The World's Weapon

by zhenyilani

Summary

With great power comes great responsibility and great risk.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Wanfeng Prison off the coast of Chameleon Bay

The prison was quiet save for the clinking of one inmate’s platinum cup against the bars of his platinum cell. The guards stood still, their crystal blue eyes staring forwards at the emptiness of the opposite wall. To avoid fatigue, guards only worked in two-hour shifts, rotating constantly. They were forbidden from even speaking to the inmates at this extremely high-security prison; with its eerie silence, it was a wonder more inmates weren’t insane.

There was a rare click of a lock and the door to the solitary confinement ward slid open with a groan.

The guards flanking the cell snapped to attention and saluted as the warden entered, then fell to their knees when they saw who followed.

“There is no need for such formalities. Unlike Hou-ting, I won’t have you beheaded for blinking in my presence. Please rise,” the familiar voice ordered the two guards.

“Is there anything we can do for you, your highness?” the guard asked.

“Yes,” the Earth Queen replied steadily. “Step aside.”

“Your Highness?” the other guard choked.

The inmate inside tensed, dreading her visitor’s presence.

“You heard correctly. Step aside.”

“But-”

“Make me repeat myself a third time and I will have you both court martialed for disobedience,” the new monarch interjected sternly.

“Yes, your Highness,” the guards said, parting.

There was the click of a second lock parting and the door to the solitary confinement chamber opened, letting in a flood of light pour in onto the thinned inmate.

“So this is where Raiko threw you away,” the woman sighed with a tone of pity in her voice.

The inmate looked away. “Don’t pretend he did this alone.” she spat bitterly.

“I’m so sorry for what they’ve done to you--” Suyin Beifong sighed.

“Why are you really here, Su?” the inmate interrupted. “To boast about how great it is to be the very thing you scorned for an eternity?”

“I came here because I am sorry for what I’ve done to you too,” Suyin Beifong replied, stepping into the cell and bending down in front of the inmate. She produced the key to the inmate’s
shackles, unlocked the bonds, and cast them away.

Whole minutes passed before the former matriarch of Zaofu spoke again. “Even though I always saw you as a daughter to me, I have come to realize that I never did treat you like one, and for that I am sorry.” She paused to draw an uneasy breath, visibly struggling to contain an emotion the inmate didn’t recognize in the woman. “I came to ask, if you were willing to allow me to, may I have a second chance to be the mother to you that I should have been?”

The inmate remained still throughout and the Earth Queen wondered if she were even still breathing. Finally, she reached out a hand to slide aside a lock of the young woman’s dark hair revealing a tear-stained and too-gaunt face that looked down at her knees incredulously.

“You’re not dreaming,” the Earth Queen said softly, tucking the lock of hair behind the young woman’s ear. She took a finger and lifted the inmate’s chin to look into her forest green eyes. “I promise.”

The inmate’s breath hitched in her throat as another tear slid down her exposed face. She ran one hand around the opposite wrist to verify that the shackles were indeed gone, not once breaking eye contact with the Earth Queen. She rubbed an ankle with the bottom of her other foot and stretched her weakened legs for the first time in weeks. Her heart rate accelerated and her breathing quickened as she ran her hands up her own arms, in desperate need for an embrace.

The Earth Queen reached for her and took her into her arms. “I will never again leave you alone.” She said as the inmate finally let her cold stone walls fall down and the tears flow freely. The Earth Queen rubbed circles on her back, through the rough-spun shift, patiently, until the inmate stopped crying. “Now come meet your family, your real family.”
Giangxi Iron Mines, Kioka Province, Fire Nation

Tetsuya heaved the last crate of building materials into the jeep and wiped his hands on his worn down, mud-saturated denim pants in pouring rain. Over at the other building, Taemon was repairing a machine for the factory where they had to provide manual labor to fulfil the community service portion of their sentence.

“Ready to head back to the tent yet?” Tetsuya asked Taemon under the machine.

“Almost,” Taemon replied. There was a click and a clunk and an exclamation from Taemon as something fell on his head.

“You alright?” Tetsuya asked with genuine concern.

“Fine— it wasn’t heavy,” Taemon replied from under the machine. “Where is Tatsu?”

“Didn’t show again. Probably hungover in some gutter,” Tetsuya replied.

Taemon sighed and emerged from under the machine dabbing his bloodied forehead with a filthy rag. “Let’s find him and bring him back.”

They found their brother stumbling around behind the back wall of the factory with a black eye, a bloodied fist, a bruised cheek, a torn shirt and limping leg.

“Dear brother, you were once so beautiful like me. Quit this folly,” Tetsuya said, touching his twin’s face.

“Never.” Tatsuya threw a feeble punch that his twin brother evaded effortlessly. The elder picked up his drunken twin and walked beside Taemon from the industrial area back to the laborers’ camp.

“You still wear your hair long like a fucking prince that you’ll never be,” a fellow laborer jeered as they passed the gates of the guard house to the tents.

“It’s a personal preference and has nothing to do with my blood relation to royalty,” Tetsuya exuded with an admirable sense of confidence and self-assuredness as he carried his inebriated twin brother to their tent.

“Your brother?” Another stranger asked, nodding to Tetsuya as he emerged after dumping Tatsu onto a straw mat to get some stew from the kettle on the open fire place in the center of the cluster of tents.

“Obviously,” Tetsuya murmured sarcastically.

“And you still care for him?” another laborer asked as if he were surprised.

“He’s blood,” Tetsu responded stiffly, appalled why anyone wouldn’t want to help his or her own brother. Then again, he almost cost his sister, and his cousins their lives. He tried to murder his own mother, outright.
“Then what’s your excuse for sticking around them?” a third asked Taemon pointedly. “You ain’t share no blood with these wretched bastards.”

“Loyalty,” Taemon answered, smoothly sipping his tea.

“What do a couple o’ convicted traitors know of loyalty?” a fourth laborer asked.

Tetsuya lunged to defend his chosen brother, nearly spilling his night’s rations.

“Tetsu, don’t fight back!” Taemon ordered, holding a hand out in front of the younger.

Tetsuya flipped his perfect hair back out of his face and huffed, returning to his tent with his tin of stew.

Taemon exhaled and followed with his own pitiful ration.

Tetsuya kicked his bag aside, then picked up his dulling razor to shave his face after wiping the dirt and grime of the day away.

“Why do you even bother with self-maintenance, Brother?” Taemon asked, squatting over the edge of his bamboo mat with his cracked bowl in hand as Tetsuya groomed himself.

“Mother always told us that presentation was important. Even before we could say we were part of her family, we represented her name and had to act accordingly,” Tetsuya replied.

“And yet you let your brother go out every day in rags and then out again every evening to get drunk.”

“It was his way of coping when she couldn’t be there to see him. I tried to teach him to breathe, to help him find peace, but his energy— it just runs on a different channel as mine.”

“Do you miss her still? After what she’s done to us—” Taemon asked sadly.

“Yes.” Tetsuya replied solemnly.

“Do you think we could have done it? If it weren’t for her inner fire?”

The man paused. “Honestly? I’m not sure. She’s smarter than everyone I have ever encountered. With that league of hers, she would have found out eventually no matter how many of her agents we turned against her. She was always ahead.”

“Once Takeo becomes Fire Lord, would you want to try again?”

“No. Once again, Mother’s right. We’re not foolish enough to try to do the same thing especially now that she knows our tactics and has declared herself the World’s Weapon. Would you?”

“No in this lifetime,” Taemon replied, drinking the last drop of his sad soup.

Just as Tetsuya finished shaving, there was a loud rapping on the canvas flap of their tent and the camp warden entered.

“Ey! Ya bastard beauties, get up! There’s someone here ta take yeh all this evening,” he grumbled lazily but dutifully, throwing the flap open. Both Tetsuya and Taemon jumped, startled while Tatsuya remained unconscious on his mat, fatigued and likely hungover..

“Brother, Brother wake up!” Tetsuya whispered insistently, shaking Tatsuya’s shoulder only to get
“Ugh!” Tetsu grumbled, slapping his brother across the face before turning to the camp warden miserably.

“Yerall have ter come,” the warden ordered a little more insistently than before.

“I got him this time,” Taemon said, heaving the inebriate over his shoulder, following the camp warden out of their tent.

Tetsuya tossed his broken mirror and old razor into his bag and grabbed his two brothers’ and followed.

“Genkei?” they asked when they saw their mother’s non-bending Captain of her personal guard.

“Boys,” he nodded.

“You know we’re older than you, right?” Taemon asked.

“I’m only following the Fire Lord’s orders, to retrieve her sons. We’re going.” Genkei informed the three.

“Where this time?” Tetsuya asked wearily.

“To Ember Island, for vacation.”

Vacation?

“But what of our sixty hours a week of community service?” Tetsuya protested like a boy, fearful of the potential public retaliation that would arise when they find the Fire Lord’s sons blew off their punishment.

“They are cumulative. You will make them up after your break. You don’t want to risk disobeying her lordship again, do you?” Genkei asked.

“No, I suppose not,” Tetsuya said with a heavy sigh, following the elite member of the Amber League back to a royal airship.

“Where’s the third?” Fire Lord Izumi demanded of her servant when he presented Taemon and Tetsuya to her.

“Asleep, my lord. He hasn’t stirred since we retrieved them from the camp. Would you like us to try to wake him?” Genkei asked.

“No. He must need his rest,” Izumi replied understandingly. She turned to study the two men kneeling before her. “Good. They haven’t beaten you too badly yet,” Izumi commented as she bored into their souls with her blazing golden-tangerine-colored eyes.

“Not us, but Tatsu. He--” Tetsuya couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“No. He must need his rest,” Izumi replied understandingly. She turned to study the two men kneeling before her. “Good. They haven’t beaten you too badly yet,” Izumi commented as she bored into their souls with her blazing golden-tangerine-colored eyes.

“Not us, but Tatsu. He--” Tetsuya couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“Hasn’t been in the best of shape lately-,” Taemon answered for him.

“It’s a shame really, what he’s become,” Izumi sighed melancholically, interlacing her hands and leaning her elbows on her desk. “If my father hadn’t banned Agni Kais, Tatsu could have possibly gained the rank of dragon,” she mused. “I’ve thought several times to reinstate the ceremony but
“Why didn’t you crush them like you crushed us?” Taemon asked.

“Because people died in Agni Kais,” Izumi answered clearly. “They weren’t tournaments. They were death matches for honor and glory. Their only purpose was to preserve tradition no matter how sick and twisted it became. You two still probably don’t realize it, but we are on the same side, you and I. We all want change in the Fire Nation and we can’t stand its current rate.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“Let Takeo lead the charge forward with his youthful new face. I am sure the Fire Nation is already tired of me. Besides, once word gets out about what we uncovered in those two weeks I am certain they will lose faith in me. They won’t trust me after they find out just how many bastards I am hiding and will begin to wonder what other secrets we keep.” Izumi said, leaning back in her seat. At first, neither man before her spoke.

“Is it true what they say? About us going on a vacation?” Tetsuya asked.

“Yes. It’s also a test for you three. The only rules will be that you cannot individually go beyond the bounds of the property alone. You may be accompanied by a handler, a cousin, parent, or even each other.” she paused after emphasizing each other. “My advisors think me insane for trusting you with such independence, but from what I knew of you in your youth and from what I have observed of your careers, you are both brilliant minds who do not ever make the same mistake twice,” Izumi said, leaning back in her seat. At first, neither man before her spoke.

“But your reputation— if the people find what you’ve done—”

“I will tell you now, at this point in my life, I don’t care about my name anymore. My time is almost done and it will be you who will have to live for a long while with the choices you’ve made. Is that in any way unclear?”

“No ma’am,” Taemon responded looking down.

“Good,” Izumi sighed sitting up.

“In that case, is that all, Mother?” Tetsuya asked.

“For now.”

They were about to leave when Tetsuya hung back.

“May I stay a moment longer?” Tetsuya asked once Taemon had gone.

“Always. That, you never have to ask that,” Izumi replied, laying her crown flat to the side of her work. He analyzed her collection. She was incredibly neat and efficient with her to-do pile, current work, and things to mail out the next morning. Then along the top of her table, she displayed an array of personal artefacts: two photographs that Tetsuya could not see and a couple of other nicknacks. Among them, an origami turtle duck stood out.

Both their eyes rested on the same object.

“You kept it?” Tetsuya asked. “After all this time?”

“Always,” Izumi replied, staring him straight in the eye. “As I said I would that moment you gave
“Mama! Mama! Guess what Father taught us to bend today?” five-year-old Tetsuya asked, beaming as he ran into Izumi’s arms.

“What did he teach you?” Izumi asked, kissing his face and brushing his long dark hair away from those brilliantly shining eyes that matched hers perfectly. She was worried, slightly for at this same age, she and her lover, Masaru were already bending lightning at each other in secret since nobody else would.

“He taught us how to beeeeend— ORIGAMI!” Tetsuya said, producing the tiny paper turtle duck.

“Oh Tetsu, it’s magnificent!” Izumi exclaimed, sweeping her son up into her arms and turning him around with glee before bringing him to rest on her hip.

“I’m glad you think so!” Tetsuya exclaimed, petting its tiny inanimate head. “It’s for you!” Tetsuya replied, turning it over for one final inspection before handing her his creation.

“I shall cherish it forever, my Love. Just as I cherish you.” she promised him, accepting the gift gratefully. She touched his nose to his and kissed him again, holding him in her arms, wishing for the moment to never end.

They looked up at each other. Tetsuya’s golden tangerine eyes were cool and unreadable, conditioned apathy burned into his being from his time serving in the Amber League. His mother’s matching ones flickered in the candle light, still bright with life but at the same time overshadowed by grief for a time long lost to misery.

“Forgive me,” Izumi whispered.

“There’s nothing to be forgiven,” Tetsuya replied. Izumi came around the desk and the two hugged.

“My boy, my darling boy! I should have never let you join the League. I should have never let the politics interfere with my family. I should have ousted the Fire Sages sooner, fucked the clergy and married your father before everything! I should have never forced you to harbor my secrets, to grow up suffering—”

“It was for our own protection, I understand that much—“

“No, it was me being selfish and weak. It was me allowing myself to be manipulated by the masses, and I’m so sorry!” Izumi said, holding him, running her fingers through his silky hair.

He bent down on his knees so she wouldn’t have to tip toe. So he could rest his head on her chest and listen to his mother’s heartbeat like an infant still in the womb or taking his first breath, he felt human again.

“You’re so cold now,” she said, feeling his energy instinctively.

“It’s only the normal temperature for a nonbender, 98.7 degrees,” he replied. Firebender blood naturally ran about a hundred and thirty. Izumi and Masaru ran even hotter as a result of their all-consuming inner fire constantly threatening to break out. Even without his bending, Tetsuya could
feel their warmth from a mile away.

Izumi held him and he held her back for a long while in her office.

“Mother, will you tell me a story?” Tetsuya asked quietly.

“What kind of story?”

“What was it like when you were a child, before you were told you were a princess, back when you were truly carefree and happy?”

“I can barely remember such a time existing.”

“You do. I know you do. I can see it just beyond your eyes. You dream of it-- your childhood-- just as I dream of mine.”

Izumi’s face melted with a bittersweet sadness. “It was blissful at times. Running as fast as I can through these very halls, sliding into the walls trying to turn. I was always the pursuer if you would believe it. Saru would provoke me and I would chase him and make him pay for wrongdoing me.”

“And did you catch him?”

“Always.”

“Did you break things?”

“We tried not to, but it was inevitable. A couple of vases shattered. A couple of suits of armor dented. A couple of tapestries torn. Nothing burned, surprisingly. We only had each other. There was no Iroh teaching us the dragon dance, no Sasuke showing us how to use swords, and there certainly was no Rikuto showing off earthbending forms. It was just the two of us, eerily quiet and dreadfully lonely. We were both kept secret, Saru because of Toph’s own pains and me, because the Fire Sages couldn’t bear the thought of a woman ruling our precious country.”

“Were you glad to have so many sons?”

“It did not matter if you were a son or a daughter. I was just glad that my children had friends that could love them and keep them company when I wasn’t there. I was glad I was healthy enough see you all grow up. I was grateful however you were all boys when Ursa came. I knew someday she’d be fucked, that someday she would be subject to the same pains as me.”

“Thank you for not giving up on us, mother,” he said crying.

“I will never give up on you. You are a part of me,” Izumi said, looking into his eyes sincerely.

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The Ember Island Airfield

The air was warmer and more humid than Kuvira ever felt Zaofu being, and when she looked outside, she saw tropics instead of the grassy plains she grew up seeing. “Where are we?” she asked.

“Ember Island, in the Fire Nation,” Suyin replied calmly as the door of the airship opened and the gangway was lowered by metalbending guards.

“This is a trick, isn’t it? We’re just being transferred to another prison?” Kuvira asked, tugging anxiously at her sleeve, following with her head hung low, not wanting to face anybody.
“It is not a trick, Kuvira. It is the real deal. Come meet your new Aunt and Uncle,” Suyin said, waving for her to follow. “Baatar, let’s go,” she called her eldest son over, careful not to call him ‘Junior.’

They both looked up from their feet to see a couple dressed in casual Fire Nation beachwear waiting for them on the deck of the airship dock.

“F-Fire Lord Izumi?” Kuvira stuttered, startled, bowing respectfully.

Izumi smiled. “Just Aunt Zumi is fine. Besides, I am no longer Fire Lord. My son Takeo is though, but since we are all on vacation, you don’t need to worry about anyone’s titles.”

“Takeo?” The name was unfamiliar to Kuvira, who had extensively studied every member of every foreign leader and all potential enemies of her Earth Empire. “I thought you only had two children—Iroh and Ursa—”

“So did the rest of the world until recently,” Izumi replied with a disarming smile, glancing at the man standing beside her.

“Kuvira, Baatar, meet Masaru Lee of Earthen Fire Refineries,” Suyin said, motioning to the tall, broad-shouldered, high-cheekboned, slightly old Fire Nation man with amber eyes and fine lines. “He is my half brother and Lin Beifong’s full brother—you remember my sister, Lin, right?”

“The Chief of Police of Republic City?” Baatar asked softly.

“Well, she is not Chief of Police anymore, Mako is.”

“Mako? The idiot brother of the idiot Bolin?” Kuvira asked in disbelief. “And Toph Beifong was okay with that?” She never thought she’d see a time when Republic City’s esteemed metalbending police force would be led by a firebender, but clearly that was no longer the case.

“Not really, but you know how difficult it is to keep your stupid kids from doing stupid things, ain’t that right, Saru? Su?” Toph Beifong asked, appearing out of the metal surface of the metal airship deck, elevating herself on a platform to place her leathery, bony arms over Izumi and Masaru’s shoulders. Masaru jumped while Izumi and Suyin both laughed warmly. Kuvira and Baatar simply looked on, both too stunned to react to anything.

“How is this all even possible?” Baatar Jr. asked breathlessly.

“It is a long and complicated story that will reveal itself soon enough,” Masaru replied as he brushed himself off, pretending he hadn’t been scared in the least. “In the meantime, come meet your other cousins. After that, we’ll release you to rest or do whatever you want. I know there’s nothing more comfortable than solid ground beneath the feet of an earthbender.” Masaru added, glancing at Kuvira with a sympathetic smile.

Kuvira and Baatar followed Masaru silently while Suyin and Izumi hung behind. Once the ex-convicts were out of earshot, Suyin let her smile fade and turned to Izumi sadly. “They’ve both changed so much. Baatar’s depressed, and Kuvira looks like she’s been starving herself. The light in their eyes is gone completely.” Suyin sighed, regretting everything.

“Just give them time. They’ll come around,” Izumi replied, putting a reassuring hand on Suyin’s shoulder.

They arrived at the cliffs just above the private beach of the Royal Family’s vacation property just
as the sun began to set, casting a beautiful orangey glow on the gentle waves that lapped at the sand below.

“It might be easier to introduce everyone from up here, where you can see everything,” Masaru mentioned before proceeding. “Playing Kuai Ball now are Suyin’s sons--you remember Wing and Wei, right?--my daughter Miyoko, and one of Lin and Tenzin’s airbenders, Jiexue,” Masaru informed Baatar Jr. and Kuvira, pointing at the circular court that had been set up on the beach.

“Wait, Lin and Tenzin have a daughter?” Kuvira asked.

“I could have told you that,” Baatar Jr. sighed wearily.

“Three daughters, three sons. They were all born before Jinora. Opposing them are Hungjian, the eldest child of Lin and Tenzin, Huifan, second eldest, Rikuto, Mine and Izumi’s only earthbending child, and the former Crown Princess, Ursa of the Fire Nation,” Masaru continued.

“Former Crown Princess?”

“Until Takeo has a child of his own, all of his siblings are Princes and Princesses. None of them direct heirs to the throne,” Izumi explained.

“Out surfing are General Iroh, Fire Lord Takeo, Tenzin and Lin’s youngest son, Kang and Tenzin and Pema’s older son, Meelo,” Masaru added, pointing at the waves. “By the tidepools, mine and Zumi’s son, Sasuke, is walking with Jinkun and Rohan. Jin is another one of Lin and Tenzin’s and…”

“Damn, you all breed like the Weasleys,” Kuvira muttered as she struggled to follow.

“Sorry?” Masaru asked.

“Never mind, it is just an expression from a fantasy novel that I once read,” Kuvira replied dismissively.

“Anyways, Opal wanted Bolin to join us on the vacation, but we didn’t want his brother to feel left out, so we invited Mako too, and by extension Korra and Asami so that he wouldn’t end up always third wheeling…”

“You know, Korra and Asami are also kind of a thing, so Mako would still kind of end up third wheeling if he hung out with them,” Suyin commented.

“But I thought he dated them both,” Masaru responded. “Why wouldn’t they just have a threesome?”

“Love, enough about the private lives of the young people,” Izumi shut down quickly. “Is there anyone we are forgetting?”

“Down here, braiding hair…” Kuvira answered deathly quietly, gazing down at one man in particular.

“The three boys are mine,” Izumi said solemnly. “Taemon is the one with his knee bent and the twins Tetsu and Tatsu are being tortured by Tenzin’s daughters, Jinora and Ikki.”

Just then Ikki looked up and saw them. She whispered something to Jinora and let go of one of the twins’ long dark locks and jumped, with a puff of air landing on the cliff in front of Kuvira.
“You’re back!” She exclaimed, hugging Kuvira and surprising everybody. “Would you like to help us braid hair? We were wondering what fire boys looked like with crimped hair, so we decided to make a thousand tiny braids and then make them sleep with it and then brush it out in the morning,” Ikki explained rapidly.

“And are the fire boys okay with this plan?” Kuvira asked.

“Well they haven’t yet protested,” Ikki replied, shrugging innocently.

“Well… I suppose that counts as a perverted form of consent,” Kuvira replied, nervously edging herself towards the cliff.

“Wait, Kuvira, before you go, there is only one rule while you’re here,” Izumi called. Kuvira looked back to her. “And it applies to everybody, even us old folks, so don’t view it as a punishment,” Izumi added as a reminder to Ikki. “No one goes beyond the bounds of the property alone.”

“Fair enough,” Kuvira shrugged. “But what if nobody wants to come with me?”

“Then ask one of us,” Izumi responded. “We’re not at all busy for the time being.”

“Thank you,” Kuvira sighed, turning back to the cliffs warily.

“Is she afraid of heights?” Izumi whispered nearly inaudibly, to Suyin.

“She probably just hasn’t earthbent anything in months,” Suyin replied. She slid a foot forward catching Kuvira on an earthen platform, then lowered her down to the beach. Kuvira dug her fingers into the earthen surface and looked up with a gasp.

“Don’t worry, it’ll come back,” Suyin said with an understanding smile.

“Mother, do you know where I might find a bed? And a drink, possibly?” Baatar Jr. asked weakly.

“I’ll show you to your room, but I won’t give you a drink, not until you’ve eaten something. Are you hungry?” Suyin asked, putting an arm around her son, guiding him to the large beach house.

“Not particularly,” Baatar replied. “In which case, maybe I should just have some water and some sleep.”

“That sounds good, sweetie,” Suyin replied, holding his arm and his waist as she guided him.

“Jinora! I got a helper!” Ikki announced excitedly. The three men—not boys—turned to look at Kuvira. All three of them looked particularly drained of their energy for some reason. The twins, Tetsuya and Tatsuya returned their gazes to the glowing surf after a few seconds while Taemon’s eyes remained on the newcomer a little longer.

“Here, you can help me with Tetsu!” Ikki said, kneeling behind one of the men sitting on the beach.

Kuvira sat down on her knees in the sand and reached for a lock of the long, silky black hair, wanting to ask why he and his comrades looked so tired. Their golden and amber eyes looked like they’d walked through hell and barely survived.

“Speak freely, please,” the man with the amber eyes said sternly, still looking directly at the former Great Uniter. Kuvira looked up with surprise. Was she that easy to read? “What is on your mind,
Kuvira?

He recognized me? “How do you know my name?”

“How could anyone not know your name, Great Uniter? You were an inspiration to many,” he replied. Jinora and Ikki looked between the two with uncertainty. The twins didn’t move, but listened intently.

An inspiration, eh? “I just wondered why you looked so tired when everyone else…”

“Looked fine?” Taemon asked. “Relieved? Almost jovial as they play their games on the beach?”

“It’s what happens when you are robbed of your bending. Grandfather Zuko says we will get used to it in time,” one of the twins, Tetsuya replied.

“Your grandfather is… Lord Zuko?” Kuvira asked in disbelief.

“The one and only,” Tetsuya replied with an insincere smile.

“Scar and all,” Tatsuya mumbled, clearly depressed about something, but by the looks of it, hadn’t been for long.

Kuvira looked at their long faces, pointed chins, sharp jawline, long nose, narrow, slanted eyes and high cheekbones and the mirroring locks of hair that hung down the twins’ faces. Now that she thought about it, they did bear a striking resemblance to their grandfather.

Ikki reached for one of those locks of hair. “Touch it, and I will bite you,” Tatsuya threatened. The little girl immediately let it go.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what happened here?” Kuvira inquired.

“A fight for freedom,” the other, seemingly less temperamental twin, Tetsuya answered.

“Obviously, we lost,” Taemon added, gazing out on the ocean. His hair was combed back and came down to the base of his neck, much like his adoptive father’s but unlike Masaru’s wasn’t at all curly and to the young airbenders, not as satisfying to play with as the twins’, apparently.

Kuvira looked down at Tetsuya’s hair in her hands and began braiding.

“You still have questions,” Taemon said after a while, turning to look at her directly.

“But none I feel like asking right now,” Kuvira replied, a little annoyed by the man’s prying eyes.
The pommel of both swords were shaped like flames erupting around a stone. On one pommel, the flame surrounded a massive sapphire enclosed by tiny rubies. In the other, the flame surrounded a massive ruby surrounded by tiny emeralds. The guard and the blade both looked as if they were made of the same unusually shiny, extremely reflective steel. When they clashed, it looked as if they never made contact. There was a space of at least an inch between the two blades.

The man dipped and stepped forward, elbowing the woman and flipped her over his shoulder, catching her blade as she tumbled, sending her sword with the sapphire and rubies flying across the arena. Rather than forfeit, she unsheathed a new weapon, a long sword, and the fight continued.

"Taemon watched his adoptive parents battle each other mercilessly from the window of his room. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword, crafted in the same style as theirs. He would have to recondition his weaponry skills now that he could no longer rely on his mastery of the four elements and all of their subsets.

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"Have you trained anyone else with swords?" nine-year-old Taemon asked Izumi as they walked out to the courtyard.

"No. Sasuke studied briefly under master Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe and then master Tianxu of Shu Jing out of necessity, but not the others. They were too comfortable with their bending to ever even consider learning how to use a blade," Izumi replied coolly. "So I could not teach them."

"Why didn’t you just make them learn?" Taemon asked, looking up at her curiously.

Izumi turned her cold gaze down to face him as they walked. “Because I know what it is like to be forced to do something I have no interest in doing. And I will do no such things to my sons.”

Taemon looked away. Even when she was terrifying, she was kind.

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Taemon put on his suit, donned his coat and jacket, and secured the harness that hosted his arsenal of blades. He carried his katana on his left hip to draw with his right, two short companion swords that were about the length of his forearm, a tanto dagger on his right hip, twin dao swords slung across his back and a longsword opposite the pair. He grabbed his polishing kit and decided to inspect his long-neglected collection at the edge of forest that surrounded the property, in crisp sunlight and away from the prying eyes of family.

Lin followed as Suyin carried the box of new clothes to Kuvira’s room on Ember Island, wondering the whole time why her little sister felt this need to be accompanied by someone.
whenever she visited her own daughter. It was absurd. One shouldn’t fear one’s own children. Kuvira never even tried to kill Suyin like Baatar did -- spitting poison in her face. And yet Su was with Baatar almost every evening whispering comforting words in his ear while Kuvira had been left to her own devices after she escaped Ikki’s braiding encampment down on the beach.

“Mama Lin! Have you seen my staff?” Ikki asked, sliding past the two Beifongs.

“Perhaps. May I ask why you need it with your wingsuit?”

“I can fly but I can’t hit things with my wingsuit!” Ikki replied in a matter-of-fact manner. “I need my staff.”

“You’re an airbender Ikki. You shouldn’t be hitting anything with anything,” Lin responded, careful to be gentle with Tenzin and Pema’s little ones.

“Hawwww!!” Ikki pouted.

“Unless the target deserves it,” Lin added with a smirk.

“Opal was dissing Kuvira for braiding Tetsu’s hair. I TOLD HER I made Kuvira do it but she didn’t care.”

“In that case, your staff is in the weapon’s closet by the east exit of the house. Next to Aunt Zumi’s favorite tea room, but Ikki— try to talk to her before you decide to use it.”

“Yes ma’am!” Ikki yelled, saluting the former Chief before scampering off.

“Did you just give her permission to beat my daughter with a staff?” Suyin asked stopping dead in her tracks.

“For dissing your other daughter, yes. Siblings should be kind to one another. If they’re not, then at least we should give them some sort of reminder,” Lin explained.

Su exhaled tiredly. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Aren’t I always?” Lin asked with a smirk, jabbing her little sister on the arm playfully.

As soon as they reached Kuvira’s door, Suyin undid the lock and handle with a nod of her chin and pushed it open with her foot. “Oh good! You’re awake!” the Earth Queen declared, waltzing right in on the former Great Uniter standing by the window, gazing at the Earthen Fire Airship tied down just off the Royal Family’s private beach.

Kuvira jumped and spun around, clutching her chest, startled. Suyin paid no attention to her shock, mindlessly continuing to unload the contents of the boxes she brought onto the unmade bed.

“Perhaps you should have knocked,” Lin suggested in a whisper as she took a seat on a bench in the far corner.

“Ah, well, didn’t have a hand to do so,” Suyin shrugged carelessly.

Lin raised her brows and looked around. Really? Really Su? “You could have asked me,” Lin suggested, not taking her remark as a valid excuse.

“Next time,” Suyin promised before turning her attention to her former ward, who watched with a heartbreakingly closed posture. Both arms were folded over her chest and she slouched while leaning back, towards the window. It was just as Izumi described Huan as behaving that one night.
Simply— tired.

“Kuvira, would you please come try these on? Or at least some of them? I can have them tailored if they don’t fit properly. I just thought you’d prefer to have some clothing of your own in some nice Earth Kingdom greens instead of having to wear Zumzu’s ancient hand-me-down robes from the medieval days.”

“I—” Kuvira uttered. “Thank you, Su.” She walked over cautiously while Lin watched. Su? Not Mom or Ma’am or Miss Beifong? Just Su?

“They’re all made of a special new fabric produced by Earthen Fire Refineries. The fabric is supposedly flame retardant, impossible to cut or tear and incredibly breathable and lightweight so that you can still fight and not die of overheating or suffocation.” Suyin explained.

“Is all that necessary?” Kuvira asked.

“After Huifan almost got raped by a bloodbender in the Siege of Republic City, Masaru thought it might be, so he had the material developed. As a sort of everyday armor for his daughter and nieces,” Suyin replied.

“Oh… I see,” Kuvira replied quietly, lifting a shirt up to her shoulders.

“You still have questions,” Lin commented. Kuvira jumped again. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, it’s alright, I am just… not used to hearing voices,” Kuvira replied, stroking her arm nervously.

“I’m sorry—”

“It is not your fault. I was just wondering, why are we all here? I mean most everybody my generation seems like they’re full grown adults. Why aren’t they all working? Even the current Fire Lord is taking a break from… well… everything.”

“Well, up until about a year ago, my children lived in hiding, on an estate in Republic City. Up until about a week ago, Zumzu’s brood of Fire Babies lived in plain sight of everybody under the name Lee, but were never allowed to even imply they had any relation to hers or our family. We are simply trying to make up for lost time by having this extended vacation after living so long in isolation,” Lin explained.

“What happened to Pema? And how did Baatar end up jailed after Su-- you pulled so many strings!” Kuvira asked.

Suyin actually laughed a little. “When Jinora discovered Lin’s babies, she, Ikki, and Meelo insisted they be united as one family. Pema just… got a little jealous of Lin and recruited Junior to help her instigate a second Equalist Uprising. They stormed on Republic City with a flying version of the very mech you used to march in the first time.”

“An Equalist Uprising? I guess this means he detests me even more now, for being an earthbender,” Kuvira sighed.

“It wasn’t actually an Equalist uprising. That was just the cover Pema used to act on her vendetta against our family,” Lin clarified.

Kuvira turned to Izumi. “I don’t understand.”
“Understand what, Kuvira?”

“How can you not hate me for my past deeds?” Kuvira asked Lin directly. “The world leaders at the time granted me the authority to unite the Earth Kingdom under the condition I step down after some time, and I didn’t. It cost thousands of lives and here you are housing me and clothing me and…and I just know Su would never take me back left on her own, so it must have been you or Izumi.”

“I don’t think I truly hate anybody except a Grand Lotus by the name of Daizo who kidnapped my oldest girl when she was just fourteen,” Lin replied, tilting her head to the side, staring right into Kuvira’s forest green eyes. “You were young, Kuvira; young, ambitious, and incredibly stupid. But we all were once, weren’t we?”

“I suppose,” Kuvira said, looking away.

“Your heart was in the right place. You just stumbled a bit in your methodology, but that can be forgiven,” Lin said, standing.

“And Kuvi, while it was Izumi who inspired me to act, I DID want you back. I have been missing you for a while,” Suyin insisted. It was obvious that Kuvira still didn’t believe her; like both Izumi and Lin said, rebuilding trust would take a long time.

“Well, breakfast should be ready soon if you’re hungry. I should probably go make sure neither Rohan nor Meelo get into the juice bowls and let you get changed,” Lin said, leaving Kuvira with Suyin.

“Do you need anything else?” Suyin asked Kuvira.

“No thank you,” Kuvira replied, looking down at the boxes of clothing.

“Then I’ll probably follow Lin down to breakfast then,” Suyin said, taking her leave.

“See you.”

For the first time ever, nothing was more unsettling than the door her surrogate mother left ajar after her departure. Kuvira was tempted to close it and lock herself in her room for the day just to have some time to process everything. Instead of closing the door, she ended up walking through it to explore this lavish estate. She needed to find a way out of the wood-floored place and find some solid ground. The earthbending Beifong women had already tracked a significant amount of dirt into the home to make things more comfortable for themselves, but a little dirt wasn’t enough to satisfy Kuvira’s less receptive seismic nerves.

She decided to venture outside. As long as she remained within the bounds of the property, she could be alone, right? She made her way into the trees towards the direction of the sea for no particular reason. The jungle was quiet and serene, and though her eyes were closed now, Kuvira could “see” everything. She could sense an army of ants running across a fallen log, a leaf cracking under the foot of a rabbitsquirrel descending on it, and two grasshoppers fighting for a mate on a tree branch quite a distance away.

Kuvira was walking when she heard the faintest sound of a soft rag on a strange, smooth surface, but could not locate its source; obvious motion of its presence did not send vibrations through the earth. She opened her eyes, startled. Kuvira ducked behind a tree snapping a small twig in the
process and curled her hand into a fist, bending the metal strips around her arm into a blade extending from her wrist.

The rag on the stone stilled and too, fell silent. Kuvira reached with her feet, but still saw nothing on the other side of the tree even though her ears clearly heard someone there. She open her eyes and lifted her sword arm in a blur, whipping around the tree, falling short where she predicted a neck might be. When her vision completely cleared, she saw her arm still raised but no blade extended from her wrist In its place, a man with a sword stood with the metal form of her blade lying in the brush at his feet. She looked down at it, reformed the blade out of what metal remained on her arm and tried to strike again only for the man to cut cleanly through it again, effortlessly.

“Your bending won’t help you against me,” he droned, as if bored with her efforts already. Kuvira took a step back and lowered her hand so he would lower his sword.

“Taemon,” she recognized, remembering what Ikki called him. He wore his neck-length hair now in a half ponytail now so that it would stay out of his face while he polished his blades. His eyes were amber, and his skin pale, like a nobleman’s. She could tell he was strong by the way he gripped a longsword only with his left hand, no noticeable strain. “You’re alone?” Kuvira asked.

“So what if I am?” Taemon asked. “I am still within the bounds of the property, no? Even if I weren’t, what would you have done? Killed me and dragged me back to one of our surrogate mothers?”

“Even if you had escaped, I wouldn’t tell on you. I’m not that kind of person,” Kuivra replied.

“Says the Great Uniter who imprisoned civilians for dissension,” Taemon murmured as he sat back down in his nest of leaves and blades continuing to polishing his swords that would never need sharpening.

“I am not that kind of person anymore,” Kuvira revised her claim. She looked a little closer at his weapon that cut so cleanly through her imperial grade metal alloy that she used for her armor.

“What kind of blade is that that can cut through imperial Earth Kingdom steel?”

“The alloy is called tsaiot. It is a special mixture of Fire Nation Steel with some amount of titanium and chromium added into certain layers of the blade depending on the shape and impact you intend to subject to the blade. Masaru and Izumi invented it when they were still teens. After the blades were forged and sharpened, they received a coating of dragon-made diamond, courtesy of Eiko, Lady Lee’s beloved dragon.” Taemon informed Kuvira, examining the clarity of the diamond coating of his blade before tossing it, catching it by the flat of the blade and offering it by the handle to the Great Uniter to inspect. She eyed him strangely. Why would he trust her with his blade even though they barely knew each other?

“Because I take it you are like me, smart enough to not make the same mistakes as before,” he answered, reading the puzzled expression on her face and the hesitation in her shaking hand.

Kuvira’s heart skipped a beat. Taemon wasn’t even looking at her at this point, only holding the blade firmly. She took it and he folded over his rag and took the next knife in hand.

“Won’t the shine of the diamond blind you in a battle?” Kuvira asked Taemon curiously as she turned the blade to face the light of the setting sun.

“Not if you know how to use it properly,” Taemon replied flatly as the rag and polish cleared the fog that had built up on the next blade while it was in storage for a decade.
Kuvira was torn. She wanted to be alone again, but at the same time, she found herself unable to part from this elusive man that could so easily read her mind. Curiosity overcame her desire for isolation and she found herself sitting beside him with his sword laid across her knees, wanting to know more. “So, Fire Lord Izumi took your bending and gave you a blade?”

“She gave me several blades long before she took my bending so I would never be defenseless in the event that I were chi-blocked or permanently stripped of my bending.” He paused in his polishing and slouched a little more as he surveyed his collection. “Who knew one day I would actually need them all?”

“So you know how to fight with all of these?”

“Of course. She trained me personally. None of her other sons took as much interest in the art. Sasuke learned out of necessity, but lacked the patience for her teachings and learned from a school after his first few lessons with the southern watertribe councilman, Sokka,” Taemon answered with his wrists balanced on his knees, loosely holding the short blade and rag.

“Was it hard?” Kuvira asked.

“Was what hard?”

“Was it hard to learn to fight with swords and to resist the urge to just turn back to your bending… when you had it?”

“It wasn’t hard at first, but admittedly, rather terrifying. I will never forget the day that she took away my wooden training sword and handed me my first real blade.”

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He was already ten years old, but only came up to her belly button. “But-- Mrs. Feng! The sword is heavier than me and four inches longer than I am tall! How can I possibly--”

“-- with great strength and persistence. A soldier knows he must make do with what little resources he has available to him on the battlefield. But don’t worry, Taemon. I won’t kill you. I promise,” Izumi replied, walking away from him with her magnificent diamond blade. Taemon lifted the steel with difficulty, almost toppling over in the process.

“Don’t waste your energy trying to keep it raised before we’ve even begun. Reserve your strength for when it is needed,” Izumi instructed him sternly. He looked at her standing there with her back towards him. The tip of her sword reached her ankle. She didn’t raise it or hold it with two hands as it was meant to be held. She just let it hang there, its tip touching the grass. Taemon lowered his shaking arms and the heavy sword came down with a heavy thud. Masaru watched from the sidelines with a critical eye.

Izumi turned and looked down at him with a deadly fire blazing in her golden-tangerine eyes. Taemon took a deep breath and she smiled, then dropped her diamond blade and threw four shot stillets that were hidden up her sleeve. Taemon raised his blade and deflected them with the flat of the sword. By the time he had opened his eyes after that first swing, she had closed the distance between them and held a three pronged sai to his neck. He screamed and dropped his sword, trembling with fear. She laughed and rumpled his hair and replaced the three pronged sai in her boot.

“No fair!” ten-year-old Taemon shrieked, picking up his sword again, stomping after her with it dragging behind him.
Izumi stopped walking, turned around and bent down to his level to wipe the tears of terror from his eyes. "Let me tell you something, Taemon. Life isn’t fair. In fact, it can be rather cruel sometimes, but you cannot let that get the better of you. We must always make the best of our circumstances. Use the resources we have at hand and trust what happens. Better you understand that now than later.”

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“I should have taken her more seriously then. Even when she was terrifying, she was kind. She only ever wanted what was best for us,” Taemon said, setting the sword down gently, tucking in his knees to his chest wrapping his arms around himself.

Kuvira didn’t know how to respond. She wanted to comfort him, but wasn’t sure how or what was even appropriate. He was more or less a stranger after all.

“Did you ever beat her when fighting with blades?”

“Once,” he replied quietly. “Only once.”

“How did that feel?”

“Terrible. She got angry. I was seventeen at the time. I got scared, fell to my knees and apologized. That made her even more livid. ‘You can never take back any stroke of the blade,’ she told me. ‘And in battle, NEVER apologize. Take pride in your victory and let me grovel in defeat while I fight my own inner demons.’”

“I take it she’s not very good with losing,” Kuvira commented.

