move the sun and the moon if they asked...

Was because after seven long years of separation, they’d brought him and his brother together again. And right now...

It felt like they were farther apart than ever.

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The two brothers sat, along with Xai Bau, atop a stone dais, with the other members of the Red Lotus arrayed around them in a circle. All of them had wordlessly adopted the lotus position.

Neither twin had a clue what they were doing here. But they both knew their duty…and were steadfastly focused on thinking of nothing else.

Particularly not of each other.

“Brothers. Sisters. Dear friends,” said the Sun Warrior, head bowed deferentially. Above them, streams of flame swirled about, unbidden by any visible gestures. “The time has come at last. The time to take a great leap forward, to a better world.”

Slowly, he opened his eyes, and looked upon the two boys before him. The fires seemed to grow slightly hotter.

“Tonight, Syed and Sajjad, you shall be officially inducted into our ranks, and receive your first mission,” continued Xai Bau. “But first…I’d wager you wish to know why I chose you, and you in particular, to join our fold in the first place.”

It was a mark of how deeply and how thoroughly Sajjad had been converted to the cause that he didn’t offer up a sarcastic, “Umm…yeah, kinda.”

Still, though he’d said nothing, the firebender’s eyes were upon the acrobat now. “It was as you answered my riddle, young man: balance,” he told him, before tilting his head to again regard them both equally. “Now and forever, balance is always the key. Tell me…have you ever heard of the Mother of Faces?”

Sajjad blanched – not knowing the answer to a question always summoned up bad memories for him, particularly after last night – and instinctually, looked to Syed for guidance. But the Acolyte looked equally as lost.

Suddenly, the fires began to move far more quickly, concentrating into the space directly above the Sun Warrior. In short order, they’d formed a figure that might vaguely be called a woman – if women could have four heads latched onto each other, sitting atop a swirling, treelike trunk.

Both twins had to pause for a moment to marvel, once more, at the sheer beauty of their teacher’s firebending.

“She is a spirit older than almost any other. When we are born, the Mother fashions each of us a unique identity. The aspects of ourselves that are utterly unlike any other,” said Xai Bau. “And all this, she crafts forth in the form of…a face.”

As he spoke, the figure of the Mother followed, the mirage of a human face emerging from her outstretched palms.

“But what happens…”

The blazing face broke apart, turning into two wisps of flame.

“…when the Mother deigns…”

The two wisps snaked around each of the twins, orbiting them a few times over before coming to rest directly in front of their noses.
“…to grant the same boon…”

Both of the wisps exploded at once, spreading their flames with a sound like the roar of a furnace.

“…twice?”

And with that, one face had become two, and each twin was staring upon a vision of their own.

A vision that was like a mirror, composed of crackling fire.

“This was all…because we’re twins?” whispered Syed, incredulous.

“That’s part of it. But there’s more to it than that,” said the Sun Warrior, dissipating the flames without moving a single muscle. “No one quite knows why the Mother of Faces sometimes produces identical twins, but I have a theory. And watching the two of you grow up has only borne it out.”

The firebender then spread his arms wide, both palms up. In each, a blazing pyre erupted forth, though that wasn’t the most notable thing about them. It was their color – with the normal reddish-orange in his left hand, and blue in his right.

“All things in this world have two aspects. Darkness and Light, Disorder and Harmony…Yin, and Yang,” he went on, slowly bringing his hands together as he did. Once the flames met, they began to swirl around each other – touching but never merging. “But in very few is a perfect balance struck. Inevitably, most will lean to one side of their nature or the other.”

“But what’s all this got to do with us?” asked Sajjad.

“For twins such as yourselves, this balance is all the more important,” Xai Bau explained. “Since you cannot distinguish your own identity using your face, your natures are the only way you can define yourselves. Well…apart from your hair, I suppose.”

He gestured briefly at Syed’s flowing locks and then at Sajjad’s own scalp, which – for reasons he’d never quite been able to articulate – he still shaved daily.

“A curious thing occurred as we observed you each come into your own,” said the Sun Warrior, as he separated the two-toned flames once more. “Not only were your natures dissimilar, but independent of one another, they grew to fully contrast. Syed, you were as bookish as your brother was athletic. Sajjad, you craved adventure as much as your twin favored solitude.”

Now, the fires were reforming into a new shape: a circle, where one half of the shape was composed of red, and the other of blue. They curled around each other, linked but separate – until a tiny wisp in the center of each transformed to the opposite color.

“Yin and Yang. True balance, finally struck...between the two of you,” declared Xai Bau, his tone almost reverential. “With you together, each of your flaws is compensated for by the other. Each of your weaknesses, offset equally by your brother’s strengths. And in that, I speak more than metaphorically.”

“Boss-man, maybe you wanna hurry this up? You’re getting the kiddies antsy, and I can’t say I blame ‘em,” Sasori spoke up from the perimeter, before erupting into a fit of snickers. “The suspense is even killing those of us who know the big twist ending.”

The firebender breathed a sigh, but ultimately nodded.
“Very well, my children. The newest of my flowers in bloom,” he said, letting the flames die away once more. “It’s time for you to learn of your first assignment with the Red Lotus.”

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The twins stood over a set of musty, faded pages, which Thubten and Zaji were carefully laying across the dais. They were clearly very old, and seemed to have been ripped haphazardly from a book – hundreds if not thousands of years ago.

Each page featured the bare minimum of text, taken up instead mostly by illustrations of what looked like some kind of ritual.

“A sage in the Earth Kingdom named Baransu created these a very long time ago. Thought lost for centuries, until they were discovered in materials held by the late Admiral Zhao,” Xai Bau told them, hands folded and lips pursed. “Baransu was fascinated by the interactions between humans and spirits, and believed a perfectly balanced heart could cross over into the Spirit World. Cross over physically.”

Sajjad glanced over at his brother, who was gaping. “That’s…not possible,” murmured Syed. “The Acolytes taught us that only through dedicated meditation could one enter the Spirit World. And then, only the mind and soul.”

“And in doing so, we lied,” said Thubten, shaking his head as he placed the last page. “In fact, there are two points where humans and spirits can cross over to the other world, their bodies intact. On this planet, they’re located at the North and South Poles. But they’ve been sealed shut since time immemorial.”

“I believe that with this ritual, however…it is possible to bypass the Spirit Portals entirely, and enter the Spirit World from any location,” added Xai Bau. “All it requires is a heart in true and lasting balance…plus enough raw energy to fuel the journey.”

And indeed, the other members of the Lotus were busy placing glowing crystals at key points around the dais. Syed recognized them from Jilu’s lessons as harvested from the Crystal Catacombs of Ba Sing Se.

Still, he had one concern.

“You say you ‘believe’ this will work. Does that mean you’re not sure?” he asked of the Sun Warrior, suppressing a shiver as he did. Judging by the illustrations, the ritual looked extraordinarily complicated, and when playing around with spirits the consequences of a backfire could be…

Less than pretty.

“There is…at least one known use of the ritual,” said Xai Bau, though he didn’t elaborate. “And with the assistance of Thubten and Zhi-Yan, I have refined it further. Originally, it was designed to be a one-way trip. But now, by pooling our psyches together in meditation, we can offer you a lifeline back.”

“Okay…let’s just say this does work, then,” Sajjad responded, his eyes darting back to the nearest portrait. It depicted a man with his mouth opened wide in a scream – though whether out of agony or ecstasy was unclear. “Why exactly do you want us going into the Spirit World?”
“At first, I only hoped to use you for simple exploration. There are many parts of the Spirit World that’re inaccessible through astral projection alone,” answered the Sun Warrior. “But recent events have…increased the urgency of this matter.”

Ryoku reached over and proffered a slightly blurry photograph. In it were an older man and two teenage boys, all dressed heavily in immaculate blue-and-white furs.

“This is Chief Akaq of the Water Tribes, and his two sons: Princes Tonraq and Unalaq,” they said, gesturing first to a broad-shouldered teen who looked around fourteen or fifteen, and then to a much thinner and sallow-faced boy, who seemed about their age. “Several weeks ago, we managed to convince Unalaq to join our ranks.”

Sajjad’s eyes went wide. “A…A prince?” he whispered. “A prince decided to join the Red Lotus?”

“Doesn’t that go against everything we stand for?” demanded Syed. “I mean…we’re trying to destroy world leaders, not recruit them.”

“In the long term, yes. But in the short term, his position of influence makes him a very useful ally,” stated Jilu, just as he set the final crystal in place. “And he’s eager to support the cause. Perhaps…a little too eager.”

“You recall where I told you the Spirit Portals were located, I trust?” asked Xai Bau, allowing the boys’ minds to click the last piece of the puzzle into place.

It took Syed a moment, and Sajjad never even got close, but eventually the former gasped in realization.

“Only the Avatar can safely unlock the Spirit Portals. When Unalaq attempted to open the one at the North Pole, there was apparently a…reaction,” said Zaji. “Now the young prince seems to be trapped between the two worlds, unable to cross fully back into either.”

“I believe that if a corporeal being were to approach from the other side, it’d provide an anchor point for his body to latch onto,” Xai Bau told them. “Which means your mission is simple…if far from straightforward. Enter the Spirit World, locate the northern portal, and rescue Unalaq from within it. Then you can return back here together.”

“Yeah…simple…” mumbled Sajjad, looking askance.

“I know it’s a lot to ask. I would’ve preferred a few test runs before sending you off on something so dangerous…but time is not on our side,” the Sun Warrior continued, shaking his head. “During meditation, I’ve been able to communicate with Unalaq. He’s still alive, but very weak. He’s been trapped for three days now; he can’t go much longer without food or water.”

“So will you help us?” added Thubten, his tones staid and solemn. “Or will we allow yet another golden opportunity to expand the Lotus slip through our fingers?”

The brothers glanced at each other and winced. That one cut both of them pretty deep.

“I…guess I will,” said Syed, before he could stop himself. “If no one else can do it.”

“Very good. But not helpful unless you’re both equal in your conviction,” Xai Bau replied, looking upon the other twin. “Remember, you must be perfectly in sync for this ritual to work. Providing the precise counterbalance to each other, with nothing else getting in the way.”

Syed and Sajjad found themselves staring at each other again, though with very different looks in
their respective eyes. Under Syed’s harsh, steely gaze, the acrobat flushed.

“C…Count me in too,” he murmured eventually, seeing no other choice. “We can’t just leave that
guy there to die.”

Xai Bau looked upon them appraisingly for several minutes, his expression a placid mask. After
about thirty seconds, however, he snapped his fingers, and plumes of flame erupted over every single
crystal encircling them.

“Excellent, my children,” he said, as the other members of the Lotus all took several steps back.
“Then let us begin.

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The entire process took nearly four hours.

First, the two of them were instructed to lock arms and take on a variety of stances – something that
was rather awkward, given that they weren’t currently on speaking terms, but which they more or
less managed. The utility of their “bending” training quickly became clear, as all of their forms
directly mirrored the disciplines they’d studied. First fire, then air, then water, then earth; never
deviating from that cycle.

Meanwhile, Xai Bau was working constantly, flicking the tiny flames in and out in complex patterns,
allowing them to “charge” the glowing crystals with their heat.

Each of the other Red Lotus members had duties to take care of as well, although Ryoku’s task made
it hard to tell what most of them were. The waterbender was filling the room with hot, thick steam,
which had a heady and soporific scent to it. Incense, Syed was fairly certain.

In the face of the heat, both twins had to fight to stay awake, but continue their forms they did,
following the illustrations as best they could. After so many repetitions of the same moves that even
Syed had stopped counting, Xai Bau raised his hands and caused all the tiny pyres to explode at
once, becoming a hundred thin but intense pillars of flame.

Then, wordlessly, he motioned for them to return to a sitting position, backs to each other, still locked
together by both elbows.

Xai Bau began to chant the words that appeared on every page of the purloined tome, and both
brothers instinctually joined in, trying to match the other’s rhythm as much as possible. It took a
couple of tries, but after a while they were speaking in perfect unison, losing themselves in the
words.

“So that All might be One and One might be All, for the Dawn of New Light and the Dusk that may
fall…”

“So that Truth may be Fire and Justice through Air, should Water find Peace and Earth known
through Love’s care…”

“So that Spirit and Man find Union undying…”
“So that Tales shall turn back, for want of Souls trying…”

“So that the Voice shall be heard, ‘neath Eternity’s Call…”

“So that All will be One and One will be All.”

Like the stances, the chants repeated over and over and over again, never varying even slightly. And as the brothers spoke them, no longer needing to think about the words, flowing from their mouths by instinct, all else disappeared.

For the briefest moment, the previous night’s fight – seven years’ worth of fighting – no longer existed. Fully and truly, the brothers forgot how they felt about each other.

Then they forgot who the other was.

Then they forgot who they were.

There was nothing but the words and the steam and the sound of Sasori rhythmically ringing a gong. Not that they had any clue in that moment who Sasori was, or for that matter what in the world was a “gong.”

Each repetition, no longer requiring guidance from the again-silent Xai Bau, grew steadily louder in volume, the glow of the crystals moving in time with the rise and fall of their voices. Eventually, however, the brothers’ crescendo reached its climax, and the crystals followed suit, enveloping the room with so much light that all they could see was a pure, blinding white.

And when the Lotus members finally managed to blink through the pain, and restore their vision once more…

The dais was empty, and every single crystal was shattered to fine dust.
At the very same time, two twelve-year-old boys fought to clear their eyes, unsure what to expect as the world slowly swam back into focus.

But what they found was nothing they could’ve possibly expected.

“Woah…” whispered Sajjad, and his brother couldn’t help but agree with the sentiment.

Spread out before them was a brilliant, magnificent, utterly terrifying kaleidoscope of color. They were in the midst of a dense grove, with trees stretching forth in every direction, as far as the eye could see. And all of it – from the trees themselves to the grass to the very water running beneath their feet – reflected the brilliant reds and oranges and yellows of a sky that seemed perpetually locked at twilight.

It’d certainly be beautiful at any other time. But right now, the alien shades – a nearby bush was a dusky purple – only served to emphasize just how far they were from home.

And how great a task still lay before them.

Belatedly, the brothers both realized they were still locking arms, and hastily leapt apart. “Come on,” said Syed, not looking his twin in the eye. “Let’s get going.”

Xai Bau’s instructions had been fairly vague from this point on, since he’d never entered the Spirit World except through meditation. The structure and layout of the Spirit World – to the degree it even had either one – were incredibly different for a disembodied soul and a physical human being, and even what was directly in front of their eyes might well be variable.

This grove, the point where Xai Bau typically crossed over, was the closest thing to a “landmark” they had to go by. But in terms of direction, they’d be on their own going forward.

“First thing’s first,” spoke the Acolyte, more to fill the silence than anything else as they walked along the banks of the crimson river. “We need to find a spirit that knows where the portals are on this side.”

“Easier said than done,” Sajjad responded pointedly. “How much do either of us really know about this world? How can we tell the spirits we can ask for directions from the ones that wanna…like, gobble us up or something?”

Syed shot him a dirty look. “No spirit is going to ‘gobble us up,’ alright?” he said, scowling.

“To be fair, I kinda want to,” declared a pleasant-voiced tree, a mouth opened in its trunk with jagged, crooked teeth.

Syed’s scowl deepened as they continued past it.

“Look…I know we don’t have a lot to go on. But the Lotus has been training us to do missions just like this for months,” he eventually told his brother, trying to sound ameliorating. “I trust them, which means I trust we’ve got the skills to make it through this.”

“Do we, though?” asked Sajjad, unsure if this line of questioning was a good idea but unable to help himself. “All that talk of ‘perfect balance,’ of being fully in sync with each other…I’m not sure that’s really us.”
In a smaller voice, he found himself adding, “I mean…of course, I’d like it to be, but…”

Abruptly, Syed stopped in his tracks and wheeled around, features twisted in fury.

“Oh, will you give it a freaking rest, already?” he said with a snarl. “Get this through your head, Sajjad: I don’t owe you forgiveness. I don’t owe you anything. I just want to get this mission over with, and go home.”

Against his better judgment, Sajjad felt his own choler start to rise.

“Maybe we’d get it done quicker if you didn’t treat every little comment as a personal attack!” shouted the acrobat, face burning hot. “Look, I’ve apologized, I’ve tried to make it up to you, I’ve gone along with this stupid quest that’ll probably get us killed…what else do you want me to do?”

Syed glared daggers right back at him. “Do you really wanna know the answer to that question?” he demanded, teeth gritted.

“Yeah, I think I do!” Sajjad exclaimed back, getting into his twin’s face.

“I want you out of my life!” roared Syed, almost before his brother had finished speaking. He accompanied the words with a forceful shove. “Whether I’m an Acolyte or part of the Lotus or whatever, you just keep following me around, like a sad little eel-puppy! Forcing me to look at my own, stupid knockoff!”

Instinctively, Sajjad shoved back. As he was significantly stronger, the result was his twin tumbling into the orange grass.

“Your knockoff? I may not be as smart as you, but you don’t wanna play that game with me,” he said, crossing his comparatively bulky arms. “I wasn’t even trying just now.”

“You ungrateful little…you wouldn’t even be alive now if it wasn’t for me!” Syed sputtered out, as he struggled to regain his footing. “I was always the one pulling your dead weight around. Even when we were five! I never got to be a kid ’cuz I was too busy keeping your dumb ass out of trouble!”

Sajjad’s hands clenched into fists. “I don’t have to stand here and take this,” he growled.

“Then why don’t you just leave?” responded his twin, body all but shaking with rage. “You’re good at that, aren’t you?”

In that moment, both seething with anger, the two brothers had eyes for no one but each other, standing in opposition five feet apart.

Which was how they failed to notice the incoming spirit until it slammed into both of them, knocking them off a nearby cliff and into the foggy canyon below.

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For the second time in ten minutes, Sajjad was struggling to his feet, eyes rapidly adjusting after a brief bout of unconsciousness.

Unfortunately, once his vision finally returned to him, he found it far less helpful than he’d been
hoping.

Surrounding him on all sides was a thick, impenetrable fog, with not one single other figure or landmark visible in any direction.

“Syed!” he found himself calling out, despite their fight. “Syed, where are you?”

There was no answer.

With no other options available, Sajjad picked a direction at random and began wandering toward it, hoping he might eventually find the cliff wall, or at least something to help guide his way. But no matter how long he searched, nothing was there to greet him but greater and thicker quantities of mist, each sight utterly identical to the last.

He continued to call out every few yards; it was about the only thing he could do right now. Yet for all the good it did, he might as well have been trying to bend. He had to face facts: here, in the midst of this billowing miasma, he was utterly alone.

Or…maybe not. The farther he wandered, the more he thought he might be hearing other voices, distant though they were. They were quiet – detached somehow – like the echo of an echo, caressing his ears like dim, haunting whispers. But they were out there, somewhere.

“Who…Who are you?” he said, his voice shaking. “Answer me, please!”

In time, the echoes grew sharper, and he was able to pick out some of the words. Yet none of them answered his questions.

“I am so sorry, Song. I wish I’d been stronger…”

“It wasn’t me, it was him! He shattered them!”

“I just wanted to know. Was that so wrong? Let me see it again, just one more time!”

“Please, my Queen…I didn’t mean…I never meant for this to happen…”

“I am Zhao the Conqueror! I am the Moon-Slayer! I will capture the Avatar!”

On and on and on, the whispers carried forward, a thousand voices echoing a thousand lost regrets. Men, women, and children, all speaking at once, until Sajjad collapsed to his knees, begging it to stop.

“I can’t help you…” he choked out, voice cracking. “I don’t think I can even help myself…or my brother…”

“That’s not the right question, Sajjad. The question is…do you want to?” said a voice behind him – far clearer and more distinct than the others.

Sajjad wheeled around, and experienced a euphoric pang as he looked upon his own face, framed by wild, matted hair. “Syed!” he exclaimed, rushing toward him.

But the moment he reached out to touch his brother, he disappeared into the fog, leaving no trace. Confused, Sajjad whipped his head around, searching desperately. Eventually, his eyes alighted
upon another figure, shadowed deeper in the mists. Panicked and not thinking, Sajjad rushed toward it.

The figure had his back turned to him, but this time Sajjad lunged faster, hand sinking onto their shoulder and forced him to turn around. The acrobat’s hand immediately fell limp.

It was Tenzin, son of Aang.

“Which spirit did Avatar Yangchen found a festival in order to honor?” he asked, without preamble.

“I…I…” Sajjad attempted to stammer out, backing away without thinking. “I dunno, okay! And you don’t want me for this! You…You want…”

Finally, after an enormous effort, he managed to whisper out the name he couldn’t two years prior: “Syed…”

“Who is Syed? There is no such person,” said another voice, and suddenly Sajjad found himself facing Thubten, his robed arms crossed and bearded face scrunched up in a frown. “We were asking you, Sajjad.”

“How can you…y’know, Syed! Your student! My brother!” yelled Sajjad. How little sense any of this made never even occurred to him; the fog had him ensnared too deeply.

In any event, Tenzin and Thubten were now standing shoulder-to-shoulder, shaking their heads simultaneously.

“You have no brother, Sajjad,” they spoke, in perfect unison. “Isn’t that what you always wanted?”

The boy’s eyes widened considerably. “N…No! Of course not!” he cried out, clenching at himself as he continued to back away in horror. “I just…I just want things to be okay between us again. Like they used to…”

Both monks adopted identical expressions of skepticism. “But do you really, Sajjad?” they said. “What if things never go back to the way they once were? Would you accept a Syed who hates you, who rejects you, who despises you, until your dying day?”

As if on cue, Syed emerged from the fog once again, standing in front of the airbender and his old master. Neither of them reacted at all to his sudden appearance.

“Can you stand it, brother?” he asked, a horrifying leer upon his face. “To love me with all your heart, forever and ever and ever? Even if I never return you the same?”

“Of…Of course I would…” murmured Sajjad, now nearly in tears.

But all three of the figures simply frowned, as if disappointed, and turned away.

“The Fog can tell when you’re lying,” Syed told him.

Then, they were gone, leaving Sajjad to sink to his knees once more, weeping uncontrollably.

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Just about fifty feet away, the actual Syed stood frozen in place.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up…” he said under his breath, panting heavily.

“Nobody loves you,” declared Thubten, circling around his pupil.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up…” repeated Syed, jamming his eyes closed and pressing his hands tightly against his ears, trying to block out the noise.

“Nobody cares for you,” Zaji was in his place now, circling along just the same path.

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” the boy was now screaming, as loudly as his tiny lungs could manage.

“I was the only one. And what’d you do? You pushed me away. Tossed me aside like a piece of hot garbage,” said a very familiar voice.

Syed’s breath caught in his throat as he slowly, timorously, opened his eyes. His twin’s expression was the farthest thing possible from its usual warmness.

“I…I couldn’t forgive you,” Syed tried to respond, through heaving, tortured sobs. “I tried to put it behind me but I just couldn’t. It hurt too much…”

“Why?” demanded Sajjad, looking down cruelly toward the pitiful creature at his feet. “Why couldn’t you forgive me? Why did you destroy everything we had, just to hold onto an old grudge?”

“Because…” the Acolyte started to answer, and in so doing, his eyes went even wider, as he realized in that moment what the answer was. “Because it was easier that way. If I could make you the bad guy the whole time, I wouldn’t have to confront any of my own mistakes. I wouldn’t have to admit any part of me was to blame.”

“A good start,” said his brother, though he was shaking his head as he did. “But too little, too late. You think a few pretty words make any difference now?”

But Syed was already rising to his feet.

“I do,” he told him, a chord of determination now sounding in his voice. “Because you’re not Sajjad. Whatever his faults, there’s one thing I know for sure…my brother would never give up on me.”

Before the apparition could react, Syed was already swinging a weak but nimble fist. It passed straight through the vision of his twin, dissipating it in an instant, and leaving only more fog in its wake.

Working off a sudden burst of purpose and adrenaline, Syed didn’t even break his stride as he passed right through.

Now that he’d had a chance to recover his wits, the Acolyte recognized this place from one of Thubten’s texts: a place called the Fog of Lost Souls. The Fog was itself a spirit, and once inside the body it plagued any human it found with visions of despair and regret.

But right now, Syed felt something much stronger than that, and so the spirit had no power over him.

It didn’t take him long at all, comparatively speaking, to find Sajjad collapsed on the ground, tearstained face buried in the dirt. The thought that this could be another fake never even crossed his mind. Somehow, Syed simply knew.
“Come on, bro,” he said, extending a hand. “Time to get going.”

Slowly, hesitantly, Sajjad raised his head up to face his brother, though his arms and legs remained prostrated across the ground. “You’re…You’re…” he breathed hoarsely.

“Here,” his brother finished for him, smiling in a way he’d almost forgotten he could. “I’m here at your side, Sajjad. Now let’s get out of this place.”

“I…I’m sorry…” the acrobat continued to mumble, even as Syed hauled him up and supported his body’s weight with his shoulder. “So so so so so so so sorry…”

“Shhh. It’s okay, bro,” Syed told him soothingly, eyes steeled with purpose as he dragged them through the fog – trusting that a way out would reveal itself before long. “And for the record…I’m sorry too.”

“F…For what?” asked his twin, voice incredibly weak. “What’ve you got to apologize for?”

Syed just shook his head and let out a brief, humorless laugh.

“For not accepting yours,” he said in muted tones.

Those were the last words either of them spoke to each other for some time.

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The story of their escape from the Fog of Lost Souls was far less interesting than their journey within it.

Like many creatures, the Fog seemed able to sense fear, and once the brothers were no longer afraid it was left with no other weapons. Though the mists themselves grew no thinner, the feelings it evoked evaporated utterly, and it took them only a handful of minutes to locate a pathway back up.

They emerged in a part of the Spirit World that was as dissimilar as possible from the quiet, tranquil grove they’d arrived within. Not one single plant – oddly colored or otherwise – could be seen in the vast, rocky expanse.

But what there was, in quantities that truly boggled the mind…were spirits.

It was a colossal stampede of spirits, stretching as far as the eye could see, moving in every conceivable direction and yet somehow never colliding. Most resembled beasts from their own world, though many of them a great deal larger or smaller than their material counterparts; a koala-sheep the size of a house was particularly eye-catching.

“I…don’t think we can go this way,” said Syed after a beat. Tugging at his twin’s sleeve, he then stuck out his arm and pointed to the right. “C’mon, let’s climb that hill over there. Might be able to spot a way around.”

Sajjad just nodded dimly and followed after him, barely paying attention. He was too weirded out by the incredibly unnerving sight of a brother that didn’t hate him.

What’d happened to Syed in the midst of all that fog? What’d he seen? More than once, Sajjad entertained the notion that he was still entrapped within the mists, and that all this was nothing more
than another, carefully crafted illusion.

But ultimately, the acrobat knew, somehow, that this was no false reality. That whatever experience they’d just suffered through, both separately and together, had brought them closer than ever by the end of it.

And for that, if nothing else…

The Spirit World had his thanks.

Syed released a heavy sigh, bringing Sajjad back to reality. “No good,” muttered his twin, peering out over a horizon that contained three and a half suns. “I can’t see a single path around all those spirits. And there’s no way we could go through them.”

“What about over?” asked an ethereal voice, causing both brothers to turn. The only thing behind them was a small brook, narrowly connected to a wide river than ran directly beneath the stampeding grounds, and their eyes had passed over it without a second glance.

Except right now, the brook wasn’t empty.

Floating above it, smiling warmly, was perhaps the most beautiful woman Sajjad had ever seen. She was obviously a spirit, if the shimmering mist at the edge of her skin and clothes was any indication, but one with billowing black hair, a slender frame, and porcelain-pale skin. She wore flowing, pure-white robes topped with a wide-brimmed hat, and all across her face and upper body were intricate patterns of burnt red.