“Heh, you can say that again. But I don’t blame her. Her own parents tried to make her perfect, as did mine before they were butchered by that combustion bender, P’li.”

“Your parents were killed by P’li?”

“My father created a monster in her. He mistreated her and payed for it dearly when she retaliated,” Taemon explained. “Izumi demanded excellence but never perfection and for that, I am grateful. I only wish she could demand the same of herself. Her life would be much less painful.”

Kuvira didn’t respond. She needed a moment to just process everything.

“So what about you? How did you end up under the iron fist of an earthbending Beifong?” Taemon asked Kuvira.

“It is a long story,” Kuvira replied, looking down at his diamond blade that she laid across her knees.

“Well, I’ve nowhere to be,” Taemon said, turning to face her. He looked almost bored.

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Kuvira stood facing her parents with her head bowed wearing a tattered pale green shirt and a pair of torn, frayed forest green shirts. Her lip and cheek were bleeding still from the punishment for her last failure.

“This will be your biggest task yet.” Her ‘Mother’ informed her. “Fail, and you will be left for dead, succeed, and we might just let live another day. Got it?”
Kuvira nodded, every bony limb trembling with fear and pain.

“Good. Now go! We don’t have all day. We need to get out of here before the city guard catches on!” Her ‘mother’ ordered, kicking her soundly on the rump as she scrambled out of the rented room in the shitty part of town with one thing on her mind. Rob the Beifong Estate. All she needed was something with even a little bit of gold in it so her family could eat another day, and their house had plenty of gold, no doubt.

Kuvira got in easily with her metalbending, but she’d have to be careful. The Matriarch of the city was accomplished in seismic sense and would detect her if she didn’t keep her distance. Fortunately, Kuvira chose an hour when she was supposed to be at the dance studio, teaching. All of the doors to the estate were unlocked since its residents assumed the security of the surrounding domes were enough. She slipped in easily. Now it was time to search the rooms. Offices. Parlors. More offices. Bingo! Bedroom!

She slipped inside and ran immediately to the dresser, bending the ground to lift her up so she could sift through the top drawers where most women kept their jewelry. There was the feeling of metal past her face. Kuvira spun, tearing off the metal drawer front to make a shield, spinning it as her attacker continued to fling metal her way. One snaked around the shield and tried to latch onto her wrist but she stomped her foot, raising a pillar to intercept it. She kicked her shield towards the attacker and rolled behind the bed. Then holed up in metal armor bent out of the floor paneling. The attacker rounded the bed and picked her up by the armed with her superior bending and threw her across the room. Kuvira became dizzy before blacking out. When she woke, she was strapped by her wrists and ankles to a platinum chair.

“So you’re the little thief who has been wreaking havoc on my city?” the matriarch asked. “Bold of you to try to raid the estate.”

“I didn’t have a choice!” Kuvira yelled defiantly, disguising her fear as anger.

“I highly doubt that. Who do you serve, child?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because I can offer you a better deal. You’re a good fighter and they don’t appreciate that. They don’t even feed you—" the matriarch of Zaofu explained.

“How would you know what they do and don’t do?"

“You are starving. Vastly underweight. They probably see you as just useless baggage most of the time anyways."

A waste of food and space... Kuvira's mom said once.

Kuvira pulled at the chains in a fit of rage, breaking the skin on the wrists and ankles. She couldn’t bend them. She needed to escape. Then she saw it. The matriarch’s necklace. With her eyes, she yanked the matriarch down to the ground to kneel, then choked her.

“RELEASE ME!” Kuvira yelled.

The matriarch overpowered the child’s bending and tore off the necklace. The door to the interrogation room opened for her to cast it out. She remained kneeling, holding her neck. This child— she had the spirit of a fighter and the will of a survivor in her tiny soul. She could be perfect. The Matriarch rubbed the back of her neck where her own necklace was used against her. She looked up at the child who now sat on that chair as if it were a throne.
“Release me!” She repeated, albeit a bit weaker than before now that she no longer had the matriarch’s life as leverage.

“I will only if you take me to your parents. I want to have a word with them about you,”

She would be betraying them by delivering them to the matriarch of Zaofu. But then again, they didn’t even feed her, so what did she have to lose in them?

“Fine.” Kuvira decided.

When they reached the apartment, it was empty.

“If this is a trap!” the Matriarch yelled.

“It isn’t! I swear! We entered the city exactly eight days ago and have been using this as our home.”

“Su, look!” One of the city guards called.

The matriarch rushed over. Freshly carved in the stone wall of the place was, “You’re too late Kuvira. You failed. Go to the alley off 10th street. There are a couple of strays there. If you’re lucky, they’ll have eaten you by morning.”

The Matriarch turned to the eight year old who, despite her rage and hate, found herself crying. “I guess this means you’re mine now,” Suyin said, striding over to take the girl by her shoulder.

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“Well, my whole life, my parents and I were starving and when I was eight, they decided they could no longer feed me or no longer wanted to. They sent me on an errand—to steal something, and then ran away, leaving me for dead,” Kuvira said hesitantly. She looked up nervously, for a reaction. Nobody had ever asked about her history. Not even Suyin cared how she ended up in such a situation. She just saw the angry, emaciated little eight-year-old girl and decided in that instant she wanted to keep her and make her her own.

“You said it was a long story,” Taemon deadpanned after a long pause of silence.

Kuvira was taken aback.

“Forgive me, that was insensitive. I’m sorry that happened. Your parents were cruel and sadistic to have subjected you to such loneliness. If they were good and merciful, they would have killed you—ended your suffering before fleeing that village or city—”

“What?” Kuvira stood abruptly, shocked someone would say such a thing.

“I’m sorry—I didn’t mean it that way I just—ergh! I’m not good at consoling people—”

“I can tell. Now if you will excuse me—” Kuvira said, turning away to leave.

“Wait! Please!”

“Just—leave—me—alone,” Kuvira said, bending juts of earth up behind her with every step. Taemon evaded them effortlessly as he followed.

“I’m sorry!” he called ducking. “How can I make it up to you?!” Taemon called.
“Why do you need to?” Kuvira asked, turning, extending a palm, striking him on the forehead as he jumped to close. Taemon fell back with a thud.

“Because I— I don’t know!” Taemon called out clutching his head. “Maybe because I’ve tired of silence too.”

“Well maybe if you had a little more empathy, I’d feel a little more sympathy,” Kuvira replied, walking away.

Once certain he was alone again, Taemon tore the ribbon from his hair to run his fingers through his hair. “How could you be so stupid?!” he cried faintly. “The woman is engaged! You could have any lady in the five nations and you suddenly feel attracted to one already taken!”

But Kuvira heard. She turned back to house. She’d almost forgotten about Baatar. He had been avoiding her ever since they arrived on Ember Island. Rumor was he rarely left his bed and only ever tolerated the company of his mother, or his bottle of tonic and gin.

When Kuvira emerged from the bathroom she almost ran into someone and jumped. The girl stared back at her with one expertly-groomed brow raised.

“Sorry,” Kuvira said, stepping back from her.

“Why are you apologizing? I should be saying sorry for scaring you.” the girl replied.

“I didn’t used to scare this easily.”

“Well, shit happens to all of us. The gods weren’t partial to you. Trust me, Great Uniter,” the girl replied with a mischievous smirk, entering the bathroom.

Who was she again?  Kuvira thought to herself. There was something about her that was strangely familiar. Maybe it was the snarky attitude, the inability to be shaken, the wit or the brow raise.

“Kuvira, I was just coming to check in. How are you feeling? You’re pale. Has something happened?” Izumi asked, instinctively touching Kuvira’s cheek with a softness the former Great Uniter didn’t expect from the formidable former Fire Lord.

“I’m just— a little confused,” Kuvira replied, taking a step back.

“About what? Is it something I can help clarify or would you just like some more time?”

“That’s one of the things I’m confused about. I don’t like being alone, but I don’t exactly want to have to talk to people either,” Kuvira replied.

“I understand completely. You know, being with people does not necessarily mean you’re talking. Here, come to my parlor with me,” Izumi offered, leading the way. The man they called Masaru was laying across a lounger with a newspaper in hand and a piece of lemon grass between his teeth.

“Stop that! You look like a hermit,” Izumi frowned, yanking the piece of lemongrass out of his mouth.

“And what is Rikuto then?” Masaru asked, snatching it back. “Kuvira! How are you doing?”

“I’m—“ Kuvira paused.
“In need of some quiet time so I thought we could let her join us,” Izumi replied, showing the young woman to the book shelf.

Kuvira chose a fantasy novel and sat on the chair farthest from her firebending “aunt and uncle”.

For two hours they read, barely moving. Masaru finished his newspaper and moved on to some letters and reports from work.

“Everything alright?” Izumi asked, prodding his hip with her foot as they lay intertwined.

“Yeah. Just— people being idiots.” Masaru replied, running his hands through his hair. Both Kuvira and Izumi chuckled.

“It’s never ending, isn’t it?” Izumi replied, reaching for one of his work papers.

“Hey! You haven’t gotten clearance yet to see these!”

“I’ll have it in two weeks!” Izumi replied, proceeding.

He took it back. “Company policy. Wouldn’t want a write up before your first day at work, do you? You don’t have absolute rule in MY company!” Masaru replied, taking his papers and holding them to his chest just out of reach.

“Fine! Be difficult!” Izumi growled playfully before returning to her scrolls.

The peace was nice while it lasted. “Mother, dinner is ready in the dining hall.” The voice belonged to the girl Kuvira had bumped into before. She peeked her head into the dismal parlor.

“Coming, Yoko,” Izumi said, swinging her legs off the lounger.

_Miyoko! She’s one of Izumi’s daughters! That’s where she gets that glare, the brow and attitude. Spirits! This is going to take a lot of getting used to._

“Kuvira, will you be joining us?” Izumi called, waiting at the door.

“I suppose I should,” Kuvira replied reluctantly, not really wanting to have to deal with this family anymore than she had to.

Miyoko eyed Kuvira curiously then walked ahead.

The dining hall was big enough to not feel congested but still filled with an overwhelming amount of unfamiliar faces.

“On second thought, Aunt Zumi—may I return to my room?” Kuvira asked, turning away. For some reason this felt more daunting than addressing the entirety of her army when the Earth Empire was on the brink of complete unification.

“As long as you don’t forget to take a meal,” Izumi replied, latching her arm around the failed dictator’s and guiding her towards the food table.
“Take at least a full plate and bowl and then you may go,” Izumi whispered, going with Masaru to survey what was available before getting dishes and utensils.

Kuvira picked up a plate and went straight for the rice and pork.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t the Great Uniter?” Wei whispered to his twin brother just loud enough for Kuvira to hear beside them in the buffet line.

“Maybe she should be renamed the Great Divider,” Wing suggested. Wei snickered in agreement.

“I wonder how it feels to fail so badly, get locked up, and only freed out of pity?” Opal mused, reaching beneath her younger brothers. They laughed.

“She was probably high on the cactus juice in pursuit of friendly mushrooms, when manning that mecha suit,” Ursa suggested reaching between Wing and Opal to grab some shu mai.

“That is enough from all of you,” Izumi said, dividing the four with her arms, casting a condescending glare down upon Suyin’s three youngest and her second youngest daughter. “Especially you, Ursa. You are a member of this family and whether you like it or not, Kuvira is your cousin and you will treat her accordingly, no matter your personal feelings or opinions on her politics. Do you understand me?” Izumi asked with both hands on her elder daughter’s shoulders.

Ursa lowered her head in shame. “Yes, Mother.”

“But Aunt Zumi, how could Kuvira become a cousin to Ursa when she was never even a sister to us?” Opal asked defiantly.

Izumi turned, appalled, to Suyin who looked back challengingly. Don’t you dare discipline my children, Her eyes warned. I can and I am. Izumi thought. She looked back to Suyin’s twins and daughter. “If family were only defined by blood, then no marriage would ever last as long as it does. We do not get to choose the family into which we are born. We do not get to choose our siblings, our parents or our children, but still we are required to love and protect them no matter how far they stray or how infuriatingly they can behave,” Izumi cast a side glance to her first daughter. “I highly doubt, that given the choice under these circumstances, Kuvira would choose to remain with such a clearly dysfunctional family, but alas she is here now.” Izumi addressed the entire room. “The moment Suyin brought Kuvira into her home and called her a daughter was the moment we all became just as bound to her as we are each other. I catch any of you bullying her again for ANYTHING, I will make you regret it,” Izumi threatened. The three shrunk a little.

Izumi turned to Kuvira. “I am sorry about that. Ursa can be savage at times, but she is not normally cruel. I’ll talk to her again later. I don’t know about Suyin’s three,” Izumi said, placing a hand on Kuvira’s shoulder.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m fine, really. I’m used to their antics,” Kuvira replied quietly, lowering her eyes, tired of fighting.

“You shouldn’t be,” Izumi replied gentler than Kuvira imagined the woman ever could be. “Nobody should be.”

“Please. Thank you for intervening but it’s really not needed. It’s what I deserve.” Kuvira shrugged off the Lady’s arm and took her half-filled plate back to her room.

“Suyi, we need to talk at your earliest convenience,” Izumi said, passing Suyin on her way to a
Izumi heated her cup and sat down on the stone work with her back to the fire.

“Can I make it mine, tonight?” She asked Masaru, regarding the fire.

“Why do you even ask?” Masaru asked, kissing her lips as he passed to leave the parlor for the bathroom. There was a knocking on the door. “AH! Sister! Perfect timing! I was just heading out.” Masaru said, feigning cheer. He kissed his half-sister right on the headband she wore then passed her through the door. “I’ll leave you to it then.”

Suyin Beifong closed the door behind her as she entered the Former Fire Lord’s parlor.

“You dare discipline my children? ALL OF OUR CHILDREN?!” Suyin yelled from the onset.

Izumi did not react but remained staring at the woman twelve years her junior. “Are you genuinely interested in trying to be a mother to Kuvira or not?”

“Yes, of course I am!”

“Then how could you allow your true-born children to bully her relentlessly for years? I can see it in hers and Huan’s eyes. They’re tired of this— of you playing clear favorites and giving those favorites free reign—”

“Spirits, Zumi! They’re children and children fight, it’s not a big deal!” Suyin argued.

“They’re all legal adults. They should know where to draw the line!” Izumi protested.

“You’re one to talk!” Suyin scoffed. “Your sons tried to kill their little sister and their own cousins- they tried to kill YOU! Where were they taught to draw their lines if taught at all!”

“They were taught that loyalty to the masses is paramount. They serve the family and the family needs a strong, safe nation to survive. The family needs a safe world. The lives of a few would be a sacrifice for the betterment of the many whereas relentless bullying benefits nobody!”

Suyin seethed. “Leave me to decide what constitutes bullying and what doesn’t in MY family. Kuvira deserves their words.”

“You’re family is MY family now and as I have told you before, my family does not have any qualms about pruning the branches that pose a threat to the rest of the tree,” Izumi reminded Suyin as she ran her finger along the edge of her tea cup.

“Is that a threat?”

“Yes. And you are a fool if you ever need to ask that question again,” Izumi replied, setting down her cup on the stonework and standing.

Suyin slid a leg back and raised her arms bending the metal strips out of her sleeves and into the air, ready to defend. Izumi raised a hand and swiped it through the air, sending all of Suyin’s metal into the wall like one would throw a knife normally.

“You’re——”
“Not a metalbender, don’t worry. But the applications of electricity and magnetism are endless,” Izumi replied, walking towards Suyin. She stepped aside as Izumi headed for the door. Masaru returned just as she reached for the handle.

“Zumiya—”

“I am going to see Eiko,” Izumi replied, slamming it shut behind her leaving Masaru and Suyin alone.

Suyin and Masaru stood in silence for a few seconds. “Are you okay, at least?” Masaru asked finally.

“I will be,” Suyin replied.

Izumi stopped by her room, suited up in her new special armor for a journey, and went to find Eiko.

“Take me to Taiyang Dao,” she asked her greatest companion.

Eiko snarled and bowed her head so Izumi could climb up and sit just behind the dragon’s horns, and together they fled Ember Island for the stars.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks cityofzaofu and MusicPlayer81 for beta-ing this chapter. [inserts a thousand hearts here]

Check out she wasn't built in a day for some beautifully written peeks into the lives of young Suyin and Young Kuvira and how they came to be who they are now AND Guess I'm Going with You for an adventure that unfolds when Korra actually listens to Lin and accompanies the Chief back to Republic City!!!

Next Chapter: The Apple and the Tree
The sun had barely risen over the peak of the volcano that was Ember Island when Izumi returned atop her dragon.

“You look like you haven’t slept in a week,” Masaru commented disapprovingly, assisting his lady down from the saddle.

“It was just one night, I can nap later. Help me with these, would you? I still haven’t finished with the ribbons, but I didn’t want to stay too long. The children would have started asking questions,” Izumi replied, pulling a heavy leather bag off of Eiko’s saddle.

“I’ll take it inside. You tend to the dragon,” Masaru grunted, heaving the bag over his shoulder.

Izumi didn’t respond as she set about undoing the girth of the saddle and detaching the reins from the spikes that lined her dragon’s spine. She heaved the heavy saddle off and carried it into the barn with difficulty.

“Izumi, would you like help?” Baatar Sr.’s voice asked from behind her.

She paused and heaved the saddle up above her head. “I am fine, thank you, Good Sir.” Her hair turned blue and lightning erupted from her hands as she used magnetic field generation to lift the saddle and place it on a large wooden frame. Her thin arms fell by her side and she sighed, her hair turning black again. “So what brings you here?”

“I was just out on a morning stroll when I saw your dragon approaching. Forgive me for intruding--I’ve never seen anything like her before. She wasn’t with us when we stayed at the palace for your wedding.”

“No, she wasn’t,” Izumi confirmed as she picked up a bucket with a couple of brushes and rags to go clean the sweat and soot off her dragon where the saddle had been.

“But she seems to know you well.”

“My father gave me Eiko as an egg when I was seven. Masaru and I hatched her, raised her, taught her to fly….we raced her across the sky once we were strong enough to sustain our firebending for that long. She was like our first child. But when I began courting my first husband, I had to send her away. His mother had concerns that I would become too powerful with a dragon by my side. She wanted me weak for her son.”

“Was she right? Did sending Eiko away change anything?” Baatar Sr. inquired. He had a hard time finding anything or anyone capable of stopping the Fire Nation Lady.

“She should have been more afraid of me without Eiko, leaving no one to check my anger,” Izumi said dismissively, picking up the first brush and beginning to clean her dragon’s scales. Eiko snorted steam and purred as her human continued. The dragon turned to eye Baatar curiously, and he jumped, startled by the creature’s movement. Eiko had a deep scar across her left eye and the right side of her snout, as if she had once been chained down. One of her horns had a chunk sawn off and the other marks suggested a similar action had been attempted several times. Baatar walked the length of her magnificent body and found more burns and gauges in various stages of healing.
“Poor thing,” he breathed, wanting to put a comforting hand on her back, but too afraid to make contact.

“Would you like to hear a secret, Baatar?” Izumi asked suddenly.

Baatar turned to his newest sister-in-law, laying on her stomach with her limbs hanging limp over both sides of her dragon’s newly clean and shiny back, relaxing with the beast.

“Like me, she can feel the energy of those around her.” Izumi said, rubbing her dragon behind its ears. “She too fought bravely for peace for her species for so long. She is not the last of her kind, but still was alone in almost all of her battles.” Izumi sat up and examined the bites and burns on her dragon’s body. “But things will be different now that we both have our families back and can be together again. Maybe we both can come out of hiding.” Izumi smiled and slid off the dragon’s back. She walked over to the dragon’s face and draped her arms over the beast’s nose where ropes had once burned and entrapped. It purred again and touched a whisker to the firebender’s forehead.

“I know, Love, but don’t worry. They can never get you again.” Izumi reassured her babe.

“...Thank you…” she whispered. She let her hand trail along its snout as she walked back to pick up the bushes and rags and return it to the barn. “Would you like to help with something else that isn’t replacing my dragon’s saddle?”

“Sure,” Baatar shrugged. “I’ve nowhere to be. Su’s out watching Wing and Wei play power disc with Rikuto and Huifan. Seemed to need to get her mind off your conversation with her last night.”

“Right, Sorry about that. Are you mad that I called out your Twins and Opal for—,”

“Not in the least. I’ve tried to talk to Su about it numerous times throughout the years but she never listens to me.”

“Then why did you stay?” Izumi asked.

“Because I thought that if I left, Junior and Opal would have nobody. Well, until Opal got airbending and Junior ran off with Kuvira, of course.”

“She lost interest in them because they were nonbenders.” Izumi surmised.

Bataar stilled. “That doesn’t surprise you?”

“Very little surprises me,” Izumi responded steadfastly. “I saw how Toph treated Lin and Su. She made them feel like their worth was determined by the competency of their bending. Lin wasn’t allowed to compete with us in pro-bending unless she could guarantee we would never lose and disgrace the Beifong name—an ironic move considering how disdainfully she treated her position in society. She never wanted her children to be defenseless. She wanted them to take her place as the most powerful earthbenders in the world, to create and cement an unbreakable dynasty.”

Baatar looked down. “Su never told me.”

“Because Toph never told her.” Izumi explained, opening a back door to the Fire Lord’s vacation house. “A lot can be learned from ignoring one’s words and watching their actions instead.”

Baatar considered her words and followed her inside to her room where Masaru had unloaded the contents of her bag all over their bed. There were dozens of throwing knives, daggers, and swords, all with different colored metals plating the blades under what looked like a substantial but transparent layer of something.
Izumi picked up one of the blades and then selected a red ribbon, looped it around the handle and tied a special knot.

“One color for each part of them,” she explained. She handed Baatar one of the daggers and a green ribbon.

He examined the blades, his fingers lightly skimming the hilt. “Where, when—”

“I got the idea to make a unifying weapon for all of our children when I heard Junior was born. When I found out he was a nonbender, I made him a sword, but could never find a way for me to get it to him. It wouldn’t make sense for me to gift him anything since we had no public association back then. Masaru and I were a secret,” Izumi explained.

“They all have the flying boar of the Beifong Family embedded in the hilt,” Baatar observed.

“Because Toph Beifong is who unites us all,” Izumi explained.

The faint ringing came first, then a pounding. “Saru—” Izumi called. She set the knife down and the ribbons.

“Zumiya—,” Masaru put down the sword he was tagging and moved towards her before also falling to his knees as she slumped to the ground.

“You guys—,” Baatar leaned the scythe against the wall and took a step forward before he too fell.

“Tenz? Tenzin!” Lin gasped. She ran through the swamp, regretting not wearing her cables while on vacation. She did have the earth and mud around her. But this was the swamp. She had to be careful. She knew Uncle Sokka’s tales about his adventures in the swamp and the consequences of unwarranted cruelty inflicted on the vines. Everything was living and everything needed to be respected. She climbed over a massive root and wiped the sweat from her brow.

“KYA!!! BUMI!!! SUYI!!!”

None of it made sense. One minute she was folding laundry, and the next minute, here, surrounded by massive, gnarly roots and water, drooping vines and other unfamiliar flora. Maybe it was the Spirit World. She dipped into a horse stance and bent some mud in an arch over her head.

Nope, not spirit world. She still had her bending.

Lin saw a figure in the distance, a man’s. Someone was better than no one. Maybe he knew directions.

“Excuse me—,” Lin called, running over. When she placed a hand on his shoulder, he vanished and in his place was a mere fragment of a tree. Ugh! Right. Time is an illusion. The mirages— they could be someone we’ve met or someone we will meet! Lin thought to herself, rubbing her temples with frustration. Maybe if I can find the sun, I can determine north and south and move out.

She decided to climb, bending mud the same way Kya bent water into extensions of her own arms. Dirt wasn’t living right? She pulled herself higher and higher until she reached the tree top. But beyond the cover were clouds blocking the sun.
“Ugh!” she groaned, letting her muddy tentacle arms fall to the ground with a splash.

“Don’t kill the vines... don’t kill the vines... don’t kill the vines...” Izumi chanted to herself as she pushed her way through the foggy swamp, terrified. Her breathing quickened and in her panic, Izumi’s hair turned blue without her realizing. The next vine she reached for steamed as soon as her burning skin made contact with it, then another reeled back and struck her, knocking her off the massive roots and into water.

“I’m sorry!” Izumi cried to the swamp, clutching her hands to herself as the water boiled around her. She drew a breath. “Cool it Zumi!” Izumi yelled at herself. “It’s just the swamp. It won’t hurt you if you don’t hurt it! Something brought you here for a reason. Trust it.” The water stopped steaming. With her hands folded under her arms, she climbed up again, her burning feet covered by the special shoes produced by Earthen Fire to protect the world from her heat. She stepped foot first through the next wall of vines, trying to avoid her head and hands from touching anything living.

How is one supposed to navigate the swamp? How did she even get here from Ember Island in an instant? Izumi looked down at her hands and touched a vine with her finger. It sizzled and curled back.

“My spirit alone shouldn’t burn things. Nothing made sense.

Maybe Eiko came too?” Izumi unbuttoned her cloak and draped it over the nearest branch and pulled herself up, not touching anything with her burning hands. She got all the way to the highest branch, replaced her cloak and whistled for Eiko. “Please hear me, girl. I just want to go home.”

“Stupid mud! Stupid vines!” Suyin yelled with both fists bared, both arm guards bent into swords as she cut her way through the swamp tying in vain to get out to some more familiar terrain. “I’ll have you deforested as soon as I get back to Ba Sing Se!” She yelled, bending a guard into a boomerang. She threw it carelessly. It sliced through dozens of vines before coming back to her hand. Su reformed it into an arm guard with her metalbending and trudged on. Stupid mud. Stupid vines!

There was a splash and a gasp. Suyin turned and saw a small girl standing just beyond the trunk of a tree. She was covered in dirt and completely naked with a mop of hair covering most of her face. She wasn’t afraid as she stared back at the Earth Queen, just curious.

“You shouldn’t be here!” Suyin said, walking towards the girl, retracting the blade that extended from her sleeve.

The girl slipped behind the tree and vanished from view.

“Wait!”

But the girl was gone. Suyin whirled around and saw the naked child up on a branch of one of the trees, just sitting. Her hair was out of her face now. Suyin bent a metal strip off her sleeve and sent it towards the girl, intending to bring the child to her by the waist, but she vanished. She was just a figment of the Earth Queen’s imagination.

Suyin rubbed her eyes and saw the girl standing in front of her from behind. She was fully clothed in a little green dress with golden pants and her hair in a braid and when she turned, Suyin saw the
sweetest face with a mole under her right eye. “Kuvira?”

The child took two steps back, turned and ran.

“Kuv—” Suyin called sprinting after her, using earthbending to launch herself over and under roots. Just when she got close, she fell, hitting solid ground to find nothing there.

Suyin whirled around, winded, her impatience mounting. With a cry of agitation, she slammed her fists on the ground creating a seismic wave, trying to reach the edge of the swamp, to reach someone. Roots snapped, water splashed and animals all leapt in distress.

“Stupid swamp!” She yelled, throwing her necklace like a boomerang, slicing through the vines before coming back to her hand.

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Masaru looked up in a clearing up ahead he saw the man with his dark grey button up shirt and pants with the red trim. The beige apron and goggles around his neck for whenever he needed to weld or solder anything for his prototypes. He had that same wavy hair, that same chip out of one ear when he accidentally snagged it with his dremel, the same glasses Masaru remembered.

“FATHER!” Masaru called, running, reaching. “Father I’m sorry for leaving. I was just so afraid of hurting you and mom again with my fire. I— I had to leave. I never wanted you to die. I’m sorry.”

“Saru,” his voice said. “Do not blame yourself for your my mistakes. You could not stop me. I misjudged the severity of the engine failure on the airship that day. Only I am to blame,” Satoru said, reaching out a hand to his son.

“Father?”

“Be brave, Saru. Continue to love with your whole heart and live the life I could never lead,” Satoru asked before departing.

“But father—”

“Do not dwell on what was. Do not feel regret. Know that I am always watching, and could not be more proud of what you have come to be.”

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“Why the Long face, little Zumzu?”

“Aunt Azula?” Izumi gasped, looking up from where she hugged her knees, perched upon a branch near the top of a tree.

“You should try to find your friends… before the swamp gets to their heads—,” her aunt taunted. “Or before I do.” Azula said, flitting a bit of lightning between her fingers.

“Leave them alone!” Izumi yelled, standing up, her hair flaring bright blue as she lashed out at the mirage.

“Zumiya, ignore her,” Fire Lady Mai said behind her. Izumi whirled around but found no one there. “Remember, no matter how things may seem to change, never forget who you are…”

“Mother?” Izumi called, turning again to see the image of the woman standing there. Mai started walking away along the branches. “Mother don’t go! Don’t leave me here! Not alone! Not with her
Izumi cried, starting after the late Fire Lady.

“You are never alone,” Mai replied, the voice coming from behind her while the image remained in front.

No matter how fast Izumi ran, leaping from branch to branch, diving, rolling swinging, she couldn’t catch up with her mother. She stopped on one branch with no more ahead, clutching the trunk of the tree. Her mother was just beyond the water. There was a branch below. She could jump, use her bending a safe distance from the tree and propel herself to the next. Not burn anything. So she leaped, but no matter how close she got, she never reached.

“Don’t go!” She screamed, diving towards her mother standing on the island. When she turned, she became a he and started screaming. They both screamed. Izumi blasted herself higher to avoid tackling the man and braced herself for impact with the land. She tucked and rolled off the island and into the water, sparing the man’s head, but still startling him enough for him to fall over. She rolled onto her feet and turned facing him with open hands.

“Izumi! Are you insane?” the old man asked, fumbling to his feet again, brushing himself off.

“I thought I saw my Mother! I was chasing her,” Izumi replied, offering Baatar Sr. a hand.

“So you’re here too?” Baatar Sr. asked.

“Too? Have you seen others?” Izumi asked.

“I think I saw Su, I tried to call her but she couldn’t hear me,” Baatar explained.

“What was she doing?” Izumi asked piquing a brow.

“Running,” Baatar Sr. asked.

“Oh Su, I hope she hasn’t damaged anything,” Izumi sighed.

“Why would she?”

“The Swamp isn’t known for its mercy on outsiders, and Su-- I’m not sure how much she remembers from Uncle Sokka and Uncle Aang’s adventures in the Swamp. We have to be careful. We could anger the swamp benders, and not to mention the spirits if we damage anything. We have to be gentle with the life.”

“And you think she won’t be gentle?”

“She wasn’t when she was a child, and based on what little I have seen of her in the past year, things haven’t changed much for the better,” Izumi replied, climbing onto a large tree root, extending her sleeve for Baatar to take. “You should stay within arm’s reach of me, so we don’t get separated,” Izumi explained.

“Why don’t you just give me your hand? I don’t want to stretch or tear your clothing.” Baatar asked.

“See my hair? When it is blue, I am burning. Besides, my clothes are practically indestructible, courtesy of Earthen Fire Companies. Let’s go find Suyi,” Izumi explained. Baatar took hold of the sleeve and Izumi hoisted him onto the tree root and they continued wandering through the swamp together.
“Su, stop!” Lin yelled, encasing Suyin in a mud mountain and immobilizing her when she saw the younger pelting a massive mass of swamp vines with solidified globs of mud. Izumi jumped between the Earth Queen and the spirit vine monster pursuing the metalbender. The former Fire Lord drew a breath and extended her hands with open palms towards the mass of vines. When it continued forward, Izumi bent a pulse of energy towards it, stilling the entire beast, and then dissolving its fibers, vaporizing the water while preserving the presumed core of the thing, hoping it was in fact only a swamp bender, and not a spirit monster. The vines fell away revealing a very familiar waterbender.

“Aunt Katara?” Izumi lowered her arms in surprise.

“Mom?” Tenzin jumped off the root and into the water, running over to the ancient southern Water Tribe woman.

“Tenzin!” Katara made her way over the vines to embrace her youngest boy.

“What are you doing here? What are we doing here? We were all on Ember Island and then--” Tenzin stammered while everyone else stood by watching.

“You’ll find out soon enough. Come see the others at the Banyan Tree,” Katara said. “All of you,” she added.

“Others?” Lin asked Masaru. He shrugged, equally confounded by the situation they found themselves in.

“And how could you attack me, Katara?!” Suyin asked, running ahead as soon as Lin released her grip on the mud mound. “I thought you loved us! You used to babysit us! I thought--”

“You were attacking the vines for no reason, Suyi. I had to do something to defend the swamp. I am sorry if it scared you, dear, but you should have remembered our stories,” Katara asked, chuckling to herself.

“I thought they were just fairy tales!” Suyin replied.

“All tales are just derivations of truth, warped by time and perception,” Izumi droned, trudging through the mud towards Masaru.

“You should have listened in your youth,” Lin added, passing Suyin as she moved to return to Tenzin’s side while they followed Katara.

Suyin seethed as she continued forward.

“It’s okay, Su. We’re safe now,” Baatar said, coming up beside her, squeezing her shoulder. “We have each other again, your brother and sister, Tenzin and Izumi, Katara… You can stop worrying. You’re safe,” He squeezed her tense shoulders.

With her arms still folded, Suyin leaned her head on Baatar’s shoulder.

“How are you doing?” Masaru asked Izumi, seeing her blue hair still glowing.

“Feeling like I lost my mother all over again. I saw her today, when I was waiting… Saw her and my Aunt, my blood aunt.”
“Azula?” Masaru asked. Izumi nodded, pouting. “How was that?”

“As you can imagine.” she replied flatly.

“Not great?”

Izumi shook her head. “So who did you see?”

“My father,” Masaru replied, walking hand in hand with his lady. “He said he was proud of me; told me to keep loving, and living.”

“Keep loving and living?” Izumi asked, turning to him quizzically. “Does he think that would be a problem for you?”

“I don’t know,” Masaru responded pensively.

“If it is any reassurance, you have a big heart, Saru, always have. I don’t think it should be an issue,” Izumi said, kissing him on the cheek as they continued walking, following Katara and Tenzin’s lead to the Banyan tree.

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“Ugh! I’m getting too old for all this galavanting over uneven terrain that I can’t bend to accommodate all of my aches!” Lin complained as Tenzin hoisted her up higher onto the gnarly roots of the banyan tree in the center of the swamp.

“Oh please, will you quit complaining, Linny! We’ve got five and six years on you!” Izumi snapped, standing above them both with Masaru by her side.

“Will you shut up already Zumzu? No one asked for your commentary,” Lin grumbled miserably, flipping a lock of wavy graying hair out of her face. Izumi rolled her eyes and turned, hiking further up the tree after Katara. In her old age, she had an easier time walking for miles on end than the six of them following.

“How are you doing, sweetie?” Suyin asked, helping Baatar onto a higher root.

“Fine,” Senior replied, pausing to adjust his glasses and wipe the sweat from his brow.

“What have you been thinking about to pass the time?” Suyin asked, desperate for something to end the silence, but not at all interested in either of her siblings or their spouses at the time being.

“The train station renovation that I have been trying to complete for the past three years. It keeps getting delayed by all of these international… incidents…” Baatar Sr. replied.

“Mother?”

Both Baatar and Suyin looked up. It was Masaru who was shocked this time.

As they reached the final bend, there was Toph, sitting cross legged at the base of the banyan Tree, flanked by Katara and Zuko, with her eyes closed and hands closed over her knees.

“Mom, what thehellare you doing dragging us all the way here from Ember Island? The children are still there; they could get hurt if left unsupervised--” Lin yelled, storming forward. Izumi and Masaru both moved out of her way, knowing it was safest to not get between two true born Beifong Ladies, unless a Beifong Lady yourself.
“Oh relax! Only the three youngest really need caretaking. The rest are fine! Beside, your bodies are still there… still functioning,” Toph replied, with her eyes still closed and projecting what she saw through the roots into their heads.

Tenzin was still napping in his room, Lin still washing clothes, Suyin still watching their children on the beach from her room, and Izumi, Masaru, and Baatar still tying ribbons to the new weapons.

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Izumi insisted, pushing the vision from her head with lightning bending.

“It doesn’t have to make sense. Your minds are here now, and that’s all that I need. Take a seat, kiddos. The sooner you all shut up and listen, the sooner I can let you return to your vacation in the physical world.”

“So is this the spirit world then?” Tenzin asked, sitting immediately, Baatar Sr. following his lead.

“Obviously not, if we still have our bending!” Izumi muttered under her breath, as she kneeled as well.

“Maybe it’s some sort of mindscape?” Masaru suggested, the scientist in him trying to find reason.

“Like an astral plane?” Lin suggested, turning to her older brother, similarly trying to make sense of the situation.

“Maybe last night, I just had too much to drink,” Suyin thought aloud, clutching her head miserably.

Toph smiled as she watched them. Masaru and Lin were both so much like Satoru, constantly trying to make sense of their world instead of just accepting what was. Suyin was more herself at that age: pained, confused, hurt, and turning to cactus juice to forget her woes. Saru and Lin would help her, now that they were all together again. They had discipline, were organized, inquisitive… and kind.

“Will you three Beifongs sit your stubborn asses down before I ask the Sugar Queen to affix them to the roots of this spirit forsaken tree with her bloodbending?!” Toph yelled.

Toph’s three children dropped immediately.

Izumi glanced nervously between Tenzin and Baatar Sr. who both shrugged.

“As we have told you several times, there will come a day when we gotta leave all we have to our kids,” Toph started. “We have decided that you six are ready to completely shoulder all that we have left in the physical world…not that it’s much--”

“What does that--” Suyin started to ask.

“Shut it and listen for once, Suyi!” Izumi hissed.

“Let her be,” Masaru whispered, placing his hand over Izumi’s.

“No-- thank you, Zumzu. Suyi’s probably tired of hearing that from me.” Lin cut across Masaru. Tenzin took Lin’s wrist and pulled her back while Suyin’s blood boiled.
“Is it just me or is it cute when they bicker?” Katara whispered to Zuko behind Toph’s back. The old Blind Bandit mustered all of her energy to refrain from laughing and further infuriating her youngest, however much she used to enjoy it in their youth.

“Anyways, for those of you who have forgotten the stories Uncle Aang and Uncle Sokka should’ve told you, I will repeat it. You see this mess of trees and weeds that we’re sitting in? It may look like a hell of an assortment of plants and animals and shit, but really, it is all just one organism, just like the rest of the world.

“I get how from the tree, others can sprout from its roots and therefore be connected, but as for the rest of the world? It doesn’t seem possible,” Masaru thought aloud, only having ever spoken to Sokka and Aang once in his lifetime. Sokka, when he came to train Sasuke and Aang, on Izumi’s tenth birthday. He had been kicked out of her party and ended up sulking with Eiko in the Royal Barnyard.

“What did I just say, boy? Open your ears! Are you really any different from your sisters, your wife? Your friends? The League? The Army? Those at Earthen Fire Refinery? When you close your eyes and listen, you can feel the energy conducted through their nerves, the activity in their brains, just as your earthbending sisters can feel the vibrations of their hearts beating. You too are all just one branch of this tree living together, breathing in sync.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Suyin asked with increasing impatience.

“Because you will be the ones who will have to convince the world of this before it unravels--”

“As in another hundred year war or something?” Izumi asked, looking from Toph then to her father for answers.

“If you you do your damn jobs right, hopefully you’ll never have to find out how,” Toph replied.

All six of the children, three of them world leaders or former leaders, hung their heads in thought, trying to decipher what the matriarch of their family was saying. Toph debated showing them the different paths she’d seen through the trees, but decided against it. They didn’t need to know what lay ahead. They only needed enough to pull through the next few months, as a family.

“Alright, the world is all connected, but what did our visions mean?” Tenzin asked.

“I saw my father,” Masaru informed them.

“I saw my mother AND Aunt Azula,” Izumi shivered.

“I saw a man I never met before,” Lin added.

“Based on your description of him, it was Father--” Masaru said to Lin.

“Dad?”

“I saw a girl I had never met,” Suyin said looking down at her feet. “At first I thought it was Kuvira, but then I remembered, I didn’t meet Kuv until she was eight, and this little girl couldn’t have been more than five if that.”

“In the swamp, we see visions of people we’ve lost, people we have loved, and those we think are gone,” Toph started slowly, to be certain her youngest heard every word of what she needed to remember. “But the swamp tells us they’re not. They’re still connected to us.”
“So if time is an illusion, then the little girl is someone I will meet?” Suyin asked.

Toph nodded.

“Great! Now can we leave?”

“Not so fast. That was just the first part of why I brought you here. My time in this world is coming to a close, and…” Toph paused. “I know I haven’t been the greatest mother, but somehow, I ended up with three wonderful kids and the absolute greatest little tree in the world. So no one person or family is burdened with inheriting everything, I have decided to divide my estate among you three, Saru, Linny, Suyi…”

Both Masaru and Lin nodded while Suyin kept looking at her feet.

“You can’t go!” she cried.

“It will be alright, Suyi. You have your brother and your sister to protect you if another one of your kids decides to try to overthrow your city,” Toph joked, tipping her head back and laughing. Suyin looked up in horror, but Toph didn’t notice.

Katara nidgeted Toph’s shoulder. The Runaway placed a hand on the roots of the Banyan tree and saw her daughter’s pain. Where her eyes failed, the Tree saw clearly.

“Su, we’ll protect you,” Lin said, placing a hand on Suyin’s shoulder.

“Always,” Masaru added, resting his hand on the other shoulder of the Earth Queen, feeling her energy fire out of synch on the verge of exploding. He slowed the conductivity, suppressed the stressors and calmed his little sister with his bending. She gasped. “It’s okay!” He insisted. “It won’t hurt you. Trust me.”

Suyin sniffled and let him keep his hand on her shoulder.

“Masaru, you have already inherited your half of Earthen Fire Companies from your father,” Toph stated.

“Yes,” Masaru nodded.

“And you have done well, growing it into a conglomerate that operated beyond the bounds of iron and crystal ore mining and refining. Satoru would be proud,” Toph said.

Izumi nudge her husband on the shoulder and he smiled at her.

“As for me, I have decided to make you and Izumi the heirs to the Beifong Estate in Gaoling. You will inherit all of my Dad’s properties, lands, titles, and assets. The Flying Boar will come to represent the Lord and Lady Lee of the Beifong Family in Gaoling…” Both Saru and Izumi’s jaws dropped. “Your passports will come to bear the Golden Seal of the Flying Boar…”

“But they’re not even Earth Kingdom!” Suyin shrieked, flying to her feet, throwing Masaru’s hand off of her with disgust. “Mom! Izumi was the fucking Fire Lord! The blood of the dragons can’t have OUR house especially in OUR homeland!”