“Who are you?” said Syed, eyebrow raised. “I don’t recognize you from any of our spiritual texts.”

“Unsurprising. In your world, only my home of Jang Hui still knows of me,” she continued to speak, her voice reverberating along the banks of the brook. “But those mortals who remember my story, have chosen to call me the Painted Lady.”

“Wait…I’ve heard of you!” Sajjad exclaimed, probably prouder than he should’ve been – especially given the tenuousness of their recent reconciliation – to have recognized an historical fact before his brother. “There’s a bit in The Boy in the Iceberg about your village. You got impersonated by Katara, right?”

“It was truly an honor to be embodied by someone so kind and generous,” replied the spirit, confirming his claim with a brief inclination of her head. “Perhaps this is one opportunity for me to pay that favor forward.”

“You mentioned something about going ‘over’ all those spirits,” said Syed, his tone instantly reverting to business. “What’d you mean?”

“I am a spirit of the river. Away from the water, I am powerless,” she told him, gesturing at the measly trickle below her. “But I do have friends.”

The Painted Lady lifted her hands to the sky, allowing thick steam to rise above her, streaming toward the suns. But unlike the fog from earlier, this mist shimmered every color of the rainbow imaginable, and several more that weren’t. It reminded an awed Sajjad of Xai Bau’s unique firebending.

The pretty colors didn’t go unnoticed by the spirits below them, and two in particular broke off from the pack to swoop toward them. While they’d been rushing about on their feet just moments ago, they moved far quicker with their wings, landing directly in front of the two non-benders and cawing...
Both twins gaped as they looked upon two enormous lizard-crows, their coal-gray bodies comparable in size to a small airship.

Their beaks dipped forward the moment they saw the Painted Lady, and she petted them each fondly. The resultant coos of contentment shook the surrounding rocks.

“I know not why you’ve come here. Living humans are a rare sight in the Spirit World…a rare sight indeed,” said the spirit. “But these noble creatures should help speed along your journey, wherever it leads.”

“Th…Thank you,” stuttered Sajjad, bowing hastily.

But before they mounted the massive beasts, Syed held up a hand, indicating he had more he wanted to say.

“Actually, maybe you can help us with that. Do you know of a place that contains portals to the material world?” he asked. “That’s what we’re trying to find.”

For the first time, the spirit’s painted face expressed an emotion other than pleasant contentment. She looked askance, as if afraid to answer.

Finally, after the silence had stretched to an uncomfortable length, she glanced back up and said, “There…is such a place. But I would not be able to seek it. And I would not try, if I could.”

“What the heck does that mean?” Syed pressed her.

“It is a place of danger. Particularly for humans,” continued the Painted Lady, now somehow staring forcefully at both of them at once. “Only the most ancient and most powerful spirits would know where to find the portals. And they tend not to be…fond…of those of us who were born to the material plane.”

“Warning duly noted,” responded Syed with a nod. “But we don’t have a choice. If we wanted to find one of these ‘older’ spirits…where would be the best place to start looking?”

She shook her head, once. “Therein lies the rub, poor child,” she said. “Should you get any closer to what you seek…they will find you.”

Without elaborating any further, she waved her hands, and both lizard-crows dutifully lowered their necks, allowing the twins to climb aboard.

As Sajjad was doing so, however, he couldn’t help but ask one last question of his own: “Why’d you decide to help us, anyway?”

The Painted Lady offered them a small smile – one that was as sad as it was happy. “I too was human…once,” she answered. “And I had two boys who looked so much like you.”

And with that, the spirit receded back into the water, while the winged beasts took flight with a massive, hissing caw.
It was difficult to keep track of time in the Spirit World, but Syed knew they’d been flying atop the lizard-crows for a long while.

The landscape below passed them by in brief flashes, as the rocky canyons gave way to a sprawling desert, and that in turn became a frigid tundra. There was no rhyme or reason to the terrain, with lush jungles standing directly next to a land composed almost entirely of flowing lava, each vista more beautiful and yet also more terrifying than the next.

And of course, wherever they flew, they were met by spirits – thousands upon thousands of spirits.

Syed had thought that he’d seen most if not all varieties spirits could come in, from scrolls and ancient texts; he’d even come up with his own classification system once, simply as an idle project. But as they raced through skies that seemed to transition between day and night and back again every few minutes, he quickly realized he hadn’t seen anything.

Big spirits, small spirits, some the size of roving mountains – heck, some of them essentially were roving mountains. They were fat and skinny, tall and short, fearsome and just plain weird.

Some, like their mounts, resembled creatures from the material plane, but far more were amorphous and semi-translucent, their bodies twisting and stretching with all the consistency of a fickle wind.

Thankfully, most ignored them, walking or crawling or swimming along with nary a glance to the lizard-crows hovering above. But a number of others were likewise airborne, and they didn’t tend to react kindly to the intruders invading their territory.

It was a good thing the lizard-crows were nimble fliers, because the brothers soon found themselves hanging on for dear life, screaming their heads off as their mounts bobbed and weaved between gnashing teeth and spewing flames.

The beasts had clearly taken their wordless instructions from their mistress to heart, because while Syed worried more than once that the lizard-crows might abandon them in the face of danger, the creatures instead pressed on all the harder. Once they hit their top speed, the world around the twins became a blur of assorted colors, and Syed found himself struggling not to nod off in the face of the rushing headwinds.

Unfortunately, all this loyal service came with a rather large caveat: they didn’t actually have a way to control their mounts, meaning that they were fully and completely at the mercy of the beasts’ whims. They wouldn’t be slowing down, much less landing, until the lizard-crows felt like it.

Eventually, after what could’ve been a few hours or a few days, for all Syed knew, he could feel the creature below him slowing down considerably. Chancing a look down, he saw that they were above a gnarled forest, one that seemed to bleed a strange, thick sort of mist.

After their encounter with the Fog of Lost Souls, it wasn’t a place that looked particularly inviting to the Acolyte. But the lizard-crows, which were pointing their beaks toward the ground in a sharp descent, seemed determined to deposit them there nonetheless.

With no other choice, Syed inwardly rationalized that at least there were no other spirits hanging around the mass of trees.

It was only later that he’d realize there might’ve been a reason for that.
“This place gives me the creeps, bro,” said Sajjad, shivering at they made their way through the mists.

“Can’t say I disagree,” his brother replied, pushing his way through a tangled mass of cold blue vines. “But the lizard-crows must’ve dumped us here for a reason. So let’s just keep going.”

It quickly became clear, as they waded through the thick vegetation, that this was not merely a forest but also a bog, with sapphire-hued swampwater reaching up past their knees and in some places reaching their wastes, forcing them to proceed at an agonizing crawl. Indeed, everything in the swamp was some variation or shade of blue, from the leafless azure trees to dozens of cerulean boulders poking their heads out of the water. Bright cyan mushrooms cast a pallid glow across everything, including their own faces, and with the tangled branches almost completely blocking their view of the sky above, it felt for all the world like they were descending deeper and deeper into some kind of weirdly hued dungeon.

“It’s just…” Sajjad added after a while, glancing around them with anxious eyes. “I kinda feel like something is watching us.”

“What do you mean?” asked Syed, stopping in his tracks for a moment. “What kind of ‘something’?”

“Not sure. But… I felt it sometimes when we were flying, too. Especially toward the end,” said the acrobat. “In fact, come to think of it…the first time I felt like this was when we were in that grove.”

“We did never find out who pushed us into the Fog of Lost Souls,” Syed admitted, shaking his head. “But for that to be the same… whatever… it would’ve needed to follow us over half the Spirit World. That’s not possible.”

“I may be totally out of my element right now, bro. But if there’s one thing I have learned over the past few hours…” stated Sajjad, eyes still darting about. “It’s that ‘impossible’ isn’t really a word that applies in this place.”

Syed didn’t have a good response to that.

There was another prolonged silence between the two of them, as the twins concentrated on making their way past the deeper waters, their robes now hopelessly marred by clumps of indigo mud and glowing teal algae.

Eventually, however, for lack of anything better to do, Syed found himself asking, “Is that how long you think we’ve been here? A few hours?”

Sajjad shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably, and in the process nearly lost his balance and tumbled into the bog.

Once he recovered his footing and took a deep breath, he said, “I…I dunno, honestly. That’s what it feels like, but… well, I kinda lost track while we were flying. And we’ve got no idea how long we were in that fog place.”

Syed nodded mutely, hanging his head low. “I’m just worried it’s been a lot longer. It didn’t sound like Unalaq has much time to spare,” he told his brother.

“A person can’t go more than seven or eight days without water. And they’re already in serious
“trouble after three,” responded Sajjad. “Zaji told me once during training.”

“He’s a waterbender, so he might’ve had some on him. But that still doesn’t leave us a lot of breathing room,” murmured the Acolyte. “Just wish we had some idea where we were going. We’re still just as lost as we were when we started.”

Suddenly, however, a hand seized upon Syed’s shoulder, and he jumped briefly before realizing Sajjad was trying to get his attention. Chastising himself for getting spooked over nothing, he followed his brother’s pointing finger upward, to a small gap between the azure branches.

“You got any idea what that is?” asked Sajjad, narrowing his eyes to peer at the strange structure. But Syed’s own eyes had already gone wide with recognition.

“That’s…Wan Shi Tong’s Library,” he said, his voice an astonished whisper. “It’s upside-down, and covered with overgrowth, but I’d recognize those spires anywhere. I…I thought it was lost…”

“Aang found out about the Day of Black Sun there, right?” muttered the acrobat, rattling his brain for more half-remembered details from *The Boy in the Iceberg*. “I dunno, the play was kinda vague on that scene.”

“Probably because no other witnesses managed to make it out alive,” Syed answered, now struggling to make it atop a low-hanging branch for a better view. Without needing to be asked, his brother stepped forward to give him a boost up. “But, for scholars…there’s no greater prize in either world. The Knowledge Seekers have been collecting info there for millennia.”

Now Sajjad’s eyes and mouth, too, were wide open.

“Then…do you think…?” he breathed out.

Syed nodded one more time. “If there’s a map to the Spirit Portals anywhere in this world, it’s there,” he said. “And not just a map. *Eons’* worth of knowledge. More books and scrolls than you could read in a hundred lifetimes! We could bring back enough info to turn the tide against the White Lotus – against all our enemies.”

“Only question is, how do we get to it?” Sajjad demanded right back, as his brother slipped back down to join him in the thigh-deep swampwater. “It’d be easy if we still had our giant awesome reptile-bird things, buuuuuuuuut…”

“That’s probably why they dumped us here. I bet it’s as close as they could get without being seen,” mused Syed softly. “According to the stories, Wan Shi Tong is…not fond of humans. So if we want to raid his library, we’re gonna have to sneak in.”

“Could that be who the Painted Lady was talking about, then?” his twin asked, now peering around for climbable objects. All the trees and rocks he could see, however, would leave them far short of the jutting spires. “Y’know…about the ‘most ancient and powerful’ spirits?”

“Maybe…” whispered Syed, though his voice was distracted.

Because the moment he’d ascended a branch to get a better view, he’d thought he could feel what Sajjad had been talking about earlier.

And now, with his eyes upon their goal, he was all but certain.

Something was watching them.
Over the course of the next hour or so, the brothers tried a number of different methods to get up to the hanging library, none of which were in any way successful.

To start with, they climbed the tallest tree they could find, carefully balancing themselves upon its gnarled, cobalt-blue branches. But even at its peak, they were still about thirty feet short.

Syed’s first instinct was to assemble a makeshift ladder or rope, with which to climb the rest of the way. Unfortunately, suitably strong building materials were in short supply. The one vine they did find that was long enough to do the job snapped in two the moment they put enough weight on it.

Eager to prove his worth, Sajjad had next tried to utilize his acrobatic skills, but though his experience with the trapeze allowed him to extend his jumps a little bit, it was simply an impossible leap for a non-bender.

Seeing no other choice, the brothers had tried to search for another – hopefully helpful and uninterested in eating them – spirit to lend them a hand, but there was nary a single other soul around for miles.

For whatever reason, not even the smallest of creatures seemed interested in approaching the blue forest.

“I am…officially out of ideas,” said Syed after a while, collapsing back across a wide branch and panting wearily.

“I was out of ideas thirty minutes ago,” his brother replied, doing likewise upon a branch next to him.

“Have we really come this far, just to be stopped by a couple dozen feet of air?” the Acolyte asked quietly, not expecting an answer. “We escape the Fog of Lost Souls, dodge a dozen angry spirits who want to shoot us out of the sky…but we can’t grab onto something that’s right there?”

“Wouldn’t it be cool to just…fly up there?” Sajjad found himself idly murmuring. “Use the wind to head on up, like we were climbing some stairs? Always wondered what that’d be like…”

The moment he said the words, he regretted them – like with many Air Acolytes, he knew Syed was sensitive about emulating all the aspects of airbender culture, without carrying the gift itself.

But rather than get angry, Syed just said, his tone unchanged, “Did you know we’ve got some Air Nomad blood? The Temples kept meticulous records.”

Sajjad tilted his head toward his brother, so that they were now lying facing each other. For a moment, it felt almost as if they were sharing a bed again, rather than two branches at the peak of a very unstable, very blue tree.

“Really?” he whispered.

“Our…let’s see…great-great-grandmother was an airbender. Or at least…I think it was her,” explained his twin. “She married an Earth Kingdom merchant and left the Eastern Temple, but she still came back for pilgrimages a couple times a year. One of them was for Sozin’s Comet.”
Even to a neophyte history student like Sajjad, no further exposition was needed.

“By that time she’d already had a couple of kids, though. And her husband had moved his business, and their family, to the Si Wong Desert,” continued Syed. “Obviously, the Temple records stop there. But the Acolytes have done their best to bridge the gaps of the Hundred Year War. Thubten helped me track things back, and make the connection.”