“Suyi, in an ever diversifying world, there is no room for prejudice anymore,” Toph replied firmly. “Besides, the house was never ours. It is mine and mine alone, since my husband’s death, and I am free to give it to whomever I please. You may be the Earth Queen, but I am still your blasted mother, and can do what I want, so sit your ass back down and listen to my final wishes, dammit!”
“You’re dying?” Lin asked, her voice small with disbelief.

“It’s complicated kid, let me finish,” Toph replied, taking a breath. “Linny, you and Baldy may have our old house in the Ivory District of Republic City to do with it what you choose. I know it is not much in terms of monetary value, but it may come in handy for other things. I have no burning desire to keep it in the family so if you want to sell it, make an orphanage, or give it to one of your kids, feel free. I couldn’t care less about that piece of shit that haunted my daydreams ever since the Terra Triad stole you from it.”

“Fair enough,” Lin nodded.

“Same goes for my half of Earthen Fire you inherited from Old Man Lao after he decided to skip me entirely in his will. You chose a very time-consuming and dynamic future when you tied yourself to flighty over there. You cannot neglect the company, but neither can you neglect the needs of the Air Nomads now as the -- whatever you call the wife of a monk who wasn’t ever supposed to have one. I would suggest you pass on the daily duties as CEO and your seat in the governing cabinet to someone in the family, or someone close enough to trust with this part of our little empire. But you must maintain ownership. The influence the company has on the economy of all countries may come in handy in the coming months.”

“Fair enough,” Lin nodded.

“Aunt Toph,” Tenzin started. “What does that mean? What will happen in the coming months that we need to know about that you’re not telling.”

“If you do what you must, it won’t be anything to worry about.”

“And what might that entail?” Izumi asked.

“Be a family.” Toph turned to Suyin. “Suyi, you built Zaofu on the backs of the comrades you gathered throughout your journey. You became a leader when no one expected you to become one. And now you have come unto the Earth Kingdom. Because of it, you will have nothing directly from me but this:” Toph reached behind her and pulled out a long package wrapped in brown paper. “It was your father’s.”

“My--” Suyin stuttered, reaching for it. Masaru always knew of Satoru. Lin learned of him last year when Masaru told her. She even sought out more information on the inventor from Penga, one of Toph’s old friends. But Suyin? She never had the slightest clue who her father was. No one did. Toph would have taken the secret to her grave if she didn’t see just how much knowing something Toph thought was insignificant meant to Lin that day Saru told her.

Everyone watched with anticipation as the youngest of their assembled family unwrapped the brown paper. Behind Toph, Katara reached for Zuko’s hand and wiped a tear from her eye.

It was a sword, that much was clear from when she first grasped the package. As soon as Suyin saw the tip of the pommel she jumped to her feet again.

“You LIE!” Suyin yelled, tears stinging her eyes as she gripped the sword in her hand, puncturing her own skin before chucking it at her mother who stilled it in the air with her metalbending.

“Su--” Baatar Sr. reached for his wife’s hand.

“I never lie,” Toph replied, bending the sword upright so the wrappings fell away revealing the custom blade built by and for Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe.
“He was there!” Suyin screamed, her voice shrill with ache and longing. “He was there the whole time and you NEVER said anything!”

Tenzin, Lin, Izumi all gasped when they saw.

“What is its significance?” Masaru asked Izumi in a whisper, just as puzzled as Baatar Sr.

“It was Uncle Sokka’s. It was his first sword forged out of meteor earth,” Izumi answered.

“I wanted to spare you a whole lot of pain and grief that comes with the loss of a loved one. You and Lin both. I figured if you never knew what you could have been, you’d have nothing to miss. I lost my first husband… and my son. If I married Sokka… and something happened to him. I would have never been able to forgive myself.”

Suyin’s lip quivered as the tears streamed down her face while blood dripped from her fingertips.

“So that’s it then? I get a sword while they get companies, fortunes, lands, titles--”

“All things you ALREADY have. I was hoping by divulging this information, I could give you some sort of closure, but I guess as any mother, can’t please everybody.” Toph took a deep breath and smacked her lips and sighed, standing up with her eyes closed and her hands folded behind her back. Everyone else followed and found their feet.

“Saru, Zumzu, as the oldest and the most experienced leaders, businessmen, and parents, please...take care of my family.” Toph asked. Her eldest son and his wife both nodded accepting their new duties to the Beifong Clan. There would be no more running. Toph opened her eyes but this time, they were completely clear. The cataracts that rendered her blind were gone. As each person blinked in shock, they found themselves in a field of purple poppies beneath a lime-green sky. “And remember. Everything is connected,” Toph finished as she bent the handle of Sokka’s Sword into Suyin’s unbloodied hand.

Suyin stood looking out the window of her room on Ember Island, watching her twins try to skim the surf on wooden boards while Hungjian and Huifan watched them. In her left hand, Sokka’s first space sword, and in her right, blood. So much blood.

Tenzin sat up in bed rubbing his head after the strangest dream. The Banyan tree, the swamp, Mom, Aunt Toph, Uncle Zuko, Lin and everybody…

Lin set down the shirt she was folding and turned to Rohan who was playing on the floor with a blanket and a couple of toy soldiers and toy dolls Aunt Zumzu had given to him. She picked up the son of Tenzin and Pema and carried him to her husband’s room where she found him with a cup of water, looking drained even after such a long nap.

“Are you okay?” he asked Lin. Wasn’t she going to do laundry or something?

“We were there. It wasn’t a dream,” Lin said, draping her arm over his back, resting her head on his shoulder.

In the other room, Masaru and Izumi were holding each other, their heads throbbing.

“I feel like I’ve been invaded by my own technique,” Izumi said, sliding closer to her husband on the floor, feeling surprisingly fatigued. It was strange. She had missed nights of sleep before.
Usually it was just to read, but a moonlight visit to Taiyang Dao to forge some new blades for her family shouldn’t have taken much more energy for someone whose inner fire burned so strongly, right?

Baatar Sr. stood up and leaned the staff he was working on against the wall and then faced his in-laws. “So, Lady Lee is it now? I guess you’re the new matriarch of the Beifong Clan,” he said bowing.

“That wasn’t--”

“We were all there,” Masaru confirmed.

Izumi thought for a moment. “What makes you assume the family will become a matriarchy? How do you know Masaru won’t--- that he doesn’t control me--”

“Masaru, correct me if I am wrong; in all honesty Izumi, from what I’ve seen so far, Masaru, Tenzin, Me… we don’t have any real power. We’re just here to keep you ladies from figuratively- and in your case-literally exploding.”

“In which case, what do you think of holding a family meeting?” Izumi asked Baatar Sr.

“When?”

“Now?.. Or … soon.”

“Maybe the unifying symbol on all of these weapons could be our first steps to becoming an actual family,” Izumi suggested picking up the knife she was working on, remembering Suyin’s comment about the Beifong Estate in Gaoling: *they’re not even Earth Kingdom!... The blood of the dragons can’t have OUR house especially in OUR homeland.... As if we were separate entities… disconnected… and unworthy.*

“A family meeting?” Hungjian asked curiously when Fire Lord Takeo made the announcement to the hall of guestrooms where all of the cousins made their temporary dwellings.

“Yep! Mum’s orders!” Takeo replied, shrugging his shoulders. “Everyone has to be there. Pass it on to whomever you see, please.”

“But aren’t you Fire Lord now? With your permission, can’t we defy her orders?” Jiexue asked, brushing her teeth in the doorway of an open bathroom, not really in the mood to see everybody.

“Now why would I do that and risk the wrath of the World’s Weapon?” Takeo asked with a smirk as he continued down the hall. “FAMILY MEETING IN FIVE IN THE THRONE ROOM! BE THERE AND YOU MIGHT BE SPARED!” he laughed jovially.

Xiaoyu leaned her head along the doorframe of her room on Ember Island. She never before felt so repulsed. The way the new Fire Lord made threats in jest sickened her almost more than the way the old Fire Lord made sure the Amber League kept her secrets. Her whole life, Xiaoyu told herself that the Fire Nation was good now, that they were a kind and accepting people. And they *were* kind, for the most part, *and* extremely accepting. Hell, they found a way for someone to open their chakras and connect to more than one element. And yet, they still viewed violence and combat as normal, almost necessary in life.
Miyoko smiled at Xiaoyu and looked down at her own scar that remained where her own sister, Ursa, had struck her with lightning. “We’ll get through, don’t worry,” she said to Xiaoyu, knowing exactly which phrase the airbender took issue with. She had experience helping outsiders deal with the culture shock when they came to the Fire Nation. “Now get dressed. My mother doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“And yet you keep her waiting all the time, oh great dissident from Ranshao Rikai,” Xiaoyu replied, inviting Miyoko into her room.

“Only because I can handle the aftermath,” Miyoko laughed lightly. Xiaoyu shot her a look of terror. “Okay, sorry. She’s not THAAAT scary, honestly!” Miyoko insisted. Xiaoyu still was not convinced. Miyoko sighed. “Sorry, I guess I’m just not very good at consoling people.”

“You’re not the only one,” a male voice said from the open doorway.

Xiaoyu gasped and grabbed a shirt to cover her bare chest. Her scowl deepened and her heart raced increased. Neither Miyoko nor Taemon said anything in response to the airbender’s reaction.

“A little privacy please?” Xiaoyu asked, visibly trembling.

“If you wanted privacy, you would have closed the door,” Taemon replied, looking at the vacant frame.

“He has a point,” Miyoko noted.

Xiaoyu reached for one of her fans on the dressing table. “Just leave!” she yelled, whirling around, bending a gust of air, at the man, sending him through the wall across the hall simultaneously slamming her door shut. She crouched down clutching her shirt to her chest, crying.

“Xiaoyu?” Miyoko called.

“Xiaoyu, they’ve changed,” Miyoko explained. “Taemon, Tetsu, and Huan-- they are not idiots. They know they made a mistake and they won’t do it again. We are safe!”

Xiaoyu wiped her tears away, still unable to believe it. She ran her hand over the scar in her side where Huan stabbed her less than a month ago without the slightest remorse in his olive eyes.

“If it makes you feel any better, remember that my own sister tried to kill me before she even knew my name. I know what it’s like to be betrayed and wounded by family,” Miyoko said, putting her hand over the scar just under her heart. “A scar is just a reminder of what you’ve survived. It is a good thing. It tells you again about the time you got back up again. Wear your scar like a badge of honor, and it can never be used to hurt you.”

Xiaoyu lifted her gaze from Miyoko’s scar to her face. Xiaoyu and Miyoko both had Satoru Lee’s amber eyes, but their faces differed. Miyoko’s chin was sharper, her eyes narrower, and her mouth smaller, lips almost pursed, like the women of her mother’s bloodline. Her brows were neatly chiseled and her hair was darker than even a moonless night with not a single hair out of place, like nobility. But even though Miyoko was slightly terrifying, she was kind. Xiaoyu on the other hand, had a rounder, heart-shaped face with high cheeks and no bridge to her small, rounded nose. Her eyes were wider, kinder, than Miyoko’s but the former innocent light had been dimmed by the recent attempt on her life by another cousin. Her youthful optimism had been withered by fright.
Xiaoyu hugged her cousin.

“It’s alright, time heals all wounds.” Miyoko soothed, rubbing the younger girl’s back.

The middle generation of the Beifong Family waited in the wings while their children all gathered according to rank in the throne room of the Fire Lord’s vacation house. Bumi leaned against the doorway watching them murmur among themselves, Kya beside him a half foot away with her arms folded and a pensive expression on her face. Masaru was rearranging the new weapons for what seemed like the thousandth time on the stone table Lin had crafted for them while Baatar Sr. watched on. Lin was beside Tenzin, squeezing his hand for comfort, feeling nervous about something and Suyin leaned against the wall in the shadows, clutching her messily wrapped wounded hand to her chest, her eyes closed, brooding.

“How is your hand?” Izumi asked Suyin as they waited in a staging room just off the throne room of the vacation house.

“It’s fine!” Suyin hissed, flinching away.

“Kya, will you please look at it later?” Izumi asked Tenzin’s sister.

“Of course,” Kya replied with a nod of the head and a soft smile directed at Lin’s little sister.

“Do you think they’ve all come?” Izumi asked Bumi, sitting down on a bench in the hall outside the house’s mini throne room letting out a shaky sigh.

“If not, we’ll get ‘em for you Zumzu!” Bumi replied, enthusiastically punching one hand into the palm of the other.

“Thank you, Bumi,” Izumi said with an uneasy smile.

“Why are you nervous?” Lin asked Izumi as Masaru turned away from the collection of weapons to put a hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“I don’t like responsibility.” Izumi replied peering out the door to the throne room.

“Neither do I,” Lin replied sitting beside Izumi. “But if it makes you feel any better, you are damn good at managing a lot of it. I admire that.”

“Thanks, Lin.”

“They’re all here!” Kya announced, peering into the hallway from the throne room.

“Great!” Masaru said trying to ease the tension. Lin slid the weapons out of the hall and onto the vacant dais by the stone table upon which they laid.

The children were all there: Masaru and Izumi’s stood from oldest to youngest at the front of the room followed by Tenzin and Lin’s and lastly, Baatar Sr. and Suyin’s.

“Thank you all for gathering on such short notice. I know I have caused a great disturbance in your lives by reuniting our families once more for this Ember Island getaway... and that for some it was most unwelcome; I am sorry. Alas, I’d like to reiterate that as much as we want to, we cannot choose our families. No matter how frustrated or angry we become at one another, in the end we MUST do everything in our power to protect each other because given our circumstances as the
descendants of protectors of the world, nobody else will. I will not ask you to set aside any
grievances you have with one another because I know that for some it will take time, and for
others,” Izumi turned to Xiaoyu. “…it will be impossible. Regardless, I would like to provide each
of you with a tool so that you may protect one another with or without bending.”

Izumi lifted her arm and bent one of her diamond short swords with magnetic field generation out
of her sleeve, grasping the handle so the blade was down. The hilt was made of steel, plated in
 gold, set with rubies, and coated in diamond. The handle was wrapped with a black grip and around
the pommel, two red ribbons criss-crossed each other with about three inches of excess.

“Each of you will receive an identifying weapon only to be used in self defense or truly life-or-
death situations. As I’m sure you can imagine, these are most certainly not toys.” Izumi flipped the
grip in her her hand and ran her thumb down the flat of the blade. She held her hand up to show at
least a dozen tiny lines carved into her hand and blood start to bead on the pad of her thumb. “Even
the edges have been cross hatched to provide you with the utmost protection.” Izumi said, wiping
the blood on her robes.

Masaru took the first sword off of the stone table and handed it to Izumi, who suspended the
weapon with magnetic field generation.

“For Iroh, a miaodao bearing the insignia of the royal fire family on both sides of the blades. You
were crown prince for twenty years until you so nobly chose to prioritize the safety of the world
over that of your own nation by joining the United Forces. May this blade aid you on that life
mission.

“For Takeo, a nihonto bearing the Royal Fire Family insignia as well as the Beifong Family Crest.
I hope that because of your mixed heritage, you will feel more inclined to consider the
repercussions all your decisions will have- on not just the Fire Nation, but the other four nations as
well.

“For Rikuto, two shikomizue capable of cleanly cutting through even the hardest stones without
your bending… For Sasuke, a set of twin yanmaodao swords... For Taemon, a tanto dagger—”
Izumi said presenting her former ward with a short dagger with a ten inch blade.

Suyin’s twins, Wing and Wei snickered.

Izumi strode over to face them.

“What do you find funny? I’m sure we would all love to hear,” she asked.

“Nothing! It’s just that— after everything, Taemon only gets a dagger while everyone else gets a
real blade. What kind of a gift is that?”

“Taemon, fetch your arsenal,” Izumi asked, not turning away from Suyin’s twins.

Taemon left the room briefly and returned with two belts crossed around his waist with two
shortswords, a broadsword, twin dao swords, and a long sword crossing his upper and lower back.
Sighing, he removed his old dagger with a swift tug and replaced it with his new one.

“I assure you it was not a punishment,” Izumi informed the earthbending twins, beckoning the
worn dagger to her hand to show the twins the perfectly unscathed blade, but tattered grip and
mangled pommel and guard. “I simply knew which in his collection needed replacing.”

The twins tightened their mouths and said nothing in response.
“For Tetsuya, a zanbatō to compliment your height.

“For Tatsuya, a chigikri with a retracting mechanism, so that if you fight beside family, you don’t accidentally strike an ally on your way to your foes…

“For Hungjian a pair of hammers that will never need to be reshaped or restored…

“For Huifan, a pair of shuang gou swords. It was the first weapon we trained with, if you remember. You were nine,” Izumi said.

“I thought you were going to kill me with your knives the first time we sparred with weaponry,” Huifan laughed.

“Trust me, you weren’t the only one with that fear facing the great Lady Ido for the first time,” Rikuto whispered loudly with a light chuckle.

Huifan, Jiexue, and Ursa laughed while Izumi only smiled. “You are family, and because if that, I would never hurt you… not intentionally, at least… anyways, Jiexue, yours, I must say, was the most challenging to design and construct,” Izumi said, walking over with a metal staff.

Tenzin lowered his gaze disapprovingly. “Relax,” Lin whispered to him.

Izumi held it. She spun it thrice and tapped it on the ground and two curved blades emerged from the structure to form a double ended scythe.

“WOAH!” Jiexue gasped.

“During my visits to the Beifong Estate, I noticed that you were perfectly ambidextrous, so I made the staff capable of splitting.” Izumi gripped it in the middle with both hands, twisted, and pulled it apart into two equal lengths. “I will need at least a few minutes to teach you how to deploy the blades and how to close it again but we can do that later this afternoon, if you so wish.” Izumi said, flipping both scythes in her hands before clicking them back together and closing the blades with another spin of the staff.

“Thank you, Aunt Zumi,” Jiexue said with a deep bow, her eyes gleaming with excitement as she admired the blade.

“And lastly,” Izumi tapped it on the ground and a glider appeared perpendicular to where the blades popped out. “It also functions as a standard glider for more day-to-day use.”

Everyone craned their neck to see the most complex weapon probably ever invented that did not exploit spirit vine energy.

“Xiaoyu,” Izumi addressed her next niece.

The airbender took a step back. “I don’t want anything from you, thank you,” she said softly, through with the lengthy presentation of weapons.

“Why?” Jiexue asked, holding her new staff tightly.

“Don’t pry her for answers.” Izumi said, raising a hand to Lin and Jiexue. “I already know, so let her be.” Izumi said. “Xiaoyi, I know you’re still angry with me—”

“I’m not angry,” she sighed. “It’s just that-- true air nomads are not supposed to wield blades or relish in the combat other nations find so essential to living.”
“And look where it got them, Xiaoyu.” Izumi commented. Xiaoyu’s gaze remained on her feet. Jinora, Ikki and Meelo turned to Xiaoyu, and Xiaoyu’s older siblings to Tenzin, to the rest of the room, to Izumi. For a moment, it felt like even the air completely stilled. “I know how traditional air nomads were supposed to be and how it lead to their demise at the hands of my own ancestors. Do not think for one second that I have forgotten our history. We cannot change what has already been done in the past. We can only adapt as we move forward,” Izumi reminded her. She beckoned to her hands two objects from the table at the front of the room. “For when you’re ready,” Izumi said, lifting the two objects into the air with her magnetic field generation, then leaving them there as she moved onto Kang. They were golden kyoshi fans with each segment plated in dragon-forged diamond. Four ribbons had been tied from the pivot: red, blue, green, and orange, one for every quarter of the airbender’s ethnicity.

Xiaoyu let them hang there, hoping her aunt would grow tired of the sustained bending and take them back. She closed her eyes and ignored the disapproving look from her mother and the distressed look from her father, waiting patiently for this meeting, this-- ceremony to end.

“Kang,” Izumi said, moving onto Xiaoyu’s little brother. He stepped back. Izumi tilted her head. “Do I frighten you too now?” she asked in a much softer tone than when she gave that lecture only moments prior.

“No!” the fifteen-year-old insisted. “I just-- had forgotten that-- you were one of them… until your speech.” Kang replied. “I had gotten so used to just Aunt Zumi.”

“One of who?” Izumi asked.

“The firebenders who killed our ancestors,” Kang replied quietly.

Izumi sighed. “Kang, I am still just Aunt Zumi. Just think… how could I have possibly been one of the firebenders who participated in the genocide when I was born over a century after that event?”

Izumi asked.

“You couldn’t,” the boy realized.

“I know it is so easy for us to categorize people into factions, but we must avoid it as much as possible. We are all but branches of the same tree, the same family, living and breathing together. We depend on each other. Do not let ethnic labels divide us, for if you do, you would be cutting yourself into pieces too.” Izumi said, brandishing her gifts for him, a boomerang and a Water Tribe style club with a Fire Nation blade on the back of it just like his great uncle Sokka, both with four different colored ribbons tied to the handles representing all four parts of Kang. You have fire in you just as I do-- through your grandfather, Satoru. But you’re special, Kang, because you also have earth, water, and air. You’re a perfect balance of all of us, just like your siblings. You are lucky.”

“Thank you, Aunt Zumi,” he said, accepting them and bowing. Izumi smiled then smiled sadly. Here came the hard part. She lifted the remainder of the weapons before their owners, but just out of reach, then walked past Jinora, her little siblings, and all of the true born children of Baatar Sr. and Suyin, straight to Kuvira.

“Kuvira,” Izumi said her voice steady. The disgraced Great Uniter looked up hesitantly to find her gifts heavily resembling the shackles she wore in that wretched prison much to her dismay.

Izumi snatched one of the thick metallic rings out of the air and opened her hand. “May I see your wrists?” she asked.
Kuvira raised one, reluctantly, wanting to pull away but finding her fear and admiration for the Fire Nation woman too great to do so. The cuts and scrapes on her wrists were still healing. She had suffered bruising and chafing as a result of the time she spent pulling on the unwavering chains in a pitiful attempt to feel something in that dreary place even if all it was was pain. Only three days had passed since she was relieved of those chains, and now here she was being locked back in again.

Seeing the Great Uniter’s attempt to mask her discomfort as well as the raw wounds on her wrists, Izumi made a mental note to ask Sunako or Kya to see her later. It was unlikely Kuvira would let them near her head to ease some of the pain, but at least they could tend to her skin.

“We can take them off immediately after I show you what they are,” Izumi assured Kuvira, locking them both around Kuvira’s wrists. Kuvira’s breath hitched in her throat at the sound of the clasp clicking into place.

“We can take them off immediately after I show you what they are,” Izumi assured Kuvira, locking them both around Kuvira’s wrists. Kuvira’s breath hitched in her throat at the sound of the clasp clicking into place.

“Why does Kuvira get weapons before us?” Wing asked with a tinge of jealousy.

“It’s not fair!” Wei added, whining.

“Seven spirits, do those two ever shut up?” Miyoko muttered from her place in the line up.

“Because,” Izumi began to explain. “Kuvira is a fierce warrior of the highest caliber, known for her strength, efficiency, and precision bending. She can subdue dozens of bandits single-handedly in a matter of seconds.”

“She’s also ruthless, selfish, and does whatever she wants—”

Just then a metal strip clamped itself over Wing’s mouth. Everyone looked to Suyin and Kuvira, the only two known to use such an oppressive move. Both looked equally stunned. Then they saw Izumi, with her eyes closed and arm extended, two more of Kuvira’s metal strips floating over the firebender’s hand.

“Do you know who else is ruthless and selfish?” Izumi asked striding over to them, using magnetic field generation to keep the spare metal near her hand. “I’ll give you a hint. Next time you pass a mirror, look into it,” She answered for them. “I told you once already I will NOT tolerate senseless bullying in this family.” Izumi growled, raising a hand, charging it with lightning.

Miyoko reached forward and grabbed Meelo and Rohan while Ursa pulled Jinora and Ikki out of the way.

“Zumi, you will not electrocute my son!” Suyin yelled, latching a cable around Izumi’s wrist.

Izumi paused, pensively, still with the cable around her wrist. “You’re right. He isn’t responsible for the way he is,” Izumi said with a sigh, standing down, the cable still latched around her. “You are!” She yelled, grabbing the cable, zapping Suyin, with a fire gleaming in her golden eyes.

Suyin screamed and fell to the ground, loosing her hold on the cable, letting it fall limp on the ground.

Everyone turned to Izumi who remained upright, chin high, eyes down. “I suggest you remember that and learn from your mistakes, little Suyi.” Izumi said, discarding her end of the limp cable like a soiled napkin before returning her attention to Kuvira. “At least you’ve learned to detach your metal from your body when you attack a firebender capable of wielding lightning.”

The Kuvira’s breathing quickened out of fear. Izumi placed a hand quickly on her right shoulder
and over her heart and suppressed the former Great Uniter’s panic attack with dark lightning before it even came. She turned over Kuvira’s hands so her palm was up and a tiny lever extended from the band into the palm of her hand. Izumi held up one of Kuvira’s hands, folded her fingers into a fist, pushing down on the lever. The blade sprung out of the band just like Kuvira’s sword she ordinarily crafted from the metal she wore.

“Since the sword is attached to me, wouldn’t my wrist break if it clashed with another blade, Aunt Zumi?” Kuvira asked, surprised at how easily the title rolled off her tongue.

“No material I have ever encountered has been able to halt the stroke of any of these blades, so your wrists should be safe,” Izumi replied. Kuvira loosened her fist and the blade returned into the thick band. Izumi unclipped it freeing Kuvira’s wrists. “Take your chains and make them your strength,” she whispered to the young woman.

Izumi smiled and turned to address the group. “As for the rest of you,” she addressed the Pemzin and Sutar Children. “I have no knowledge as to whether you’ve been trained with weapons and if so, how extensively, but I do have knowledge of your fighting styles. These weapons were designed to supplement your weaknesses as well as complement your strengths. When you have time in the coming few days, I would like to meet with each of you to make sure you understand some basic weapons etiquette before I entrust you with these tools for defense.”

“Did our mother approve these gifts?” Baatar Jr. asked drearily, his eyes half closed as he swayed lightly on his feet, gazing at his shiny new sword, likely inebriated.

“Does she need to?” Izumi asked pointedly. Suyin’s eyes narrowed. “Are you incapable of independently deciding whether or not to accept a gift from your own aunt?”

“I am a convict in the care of the Earth Queen,” Baatar Jr. slurred. “I thought--” he hiccupped, “--she had to approve *hic* everything…”

“Earth Queen or not, in the FAMILY, I outrank her,” Izumi said to Baatar Jr. “Besides, you are a grown ass man with far more freedom of choice than you think, so cut this infantile act of dependency on your mother.”

In a slightly drunken stupor, Baatar attempted to strike his aunt.

Izumi bobbed and weaved and trapped his punching arm in an arm bar and brought him to kneel before her.

“Zumi! Let him go!” Suyin yelled.

“My place in this family is to make sure you all don’t get yourselves killed no matter how you seem to BEG for it by provoking me,” Izumi growled through gritted teeth as she stood behind him, with his arm under hers, twisting his shoulder. “It’s time you’ve learned yours.” She let go and left him on the ground.

No one spoke. “If there are no questions, then family meeting is adjourned. You may resume your vacation, thank you for your attention,” Izumi said, heading back to the front to stow away the weapons for Tenzin’s children from Pema and Suyin’s children with Baatar, “Jinora, if you would like, I can see you at four in the afternoon today.”

Kuvira looked at the two metal rings in her hands and the rest of Suyin Beifong’s brood dispersing
with nothing. Why did she trust me and not the others? Kuvira thought.

“Because you’re not stupid like some of them,” Taemon whispered in Kuvira’s ear as he passed on his way to the forest for another retreat.

Kuvira turned but Taemon was already gone, his footsteps fading down the hall.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to cityofzaofu, MusicPlayer81, and Satomobile for your help with the first part of this monstrous chapter that has been divided in two. And thank you, reader for bearing with me. Sorry for the slow update. School and living has really difficult and I wanted to not rush this story as I feel I have done with most of my others. Hope you have a great Tuesday!
Miyoko had perched herself in a tree to watch her father attempt to console one of her young airbending cousins.

"Why the long face?" Masaru asked, seating the ten-year-old Meelo on the bench beside him.

"Ikki and Kang are being mean. I don't know what changed. We used to have fun playing pranks on everyone else and now they just play modified airball with Wing and Wei all day and none of them want me on their team, so they send me away,"

"Do you know why they send you away?" Masaru asked.

"They call me dead weight," Meelo replied.

"Well, that's just cruel!" Masaru exclaimed, squeezing the boy's shoulder. "But at the same time, understandable."

"What?" Meelo asked, saddening.

"You must understand that everyone's primary instinct is self-preservation. Even in something as casual as a ball game, every person on every team wants to win and will do anything to achieve that win."

"Even if that means being mean?"

"No, such cruelty was completely uncalled for and I shall speak to my sisters about discipline later today, but in the meantime, I have a proposal for you."

"You do?"

"We can train together and make you the one they fight over when choosing teams."

"You'd do that? You'd train me?" Meelo asked, his face lighting up with excitement.

"Of course! You're my nephew! Come on, let's get started," Masaru said, standing, offering his nephew a hand. Meelo took it, but before they left, turned back. "Oh wait, I almost forgot something!"

"I don't think you brought-"

"Bye Yoko!" Meelo chirped, waving up into the tree.

"Oh-" Masaru sighed with a smile.

Miyoko glared at the boy.

"You'd make a terrible spy, Sister," Tetsuya chided, coming up behind Miyoko.

"I am not spying on him." Miyoko claimed snapping her head around to face him.
"You are watching and eavesdropping on a private conversation-"

"-In a public place-

"-and making a pitiful attempt to go unseen. I believe that constitutes spying," Tetsuya replied.

"Why do you care?" Miyoko asked impatiently.

"I don't. Honestly, I'm really bored and there's nobody else here to talk to."

"Don't you have Tatsu?"

"A man can only spend so long staring at a hammered distortion of his own reflection."

Miyoko sighed. A month ago, she found it so easy to hate the man who tried to manipulate her into joining the Rogue League and overthrowing their mother, and now, she just felt sorry for him.

"How about Taemon?"

"He is too busy groveling in shame and humiliation over how he responded to hearing Kuvira's life story to hold an intelligible conversation."

Miyoko cocked her head to the side curiously. "What did he say to her?"

"After she finished, he just ends with, 'I thought it was a long story,'" Tetsuya answered, sitting on the branch beside his sister.

"That is why I was watching Father," Miyoko answered finally, watching Meelo and Masaru depart for the airball courts.

"I don't understand."

"He and mother are so good at consoling people, but I feel like we've the emotional range of a teaspoon."

"First of all, it's Father that can console people. Mother is shit at it, just like you and Taemon-in fact, I'm surprised she didn't make Xiaoyu cry yesterday during that weapons presentation ceremony. I like to think I am pretty good at consoling people considering I did manage to inspire an army of children to fight for my cause."

"Give a kid some fire flakes or ice cream and he'll do anything. Their willingness to fight for you doesn't tell shit your consolation skills when there's no proof, Tetsu." Miyoko retorted, jumping down from the branch.

Lin knocked on the door of her little sister's room with Kya beside her.

"Who is it?" the Earth Queen called, unable to tell through the wooden floors.

"Kya and me," Lin replied.

The door unlatched and swung open, revealing Suyin sitting on her bed with Sokka's space sword across her lap, her hand wrapped.

"May I see it?" Kya asked, sitting beside Suyin while Lin remained standing.

"If you want to," Suyin replied, offering her hand.
"How are you feeling?" Lin asked.

"Bereft," Suyin replied. "Slighted and betrayed by my own mother… and my own family if we're being honest."

"You're not the only one," Lin reassured her, sitting across from her on a bench while Kya healed the self-inflicted wound in the palm of Suyin's hand.

"I can't believe Mom would just pass up the both of us to give Gaoling to the fucking Fire Lord!"

"Former Fire Lord," Kya corrected her.

"Still!"

"Technically, Mom is passing the place on to her firstborn son who just happens to practically be full fire by now and married to a literal dragon," Lin reminded her little sister.

"Do you think we should we fight them?" Suyin asked.

"What? No, Su! Saru is still our brother. He has every right to inherit whatever Mom decides to give him and Zumi."

"But they're not family! They were literally absent until a year ago!"

"I was literally absent until three years ago—"

"They can't be trusted with Gaoling! Especially after Izumi electrocuted me just because my son spoke out of turn. She's just like her grandfather! Brutal, cold—"

Lin pinched the bridge of her nose. This was Lin's best friend and Kya's ex-girlfriend Su was talking about. "Why do you even want Gaoling? You already have Zaofu, not to mention the entire Earth Kingdom."

"I don't know. I guess I just always felt like Gaoling was where we came from."

"It is where Mom came from. We were both born in the United Republic."

"What about Saru? Wasn't he also born in Republic City?"

"I don't know."

"There's a lot of things we don't know about him. How do we even know if he is our brother?"

"Would Mom give him so much if he weren't?"

Su said nothing, her mouth hardening into a thin line.

"Almost there— get it!" Masaru yelled as Meelo ran for the air ball. He jumped off of a post and flipped through the air, kicking a blade of wind towards the ball and sending it back towards his uncle. Masaru flipped onto another post and sent a pulse of heat, sending it back. "Go!"

Meelo dove and hit it to the side, projecting the path of the ball to bounce off exactly six posts before— "A SCORE!" Meelo yelled as Masaru tripped on his way to another post, allowing the air ball to pass through the goal window.
"Congratulations, little lad!" Masaru gasped, heaving himself off the ground, holding his back and feigning windedness.

"Thank you for training me, Uncle Saru!" Meelo said as he retrieved the ball, rolling it over his shoulders and tossing it around as he ran over.

"Anytime, kid!" Masaru replied, messing the airbender boy's hair.

"Did your Dad ever play games with you?" Meelo asked.

"He—" Masaru paused. "He tried to… but it was hard… to play games with an infant and then a toddler."

"You're lucky. My Dad never played with us. He was always meditating or busy with his council duties in the city. Did you know Aunt Lin was the one who first taught us the rules of airball at the Northern Air Temple during the reconstruction?"

"I did not! Did you play against Jiexue and Xiaoyu then?"

"Yeah! And Kang back when he was actually liked me," Meelo replied.

"Kang still likes you. People just—change," Masaru explained as they walked back to the main house for drinks.

"You could say that again!" Meelo groaned, walking with the ball tucked under his arm.

"Eight… nine… ten… eleven… .TWELVE... Thir-and the knife bounced off of all the others already sticking out of the target.

"So close!" Jinora exclaimed. From the sidelines, Lin nodded her head with approval. Behind Jinora, Izumi smiled and reached for another training knife that had been laid out beside the diamond ones. She threw it at Jinora's target practice. Instead of being kept out of that center circles by the other knives already there, it knocked out those down on its way in.

"When the target is so cluttered, you can no longer aim for its general area. You must aim for a single point between the previous throws. The knife in your hand must be treated like a wedge capable of forcing its way through," Izumi threw another knife and knocked out three. Then another and knocked out two. Then another and knocked out four. All of her throws sunk into the target deeper and closer together than any of Jinora's throws before. After fifteen, the pattern of the knives took the appearance of a steel flower growing horizontally.

Izumi picked up the last knife and took aim at the center of the flower and threw. That last knife flew straight and fast into the center of the flower, the widening width of its blade enough to cause all of the other knives to fall.

"Woah!" Jinora gasped.

"Why don't you go pick up what we've done while I speak to Mama Lin," Izumi suggested to Jinora.

"Yes, Aunt Zumi," Jinora replied, running over to the target while Izumi strode over to Lin.

"How is Suyi doing?" Izumi asked.

"She's hurt, and isn't exactly shy about letting everyone know. How are you?"
"I didn't mean to hurt her. I was trying to startle her, but I guess it could have felt amplified given the circumstance. It was like this," Izumi said touching Lin's wrist and administering the same volt of electricity she zapped Suyin with the previous day.

"I know you wouldn't actually hurt one of us with your lightning. She just- she worries a lot… about a lot of things," Lin sighed, watching Rohan run to help Jinora pick up the knives as soon as Lin let go of him.

"Always has been… did Kya get a chance to heal her hand?"

"Yeah, and she is working on Kuvira's wrists now."

"Good," Izumi sighed. "Do you know how Xiaoyu is doing? It seems that she's still terrified of me even after a month of distance."

"That's probably my fault for giving her such classical training. I had her too classically trained. I didn't want to deprive her of the opportunity to be an airbender and experience its culture and know its history but at the same time, I may have not emphasized enough that she didn't need to follow it as creed. You're right. The airbenders are going to have to fight if they're to survive."

"Well, if she doesn't want to defile the air around her, she can still bend lightning," Izumi remembered. "It is already in her."

"Right. Kohaku taught her how to bend lightning."

"Crudely. If she doesn't want to use fans, I can train her bending. She needs every defense she can get. We all do especially after everything."

\[\text{Xiaoyu perched herself on one foot, balancing and meditating on the top of the dormant volcano above a boiling lake. The heat of the steam never felt more comforting and unsettling at the same time. The energy enveloped her and made her feel safe from harm, but the warmth of it all reminded her too much of the past month. She had been manipulated, tricked into bending lightning, tricked into trusting her new family only to be betrayed them. Her cousins staged a coup, and her aunt used dark lightning on her to make her less afraid of going on a date with the man who tried to kill her mother to gather information. She felt like a soiled napkin, discarded after serving a purpose, her history forgotten.}\

"Mind if I join you?" Tenzin asked, sitting beside her and folding his legs into the lotus position.

"No," Xiaoyu replied, coming down from her one foot to copy his position "How did you find me?"

"Jiexue. She told me you always did like finding the highest place possible to meditate, to feel the air move all around."

Xiaoyu pulled her knees into her chest. "But I feel like that is changing and I hate it."

"How? Why?"

"Because I don't just seek out air anymore, but heat as well" Xiaoyu explained. "And the heat reminds me of Kohaku and how he played me."

"He played all of us, but now he's dead."
"Taemon and Tetsu played the entirety of the Fire Nation but they're still here because of Izumi… they were sentenced to death and she spared them."

"They're not getting away unscathed. Izumi made sure they were punished. They are serving a life sentence of hard labor for the state. They're still being punished."

"What do you call whatever they're doing now? How is enjoying a nice vacation on Ember Island serving the state, exactly?"

Tenzin sighed pensively. How could he prove to Xiaoyu that people could change? That she didn't need to be afraid of Izumi or the others now. "You know, there was a time that Azula tried to kill her brother, relentlessly."

"Dad, that never changed. I remember reading about it during our history lessons with Mum and Captain Peng. After they finally caught up with the impostors posing as the Kemurikage, in 115AG, they threw her in jail for the rest of eternity."

"That is what the history books wrote. But we know, Azula changed."

"How?"

"In 134AG, Azula moved from the prison back into the palace. Why do you think that forbidden section is called Azula's Quarter? It was where she lived. Not even the staff knew she was there."

"How could they trust her to be so close, after all she had done?"

"Because they knew people can change."

Xiaoyu frowned at him, skeptically.

"Maybe she is a bad example."

"Because you can't prove Azula was there in the castle if it was never documented."

"Hmmm. then the Dragon of the West, Iroh! Lord Zuko's Uncle. He once laid siege to Ba Sing Se for a hundred nights and a hundred days; he personally murdered and pillaged and commanded others to do the same for the 'glory' of the Fire Nation, but changed after the death of his son, Lu Ten. He helped your grandfather end the war and went on to become one of the most beloved figures of modern history."

Xiaoyu said nothing at first as she gazed down at the boiling lake below them. She looked so much like her mother when she was angry, but her amber eyes screamed Fire.

"I won't ever ask you to forgive your cousins for what they've done to our family, or your aunt for using you, but I will ask that you at least give them a chance to show you who they are now and how they've changed."

"Alright," Xiaoyu relented, standing. "But Dad, I know all life is sacred, and I may be an airbender, but if any of them make one step backwards, one slip up, or give me any indication that they mean to hurt anyone in our family, I will end them. This is their last chance. I won't make the mistake of trusting the flames ever again."

Tenzin held his breath as his daughter fled his presence, flying down the face of the volcano, leaping from tree top to tree top with the assistance of her airbending. In his head, he could almost hear her words coming out of the mouth of his own mother when she told them the story of when
Lord Zuko first joined their Team Avatar. Perhaps she was more like Katara than he thought.

Diamond clashed with diamond then diamond cut through flesh. It wasn't deep, Taemon knew—just a shallow slice, meant to distract and disorient as blood trickled down his leg, tickling. It was a good strategy but one he too knew well. After all, she was the one who trained him to best her.

Taemon cast aside his long sword as he took a sliding step back to gain distance and time to unsheath his tanto tagger and one of the short swords he carried before diving back into the fight. He dipped, narrowly evading her blade by a hair's length width away. She too had sheathed her longsword in the seconds of distance that had passed, and drawn her twin dao swords, sacrificing reach but compensating with agility and flexibility. He threw the tanto daggers past her blades, aiming to graze her arm as she did her leg, but she misjudged the direction and stepped sideways into it, receiving a gauge in her arm instead of a stinging line.

Taemon's eyes widened in shock that he didn't predict that maneuver even after so many years of training with her. Rather than crumple under the pain of the injury, she roared, flying towards him. She kicked his short sword out of his hand and dropped her blades to ram him in the stomach with her shoulder. Grabing the back of his legs, she broke his base and dropped him flat on his back, knocking the air from his lungs with blood from her arm dripping onto his chest. He drove a knee between them and threw her up, over his head.

She saved her own with her wounded arm, kicking over and onto her feet again, spilling more blood on him as she went. He kipped up onto his own feet and spun to face her. She closed the distance between and soon they were locked, fingers interlocked, both fighting to drive the other back on the dusty surface of the sparring arena. He dropped to a knee to avoid an elbow to the head and slipped a hand up and around her long and narrow neck then managed to get another around her waist. She was thin, he remembered. Despite her strength and resilience, in those two places she was vulnerable. There, she was weak. She could pull at his wrists all she wanted, but it wouldn't change anything.

He didn't squeeze since they were just sparring, but he did think about how it would just be so easy to-

And he screamed as the electricity coursed through every fibre of his flimsy, mortal body. He fell back on his rump panting for relief while she fell to her hands and knees, coughing, rubbing her neck and shoulder where he had gripped her firmly without suffocating.

"Lady Lee," Genkei called from the side lines.

Taemon rolled over onto his hands and knees while Izumi sat back on hers, looked up and brushed some loose hair aside as she worked to regain her breath and calm down her heart beat after the intensity of the spar.

"Yes?" she asked, passing a glance from Genkei to the young lady he was escorting.

"Your daughter, Lady Lee, was caught trying to leave the bounds of the property unaccompanied," Genkei explained, giving Miyoko a gentle nudge forward while she snarled and scowled at him.

"Caught? By the Amber League? You'd make a terrible spy," Taemon commented, recovering as Izumi stood up to receive her youngest daughter.

"So I've been told," Miyoko grumbled.

"Thank you, Genkei," Izumi said, pulling the girl into a sweat-and-blood-filled hug. "Did nobody
The latter.

Silly Yoko! You know I don't gamble with your safety," Izumi reminded her girl softly as she brushed hair from her girl's smooth, pale forehead.

"You did before the last month happened," Miyoko replied, trying in vain to wiggle free. "Quite often, I might add."

"It wasn't intentional. Genkei, you may go. Anyways, Yoko, would you care for a round of sparring?"

"No thank you, Mother. I swore off fighting when I was ten, don't you remember?"

"I do, I just wanted to check in with you since people change, Yoko. My father did, Aunt Azula, Great Uncle Iroh..."

"Well I haven't and I would appreciate it if you don't ask again. Don't want me to become like Huan, do you? Joining an actual rebellion? No? Didn't think so. I won't fight unless I have to, Mother." Miyoko decided, prying her mother's hands from her shoulders and retreating to the house.

Izumi sighed and cupped her hand over the gash on her arm cauterizing it closed with a hiss of pain. "Why does she have to be so..."

Taemon raised a brow. "You know, you're both so similar."

"How so?"

"You've both done rather well with the shat hands you've been dealt."

"Was I wrong to put a restriction on independent travel for the duration of this vacation?" Izumi asked, wrapping her mangled flesh to hide the gash turned burn from sunlight until Kya could get to it.

"I don't think so. The fear for our safety is understandable. Although, I was surprised it was Yoko who was the first to try to break free from your tyranny, not me or Tetsu," Taemon replied.

"Ha. Ha." Izumi groaned, tying the knot of the arm wrappings with one hand. "Want to go again?" she asked, untying her belt and pulling off her shirt.

"Sure, but why are you disrobing?"

"Because I am hot and sweating and neither my mother nor Iliana are here to tell me not to," she replied using her shirt to wipe off her perspiration. "Men do it all the time, so why can't I?"

Taemon shrugged. Fair enough.

"Shall we begin?" she asked, cracking her knuckles and shoulders in preparation for her next bout.

"I suppose. Best always be prepared for whatever may come," Taemon decided, finding his feet again.

"Blades again?" Izumi asked.
"Use your fire, Mrs. Feng. I always did like a little challenge."

"Are you implying I went too easy on you our last time?"

"I would have won if you didn't have your dark lightning to save you."

"As it should be, my child." Izumi replied.

"You're looking more sullen than usual," Tetsuya commented when he found Miyoko brooding in the kitchens of the Fire Lord's vacation house.

"Is that so?" Miyoko asked. "I always thought I looked the same."

"Your darkness always deepens whenever mother gives you attention. What did you do this time?"

"I tried to sneak out of bounds," Miyoko confessed.

Tetsuya laughed as he took a bottle of sake out of the cupboards. "Couldn't wait to visit Ikta again?"

"How do you know about him?!" Miyoko gasped.

"Dear sister, I served ten years in the great *Amber League*. At its founding, its sole purpose was protecting the Fire Lord's sanity, and that meant ensuring the physical safety of her children. And as her favorite, you were the most important. So of course we kept tabs on who you wanted to fuck in case they broke your heart once the deed was done."

"What?!" Miyoko shrieked, her face reddening. "I haven't even— never wanted to—"

"But now you do," Tetsuya replied, amused by her defensiveness regarding the subject.

Miyoko sputtered at first, then covered her head and screamed against the table while Tetsuya laughed.

"Are you tormenting your dear sister over her failure to get past your former employer?" Taemon asked, entering the kitchen to fetch himself something to eat.

"Perhaps," Tetsuya replied with a smug grin on his face.

"You know, Yoko. You CAN just ask one of us to go with you next time you want to fuck your boyfriend.""

"Or both of us. That way we can keep each other company while you try to get over your fear of that first time—"

"How do you know I haven't fucked him before?!" Miyoko asked.

"You'd be a lot more cautious."

"And understand mother's reluctance to let you out of her sight a little bit more."

Izumi knew right away that something had happened earlier that day as soon as she walked into Kya's room to find her and Lin whispering between each other. Both had fallen silent when they noticed her presence. The entire visit had been so bizarre with her best friend and her lover
remaining so tight-lipped. She knew they still cared by the way they both gazed at her burns with disapproval, refraining from lecturing her about not coming sooner. But Izumi could tell something had changed. Only after Lin had left, Kya told her. Despite being warned against it, Izumi found herself making her way to the Earth Queen's old room on Ember Island.

"Fuck these wooden floors-" She heard the woman whisper. "Who is it?"

"A sister," Izumi replied.

Suyin groaned and flicked the door open. "To what do I owe the occasion?"

"I have a gift for you… and a favor to ask…"

"I thought the gifts were reserved for the kids… and a favor? That's a tall order to ask of the Earth Queen after everything."

"I know, but please, hear me out."

"Alright I'll listen, but won't make any promises. Not yet, at least."

Izumi drew a breath. "I know you don't trust me right now, Suyi… But I trust you-" Suyin lifted her eyes in mild surprise and Izumi knew she had the younger's attention.

"If you don't remember, my grandmother Ursa never did love Ozai. She was forced to be with him because of some prophecy regarding the combinations of the bloodlines of Avatar Roku and Fire Lord Sozin. From the age of seventeen, she had to heed his every demand, serve him however he pleased. When the time came, she was the one who assassinated Fire Lord Azulon on his orders in a sick deal to save her son's life.

"She knew that that potential for cruelty runs through the blood of the Royal Family. She had seen it manifest too many time in too many people. So, when my mother, Fire Lady Mai married my father, Grandmother Ursa gave her a gift," Izumi said. She stopped to draw a clear dagger that looked like it was made of glass with a liquid well in it. Suyin looked at it, backlit by the lamplight and noted that there were veins throughout the weapon. Izumi stabbed it in the bedside table with a heavy thud. "A dagger- laced with a potent, colorless, odorless poison. Like the mercury in a thermometer, the poison expands when heated, and will only come out through the veins of the blade once lodged in the body of a firebender whose natural temperature remains above a forty degrees centigrade. My grandmother told my mother that if my father ever began a spiraling descent into madness, to run him through with this dagger through and spare the lives of the people of our nation AND the rest of the world."

"Why are you telling me this?" Suyin asked, avoiding Izumi's eyes.

"Because, I want you to have it-and if you see me fall off the deep end, to end the descent, permanently. Prune away the branches that pose a threat to the rest of the tree."

Suyin slid away from Izumi on the bed.

"I can't! One sovereign killing another? The world would-"

"I am no sovereign anymore! Why do people KEEP forgetting that-" Izumi asked herself.

"Why don't you ask Lin or Kya? I can't-"

"They could never do it. Kya is my lover, and Lin my best friend. They'd try to save me if they saw
me fall off the deep end. As for you, though you say you do, I know you don't give those second chances."

Izumi waited, patiently, for a response to her request. She could see the rage boiling just beyond the jade eyes of the enlightened Earth Queen as if she'd been physically struck across the face by truth being spoken. Suyin looked at the knife sticking out of her side table with scrutiny. "I can't- you can just- magnetic field your way out or vaporize the thing with your- fancy blue fire!" she dismissed flippanly.

"Diamond isn't magnetic, you know that. Besides, my fire, at the peak of its power is still 1200 degrees shy of the minimum temperature to break the carbon arrangement of the crystal lattice structure. Only Eiko can manipulate it, and she won't stop you from killing me if she knows it needs to be done." Izumi also stood and placed a hand on the younger's shoulder. "As I've said before, I know you don't trust me right now, after everything that has happened in the last few months... but I trust you." She kissed Suyin on the forehead and left the knife erect in the surface of the bedside table for Suyin to contemplate using.

In the forest surrounding the Fire Lord's Vacation home, Kuvira sat among the leaves, where she met him that day around that same tree, waiting for something or nothing at all.

"What are you doing here?" Kuvira demanded when she saw Taemon approaching.

He raised a brow. "Looking for you. Your absence at dinner was noticed."

"Sorry I just- needed time alone. It's felt claustrophobic in there with so many people!"

"Tell me about it," Taemon replied, sitting with his back against a tree opposite her.

"One would think after a year with only one's own thoughts for company, one would want to be around people, but it's nothing like that ," Kuvira replied, holding her head in her hands. "I want to be better, but- I feel like I just can't. It's like I'm stuck."

"What's stopping you?"

"Opal and her brothers' incessant whispering about all the murders I have committed or ordered."

"What else is expected in a time of war?"

"But I invaded the United Republic and—"

"Which used to belong to the Earth Kingdom before the Fire Nation colonized it. You were given a job to reunite the Earth Kingdom under one power and you were doing just that. If they wanted you to omit Zaofu and the United Republic, they should have said something before they gave you the green light to go. You're a good person and a soldier, Kuvira- and a great leader! You managed to accomplish a nearly impossible mission nobody else was even brave enough to attempt. Their lack of clarity was no fault of yours."

"What will happen after this vacation?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to go back to Zaofu or Ba Sing Se or anywhere in the Earth Kingdom. Not after everything. They won't forgive me for what I've done, for all the grief and devastation I've caused."
"You'd be surprised by the cruelty of man, and also its kindness. They will never forget, but in
time, they will forgive. You're still young. You've time to change if you want to and leave a
different mark on the world."

"What if I don't want to leave a mark on the world? What if I want to just disappear with the wind
or dig my own grave? Do you think if I provoke Izumi's dragon enough she will-"

"Even Eiko won't let you escape the mortal world that easily. Besides, death is so finite and boring.
Why meet it now when life is so full of possibilities?"

"The conditions of my release included allowing Suyin a second chance at being a mother to me. I
was so hopeful then, so desperate to put an end to the silence, and solitude, but now… I regret it.
Anything is better than living under that tyrant and with her bitching brood of insufferable children
who think I haven't changed!"

"Only time and consistency can prove such a thing." He pulled out a container with rice, pork and
sauteed green beans and mushrooms. "Apparently Lin and Izumi have decided that I should be the
one charged with making you eat."

"Not Suyin?" Kuvira asked, raising a brow while keeping her gaze at her feet.

"She-" doesn't care about you as much as them apparently. "She's still trying to come to terms with
the loss of something that was never hers… that and finding out the identity of her father."

"Some Mother," Kuvira sighed, taking the bowl, but setting it down in the leaves beside her.

He watched her wallow in her misery, neither pushing nor pulling her to eat. She had enough
nagging for a lifetime, he decided. She deserved peace, after everything.

Miyoko watched as Tetsuya held Tatsu over the toilet while he vomited. Tetsu took a ribbon and
tied up his brother's hair and rubbed his back soothingly.

"Pants," Tatsu croaked.

"Yoko, please look away." Tetsuya asked.

"I've seen a cock before," Miyoko replied, leaning against the door stubbornly as Tetsuya helped
his drunken twin to his feet.

"I doubt it. Besides, Mother would disapprove greatly if I allowed you to see a brother's—"
Tetsuya said, moving to shield his twin's member from Yoko's view while the drunk pissed into
the toilet.

"I don't care what she thinks... most of the time," Miyoko replied.

"Why have you been following me? I'm almost certain you have no interest in watching me tend to
our drunken brother," Tetsuya asked, wiping the tip of his brother's penis with a bit of toilet tissue
before helping him to his knees again for when he next vomited.

"My room is too near to the others. One can only hear so much of their empty chatter."

"You didn't seem to mind it back at the palace and during our parents' wedding."

"I only endured it as a courtesy to Mother," Miyoko corrected him.
"What kind of conversation do you prefer if not mindless chatter?"

"None," Miyoko shrugged.

"So you prefer silence?"

"It's what I'm used to."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Let's see. As soon as I could walk, I was taught how to navigate the vents of the palace silent and unseen. Out of all the dinners I was supposed to have with Mother and Father between the ages of zero and seven, I believe they came to three. Servants weren't allowed to sit at the table with me until Sunako came along, and even then those memories were stripped from my consciousness to prevent me from feeling any longing. Because I was born after mother was supposed to stop having children, I didn't exist to the world. Though sometimes it felt as if I didn't exist to her either, since she and Father for that matter were so busy."

"I was born an identical twin. We were the youngest out of six children. Iroh and Takeo needed homework help. Rikuto was an oddity with his earthbending and always needed reassurance that he was still worth something in the Fire Nation. Sasuke needed to be brought to Shu Jing almost every weekend for his swordsmanship training at Piandao's academy, Taemon followed our Mother around like a tiny turtle duck absorbing her every word, every order, and executing, and Tatsu—Tatsu was always getting into things he wasn't supposed to, isn't that right, Brother?" Tetsuya asked loudly.

"Water—" he croaked.

Tetsuya moved to get up, but Miyoko stepped forward, filled the cup and handed it to him.

"Sure mother cooked dinner for us every night and we ate as a family unit, but bet I probably got no more attention than you did growing up. Just think, we knew our mothers' aims as Princess, and then Fire Lord but no more about her, and she knew nothing of us—still knows nothing of us."

"Do you think that could change now that she's retired?" Miyoko asked.

"It is a possibility, but only if we are the ones to change it," Tetsuya turned to Tatsu who was asleep on the bathroom floor. "He should be okay to get to bed now. The worst has passed."

Tetsuya heaved his twin into his shoulder and carried him to bed. "If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that you cannot wait for your world to change. You must be the one to change it."

"Trust me, I know. It's why I made that organization—because I know alone we're but drops of water in an ocean," Miyoko replied.

Tetsuya and Miyoko could practically feel the heat radiating from their parents' parlor as they approached it nervously. It must have been their mother's turn to light the evening fire in the hearth. "Do you want to go first, or shall I?" Tetsuya asked.

"I'm already closer," Miyoko replied, opening the door just a crack. "Mother, Father, may we join you in your parlor?"

Masaru lowered the papers in his hands for a moment while Izumi was the one to respond. "Of course, loves! You don't have to ask. You know that!"
Izumi wore a long flowing deep burgundy robe and Masaru wore a pair of underwear shorts and no shirt as he settled down on one of the couches. Miyoko and Tetsuya slipped into the room, both still in their day clothes.

"You don't usually come to us at this hour," Masaru noted aloud.

"We were just curious," Miyoko replied as she sat down on the rug in front of the couch where her parents lay. "What do you usually do in your evenings together these days?"

"Read," Izumi answered after taking a moment to think. She picked up an ancient tome that looked like she had pilfered it from Wan Shi Tong's Spirit Library and opened it, perching it on her knees to read.

"I fuck her when she lets me," Masaru added, shrugging casually.

Both Miyoko and Tetsuya froze in surprise. Izumi's hair and fire in the hearth both flared up in annoyance and she kicked him in the leg.

"Ew, Father!" Miyoko scolded.

"We did NOT need to hear about that!" Tetsuya declared.

He shrugged. "What? Just because we're old doesn't mean we don't have desires."

"Saru, don't ever speak that way in front of the children again," Izumi warned him.

"Oh please, they're hardly children anymore." Masaru rolled his eyes.

"They'll ALWAYS be children in my mind!"

Miyoko searched the drawers in the center table and found a pai sho table.

"Care for a game?" she asked Tetsuya.

"Sure," he replied, already reaching for a game piece.

Izumi watched out of the corner of her eye while Masaru sat down his newspaper completely. Tetsuya and Miyoko were by far the most intelligent of their trueborn children, that much was beyond dispute. Both were equally dissatisfied with Izumi's reign and were no doubt relieved when it came to a premature end, but they had still been at opposite ends of the spectrum in their methods of how to depose her if she had remained in power for too long.

Izumi noticed Tetsuya shivering and frowned.

He must be cold since he could no longer warm the air around him with his bending.

Masaru saw it too. His hair turned red and he released one of his dragons to wrap around and warm his son, startling Tetsuya.

"Don't be afraid. It won't burn you!" Izumi insisted.

He relaxed a little and looked at it. It was red, not at all like his mother's blue Flames that he fought in the infirmary that day. He turned to his father. "You're just like her, aren't you?"

"Yes," he replied, his hair now a shimmering crimson inlaid with orange streaks. "Although, I must say I've more control over my inner flame. I haven't combusted with grief," Masaru said, winking at Izumi who frowned.
"Do they have names, father?" Tetsuya asked.

"This one's name is Anger."

"Why?"

"Because he's always angry at Izumi's Fear for consuming so much of her energy."

"I don't understand," Tetsuya replied, gently stroking the energy being wrapped around his torso, warming but not burning him.

"Show him."

Izumi let out her six dragons and Masaru his remaining five.

Masaru's Anger immediately flew at Izumi's Fear as Masaru's Happiness took its place warming Tetsu. The rest of his dragons were fairly small and began playing amongst themselves.

Izumi covered her eyes, wincing when her Fear received its first strike.

"I don't think it's actually angry," Miyoko said as they watched the two dragons fighting for dominance.

Masaru reached over and took his wife's hands.

"I think it's a protector," Tetsuya commented, watching in awe. The two children turned to their parents who had smaller dragons of different sizes on their laps and shoulders as they held hands.

"Mum, are you alright?"

"I just— have a lot of suppressed energy that it's good to let out sometimes, only— terrifying," Izumi replied her arms tensed as Masaru's anger tore Izumi's fear in half.

"You're alright," he said, holding her.

"What does it feel like?" Miyoko asked. For you, Mum?"

"It's like... facing everything that pains you. It hurts at first to face it, but then feels— almost relieving afterwards." Izumi replied. Her other dragons grew a little. Fear limped over to Izumi and Izumi smiled, stroking its head with a finger.

"Will I ever be able to stop feeding you?" Izumi asked the dragon.

It curled up in her lap.

"If Fear is such a bad thing, debilitating at times, why doesn't Father's Anger just make it go away completely?" Miyoko asked.

"Because some amount of fear is still needed every day, just under a different name." Masaru replied.

"It's called caution. It's why I don't like you guys going out alone. Fear still has its place in all of our lives. We just can't let it consume all of our energy and keep us from making more pleasant memories," Izumi said.

"I don't know why it got so big since coming here," Masaru said to Izumi. "You're retired now
sweetheart. You haven't any reason to fear as much as you used to," he said stroking her cheek. "Nobody can hurt them now. There are no Sages who will murder them for existing. The public have accepted Takeo. We're safe. We have a family. We're not alone anymore, Zumi. Breathe. It's okay," he cupped her cheek and ran a finger along her temple. Her hair darkened until it was almost as black as Yoko's.

"May I retire? You'll stay with the children?"

"Go," Masaru said. Izumi retreated to her room.

"You both look as if you're about to explode with questions," Masaru commented after she left.

"Why did you hide your inner fires for so long?"

"Because Izumi did not want us to be labeled as monsters. People fear what they don't understand, and even she didn't know what she was." Masaru explained.

"So you lied to the world."

"We thought lying would be safer than letting them know. It's dangerous to play with fire and so easy to lose control. You remember, Tetsu, when they took Ursa away?"

"Mother couldn't stop crying for days."

"She exploded that morning. Physically blew up, destroying the entire throne room and part of the parliamentary chamber. No one, not Zuko or Mai could even reach her because her flames burned so hot. Her Fear and Hurt had consumed every ounce of her being and paralyzed her."

"Are the dragons like... a part of you or do that have minds of their own."

"I don't know."

"Because one of Mother's touched me that day in the infirmary and spoke directly into my mind, it seemed. It said, 'The masters may love you, but I see truth'."

Masaru leaned back in thought. "Maybe it is just manifestations of our own minds. I don't think they're independent. I don't see how they can be if they come from inside. Maybe they're parts of our subconscious? We don't have to bend them like we bend Fire. They're just— there, all the time. Maybe we knew something was up with you Tetsu, but the parents inside were in denial that our child could stray so far from the line we tried to define. They fight each other sometimes for center stage in our heads."

"Like consciousness and impulse," Tetsuya replied.

"Exactly."

"Father?"

"Yes, Tetsu?"

"I want to come home."

"You are home,"

"No. I want to move back home. I— I miss being together like this. Without so many responsibilities and worries. I will still be working, paying off that debt to the country, but can my
"base of operations be by you?" Tetsuya asked.

"Always," Masaru replied with a warm smile. "I'm sure your mother would love to have you home."

Miyoko leaned closer to her father and rested her head on his knee. Tetsuya in an instant moved over from the other side of the table and did the same.

Masaru looked down at them. They were hurting. He couldn't do with them like he did with Izumi. They couldn't let out their fears for him to attack. But... maybe he could feed a little more energy into their Happiness to combat the sad. He reached into his own head, searching for a memory.

For Yoko, she at twelve years old beating her mother at pai sho and in a way, meeting her for the first time. The real her. The snarky, sarcastic Izumi that didn't really care for courtesy. Miyoko discovered her prim and proper parents lit up the palace bathrooms with wildfyre for fun when they were young. She learned that they were just as crazy as any other child's parents.

For Tetsu, Masaru watching the four year old making origami.

"Father, What is mother's favorite animal?"

"I believe it's a turtle duck."

"Not a dragon?" Tetsuya asked, glancing down at his instruction book. He was so small, kneeling on the bench by the dinner table.

"She's may be a dragon, but she loves her little turtle ducks," Masaru replied to Tetsuya

"I'm hopeless!" Tatsuya yelled, burning his paper, starting to cry.

"Let me help you!" Tetsuya said, calming Tatsu instantly. Masaru smiled.

"Do you think Mother will like our gifts?"

"I know she'll love it as if it were an extension of you," Masaru replied.

—he had it at his fingertips and touched a hand to their temples and the memories flooded their eyes. They both turned to him, shocked. "How did you do that?" Tetsuya asked.

"Dark lightning— isn't always a bad thing," he replied.

They both hugged his legs and he laughed.

For the rest of the evening they asked about his childhood, their siblings', and their mother's.

"It's getting late," he said, imagining them as children again. "You both should get some rest. I heard a rumor that Aunt Kya has something special planned for all of you tomorrow."

"Awwwwww!" They whined.

"Her surprises always involve either dancing or smoking!"

"Smoking?"

"Maybe just for those of us who are older." Tetsuya thought aloud.
"And I'm tired too!" He said, kissing their heads, running his fingers through their long hair. "Get some rest."

"Goodnight Father!"

"Goodnight!"

"Goodnight you two," he said, hugging them each before sending them off.

"You're awake," Masaru said to Izumi when he got to their room.

"I was listening to you."

"Why?"

"Because you always seem to know what to do. You don't explode like I do, and I wanted to learn from you," Izumi replied, rolling over to drape an arm over his stomach.

"Why didn't you say so?" Masaru asked with a smile stroking her long neck.

"Because my tiny Fear is still so powerful," she replied quietly. "I don't want to make a mistake or make them hate me any more than they already do."

"Izumi, none of them hate you. Not Taemon, not Tetsu, not Yoko. They love you for what you've done—"

"I took their bending away."

"Maybe it was for the better. You heard Tetsu today. He misses being home. He misses you!"

"He misses you, Saru. You were always there, teaching him—"

Masaru recalled the memory, doing origami with the twins and gave it to Izumi.

The look on his face when she embraced him. He couldn't be happier.

"They love you," Masaru said. "His bending didn't matter then, and not having it won't matter now. Tetsu was never a fighter. He was an revolutionary intellectual just like you. He can kick ass if he needs to, but he doesn't enjoy senseless cruelty like Tatsu."

"I don't want to hurt them any more with my ineptitude."

"You're not inept. Give them a chance to prove to you that you've done fine with them. Give them time," Masaru asked.

"Alright," she whispered. Their foreheads were touching, their limbs intertwined.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to cityofzaofu and MusicPlayer81 for all of your help!!!
I ended up gutting the second half of the original Apple and the Tree chapter and redoing everything after I thought this one particular beach scene droned on for too long. It got cut completely but now I kind of want a bit of it back. Hmmmmm... blocking this story is hard. There are sooooo many scenes in my notes on my phone that I want to keep, but have to cut. I am sorry if this chapter seems choppy and less cohesive than the previous ones. I realized while rereading it that the intros to each scene are incredibly lacking, but I don't know what to add to it that won't feel like it has been done before in other chapters. As always, all criticism, positive, negative, constructive or superfluous is always greatly appreciated *inserts hearts* thanks for reading this story :)
Kuvira and Taemon watched with confusion from the cliffs overlooking the Royal Fire Family’s private beach as Oogi landed with the Avatar, Korra, The CEO of Future Industries, Asami Sato, Republic City’s Chief of Police, Mako, and his brother, Bolin atop his back.

“Why?” Kuvira asked Taemon. With him, she never seemed to need to communicate in full sentences, or articulate complete, cohesive thoughts. Somehow, he always seemed to know to what she was referring.

“Apparently, Izumi struck a deal with Opal to get her and the youngest of her brothers off your back,” Taemon responded flatly with scrutinizing eyes as he watched Masaru, Izumi, the rest of their aunts and uncles, and some of their cousins greet the ‘Krew’ warmly.

“What? I-- that really wasn’t necessary,” Kuvira responded, frowning. “I could just remove myself from the situation the next time they try to insult me. I already have my own room here, it would be easy--”

“That is what I told her. ‘Kuvira is a perfectly independent woman capable of taking the flack and ignoring it.’ Still, Izumi insists. She wants to be the ‘good’ Aunt, and after that little light show yesterday in response to Wei flapping his gums, she’s not very close to accomplishing that aim. She thought that by indulging in Opal’s desire to be beside Bolin, she could kill two birds with one stone: distract the petulant airbender so she’d lay off you and improve the other nieces and nephews’ perception of her.”

“What is wrong with their perception of her? She seems kind enough from what I’ve seen,” Kuvira replied, squinting and shielding her eyes from the bright afternoon sunlight.

“Which is very limited, I might add. You’ve been here what, two days? About a month ago, there was a wedding between Masaru and Izumi. The few weeks preceding that… let’s just say it was a nightmare for everybody, mostly because of me, and by the end, neither of us looked very decent in the eyes of the rest of the family.”

“But they all seem to be getting along fine now,” Kuvira commented, watching Izumi and Masaru converse without issue with everyone else down on the beach.

“Thanks to time. We’ve had a month to settle into new routines since Izumi’s retirement. Takeo seems like a stable, good leader, and even now meets with his advisors daily for at least four hours per Izumi’s advice. The Fire Lord must never rest if he wants his nation to not just survive but thrive.”

“If Izumi was intending to f**k the part about legitimacy this whole time, why didn’t she just name you heir to the throne--especially if you wanted it?”

“The best leaders are not those who want to lead, but those who do so naturally. With great power comes great responsibility and great risk for corruption. Even the purest can become tainted by gold, or glory, as I am sure you’ve seen.” Taemon replied. His amber eyes were unreadable, like always, and his expression smooth and still as if he wore a mask. “Besides, there’s still politics to consider. The conservatives would have had hers, and the rest of our heads up on pikes if she were
to name the orphaned son of a pedophillic rapist heir apparent to the Fire Nation throne.”

“You’re a-- nevermind.”

“Besides,” Taemon continued. “My loyalty is and always has been to the world. I do not prioritize the welfare of my own home country over the other four nations as is required of a Fire Lord. Takeo will. Of that, I’m sure.”

Introductions weren’t so bad for the Krew. They had met Suyin and Bataar’s children four years prior when recruiting new airbenders to train with Tenzin in the aftermath of Harmonic Convergence. Then three years after that, they met Lin and Tenzin’s children during the Second Siege of Republic City.

“I would introduce mine, but I’m afraid most of them decided they were too busy to join us for introductions,” Izumi apologized to Korra.

“Rude!” Opal whispered to Bolin.

“Unlike most of us, their careers do not accommodate extended vacations all that well,” Izumi reminded Opal.

“But at least we’re here!” Ursa exclaimed, indicating herself and her earthbending half-brother, extending open arms towards the Avatar, offering a hug.

“I’m Rikuto, second son of Masaru and Izumi, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you. My grandmother often spoke so fondly of your last incarnation. I can’t say the same about your current,” the man behind Ursa introduced himself, offering a hand to Korra to shake.

“I— thanks?” Korra replied with uncertainty as she shook the earthbender’s hand.

“Kuto!” Izumi hissed.

“What?” Rikuto shrugged as he shook hands with Asami, Mako, and Bolin. “You always DID say honesty IS the best policy!”

Izumi sighed and rolled her eyes with a proud smile.

“So Ma’am,” Korra said, sliding closer to Izumi. “You’re retired now, eh? Does this mean I get to call you Aunt Zumzu, or just Izumi?” Korra asked, nudging Izumi on the shoulder with her elbow.

Izumi raised a condescending brow at the young avatar, and tilted her chin only slightly, but it was enough to make the younger flinch away. “Your options are Lady Lee of Gaoling or Lady Ido of Ruyiao Jing. Slip up and you’ll be on the first bison back to Republic City,” Izumi clarified.

“Isn’t that a little— harsh?” Bolin asked.

“Not for Aunt Zumi, piss her off, and she might take away your bending,” Opal whispered in Bolin’s ear.

“What!!” Bolin shrieked as Izumi let out a slow sigh. Ursa and Rikuto both took a step back, Lin hit her own face with her palm, Tenzin pinched the bridge of his nose and their children eyed Opal with worry.

“Opal, what did we discuss earlier?” Izumi asked.

“Sorry Aunt Zumi,” Opal apologized.
“Wait! You can take a person’s bending away?” Korra asked Izumi, enthralled. “I thought only the Avatar could—”

“There is a great number of things that you don’t know about me, the nature of bending, and the rest of the world, Avatar. All things you don’t need to learn this instant.”

“But could you teach me eventually?” Korra asked.

“Maybe— Ursa, Huifan, why don’t you take the Avatar and her friends for a tour of Takeo’s summer residence and inform them of the house rules they must abide by during their stay with our family,” Izumi suggested.

Huifan and Ursa both stepped forward.

“Wait there are rules? I thought this was a vacation!” Bolin asked.

“They’re really basic, don’t worry!” Huifan said quickly, patting him on the shoulder as she passed.

“Just don’t go anywhere beyond the bounds of the property alone,” Ursa informed the Krew twirling to face them.

“It is just for safety purposes. Anyone can accompany you, even Rohan!” Huifan added, picking up the five-year-old boy that had been wandering around the legs of the group gathered on the docks.

“I guess that makes sense, but who will be there to stop us from wandering off?” Korra asked, looking around the group as she took a few steps forward. When she turned, she came to face a piece of paper.

**People like us,** the parchment read. It was suspended in the air by three frozen corners being waterbent at all times. The ink reshaped itself into a blob and vanished behind the parchment into a small jar tied to the belt of a stranger. The parchment moved aside revealing a young waterbender with brilliantly blue eyes of the water tribes, light skin of those from the Southern Earth Kingdom, wearing Fire Nation red and black robes.

“Who are you?” Korra asked.

**Sunako of the Swamps; Head Alchemist of the Amber League and member of the former Fire Lord’s personal guard.** The ink wrote on the parchment while the waterbender remained still, her face unmoving.

“You don’t speak?” Asami asked, stepping forward curiously.

Sunako opened her mouth revealing the scarred remains of her tongue that had been burned out of her mouth six years prior.

Both Korra and Asami gasped while Mako and Bolin turned away.

**Don’t worry. He who did it is dead now,** Sunako wrote. **You’ve nothing to fear.**

“That is very… reassuring,” Bolin mumbled warily.

“Why don’t you serve the new Fire Lord’s personal guard if you served in the old one’s?” Korra asked Sunako.
Because my former master has relieved me of my guard position because, one of her in-laws wishes to adopt me, Sunako explained.

“Who?” Huifan asked, looking to her parents and then to Suyin and Baatar.

“Sunako! There you are! I have been looking everywhere for you!” Kya exclaimed, running down the cliff trail to the docks. “Where were you?”

The cliffs until recently. I felt bad so few representing the Fire Nation came to greet our honored guests so I came down to the docks.

“Why didn’t you want to come down sooner? It wouldn’t have harmed anybody,” Masaru asked.

Forgive me, Sir. I wasn’t quite sure why the Avatar, the CEO of Future Industries, the Chief of Police of Republic City and the star of the Nuktuk series was joining us, and honestly didn’t know how I felt about the whole thing.

“Fair enough,” Izumi shrugged understandingly, looking around to see if anyone else shared Sunako’s sentiment. Sure enough, Kuvira and Taemon also stood up on the cliffs, and a little further away, Tetsu was crouched in the grass and beyond him, Miyoko perched on a branch of a tree, watching. “It appears you weren’t the only one, Sunako.” Izumi said with a smile, before turning away quickly before anyone other than Sunako, Masaru, and Lin noticed where she was looking.

“Korra! Before the tour do you want to have an air scooter race around the perimeter?” Ikki asked suddenly, never comfortable with tension.

“Sure! You guys mind waiting to give me the tour, right?” Korra asked Huifan and Ursa.

“Not at all,” they replied.

“Or I could give you guys the tour!” Ikki suggested.

“That sounds good. Then we can go to the hot springs with Jin and Jiang and the others,” Huifan shrugged turning to Ursa who nodded in agreement.

“I’ll see you in a few minutes?” Asami said, gifting Korra a quick peck on the cheek before letting her go.

“Less than that! Our last race with Jinora and Meelo and Jiexue and Xiaoyi and Kang only lasted 58.34 seconds!” Ikki replied. “I just remembered you don’t know the perimeter to race it. Here, the first time won’t count. You can just follow!”

“Alright,” Korra smiles, mounting her air scooter as Ikki and Meelo and Kang did the same.

“I never understood why one so blessed with the powers of a god would waste their ability on such trivial things,” Taemon thought aloud as he and Kuvira watched the Avatar use the Avatar state to beat Ikki, Jinora and Meelo in their third air scooter race.

“No fair! You cheated again!” Ikki yelled, stomping her foot at Korra only to receive a tongue out in response.

“It does seem a little unfair,” Kuvira agreed, nodding.

“Alas, life isn’t fair. We can only make do with what we’re given.”
“This is true.”

For a moment, they remained perfectly still with nothing but the wind in their ears when they were joined by another. “Brother, Kuvira, is there a reason you didn’t join the Avatar’s welcoming committee?” Fire Lord Takeo asked, walking up behind them with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Not particularly, why?” Taemon replied, not taking his eyes off of the activity below on the beach.

“Just curious to see what interests my little brother these days,” Takeo replied, glancing sideways at Kuvira knowingly as he messed the younger’s hair that was usually slicked back so perfectly. “A month ago, you would have leapt at the opportunity to possibly spar the ‘real’ avatar.”

“Please, don’t ever do that again,” Taemon asked, frowning, smoothing it back once Takeo had removed his hand.

Kuvira was surprised, seeing someone acting so familiarly with this elusive outcast of the Fire Family.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what is your story, Fire Lord Takeo?” Kuvira inquired, deciding to initiate small for the first time in a long time.

“My story?” Takeo asked. He smiled. “I was born of an illicit affair between a rebellious Princess and a daring lieutenant of the army, BUT my parentage had to remain a secret. The existence of a bastard of the royal family wouldn’t sit well with the conservatives. However, we couldn’t let their abnormally large and arrogant noses bother us, could we?” Takeo said with a smirk. “I attended the Royal Fire Academy for Boys in the capital as a day student, was top in my class in firebending, joined the kuei ball team in my secondary years, then spent some time teaching the young ones bending in my sixth-form years. I came across this little lad about to be ousted because of a little debt he inherited, and couldn’t let that happen to him. He was like a little brother to me. Father accepted him almost immediately, paid off the boy’s inherited debts, and the rest of his education and allowed him to stay. Mother, on the other hand, consented to allowing him into her home, but took a little convincing before she allowed him into her heart. But I think it all worked out in the end, don’t you, Taemon?” Takeo asked with his arm around the surly younger man.

“Have you forgotten what happened last month?” Taemon asked, frowning.

“A hiccup, but not even that will make you no longer my little brother,” Takeo replied affectionately.

Taemon rolled his eyes. “So why didn’t you join the welcoming committee for the Avatar and her Friends?”

“I had certain… Fire Lord duties to take care of,” Takeo replied vaguely.

“Such as….”

“Checking in on the other members of my family,” Takeo answered with a wink. “Now if you excuse me, lunch is about to be served and I’m starving!” With that, the Fire Lord turned and retreated to the vacation house he inherited when his mother abdicated.

“We should probably eat too,” Taemon suggested, looking away from the beach to the house just beyond the trees.
"But… I kind of like just hanging out here. It’s nicer with just…” *you*, Kuvira began to say before stopping herself.

Taemon paused, no doubt ignoring her words in favor of reading what was unspoken but written all over her face.

"Ten more minutes," he stated firmly. "Then we go in and eat or else Izumi’s have *me* torched alive for allowing *you* to starve," Taemon decided, sitting in the grass on the cliffside, soaking up the sun with his eyes closed.

Kuvira fell beside Taemon and together they basked in the sunlight in silence, Kuvira with her head cocked to the side wondering why the Fire Nation Lady cared so much about her wellbeing. Suyin certainly never did.

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"And this is the archive room! Last time we were in here we found old photographs of our parents when they used to vacation here as kids!" Ikki said, opening a cabinet and pulling out a box. "There are even pictures of aunt Kya and Aunt Izumi kissing!"

"Really?" Asami asked, eager to see.

"So what we saw at the wedding wasn’t our imagination?" Korra verified.

"Nope! They’re still snogging,” Miyoko confirmed, entering the room with a look of determination on her beautiful face.

"Yoko! What brings you to the archive room?" Ikki asked, bounding over to her cousin.

"Searching for another stash of cactus juice Tatsu has hidden in this room.” Miyoko replied, bending down by another cabinet. It was locked. She looked back to Tetsuya who nodded. She pointed two fingers at the lock and blasted it to smithereens with lightning and wrenched it open. "We’re trying to wean him off of that toxic tonic.” She explained with a sigh as she saw the concealed entrance to a cellar. “When the fuck did he—”

“I don’t know,” Tetsuya shrugged.

"Who is Tatsu again?" Korra asked.

"He’s my most **beloved** brother. You haven’t seen him and he probably hasn’t seen anything but the inside of a glass bottle and a porcelain bowl for most of this fucking vacation."

"Tsuya, language around Lin’s younger ones!” Miyoko scolded her brother as she climbed through the cabinet and into the hole.

"Forgive me, Ikki," Tetsuya said, turning to the eleven year old suddenly, startling her.

"It’s okay. You’re still learning!... We all are” Ikki smiled and returned to the Krew. “Shall we continue the tour?"

"Sure!” Bolin shrugged, holding Opal’s hand.

"Is it just me or are they kind of— creepy?" Bolin asked Opal.

"They’re a bunch of insensitive asses, in my opinion,” Opal replied.
“They probably think the same thing about you,” a small, sad voice whispered from ahead of them. Ikki? Her head hung low as she walked… “They just think honesty is the best policy. They might not say everything upfront, but they don’t lie. They don’t mean to be insensitive. They’re just… blunt.” explained softly as they walked. By the time they reached the next room, she had perked up again. “And here is is one of the sitting rooms… and here is another… and this is the game room… there is pai sho and checkers and go and up here, there are some yo-yos…”

Tenzin and Lin sat at a table unto themselves instead of with their siblings as they usually did. Both had endured more social interaction in the last two days then either had in the past year. Their family had grown exponentially and for the first time in what felt like their lifetime, there was no world-wide crisis that demanded their full attention. They could breathe and sit and be at peace. Together, they watched their children, nieces, nephews, and siblings help themselves to the scores of food Takeo and Sasuke had prepared that day. They had decided before the vacation even began that everyone would take turns cooking to minimize the number of non-family present during the vacation.

“Can you believe how our family has grown?” Tenzin asked Lin suddenly as he watched Hungjian and Huifan enter the dining hall with Ursa and Iroh while he sipped a sweet tea instead of that bitter black stuff often preferred by the former chief of police.

“And to think there was a time when we didn’t even think I’d ever conceive?” Lin added bittersweetly when she saw Xiaoyu and Jinora enter each with books still in hand.

“Or ever reconcile with your own sister.”

“Or discover a brother from the same mother and father.”

They both laughed.

“Can you believe that Zumi was able to hide them in plain sight?” Tenzin asked as Sasuke entered the hall.

“She does have the Amber League to cover up any of their missteps.”

“Do you ever think we did our children a disservice keeping them hidden, in isolation, on your estate?” Tenzin asked.

“Sometimes,” Lin replied, watching Kang pull the string of some flying toy, releasing a winged stick in the air that Meelo chased after.

“Should we have tried to hide them in plain sight under fake names?”

“I don’t know. They seem happy, strong and healthy, and fine for the most part… I feel like that would have been more stressful. How about you? Do you wish we had stayed together and fought the White Lotus for more time and-- or more freedom?”

“I did, often, but then we wouldn’t have Jinora, Ikki, Meelo, and Rohan and I wouldn’t sacrifice any of my children for the world.”

“Neither would I. I guess you just have to give a little to get what you want,” Lin sighed.

They watched Huan enter alone, his gaze downcast as he approached the food table to take what he
wanted and flee again. Not even Suyin knew what he was up to this vacation. Xiaoyu turned to
him, scowled and moved away.

“She’s still afraid of them,” Tenzin noted.

“I am too, in all honesty,” Lin confessed. “Do you still think it was right to let him, and the others
who were involved with the Rogue League join us on this vacation?”

Tenzin turned to her. “It is hard to say, because they ARE still family. They’re our—or your blood
at least. Do we really want to cast them aside and not speak for thirty years like Su and you did?
Just think of all that time you regret losing. I think we should trust Izumi’s judgement. They’re
smart. They won’t make the same mistakes after being beaten so badly.”

“What about Taemon? He is not any of our blood, not even hers.”

“Neither is Kuvira Su’s, but from what I’ve seen, they tend to act more like their respective
surrogate moms than any of our blood children,” Lin replied.

Lin chuckled lightly. “In what way? The slight insanity, pursuit of perfection, or tendency to
overkill everything?”

“All of the above!” Tenzin laughed, nearly spilling his tea while Lin choked on her coffee.

It was nice, to be able to sit and be able to talk to Lin again, in peace.

“We don’t have to stay,” Taemon suggested to Kuvira as they entered the dining hall together for
lunch.

“Good,” Kuvira replied, spotting Korra and her Krew among the crowd of Beifongs. She hadn’t
spoken to them directly since her sentencing over a year ago. The memory of lightning flashing
across her eyes from electrocution that day replayed before her mind and she turned away,
searching for Taemon who had already reached the food table. Just when she began to believe they
could get away quickly, Korra saw her.

“Kuvira?” she gasped before making her way over. “You’re here?”

“I—”

“How? I thought Zhu Li sentenced you to life in prison—” Asami exclaimed, standing as well, a
look of pure hate spreading across her perfectly painted face.