There was a beat of silence, during which an eerily complete silence hung over the air. The only sound that could be heard was the skittering of some kind of insect.

Then, in a very small voice, Sajjad asked, “Does…that mean you know who our mom and dad were?”

“I’ve got a guess. Not that it gives us a lot of answers,” said the Acolyte. “Tracing the descendants gave me a couple that would’ve been about the right age, found dead in the desert twelve years ago. Probably heatstroke or dehydration. Could’ve been them.”

“Could’ve been,” repeated Sajjad, somewhat hollowly.

They were silent for quite a while longer, staring up at the spire above, almost seeming to mock them with its closeness. Near enough to touch, or so it felt, and Sajjad actually found his hand idly reaching, closing around the library’s silhouette.

In the time they’d been speaking, the sky had already transitioned from midday sun to pitch-dark night. There didn’t seem to be anything like “sunrise” or “sunset” in the Spirit World; simply a transformation from one state to another, often in the blink of an eye.

“Syed…” he mumbled after several minutes, unsure what he should say next; more to fill the silence than anything else. “Do you…?”

But his twin had a hand up to stop him, wordlessly urging quiet. “You hear that too, right?” he said, his voice so low as to be nearly inaudible.

Sajjad piqued his ears, but no new sounds came to them. Just the same slow, relaxed crawling. “It’s just a bug or something, isn’t it?” he asked, unsure what his brother was getting at.

But Syed was already sitting bolt upright upon his branch, mouth hanging open.

“Did you see any bugs while we were marching through the bog?” demanded the Acolyte.

Sajjad opened his mouth to reply, but no sound came out. He never had the chance.

Because in that moment, the tree they’d balanced themselves so precariously upon began to shake and sway. And few seconds later…it toppled.

The twins didn’t have enough warning to do more than brace themselves before the falling trunk completed its arc and impacted the swampwater, both of them going along for the ride. Though the arcing momentum of the tree and the water itself both absorbed some of the energy, they still felt the impact with every bone in their bodies – several of which shattered or splintered from the stress.

Sajjad heard himself release a scream of pain, fighting off the panic response to keep his head above the water. While it was still only waist-deep in the place where they’d landed, he knew well that if he allowed his lungs to take in a mouthful of the filthy swampwater, drowning was possible.

A fact his brother, Sajjad realized with alarm, was amply demonstrating.
With a great effort and another roar of pain, Sajjad forced himself to stand firmly upon partially sprained ankles, and waded his way over to Syed, who was thrashing aimlessly. The acrobat took a sharp, uncontrolled strike to the jaw for his troubles, but nonetheless he used all his strength to grab onto his twin’s limbs, and haul him back to shallower waters.

As he did, the logical part of Syed’s brain seemed to gradually come back to him, and though he was still wincing and groaning from his injuries, he no longer fought off Sajjad’s rescue attempt. Eventually, the acrobat was able to prop them both up against a jutting, cerulean rock.

The moment he had Syed up in a sitting position, the water reaching only up to his ankles, Sajjad knew that they were in trouble. While his own injuries were mostly internal, apart from a bad gash from a branch on his upper arm, Syed seemed to have cracked a couple of ribs, and was bleeding from the surrounding area.

Sajjad looked around desperately for something to patch up the wound, but Syed grabbed him forcefully by the wrist, eliciting another cry of pain – that being another place where he’d broken a bone. The Acolyte held on tight, however, his expression stern.

“N…No time for that now. I…I think I know what’s coming…” he said, voice slurred. “Whatever you do, d…don’t…”

“What’s going on?” Sajjad asked, disturbed by the sheer, sudden urgency in his brother’s voice.

“Don’t show emotion!” exclaimed Syed through pained gasps. “Just keep your face c…completely blank. Completely. No emotion. No emotion…”

“I…I don’t get it, bro…” muttered the acrobat, shaking his brother by the shoulders, trying to keep him awake and alert. “Why should I…?”

“Just do it!” Syed screamed, cutting him off, as he struggled to follow his own advice. As a result, the sheer dissonance in the emotion expressed in his voice and upon his face was rather jarring. “If…I’m right, then…by the spirits…no, no…”

Those were the last words he spoke before his face truly did become blank – as a result of slipping into unconsciousness.

“Syed…? Syed?! Syed!” said Sajjad, each repetition of the name growing more and more panicked. But no matter how much he continued to shake his twin, he would not rouse. Sajjad was alone.

Alone…with whatever it was that had Syed nearly beside himself with fear.

It was at about that time that Sajjad realized he could no longer see the night sky. The hole through which he’d spotted the library was blocked, now.

Blocked by something long, and dark.

Blocked by something that was moving.

It was difficult to see, because it seemed to stay away from the glowing cyan mushrooms – the only source of light left in this murky bog. But Sajjad could just barely make out a blackish silhouette, slithering about above him, propelled by countless, insect-like legs. Now that they were so close, Sajjad thought he understood how his brother could’ve identified this thing through sound alone.

The skittering noise it made was nothing if not distinctive.
Slowly, methodically, it was lowering itself to his level, coming clearer and clearer into view as it drew toward the nearest clump of mushrooms.

Then, when it was only a few feet away, the membrane that stood at the “front” of its body fluttered open. Cast in the eerie blue glow of the swamp was a pale Noh mask, its painted lips curled into a smile.

“Well now,” it said, its voice a hushed and deathly whisper. “It seems I’ve caught up to you at last.”

Sajjad backed away from the strange being, concentrating on keeping his expression perfectly neutral. He still wasn’t sure why, but he couldn’t imagine Syed would’ve been so emphatic without a good reason.

The creature, meanwhile, slowly curled its long and winding body around him, cutting off any hope of escape. At all times, however, its face remained transfixed upon the pair of them – Syed out cold and collapsed against the azure boulder, and Sajjad slumped over in front of him, one arm against the rock to support his weight.

“Such an…irresistible prize. Three or four hundred years it’s been since the last,” spoke the spirit. “Mother must realize how deeply she tempts me. What collector can resist a matching set?”

“I don’t understand,” said Sajjad, fighting to keep his voice level and toneless. “Will you tell me who you are?”

“I have been called a number of things,” it answered, its “head” now revolving around him, whispering the words in his ears as it passed. “But I prefer the name ‘Koh.’ The Face-Stealer.”

As the Noh mask drifted back into view, the fleshy membrane closed around it, and when it opened again there was a new face in its place – a middle-aged woman with golden beads embedded along her nose and jawline.

“When the last pair came to our World, I knew I must have them,” it continued, voice unchanged. Another “blink” and the face was replaced by one almost identical to the last – but with intricate facial tattoos instead of the jewelry. “They say history repeats itself. I am one of the few spirits old enough to know the Truth of those words.”

Sajjad’s brain, always a few steps slower than his brother’s, was working overtime to keep up with all of this.

“So…you take people’s faces away,” he said, glancing back briefly at Syed, realizing the meaning of his pleas. “When they show emotion?”

“It is what gives the faces their…flavor,” responded Koh, blinking several times more in rapid succession. A bald face, deep red, contorted in rage; one with a blue hue, wearing glasses, looking sad and downcast; another with skin and hair of green, its tongue hanging out in disgust. “I suppose that’s the closest thing a mortal could comprehend.”

“And you want ours…because we’re twins?” asked Sajjad, wincing inwardly and very specifically not outwardly. He was getting a little tired of how much all this mystical mumbo-jumbo stuff
seemed to care about that fact.

“Oh, I would’ve seized the chance regardless. It’s been a long time since I added a child’s face to my Collection,” the spirit told him, demonstrating the point by shifting to the face of a little girl, who couldn’t have been more than four or five. The fact that it was still speaking in the same deep, breathy voice was incredibly disturbing. “But faces such as yours are Mother’s greatest work. Why deny the wonderful gift Fate has supplied me?”

“Is…Is there anything I can do?” Sajjad added, instantly chastising himself for asking such a stupid question. As if the spirit would be interested in helping him avoid it.

But Koh actually seemed amused. Switching to a withered old man, it said, “Well, we’re at a stalemate until I can compel that beautiful face you wear to contort, in fury or despair. So why not pass the time? Perhaps there is something I can help you with.”

To say Sajjad was skeptical of these words would’ve been an understatement, as severe as saying he was just a little frightened right now. Constantly having to fight that fear from seeping into his eyes or mouth only made it more intense, in a horrific feedback loop he knew he couldn’t resist forever.

Still…one thing the spirit had said caught his attention. “You told me you’re…really old, right?” he asked, deciding it was the best option he had. “Does that mean you know where the Spirit Portals are?”

The “old man” slowly broke into a wide, toothless grin.

“Ah, now there’s a tale which has gone a long time untold!” it exclaimed, laughing coldly. “And what a shame, for without it, the histories of both our Worlds would’ve unfolded quite…differently.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” said Sajjad evenly.

“Oh, but it does. Because to seek the Portals, means to go back to the Beginning,” Koh declared, now through the bill of a bruised, battlescarred platypus-bear. “To an Age where all things were still in Balance. Where Life and Peace and Order had not yet ascended to best their opposites. Reaching the Portals is as simple as understanding these simple Truths.”

Koh continued to curl around him, its orbit growing ever-tighter by the moment, as it spoke these words.

“The Portals, you see, are located at the very heart of our World. It is not a physical place, that one could find on a map,” it went on, nodding deliberately to the unconscious Syed. “But those who know how to look can always find it. The Root. The Core. The Center of Everything.”

It took on the guise of a young, bearded man before leaning in, and whispering in his ear, “The Tree of Time…”

Sajjad almost—almost—allowed the confusion he felt to slip into his face, but he caught himself just in time. This, he realized, had been Koh’s plan all along: to throw out as many cryptic clues as possible, until something changed in the young acrobat’s expression.

Either astonishment, at finally putting all the pieces together, or—far more likely, given Sajjad was talking about himself here—simple puzzlement, in the face of all this enigmatic nonsense.

Would that be enough? Admittedly, Sajjad wasn’t very clear on all the ins and outs of how Koh’s power “worked.”
But he also wasn’t especially eager to find out.

Taking a deep, calming breath – through his nose, as he was unwilling to test if even opening his mouth wide enough might count as an “expression” – Sajjad looked directly at Koh and said, “I don’t know what that is.”

“Which is why I’m telling you,” replied the face of the bearded man, which in a blink became that of a wide-eyed, green monkey. “I like mortals, you know. I like to see them succeed. But then…I also like to see them fail. The faces formed by both extremes are equally magnificent.”

“So…let’s see if I’ve got this straight. To get to the portals – to this ‘Tree of Time’ place – all we have to do is…wish to go there?” he asked of the spirit, suppressing a brief pang of fear at the sheer delight in its voice.

“And to know how to make the wish. That is the key,” stated Koh, turning its back to the boy. Sajjad could hear the distinctive sound of him changing faces every few seconds, but he could no longer see them. “But it is true that the place you seek can be reached from any point in the Spirit World. Simply have the focus to know your destination, and it will be so.”

“O…Okay then…I’ll try that,” mumbled Sajjad, desperate to get out of there as soon as possible. He could already feel his face’s resolve wavering. “So…can I, err…go now?”

“I won’t stop you,” it said, still facing away from him. “That would go against all I stand for. If you manage to leave this forest without joining my Collection, then you’ve bested me. No hard feelings. There will always be more faces.”

Hardly believing his good fortune, Sajjad leaned down to try and heave his twin over his shoulder. But the moment he grabbed onto Syed’s arm, the spirit added in a low voice, “Of course…that’s assuming your brother feels the same way.”

Against his better judgment, Sajjad found himself breathing out, “What…?”

“You’ll only be able to make it there together. And are you so certain he wishes to go any further with you?” Koh asked of him, his tone taunting and cruel. “I was there, you know – watching you in the Fog of Lost Souls. You’ve probably figured it out already, but I was the one who deposited you there in the first place.”

Sajjad hadn’t figured that out, though in retrospect it made perfect sense. After being tormented by the Fog’s visions, his face had certainly been…expressive.

“I’ve seen, deep down, how frightened you are of your brother. And how deeply he resents you,” Koh continued to speak. “For now, you’ve made peace. But a great many trials still lie ahead. Can your relationship survive them?”

He knew what the spirit was doing – getting him riled up, loosening the already unstable pressure valve he had on his emotions – but Sajjad was unable to help himself. He could feel color rising to his cheeks, much as he struggled to push it back down.

“You don’t…know…anything about us,” said the acrobat, fighting with every breath to keep the boiling mix of anger, fear, and doubt out of his voice. He slipped slightly on one word, but recovered quickly. “And we’re leaving now.”

“I know that everything is now upon your shoulders. And I know how much that terrifies you,” responded Koh, its innumerable legs twitching as one. “But I am curious whether you could stand it. After all that’s transpired…”
There was one, last, drawn-out sound of a “blink,” as the spirit’s entire body suddenly went rigid and still. Then, with slow and deliberate tones, it finished its words:

“Would he forgive you if you failed him again?”

That was it. That was the straw that broke Sajjad entirely. Out of the turbulent war of emotions inside his head emerged a victor, and that victor was guilt. Guilt that spilled out into every corner of his face, like a leaky faucet suddenly bursting.

He knew, at once, that it was over. As if in slow motion he could see Koh twisting right back around, seizing the opportunity and striking in an instant. It was wearing the female Noh mask again, and the last thing Sajjad remembered seeing was it flying toward him, painted lips stretched wide – like a predator that’d finally caught its prey.

Sajjad braced himself, unsure what was coming. How it’d feel, to lose all of his features to this thieving spirit. Whether he’d even be alive afterwards.

Until he was shoved roughly aside, and sent careening into the water.

Already weakened by his injuries, the acrobat blacked out for a couple seconds as he struck the shallow swampwater. A few lungfuls of the putrid liquid, however, were enough to force him back into consciousness rather quickly, coughing and sputtering and fighting to regain control of his eyes.

When they finally came back into focus, it was his own face they met – contorted into an expression of abject horror, and surrounded on all sides by spindly, insect-like legs.

Slowly, as one hand worked inexpertly to force his body into a sitting position, the other wandered up his face, daring not to wonder how it might feel. But there was his mouth…his nose…his ears…his eyelids…

Those same eyelids went wide, as he suddenly realized what’d just happened.

“Syed!” he screamed, scrambling madly through the water toward the rock where he’d left his twin. The Acolyte was slumped over, lying face-down in the water, and Sajjad immediately grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him into an upright position.

But it became clear very quickly that the term “face-down” was a misnomer. While he’d been expecting (fearing, dreading) the sight, nothing could’ve truly prepared Sajjad for what he was witnessing.

Syed’s face was gone – completely. A blank stretch of skin was all that remained, from forehead down to chin. Only his hair, wild and untamed, had been left in place.

His brother had just sacrificed his own face to save his.

Sajjad wheeled upon Koh, still wearing Syed’s face in a gleeful grin, tears in the acrobat’s eyes. “H…How could you?” he demanded, seething. “Give him back!”

“That’s not how the arrangement works,” said Koh, speaking that same awful voice through lips that now perfectly mirrored his own. “Your brother failed to heed his own advice, and offered his face to me. He knew what would be the result.”

“Then…take me too…” choked out Sajjad, who wasn’t even trying to hide his emotions at this point. “That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?! The ‘complete set’!”
But the spirit just shook Syed’s face at him.

“I’m afraid I am limited to taking a single face at a time,” it told Sajjad. “And the Rules, after all, are what keep the Game…interesting. But don’t worry, child. I shall return to complete my Collection another day.”

The creature was, indeed, already moving as if to leave. It’d even removed the portion of its body blocking the gap in the trees, allowing sunlight – for it seemed it was daytime once more – to stream back into the bog.

“Wait!” cried Sajjad, voice still rough and hoarse from agony. “Y…You’re just going to leave him like this?! You…You monster! You killed my brother!”

Turning back, Koh perverted Syed’s face into a slow, patronizing shake once more. “He is not dead,” it said, its tone infuriatingly light and casual. “So long as his heart beats and his brain functions, he will live. Press food to where his mouth used to be, and he can even eat.”

The spirit drifted back, closer to the boy, until the two nigh-identical faces were less than a foot apart.

“What he’s lost is everything that made him a unique individual,” it went on, its tones low and cold. “His hopes, his dreams, his emotions. His deepest desires and his darkest fears. Everything that was Syed of the Eastern Air Temple…now belongs to me.”

“N…No…” was all Sajjad could sputter out, body freezing up in horror.

“But I suppose it’s true that I shouldn’t merely take, without giving something in return,” added Koh after a moment, its borrowed face looking as if it was pondering something. “I’ve already given you plenty of clues, of course. But you seem like something of a slow one. So I’ll offer you a…shortcut.”

And with that, the spirit closed the distance, and pressed Syed’s lips to his.

Sajjad immediately scrambled away, disgusted for more reasons than he could count. Koh just curled his brother’s freshly kissed lips into an amused grin, however.

“There. You should now have all the Knowledge your brother held regarding the Tree of Time,” it said. “Together with the hints I’ve so generously shared, it should be enough for you to complete your quest.”

Despite spitting out what felt like every last drop of saliva in his mouth, and wiping his lips across his filthy sleeve more times than he could count, Sajjad could feel instantly that the spirit was right. He knew where to go, now – and more to the point, he knew how to get there.

Which didn’t change his feelings toward the terrifying spirit one iota. He glared daggers at it, as it again moved to slink back into the shadows.

“You’ll pay for this,” he snarled. “Someday, somehow, you will pay.”

“No one can know what the future holds,” it called back to him, shifting its face one last time. Now it was a young woman, her features almost impossibly beautiful, staring back at him with sad-lidded eyes. “But I’m always eager to find out.”

Sajjad sat there in the swamp, cradling his twin, as the skittering sound of Koh’s movements drew farther and farther away. Eventually, it faded away completely.
Leaving the two brothers alone once more.

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Despite now knowing where to go – and not having to visit some human-hating spirit’s secret library in order to do so – it took some time before Sajjad was able to muster up the will to leave the swamp. Instead, for what felt like at least half of an entire day, he stayed there with Syed, trying to coax something of the brother he knew out of this faceless figure. But to no avail. Syed, if he could even be called that anymore, was little more than a living doll at this point. He took no action on his own and responded to very few stimuli. If Sajjad propped him up into a sitting or standing position, he’d remain that way; if he lay him down on his back, he’d do the same.

In a fit of frustration, the acrobat even tried dunking his brother’s faceless head back into the water… but pulled it out a few seconds later in a panic, as Syed showed no signs of movement to avoid drowning.

Yet he was still, indisputably, alive. Syed was clearly breathing, as evidenced by the rise and fall of his chest – though without a nose or mouth, Sajjad was at a loss to explain how. Meanwhile, his heart still beat steadily, and his pasty skin still felt as warm as ever.

Koh had even told the truth regarding food, as bits of glowing mushroom – which he admittedly wasn’t certain weren’t poisonous, but Sajjad reasoned that at least Syed throwing up would be a reaction – that he held up above his brother’s chin disappeared little by little, as if being chewed by invisible teeth.

All this meant, however, that Syed was still in very real, physical danger from his injuries. Sajjad was far from an expert, but he followed half-remembered survival lessons from Zaji as best he could, tearing off pieces of their damp robes to absorb the bleeding from Syed’s abdomen.

“It’ll be okay, alright?” he said, unable to control the shaking of his hands and the anxiety in his voice. “We’ll find some way…some way to get you back…you’ll see, you’ll see…”

Syed, of course, did not answer.

After a few more hours of rest, during which he had to change the makeshift bandages three times over, Sajjad decided they had little choice but to press onward. If there was something that could cure Syed, they weren’t likely to find it just waiting around.

Armed with the knowledge implanted by Koh – and trying not to think about the fact that it’d been ripped directly from his brother’s skull, like everything else that made him “Syed” – Sajjad knew that if he just kept walking, all roads in the Spirit World ultimately led to their destination. It was simply a matter of mindset.

And right now, Sajjad’s mind wanted nothing more than to find the Spirit Portals, complete their mission, and get the heck out of this stupid world.

With no will or impetus of his own, Sajjad was forced to lead his brother by the hand the entire way. As long as he was pulling, Syed would dutifully follow along, but the moment he stopped exerting
force the Acolyte halted dead in his tracks. He was as helpful and cooperative as a vegetable.

Sajjad fought to hold back tears at the sight.

That was how they proceeded for at least half an hour – Sajjad a few steps ahead, tugging his twin behind him like a toddler – as azure trees and cerulean water gave way to nothing but more azure trees and cerulean water. Still, he persevered.

He had no other choice.

In time, however, the forest began to thin, and the swampwater grew shallower and shallower. Soon enough they were walking across rough, hard stone once more, though tinged an otherworldly bluish-green. At first, Sajjad thought it was the trees casting a dense glow upon it, but when he looked back the forest was gone.

Instead, in every direction and for as far as the eye could see, there was the same teal or turquoise rock, most of it smooth but some raised in winding, jagged formations. Between each of the formations was a stream of cool, still water, similarly curved. The sky above was an almost perfect mirror of the ground below, filled with billowing, unmoving clouds of rich greens and blues.

Naturally, then, his eyes soon jumped to the one thing not of these shades.

At the very center of it all, reaching high into the sky, stood a tangled and gnarled tree, as leafless as the ones in the blue forest but far more enormous. Its bark was a deep reddish brown, but that wasn’t what really drew the eye.

The Tree of Time – for what else could it be? – had a massive hollow at its core, but it wasn’t empty. Swirling energy covered the opening, sealing it completely, and on the other side…

Sajjad didn’t know what to call it.

It was larger, stronger, greater than any spirit he’d ever before witnessed. Even from behind what looked to be a prison, it seemed to radiate power, and Sajjad felt the sudden, inexplicable urge to sink to his knees, in awe of its presence.

Then, the acrobat felt a chill run down his spine, as he realized the creature’s single, orange-hued eye was staring directly at him.

Suddenly, Sajjad didn’t want to be anywhere near the mysterious spirit, watching him silently from within its tree.

It took less than a second for his unspoken plea to be answered. The world around them actually seemed to rotate, with them as the axis, bringing them farther from the Tree of Time and closer to…

Sajjad’s breath caught in his throat. Could it possibly be…?

They’d been brought before a swirling mass of energy, shaped like a dome. Sajjad’s first thought was that it looked kind of like a sunset, all pressed and squeezed together, with an outer rim of deep purples and pinks, and an inner core that blazed all the beautiful and terrible shades of fire.

Experimentally, he tried touching the surface, and let out a scream of pain as his arm was blasted back, nearly wrenching it clean out of its socket. Whimpering, he backed away, returning to Syed’s side…who, naturally, had “watched” all this with absolutely no reaction one way or the other.

“That has to be it,” said Sajjad, once again speaking to a person who couldn’t respond back – and
indeed, whom he wasn’t even sure could understand him. “The sealed Spirit Portal. So...what do we do now?”

Because Xai Bau had been a little vague on that part. He’d said their physical bodies would serve as an “anchor,” allowing Unalaq to escape on his own. But they were here, and the portal seemed just as impervious as ever.

“Maybe we’ve got the wrong one?” he wondered aloud. “Maybe this is the Southern portal? I can’t exactly tell from this side...”

But the ground below their feet didn’t rotate again. Sajjad decided he had to take that as a sign that this was, in fact, the Northern portal after all.

“C’mon...C’mon, think of something,” he demanded of himself, gripping onto both his own robes as well as Syed’s. “What the heck am I doing wrong...?”

“For one thing, you’re not the Avatar.”

Sajjad whirled around, holding onto his twin protectively, his eyes darting around the barren landscape for the source of the voice, but he could see nothing different amongst their surroundings.

For one terrible, bone-chilling moment, Sajjad thought that perhaps the enormous spirit had just spoken to him. But if that...thing was capable of speaking from within its prison – and Sajjad wasn’t sure it could – then he’d have expected a voice as deep and dark as night. Like Koh, but without all the creepy whispering.

The voice he’d just heard had an aura of menace all its own, but at the same time it had an air that was distinctly...human. Sounding, if anything, like...

Sajjad turned back to face the Spirit Portal, and found his vision blocked. He knew in an instant that this was the speaker.

To all appearances, he was nothing more or less than a hunchbacked old man. He had pale green eyes and a withered face, along with a long, white beard that reached past his chest. His clothing, mostly pale reds framed by gold, was dignified and intricate, with jewels and golden beads flowing down from a tall, conical hat. His fingers, the nails sharpened to points, rested upon a crooked walking stick.

“The Avatar’s chi is...unique. Always in perfect balance, no matter the incarnation. They could draw out someone trapped between worlds without lifting a finger,” said the man, that same low, rumbling voice echoing from the depths of his throat. “But then... they could also remove the barrier, which I suppose would solve the problem anyway. They are the one who placed it, after all.”

“Wh...What...?” muttered Sajjad. The man might as well have been speaking gibberish. “Who are you? Where’d you come from?”

“But your chi...no, no, that won’t do at all. Completely out of balance,” he continued on, ignoring Sajjad’s questions completely. Instead, his beady eyes drifted over to Syed’s still, unmoving form. “Almost as if...ah, that makes sense. Ran afoul of the Face-Stealer, have we? Such a tragic state of affairs.”

The wide, cruel smirk upon his face put lie to his expression of sympathy.

“My...chi...?” Sajjad repeated quietly, fingers drifting absently to his chest. “I’m sorry. I don’t have
any idea what you’re saying.”

“And yet, here you are. In the flesh, and everything,” said the old man, speaking the words with a disturbing amount of relish in his voice. “I suppose that little ritual’s still floating around? That’s the only explanation. The portals haven’t budged in the past thousand years, after all. Not unless I missed something.”

“You…know about the ritual?” asked Sajjad, seizing on the one thing he could understand from the man’s cryptic speech.

His smirk broadened, displaying sharp, pointed teeth. With a short, wheezing chuckle, he replied, “I created it.”

A brief, breathless gasp escaped Sajjad’s lips. “Then…Then you’re…” he whispered.

“A man. At least…in some ways,” the bearded man cut him off. “In so many others, I’ve long since transcended that limitation. It has, after all…been a great many years since I crossed over. Would you like to hear the tale?”

He seemed to take Sajjad’s stunned silence as a “yes.”

Slowly, using his walking stick to aid each laborious step, he ambled forward, until the both of them were practically touching. This close, the old man seemed to tower over Sajjad, even though it seemed like he shouldn’t.

One wrinkled, talon-like hand drifted toward him, coming to rest upon the young boy’s forehead.

“On second thought…” he said, his face a predatory leer. His entire arm was glowing a sickly, unnatural green.

“Why don’t I show you?”

[--------------------]

Once, there was a pair of mighty and terrifying warriors. Brothers, born of the same womb and in the same moment, their destinies forever intertwined.

With their military prowess and skill in earthbending, they fought a campaign of conquest all across the Earth Kingdom. Finally, their armies reached the Impenetrable City of Ba Sing Se.

The Earth King fought long and hard to protect his rule, but to no avail. The brothers overthrew him, and established a new dynasty in his place. And under their rule, the kingdom prospered. Untold wealth and advances in technology. Enough to build an empire that would last to the end of time.

Only thing still stood in their path – the spirits. In those days, Ba Sing Se was often besieged by their attacks, inflicting catastrophic loss of life and treasure. Previous Earth Kings had been forced simply to endure this one-sided war, helpless to fight back.

But the brothers were not merely skilled of bending and blade. They were also sages, experts in the spiritual and the arcane, and they had a great many secret weapons to unleash.
The greatest of the spirits that plagued the capital were that of an enormous mountain, and of a whirling storm. The sound and fury of their rampages was legendary. Yet they also had another aspect. The two colossal spirits were wed, as husband and wife, and madly in love.