“Suyin. She let me out. She wanted to—” Kuvira began to explain, subconsciously taking a step
back, trying to be extra careful, so she wouldn’t have to return to that horrid place.

“That’s impossible!” Asami exclaimed, shocked to see the woman who murdered her father before
her for the first time in over a year.

“I thought Suyin couldn’t do something like that-- not without the approval of the other world
leaders—” Korra mused.

“She must have tricked the guards or something. It wouldn’t have been the first time it’s
happened,” Asami suggested.
“I didn’t trick anyone into anything. The Earth Queen—”

“No— She made a mistake—

“Asami—” Korra whispered, squeezing the owner of Future Industries’ arm.

“Who are you to question the Earth Queen’s decision?” Taemon asked, stepping between Asami and Kuvira, blanketing the fallen Great Uniter in the shadow of his frame. “Yelling won’t bring back your father. He is gone as are so many others, and Kuvira has changed!”

“People like that don’t change—”

“Has she tried to kill you yet?”

“No, but—”

“Taemon, drop it please,” Kuvira asked him.

“Then she has changed. Time is irrelevant. Your girlfriend changed in the instant Amon took her bending, enough to unlock her air chakra of all things. Lin changed when she lost hers. Your father changed when he lost his army and Kuvira when she lost her Empire. We all change when we lose something so integral to our being, so defining—”

“And you think my father wasn’t integral to my being?” Asami retorted.

“Hiroshi Sato lied to your whole life, tried to kill your girlfriend and best friends, as well as every other bender on the planet and for what? To avenge the life of his lost wife? Your mother? Would she even have wanted him to do such a thing? No. He lost prevalence in your life when he revealed his true nature. I can see that much just beyond your eyes.”

“But he changed!”

“For a day!”

“Taemon, please,” Kuvira asked.

“You know nothing about my father!”

“And you know nothing about Kuvira! At least she unwaveringly fought for good since the beginning. She did what she was asked of her. Raiko and Tenzin ordered the reunion of the Earth Kingdom, which includes the former Fire Nation colonies and she did her best to deliver. It is not her fault that they didn’t specify some states were to be omitted—”

“Taemon!” Kuvira yelled, making an attempt to physically pull him away.

“You don’t know what it is like to lose something so dear, so near— I can help you there—” Taemon said, freeing his wrist from Kuvira’s grip with a flourish, sliding around Asami and delivering several light jabs to very specific points on the body, causing her to fall.

“That’s assault!” Opal yelled. The room fell still in shock and horror.

“Assault involves hurting another. I assure you she feels no pain. Now... she feels nothing,” Taemon assured them, gazing down at the heiress with contempt.

“Is this REALLY necessary?!” Asami cried out, completely immobilized from the neck down.
Kuvira stepped back, eyes wide, shocked by what he could become when provoked even after she told him she could handle their petty insults.

“Put her right!” Korra demanded baring a fistfull of flames.

“Why should I? That would deprive your dearly beloved an opportunity to learn?! Don’t worry, Avatar. It is only temporary!” Taemon shot back standing up, unfazed.

Before anyone could respond, Taemon fell screaming, knocking over glasses and plates on his way down as he attempted to grab the edge of a table. His body contorted in a horrifyingly futile attempt to escape some invisible pain that scourged through him caused by dark lightning.

As soon as it began, it was over, and he lay still, his muscles convulsing involuntarily, his chest heaving, body exhausted, heart racing, and mind tormented by dreadful memories. Even Asami, who couldn’t turn her head to see, heard his screams and felt sorry for him, for a moment. Korra and her friends, having never seen anything like it, were absolutely mortified. For a moment the room was still save for the sound of a single pair of feet approaching. Izumi entered, pushing past some of her nieces and nephews and gazed down upon her former ward with disdain, Ikki staying back at the door after fetching her.

“Taemon Yamakatsu, do I need to remind you that unlike Kuvira, you have not be acquitted of your crimes and even the most minor offense can completely decimate any chances of release?”

“They were—” Taemon croaked weakly. Izumi opened her fist and he thrashed again for a fraction of a second before she released, leaving him face down on the wooden floor of the dining hall.

“I don’t care what they said or did. You lay hand on NOBODY with ill intent. Do you understand?” Izumi asked dangerously softly.

Taemon wheezed.

Izumi opened her hand a third time, sending dark lightning coursing through his nerves. “Do you understand?” She repeated, practically whispering.

“Yes! Mrs. Feng!” he cried out.

“To your room. Food will be brought later.” Izumi ordered. He pushed himself up and through the crowd of cousins, limping to his room.

“Asami.” Izumi bent down and touched a hand to her shoulder and unblocked the chi pathways he locked with chi blocking.

“What is wrong with him?” Asami asked, sitting up slowly with help.

“Lots of things,” Izumi answered. “But we all have our shortcomings… and varying tolerance levels for insolence. But don’t worry. He will be punished for disabling you.”

“Aunt Zumi, what did you do to him? It hurt him,” Ikki asked, coming closer, regret etched on her young face. She didn’t expect Izumi to cause such hurt.

“I did what I had to— he may be my son, but now first and foremost, he is property of the state, beneath all us, to be used as they see fit.” Izumi explained.

“But he’s human isn’t he?”
“Temporarily, little love,” Izumi replied softly to Ikki. She stood and looked at nobody before fleeing the room, deep burgundy skirts swirling around her. “Kuvira,” Izumi called, pausing at the door. “Don’t forget to eat. Kya, Lin, and I are watching.”

With that, Izumi left, fuming.

“Bolin, you’re crazy for wanting to join them,” Asami muttered as Korra helped them up.

“Join?” Opal asked, turning to Bolin, surprised and not surprised at the same time.

He smiled nervously.

He was standing by the window, watching the waves lap at the cliffs of the cove when Izumi arrived at his room. “Come to ship me back to the labor camps?”

“Not yet.” Izumi responded, joining him by the window. “It would be so freeing don’t you think? To live on the water, let the tides carry you wherever without a care in the world?”

“For a bit of algae, maybe.” Taemon replied, still.

“But one can still dream, no?”

“Of course, but one must also be careful. Dream too much and the dreams become a blur with reality making real life seem even more depressing than it already is.”

Izumi smiled. “I’ve made you into such a realist, haven’t I?”

“Is that a bad thing?” He asked.

“Only sometimes.” Izumi turned away from the window and motioned for him to join her on the foot of his bed. “I know it hurts to watch the ones you love being mistreated, but you have to hold back. Trust them, for they’re not as weak as you think.”

“I know she’s not weak, but she’s not impervious to verbal attacks either. We both know just how much pain can be hidden behind such a well-sculpted visage.”

“That is still no excuse for senseless violence, you know that.”

“I know.”

“Then why did you do it?”

“Anger. Annoyance. Vengefulness… I never did like the Avatar and her friends from what I’ve read of them.”

“I don’t either, but we must accommodate them… for Opal.”

“Opal—” He scoffed. “But she’s done nothing for us but cause hurt!”

“It is still nothing compared to what you’ve done, despite your good intentions.” Izumi shrugged.

Taemon sighed. “I’m sorry for attacking Sato.”

“You should probably tell her that. I know it won’t make much of a difference, but it is a common
courtesy.” Izumi suggested.

“I will… eventually.”

After a long pause, Izumi spoke. “Taemon can you promise me something?”

“What?”

“Set aside your anger. Love with your whole heart… what’s left of it anyways and then make your decisions. Then decide when to hold back… when to defend and when to attack. Don’t underestimate the heart and strength of those you love. Don’t make the same mistake your father did with me: thinking your lady is weak.”

Taemon lifted his head abruptly but Izumi was already at the door, fleeing. Izumi didn’t often bring up Kage Yamakatsu without prompt these days, but when she did, her tone always left him so confused. Even after all the horrible things he did to Masaru, out of pure jealousy, she still sounded as though she missed him.

“Why?” he asked not needing to elaborate with Izumi.

“Because even though he betrayed us in the worst way possible, he was still the first man I loved—wanted to love,” Izumi explained, fleeing quickly before Taemon could ask any more questions.

Miyoko lay on the floor with her feet up on the wall, skirts hiked up to her hips bouncing a rubber ball between the ceiling and her hand with rhythm, bored while Tetsuya read in an armchair and Tatsu trudged back into bed after pissing out the last of that toxic tonic.

“You burned it all?” Tatsu asked, dismayed.

“Yep,” Tetsuya replied, turning the page. “Thank, Yoko.”

Tatsu looked at their little sister who appeared in double with his hazy vision. “You’re a wicked girl.”

Miyoko threw the ball harder against the ceiling. “Was there ever any doubt?”

Tatsu grumbled and flopped down on the covers of his bed.

“Why don’t you hang out with the cousins if you’re bored?” Tetsuya asked closing his book for a moment, taking a break.

“I don’t like the noise, as I’ve told you before,” Miyoko replied. “Your silence gives me time to think.”

“Sometimes I worry about your thoughts. At times it seems as if they’re corrupting your brain.” Tetsuya expressed, setting aside his book.

“Why do you think so much about brains and thoughts?” Miyoko asked, throwing the ball against the wall just above her feet instead of the ceiling this time.

“Because I was trained to do so.”

For a few moments, Miyoko said nothing. “Teach me how to bend dark lighting, Tsuya.”
“Why do you want to know how to wield such a perverted form of bending?”

“I want to see what mother sees— what she dreams about. I feel like that would make finding answers to questions I don’t want to ask out loud so much easier.”

“I could ask her all of your questions, though I probably already know the answers to most of them and can answer for her—”

“Some of the questions are about you too. Even you don’t know what her true desires are and if she really loves us.”

Tetsuya studied her expression.

“I won’t change anything. I’ll just observe, like how we were able to observe Father’s memories the other night.”

“We could only see what was in him because he opened that channel for us. He gave to us the gift of his memory! Prying is a whole different avenue! It’s too risky— you can cause slippage and—”

“Then teach me to do it properly.” Miyoko demanded, getting off the floor to face Tetsuya reclined slightly in his chair.

“And if I refuse.”

“Then I’ll teach myself—” Miyoko replied, planting her palm on his chest “The old fashioned way.” She said, bending an uncontrolled blast of lightning through his body.

“You’re a wicked girl, Yoko!” Tetsuya gasped upon his release, looking up at his baby sister looming over him.

“That’s what happens when you go so long without getting any of what you want. At least I’m not trying to overthrow a God. I only seek to understand her.” Miyoko explained.

Tetsuya sighed. “If I train you,” he began before taking another labored breath. “I will do so on my terms.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“We begin now and you, must swear unconditional obedience—”

“And why would I be stupid enough to do that?”

“To survive? I was ordered to submit the names of every single one of my students of dark lightning, and every single one of them were butchered for the safety of the world. Dark Lightning is a dangerous art form that isn’t banned like bloodbending. It is wiped from the face of the earth. Obey so you don’t get caught.”

Miyoko bent down to his face level on the floor. “If Mother didn’t have the balls to kill you for what you’ve done, she certainly won’t kill me for simply continuing my firebending studies.”

Tetsuya stared back at her and blew a stray lock of hair out of his face. “In which case, we begin now,” he declared, heaving himself off the ground, leading her outside.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks MusicPlayer81 for all of your help!!

Sorry this is short... and without a title. my friend suggested "Watching From Afar" but that only really applied to the first scene...
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The air was still in that resident corridor. Most of the Linzin and Sutar Children had been convinced to accompany the Krew to the Ember Island theatre. Meanwhile, the Masumi children, Kuvira, and Baatar Jr. remained. Kuvira was grateful for the isolated location of her own room because it gave her the option to socialize or not without being stuck amidst the army of Beifongs; at the same time, however, it also served as a reminder of her true place in the family— on the fringes.

"You're sure it's this room?" Kuvira whispered to Taemon, standing before Baatar's door in the resident corridor.

"Certain," he confirmed with a nod before leaving her. It seemed like he sometimes walked even lighter and more silent than the airbenders when he didn't want his presence known.

Kuvira drew a breath and knocked.

"Come in!" Baatar called irritably.

Kuvira slowly pushed the door open to find the man she was engaged to sitting up in bed in a disgusting state of disarray with his undercut overgrown, his glasses lopsided on his face, soiled tissues strewn about and empty bottles littering the place.

"You didn't used to drink," she commented.

"You didn't used to knock before entering, that's why I thought it was someone else," Baatar groaned, his head lolling to the side as though dreading her presence already.

"If you knew it was me behind the door, would you have denied me entrance?"

He rolled his eyes adjusted his glasses, and turned his head slightly to look at her.

"Perhaps. To what do I owe the pleasure, Great Uniter?"

"I thought I was always just… Kuvira to you,"

"Do you really think that's true?"

"Well, we were once children living together and then friends then allies working towards common goal. We knew each other before titles and ranks and-"

"What do you want, Kuvira?" he asked impatiently, reaching for a glass, smelling it, and grabbing another bottle.

"Clarity, I think," she replied.

"Alright—not sure how clear the answers I give in this state will be but— best get this over with sooner rather than later. Shoot, Kuv…"

"I just wanted to touch base, on whatever we were before I was interned and you cleared of all charges— We were going to get married and I just— I wanted to know if there was anything left of"
that between us… if you still loved—"

"Could you say you still love me?" Baatar asked.

"Baatar—"

"Answer the question."

"I-" Kuvira paused to think. She wanted so much to say yes, to believe that she still could, but the thought of being with him and only him, she also found reeling after he expressed that he was not supportive of their plan, and his willingness to throw it all away, for each other, while she would always prioritize the state. "I don't know."

"It is an easy question."

"I want to," Kuvira confessed. "I really do."

"And yet you couldn't even look at me once on the airship ride from Wanfeng Prison."

"I didn't know what to say then-"

"And now? You haven't once visited me once arriving here-"

"You never visited me-" Kuvira muttered.

Baatar frowned. "Have you already replaced me?"

"No! Of course not! Baatar! You were my first love. My only friend in Zaofu — in the entire Earth Kingdom and my confidante—"

He laughed. "I wasn't. I realize now more than ever that I was nothing to you. All you did was exploit me for my knowledge of mechanics engineering—"

"Baatar no— I didn't! I set you free! All Suyin ever allowed you was to refine on your father's designs! She never let you pursue anything of your own making! You said so yourself—"

"Only because you brainwashed me!"

Kuvira shook her head in disbelief, tears stinging her eyes. "How could you think such a thing after all we've been through?"

"The moment you pointed that spirit canon at me, a weapon of my own creation— and fired, I knew what I was to you— A TOOL!"

"What?!" Kuvira shrieked, her fear and disbelief manifesting itself into anger.

"—We could have eloped and been happy—"

"Happy knowing the fate of our nation of millions were in the hands of an idiot prince and a pompous imbecile, neither of whom have ever seen, let alone lived in our nation— never known it or its people as we did?"

"Love would have been enough, you once told me—" Baatar yelled back.

Kuvira shook her head and bit back tears. What kind of love, exactly? What even was love anymore? she asked herself as her anger transformed into an indescribable, almost blinding pain.
"Do you regret it?" she asked, biting back all she wanted to do and say at that moment.

"Regret what?"

"What we had done with the time we had? Who we loved? Would you take it back if you had the chance?"

Baatar stilled. He could hear the pain in her voice then. His head tilted back. Her parents abandoned her, his mother abandoned her, and now he was doing the same. But you can't save anyone until you, yourself are sane, he told himself. Your own closure is more important than her — anything. After all, she deserves to suffer... for what she has done... for her actions. And he would be her teacher. "Yes," he deadpanned, gazing straight into those jade eyes that he used to love with his entire being. "In a heartbeat."

She reeled.

"Would you?" he inquired, sitting up straighter, perfectly composed, relieved even, as though the weight of a mountain had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Never!" Kuvira insisted.

"Why?"

"Because you were my first love, and even if I weren't yours... you taught me so much and for that, I am grateful."

"Like what?"

"Like how to not trust even those you think you love!" Kuvira snapped, turning to the door.

"If you loved me, you would have done it when I asked—"

"Done what?" she asked, turning around only to find his lips on hers, his arms around her waist.

"No— what are you— let go! LET GO!" she yelled, trying to push him away, not wanting to maim him with her metalbending, but finding her close combat skills incredibly out of sync after spending so long imprisoned with no space to train.

She was trapped with her hands against his chest, losing, falling back, when he fell limp on her body. And she saw the ceiling, and all of her clothes were in tact.

A hand grasped Baatar by the back of the shirt and lift him off of her, gracelessly casting him aside without an ounce of care. Kuvira looked up and saw Taemon standing over her with one open hand above where he dropped Baatar and the other holding a set of darts, all laced with shirshu toxin. Kuvira turned and saw one of those darts, stuck in the back of Baatar's neck.

Kuvira remained on the ground, eyes wide and open-mouthed.

Before she could even blink, let alone thank him, the door was thrown open, revealing Suyin, Lin, and Izumi.

Taemon turned, his anger and confidence evaporating when he saw the Earth Queen. "Your majesty please hear me before—" Taemon begged before getting a metal strip thrown over his mouth and two more binding his wrists behind his back.
Kuvira's arms were shaking where they propped her up on the ground.

"What happened?" Lin asked, bending down beside the Earth Queen's protege.

"You can't ask her! She's probably part of the conspiracy to hurt my son!" Suyin yelled, beside herself with rage as she fell beside a limp Baatar.

"But we can't know for certain unless we ask," Izumi reminded Suyin, yanking the gag off of Taemon's face but leaving the shackles on his wrists, as she passed him to get to the clear crime scene. "It's just shirshu toxin," she said, feeling his pulse. "He'll wake in a few hours unless I get Sunako to come, she usually carries antidotes for it on her," Izumi offered.

Suyin didn't respond. She pulled the dart out of his neck and bent over him crying. Izumi turned to Lin who looked equally fed up with Suyin's sobbing.

"Su, he's not dead—" Lin reminded her little sister.

"Kuvira," Izumi turned to the young earthbender and assessed her body position: her shaking arms, her chest rising and falling rapidly, and her quick breaths. Her tunic was unteared, but had been pulled up through her belt. Her legs somewhat spread, and one of Baatar's feet lay between hers, their ankles overlapping.

"Su, you need to see," Izumi said firmly, placing a hand on Baatar's head and one on Suyin's shoulder, extracting and sharing the man's memory with dark lightning.

"If you loved me, you would have done it when I asked—"

"Done what?" she asked, turning around only to find his lips on hers, his arms around her waist.

"No— what are you— let go! LET GO!" she yelled, trying to push him away.

"How do I know this isn't all artificial?" Suyin demanded, pushing Izumi off her feet and into the chest of drawers behind her. Izumi rose an arm to protect her head from the glass bottles that fell from on top of the piece of furniture. "You can generate regular lightning from nothing! How do I know it's not the same with dark? That this— THIS TOUCHING BUSINESS is just an unnecessary gesture to your freak art! You and him both!" she pointed at Taemon. "You're just monsters! Monsters protecting other monsters!"

Izumi remained still, silent for a moment, pensive. "Lin, can you take them both outside?" Izumi asked motioning Kuvira and Taemon.

"Sure." Lin pulled Kuvira up. The ex-Great Uniter found her knees particularly weaker than before and herself needing to hold onto the elder woman for balance for some strange reason.

"Aunt Lin could I—" Taemon asked wiggling his fingers.

"Not yet, Taemon. I'm sorry." Lin said helping Kuvira out while Taemon followed.

"I'm going to be blunt with you, this has gone on long enough!" Izumi barked.

"What has?" Suyin responded incredulously.

"This denial and hypocrisy. You say Kuvira is like a daughter, you released her to give yourself a second chance at actually being a mother to her and yet you treat her like she's subhuman"
"She knocked out my son!"

"Taemon did that because your son was going to rape her! You saw—"

"I don't know what I saw! I know my son would never do that to anyone!"

"Men aren't themselves when they're drunk! Look around you Su! Tell me what you see! These—
bottles— these soiled napkins everywhere— you saw the state they were in. Where his leg was!
You felt his intentions! Quit denying it! You saw everything—"

"Which you could have artificially generated—" Suyin spat.

"Lightning doesn't even work that way!" Izumi pulled the ribbon out of her hair, loosing the bun,
just so she could yank her dark grey locks all at once.

"How am I supposed to know that if I'm an earthbender!"

"We're sisters now! We're just supposed to trust each other!"

"How can I trust a woman who kept her seven out of her nine children hidden for everybody for
thirty-five fucking years!"

Izumi seethed as she listened to the younger woman speak.

"—You coddle your boys too—"

"I have never—" Izumi contested.

"You're coddling Taemon now letting him stay with us—"

"He's not staying. He's going back on the first airship to the mainland tomorrow. I'm submitting the
order immediately after we're through. We had an agreement before our arrival that he had two
strikes before his break was terminated. We left no room for assumptions or exceptions just like it
is in the real world! When Baatar regains consciousness you will tell him to steer clear of Kuvira.
If his hands go anywhere near her, I will personally cut them off!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

The air around Izumi simmered. "Try me."

"You don't want to make an enemy of me, Izumi—"

Izumi's hair flared blue as she whirled around. "Earth Queen or not, you're still just Little Sister to
me— which is the only reason I'm not exiling you permanently from this country for hypocrisy."

"Is that even an exileable offense?"

"Does it matter in a true autocracy?"

Suyin brandished the diamond blade Izumi gave to her only two days before.

"Do it." Izumi dared. "And when they find my body, they'll know I was only trying to protect your
own daughter from you and your graceless spawn!"

Suyin lowered the knife to the ground with tears streaming down her face and leaned over Baatar's
body again, sobbing in defeat.
Izumi rolled her eyes and raised her hand to the limp figure, sending a combination of regular and dark lightning, and scourged the body of the shirshu toxins by superheating the molecules enough to completely disintegrate them into their harmless fragments. With a scream, Baatar jolted awake.

"Suyin, you're the one who wanted a second chance at being a good mother to all of your children. Consider this your last," Izumi warned before exiting the room.

"Your hair is blue," Taemon droned as Izumi freed his wrists from their bounds, quickly removing her hands from proximity to his body before he burned too.

"I'm angry and letting the heat out helps me not burn everything down," Izumi replied, her voice low and deep. "How much did you hear?"

"All if it."

"Good. Then I don't need to repeat that you're leaving tomorrow morning."

"You didn't have to re-" Taemon started to say.

"I said I didn't have to. I did NOT say I wouldn't anyways." Izumi interrupted curtly.

"In the meantime?" Taemon asked.

"Go cool off and watch your back," Izumi ordered. "I should do the same."

He bowed to her and left. Izumi turned to Kuvira and her hair turned dimmed significantly. She waited a moment for her skin to cool before reaching for Kuvira's face, but never touched her.

"I know what it's like to trust nobody. Just know… you'll always have a place here," Izumi said before fleeing quickly, her hair turning blue again as soon as she was far enough away to not at risk burning Lin and Kuvira with the touch of her own skin.

"I didn't mean to cause such a—" Kuvira said to Lin, her voice cracking.

"It's not your fault, Kuvira." Lin pulled Kuvira into one of the most awkward hugs the younger had ever experienced. "Baatar should not have thrown himself on you like that."

"But now Taemon has to leave for defending me!" she whispered.

"He has to leave to appease the Earth Queen."

"But shouldn't the Earth Queen be the one appeasing the World's Weapon?" Kuvira asked.

"Believe it or not, but the World's Weapon would rather not have to be a weapon for the remainder of her lifetime." Lin patted Kuvira on the shoulder. The former Great Uniter was almost unrecognizable in the sad young woman she saw before her with eyes downcast, cheeks slightly gaunt, and shoulders slumped forward. "How about a distraction? I think I heard Fa-ni mention something about an earth rumble today at the private arena. Why don't we check it out?"

Kuvira said nothing but folded one arm across her body and grabbed the other.

"Besides, this house is getting stuffy, don't you think?" Lin added, leading Kuvira far away from Baatar's room.

"I can feel your blood boil from a mile away," Masaru sighed, finding Izumi by the stables,
assembling Eiko's saddle while the dragon waited patiently.

"Your littlest sister's behavior drives me insane!"

"She lives off of the drama. Don't give her that satisfaction, my lovely turtleduck."

"You haven't called me that since we were seven!" Izumi groaned, turning to face him, dropping her arms in frustration.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet, probably back to the mainland, or to Taiyang Dao. Somewhere I can have space to torch myself for about an hour or so." Izumi responded, returning to the saddle.

Masaru exhaled. "Running isn't the answer."

"I'll come back."

"Have you tried talking to Suyi?"

"Yes! Just now! And it's just about as efficient as a non-bender trying to move a fucking mountain," Izumi retorted.

"Zumi. We're adults. We're done running just because we can. Set an example for our children. Do you want them to continue run to the shadows or learn to cope and work things out with their peers in a civil manner?"

Izumi's hair went from dim to glowing blue again. She hated when he was right.

"Why don't we go to Lake Kodo."

Izumi turned to look at the peak of the highest mountain on Ember Island. Few knew about the lake it contained; with its natural tunnels and clear waters, it had been their favorite place to swim in their youth. Izumi sighed.

"Oh all right."

Kuvira fell harder than before, rolling into her shoulders, over her head, then onto her feet again before having the ground swept out from under her once more.

"That's enough Fa-ni!" Lin called to her oldest daughter. "Let your cousin breathe."

Kuvira pushed herself into all fours and coughed up what tasted like a dust cloud that had lodged itself in her lungs during the last bout.

"Let me help you!" a man offered, his hand already extended.

"I don't need help!" Kuvira spat out another ball of dirt and saliva onto the arena floor.

"Hey!" the man said more gently, squatting down, retracting his hand. "There's nothing shameful about being tired. You fought well! Now, allow me," and he extended the hand once more.

Kuvira glanced at him quickly. He was that extroverted earthbending son of Masaru and Izumi. She stood on her own and brushed herself off once before remembering her bending. With a grunt, she expelled the dirt from her skin and clothes and walked over to the benches for a drink of water.
"Fa-Ni! Think you can handle back-to-backs?" Rikuto asked, cracking his knuckles and shoulders.

"Try me!" Huifan yelled back teasingly.

Kuvira poured some of the water on her head to cool off then almost instantly regretted it because it made less to drink. She watched the two blood Beifong's pace around each other for what felt like an eternity. *Who in their right mind would invent such a style of earthbending that revolved around waiting and listening?* she thought impatiently.

Suyin's style was nothing like this. The Earth Queen did everything fast. She was always racing across the arena, dancing around her opponent, or faking them out with quick, intentional misses with metal strips or small rocks, right past the head. Huifan fought differently. Her reflexes were quick and smooth, like flowing water, but she was much more rooted in the earth.

Then it seemed almost the entire arena had been reduced to mud.

"You should feel right at home, Swamp Cousin!" Huifan laughed, bending the mud into a wheel around her body, just like a waterbender.

"Have you been working the ground moisture up this whole time?" Rikuto asked, simultaneously impressed and amused.

"Very resourceful, hun!" Lin yelled.

"Have you ever been told how hard it is to defeat someone on their home turf?" Rikuto asked, launching Huifan into the air on a muddy spout.

As soon as she landed, he punted her into the wall with another spout of mud.

"OOOOOOOOO!" Hungjian, Wing and Wei yelled as Huifan raised a hand in forfeit.

"YES! I HAVE DEFEATED YOU FOR ALL TIME! YOU WILL NEVER RISE FROM THE ASHES OF YOUR SHAME AND HUMILIATION!" Rikuto yelled with his arms outstretched as if he held fire in the palms of his hands. "Well, that was fun!" He offered Huifan a hand as well, and she took it.

"I find it hilarious that there are still people who doubt the Fire in you, I swear I read that exact verbiage in a book about the old Fire Princess Azula!" Huifan grumbled, spitting out more dust.

"Where do you think I got it from? My mom?" he teased sarcastically. "She's much too humble for something like that!"

The two laughed as they returned to the benches for a much-needed break.

"Well, I'm going to check on lunch and make sure Kya and Sunako haven't flooded the kitchen, you kids will be in soon, right?" Lin asked the group.

"Yep! See ya, Aunt Lin!" Rikuto yelled, waving and flipping his mess of hair back. It was so messy compared to his brothers. It had a bit of texture to it, a wave, that left untamed stuck up pretty much every which way.

"Wing, Wei, you guys want to go get drinks before lunch?" Huifan's older brother, Hungjian asked elbowing Suyin's twins.

"Shouldn't we wait until after the meal to drink?" Wei asked.
"Eh," Hunjian shrugged. "I don't know about you, but I had a big enough breakfast."

"Aight," Wing decided, nudging his brother to follow Hunjian into town.

"How's your shoulder?" a long-haired son of Lin asked appearing behind Kuvira, startling her.

His resemblance to Huan was uncanny, though his hair had never been dyed and his eyes were wider and kinder. He wasn't as jaded or angry. Just- quiet.

"It's-" Kuvira began to answer before her voice gave way when she noticed Huifan and Rikuto also approaching.

"It was a nasty toss," Rikuto noted, sitting a safe distance away from her on the same bench.

"Yeh, sorry 'bout that. I get a little carried away sometimes. I haven't been able to spar like that in a long while with everything that's been happening. It feels nice to kick back and not have to hold back," Huifan said, bending a seat for herself out of the arena floor as she sat.

"Why are you here?" Kuvira inquired, warily.

"What do you mean?" Rikuto asked her.

"Why didn't you go drink with the twins and- that other guy?"

Huifan laughed. "That other guy is Hungjian. He's my big brother. We just wanted to check in."

"I haven't felt Aunt Su quaking that hard for a LONG while and wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Why?" Kuvira asked again, still confused.

"You're a Beifong, that's why!" Rikuto insisted. "You're one, we're ones. We have to look out for each other. That's what being a family is."

"I'm not-"

"You are! Get it through your thick skull before I pound it into you!" Huifan said, standing again, throwing her hands in the air, but non-threateningly.

"You can't be serious."

"As hard as it is to believe, we are. Family isn't always defined by blood."

Kuvira paused. "You remember what I did, right? Who I am, what I've done?"

"Yeah, we do, but we'll still stand by you regardless."

Kuvira felt torn between running and crying and burying herself in the ground.

"Also, we wanted to ask if you knew the emergency signal." Rikuto added.

"Emergency signal?"

"It is a certain wavelength we can send through the earth and detect using our seismic sense. That way, if any of us are captured or hurt, we can still reach each other." Huifan explained.

"We can send it in a way that causes a ripple effect, that resonates through hundreds of miles and all types of terrain and rock density, so even if we're tired, it gets through," Jinkun appended.
"That all sounds great, but- Su never taught me seismic sense," Kuvira confessed.

"Not even a little?" Huifan asked.

Kuvira shook her head. "I tried to teach myself, and kind of got the idea of it, but it's not that precise. It can't differentiate wavelengths magnitudes that precisely."

"We can help you!" Huifan jumped up again, making Kuvira flinch slightly at the sudden motion.

"Fa-ni! Cool your panties!" Rikuto yelled, raising a halting hand to her.

"What kind of an expression is that?" Huifan laughed, rolling her eyes.

"It means calm down in Generation T Fire Nation!" Rikuto replied. "Obviously!"

"You'd do that?" Kuvira asked.

"Course we would!"

"How could you not hate me for what I've done?"

"Oh don't worry! There's still hate! It came, it boiled, overflowed, but the water has since fallen on the fire and now that has been reduced to a warm glow. With time, those embers too will go!" Huifan said, twirling around.

"Where in the spirit world did you get that poetic bullshit?" Jinkun asked.

"An anthology of works by Moo-Chee-Goo-Chee-La-Poo-Chee the Third."

"Ah yes! The Dark One! A classical literary genius!" Rikuto smiled to himself.

"So, Great Uniter, Shall we begin now that Aunt Su's twins are out of the way?" Huifan asked.

"I suppose we can," Kuvira sighed.

"WAIT!" Rikuto yelled jumping between Huifan and Kuvira just as Huifan bent a metal strip off her own arm to use as a blindfold. Both women turned to him suspiciously.

"Would you like to learn the Toph Beifong Method or the Lin Beifong Method?" Rikuto asked.

"Right! You were trained by the original master!" Huifan exclaimed.

"MHM! And there's a HUGE difference!" Rikuto confirmed.

"Well, it's not thaaat different! We did have that one master class with her on Air Temple Island during the Siege of Republic City…" Jinkun chimed in, standing up.

"What is the difference?" Kuvira asked.

"You know that expression…. 'Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me'?" Rikuto asked.

"Yeah?"

"With the Toph Beifong method, you'll wish your bones were all broken so that your teacher would have mercy," Rikuto clarified.
"What?!" Kuvira cried as all the other three burst out laughing.

"We're just messing with ya, they're not thaaaat bad," Rikuto claimed, clapping Kuvira on the back.

She slid away from him skeptically.

"Well, let's begin!" Huifan said, throwing the metal over Kuvira's face. She instinctively tried to bend it off.

"Wait! This is platinum!" Kuvira screamed pulling at it, while Huifan held firm. "You can bend platinum?"

"Surprise!" Huifan said, nonchalantly waving her fingers with contempt.

It was a needle... in a wet sponge... stapled to a block of wood... nailed to a tree.

Miyoko stared hard at it and took another deep breath and bent her weight onto her back leg, charging up for another lightning strike.

"You're too tense. You need to think like a waterbender, not an earthbender, you stubborn little girl-" Tetsuya instructed, standing by with his arms folded.

Miyoko stepped forward and discharged the lightning but missed again landing another assault on the poor tree backing the toothpick, sponge, and wood block fixing.

"How do you expect to be able to bend dark lightning through the brain with any precision if you can't even hit a target with regular lightning outside a body? I must say, I am truly shocked I wasn't reduced to a pile of molten flesh when you tried it on me earlier. Your lack of control is-"

"Will you shut it? Your reprimanding comments about my lack of competence AREN'T helping!" Miyoko yelled, green hair flaring as he whipped towards him.

He remained perfectly still, undeterred.

"Perhaps it was a good thing you became a speaker. Bending clearly isn't your forte," Tetsuya went on, picking at a speck of dust under his finger nail.

Miyoko growled louder.

"But as Grandma Toph told us, even an idiot like the Avatar's friend can learn metalbending with the proper teacher. So I am not worried. You'll get it eventually!"

"I don't even know what I am trying to do anymore!" Miyoko yelled, pulling at her hair tendrils in frustration.

"The needle acts as an antenna. Your job is to bend the lightning through IT and the water around it, saturating the sponge. If you let the lightning touch the sponge, it will melt the rubber! That is where the precision comes in! You must restrict the energy to traveling through the spaces between, through the water molecules-vaporizing it!" Tetsuya repeated for what felt like the hundredth time since they began that previous night.

With a roar of green fire, Miyoko tried again. She actually hit the fixing this time instead of assaulting the tree, but completely vaporized the sponge, melted the needle, and burnt through the wooden block nailed to the trunk of the poor thing.
"You've the power of Azula and patience of Izumi," Tetsuya remarked, going to replace the fixing with a fresh apparatus.

Miyoko glared at him, unamused.

"It is a great recipe for disaster."

Miyoko buried her head in her hands.

"What happened to that little turtle duck of a boy in you that I heard about? That we saw through Father's memories? The one that hadn't the stomach for lying or cruelty?"

"He died long ago," Tetsuya replied, his arms folded as he looked down at her.

She practically boiled the entire lake upon entry. Her hair was still blue, despite the water taking most of the heat away. Masaru's hair turned red as he dove in after her, making a considerably large wave, splashing her face as he joined her. She dipped under and then surfaced, letting the water pull her hair out of her face.

"Can barely see you through the steam," Izumi sighed, treading.

"And whose fault is that, my Lady?" he asked pointedly.

"Sorry."

There was a small earthen rise in the center of the lake, likely where there used to be thinning in the cap of the volcano. "Look, Saru! I can bend earth TOO!" Izumi growled, pushing herself up onto the little island, superheating her hands to melt the pumice stone away to mold a seat for herself up out of the water. Masaru rested his chin on her thighs and wrapped his arms around his waist. She bent over his head and splashed water onto his back, watching it turn to steam where they sat.

"I know you want to protect everybody, but you have to lay off a little, Zumi," Masaru said softly.

"I know. I had this same conversation with Taemon yesterday evening after he attacked Asami... but how can I lay off? I pledged myself to the world! How can I protect them if I can't even hold our family together?"

"There's still the Avatar!"

"Oh please. She's twenty what— two now? And is probably less experienced in leading and organizing than Yoko now at eighteen!"

"She's saved the world four times," Masaru reminded Izumi. "Not to mention, the only way she'll get better is if she actually has the chance to do her job."

Izumi frowned but said nothing.

"But in all seriousness, we need to come up with some sort of plan for when someone irks you. In your new capacity as nearly nothing—"

"Nothing? I'm the heir to the Isikawa Estate and wife to the richest man alive!"

"You don't have an army—"

"Still have the League—"
"Zumiya, let me finish."

"Alright…"

"You can't go around threatening those who don't think like you do with flames and lightning. I know we're not hiding your inner fire anymore, but we still have to be careful, lest you become the monster you feared as a younger woman. Be stronger. Don't let their words hurt you—"

"Their words don't hurt me, not anymore. I'm at a place where I can't be hurt. But seeing others, younger than me, who are still so impressionable being beaten down by something that should be brushed off easily, it's hard. It's hard because I've been there, Saru."

"But where would you be now if someone never let you fight these battles and always intervened" Masaru asked. "Sheltered, ignorant? Maybe even like the former Earth Prince, Wu?"

"Nobody let me fight battles, they threw me into them. They enabled the Fire Sages and Hisoki to flat out abuse me and what has it made? A jaded flame inside of a body. What do you suggest I do? Let Su continue to be Su? You remember how she treated Huan during the trials? Have you seen how she treats Kuvira now?"

"Yes, but there must be a middle ground. You can't change Su and you can't just take Kuvira because you want to. She's been strong before; she can become strong again."

"Was whatever that was a year ago actual strength or a mask for the pain—a flimsy bandage over the end of a severed limb still bleeding?"

"I don't know, but neither do you despite how much you think you can see. We all have to be more careful, Zumi. And don't underestimate those around you, either. It is insulting."

Izumi ran her fingers through his red hair in the steam of the lake. "I'll try."

"Good. It's all you can do."

Huifan bent pillars out of the ground of the arena while Kuvira slid across the dirt away from them, platinum blindfold still on her face.

Rikuto jumped out of a tunnel and landed lightly right in front of her. "ROCK ON!" he yelled. Caught off-guard, Kuvira shrieked and toppled over backwards.

"Don't be selective about your seismic sense like most are with their vision and perception. It is easy to see only what you want to see, like these pillars, but you can't forget what may be above, around or below you. You must always look for everything," Rikuto explained, pulling Kuvira off the arena floor.

"Why does this keep happening?" Kuvira asked.

"Why does what keep happening?" Rikuto asked.

"You moderately failing at seismic sense?" Huifan suggested.

"No, falling over," Kuvira replied, rubbing her sore behind. It must have been the sixth time in the hour they'd been practicing. She used to be so agile and sure footed. She could stare death in the face unblinkingly and now a cousin sprouting from the ground was terrifying.

"You're scared where you didn't used to be," Rikuto answered. "But don't worry. It's normal to
change with time. We may be the most stubborn of people, but we aren't static as the stones we bend. People are more like sand-we change shape, sometimes get carried away..."

Kuvira stilled, contemplating his words.

"Shall we try again?" Huifan asked impatiently. "Jin, you want to make the pillars while I tunnel underneath?"

"I can," Junkun said, jumping down from the stands.

"I think next round will have to wait," Rikuto interrupted, pointing to the arena gates.

"Lunchtime!" Ikki called.

Kuvira held back.

"Would you care to sit with us?" Jinkun invited.

"Will Asami and her friends be in the dining hall?"

"Probably."

"I think I'll just take my food to my room, then."

"Nonsense!"

"Kuvira, please!"

"We'll protect you!" Ikki promised.

Kuvira looked down at the small airbender, and for an instant saw the girl's little brother with the lopsided smile that she tried to squash on the glass window of her colossus a year ago. She turned away.

"I don't deserve your protection," Kuvira replied, leaving in the other direction, tunnelling straight through the metal bleachers of the arena with her bending.

Huifan took a step after her.

"It's just guilt. Don't try to stop it," Rikuto said, extending an arm in front of her cousin.

"But my mom asked that we distract her from all of that," Huifan argued.

"For a while, yes. But she still needs time to process." Rikuto lowered his arm once he was sure Huifan wouldn't pursue.

"I can track her even through the wood. Why don't we go to lunch? I'll see if Taemon can fish her out of the trees later."

"What will happen once Taemon leaves?"

"What do you mean?"

"He and Baatar got into a scuffle earlier. That's why Su was quaking so hard and Ma brought Kuvira out here, to get her away from everything. Izumi decided it would be best if Taemon was gone first thing tomorrow morning."
Miyoko walked through the trees alone. Tetsuya had given up on her for the rest of the day. She had a few nails, a few sponges, a block of wood, and a canteen of water. She looked at the set up on the tree. It seemed so easy. Just keep the lightning in the space between the fibers of the sponge. She tried again. The lightning was smaller, calmer, and slightly more controlled without having Tetsuya there taunting her.

She went to inspect. The lightning bolt was smaller and more controlled, but lacked precision. She touched the sponge, wrapped her hand around it, ignoring the needle as it pierced the palm of her hand and felt for the water in the small spaces between… and vaporized it in an instant, keeping the sponge perfectly intact, in no places melted. It was easy to feel the spaces between and control where the energy traveled while making contact with the thing. She poured more water on the sponge and did it again. She took a step away and outstretched her arm. She should be able to make a channel of electricity between the tips of her finger and the needle, but lost accuracy and blew apart the sponge and wood. She looked up the sky and just wanted to scream. Just like before, she was left on her own to fight through or give up trying. She felt something brush against her leg and looked down to find a rabbitsquirrel making itself comfortable on the long hem of her skirt. She bent down and offered it a hand. It smelled her fingertips and proceeded to lay down on the crimson fabrics she wore.

She scratched it behind the ear and shoulder. Despite it not being a domestic animal, it seemed comfortable with her. She wondered why. She looked up at the sponge. With contact, it was easy to feel the space between. In a body, one only needed to feel the conductivity in the nerves to observe. If there was one perk to being the bastard of royalty, it was having access to the National archive of banned books in the Royal Palace's Library. Miyoko knew the theory. Tetsuya sort of simplified things. All Miyoko needed now was practice. She parted the soft fur behind the shoulder of the rabbit squirrel while rubbing its ear with her thumb, and invaded with her lightning-bending.