So the brothers concocted a plan. Using dark and forbidden arts, they bound the mountain-husband to a clay idol, linking the fate of one with the fate of the other. To the storm-wife, they delivered an ultimatum.

Either she would leave their kingdom in peace, never to return again...or they would shatter the idol.

Nevertheless, she persisted. And so, the kings made good upon their threat.

In an instant, an entire mountain crumbled to dust. One of the great spirits had been vanquished forevermore, and the people cheered.

But the fury of his widow was like nothing the world had ever seen. Entire villages were swallowed whole, as tumultuous hurricanes and tornadoes ravaged the continent for weeks. Ba Sing Se was nearly cleaved in twain.

The brothers unleashed all they had, their mystical powers and mundane armies alike, but none could stand against the wrathful spirit. Even their binding spell was useless, for their earthbending had been the key for connecting stone to stone, and no airbenders would aid them in repeating the feat.

Then, in the Earth Kingdom’s darkest hour, there came a savior: that era’s Avatar. A strong and valiant waterbender, born of the northern snows. His training finally complete, he raced to meet the storm-wife, determined to conquer her or die trying.

In the battle that followed...he achieved his wish.

For the next nine years, the planet despaired, as more and more of the Earth Kingdom was devastated by the neverending storm. Other nations began to wonder if they would be next, once there was nothing left for the widowed spirit to consume.

One Air Nomad, breaking from his vow of pacifism, even consented to assist the kings with their ritual, and bind the spirit to a container of air. But she had only grown more and more powerful as she raged, and by the time they tried, the spell could not stop her.

Only one last, lingering hope remained for the world. The Cycle dictated the next Avatar be born of earth. Knowing that he or she would be one of their subjects, the brothers’ armies scoured their Kingdom far and wide – intending to train the young Avatar personally.

Little did they know she’d been right under their noses all along. Among their other triumphs, the new kings had drastically expanded the institution of slavery, allowing them to build great works and monuments unparalleled.

On the day the previous Avatar was slain, a girl was born amongst these slaves. For the first nine years of her life, she was fully ignorant of her true identity. No sages sought her out, to administer the age-old tests; no opportunity presented itself, to discover her calling amidst the other elements.

She was surrounded, always, by the rocks and dirt and chiseled stone, to which her people had always been consigned. Why would she ever suspect she could be something greater?

Then came the day when the storm-wife returned to Ba Sing Se for the final time. Her rampages...
against the capital had become a seasonal event, but her chaotic nature had always dulled their chances of actually penetrating the Upper Ring.

Yet in that instance, she moved with precision and intent, saving her vengeance for the ones who’d truly earned it. Desperate, the brothers were forced to take drastic measures.

From their thousandfold array of slaves, the oldest and feeblest earthbenders were selected. They would be marched to a clearing, far outside the walls of the city...and would unleash all their remaining energy against the tempest. With any luck, the spirit would be distracted from her mission, and take only a handful of worthless lives.

But the girl could not accept this. Her beloved grandfather had been chosen for the honor, to die for his kings – and she responded by striking at the overseers who tried to take him.

Naturally, this defiance could not be left unpunished. A battle ensued, and a number of rebellious slaves were put down in the process. But when a hand was laid upon the brat who’d started the whole mess, to silence her for good...

The Avatar State flared to life, for the first time in nine years.

Though they acted through the medium of a tiny, malnourished slavegirl, the brothers’ armies were no match for the spirits of ninety-nine Avatars. A thousand chains, whips, and hot irons were obliterated in the blink of an eye, and nearly every last slave in Ba Sing Se entered into open revolt.

The girl, meanwhile, turned her attentions to the rapidly encroaching storm. But despite the urgings of many of her past lives, the young Avatar chose not to fight. Instead, through sheer force of will, she wrested back control of her body, stood before the great spirit...

And talked.

For hours and hours and hours, she spoke to the storm-wife, coming to know her anger, to understand her grief. The spirit did not have words to return, but the girl didn’t need them. She was the bridge between worlds, she’d finally realized, and repairing the storm’s broken heart was both her duty and her honor.

By that time, the slave rebellion had drawn the kings out of their secluded palace. Briefly, the sight of her husband’s murderers flared up the spirit’s hatred and fury, which the Avatar had just begun to calm. But ultimately, she convinced the storm-wife of another path.

The kings were a mortal threat, she told the spirit. And they would face mortal justice.

And so, by the bidding of her Avatar, the great spirit went in peace. For the first time in nearly a decade, clear skies flew above the Earth Kingdom.

But as her words suggested, the young Avatar was not done. Yielding to the spirits of her predecessors once more, she flew before the two brothers, blaming them for all the devastation that’d been wrought throughout their reign. She – they – demanded the Earth Kings step down.

Of course, they refused.

What followed was a battle that would pass rapidly into legend. The brothers levied all of their great and terrible power, splitting the ground and filling the sky with stone.

But though they fought valiantly, the Avatar called upon nearly a hundred lifetimes of mastery, and delivered them a sound defeat. Broken, both physically and spiritually, the brothers had no choice
but to retreat.

Yet this was no act of petty cowardice. For the two earthbenders knew of a place where they’d be immune to the ravages of time. Where they’d be free to plot and plan, no matter how long it took, for the day of their glorious revenge.

Where even the mighty Avatar would not be able to touch them.

And they knew how to reach it...because they themselves had devised the way.

Using the balance between their two souls as an anchor, the brothers meditated themselves – bodies and all – into the realm of the spirits they so despised. And there they would remain, for the next thousand years.

Biding their time.

Watching...

And waiting.

[-------------------]

Sajjad backed away slowly from the grinning old man, blinking spots out of his eyes.

“You...You’re the king from the story,” he said hollowly, his mind making the connection in an instant. It was, after all, a tale that was burned into his brain pretty starkly...given when he’d first learnt it. “The one who fought Avatar Bai.”

He looked down upon the child, sneering. “I tend to find that names ruin a good legend. They make them so...small,” was his croaking, raspy reply. “Plus, she wasn’t even called that at the time. What use does a slave have for a name?”

“But the way I heard it...” muttered Sajjad, wracking his brain for the exact words Tenzin and Xai Bau had used. “She only took down one king. What happened to your brother?”

The man’s wicked smile disappeared completely.

“You’ll find the sands of time tend to weather away certain...details,” he replied, his tones soft and cruel. “After our defeat at the hands of the Avatar, a niece of the previous Earth King took the throne, and erased any record of our glorious rule. Though every schoolchild knows the tale of our defeat, all official histories of the royal family deny our rightful place.”

His spindly, wrinkled hand drifted to his cloak, shaking with barely suppressed rage.

“So it’s no surprise, then, that the world has forgotten the truth of who we were. Of what we were,” he said, seizing the edge of his robes in a vicelike grip. “That it persists in denying its rightful lords and masters. Now, boy! Be the first in a millennium to bear witness!”

In one fluid, surprisingly powerful motion, the cloak was ripped away, exposing all that was covered underneath.

“Witness...Hundun!”
Sajjad was unable to help himself. He backed away, screaming aloud.

For what the boy had taken to be a pronounced hump was, in fact, an entire other person. His head, torso, and limbs stretched out from the old man’s back like a hideous growth, attached to his brother by a large section of their shared body.

Once Sajjad managed to get past the initial shock, however, he began to notice a few more things about this hidden twin. He looked, if anything, even more withered and emaciated than his brother, his skin deathly pale and covered with liver spots. Not an ounce of body fat seemed to be left upon him, with his skin pulled taught over his face like a ghastly skull.

The bearded man’s eyes briefly pulsed a violent red, while his brother’s sole one – for his left eye seemed to have been gouged out of its socket – turned a cold, sickly blue.

“In life, we had many names. Some together, some apart,” continued the first man. His twin seemed either unwilling or unable to speak. “But that was the one we always favored, for it described us both in full. Hundun…Masters of the Chaotic Attack.”

“I’m…not sure I understand,” said Sajjad, instinctively stepping to the side to shield the unmoving Syed with his body. “Were you, err…born this way?”

Of all the questions he could have asked, it was far from the most important one, but it was what jumped to mind the quickest.

“We have been joined for all time,” Hundun explained, both mouths frowning. “Rare, certainly…but not unnatural. Still, few ever treated us as individuals. As more than a sideshow freak. For always and forever, we’ve only had each other.”

Powerful, muscular arms reached back to touch dry, lifeless ones, which could do little more in return than twitch weakly.

“When the Avatar struck us down, she dealt my brother a blow that was all but lethal,” added the bearded twin. “We had no choice. Coming to the Spirit World was the only way to save his life. For in this realm, even within a physical body, one will never age. Never die. But at the same time…one will also never heal.”

His eyes glanced meaningfully past Sajjad, at his still, silent brother. “But enough about us,” he said, crossing the pair of arms that belonged to him. “It is your predicament you should be concerned with.”

“Right…Right…” whispered Sajjad, shaking his head to try and clear it. “You said…that we wouldn’t be able to save Unalaq without a ‘balanced chi’?”

“The very same balance that allowed you to enter this world in the first place,” responded Hundun. “Your compatriot is at risk of having his soul ripped apart. Only an uncommonly strong bond can cut through the maelstrom, and serve as a beacon for his spirit.”

“Does that mean…you could do it?” the boy asked quietly.

But Hundun just shook his head, his face once more twisting into a leering grin.

“My brother’s chi is too weak. It took nearly all the strength he had left just to bring us here. And in one thousand years, he’s regained none of it,” he told Sajjad.

“Then why?” said the acrobat, his voice growing more desperate by the second. “Why’d you come
to talk to me? Why’re you even here?”

At this, the old king spared a single glance to the tree at the center of the landscape, though he didn’t explain any further.

Instead, he simply answered, “Because I can help you.”

“Wh…What?” murmured Sajjad, at a loss for what else to say.

“Right now, this is a place of Chaos. Meaning it’s a domain I can walk freely, as Master of the Chaotic Attack,” Hundun went on. “When that fool got himself trapped, I sensed it immediately. And so, I lay in wait. Sure that it would draw attention from someone with power. The power necessary for me to achieve vengeance…and restoration.”

“I don’t have any kind of power,” said Sajjad, hanging his head.

But Hundun’s rictus grin only widened further. Upon both of their visible mouths.

“Oh, but you do. And you could have more. That’s how I’m going to help you,” he replied. “You and your beloved brother.”

The acrobat clutched onto Syed protectively. As always, his faceless twin failed to react one way or the other.

But this only seemed to amuse Hundun more. “You see, while your brother’s face and identity have been stolen…his chi remains whole and untouched,” he stated, energy faintly crackling around the conjoined twins. “He simply cannot access it. But we know more about manipulating chi than anyone who’s ever lived. We can.”

Sajjad didn’t let go of his brother, but looked up at the kings, lip trembling.

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded. “What would you do?”

“Simply put? I would bring your souls together,” said Hundun. “Allow the one that is healthy and strong, to sustain the one that’s weak. It is, after all…a concept I’m most familiar with.”

At this, he gestured toward his own body – toward both their bodies.

There was a moment of silence. Then, Sajjad’s jaw practically dislocated itself.

“You want us to become…like you?” he asked, his voice little more than a horrified whisper. “I…I dunno if I…”

But Hundun held up a thin, claw-like hand to forestall him.

“You misunderstand. You would not merge in body, as we are. I told you, that was simply the nature of our birth,” spoke the old king. “What I can do, is place your chi in a single vessel. Presumably yours, since your brother’s is rather…damaged.”

He offered a knowing, lingering glare at Syed’s blank face.

“What…would that mean…?” mumbled Sajjad, suddenly short of breath.

Hundun chuckled darkly. “Hard to say. After all, I’ve never attempted such a thing before,” he said. “But I’ll tell you what I guess. Two souls cannot exist within the same flesh, without a body meant to contain them – as ours is. Yours shall, instead…shall we say, come together. You will be
a new person, with a new spirit. All the memories of who you once were, apart. But with your thoughts, your personalities, your strengths and weaknesses alike…fused into one.”

“And…if you guessed wrong?” came the obvious question, Sajjad’s lips barely moving.

The earthbender waved a dismissive hand. “Well then, you’ll both probably be obliterated,” he answered matter-of-factly. “But your brother, at least, would be no worse off. Which leaves you just one question.”

He leaned in, bending forward to bring his face level with Sajjad’s – while at the same time his twin’s head lolled to the side, staring dimly at Syed’s empty expression. The overall effect was incredibly disturbing.

“Would you be willing to give up everything…your life, your future, your very identity…” he whispered, hot and putrid breath washing over the young boy. “To grant your brother a chance at the same?”

Sajjad was quiet for a very long time, staring straight at the misshapen twins before him. In a sense a better metaphor for the relationship between him and Syed, than they were for their own.

He had no idea what to do; what decision to make. He’d always relied on others to handle these kind of things for him. Zaji or Xai Bau – or, most commonly, Syed himself. The few times Sajjad had ever acted on his own, he’d only succeeded at ruining everything.

But Syed wasn’t here, not really. And he might never be again…unless…

“Is there any other way?” he found himself asking, his throat suddenly dry and hoarse. “To cure him…?”

“No, that I’m aware of, at least,” said Hundun. “I won’t guarantee there isn’t a spirit somewhere who could restore your brother as he once was – but I also won’t guarantee he’d live long to find them. Without a face, he has no will of his own, no drive to keep himself going. He won’t even feed himself unless you force him.”

The king glanced aside at the sealed portal. “Besides…you’d never be able to complete your mission, otherwise,” he added with a knowing smirk. “The boy inside there will die. And you’ll have lost your brother for nothing.”

Unable to stand looking at the two old earthbenders any longer, Sajjad turned to his faceless twin, begging, pleading silently for some kind of sign on which path to take.