Such a strange feeling it was to feel her own clothes through different sensory nerves. To feel her own finger on a different skin, to suddenly want nothing but to sleep and bask in the sun on this satin sheet. It wasn't just seeing through another's eyes when observing. It was feeling their feelings. And suddenly something shifted in the small being. It was being watched, the touch went from soothing to threatening and the desire to run overcame everything. Both hearts raced and both bodies began to shake.

Miyoko pulled away and the rabbit squirrel fled into the brush surrounding.

The fear of being hunted lingered in her brain. For a moment it was as if she was the rabbitsquirrel and it became her. If she could do the same with her mother, maybe she'd know if her mother's love for her children was real, and maybe her mother would be able to feel the pain and depravity she suffered from every day.

The Fire Lord was in his own quarters reviewing various reports from the capital that evening like he did every night for almost exactly three hours.

"Fire Lord Takeo," Kuvira called, knocking on his open door.

"Kuvira!" He exclaimed, spinning in his chair.

She bowed awkwardly. Takeo held his hand up in response.
"Please, don't. We're family, and we're on vacation. There is no need for titles and formalities. With such limited time to kick back, why not take advantage of it?" He asked, inviting her in.

"Actually, I just wanted to ask, have you seen Taemon? After- after the incident this morning, I haven't seen him once, not even passing."

The Fire Lord's smile faltered slightly as if a weight had been lowered onto his shoulders, but he recovered almost instantly.

"He's on the roof," Takeo replied with a smile. "He likes being where he can feel all of the elements."

_The roof? _"Thank you- Takeo,"

"Just Keyo is fine, if you want to save breath and time," Takeo said with a smile.

"Keyo?" Kuvira confirmed.

He nodded. "Is that all?"

"Yes, I'm sorry for wasting your time."

"You're not wasting my time, feel free to come by any time, Cousin!"

"I only thought- you're the Fire Lord, _surely_ you have more important things to do? You made time sound like such a - limited commodity" …

"It is, but I would give it all to family in a heartbeat if they would let me," Takeo replied returning to his paperwork. "Goodnight, Kuvira."

"Goodnight," Kuvira responded pensively. _Family._

She found him, on his back, his hands behind his head, gazing up at the stars.

"How'd you find me?" Taemon asked. "I thought seismic sense didn't work through wood, especially for beginners."

"How do you know I am a beginner?"

"It wasn't difficult to deduce watching you spar with Fa-ni. She may be fast, but she's repetitive and predictable, if you pay attention to how she steps."

"Takeo told me you liked being where you could feel all of the elements," Kuvira explained, sitting beside him, holding her knees close to her chest to shield herself from the evening wind thrashing against the roof.

"Used to…" Taemon replied.

"Used to?"

"You know that chi-blocking can inhibit a bender's bending temporarily right?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how?"
"They block the chi-pathways."

"Do you know what the chi-pathways are? What they connect?"

Kuvira shrugged.

"Pools of energy. I found a book that explained it much more eloquently than I ever could. It proposed that if chi-pathways could be blocked, they could also be unblocked. Not only that, I confirmed it. I opened every pathway, unlocked every element, trained myself, my brothers, and raised an army. I wanted to show the world what man was capable of doing and becoming, and to rise against the close-minded conservatives. I wanted to free the bound youth from obsolete expectations, limitations, and obligations and spread freedom and peace to those subject to such cruelty."

"That sounds...that sounds..."

"It was foolish- dabbling in territory about which I knew nothing. I tried to unseat the mortal equivalent of one of the ancient spirits, and in turn, lost my bending. I used to be able to feel the earth through these stone shingles, the wind through my skin, the moisture in the humid air and the faintest bits of heat from the distant suns outside our planetary system. But now, everything seems so silent. The sky is so dark as if the stars are farther, or maybe the loss of connection to the fire within severed that with the fire afar." He blinked. "Have you ever tried to count the stars in the night sky?"

Kuvira looked up. The constellations were different here than in Zaofu, where she would climb out of the domes with Huan when they were both just children. Before life took them their separate ways. "I have."

"How many can you see now if you look straight up, unmoving..." Taemon asked.

"I don't know."

"Will you count them again, Kuvira? I want to know if there's a difference, between the sensitivity to light of a true earthbender, and one with nothing now, who used to have fire within him," Taemon asked more firmly than usual.

Kuvira laid down on the roof beside him and mirrored his position with her hands behind her head, and began to count.

"Seventy-nine,"

"Sixty-five," Taemon replied sadly.

"Maybe I miscounted. Maybe some of the specs were airships passing," Kuvira thought aloud.

"No. Airships fly too low to be mistaken for stars," Taemon dismissed.

"I'm sorry,"

"Don't be. They're just stars. So far away... They don't matter to us here on this planet.

"No, I'm sorry for this morning. I shouldn't have visited him while he was drinking. I should have known something like that could have happened. I should have remembered! Then you wouldn't have had to save me and you wouldn't have to leave because you laid hand on the Earth Queen's beloved son!" Kuvira blurted out. "It's all my fau-"
Taemon sat up and flicked a grain of clay at Kuvira's temple, to startle her enough to disrupt her train of thought and shut her mouth. "That's enough. You can acknowledge forgetting that men aren't themselves when drunk and depressed, but you CANNOT blame yourself for something like \textit{that} for happening!" Taemon said before removing his hand from her mouth and sitting back on his feet. Kuvira sat up and glared at him, but despite his act of aggression, didn't feel threatened. "I chose to act as I did despite the consequences."

"But if it weren't for me, you wouldn't have to leave."

"If it weren't for you, my sending off may have been delayed a day at most. I can only take so much of the Krew's ignorant blather before feeling the urge to remind them of the truth about this cruel world."

"Why do you see the need to?"

"Because I wish someone warned me about the world's before I fell into it nearly blind and lost everything."

"Didn't Izumi teach you?"

"She did- too much, I thought, at times. But looking back, even too much is never enough." Taemon revealed. "We should go in, or at least me. It would probably be good to sleep while I can before returning to my patch of dirt in a borrowed tent."

Kuvira watched him rise and descend from the roof of the house onto a balcony on the other side.

"Taemon, wait!" Kuvira called, sliding off the roof, bending the metal on her arms into a hook she latched onto the edge to swing her back and keep her from being launched past the balcony, landing beside him. He turned away from the sliding door to his room, to face her. "I wanted to thank you for-" being a friend… being you… I appreciate it."

"You wouldn't if you knew what I've done," Taemon replied, entering the room, and sliding the door closed on her.

She placed a hand on the thin wood. She knew she couldn't be able to feel his heartbeat through a fragment of a tree, but she couldn't stop herself from imagining his heart beating in his chest, with his back pressed against the door listening. "You know exactly what I've done, and yet of all of them, you've been the most forgiving," she whispered. "Don't underestimate your worth."

He threw open the door to the balcony, but she was already gone.

Miyoko pushed the door to her parents' room open. She had greased the hinges while they were still out swimming so that it would be absolutely silent when she came in. Tetsu would have stopped her if he knew, but she didn't care. She'd waited eighteen years already to know the truth about if her mother cared about her, or if they were all just empty words.

There was a pressure point behind the neck that Fire Lady Mai used to put Izumi to sleep and another to keep her asleep, and Izumi had used both on her before.

Masaru rolled over.

Miyoko froze, stilling even the air in her lungs from escaping. She waited nearly two whole moments before starting again towards her mother's side of the bed. Her mother was sleeping on her side, her hair black again, draped so elegantly over her pillow. For once she looked…at peace.
Miyoko drew a breath. If she were caught using dark lightning—especially on the former Fire Lord—she could be hunted and killed. But the former Fire Lord was her mother, and her Mother was merciful… when she wanted to be.

Miyoko could barely recognize the room they were in as her own at the Earthen Fire Estate. The walls were so…bare. Where were the calligraphy posters, or newspaper clippings, or protest flyers for that matter?

Better yet, where was she?

Izumi sat on the edge of her bed, just…staring down at a tiny figure buried in the blankets. Miyoko looked at the figure in the bed and saw herself nestled deep in the massive bed, covered up to her neck in blankets. Her face was so small and so…clean. There weren’t any scrapes or dirt on her face—how old was she exactly?

It was the most boring thing Yoko had ever seen. This can’t be the extent of her mother’s dreams, can they? Surely there’s something else—

"MAMAAAAA!" A pitched, little girl’s voice pierced the room. "Kuto stole my sleeves!" Twelve-year-old Ursa yelled, skidding to a stop just outside the room when she saw Izumi in the room. She was dressed in casual clothes, just like her mother. No armor, no royal insignias or collars.

"Shhh! Gentle in the morning Ursa!" Izumi scolded.

Ursa relaxed her shoulders and came into the room to see Miyoko start to stir from the noise.

"Sorry!" Ursa whispered, peering over the pillows at the baby Yoko.

Miyoko cooed, not wanting to wake. She sensed the hand nearby and pulled it close against her ear.

"She’s dreaming," Izumi said with a smile, pulling Ursa onto her lap.

"How can you tell?" Ursa asked.

Izumi brushed a loose hair out of Ursa’s face and touched her temple and gave her a glimpse into the little sister’s head.

"Of riding the Komodo rhinos?" Ursa laughed.

"Apparently, my little wild child," Izumi said, letting go.

"Why did you stop?" Ursa asked. "I want to see too!"

"Because, Love. Spending too much time in another’s head is dangerous," Izumi said softly with her hand on Ursa’s shoulder.

"Don’t you get bored just watching her sleep?" Ursa asked.

"Never," Izumi replied. "I used to watch you sleep too."

"Why?"

"Because it just makes me so happy to see you exist."
Ursa furrowed her brows skeptically.

"You were once just a little nothing. Not even a speck of dust. And you grew from nothing, into this tiny creature with a beating heart these noddley little limbs and this big head that's ALWAYS soo noisy!" Izumi said, tickling Ursa only to shush her again and point at Yoko. Ursa giggled and leaned into Izumi's chest and also watched Yoko sleep.

"You'll understand if you ever become a mother," Izumi said, resting her chin on her older daughter's head, watching the younger sleep.

"If?"

"I was forced to become a mother, before I was ready, I think. I will never make you, or her, do the same," Izumi explained. Young Ursa shrugged. "You'll understand when you're older."

Miyoko stepped closer. All her mother wanted, was for her children to be happy without obligations from the Fire Sages or anybody.

"So, Kuto stole your sword?" Izumi raised a brow.

Ursa nodded furiously.

"And what did you expect me to do about that?"

"Yell at him?" Ursa suggested hopefully. "Get it back for me?"

Izumi laughed. It was such a free laugh so unlike anything Miyoko had ever heard from her mother. And Young Ursa laughed too. "Kuto is your brother. You can get your own sword back!"

"But he's so much bigger than me!"

"So what if you're smaller? You're also faster..." Izumi bent closer. "...and smarter." she added with a wink, giving her baby a squeeze. Ursa giggled. "Here's what you do, you run circles around him, fake him out. Get him dizzy and tired, and when he's about to fall, give the final push and BAM! Sword's yours again!" Izumi said, shaking the girl abruptly. Young Ursa laughed again.

Miyoko smiled. She wondered if this dream was a memory or a complete figment of her mother's imagination. It was almost too good, too peaceful to have ever been real.

Before Izumi could release Ursa to go try the tactic, a wind blew through the bedroom.

"It's not supposed to rain today," Ursa said, turning to Izumi. "Uncle Saru said so at breakfast when I asked if I needed to wear a cloak over my clothes."

Izumi didn't respond, her gaze fixed on the window, and a figure that stood before it.

"Mama?" Ursa asked. Izumi only held her tighter and reached for Miyoko in the bed and pulled her out waking her.

"Ama?" baby Yoko cooed, still half-asleep, curling up against Izumi's breast, slipping a hand into her mother's robes for that familiar, comforting warmth..

Ursa turned to see the man by the window. She did not recognize him either, but Izumi did. That much was clear.

"Ursa..." the man's voice said. It was smooth, but crisp with an accent like those nobles of the
"outer isles of the Fire Nations. "Ursa, come."

"Stay away from her!" Izumi barked, holding Ursa and Yoko tighter than before.

"Ursa… come with me. Your mother doesn't want you," the man claimed.

"What? Why wouldn't she?" Ursa asked.

"Ursa- don't listen to him! You don't know him! He's a stranger. Remember what we taught you about strangers."

"Because you're my daughter and I love you!" the man said, taking a knee and reaching out a hand.

Miyoko could see the hesitance in young Ursa's mind. Miyoko's skin began to crawl, her heart rate increased. Every hair on her body stood up on end like a feeble animal of prey standing mere feet before its predator.

"Ursa! Remember!" Izumi insisted, her voice pleading, as tears beaded in the corners of her eyes. Both Izumi and Miyoko's breathing increased, their arms began to shake, and their knees became weak.

"Ursa, she never wanted you in the first place! She never wanted me, but she didn't have a choice! She HATES me, and hates you just the same because you are my blood! See? She has already born a bastard by her lover to replace you," the man said.

Ursa turned to Izumi. Is it true? The girl's eyes asked.

"Ursa don't listen to him. He's lying! Of course I want you! I've always wanted you since the day you were born!"

"But not before when I was still in your belly?" Ursa asked pushing Izumi away. "You couldn't wait for Yoko to be out of your belly and now all you ever do is watch her sleep while I'm left to fend for myself! I'm nothing!" Ursa turned away from her, running towards the strange man.

"NO!" Izumi screamed most terribly as she lunged forward, reaching. A pair of arms wrapped around her waist holding her back. Izumi turned her head and screamed even louder and more frighteningly than before when she saw the second man reach to take baby Yoko. She tried to grab the crying child back, but the man extended a hand towards her and stilled her completely with dark lightning. She choked on her own screams, and the muscles in her body all strained as she tried to fight his hold on her, and his hold on baby Yoko. Miyoko only got a glimpse of the second figure before the scene dissolved completely.

Miyoko dove under the bed as her mother sat up, hair blazing, body shaking and covered in sweat, eyes wet.

"Zumi! What-" Masaru sat up beside her. Both Izumi and Miyoko were trembling, those men in the dream— why did just the thought of them make Even Yoko's blood boil? Like with the rabbitsquirrel, she became her mother, and her mother her. Observing… wasn't one way.

"They were there! Here!" Izumi gasped as if she had been choked. She swallowed. "Hisoki and—"

"Izumi! They're dead, Zumi- it was just a-"
"They took Ursa and Yoko!"

"Zumi! It was just a nightmare, Love— they're not here!"

"Saru what if they feigned it? What if Hisoki was alive when we buried his body? What if he earthenbent himself out of his grave! It isn't impossible! We know he wasn't lying about crossing over— What if he's back and the dream was actually a prophecy—"

"ZUMI!" Masaru yelled, shaking her.

She was panicking. "And Kage! P’li could have killed anybody that night! The body was beyond recognizable at a point blank explosion like that! No one would have been able to identify the body? What if he's out there too?"

"Zumi, they're both dead, and you're safe here!" Masaru insisted.

"I need to check on the children—" Izumi decided, throwing her covers off.

"Wait!"

"WHAT?"

"Just— please, don't wake them. They're safe, Zumiya."

She threw off the covers and leapt from the bed, completely naked and went to fetch her robe. Miyoko watched her walk to the closet with her right over her left ribs, where she had a nasty scar that had never healed properly.

Masaru flopped back down on his back and sighed heavily. Why did he have to marry a dragon?

Miyoko waited for him to still before slipping swiftly and silently out the window and back to her room, hoping to beat her mother there.

She slowed her heart and breathing as much as she could as she waited for her mother to come through her.

She checked on Ursa first. The former princess, 26 years of age was deep asleep with an awkward smile on her face, perfectly at peace, happy. Even in her subconscious, she was free. Izumi watched her eyelid twitch, her chest rise and fall with each breath, and her arm shift under her pillow. She was so big now- a woman grown, and not a little girl anymore. She was so strong. She had black hair, blue fire, and Izumi's own golden-tangerine eyes. No trace of Hisoki came through in her physical features. She heavily resembled her great grandmother, but with a slightly pointier chin and smoother jawline. She leaned over and planted a kiss on her older daughter's brow and gently brushed a hair from her face so she could see her child more clearly.

"I'll always want you," Izumi whispered before leaving to check on the next child.

Rikuto was half on, half on his bed, snoring loudly with the covers falling off. He was a heavy sleeper, always had been, so Izumi bent down and gracelessly heaved his weight back onto the bed and covered him as she would when he were small. Even at thirty-three years old, he still looked like a little Fire Nation Boy terrified of being an earthbender out of fear his friends at the Royal Academy might reject him. So, he pushed them away before they could accept or reject and fled to the trees in the swamp where he lived with his grandmother between the periods of time she asked him back to the Fire Nation. He told her he found safety in solitude. The Swamps was the only
place where he felt truly free and she was starting to understand why. Among others, one was always second-guessing if what they said or did would hurt another, or get themselves hurt in return.

"I so wish I could join you and feel the mud between my toes and hear the screechers singing and not have to wear restrictive clothing. I too wish I could be free from the bonds of my humanity," Izumi said to him while he slept. She kissed his browline and headed to the next room. Sasuke's.

Sasuke's light was on, and he was still awake, at his desk, writing a letter to his secretary in Shu Jing regarding a case he was working on.

"You're troubled," Sasuke noted.

"Had a nightmare," Izumi replied, inviting herself in, sitting beside him, reaching out to touch his jaw and neck, feeling for his temperature, making sure he was real and breathing and sitting in front of her.

"This is the first in what, fourteen years, maybe?" Sasuke asked.

"You've been keeping track?"

"You're my mother; I care about you. And I keep track of everything," Sasuke replied, pulling out a book. He scanned the table of contents then flipped through for a page, then crossed his room to his stash of tea leaves.

"What are you mixing this time?" Izumi asked.

"Hibiscus, Ginger, Chamomile… and a bit of lemongrass and zest to make it less… bitter," he said dropping the tea cage into the cup, handing it to his mother for her to heat herself.

He sat down and examined her. Her posture was all hunched over, her elbows tucked inwards, and her cup held close to her abdomen. She was looking down, into the water than up at him, her own son. She was avoiding eye contact even if she didn't realize it. He'd seen it so many times before as a lawyer. It was always like this in domestic abuse cases.

"It's normal to have fear after everything. But don't worry. We'll help you through it," He reassured her. Usually, when she appeared stressed, he'd pry, preferring to face her problems head on like his grandmother while Masaru was the one who ran from his problems and tried to distract Izumi from the nightmares and toxic thoughts swirling around in her subconscious, always threatening to resurface to her working memory. She drank the tea in small sips in silence as she contemplated everything. It calmed her extremities at least, but her core was still twisted and tense in a spell of paranoia.

"Thank you, my son," she said when she finished the tea. She hugged him from the side, holding his head into her chest and kissed the top of his head, running her thumb over his cheek and inhaling the scent of her fourth-born son.

"Thank you!" he replied. "For letting us try to help."

She went to check on Taemon next. He was sprawled on his bed looking the most relaxed she had seen in ages. Maybe relaxed was the wrong word. Exhausted. Truly exhausted. The the drawer of his bedside table was left ajar, unusual for Izumi's former ward who always was so tidy. Izumi moved to close it when she saw a paper folded over the rim of it, tossed inside rather hastily.
"Just don't let love turn you stupid like it did your Father when he was chasing me," Izumi thought aloud as she brushed a few strands of his hair out of his face and bent down to kiss him too on the forehead, feeling his temperature and nerves on simultaneously. She watched him for a while then for good measure, checked under her bed, in his closets, bathroom, and out on the balcony just to make sure he was alone, that nobody was there to hurt her babies. He entered their home when he was eight, but still, was just as much her own as the rest of them.

Tatsuya's room was the next one over. Izumi smelled then refilled his carafe of water and replaced it on his bedside table. She'd heard from Ikki that Tetsuya and Miyoko were working to wean him off of his alcohol and cactus juice dependency. She wondered if it was something she did that lead him to that path of self-destruction and desire to escape reality. She considered asking if she could help but Masaru urged her not to. After her children reached a certain age, she had to hold back and trust that they'd be okay. Remain so overbearing, and it could drive them away… as it did. The Mother, pulled the covers up over her son and checked his temperature. outside the window of is room and then moved his hair aside to plant a kiss on his head.

Then Tetsuya. She had to move his hair aside like Tatsu to see his beautiful face.

"You're awake," she noticed as soon as she made contact with his smooth skin.

"As are you," he replied, opening his golding tangerine eyes that matched hers so perfectly.

She sat down on the edge of his bed as he moved over and sat up.

"You haven't been paranoid enough to check on us in our sleep since we were all still living at the Earthen Fire Estate, fifteen years ago," Tetsuya commented.

"I know," Izumi sighed. "Tsuya, I know you've seen the ruins of the Yamakatsu Estate, and the police records of that case with Kage and his wife— is there any way—"

"He's dead, Mother," Tetsuya confirmed.

"You're certain?"

"Yes."

Tetsuya studied her expression. He hadn't seen it in years, but still knew it like the lines in the palms of his own hands. Trauma.

Dark lightning was... incredible. One could use it to look into another's minds, look back into one's own. Help them see clearly, and they... they could help you.

"You have to come to acceptance with what you are... and what you've seen..." Taemon said touching Tetsu's head resurfacing long forgotten memories.

Tetsuya heard his mother's screams when Ursa was born, and her screams when Ursa was taken away. He hated seeing her in pain.

"But you cannot stop it. We will all suffer. How we act after is what defines us and our name. You get to choose what to do with your knowledge."

Tetsuya knew her greatest fears. He had seen them as a young child, and had forgotten them until Taemon showed him dark lightning and helped him look back into his own mind. It was a gift when one could see the light, but the greatest curse in the night.
"We're not going to leave you again, and nobody will take us away."

Izumi looked up at him. Thank you, my Love," she said, kissing him on the head, holding him for a few moments longer than the others.

Iroh was in Republic City for the night, and Takeo had left for the Palace some time after dinner leaving only Miyoko to check on. The smallest baby.

She was asleep. It was a deeper sleep than usual. She was tired, her chi pathways unusually active, and her breathing… different.

"You've started bending again, my little turtleduck," Izumi thought, tracing the pathways with a spark. "So strange it is… to feel so much of oneself in another." She watched her child sleep, feeling the heat of her youngest child's energy radiating from her thin body. Then, like with the others, checked in the closets and drawers, under the bed and outside the window.

When Izumi emerged from Miyoko's room, she found Kya waiting for her.

"Saru sent you, didn't he? To keep me from fleeing to the mainland?" Izumi asked.

"Perhaps."

"I will be fine. I just need space… and time. Guard Eiko if you feel the need. I won't leave. I promise. Just please… let me be," Izumi asked.

"We love you, Izumi," Kya reminded the Fire Nation sister-in-law, pulling her into a hug.

Would you still if you knew what has become of me? "I love you, too… but right now, I need silence and solitude to think clearly," Izumi replied, pulling away to go secure the perimeter of the estate.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks MusicPlayer81 for all of your help!!!

**Are you scared, cause I'm terrified**-- Florence Welch-Patricia-High as Hope 2019

Summer vacation lasted less than a day for this starving student. Now I have summer class, internship, and family shit. Hope your lives are a bit less chaotic than mine! :)
Chapter 6: No Light, Part 1- Burned but not Buried

“Thank the Spirits, he's finally leaving,” Asami exclaimed, massaging the back of her neck. “For a chi-blocker, he's not that gentle…”

“I know, right?! That leaves only two of them left to get rid of!” Opal added, glancing over at Tsuya and Tatsu by the food table.

“Three if you count Huan. Or did you forget that big brother existed and was equally involved as mine were in the crossover project, Cousin?” Miyoko asked, sitting across from Opal with a bowl of rice porridge topped with barbecue chicken.

Bolin took a big sip of his watermelon juice and Opal scowled. “If there’s something you want to say, go ahead! I’m right here!” she growled challengingly.

“I just did,” Miyoko replied, perfectly steady.

“I’m sorry, but who is she again?” Asami asked, floored by the young lady’s audacity.

“I am Miyoko Lee, only daughter of Masaru Lee and Izumi Ido, student of Political Science at Ranshao Rikai University and Vice President of the Students for True Freedom in the Fire Nation national Organization! Pleased to make your acquaintance. Forgive me for not being present during your arrival on the docks yesterday. I didn’t want to come seeing as you’re neither a Beifong, nor have any business being here on our family vacation.”

“Is she always—”

“A little shit? Yes. Yoko, why are you even sitting here? As Taemon demonstrated yesterday, they aren’t worth your efforts. People won’t see what they don’t want to believe,” Tetsuya replied, pulling her away.

“They’re so rude!” Bolin exclaimed once Yoko and Tsuya left the room.

“I know right?” Asami sipped her tea and rolled her eyes.

“Maybe they think you’re rude,” Mako suggested, receiving a glare from both Opal and Asami and a look of surprise from Bolin.

“What makes you say that?” Korra asked.

“I don’t know! Maybe it was the way she said ‘three of you counting Huan’. Did he participate in the crimes that Taemon and the twins committed?” Mako asked.

“Yeah, but he just made a mistake.” Opal dismissed with the signature Beifong wave of the hand. “They probably just brainwashed him to do their bidding so they didn’t have to take all the blame.”

“You know, your mom said the same thing about Baatar and Bolin during Kuvira’s Reign of Terror,” Korra bemused.

“That’s different! Kuvira didn’t tell them the extent of what she did!” Opal exclaimed.
“Actually, she did… eventually. And we chose to stay. It was a necessary sacrifice for the good of the whole nation, or at least that’s what we thought… then,” Bolin realised.

Opal turned her head and smirked with disbelief.

“Speaking of Vaatu’s wife, look who arrived,” Asami pointed out as Kuvira walked in the room with Taemon following silently behind her.

“Can’t you talk your way out of it?” Kuvira asked Taemon as she reached for a hard-boiled hundred year egg.

“Nope, nor would I want to. I knew the consequences of my actions, and I have no regrets. There’s no point dwelling on the past.” Taemon insisted, sprinkling a bit of red pepper flakes on his udon. “Kuto tells me you know the call now. If you need anything at all you still have him and Huifan… and probably Tsuya and Yoko if they’re available. You’re not alone anymore.”

“But I still don’t know them.”

“You don’t know me either. You don’t know any of us yet. To get to know someone will take more than the four days you have been here.” He turned and noticed Asami glaring at him from across the room. “Would you mind finding some place for us to sit?”

“Not at all,” Kuvira replied, quietly taking his bowl.

Taemon drew something from his pocket and crossed the room to where the Krew sat, open palmed and calm. “Miss. Sato, for what it is worth, I would like to apologize for my actions the other day. I should not have allowed myself to be provoked so easily by the supposedly harmless words of a bully. I had hoped to be able to teach you something that might help you later, but failed to remember that not everyone is worth the effort. I wish you a good rest of your stay on my brother's island.” Taemon bowed stiffly before finding a seat by Kuvira.

The Krew watched them, dumbstruck. Asami cleared her throat and returned to her bowl, speechless.

“How was that an apology?” Opal asked.

“I don’t know,” Korra replied.

“Hey, at least he tried!” Bolin exclaimed positively, unsuccessfully attempting to lighten the mood of the Krew.

Astonishingly, hardly anyone came for the arrival of the Krew, but nearly everyone came for the departure of Taemon. Most stayed back on the beach, watching from a safe distance, while the Royal Family stood on the docks to send one of their own away.

“You left your swords and all of your knives right, so they won’t be confiscated?” Izumi asked him in a hushed tone, fussing over him, reaching into pockets and folds just to make sure.

“Yes, Mother!” Taemon groaned, rolling his eyes.
“Do you have your canteen? Give it,” Izumi ordered.

He pulled his belt around and handed it to her. She smelled it for cactus juice and alcohol just in case.

Izumi frowned. “It’s not full.”

“I drank some on the walk from the house to the docks, there will be barrels on the ferry. I can refill,” Taemon replied.

“Kya, would you please—” Kya bent water from the sea while Lin pulled the dirt and salt from it and then bent it into the canteen until it was full. Izumi corked it and handed it back. “Got everything else you need?”

“Mother, it’s a prison, not a vacation resort. I am not actually supposed to be bringing anything!”

Izumi sighed. “Right. Well… good luck, then, Little Love.” She pulled him into a hug. “Remember who you are and what you represent.” she added in a whisper.

“I will.” he promised.

“Brother,” Iroh nodded, shaking Taemon’s hand.

“Brother.”

“Brother!” Takeo jumped upon the younger man, clapping him on the back, mussing his hair like he always did. Taemon growled but relented. “Oh suck it up! You’re not going to be able to gel it for a while, so what’s the matter if I mess it up?” Takeo laughed. “And don’t forget, even in the darkest times, to remember the light.”

“I won’t,” Taemon said, moving onto Rikuto who glomped him as well.

He only shook hands with Sasuke and gave a handshake and a pat on the back to each of the twins.

To Ursa, he bowed, keeping a respectful distance from the former crown princess and to Miyoko... *Where was Yoko?*

“Off sulking, probably,” Izumi shrugged, pulling him into a second hug before letting him go.

“Naturally. Take care, Mother. Father,” Taemon shook Masaru’s hand.

“And you, Son.” Masaru pulled him by the hand into a hug. Izumi bit back her tongue as Taemon boarded the ferry. The prison guards sent to receive him took him straight under dreck, out of sight, so the passengers they picked up from the main pier wouldn’t know what came along for the ride.

Izumi watched it pull away with her right hand across her body, clutching her left side.

“He’ll be okay,” Masaru reassured her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I know.” Izumi turned away from Masaru and retreated back to the house alone, pushing past family members and bending fire from her feet to fly back to her son’s summer home.

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Masaru, Baatar, Tenzin, Lin, Takeo, and Iroh had gone to the Earthen Fire Flag Ship so that they
could work for a few hours with radio connection for quick access to all of their direct reports. They had invited Asami, but the CEO of Future Industries had no need or desire to check in with her company, nor did the current chief of Police of Republic City feel the need to check in on his deputy. They remained, enjoying their third day on Ember Island in the arena, sparring. They decided to have a pro-bending style tournament. Mako, Korra, Bolin, reunited the fire ferrets and invited Opal to join their team while Huifan, Sunako, Ursa, and Jiexue opposed them.

They carved and elevated a pro-bending ring out of the arena and bent water in from the ocean with Kya’s help.

“So you know the rules right, Princess?” Korra asked Ursa teasingly.

“You’re kidding right? My Mom and Kya invented the whole thing!” Ursa replied, punching Korra right off the ring with a point blank fire blast.

“Seriously?” Korra called, flipping her hair out of her face.

“Yep! Needed to do something to turn Zumzu’s perpetual frown upside down!” Kya laughed.

“It was brilliant! Benders beating up other benders for fun!” Bumi yelled. “What could be better?”

Opal spun to the left dodging an earthen disk from Huifan only to be hosed by Sunako.

“Hey! Illegal headshot!” Mako yelled.

“In the Fire Nation, we play by the original rules!” Bumi yelled.

“Wait what?” Bolin asked. “What are those?”

“Last man standing wins for his team,” Kya answered with a smirk.

In which case, Chief Mako,” Ursa called. “Do you know how to redirect lightning?”

“Er…. yes?”

“Good,” Ursa replied with a devilish grin as she unleashed a massive bolt of lightning aimed right for the heart of Republic City’s Chief of Police while she cackled madly.

Izumi was passing through the throne room, a few knives in hand fresh from a rather intense sharpening session, with no particular destination in mind. Everything was so quiet save for this strange, distant, yet familiar voice that taunted the back of her mind.

>You’re a fool for thinking you could escape!

She tried to ignore it.

>Don’t walk away from me!

Ignore it!

>You will rue the first day you ever disobeyed—

She could feel the owner of the voice in her memory, reaching for her wrist, but this time, she was
ready. She whirled around and threw the blades blindly.

But it wasn’t a skull the blades cracked as she had subconsciously hoped they would, but the wall, through a painting, narrowly missing—

“Iroh!” she gasped, heart racing fast as she saw her firstborn son frozen in place, staring at the blades that passed just beyond his nose.

“Mom, you—,” he started to chuckle believing it a joke at first, before seeing the terror in her face.

She was mortified by what she had done— or almost done. “I— I’m sorry—” She uttered, stepping away from him, hands up in surrender, as if expecting some sort of retaliation. “—I could have—”

Iroh ran over, enveloping her in his arms. “But you didn’t. You didn’t hurt me. I’m still here. I’m okay! It was just a mistake!”

“But I shouldn’t have thrown so blindly— I— I’m not even supposed to be carrying blades on vacation— and I--!”

“It’s okay! Mom! Look at me! I’m fine! You’re fine!— You are fine, right?”

“I--” she paused, hearing the creaking floorboards again, louder than ever. She scanned the room.

“Is everything okay in here?” Takeo asked, entering the room.

“—I thought I heard—” her voice broke away as she noticed the damage she’d done to the painting. “The Sages will kill me if they knew! I’ve already made so many mistakes!”

Takeo’s face fell in shock. Didn’t she remember? “Mother, the Sages can’t kill you, they’ve been expelled from the palace, their political authority decimated and I have become Fire Lord. You are safe!” Takeo insisted, joining Iroh in his efforts to console their mother. She didn’t respond as she held onto them both, her head on Iroh’s chest, listening to his heartbeat and comparing it to another that she once knew.

“Is everything alright in here?” Sasuke asked, passing through with some letters to take into town to the messenger hawk barn.

“Ma just— loosed some arrows. Everything’s fine,” Iroh said, stroking her hair, holding her shaking body.

Sasuke turned and found the knives protruding from the painting. Izumi had told him she wouldn’t carry during the vacation. She only carried when afraid. “That is not fine,” Sasuke replied, noticing the blades protruding from the portrait on the wall.

The sai stuck out of Hisoki’s throat and the three knives out of his eyes and mouth. They were perfectly spaced to kill the figure in the photo.

Sasuke looked at the image of his young mother in the damaged portrait. Hisoki’s hand was on her waist, not resting, but grasping her rather tightly. Sasuke turned to his two brothers attempting to comfort their mother. Her head was tilted down, but her eyes travelling, rapidly, surveying the ground, ears open, listening, reaching out. Sasuke noted her increasingly rapid breathing and shaky stance...

“I’m going to get Father,” Sasuke announced.
“No!” Izumi insisted. “Don’t bother him. He’s probably working on something important right now. Leave him be.”

“Mother, you are important,” Sasuke replied, crossing the room to touch the back of his hand to the side of her face.

“You think you can feel my temperature?” Izumi laughed. How could her non-bending son feel her temperature?

“I may not be able to tell it to the tenth of a degree like Yoko or the hundredth of a degree as Tetsu could but I know when you’re about to ignite—,” Sasuke reminded her, pulling Iroh and Sasuke away as Izumi’s hair flared blue and her skin burned just as Iroh let go.

“Ow!” Iroh hissed, clutching his hand.

“My love! I’m so sorry!” Izumi exclaimed, stepping forward but pulling back when she remembered that in this state, she was unable to touch her first born without burning him.

“Don’t worry about it! It’ll be fine,” Iroh replied, shaking his hand.

“Go put it under water or find Kya or Sunako. Keyo and I got mom,” Sasuke recommended.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. If you see Father--”

“I’ll bring him.”

“Thanks.”

When Iroh returned, he brought not only Masaru, but Lin, Tenzin and all of their children. “Figured distraction would give us the opportunity to figure stuff out,” Iroh explained to Takeo and Sasuke in a quiet whisper while Ikki and Meelo quickly overwhelmed Aunt Zumi with a thousand questions about the secret stash of photographs they found last time they were on Ember Island of her and Aunt Kya kissing.

“Is it true you used to date each other?” Meelo asked.

“Perhaps,” Izumi replied with a guilty smile.

“I thought we were still dating,” Kya whispered, sandwiching Izumi’s head with blocks of ice as she tilted it up for a kiss, close, but not touching. The children laughed.

Tenzin supervised the room while Masaru, Takeo, Iroh, and Sasuke took down the photo and moved it to a side room off the main chamber.

“My biological Father really hurt her,” Iroh asked Masaru.

“In ways she couldn’t even afford to remember,” he replied.

“Do you think she’s upset because Taemon had to go?” Lin asked.

“Doubt it.” Iroh replied with his hand wrapped in bandages.

“She’s seen him go before, that shouldn’t have had any effect.” Sasuke added.
“Was it Su?” Lin asked.

“Nah. She spent what, forty-one years dealing with petty politicians? That shouldn’t have done anything either!”

“She should be handle a petulant Queen.”

“Then what gives? She doesn’t usually ‘almost’ kill one of her own sons!” Lin asked.

“I have an idea but it’s— only a theory. Nothing we’ve managed to confirm in all of our studies,” Sasuke replied, wracking his brain.

“A theory about your mother?” Lin asked, placing a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder.

“No, her primary art,” Sasuke replied, sliding Lin’s hand off his shoulder. “Excuse me.”

“Sasuke used to work closely with Taemon and Tetsuya,” Masaru explained. “They fell off when Taemon and Tetsuya’s plan for a new Fire Nation evolved to include the death of their mother.”

“Spirits!”

Tetsuya was in the library of the vacation house enjoying the silence and solitude when Sasuke found him.

“You taught someone!”

“Taught someone what?”

“Dark lightning!”

“And what, dear brother would give you that idea? You know as well as I that such an action would guarantee a death sentence.”

“The threat of death never deterred you before—”

“I suppose that’s true—”

“Mother’s head has been tampered with!”

“In what way?”

“The wall erected between her and her trauma center has been obliterated, a feat only possible by the use of dark lightning. There are only four known competent users of dark lightning: Azula, Izumi, Masaru, Taemon and You, the last two stripped of their bending.”

“There were more.”

“All slaughtered in the Hunt last month.”

“All except one.”

“The area is secure. There is no way she could have gotten through.”

“Who else could I have possibly taught?” Tetsuya implored, running his hands through his hair,
annoyed.

“Yoko.” Sasuke answered. Tetsuya fell silent, his denial waning. “She has been desperate for answers only obtainable by way of invasion. And you always did have an affinity for our littlest sister and her potential, so you taught her.”

Tetsuya’s silence confirmed it.

“At this rate, Mother could be dead by the end of the day if we do not make Yoko reverse whatever she’s done.”

“Even if Yoko invaded and allowed some slippage to occur, nobody has died from memory alteration.” Tetsuya sighed, running his fingers through his long free hair.

“Nobody else has a history like hers. She will try to kill herself in an attempt to escape the pain.”

“How do you know?”

Tetsuya turned to his brother, not surprised, but still intrigued.

“We were here. It was our first vacation retreat since the White Lotus took Ursa away. Father tried to remind her that she still had us to care for even with Ursa gone. She went for a walk into the forest, and ran herself through with her own dagger. She thought she had gone far enough to be alone and unseen, but I had followed and after the deed was done, went to fetch Iliana and Akira. They healed her before Father could see, knowing he would be angry—”

“Father is never angry.”

“He is when Mother lets her past hurt her more than the thought of what would become of her children if she put herself out of her misery.”

Tetsuya sat back, reeling. “What do you propose, Brother?”

“Teach Yoko enough to at least be able to identify what she did so we could figure out a way for her to reverse it—”

“How do you suppose to teach her? She does not respond to my methods.”

“She’s a poli-sci student. Give her some books. Those should be enough for her to learn.”

“We’d have to go to the palace for that. It was the only place safe enough to house my collection.”

“Then let’s go.”

“If we go now, some of the others will think we’re up to something. We have to wait for the proper opportunity!”

Ikki and Jinora had arranged all of the family portraits of the Fire Lords from a guy called Azran to Ozai in a line against the platform of the dais in the throne room of the vacation house.

“But where is the portrait of Lord Zuko and Fire Lady Mai and you, Aunt Zumi!” Ikki implored, propping up the last of the official paintings propped against the base of the dais.
“There must be one somewhere! I remember sitting for several!” Izumi replied in the unrecognizably cheerful tone that she used with young children. “It was dreadful!”

“Might there be a secondary location for the portraits?” Takeo prompted.

“Like the palace archives?” Izumi guessed, making a face, trying to remember the fates of those family portraits.

“Or the locked rooms in the North Wing!” Huifan remembered.

“The old resident quarters! Mother and Father’s room was there!” Izumi remembered. “Maybe I can get in!”

“Should someone go with you, Mother?” Takeo called as Izumi bolted for the hall.

“I’ll be quick!” Izumi promised, running.

She returned within a few minutes with a stack of framed and unframed paintings, photos, and photo albums piled high in her arms.

“Allow me!” Iroh insisted, taking some from her arms and setting them on the floor for the rest of the family to inspect.

“Maybe it is among these,” Izumi announced, offering Ikki the stack of framed portraits.

“Found it!” Ikki exclaimed, examining the portrait of Fire Lord Zuko and his family while Takeo and Izumi opened up some photo albums. “Aunt Zumi, did you have a brother?”

“None that lived past infancy, why?” Izumi asked, turning to see at what Ikki was looking. Her face fell, eyes wide, mouth still. “It’s-- Saru,” Izumi breathed, seeing an eight year old Masaru staring back at her from inside the portrait. Between her and him, a one year old Eiko also posed for the photo.

“He sat in for the royal family portrait?” Iroh asked.

She had almost forgotten. She stared at the photograph, remembering his gleeful laughs, his infectious energy and adventurous personality. He taught her what it meant to silently rebel even when explicit fighting proved too futile. He taught her what it meant to breathe. He taught her how to feel the sun on her skin and the grass beneath her feet. He taught her about equality. He taught her that she wasn’t just a figure or asset. She was a princess, yes, but not a slave to the state, not if she didn’t want to be.

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“I like it,” Mai commented, admiring the placement of the wallhanging.

“It’s a score!” Masaru cheered, throwing both fists in the air while Izumi laughed.

“I am glad you liked it My Lady!” the painter bowed then continued folding up his easel.

“Fire Lord Zuko, are you pleased with it?” Mai asked, turning to her husband and away from the new family portrait only for a moment.

“As long as the scar is on the correct side, and you are happy, then I am happy,” Zuko responded, kissing her.
“And they’re happy,” Mai added, looking down at the two children playing on the floor with the young dragon twisting around their limbs, leaping between the two.

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“And it was hung… immediately after it was done….” Izumi said aloud with her eyes focused on some nondescript point in space in the room, her brows furrowed slightly, and lips pursed, as if mantally drifting to some other place in the world.

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“Your family’s vacation home?” Hisoki asked, ascending the steps ahead of her while she carried an infant Iroh.

“Yes. We’ve had it for generations. It is a nice retreat, away from the stifling court,” Izumi replied, taking a break on the deck to admire the view of the trees, beaches, and crashing water surrounding the home.

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” Hisoki commented from inside.

“I don’t. Not one that made it past infancy. What made you think--” Izumi turned and saw him by the photo, fear gripping her being.

“Then who is this?” he asked, his gaze narrowing.

“Just a friend,” Izumi insisted, rushing over to protect the photograph if necessary, the memory.

“Just a friend… in an official royal portrait?”

“Hisoki, please, Father allowed it so just let it go.”

“He will NEVER be family--” Hisoki insisted.

“He always has and always will be! Family is not defined solely by blood or marriage--”

“It will be in our dynasty,” Hisoki replied firmly, taking a heavy step towards her.

Izumi stood her ground. “You do not have the authority to make that decision for us both.”

“Until you’re Fire Lord, I do,” he replied, taking her neck in his hand, not minding their sleeping son in between them. You will get rid of this portrait before I burn it. We’ll have a new one commissioned. One of us. And you will not forget to smile this time.”

She seethed.

“You said so yourself, how important it was to make the best of our circumstances. Trust me, I dislike this just as much as you,” he said, tilting her chin up and kissing her forehead, before leaving to explore other parts of the house.

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“Aunt Zumi?” Jinora asked, waving her arm in front of Izumi who sat, with her eyes closed, teeth clenched, brows knit, and mouth curled into a pained frown, grimacing. She looked up to find everyone staring at her. Rikuto, Ursa, Xiaoyu, Hungjian, Jinora, Jinkun, and the Krew had joined them.
“I’m fine,” Izumi insisted, turning to the row of family portraits including hers with her parents, Masaru and Eiko. She looked up to find the wall blank.

“Maybe we could have a portrait session!” Rikuto suggested. “I remember seeing Sunako paint with waterbending once. It is much faster than traditional painting!”

_How could you see me paint? I believe we’ve only met probably a dozen times and all were in a formal setting_, Sunako wrote in the air before her parchment with the glob of ink she always kept hovering by her head.

“Vines,” Rikuto replied, smirking.

“You can do that thing that Toph does too?” Korra asked.

“YEP! She IS my grandmother and taught me everything she knows…. I think,” Rikuto responded proudly.

“Not likely, kid,” Lin replied, punching him in the shoulder.

“If we want to be even faster, we could take a photograph! Asami brought a camera and Mako and Bo found a print shop in town yesterday. If we want the image big, we can take it there!” Korra suggested.

“I appreciate the offer, but Yoko hasn’t consented to being publicly acknowledged as ours, and taking a family photo of us to a print shop would risk exposure,” Izumi replied, folding her arm over her body, holding her left side. “And I don’t feel like ordering another censorship.”

“We could also have the photograph developed on the Earthen Fire Airship. It never has to leave the possession of family,” Masaru added.

“Anyways, what do you think, Ma? New family photo?” Rikuto asked. “Fire Lord Keyo, care to make this a royal order, else we’ll be here all day, waiting.”

“Mother, Please?” Takeo asked.

Okay. In which case, Shall I go get Tetsu and Yoko?” Izumi asked, standing wearily.

“I can!” Ikki exclaimed, sprinting off.

“Very energetic one you have there,” Izumi commented to Lin.

“She’s just very excited to have such a big family now,” Lin explained, bouncing Rohan on her knee.

“It is probably just a consequence of spending so long as a member of a critically endangered species,” Jinora mused.
“Right you are, Son,” Masaru said, squeezing Sasuke’s shoulder as he passed. On Masaru’s side, Iroh, Ursa, Takeo, Rikuto, and Tatsuya, and on Izumi’s side, Sasuke, Tetsuya, and Miyoko.

“Is it just me or are they organized from fun to boring?” Bolin asked.

Izumi leaned forward and looked down the line.

“You’re not wrong, Nuktuk,” Tatsuya commented, flipping his ponytail over his shoulder. “By definition, theoretical intellectuals are dreadfully boring!”

“Hey!”

“Not true!”

“We can be fun!... when necessary,” Tetsuya claimed, bending down to find a pebble on the wooden floor tracked in by one of the earthbenders to flick across the way at his twin.

“Little shi--” Tatsuya yelled, lunging.

“HEY!” Masaru yelled as both he and Izumi stepped back, between them. Tetsuya remained cool and smirking while Tatsu seemed enraged.

“Tsuya, you know your brother’s easily provoked,” Izumi frowned.

“Yes, and that’s what makes things fun,” Tetsuya replied. Flipping his long, gently cascading hair over his shoulder as he posed.

Izumi smiled and shook her head.

“Do we all fit in the frame, Asami?” Masaru asked.

“Just a second,” Asami adjusted the camera while Sunako straightened the canvass on the easel.

And the Royal Fire Family posed: the Fire Lord, six of his brothers, his two sisters, and parents, all in their casual beach clothes.

Izumi looked into the camera and smiled her one hand on the chair where Yoko sat and the other around Masaru’s back with his arm around her waist.

Don’t forget to smile this time, a voice inside her head whispered eerily as the photographer pressed down on the shutter.

And an invisible hand clutched her waist, digging its nails into her side just below her rib cage, to remind her… to remember to...

CLICK!

I know you forgot to smile this time...

“I DON’T CARE, LET GO!” she screamed, shrill as she pushed Masaru and bumped into Sasuke. “You can’t make me! Just can’t--” She bolted for the side door only to find it locked. She slammed both forearms against it in frustration as she slid to the ground, tormented by something no one could see but her.
“Zumi?” Masaru walked towards her as she started sobbing.

“You cannot make me!” she cried in an unfamiliar, almost feral tone as she clutched her knees and hid her face from everybody.

“Zumiya, it’s just me... I’m not making you do anything,” Masaru explained. “You don’t have to take the photo if you don’t want to.”

Huifan, Jiexue, and Ursa stepped towards Izumi and Masaru. Ikki and Jinora both grabbed onto Lin, Meelo ran to Tenzin. Miyoko and the rest of her siblings remained where they were, watching with mixtures of confusion and concern etched on their faces. Still, Izumi wouldn’t look up from where she cowered in fetal position, crying.

Get back here, this instant!

She shook her head in refusal

“Zumi--” Masaru knelt in front of her, trying to see her face.

Zumi... this is your last chance- he said, snaking an arm around her waist.

“Let go--” she croaked “LET GO!” She dug her hand into her own side and burned right through her robes, her mind betraying her body as it burnt through its own flesh and she pried his invisible grip from her body.

“Zumi stop! You’re hurting yourself!” Masaru reached for her but she moved away her hand still in her own side as it melted through, nearing her ribs, lungs, and heart.

“Sunako, Kya! Can either of you—“ Masaru cried in a full panic.

With a gaze, Sunako bloodbent the lady, moving both arms away from the firebender’s body, lifting them up and back them back, keeping them as far from the wound as possible. The room fell silent save for the silent fight Izumi made against the bloodbending. Her breathing quickened as she struggled. Sunako lifted her former master’s head so that it faced Masaru. She closed her eyes in the despair of defeat when she found she could not escape the grip of the bloodbender.

“Zumiya?” Masaru asked, watching the love of his life hurting, trapped in the terrifying confines of her own mind.

“Zumiya, I’m sorry, my love but I know no other way,” Masaru whispered, kissing her head as a tear slipped down her cheek and blood dripped down her side. He slid his hand behind her neck as Sunako held her still, and administered a an extremely high voltage shock to force some sort of reset in her. In spite of the distance, Sunako could feel Masaru’s energy. Surprised, she lost her hold on Izumi. Izumi thrashed in silent agony, writhing as though being stabbed by a thousand flaming red daggers all over her body, smearing blood over the floor as the family watched, helplessly. Finally, Masaru lifted his hand and stepped back.

Izumi curled up like a flower left to dry in the sun, centered in a pool of blood, gifting any onlookers with a view of charred ribs and exposed lungs. For a moment, it seemed the world stood still. Sunako, Masaru, and Kya all stepped forward to see if Izumi had returned from the haunting back alley her own memories. Enraptured by the woman’s distant gaze, nobody noticed Izumi’s right hand sneak back, and successfully manage another gruesome tear at the open wound. Several people screamed while Sunako jumped forward, outstretching her nubs for a stronger and more controlled attempt at bloodbending. The smell of her own flesh burning stung the Fire Nation Lady’s glassy eyes. “Saru,” she croaked faintly as the gap between her and her world closed. “It
hurts--”

“I’m here,” Masaru bent down beside her, his own hands shaking with fear as Kya rushed to heal the gaping wound.

“She’s moving too much! Even breathing is tearing at the skin--” Kya called to Sunako. Sunako tightened her grip on the Izumi’s blood, slowing even her lungs eliciting a whimper from the lady.

“Zumiya, what happened?” Masaru asked, bending down to face her.

She closed her eyes. “It’s hard to explain… and… There are too many people here,” she claimed.

“Then whisper,” Masaru replied, leaning closer, clutching her bloodied hand.

“Someone’s been in my head. I can feel it creeping in...As if the bridges I’ve burned have been rebuilt again.” Izumi hissed as Kya cut away the melted flesh around the wound.

Wing and Wei were clutching each other for support, Opal squeezed Bolin’s arm, and Huan lowered his gaze. Against the far wall, Kuvira’s face fell as she watched the former Fire Lord’s mind break, succumbing to a lifetime of agony.

Sunako lifted Izumi to her knees, so her ears were away from the floor, stretching her arms back, holding every muscle still. Total control was much easier to maintain than only holding parts of another’s body.

“Can we help in any way?” Ursa asked Sunako.

“Sunako, at least let her speak, please,” Masaru asked.

Sunako relented and loosened her grip on just the jaw and parts of the larynx.

“If I could just have—total silence and-- isolation,” Izumi breathed. “Please.”

Masaru reached to lift his wife only to find her body rigid. “Sunako, please,” He asked. Sunako allowed the limbs to fall limp while staying any muscular contractions so that Masaru could carry Izumi to her room comfortably with Kya and Sunako following.

“What did we just witness?” Korra asked, breaking the silence.

“Trauma overtaking all of her senses,” Tetsuya answered.

“I don’t understand, Fire Lord Izumi has always seemed so-- I don’t know, level-- She’s never even seen war-- What could possibly have led to such-- trauma--”

“Not all wars are fought on a battlefront, Avatar,” Miyoko reminded the young Avatar.

“Miyoko,” Lin called, warningly.

“If you think three attempts on your life between the ages of 17 and twenty are terrifying, try surviving 65 assassination attempts before reaching the age of twenty, then marrying a sadistic, social climbing asshole disguised as a gentlemen in fancy silk robes. Imaging being treated as a mare for breeding for a good three years, suffering a miscarriage, and then being accused of killing your own child by engaging in ‘overstrenuous’ activity. Imagine being abandoned by your own husband in the wake of it all.

“Imagine going on a hunt to find the man that subjected you to daily rape, to avenge your ravaged
childhood, nearly get sold into sex slavery, and escaping, passing out and waking with blue hair in
the healing hut of some sandbending loonies who think you are an angered Spirit!”

“Imagine spending a year fighting to find out what you are—if you have any woman left in you or
have been reduced to a monster. Imagine coming home to find that the Sages still expect you to
produce a spare heir for the throne then having to hide that child and those that followed. Imagine
the consequences of the public finding out about such a lie you’ve hid for the majority of your life,
and immediately calling for all of their heads on spears. Imagine your first husband returning after
12 years, hell bent on exterminating your family and putting an end to a dynasty, and surviving.
Imagine all that with every citizen of your nation watching.” Tetsuya stepped back and down. His
mother’s secrets out before family.

Miyoko leaned back, folding her legs. “So you read her diaries too?”

Tetsuya shrugged. “I had to know the vulnerabilities of the woman I was trying to usurp.”

“This still doesn’t make any sense. After all that, why didn’t something like this happen sooner?”
Ursa asked. “This— breakdown.”

“I can’t be sure,” Tetsuya responded.

Sasuke eyed him suspiciously. “We have our theories but they cannot be confirmed unless we
return to the palace to fetch some— records.” He turned to their elder brother, Takeo, the new Fire
Lord and dropped to his knees, bowing. “Brother with your permission, may Tsuya, Yoko and I
travel to the palace to retrieve the records we’ve kept. Perhaps we could figure out a way to help
Mother.”

“If you have information that could help her, by all means, go—” Takeo answered, waving his
hand like a Beifong.

“Wait!” Korra interjected. “Sorry for interrupting but do you really think it’s a good idea to let
them just waltz right into your Palace in search of information?”

“They’re my siblings. I’d trust them with my life!” Takeo insisted.

“But do you trust them with your country?” Korra asked. “Forgive me but as the Avatar, I have to
look out for all of the people in the world and I just don’t think it’s wise to allow—a convicted
traitor, the nation’s greatest and arguably most well known dissident, and a lawyer into your palace
unaccompanied. They could be plotting to unseat you.”

“I respect your— devotion to the people of this world, Avatar Korra, but as the Fire Lord, I must
remind you that you have no authority here,” Takeo explained, striding towards Korra, with an
unfamiliar air of contempt about him. “Even when serving in your official capacity as Avatar, you
are a mediator between the world leaders, or the world leaders and their subjects. At most, your job
is to advise, but in the end, you are nothing here.”

Korra looked up at him, shocked with good reason. She thought Takeo was one of the fun ones.
She didn’t expect this seriousness from him and in all respects, didn’t like it.

After a terse moment of silence, Korra barked, “Disregard my power and you’re no better than Fire
Lord Ozai!”

Takeo didn’t even flinch. He was like his mother in that, difficult to intimidate when at full
capacity. “Suke, Tsuya and Yoko will go to the palace and Hiryur will see that they have all they
need for their research. If you would like them accompanied, you may allow one of your friends to
join them, but only one that is of Fire Nation descent. Surely you must understand my caution. A Water Tribe woman as bull headed as yourself wouldn’t do well at our courts especially in this age. After hearing you questioned the new Fire Lord thrice in the span of five minutes, they might think you are trying to make a claim to our throne.”

“Fine, Mako!” Korra turned. “Will you please go with them?”

“I guess.”


“Does this mean there will be no new portrait of the Royal Family?” Ikki asked Lin sadly.

Lin leaned over to see Sunako’s canvas. “Not today, I’m afraid.”

“Zumi,” Masaru called, closing the door behind him as Sunako laid his wife down on their bed and Kya kept healing, pulling away the singed flesh piece by piece, exposing more ribs, more of her lungs, and a bit of her heart for anyone to see.

“I’m sorry,” Izumi cried. “I should have told you sooner.”

“Told me what?”

“I tried! I tried to close it off-- to reduce the risk of SHIT like this from happening!”

“Close things off?” Kya asked.

“Memories--” Masaru realized.

Izumi swallowed. “When they took Ursa, I lost myself completely. So, Aunt Azula took me to the North Pole and taught me how to use dark lightning to suppress critical memories in the prisoners there. We thought that without recollection of their old networks, they could be released and not return to a life of crime, and that it would save the state millions of yuans in maintenance expenses for the prisons…”

“Yes,” Masaru, said sitting beside her.

“The event shook me, more than it should have. I can hear the screams of the inmates as Azula tortured them to motivate me to learn faster. Played me like an erhu. We soon realized that the lightning could be used on more than just the prisoners. It was the only way they-- Mother and Aunt Azula-- saw to save me, to keep me from becoming Sozin or Ozai and killing all of my opponents, or killing myself to escape the pain and fear. They saw my fury, proposed a solution, and I agreed… I knew the pain within would become too much--too heavy eventually. I was breaking… and so we had Azula try it on me. She tried to suppress some of the more troublesome memories. They were faded. So I could get through a day without being triggered by something as mundane as a teapot boiling or a door closing. Even the creak of a floorboard could send me into this state before she--.”

“How can I help? You taught me how to let out my inner fire. Tell me how to make you right--”

Izumi shook her head. “Aunt Azula and I designed defenses in case Hisoki returned from the dead, or Kage and tried to exploit my weaknesses. The defenses were designed against all men--”
“So not even Tsuya could fix things if he had his bending?”

“I don’t know. His knowledge is more extensive than mine was when we made it. He-- he might be able to find a way to bypass the defenses given my head and some time… but he would need his bending to do so and I could not tell you where I severed his chi-pathways for you to restore. Even with this dreadfully expansive access to my memories. I lost too much attentiveness to my fury that day,” Izumi explained.

“So what can we do?”

“End it, Saru.” Izumi asked.

“What?”

“Stop the pain—have mercy on me Saru! I cannot live like this And you know it!” Izumi yelled, breaking Sunako’s hold on her to grab Masaru by the collar of his shirt.

“We’re not going to kill you!” he yelled, tearing her hands off of him and throwing her into the bed, extending his left hand shocking her with lightning to dull her reflexes long enough for Sunako to regain her bloodbending grip on the Lady.

Izumi screamed and thrashed, fighting the invisible bindings that held her hands and feet down so far.

“You’ve sent her into another panic attack with that shock; thanks for that!” Kya scolded sarcastically.

“She would have killed me before I could even think about killing her—”

Well it’s done. Don’t do it again, My Lord. For her, it’s too reminiscent of Hisoki. According to Iliana’s accounts, it was his favorite method of discipline—the dark lightning. You don’t want to become like him to her! Sunako wrote on her floating parchment.

Izumi gasped for air as Sunako had her completely stilled. “Have mercy on me, DAMMIT! End me, please!”

“NO! You don’t get to make a decision in this state!” Masaru yelled at her, coming closer, tears streaming down his face.

“Saru, please—”

“No, because last time you were like this, your decision made you into a ticking time bomb for self-destruction! Remember the children we made. The world we created from the ashes of your ancestors. You can’t make the great escape!”

Izumi sighed. “But what use am I to our children, or to our world for that matter, if I cannot walk down a hallway without falling at the sound of literally anything?”

“Still more use than if you were six feet under, Zumi--”

“I’m just a burden now--”

“You’re not! Zumi, we’ll get through this,” Kya insisted as she worked the glowing water around and in the wound of the skeptic. “Just hold on!”
Izumi turned away from Masaru, feeling nothing but betrayal as Kya cleaned up the wound.

_You should leave, My Lord Lee. Your presence now may only make things worse. Get help, from the palace. Iliana has experience with Izumi when she is like this. And hurry._ Sunako suggested.

Masaru looked down at her distant glare and devastating sadness before fleeing for the capital.

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“There must be a way we can help her!” Ursa asked her siblings hopefully.

“Yes! Distract her from the darkness with your vibrant youth and beauty!” Rikuto replied, flashing his signature grin.

Ursa frowned at him and turned to Sasuke passing through with Tetsuya, Miyoko, and Mako. “Suke, what do you think?”

“They say time heals all wounds... memories fade... are replaced... but only on an ordinary person’s mind. For someone with such a natural penchant for dark lighting, it’s hard to forget since they can activate even the most dormant parts of their own head subconsciously,” Sasuke explained. “At this point, either Tetsu gets his bending back some how, or Masaru may have to experiment with her until they can find a way to sever the flow of the past to the present. But like building a dam in the largest river, such a task will be hard.”

“How do you know about all this even though your not a bender and never were?” Jiexue asked the lawyer son of Masaru and Izumi.

Tetsuya looked down at his feet.

“I used to work closely with Tsuya and the others, back-- back when we wanted the same thing for our nation,” Sasuke confessed.

“Excuse the interruption, Huifan and---” Kya looked around. “Kuvira, could I get your help with something?”

“Certainly!” Huifan said, walking forward.

“Sure,” Kuvira replied quietly. The group had almost forgotten her while she lurked in the shadows, observing.

“Wait! Why do you need them?” Suyin asked, stepping in front of Kuvira, blocking her way.

“Huifan is a bloodbender and I could use Sunako’s help healing.”

“And Kuvira--”

“There isn’t enough flesh left to sew the wound closed so we need Kuvira to bend a metal mesh to cover the wound and give the dermis a frame to grow into. We’re too far from any hospital to get access to a skin graft and even then, I doubt dear Zumi would be comfortable risking the publicity,” Kya explained. “Kuvira, please…”

Kuvira walked around Suyin and followed the elder waterbender to Izumi’s room.
Huifan took over for Sunako and kept Izumi’s hands away from her torso with bloodbending while Sunako showed Kuvira how to weave the metal mesh then oversaw its installation while Kya paced by the window, waiting for Masaru’s return.

“Finally,” Kya said, seeing an airship come into view over the horizon.

“Who did you call?” Izumi asked, laying on the bed, tired from fighting.

“An old friend,” Kya responded, leaving to receive help.

“Zumiya,” Iliana’s voice whispered when she arrived.

“No!” Izumi yelled at Saru when she saw what Iliana was carrying. She broke through Huifan’s grip on her. Her hair turned blue and her tears evaporated off her high cheeks. “You promised!” She snarled turning to Masaru. “You promised the night you burned those wretched things off of me, that it would be the last time I would EVER have to wear one of those things! You PROMISED!” she shrieked before running away from him and Iliana and into a corner of her room.

“Zumi!” Iliana called, approaching her slowly, hands held up.

“Don’t make me do it again, please!” Izumi sobbed, unrecognizably weak in her final plea.

Huifan moved to try to bloodbend her aunt again, but Sunako blocked her. She’s still here, and hasn’t reached for the wound. Just let her be… Sunako suggested. So they waited.

“Zumiya, please. It is for your own good. You have to heal. I promise we won’t make it tight. Just enough to set your ribs and hold the meshing in place while you heal. Don’t think of it as a corset but a bandage. It’s only temporary. I promise it won’t hurt! Not anymore than you’re already hurting. Zumiya, please. You need it to heal,” Iliana explained, bending down before the terrified lady hyperventilating in the corner.

“Iliana please-- don’t make me… not again... “ Izumi cried, shaking her head.

“I’m sorry, sweet girl, but when you revealed your inner fire, abdicated, and appointed your bastard child as your successor, I made a vow to also fuck tradition and serve your best interests regardless of the orders I received from my superiors-- to protect you from the sages, and your family. I am sorry, but I have to do this no matter what you say… to protect you… from yourself this time, my Lady. You know I would never intentionally hurt you,” Iliana explained offering a hand to Izumi.

Izumi’s face fell in defeat. As scared as she was, she remained a woman of reason and knew she had to comply, for her own safety. She took the hand and let Iliana help her to stand.

“Face the wall; you know how this goes,” Iliana said, wrapping the corset around Izumi’s bare middle.

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Izumi stood against the post, looking down at the peaceful face of one of her new baby boys. One lay here, before her, and the other, in her mother’s arms across the room. Twins! Both matching in all of their strength and beauty even at the young age of three months. She had to be strong to be allowed to see them again at the end of the day.

The Sages found out about these ones, early and urged her to terminate the pregnancy to ‘save face’ for the Royal Family. She’d never heard of such a thing being possible before the twins.
She burned them that day in her office for their audacity and bought herself a lecture from her father and a few months of silence and peace. It was a small victory for the Crown Princess of the Fire Nation.

They reminded her of her Father’s unsteady position, and the difficulties she’d have appeasing the wealthy, more conservative population of their country. “How could they trust you after finding out you were a whore who left so many bastards lying around, Princess?”

Her body, her choice, but still, as with every great thing, it came with a price. She had to hide them, just like her other sons by Masaru. She had to hide them, and all evidence of what she’d done, including any changes to her body.

“She done had twins, My Lady! Twins! Her hips aren’t going to come back down to thirty-five inches, nor her waist to 19. It can’t be done!” Iliana exclaimed, tying off. Izumi stood, breathing slowly trying to adjust to the compression, looking to her baby boy for strength. Tatsuya, the little dragon came first, breathing fire in his fury as soon as he emerged wailing. Mai stood off to the side, swaying Tetsuya in her arms. The younger’s eyes were wide open, observing the blurry world around him, and listening to everything while his twin slept on the edge of the bed.

“Because no one is supposed to know, we must still try the best we can,” Mai replied. Izumi closed her eyes. There was already so much pain. She couldn’t imagine it tighter. Mai went to the door.

“Shen, call Kei Lo please,” Mai asked.

Her mom’s best friend was allowed in the room.

“We need your help, to close it, so no one knows what we’ve done,” Mai explained.

Kei Lo looked at the twins and then to Izumi, who was visibly pained beyond comprehension.

“I’m sorry, Princess,” he said, walking towards her.

“No, I know, it’s for the Fire Nation. I cannot mess up or our family will be deposed,” she replied, putting her hands back on the post. He started at the bottom and pulled slowly closing the device completely Izumi tried to be strong but quickly succumbed to the tears. Iliana took Tatsuya off the bed just in case Flames came as Kei Lo moved higher up the corset until finally it was done. He tied off and rubbed the princess’s back and took her into his arms in an embrace.

“Why couldn’t I be born a man?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, sweet girl,” he replied, holding her for a moment before leaving to let her finish getting dressed.

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Iliana laced it slowly with Masaru and Kya each holding an arm while Kuvira, Sunako, and Huifan stepped back and watched.

“It’s okay, Deary,” Iliana cooed while she wrapped the platinum mesh corset around Izumi’s’s body. “You’re okay, it will be fast, painless, I promise, Sweet thing,”

“Sunako or Huifan, can you slow her breathing?” Kya asked, watching the mesh pull on the flesh in Izumi’s panic.

Iliana laced it snug, just enough to keep the torso from twisting or stretching before tying off.
“See? All done! You’re okay, Sweetie! Zumi! Look at me, slow down, Little one!” Iliana asked, turning Izumi around as Masaru and Kya released her hands.

Izumi looked down in despair but Iliana lifted her chin again. “Look at me. Take a deep breath, slowly! Count to ten, and then release… was that so hard? See! You’re okay, Love! You’re okay!” Iliana said, stroking her face as if she were a child again.

Izumi held onto Iliana as if the old maid could bury her in the flesh of her bosom and make her disappear from the world.

Masaru reached out to rub her back as she calmed down, realizing she could breathe just fine. Masaru glanced at Iliana who nodded.

“We love you, Izumi,” he said, kissing the side of her head before pressing on the pressure point at the back of her neck, knocking her unconscious instantly. Iliana caught her and lifted her onto the bed that had been redressed with clean linens.

“She will wake eventually, but when she does, we best be ready for whatever she tries to do to herself,” Iliana suggested as Genkei entered the room with chains slung over his arms. “Huifan, could you bend some rock around her hands, so she can’t scratch?”

“Yes,” Huifan molded massive rock clubs around her aunt’s hands while Iliana handed a pair of cuffs to Kya for Izumi’s wrists.

Sunako lifted Izumi while Iliana locked a massive ring around the woman’s waist and then secured it to the head board by two chains.

Kuvira found herself rubbing her own aching wrists as she watched Iliana and Kya secure the last of the chains that held Izumi to the four posts of the bed. “Don’t you think it’s a little inhumane to just— chain her like that?”

“It’s for her own good,” Huifan claimed, feigning certainty. “Aunt Zumi’s a woman of reason. She will understand when she wakes— or so Aunt Kya says.”

“There! There is enough slack to lay and sit, but not enough to thrash or hit herself!” Iliana exclaimed, victoriously cracking her own back with her hands on her hips while both Sunako and Kya waterbent the blood off of their hands. Masaru sat on one side of the bed running his thumb over Izumi’s brow while she dozed, breating lightly.

“We should let her rest. Kya, is there anything left that needs to be done?” Iliana asked the healer.

“Nothing that I can think of. Why don’t we just get cleaned up? She should be out for a while,” Kya replied.

Everyone rose and shuffled past Kuvira and Huifan who lingered for a few moments.

“She’ll be okay, eventually,” Masaru insisted, placing a hand on their shoulders, leading them out of the room with everybody.

“How can you be sure?”

“I’m her husband. I know her.”
“Is she okay?” Ursa asked, jumping to her feet when Masaru, Huifan, and Kuvira returned to the throne room of the vacation house. Huifan didn’t respond, running straight to her mother’s arms before bursting into tears. They turned to Kuvira who stood frozen, petrified by the sudden attention.

“Are you okay?” Takeo asked her, blocking her view of everybody, and everybody’s view of her. He looked down at her shaking hands. “Why don’t we take a walk?” He suggested, offering his arm. She refused to take it but stepped beside him nonetheless and they went. “I would like to apologize. You shouldn’t have had to deal with all of our family’s— problems like that. Kya and Father should have asked Tadashi for his metalbending services, but I suppose your precision bending is superior, and apparently he was sent with the envoy to retrieve Iliana.”

“I thought we were all one family now, with a duty to each other…” Kuvira said softly.

Takeo stopped walking. “You’re completely right!” He confirmed with his hands clasped behind his back. “Forgive me for misspeaking. Thank you so much for helping her. Now, I wanted to ask, is there anything we can do for you? I know it is not the same hurt but… several of us can see you’re hurting too.”

“It’s—nothing compared to—” Kuvira mimed, clawing at her left side.

Takeo sighed.

“Has she done that before?”

“I had never seen it happen, but… she had scars there for as long as I could remember. She told us Azula grazed her with lightning in a spar and we believed it. Looking back that was impossible. Lightning would have made one large gash, not five small narrow ones.”

Kuvira looked up at the ocean as they reached the cliffs where she sat so often with Taemon in silence before they left.

“How can someone so strong, just—break so easily?” She asked, biting back tears.

“I assure you, Kuvira, my mother did not break easily. What you saw was the result of decades of abuse. Not unlike, I think…” Takeo said, stepping forward cautiously, watching her. “… what you have gone through, Great Uniter.”

She turned to him. There was no sarcasm in his eyes. She looked down at the ground, her eyes refusing to meet his.

Takeo reached out a hand hesitantly, he’d heard about the incident with Baatar and didn’t want to worsen things. He’d seen what trauma could do to a woman in his mother and didn’t want to contribute more pain. But he also knew, physical contact could help lessen the grief, especially in a touch-deprived orphan. He made the presence of his hand known, made sure she saw it before he set it lightly on her shoulder. “She’ll be okay,” he promised. “And so will you, eventually.” He removed his hand. “Why don’t we get back to the house. Sasuke has a special blend of teas stashed in his personal collection that always helps the fear go away.”

Kuvira sighed and resigned, following.
Once in the Palace, Tetsuya lead the way to his office with long silent strides. He held all the grace and beauty a king should, or rather more fitting, a Fire Lord. If it weren’t for his treasonous acts and crimes against humanity, he could have very well been a contender for Izumi’s successor. He was a member of the mysterious and elite Amber League whose members were famed for their endurance and stamina, each member rumored to be able to defeat at minimum several hundred opponents single-handedly before falling. At first, Mako thought the Amber League belonged to the Fire Nation, but since his vacation, he learned they were in reality, a private, not-so-secret secret army controlled entirely by Masaru and Izumi.

While Mako struggled to keep up with Tetsuya, Sasuke and Miyoko easily kept in time, their steps, nearly completely synchronized with their brother’s. They were allowed to enter the palace without issue, as tourists were now to some parts of it, but other areas had higher security such as the state offices and alchemy labs.

Their first obstacle was a palace captain of the guard of the East Wing’s regiment and two imperial firebending officers. “We will need to see your access papers.”

“Which are?” Mako asked lacking certainty, earning himself a glare from the fire siblings and a raised brow from the captain.

The captain sneered, “If you were authorized to be here, you would know what those are.”

Sasuke stepped forward. “This should be sufficient for the current purposes.” He offered the captain a letter bearing Takeo’s seal of approval.

“But the Fire Lord is on vacation! How did you get this??”

“Yes, the Fire Lord is on vacation, but he is not a fool who leaves his post without the proper stationery to issue royal orders in the event we reach a state of emergency,” Sasuke retorted.

“I would think in the event of a state of emergency, the Fire Lord would alert the staff no?”

“Perhaps he doesn’t yet believe all of his staff are trustworthy enough to be made aware of the current status of all things. We are only a month into his reign, are we not? Nevertheless, I’m sure he will be glad to hear you are questioning his orders. What is your name again, Captain?”

“I--” the captain stammered as he skimmed the document. “Forgive me, Master Lee.”

“I am Mister Lee. Master is my father. You make me feel old, Captain, not honored,” Sasuke clarified as he walked past the Captain and the Imperial Firebenders.

“I didn’t know our quiet, non-bending lawyer of a brother had such a fire in him,” Miyoko noted, impressed.

“I worked nearly a decade under Taemon and Tsuya. In that time, you learn how to make threats and get your targets to keep quiet,” Sasuke explained.

“Did the letter actually come from Takeo?” Mako asked warily.

“Yes, it did. He wrote several for us, just in case we ran into multiple obstacles. Landing our war balloon on the roof of the palace eliminated three of those.” Sasuke answered.

“And how many do you think are left?”
“Just one,” Tetsuya responded, rounding a corner coming face to face with the guard of the alchemy labs who was flanked by two Imperial Firebenders each holding the reins of two bearhounds.

“Sir,” Sasuke brandished another letter.

The guard waved for the hounds and the benders to part for them to pass through, but blocked the passageway again when it came Mako’s turn to walk.

“There must be a mistake!”

“His Lordship, Takeo only granted them entrance to the Alchemy Labs. What makes you think you could follow?”

“The Avatar asked me to-- to protect you in case they tried to stage a coup or something--” Mako exclaimed, receiving another trio of glares from the fire siblings.

“The Fire Lord trusts them with this and therefore we must. If take issue with his judgement--

“No-- that's not what I-- It's just that I've been, you know, with them and.....”

“The Traitor is slated to suffer and serve until he drops dead from exhaustion or disease. The Dissident is a harmless girl whose words fall on the empty ears of young students gawking at her torso. The Lawyer is a good, loyal soul who helped the nation steal valuable assets from executioner's longsword. He will be responsible for the others. And you, you will stay here, Chief Mako of Republic City’s Police.”

“Am I really so harmless?” Miyoko asked, slightly taken aback as they walked to Tetsuya’s office.

“If it is any solace, you’re just about as harmless as our dear Mother.” Tetsuya reassured her.

Sasuke looked down, amused. “Although instead of a bare torso, she flaunted a corseted one before the council.”

“Pfft, conservatives.”

“What is it with them and oppressing their women?”

“Maybe they’ve small dick syndrome.”

“Maybe.”

“Here it is,” Tetsuya announced, picking the lock of the door with his cuff pin. “What we are looking for will be deeper in.

They walked through a rather large lab space lined with shelves of bodily specimens of man and animal in clear jars of mysterious fluids, labeled beakers of water with different concentrations of various dissolved ions, and long disconnected burners and boilers beneath a plethora of flasks with tubes and valves connecting them.

“For separating the constituents of a poisonous liquid so that a more concentrated substance can be fabricated for--- assassins’ work,” Tetsuya said, tapping on one flask of one set up as they passed.
“Lovely,” Miyoko noted.

“Brother, if you don’t mind.” Tetsuya tossed aside a rug revealing a hidden door in the floor. He and Sasuke heaved it open and the three began a descent down a spiral staircase. “Yoko, if you don’t mind, a light?”

“You never had it wired with electricity?”

“Any master bender knows that lightning and electricity takes about sixteen times the energy to generate and control than a raw flame does, so we decided to use torches. Even after spending forty hours awake, pouring over old records and texts, we still had sufficient energy to protect the books from the flames. That will be your job today.” the Alchemist lifted a wick out of the nearest torch and put its tip into Yoko’s flame, setting alight a chain of torches that ran the perimeter of the cavernous room, down and around the spiraling book cases, between shelves, and illuminating the work space at the bottom of the secret hideout.

“Most of the books are on bending, herbology, alchemy, and spirits. The oldest records on dark lightning were from Kage Yamakatsu who wrote of the art as a means of external control of another’s muscular system not unlike bloodbending in its effects and outward appearance. The next collection of records were from Hisoki Ibonara who expanded on the use of dark lightning to temporarily paralyze the human body by cutting interrupting the conductivity along the motor neurons in certain places of the body. He also experimented with it as a means of torture, firing all the pain receptors in a body at once, or stilling their functionality while he beat his victims then let the bruising come in a wave. Pain alone was enough for him to kill dozens. The brains, overstimulated, either shut down, or drove their inhabitants to kill themselves in a futile attempt to escape. Mother didn’t know he’d done it when she incorporated full body torture into her endurance testing for the Amber league as surprising as it is. Discovered ways to be a sadist all on her own….

“The next records we have were from Azula. She first heard of it used on her dear niece on mother’s wedding night. In a moment of fury, marched into the capital’s prison and stole an inmate on death row for experimentation. She was the first to use dark lightning to painlessly paralyze parts or all of the body, map the entire nervous system and even detect when Mother was pregnant by feeling the secondary system developing in her womb.

“The most recent records we have that are not our own were from Mother. Aunt Azula taught her everything she knew, and then some. She was a sadistic genius who first envisioned memory alteration as a possible application for dark lightning but lacked the patience and compassion required to execute it. She drafted the first theory of marking and Taemon the second. I dabbled in it but my primary focus was on crossing over bending techniques.”

“How did you get your hands on her private notes?” asked Miyoko, recognizing her mother’s hand from when she broke into the Fire Lord’s office and read her private diaries.

“She gifted them to me after my internment… well… actually, she thought it might be more convenient for her purposes to consolidate all of the research on the subject matter that is in all ways a forbidden field of study here, in the Fire Nation.”

“Sounds great and all, but why did I have to come see it?”

“Because you are going to have to go back into Mother’s head and undo what you’ve done.”

“What are you talking about?!”
“Don’t play dumb, Yoko— We know you went in.”

“How could you—”

“It is not difficult to deduce, Dear Sister! Only a couple dozen people in the world ever achieved competency in dark lightning and of them, all except six were slaughtered in the purge.

“And two of those remaining six were robbed of their bending.”

Miyoko turned to them, guilt ridden. “Even if I did do it, you know I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“Whether or not you meant to do it is besides the point. You must be the one to undo it!”

“What about Father? Surely she’s let him in before, maybe he could at a time when they’re—intimate or— she’s vulnerable or SOMETHING?” she asked.

“He’s smart enough to steer clear of Mother’s head,” Sasuke muttered in response.

“We have to find someone else! Clearly I can’t be trusted if I caused all— that—”

“It’s called slippage—” Sasuke interjected.

“I doubt anyone else would be able to get combat Izumi’s mental defenses and close those synapses.”

“There must be somebody who can!” Miyoko exclaimed.

“Well nobody here! So here’s the plan. You’re going to read as much as you can on memory alteration while we create a composite map of what we know is in there and where. That way, you don’t get too scared by what you find in there,”

“What does that even mean?”

“Just— read.”

“‘What is the Theory of Marking?’ Miyoko asked turning to another page in one of her mother’s books.

“The idea that when you use dark lightning on another, that you are not just an observer watching something unfold. You feel what they feel, whatever you’re doing. You grab someone’s arm, and you feel a hand on yours. You feel their surprise, their fear and you will remember it, but also, you give your feeling-- your intention. It is a two-way connection in which both gain the other’s emotions as well as their own in the transfer of energy. It brinks your enemy closer than ever by bringing them into you. That’s why it takes a sadist with a loose screw to even attempt dark lightning.”

Miyoko kept reading. There were examples. One page documented controlling a hamsterbil, and all of the feelings associated with it. Then the practitioner controlled a larger animal, pig chicken, then an elephant seal, and finally a human prisoner in the Northern Tundra.

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I may have just uncovered the best interrogation technique known to man— or maybe just the most
Denkuo GAO: 56 years of age

Crimes: international opium smuggling, piracy, theft, murder and human trafficking.

He was a sea lord... or so Aunt Azula told me. A high ranking sailor that profited greatly not just from the sale of illegal goods, but the brothels hidden deep in the bowels of his ship. But he was a burden on the wardens. He did not cooperate with interrogators or respond to therapy. He had a plethora of medical ailments that by law, the state was required to treat. Why? So they would be compelled to speak, in theory. But he never broke. Aunt Azula convinced my father to let her have a go at him. She got him to reveal some of his sources and contacts, but Auntie knew there was more and that’s when they brought me in. She made me watch as she tortured him, and revelled in his pain. I wanted to leave, tried to, but Auntie stilled me with her bending. She was always stronger, no matter how much I practiced.

I could feel her determination coursing through my veins. Her ruthlessness was terrifying and in that moment I realized she hadn’t changed. She was still the deranged, disgraced princess that Uncle Sokka had told me during one of his ostentatious story-telling sessions. I feared my ears had begun to bleed from hearing his screams. If I had a merciful heart, Auntie told me, I’d make him forget the pains he experienced today. I’d package the trauma and tuck it away. Severing the connections between them and the rest of the brain. It seemed like a simple task, but meant I would first have to find the trauma center. That is different for everyone, and would require exploring.

It came in quick bursts, glimpses of this strange man’s childhood. He was an orphan from infancy, a beggar in the streets, and then a deckhand beginning at the age of thirteen. He grew up on the water fighting the bigger boys for what scraps the captain left for the servants to eat. At sixteen, he organized a mutiny, took that ship, conquered others, was tortured by other gangs, but had this fiery resilience, this inner flame so many of our strong nation contained. He could have been a good navy admiral, I thought as I searched for his more recent memories. I saw him shaking hands with other merchants and pirates, he was granting them protection in exchange for business. Those who refused, he sunk just out of harbor. He was good at that, sinking enemy ships.

Then I saw our men raiding his ship. He wasn’t afraid of them, merely annoyed. He roared and unleashed a barrage on our navy, sunk three of the five ships sent to intercept his. My father got him, in the Southern Water Tribe. And Uncle Sokka was there. They fought side by side. I remembered this expedition. I must have been only seven or eight. Mother told me it would be dangerous, but Father would make it out okay.

Then through Denkuo’s eyes, a blazing lightning flew from the top of his fingers and at my father’s back. I could feel his elation at the sight of the Fire Lord falling, so close to victory.

I fainted and woke with the prisoner’s hands around my neck. “I could have killed you while you were under, but where’s the fun in that? No, I want to hear you scream. I want your aunt to come running. She loves you, Princess. Wants you to be strong and brave, but you’re NOTHING, against me!”

He spat in my face and tightened his grip. I took his wrists and electrocuted him with all the energy I had left. I wanted to make him suffer. I pitied him for a moment, when Auntie made him hurt. But he deserved no pity, I decided to reduce him to a shell. Leave him with a half-existence. I decided not just to sever his trauma from his conscious brain, but his entire history. Every last memory I could get my hands on would become mine leaving him with nothing.

Aunt Azula knew it would happen and was ready. This time I sat in the prisoner’s chair in the
prison while she posed as the interrogator. And I could reveal everything. Every participating port, tax collector, corrupted customs agent, supplier, crew member... every person who made direct contact with this pirate or had any sort of deal with him. I could identify more than half of the whites he took from the earth kingdom and water tribes and all of the women he took as honored concubines from the Fire Nation.