But Syed offered him nothing. He might as well have not even been there.

And that, in and of itself…was the only sign Sajjad really needed to make his choice. Turning back to Hundun, he swallowed both his breath and his pride, and spoke the last words of his life.

“Do it.”

[------------------]

Sajjad’s mind floated through air, as if in a dream, while the kings cast their spell.
Compared to the ritual that’d brought them here in the first place, it was relatively simple. The
conjoined twins placed their much younger counterparts together, knee-deep in the nearby river, and
began to circle them, chanting a number of words Sajjad barely understood and far more he didn’t at
all.

Over and over and over, Hundun revolved around the pair, as the ground below them grew darker,
and faint murmurs of electricity seemed to fill the air. Sajjad could just barely make out the
mysterious spirit within the tree from his current position, and he could’ve sworn that he caught its
orange contours flash a deep purple once or twice.

These same, monotonous steps repeated for so long that Sajjad almost found himself drifting off,
suddenly incredibly tired. Soon enough, he had to fight simply to remain conscious.

He barely even noticed when Hundun’s rough, wrinkled hands seized him about the face, talon-like
nails digging into his skull.

He barely even noticed when the old king’s brother did the same to Syed, using what looked to be
the very last of his strength to hold on tight.

The chanting reached a fever pitch, now completely incomprehensible. Though perhaps that was
only because Sajjad was seconds away from dropping like a stone.

That same, sickly green lightning he’d used to show Sajjad his “story” flashed through the air, so
intense that it seemed to consume both pairs of twins utterly. It was all the acrobat could see, hear, or
feel.

Syed fell away first, collapsing into a limp heap as the paler of the kings finally released him.
Shimmering energy, its aura a staggering array of color, flowed across the brothers’ conjoined body,
glowing all the more powerfully by the moment as it absorbed more and more of the crackling
lightning.

Through hazy, half-lidded eyes, Sajjad watched the energy travel along Hundun’s powerful muscles
and then down his arms…

Across his hands…

Into his fingertips…

Then…the pain. The excruciating, agonizing, incomprehensible pain. Like nothing Sajjad had ever
before experienced. Like nothing he ever would again.

As if someone had taken a scalpel to every last part of his insides, all at once, and then just kept
digging.

It was too much to bear. Too much for any one man.

And so…for the very last time…

Sajjad sunk into blissful, dreamless sleep.

[-------------------]
What stirred in Sajjad’s body, nearly an hour later, wasn’t Sajjad.

He knew this, instinctively, even though he knew almost nothing else about himself. He had no name, or personality, or history of his own. He couldn’t be said to have any family, friends, or enemies that were truly “his.” It was as if he was a complete newborn, except one who’d been dropped into a body and brain that’d already aged twelve years.

A bit of wracking said brain proved, rather quickly, that Hundun had been telling the truth. All of the memories both Syed and Sajjad had held in life were at his disposal, tinged by the emotions the twins had attached to each.

He felt a strange prickling sensation as he thought back to the day two years ago, at the Eastern Air Temple, and immediately experienced conflicting swings of both guilt and betrayal. He knew, intellectually, whose memory each emotion must’ve come from, but that wasn’t how his mind processed it. Instead, the feelings came at once, equal in intensity, clashing with each other and hurting his head quite fiercely.

The person in Sajjad’s body took a deep breath, calming himself in a very un-Sajjad way. If he wanted to survive the next few years without having a nervous breakdown, he’d need to get a handle on this.

It helped that, when viewed through a certain mental lens, all the memories seemed…distant. They’d happened, he knew every detail about them, but they hadn’t happened to him.

He had memories, but he hadn’t lived any of them.

The same went for just about everything his fused psyche had inherited, he soon realized. He knew the favorite foods of Syed (steamed asparagus) and Sajjad (medium rare hippo-steak), for example, but neither of them were his favorite food.

No doubt, he’d react well to either one, on a purely physiological level. But he’d need to experiment to find whether his own tastes rested with one, both, or neither.

He knew everything Syed did about meditation, philosophy, and Air Nomad history. He possessed all of Sajjad’s skills in acrobatics, combat, and stealth. Yet it didn’t feel, at all, as if he was drawing from one or the other discretely.

It was like everything that’d been “Syed” and “Sajjad” had been thrown into a giant bowl and mixed around until there was no distinguishing one from the other.

They were all his thoughts, knowledge, and abilities.

They were all him.

Slowly, the boy without a name rose from the ground, standing taller and more confident than either of his constituent selves had in some time. He was, he knew at his core, more than the sum of their parts.

He was not surprised to see that Hundun had apparently been watching him with interest this entire time.

“How do you feel, little one?” asked the king who could still speak, grinning broadly; the other still seemed to be recovering from the moderate exertion earlier.

The boy glanced down at his own powerful muscles, partially hidden under loose-fitting robes,
thankful – if for nothing else – than that he’d wound up in the body with significantly greater physical prowess.

That reminded him of something, and for the first time his eyes met Syed’s lifeless corpse, its soul having abandoned it at Hundun’s feet. With its face erased and body completely still, it looked almost more like an overlarge toy than a real person.

A person that a part of him had once been, just a few shorts hours ago.

But there was no use dwelling on that, and the boy found he had very little trouble detaching it as a concern. Instead, he stood up straight, and looked Hundun right in the eyes – well, two of them, anyway.

“I’m ready to find out what you want in return,” he said, voice firm.

Hundun answered that with a wheezing cackle. “Oh, nothing for now. But I have a feeling you’re going to give me exactly what I want…somewhere down the line,” he told the boy.

The fusion frowned. “And that would be…” he replied.

Lacing his fingers across his cane, which he seemed to have picked back up while the boy was unconscious, Hundun smiled even wider.

“I already told you. Or told him, I suppose. Vengeance and restoration,” declared the earthbender. “You see, I’ve found a way to breathe new life into my dear, crippled brother. But I will need the chi of the Avatar to do so. Neatly handing me a thousand years of delayed revenge at the same time.”

“And you think I’m going to help you get to Aang,” said the boy, his tone indicating neither one way nor the other what he thought about such a prospect.

After all, while he knew how Syed and Sajjad felt about the Avatar – a swell of childish hero-worship that’d gradually soured to varying levels of disappointment after joining the Lotus – he still wasn’t sure what his opinions were on the man.

“Oh, certainly, if the opportunity presents itself. If not, there’s always the next one. Or the next,” Hundun responded, tipping his hand in casual indifference. “The advantage of waiting a thousand years for retribution, is that you learn to be patient.”

In a fluid motion, he turned his extended hand to the dome of energy just a few feet away.

“But I can do little while this seal remains, trapping me in this world,” he continued. “Only the Avatar can remove it. Once I have free reign over the material plane once again, I can handle the rest. And should you fail…well, I’m no worse off than I was before, am I?”

“I suppose we shall see,” the nameless boy muttered noncommittally.

“Indeed,” said Hundun, before reaching down. Not, incidentally, by bending over so that his arms could reach the ground, but rather by stretching his limbs to cover the remaining distance. “And just for the sake of…ahem, insurance…”

He was now holding Syed’s still body in both arms, his blank face turned to face the person in his twin’s body.

“I’m uncertain what would happen to you if I destroyed this empty shell. Probably nothing, but…
well, we are now in uncharted waters,” he added, baring his fanglike teeth. “In any event, I’ll keep it around, as a…memento of our bargain. And so that you’re certain never to forget it.”

Suddenly, something seemed to catch his eye on the corpse he was holding. Turning him over slightly, Hundun looked upon the symbol of the Red Lotus – which Jilu had sewn onto both of their robes, before they journeyed to the Spirit World.

“What is this marking?” he asked. “I’m curious.”

“We…are the Red Lotus,” said the fusion, placing emphasis on the plural. Uncertain whether he was speaking generally – or for the sake of the two boys he’d once been. “We oppose all the unnatural separations and structures humanity has imposed in the world. That includes nations, and chiefs, and presidents…”

He then glared at the earthbenders, olive-green eyes like daggers, before concluding in a soft voice, “And kings.”

Far from being offended, however, Hundun’s grin merely widened. “Well, I certainly oppose all but one of those things,” he answered. “For when we are kings once more, there can be no other. So why don’t we settle on the parts where we agree? Once your entire world has been burned to the ground…we can see just who rises from the ashes.”

The boy continued to glare. “I suppose we shall see,” he repeated.

Meanwhile, the earthbender again extended a limb, retrieving a piece of the clothing he’d ripped off earlier: his tall, ornamental hat. It bore the symbol of the Earth Kingdom in bright gold.

But with a burst of green energy, the concentric circle and square were replaced – by a blooming crimson flower, which disappeared off of Syed’s robes at the same time.

“There. Now I have my own reminder of this…cherished occasion,” he said. “We will meet again, little boy.”

And with that, in a blinding burst of dark energy, Hundun and Syed’s body both disappeared from sight.

All that lingered behind was the distant echo of the old king’s mad, haunting laughter.

[-------------------]

For several minutes, the boy who was not Sajjad stood still, alone with the portal and the entrapped spirit once again.

Armed with Syed’s knowledge, while he still wasn’t sure who the spirit was, he was fairly certain Sajjad’s paranoia hadn’t been misplaced. So he kept his back to the Tree of Time, staring determinedly at the locked Spirit Portal.

Right now, he had a mission to finally complete.

The funny thing was, that while he knew exactly what he should do right now, he couldn’t honestly say that the knowledge came directly from Syed or Sajjad. It was as if his thoughts were complete
for the first time ever – that they’d been split into two containers until now, that *that* had been the unnatural state – and only once joined was the answer apparent.

Not that it was an exceedingly complicated answer. From Xai Bau to Hundun, the only advice he’d ever been given turned out to be the only one he *needed*: standing before the portal, and simply *being*.

Being himself.

Being the balance between two halves, now brought together after so long.

Being the balance between two halves, now *whole*.

Balance had always been so *hard*, when he’d been two people. Trying to find a happy medium between Syed’s studiousness and dedication, and Sajjad’s carefree attitude and love of freedom.

Now it was as effortless as breathing. People didn’t have to *think* about the flow of air through their bodies being in balance; the lungs and windpipe simply worked in concert, all on their own.

And finally, so too were his mind, heart, *and* soul.

Thus, he didn’t actually have to *try* to act as a beacon for Unalaq’s spirit. He simply sat there, reflexively adopting the lotus position – out of preference, if not necessity – and waited.

For a while, nothing happened, but this new person found he was a patient one. Unalaq had a long way to go, and he had no way of speeding the process along. There was no use dwelling on factors outside his control.

Eventually, however, the shimmering energy of the Spirit Portal began to shift subtly. A faint hint of blue could be seen within its depths, like a tiny, drowning creature fighting to breach the surface of the water.

Encouraged, he continued to meditate, focused on detaching himself from Sajjad’s body and opening his newborn soul to the cosmic energy of the universe. The blue glow seemed to react positively at this, as it grew brighter and brighter in intensity, as if gradually moving closer.

Finally, it reached the “edge” of the swirling dome.

What followed wasn’t anything that could be described perfectly with words. It was as if the boy was seeing two realities at once, both overlaid over each other with no clear distinction between them.

One reality was all light and sound and color, and it was in *pandemonium*. Soft, cool colors clashed with bright and brilliant ones, fighting for supremacy, while sounds both calm and furious mixed together in an earsplitting, incomprehensible cacophony.

And at the very same time, there was something undeniably *human* in the middle of it all, struggling and clawing and *fighting*, with every last breath, to break free. It was clearly taking every remaining ounce of their strength, but they *were* making progress, slowly but surely.

Two steps forward, one step back. It was a battle they were just *barely* winning, but that would be enough. All that was left was to…

A hand burst through the barrier.
It was a weak hand, one that’d never trained itself in any arts more strenuous than meditative waterbending. And hunger and thirst had weakened it still further.

Already, it was slipping back, its smallest of victories short-lived.

Until the boy seized it, grasping the bony wrist with both arms to get a good grip, and pulled.

It was the hardest thing he could ever remember doing – harder than any of Syed’s intense training or Sajjad’s death-defying stunts. His muscles, while very well developed for his age, still belonged to a twelve-year-old boy, and the opposing force moved against him with all the intensity of a vacuum, hungrily trying to swallow back up its escaping prey.

But the boy did not yield. He dug his shoes into the jagged earth, as deeply as he could, and continued to pull and pull and pull, with every last fiber of his might.

And then, just as suddenly as it’d all started…it stopped.

The colors faded away. The sounds were abruptly silenced. And the intense pull he felt against him utterly collapsed, all at once.

He was lying on the ground, panting for breath. And another boy, just about his age and clad in royal blue furs, was splayed atop him, unconscious.

He’d done it.

[--------------------]

It was another few hours before Unalaq had the strength to reawaken.

The other boy had wrapped him in as many of his loose robes as he could spare, to conserve body heat. He had no food handy, but he’d placed the prince right by the nearest stream, so that he’d see it when he regained consciousness.

As soon as he did, and as soon as he remembered that he was a day or two away from dying from dehydration, he seized at the water greedily, bending enormous slurps directly into his mouth.

This continued for some time, with the boy watching on dispassionately. Eventually, however, once Unalaq had sated the worst of his burning thirst, the prince turned to him, and frowned.

“Xai Bau’s spirit told me I should be awaiting two rescuers,” he said. “What happened to the other one?”

“It’s…a long story,” was the terse reply.

The slightest hint of sympathy flowed into the cracks of Unalaq’s long face, as he seemed to assume the worst.

“I see,” he murmured, using a few seconds to take stock of his surroundings. Like Hundun, his eyes lingered momentarily over the Tree of Time – or possibly, the figure within it – but he didn’t say anything. “Well, I thank you, in any event. Shall we get going?”

“Are you strong enough to walk on your own?” asked the boy, surprised at the quickness of the
Unalaq rose to his feet and tested them gingerly, before nodding. “I’m far from full strength,” he said. “But I’ll manage. Compared to what I just went through, any further journeying can only be an improvement.”

“I trust you don’t wish to share details,” responded the fusion, his tone muted.

“I’ll tell Xai Bau the full story, once we return. Some of my observations may prove useful in unsealing the portals permanently,” Unalaq told him, as they fell into step beside each other, wandering along one of the landscape’s raised ridges. “But for the moment…no. I’d prefer not to dwell.”

“Very well. Then once we’ve left this plane, I’ll contact him through meditation,” the other boy declared, concentrating on trying to leave this “center” the way he’d come to it. “Using the combined spirits of the other Lotus members, he said he’d be able to…”

But Unalaq was holding up a hand, to forestall him from speaking further.

“We can do that later. After what I went through to get here, I’m not leaving until I’ve achieved my original goal,” he said.

The non-bender looked askance at him. “Which is?” he asked.

“Somewhere in the Spirit World, there is an enormous library, curated by a spirit known as Wan Shi Tong,” explained the prince. “That’s what I was trying to seek, before I was…ahem, indisposed.”

The corner of the other boy’s lip actually curled a bit. It was the first smile of his new life.

“I think I might be able to help you there, Prince Unalaq,” he stated, his strides now long and purposeful.

The waterbender hastened to keep up, waving dismissively as he did. “Just Unalaq is fine. I take no pride in my title, useful as it’s been,” he muttered, a hint of bitterness in his tone. “Besides, it’s not like it’ll ever really amount to anything…”

A dark look overtook his eyes, though he didn’t elaborate further. Still, the other boy resolved not to broach the topic again.

Unalaq seemed to notice him staring, because the scowl faded away from his face, shrinking to a thin line. After a moment, he said, “That reminds me. What should I be calling you? Xai Bau neglected to mention.”

That, unbeknownst to the prince, was not an easy question to answer. He supposed it might’ve been easier just to pick one of the twins’ names – probably Sajjad’s, since it would prevent having to explain his shaved head and acrobatic figure – and use that going forward, pretending the other had simply perished during the mission.

Yes. There was no question that would’ve been the easier route.

But ease was one thing. Being able to live with himself was another.

Because at the end of the day, he was his own person. And he wouldn’t have been able to live another’s life – to carry another’s name – for long, without going mad.
Not even the life of someone he’d used to be.

He needed a new name, to reflect his new identity. An identity that wasn’t quite Syed’s, and wasn’t quite Sajjad’s, but was instead something totally new.

It came to him, somehow, in an instant. He wouldn’t have been able to say from where. He wouldn’t have been able to say what it meant, or why he’d picked it, beyond a vague tonal similarity to both the twins’ names.

But he knew, at the depths of his newborn soul, that it felt right.

The boy, the eternal union of two brothers whose destinies had been intertwined from birth, turned to the Water Tribe prince, determination in his pale green eyes.

And he gave his answer.

“My name is Zaheer.”
Book One, Epilogue: Reawakening

“And now, folks, for the moment you’ve all been waiting for! We’re kicking off the sixteenth annual Pro-Bending Championship Tournament with a match that’s going to bend your socks off!”

“On the far side of the arena, introducing the lovely ladies from a distant desert: the Red Sands Rabaroos! And, to challenge them tonight, debuting for their very first season…”

“Republic City’s very own Fiiiiiiiiire Feeeeeeeerrets!”

Zaheer frowned deeply as he leaned forward, half-listening to the commentary. He didn’t feel the need to pay particularly close attention, however. Even if he cared about such inanities, the outcome of this match had been decided before it even began.

And, in any event…

He had far more pressing business to be concerned with right now.

“I see you’re treated well here,” he said. “Not many attempted murderers get to listen to the radio in prison.”

Through a pane of tempered glass, Jilu adopted a wide, self-satisfied smirk. “There are advantages to my… status,” he replied coolly. “In any event, why aren’t you watching the match yourself? I know all your little friends are doing the same.”

Zaheer didn’t allow his surprise to show on his face – though he had a sinking suspicion the other man could sense exactly what he was feeling. All he stated aloud, however, was, “I see you’re as well-informed as ever.”

“A man must have his sources,” stated Jilu, grinning cheekily, as if enjoying a private joke.

The younger man wasn’t especially amused. Still, to fill time if nothing else, he said, “They wanted to support her. Even if they can’t do it openly, they said they had to be there. Ghazan especially. He knew the risk, but…”

“Were you anticipating that?” asked Jilu, reclining back casually in his chair. “How deeply they’d all become attached to our precious young Avatar?”

Zaheer’s eyes widened slightly, as they flicked between the armored guards standing on either side of the elderly page. He’d avoided mentioning too many specifics so far, thanks to their presence. He’d even been prepared to resort to code, if he had to.

Jilu, however, just looked amused by his reaction. “Worried about the grunts? I assure you, there’s no need,” he told him in a carrying whisper, his voice raised high enough that it was obvious the guards could hear him. “They are my creatures now.”

The page waved one hand lazily in the air, like he was shooing away a spiderfly. Then, in unison, both guards sank to their knees.

“It didn’t take me long,” said Jilu, his leer twisting to become sick and predatory. With no reason to hide it any longer, the mask was rapidly peeling away. “Such weak minds rarely do. And it’s been
a few centuries since I’ve tasted minds as weak and pathetic as these.”

Zaheer folded his fingers across each other. “I suppose if there is anyone with the perspective to judge such a thing, it is you,” he responded mutedly, tapping at his chin. “Although, if you’ll indulge my curiosity…”

“Always,” interjected the other man, a twinkle in his eye. “I practically invented the concept.”

“I’ve always wondered,” Zaheer continued on, as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “How do the minds of spirits, and the minds of humans, compare?”

“Oh, a little of this, a little of that,” answered Jilu, his tone elusive. “But in the way I affect them? Really, there’re far more similarities than there are differences. I should know, after all – being at present both, and also neither.”

He punctuated his point by cracking his neck once to each side, his head bending just a little farther than seemed humanly possible.

“You see, I don’t actually control minds…mortal or otherwise,” said the page, after a moment’s pause. “My influence simply brings out the part of them that’s more…primal. The base instincts that, whether your kind wishes to acknowledge it or not, undergird everything you do. Aggression. Vengeance. Bloodlust.”

Zaheer gestured offhandedly to the guards. “And these men?” he asked.

“Submission to authority,” Jilu explained, his tongue running softly against the surface of his teeth. “They are soldiers at heart, by inclination if not training. You think they realize where they are now? They believe they follow some great general, who leads them into glorious battle. Their zealousness blinds them to all but that which I speak.”

The younger man nodded once. “So, in the same way your presence turns spirits dark…” he murmured.

“Every mortal has a spirit within them. Dim, and incorporeal…but strong. I believe your philosophers call it the ‘soul,’” Jilu finished for him, lowering his glasses. “And it is just as susceptible to Chaos.”

For just a moment, the page’s eyes flashed a deep, burning orange. When he reset the glasses back on his brow, however, they were again a beady dark green.

“Why remain here, then?” said Zaheer, suppressing the brief pang of fear those eyes always inspired. Even if he was expecting it, the sheer wrongness of the sight never failed to send a chill down his spine. “If you can so easily corrupt your captors, why not escape?”

Jilu reclined again, his eyes rolling upward in a quizzical expression – as if he’d honestly never considered the question.

“I suppose…there’s the novelty of it, for one thing,” he eventually replied. “Not imprisonment itself, of course – I know that better than any other being since the beginning of time. But I’ve never experienced it in this form before.”

The page blinked a couple of times, as if the sensation was mildly foreign and uncomfortable, before adding, “Although I’d really prefer not to stay here for a full ten-thousand years.”

Zaheer’s frown deepened. Not for the first time, he found himself idly wondering whether he ought
to have chosen differently in this particular…endeavor. In more ways than one.

But what was done, was done. He couldn’t afford to pretend otherwise.

There was far too much at stake to second-guess himself now.

“So…” said Zaheer, switching gears completely. “Did Amon accept your story?”

The corner of Jilu’s mouth twitched slightly. “About the schism, you mean?” he asked. “Well, that has the always-considerable benefit of being the truth. I simply failed to specify which side I was on. Oh, the irony! I actually told him I believed messing around with ‘spiritual mumbo-jumbo’ was a waste of time! Can you believe it? Me!”

He quickly descended into a series of wild, undignified guffaws, rolling around in his chair in a manner that in no way reflected the power he currently held.

Zaheer allowed the mad laughter to continue on for a few moments longer, before cutting him off with a stern, “That really wasn’t much of an answer.”

“It…hee hee…really wasn’t much of a question,” choked out Jilu, as the page finally got a hold of himself once more. “But ultimately, yes. I think he bought it hook, line, and sinker. Dear Noatak operates on the level of betrayal, conflict, and mistrust on a daily basis. It’s what he expects from others.”

“This is a risk, you know,” said Zaheer. “Amon is the worst kind of ally: the one who stands for something. We can only steer him toward our ends for so long.”

“I didn’t have a choice in the matter. This body won’t last to Harmonic Convergence, in my current state,” Jilu admitted. The other man cocked an eyebrow. He’d suspected as much, dimly, but it was still a surprise to hear it out loud. “I needed to increase the Chaos surrounding Republic City, and signal-boosting the Equalists was the quickest way.”

“Nevertheless…” the other man began.

“Nevertheless, I know what I am doing. Do not forget to whom you speak,” snapped the page, cutting him off. There was a slight reverberation to his normally squeaky tones, now. “Even with the Avatar…indisposed at present, I’m confident we can restore her before the year is through. The fool’s bloodbending is reversible, if not easily.”

Zaheer closed his eyes and took a deep, heavy breath, letting these words wash over him.

“I suppose…I have no choice but to trust you in this,” he said softly. “I’ve spent the past thirteen years doing nothing but. Longer, depending on how one wishes to count time.”

Jilu chuckled, though the sound that escaped his lips sounded about ten degrees deeper than anything that should’ve come from his pale, wrinkled frame.

“A wise man once said that time is an illusion. And so is death,” he told the other man, crossing his arms behind him and turning away. The still-kneeling guards didn’t react one iota. “By winter’s end, you shall see just how true both these are. You and your entire, pathetic, mewling race.”

“This wouldn’t be the first time your arrogance has been your undoing, Vaatu.”

The words had left his mouth before he’d had time to think about them. A second later…well, he didn’t regret saying it, exactly. But he had no idea how the most powerful spirit to ever come into
existence would react.

To his surprise, however, the page merely turned around slowly, his head revolving as if on a rusted axle. An enormous, unnerving, utterly mad grin sat upon it.

“Ah, but that’s beauty of it. Right Zaheer?” he asked. “I’m not just Vaatu any longer. That was the entire point of this…”

He raised one small, weak hand and turned it over a few times, marveling at it. He seemed to be searching for just the right word, before finally settling on, “Experiment.”

Then, without any further preamble, he snapped his fingers. Both the guards immediately stood back up, rubbing their eyes and groaning groggily.

“Gentlemen, I’d like to return to my cell now,” he said brightly, the echoing undertone faded away to whispers once more. “Time to get back to paying my debt to society!”

If the guards noticed that the radio was still playing – or that on the other side of the glass sat one of the world’s most wanted criminals – they failed to react to either one. Instead, moving with a sudden certainty of purpose that stiffened their backs and forced their vision steadily forward, they took hold of Jilu by either arm, and escorted him from the visiting room.

Leaving Zaheer alone with the tinny, electronic voice once more.

“And with that incredible double-whammy, Bolin of the Fire Ferrets has sacrificed himself to send the Rabaroos’ water and earthbenders into the drink!”

“With Mako already down for the count, that makes this a one-on-one fight to the finish between team captain Adi and the Ferrets’ new waterbender, Mizore! We’ve been seeing some pretty impressive moves out of this rookie so far, but with only fifteen seconds left on the clock, can either of these girls pull off that winning shot?”

“There’s the whistle…and oof, that’s gotta hurt! Adi’s giving everything she’s got right out of the gate, and it looks like all Mizore can do just to block what the Desert Queen’s cooking! Already she’s been backed into Zone Two and…there it is! Mizore’s now in Zone Three, and Adi’s literally got her back up against the wall! Well…a wall made of water, anyway.”

“With nine seconds left in the round, it looks like this might just be all over for the Fire Ferrets! Adi readies herself for the final blow, and…”

“Wait. Wait a minute, folks. I…don’t even know how to describe what I’m seeing! Looks like Mizore’s still in this game, and she’s moving like an entirely different player! All of a sudden, Adi’s attacks are only striking air!”

“She’s bobbing and weaving! Weaving and bobbing! Adi’s giving it her all but it’s just not enough, folks!”

“We’re down to the final seconds here. Adi unleashes another torrent of flame, but experienced eyes can tell she’s run out most of her juice. Still, if Mizore can’t counterattack soon it’s still game over for the Ferrets on points!”

“And that’s five…four…three…two…oooooooooo-what a knockout!”
“I can’t believe my own eyes, folks! With just one aerial shot, Mizore sends her opponent tumbling down the entire length of the arena, and straight into the drink! The Fire Ferrets come from way behind to seize the first round of the championship!”

The commentary continued on for several minutes past that, but Zaheer didn’t stick around to listen. Again, he’d had little doubt how this was all fated to end.

Even without seeing it in person, it was obvious what’d just unfolded. Korra had put his teachings to work, applying airbending theory to her movements even if she hadn’t yet mastered the practice.

A handful of ordinary athletes hadn’t a snowball’s chance in the Boiling Rock.

There were a great many thoughts passing through the non-bender’s mind as he slipped out of the prison, ready to meet up with the others post-match and return to base. A thousand plots, both presently unfolding and yet to be hatched, which were competing for attention in his mind. Each of them with stakes no less grand than the fate of the world itself.

But above them all, to Zaheer’s great surprise, was one other thought. One that was quiet, barely a whisper…

And yet was no less insistent.

“That’s my girl.”

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