The official report says I took his memory so that he could be released to the workhouses. But in reality, I took his memory to make him suffer as a half man, not fully realizing I would have to live with his history.

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Miyoko flipped through more entries. More high profile prisoners her mother wiped, and retained. Her writing became messier, more frantic, more panicked, as if afraid. Then suddenly, it was calm and collected again.

“Tsuya, did you ever find out why Azula’s entries stopped after after Ursa was sent to the Royal Academy?” Sasuke announced.

“She went missing for a while. I believe Grandfather’s diaries implied a spiritual quest was in order. She came back briefly but apparently had no interest anymore in writing, then went off again,” Tetsuya answered.

Then she remembered. “Azula! SHE CAN FIX MOTHER!”

“Azula has been missing for six years, since the night of Mother’s Coronation,” Tetsuya dismissed.

“She could be dead for all we know,” Sasuke added.

“No, we’d know if she were dead,” Miyoko insisted.

“How?”

“The theory of marking. We know Izumi and Azula experimented on each other... If I could feel myself becoming a fucking rabbit squirrel after bending its energy for only a few seconds, imagine the connection Izumi has to Azula! If Azula had died…”

“We would have seen it in Mother!” Sasuke realized.

“And how do you propose we find Azula? By magic or some sort of spy glass?” Tetsuya asked skeptically. “The Palace Record show--”

“Nothing. They show nothing because she was secretly released to the custody of our Grandmother, then Fire Lady Mai. But recently, she and Grandfather Zuko approved her for some spiritual quest and she vanished.

Miyoko beamed.

“You can’t be serious!”

“Eiko... Mother and Eiko are connected! She can sense our energy and our distress and Mother’s from a thousand leagues away. Maybe she could sense Azula’s!” Miyoko suggested.

Tetsuya folded his arms “Okay, I may not be terribly well versed on the nature and ability of
dragons but that seems a little far-fetched.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Yoko shrugged.

“Do you really think we can convince Mother to let us borrow her dragon?” Sasuke asked

“Not likely—” Tetsuya answered.

“And Father’s probably not letting her make any decisions in this state.” Sasuke added.

“Then how are we supposed to—”

“We just take her.” Miyoko decided. “She’ll want to help Mother just as much as we do and she knows Azula can.”

“She’ll burn us alive if we went anywhere near her!” Tetsuya claimed.

“Maybe you, but not me.”

“I still don’t like this plan.”

“Well it’s something! If we can’t find her by tomorrow night’s end, You can tell me what to do, and I’ll go in again.” Miyoko promised.

Izumi tossed and turned, struggling against the chains that held her, tears stained her pale cheeks as Kya watched, able to do nothing, not even wake her while her hair ran blue and her skin burned.

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And she heard her mother’s voice, clear as day. “She needs to concentrate.”

It had been four years since Izumi saw her mother. Four years since the Fire Lady vanished without a trace. Izumi found herself tiptoeing towards the unfamiliar door in the Palace’s resident quarter. She couldn’t understand why, but had this strange, dreadful feeling that she wasn’t supposed to be there. Like it was a place only for adults and she were a child being sneaky. She found herself reaching up for the door handle with a skinny little arm and a tiny little hand. How old was she?

She wore a knee length dress, pointed shoes, long sleeves and a high royal collar with the sun emblem of the princes and princesses of the fire nation instead of the flame emblem reserved for the Fire Lord. She felt the same, like a woman, but was trapped in a child’s body.

The door before her was locked. She growled. How she came to hate locks during her marriage to Hisoki. She pointed two fingers up at the mechanism and attempted to use magnetic field generation to unlock it, but all she could produce was an incredibly basic little spark of lightning. It was pitiful. She huffed and found herself stomping her foot before trying again, and again and again, each time blasting a bit of the mechanism out of the dark oak until someone opened the door. And then she saw her mother standing there before her in all of her glory with her narrow, condescending eyes and her pointed chin and long, straight neck perfect posture and everything.

“Izumi?” the Fire Lady asked, her voice smooth as water.

“Mother!” Izumi exclaimed, burying herself in her mother’s skirts, clutching on for dear life. “I’ve
missed you!!!"

The Fire Lady bent over her girl and embraced her.

“I’ve missed you too, my Love.”

“Why now of all times have you come?”

“I have a favor to ask of you, sweet Love.”

“Anything!” Izumi cried, tiptoeing, looking up at the sky to see her mother’s eyes.

“Never forget who you are...,” Mai whispered, touching her forehead to Izumi’s.

Izumi smiled. How she missed these moments when they were head to head, nose to nose, safe, in each other’s arms for what felt like a blissful eternity.

And she heard the whip of a knife being thrown, and the sound of a blade penetrating the skull. Izumi opened her eyes and saw the blood seep from a wound in the side of a head, down her mother’s face and onto her own skin.

The Fire Lady’s eyes widened with terror.

“Mother? Mother!” She screamed, lowering her mother to her knees gently.

“Never— Forget,” Mai croaked, closing her eyes and falling limp in her daughter’s arms.

“Zumi, run!” a young Iliana yelled from a corner by the fireplace before a knife stuck her in the face as well.

Izumi turned and saw the man with more knives stepping out of the shadows towering over her. She ran as fast as she could back out of the room but her ten year old legs weren’t long enough or fast enough. Her bending was too uncontrolled and weak for her to fly and she found herself in a corner with her back against another locked door. She turned. He did not brandish a knife for her when he arrived, but a handkerchief to the blood on her face.

“Stay away!” Izumi yelled, throwing a flaming fist of cool red flames. He caught it, smothering her flames and pulling her towards him.

“No! Let go!” she screamed, trying to pull away only to find her feet sliding across the smooth, polished floors. She caught his second fist and as she tried to hit him and placed it in his hand with the first then used the handkerchief to wipe her face.

“Now, now, Fire Lord Izumi,” the man cooed. “You were such a pretty little thing before you started crying. You don’t want to disappoint your people when you come before them tonight to name me regent.”

“I will NEVER yield my nation to you!” she yelled, spitting in his face.

He let go of her hands and struck her causing her to fall to the floor.

“You have an hour to come to your senses and don’t bother calling for Eiko. Your dragon too has been slain,” the man said.

No—
“NO!” Izumi sat up in bed with a gasp to find Kya in bed beside her, eyelids heavy with concern. She checked for her own arm for lines and wrinkles. She was an adult again.

“You have to be careful, Zumzu. You’re injured, remember?” the weary waterbender reminded her ex-girlfriend.

Izumi looked down at the corset. It fit like a glove, nothing at all like what she was forced to wear in her youth. She moved to feel it, finding both arms encapsulated by massive masses of earth.

“Where’s my father?” Izumi inquired.

“In the South Pole, with my mother—” Kya answered dutifully before realising. “Zumzu!” Kya called, reaching for Izumi as she slammed her hands together, shattering the earth. Before the water could even reach Izumi, Izumi reached Kya, painlessly shutting down her girlfriend’s muscular system, paralyzing her completely.

“I’m sorry,” Izumi whispered with a tear dripping down her face as she melted the chains off of her wrists and the band off of her waist. “I’ll be back tomorrow; I need him here, now.” Izumi explained as she threw the covers off of her bed. She dressed quickly and made for the window.

Tadashi heard the rustling below. He kicked up a disk and launched it into the sky, signaling the other members of the Amber League. By the time he looked down, he had to drop, ducking to avoid a bolt of lightning.

“My Lady please! You’re still injured!” Tadashi yelled, joining Hiryur and Sunako, surrounding Izumi.

“I have to go,” Izumi growled, disabling the bloodbender first. “I have to fetch my Father! To know he is safe, and no one can stop me!” With a massive burst of static, she overwhelmed the nerves of her own personal guard and sprinted to the stables.

“Zumi! Don’t!” Tenzin yelled, intercepting her.

“Tenzin, you’re not an endangered species anymore, so if I were you, I’d step aside if I didn’t want to get roasted alive!” Izumi yelled, blue fire igniting from her hairline and fists as she charged for him. He blew her back with a funnel of air. She rolled, seething with pain as she felt the mesh tear at her body.

“Zumi! Stand down!” Lin yelled, coming to aid her husband.

Izumi looked in the direction of the stables, who needed a saddle anyways? She whistled loud and hard and stood up, clutching her side, but not clawing at it, and she flew, propelling herself up with a jet of blue flames from her freehand and both feet as Eiko caught her just above the trees.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks MusicPlayer81 and Ohtwoh for all of your help!!!

Sorry it has been so long! Summer was a wild one. Now, only one more "Part" until
we're done with Ember Island and on to Republic City!!!

As always, all and any feedback is greatly appreciated!!!
Chapter 7: No Light, Part 2: Who Knew

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*How is the Southern Tundra always so much warmer and friendlier*, Izumi thought as she strode towards Aunt Katara’s igloo. Small and humble, it had remained unchanged despite the Southern Water Tribe’s decades of expansion and modernization. Izumi threw open the elephant-seal skin flap of the igloo.

“Father!”

“Zumi?”

“You’re coming with me back to the Fire Nation!” Izumi announced, gathering some things in the igloo that she knew were his.

“What? Slow down, sweet child! What happened?”

“Nothing. I just need you by me! So I can protect you!” Izumi explained.

“From what, love?”

“Zumi, dear, slow down. We’re old and-” Katara began to say, wearily rubbing her eyes.

“Then I’ll carry you!” Izumi asserted, whirling around with her father’s satchel in hand.

“Zumi, you’re troubled. Come, let me take a look at you,” Katara asked, bending water from a healing pot to her old, veiny hands.

Izumi squeezed her eyes shut and the sound of the knife cracking a skull replayed in her mind. “There’s no time!” She yelled, clutching her head.

“Zumi—“ Mai’s voice whispered. “Zumi focus! Concentrate! Never forget who you are...”

Izumi slipped to her knees.

Never...

“Zumi?” Zuko asked, moving towards her as her arms started to shake.

“Father, I’m scared!” Izumi cried, clutching his wrist, breaking into tears.

*Never forget...*

Katara moved closer with the healing water and covered Izumi’s head, soothing the anxiety but only slightly before Izumi’s hair turned blue and vaporized her healing water. Zuko had to pull away, the skin of her hands burning his wrists, causing her to fall accidentally.

“Father! I’m sorry!” Izumi wailed, trying to regain her breath and cool down.

“IZumi, when did this start?”

“What do you mean?”
“When did the terrors return?”

“I think this morning,” Izumi replied. Her hair dimmed, but the voice never stopped repeating. “Never forget… she says.”

“Who says?”

“Mother.”

Meelo was the first to spot Eiko on the horizon and gathered the Beifong Clan by the cliffs to receive his aunt.

“Aunt Zumi!”

“Gran Gran?” Jinora gasped, seeing Katara behind Izumi.

Takeo ran ahead of both airbabies to help them off the dragon. “Grandfather?”

“IZUMI IDO— HOW DARE YOU DISAPPEAR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE—”

“OH SPARE ME!” Izumi snarled at the maid as her hair flared blue with annoyance. “I’m already heading back to bed so save your breath!” She gave Eiko one last nuzzle against her muzzle and returned to the house.

“Iliana!”

“My Lord!” Iliana exclaimed, bowing to Zuko.

“Please, forgive my daughter. It was night terrors that drove her to disappear. She dreamt we were assassinated and needed verification that we were indeed still here. And—for the remainder of our stay leave the discipline to me please, since I am her father,” Zuko asked Iliana.

The maid bowed dutifully and went to secure Izumi.

“As for the rest of you,” Zuko addressed his grandchildren and extended family. “I heard your Gran Gran makes a mean dish of stewed sea prunes!”

“YEAH!” Kang, Jinora, Ikki, Meelo, Rohan all yelled following Katara to the kitchens.

They found Mako and the Alchemy Lab Department Guard engaged in a rather intense game of Pai Sho when they returned.

Mako stood up so abruptly, he jostled the pai so table, earning himself a scowl from the guard he was playing. “Did you find the answers you needed?”

“More or less,” Miyoko drawled ambiguously.

“And no funny business right?”

“If we were going to kill you and attempt anything stupid, we would have done so already. That, I can assure you,” Tetsuya promised as he and his siblings passed Mako on their way back to their private biplane.
It was Kuvira’s turn to cook a meal for the entire Beifong Clan. Naturally, Wing, Wei and Opal protested, claiming Kuvira would poison them all so that she’d be free to again attempt her quest for world domination, and with Izumi out of commission, got away with it.

“Just because Zumzu’s down and out does NOT mean you guys can ignore the rules!” Lin yelled, swatting her little sister’s children out of the room. “Kuvira, have you chosen someone to go to market with you? Do you know what you are cooking today?”

Kuvira shook her head.

“I’ll go with her, Aunt Lin!” Takeo offered, running in just in time.

“Won’t people recognize you, Fire Lord Takeo?” Kuvira asked.

“Not yet. I suspect after my first controversial decision they will. Believe it or not, when my Mother appointed me her successor, she did NOT have my face plastered all over the papers. And as surprising as it is, no paper really asked for it, since they were too consumed by her bending fire higher than the tallest spire of the Royal Palace!” Takeo responded.

“Oh, well, don’t be gone too long, the kids especially are usually hungry by noon,” Lin reminded them.

“We won’t!” Takeo answered, ushering Kuvira from the house and towards the village.

Zuko, Masaru, Tenzin and Lin, Baatar and Suyin, Kya, and Bumi all gathered in the parlor.

“Did you know this would happen?” Suyin asked Zuko.

“We knew it was a potential risk,” Zuko answered, stroking his long white beard.

“Wait Azula? What does she have to do with this?” Lin asked.

“She helped devise a way to package some of Izumi’s trauma and lock it away in a distant part of her mind, so it wouldn’t interfere with her working consciousness,” Masaru explained.

“A among other things, but… It was all so new at the time. We didn’t know how long it would last,” Zuko explained. “I believe she was only able to observe the effects of the procedure for a decade before leaving.


“So you essentially made your daughter into a ticking time bomb?” Suyin clarified.

“She’s not a bomb… she’s just… fragile.”

Suyin rolled her eyes in response.

“Masaru, don’t you know how to-- bend dark lightning?” Baatar asked.

Masaru sighed. “I can exert muscular control on another, ONLY if I have to. I have never attempted memory alteration, nor will I.”
“Even if it means potentially saving your wife?” Suyin asked.

“After Hisoki, Izumi and Azula designed safeguards against all men who attempted to access or alter any part of her mind,” Zuko informed them. “Not even Masaru could get in.”

“Then what can we do to help her?” Baatar inquired.

“I guess just make her comfortable.”

“For what? To live and die chained to that bed?” Suyin asked, her crassness fading to reveal a sadness.

“Just until we can think of a way to make her right again,” Kya clarified.

“Excuse me,” Baatar asked, excusing himself from the room. “I have an idea—for—temporary entertainment.” He suddenly remembered the weapons Izumi crafted for their children. The retractable sectioned blades for Kuvira, and the convertible scythe-glider for Jiexue were not as easy to make as a two piece sword. They were complex weapons with retractable, sectioned blades, spring-loaded mechanisms, joints, and sockets made out of some special metal alloy coated in dragon-forged diamond. Izumi wasn’t ever just a public figure or a mother. She was a brain like no other.

He had to fight Iliana for time with Izumi and explain just why his in-law wouldn’t be satisfied with the fairy tales the maid brought from the palace. “She is an inventor, not a child naive enough to fall for fantasy!” Eventually, he won the argument and was able to present his designs to Izumi for the train station he had spent the last four years trying to complete. It would have been done by now, but leave it to his family to pull him from his work.

“...If you want this building to last more than a week, you’ll add support cables here, here, here, and here.” Izumi said, motioning to various parts of the blueprints for the train station Baatar had spent the last four years trying to complete.

“Why cables and not reinforcement beams?”

“Cables give under the appropriate tension. This station is for Zaofu right? Zaofu is situated between two mountain ranges on a tectonic plate of its own. The seismic activity would destroy the beams after maybe two years, give or take a few months...” Izumi explained.

“Amazing! Where did you learn all this?” Baatar asked.

“Elementary Physics by Hu Jianxu and Yakimo Togashiru, 8th edition...,” Izumi answered, searching the technical drawing for any more potential flaws.

“You just picked it up some afternoon?”

“I had to do something while waiting for the councilmen of my nation to shut their primary airholes and quit bickering,” Izumi replied. “Here—”

“Who is it?” Baatar called.

“Just me, Sir—,” Kuvira replied, opening the door carrying a tray with tea, and a bowl of some sweet and spicy smelling stew.
“You brought food.”

“It was my turn to cook. Takeo helped me and— after asking around, there didn’t really seem to be a delivery system for— Aunt Zumi so I thought I’d bring her some.”

“Of course! That was very kind of you! I’ll leave you to— excuse me,” Baatar said, hastily rolling up his drawings and running off.

“He didn’t need to leave,” Kuvira mumbled as she set the tray down on the bed.

“Perhaps he didn’t want the soup to spill on his drawings…”

“That’s never stopped him from having dinner in his office before—”

“Or perhaps he grew tired of me pointing out every flaw in his crowning glory,” Izumi suggested with a smirk.

Kuvira almost smiled at the remark before she pulled back.

“Could you—” Izumi asked, rattling her chains.

“As long as Kya and Iliana don’t see,” Kuvira replied, bending the rocks off of Izumi’s hands.

Izumi snatched up the bowl and practically inhaled it like a famished prisoner long forgotten in the deepest bowels of the Boiling Rock. Kuvira looked down at the older woman’s wrists, bloodied from the chafing and pulling of the cuffs.

“Is—”

“Nothing I’m not used to,” Izumi replied wearily.

“They’ve chained you before?”

“Not chains specifically, but restricted, of course-- for my own safety. They say desperate times call for desperate measures. I suppose this is just one of those times.” Izumi paused from the soup to inspect her left wrist which was significantly bloodier than the right. She turned the shackle around her wrist and found the culprit. An unfiled part of seam left over from the initial molding of the iron. “You’d think the Royal Fire Family could afford a pair of half decent handcuffs.” She placed her right index finger over the rough seam and lit a torch, superheating melting the metal and then pressed on it, hissing as the sharp edge pierced her finger before flattening against the rest of the metal.

Her efforts were pitiful, Kuvira observed. She took the the former Fire Lord’s hands and pulled them apart, then used her metalbending to smooth the rough seams left over from the mold.

“Thanks,” Izumi sighed, letting her left hand drop into her lap again.

“But now you’re bleeding,” Kuvira noticed.

“I could just—”

“You’re not singing it closed!”

“Why not?”

“Because last time you burned yourself, I had to help repair it and I REALLY don’t want to have to
do that again.”

“Then bring Korra to heal it if you want it done properly.”

“Korra? You’re sure?” Kuvira asked.

“I’ll explain later.”

Kuvira found Korra on the sparring ring having a rematch against Ursa in firebending while most of the family watched from the sidelines.

“Kuvira! So nice of you to join us!” Lin yelled, crossing the bleachers to take Rohan from Tenzin.

“I’m— not staying, I just need Korra,” Kuvira explained.

“Why?” Korra asked, diving to avoid a bolt of lightning.

“You still can’t redirect it? Weak!” Ursa taunted with a smirk.

“Hey! Just haven’t gotten around to it!” Korra shrugged, sending a massive blast of red back the princess’s way. It was decimated by a wall of blue flames.

“And yet master Sheng signed off on your ‘mastery’ exams, eh?” Ursa said, blocking another uncontrolled fire blast.

“Don’t let her unhinge your head, Korra!” Bolin yelled.

“She’s related to Azula. She knows how to undo you—” Mako added.

“Korra, she needs healing!” Kuvira yelled, growing impatient. Everyone paused, surprised. Kuvira had whispered throughout her entire time at Ember Island. By everyone’s observation, she had been broken by her fall in Republic City and time in isolation at Wanfeng Prison.

“Who needs healing?” Kya asked, appearing behind Kuvira. Kuvira jumped and sunk back into her shell.

“Just— it’s something only the Avatar can do, for Izumi.”

Kya eyed her suspiciously. “Izumi asked for Korra?”

The former Great Uniter whirled around, nearly knocking herself down. “Specifically-- didn’t explain why.”

“Well then, Korra, you should probably go,” Kya suggested, eyeing Kuvira suspiciously.

“But I thought Izumi hated me,” Korra muttered, bending water from the moat of the sparring ring to shower off and steam dry before joining Kuvira.

“She doesn’t actually hate anyone except my Father,” Ursa called.

“And the sage Miu!” Iroh added from the stands.

“Thanks, that’s reassuring,” Korra nodded skeptically.
“Jokes aside, rematch later?” Ursa asked.

“You BET!”

“This time don’t chicken away from the lightning!”

“I won’t!”

“Should I come?” Kya asked Kuvira.

“NO!” Kuvira exclaimed.

Kya raised a brow.

“Spirits! I’m not good at lying anymore!”

“Were you ever, really?”

“Kya, let them go,” Lin asked, bouncing Rohan on her hip.

Kya waved them off. “I’m just worried. Izumi is my— you know—”

“Yes. We know. And she’s my best friend. But she knows what she needs more than any of us right now. If that’s Korra then— well, Korra IS the Avatar.”

“So what’s this special thing you needed help with—” Korra asked right off the bat.

“Can you heal external lacerations?” Izumi asked, setting down her bowl and raising her bloodied wrists.

“That’s it?” Korra asked.

Izumi shrugged.

“Yeah, of course! I’m just surprised you didn’t call your lover or your— Amber League chick?”

“By the end of the month, Sunako will be Kya’s daughter, my niece, not just -- some Amber League chick, thank you very much. And one can only take so much of their incessant nagging.”

“Why do they nag you?” Korra asked, cleaning the blood off first so she could see the wounds more clearly. “Oh, that’s deep!”

“The abrasions on the wrists can be blamed on shitty craftsmanship. This injury-- on the finger-- on the other hand, was obtained trying to fix it myself.”

Korra couldn’t help but laugh. “Did you melt the metal and try to smooth it?”

“Mhm!”

Korra laughed. “How do you know I won't nag you for your old-lady foolishness?”

“Because you know I’d beat your ass for it, young lady. And then of course, ship you and your friends back to Republic City,” Izumi answered rather nonchalantly.
Korra paused pensively. “And you wouldn’t do the same to Kya and Sunako?”

“They know my offensive techniques too well. Kya and I could dance for a while, but Sunako, well, she can just bloodbend me into the ground, as you’ve seen before.” Izumi reminded Korra, glancing down at the harness meant to keep her ribs in place while her flesh grew over the metal mesh covering her exposed ribs and lungs.

“And you have no counter to that? Good to know,” Korra laughed nervously, unease visibly growing.

Izumi smiled. “I do; it just isn’t pretty. There is a way to conduct energy through even seemingly non conductive materials like fabric, wood-- even concrete. I could roast someone alive from the inside with or without contact if my subconscious decided I were actually in danger of dying,” Izumi explained.

“Your subconscious decides?”

“Yes. Like an Avatar’s Avatar State before they can control it.”

“That’s— reassuring,” Korra whispered, working the healing water a little faster, eager to get away.

“Have I frightened you, Avatar?” Izumi asked.

“If we’re being honest, a little.”

Izumi smiled. “As I’m sure you’ve seen, Avatar Korra, our world has sharp edges. Though however sharp they may be, they never do seem to cut cleanly.” She examined the scar tissue Korra left behind on her wrists. “You can’t always believe what you hear or see, or trust what others say about a person--” Izumi glanced at Kuvira. “--or thing. What is perceived as good and right isn’t always great, and what can be perceived as cruelty is sometimes... necessary.” She looked up at the Avatar’s vivid blue eyes. “Thank you for your healing services, Avatar Korra.”

“Yeah, sure, no problem...” Korra said, rushing to the vanity of the bathroom to wash her hands. “I’m going to go— spar your daughter in Agni Kai.”

“Which one?”

“The fun one.”

“As opposed to the salty one?” Izumi asked knowingly.

“Maybe,” Korra replied, bowing before running off rather hastily.

Kuvira eyed Izumi curiously. “Did you freak her out for a reason?”

“How was I supposed to know that I would freak her out? The conversation took a— natural turn.”

Kuvira raised a skeptical brow.

Izumi sighed. “I never miss an opportunity to educate when someone shows a little too much naivety and disrespect for his or her elders,” Izumi replied, taking a sip of reheated tea.

“You and Taemon both,” Kuvira noted, folding her arms and turning away, waiting for Izumi to finish eating so she could take the dishes back to the kitchen.
Izumi frowned at the mention of her former ward.

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Izumi watched Takeo and Taemon out on the lawn of the courtyard of the Earthen Fire Estate sparring. It had been a year since Taemon’s arrival at the Earthen Fire Estate. The adoption papers had been completed and Taemon was officially a Lee.

“How does it feel?” twelve-year-old Takeo asked, sending a stream of fire Taemon’s way while Masaru watched from the sidelines, ready to step in if either boy got too aggressive, distracted, or endangered in any way.

“How does what feel?” nine-year-old Taemon asked obliviously.

“Being one of us-- officially?”

“Not much different, honestly,” Taemon replied, splitting the blaze then doing a butterfly kick out of the way of another stream of red and orange flames. “Not yet at least.”

“Taemon,” Izumi called from the balcony where she stood with two-year-old Ursa asleep on her shoulder, five-year-old Tsuya balanced on her knee, and five-year-old Tatsuya on the ground beside her playing with a rock and a flower. “Your torso is too high. Your trunk needs to be parallel with the ground if you’re to do that jump properly. Keyo, strike again.”

Takeo nodded and sent a similar fire blast at his new adopted brother. Taemon kicked, dipping his head and body lower as he threw himself into the air. Izumi nodded in approval.

“Forgive me for asking, Mrs. Feng, but how would you know how to properly perform evasive maneuvers against firebenders? I mean, you say you too are one but you only ever use your bending to make tea,” Taemon asked, as he continued to spar.

Takeo hesitated, looking to Masaru to see if he should stop. If Taemon speaking to Izumi would prove too much of a distraction for them to continue sparring safely for their age. Masaru paid no attention to him, implying they should continue, as a test for their ability to multitask.

“I know because I have been trained to be a good soldier in the army, Taemon.” Izumi replied as leveled as possible. “And a good soldier knows when to reserve his energy... and when to crush his enemies.”

Taemon slipped and instead of jumping to avoid a horizontal blade of flames, had to melt a hole in the ground and flatten himself to be as low as possible.

“Continue?” Takeo asked his mother silently.

She nodded and Takeo struck again as Taemon did a kip up. The younger boy did a back walkover to avoid the jab and then weaved to avoid another.

Izumi continued her lesson. “My fire and my lightning are among my greatest strengths, but you, my child, are not an enemy. Therefore, I will never fight you with fire.”

Taemon contemplated her words for a few minutes while Takeo waited patiently for him to regain focus. “Does this mean your blades are a weakness, in which case I don’t think I am interested in sparring you with firebending anymore.”

Izumi laughed. “What do you think?”
“But wait!” five-year-old Tsuya cried, tugging on a lock of Izumi’s hair. She pulled it out of his tiny grip. And shifted him from her knee onto her hip. “Does this mean Father is a bad soldier, because he fights us with fire and lightning? Or does this mean Father is a bad father because he has made his sons his enemies?”

Izumi and Masaru both laughed, surprising the older boys who ceased their bout.

“It means neither. Your father’s strength lies in his negotiation skills. He makes a great military officer and businessman-- and I think a great father.” Izumi explained. “But I am not one of his sons and-- therefore, I cannot attest to that. Now it doesn’t make him a bad soldier. Just not a very good one,” Izumi replied, smirking at the love of her life across the way.

“Hey!” he replied, feigning offense.

Takeo and Taemon laughed and continued their sparring day while Tsuya leaned his head on Izumi’s free shoulder, confused, but content.

“Aunt Zumi, are you okay?” Kuvira asked.

“Sorry?” Izumi asked, looking up.

“You fell silent and got really pale.”

Izumi looked up at Kuvira with a strange, almost distant gaze, as if she wasn’t completely back from wherever she went in her head. “You should leave,” she suggested, looking away from Kuvira, replacing the tea cup and the bowl back on the tray.

“Sorry?”

“Since I cannot dismiss myself from this, LEAVE!” Izumi yelled, throwing her hands back as far as her chains allowed, burning some of the sheets in the process.

Kuvira ran, abandoning the tray.

“Kuvira?” Masaru asked curiously, stepping out of a room, stopping Kuvira in the hall. She gasped, sliding to dodge him and slipped. “What happened?”

“Nothing!” Kuvira responded automatically.

“You’re sweating, and running,” Masaru pointed out.

“It’s nothing!”

Masaru bent down and offered a hand, not buying her claim. “Keyo told me you were with Izumi.”

Silence confirmed it.

Masaru turned and headed straight for Izumi’s room.

Kuvira felt a strange pang of guilt for some reason. She knew she shouldn’t. Everyone knew Izumi was not well, but still, she was fine before--
“Zumiya!” Masaru yelled grabbing the door handle. He released it quickly with a hiss of pain.

How-- right, she can send electricity even through nonconductive materials. She must have charged the metal door handle through the non-conductive wooden floor.

“LEAVE ME ALONE!” Izumi yelled.

“What did you do?” Masaru asked Kuvira in a panicked whisper.

“I don’t know--I-- didn’t mean to!”

“What did you do?” Masaru repeated more slowly.

“I brought her food and helped her get a healer for some chafing from the cuffs and then we just talked and--”

“What did you talk about?”

“Why she was roasting Korra and--”

“Korra--”

“She asked for Korra, because she felt like Kya and Sunako would yell at her for-- something… I think it was the mention of Taemon that set her off,” Kuvira confessed.

Masaru sighed.

Kuvira was panting. She felt the same way she did after her trial a year ago for her war crimes against the people of the Earth Kingdom and United Republic: utterly drained and expecting a punishment of some sort.

Instead, Masaru took a deep breath then kicked down the door entirely.

“Zumi--”

“WHAT IS THE POINT?!” Izumi shrieked at a piercing frequency that sent Kuvira cowering on the floor of the hallway.

“What are you--” Masaru began to say.

“What is the point of living-- of working-- for--” she was panting, turning her head rapidly, erratically. “--ANYTHING if we get none of what we want--”

“Zumi--”

“What is the point of giving life only to have to let it go?” Izumi cried.

“Let go?”

“Of Taemon!”

“You did not give life to Taemon--”

“I just as well did! He would have died in a gutter with the amount of debt Yamakatsu left for him to pay.”

“Izumi, you need to calm down--”
“I want him back here-- with me-- where I can see that he’s okay--”

“Izumi, you know why we can’t do that. He made a mistake and has to repent for his actions--”

“No I made the mistake! He’s just a boy! I failed to see him and give to him what he needed and--”

“He is not JUST a boy-- The law states--”

“FUCK THE LAW! The LAW is what made us had to hide EVERYTHING for DECADES!”

“Izumi! You are not a sovereign. You have no control over--”

“No! I know what its like to not have control-- Now. I can control EVERYTHING if I wanted.”

“Zumi--” Masaru called warningly.

“But I don’t try to control everything. You should be grateful. EVERYONE should be grateful. All I want now is my FUCKING son!” Izumi cried.

“Zumi Taemon can’t come--” Masaru reminded her with his hands opened in defense.

Izumi felt empty, like the day the sages abducted Ursa and sent her to the Royal Academy. She screamed, bursting into flames of every colour. Her eyes closed, arms folded in and body doubled over as the roof of that section of the house was blown off by a column of a blinding white and blue flames. The walls were vaporized and the floors, decimated.

Masaru ran back to the room and dove to shield Kuvira from the intense, pulsing bursts of heat that followed the explosion.

Everyone down at the sparring ring raced back to the house at the sound of the blast and sight of the raging blue.

Korra, Zuko, Mako, Iroh, Ursa, and Takeo made a ring of red fire to try to contain the blaze, but it was still no match for Izumi’s rage. Massive flares began erupting from the blinding haze, keeping them away.

“Kuvira and Saru were in there!” Takeo yelled about to run into the flames before his grandfather yanked him back by his belt.

“Your Father can take the heat. He will protect Kuvira,” Zuko said confidently.

Takeo stepped down apprehensively. “You’re sure?”

“Certain.”

The column of flames subsided to a small ring of blue around Izumi’s bed which somehow managed to stay in tact while her steel chains had been completely decimated.

“Uncle!” Masaru yelled, carrying Kuvira out of the blaze, keeping the flares a safe distance from her earthen body.

“Is she burned?” Zuko asked, taking the Great Uniter in his arms.
“She shouldn’t be,” Masaru replied. “But in the light, it was hard to see clearly,” he added heading back into the flames. He blasted himself over Izumi’s protective ring of blue flames and tried to get to her. His hair turned red as he released his inner fire in the form of six dragons to protect him while he navigated through her rage.

“She’s not breathing but still has a pulse,” Kya announced, examining Kuvira.

Sunako tore Kuvira’s shirt and pants off to see her skin. No burns, she confirmed.

Kya felt the earthbender’s pulse and checked her chi-pathways. “It was likely just shock that knocked her out.”

And the smoke inhalation that kept her down.

“Good thing we were all at the arena!” Bolin exclaimed. “Whoo! That was a close one! We could have been toast if we were in the house.”

Zuko turned to Bolin. “No, my daughter doesn’t kill unintentionally, even in rag,” Zuko reassured the group.

“How do you know?” Opal asked skeptically.

“She blew up the throne room and parliamentary wing the day the Sages took Ursa away-- while council was in session-- and none of the council members or Fire Sages were killed. The worst of the injuries sustained were mild bruises from falling debris.” Zuko explained rather calmly, as if this type of outburst were at some point a daily occurrence.

Masaru wrapping his arms around his Lady while she cried. She pushed him off with enough force to send her husband through four walls. He ran back towards her and rammed her, breaking the bedposts her wrists were chained to. They rolled through charred wood and cracked shingles before finally skidding to a stop at the edge of the trees. Izumi found her feet first, beckoning the blue ring of flames that protected her bed, to her. Masaru lifted his arms bending his dragons into menacing extensions of his own body. She sent a bolt of lightning towards him, only to be returned to her. She dove to the side with an arching kick, then a series of punches and a sweep, sending Masaru on the defensive. He evaded all of her attacks and then charged, diving under and jumping over several more attempts on his body, finally, he dove through her blue ring. He gave up on the defensive donut and engaged in hand to hand combat, trying to get behind Masaru, to chi-block him.

“If he hits the fucking mesh, I am going to kill him,” Kya hissed, watching the fight intently while Sunako tended to Kuvira’s lungs.

He wouldn’t. He is in control right now. Chances are she will tear it trying something stupid, Sunako wrote on her piece of parchment, sending it before Kya’s face for a moment, not wanting to block too much of the fight.

Izumi got behind Masaru but he turned and managed to trip her.

“She’s done,” Zuko said, turning away, unable to watch his daughter losing anything.

Masaru swung at her head and as she bent backwards and blocked, swept her feet out from under her. He wrapped his arm around hers and caught her fall, then snatched the other wrist before she could regain footing and turn around. He kneed the back of her leg, sending her down, and transferred both of her thin wrists into one of his hands. Just as she heated her skin, he struck the
back of her neck where Mai had shown him a pressure point that she used to knock her daughter out. Her hair turned black in an instant, and the temperature of the beach estate dropped drastically. The flames and heat vanished in a single wave of heat and her hair turned black.

Ursa staggered back, having never seen “Uncle Saru” exhibit such prowess or brutality in a fight, let alone against her own mother. Iroh caught his little sister and turned her away from the scene, shielding her.

“What if other islanders come to see?” Hungjian asked his mother.

Before Lin could answer, Genkei appeared. “The Amber League will hold them back. Don’t worry, we’re used to having to deal with-- our Lady’s antics.”

“I’m almost glad now our sleeping quarters are so far from them,” Rikuto chirped, attempting to lighten the mood among the family.

“That’s it!” Suyin yelled turning away from the ruins of that part of the house. “Opal, Wing, Wei! Go pack your things, we’re leaving! I don’t feel safe staying so close to that fucking flame anymore—And someone find Junior!”

“What about Huan and Kuvira?” Ursa asked pointedly.

Suyin ignored her.

“Su!” Lin called, running after Suyin. “You can’t just abandon Izumi! She’s family! She needs all of us!”

“Why?!” Suyin asked incredulously. “We can’t even get through that fucking wall of fire! Her husband can handle her—”

“This is not just about who can bring her down!” Lin exclaimed. “She’s hurt and even just having family nearby is reassuring! Su! We went thirty-five years without speaking to each other. Fifty-five years without knowing Masaru even existed and yet, he was always looking out for us regardless. Let us return the favor. Stay!-- If not for Izumi, then for Masaru. He’s our blood!”

“He’s Fire Nation!”

“Why are you being so prejudiced?!”

“I am the Earth Queen! I have to prioritize the safety of MY people and MY ACTUAL family before ANYTHING” Suyin yelled.

“Then go,” a third voice said. The Beifong sisters turned to find Baatar Sr. had joined them. “I’ll stay, Su. Take the children and go, if that is what you want to do.”

“You can’t stay! You’re my husband!” Su exclaimed, her tone softening. “I need you.”

“But Izumi needs me more. I know how to work with her and not let her get bored.”

“No-- NO, I won’t let you stay here! It’s too dangerous!”

Baatar Sr. lifted his gaze to meet his wife’s eyes. “You cannot command me on Fire Nation soil, Earth Queen or not. I checked,” Baatar shrugged. He turned to Lin. “I’ll go to the Earthen Fire Airship to get some more drawings Izumi can look at when she wakes from-- whatever Masaru did to her. It is the least I can do. I know she prefers a challenge to Iliana’s children’s stories.”
Lin hugged Baatar. “Thank you.”

“Mom!” Opal yelled, running into the clearing. “We were packing Juicy and— Yoko and Tsuya and Sasuke came back and— they’re trying to steal Eiko!”

“What?” Lin, Baatar, and Suyin ran towards the stables to find Wing and Wei hurling rocks in the direction of the three fire siblings.

Sasuke used a broad swords and Tetsuya, dual swords that cut through or struck aside every rock and boulder the twins tried to hit them with. Beside them, Miyoko dodged a disk and sprayed the twins with a wall of green fire that none of them had ever seen before. Her hair streaked.

“I’m getting real sick and tired of your fucking suspicions!” Miyoko yelled. “We’re not trying to overthrow anyone!”

“Just, seeking ways to help our mother!” Sasuke added.

“And not running away like fucking cowards,” Tetsuya yelled. “You should count yourself lucky! If you weren’t blood, I’d have run you through by now!”

Behind the three, Eiko watched like a fan would a pro-bending game, interested and utterly unfazed by the fight’s sheer energy.

Finally, Tetsuya threw one of his swords at Wei. Suyin screamed as it carried Wei back several feet and pinned his shirt to a tree.

“Eiko! You know Izumi’s hurting!” Miyoko told the observing dragon. “You know who can help her. Help us find her! Please!”

If a dragon could raise a brow, it did then, and then bent down for the three to climb on.

“What about Tsuya’s other sword?” Sasuke asked as Eiko lifted off the ground.

Magnetic field generation! Miyoko stood up on the dragon’s back, Tetsuya grabbing her ankles in case she did fall, and concentrated hard. She reached, to control the push and the pulling forces of the electromagnetic field around her creating artificial gravity and then reached for the sword—

“Woah!” Sasuke grabbed his brother’s second sword as Tetsuya helped Miyoko to sit down.

“But you got his necklace to,” Tetsuya said, separating the two before sheathing the sword. He handed it to Miyoko.

“Gross,” Miyoko grimaced and tossed the metal necklace back down to one of the youngest earthbending sons of Suyin.

“We lost!” Wing exclaimed, punching the ground with frustration.

“You were outnumbered,” Opal replied, trying to reassure him in some way.

“By two nonbenders and some Fire girl!” Wei yelled.

“Hey! Don’t discount the strength of non-benders!” Lin scolded them.
“Don’t you dare discipline my children! You and zumi both need to back off!” Suyin yelled stepping between them and Lin.

Lin rolled her eyes.

“Why did they need Eiko.”

“I don’t know, to go burn down the Earth Kingdom?” Wei shrugged.

“That’s a bit of a stretch, don’t you think?” Lin asked skeptically.

“You just sympathize with them because you found out you’re half Fire Nation!” Wei yelled.

“That’s it!” Lin practically threw Suyin aside to get to the twins. “You listen long and hard right now! This idiocy ends. I catch you dissing non-benders one more time, and SHE will get an ass whooping!” Lin yelled indicating Suyin.

“What in the spirit world—“

“You make one more racist remark and SHE gets her mouth washed out with soap AND an ass whooping!”

“Lin!”

“You’re a FUCKING Beifong. Act like it!” Lin yelled.

“Why don’t you just beat us then if that’s how you feel?” Wei challenged as Lin started to walk away.

“Because, You can never be when cutting a disease off the branch of a tree that it won’t come back. You have to start with the roots if you’re to fix anything,” Lin explained.

“Great, now SHE’s using plant allegories too!” Opal sighed with frustration.

Lin was bent over sideways leaning on the arm of the couch after the children had all been out to bed, exhausted and wallowing in regrets while Tenzin massaged her back. Kya and Bumi played a game of Pai Sho. And Masaru sat on the stonework of the fireplace, gazing into the flame pensively with his back to his family.

“Hi dee ho, folks!” Baatar exclaimed, entering with a cup of his own special tea.

“Hey!” Chorused the others weakly.

“How are things out there?” Kya asked, making her next move.

“Kids are mostly all back in their rooms. Izumi’s asleep. Sunako’s taking first watch, Iliana second, and then Genkei third, then I’ll see her in the morning to go over a clock tower with her,” baatar said.

“I never heard about plans for a clock tower before. Is this a new venture?” Tenzin asked.

“I drew up a sketch while she tore apart the plans for the Gaoling maglev hub we’re planning,” baatar replied taking a seat on a couch behind Kya and Bumi.
“How’s Su?” Lin asked.

“She’ll be fine.”

“I shouldn’t have verbally assaulted her boys like that—and then threaten her,” Lin whispered.

“Izumi gave her a similar ultimatum when she caught the twins and Opal bullying Kuvira,” Baatar told them.

“She’s the matriarch of this family now. She can do that—”

“They feel emboldened with her disabled. It wasn’t out of line, Lin.”

“Why don’t you ever say anything to them?” Lin asked.

“You heard how they think of non-benders. They don’t take me seriously.” Baatar explained.

Lin sighed. “It’s such a shame. And so strange how Opal could share their sentiment when she used to be a nonbender!”

“Hey Brother, weren’t you supposed to teach her the ways of peace and non-violent something or other having to do with that Air Nomad philosophy or something?” Bumi asked Tenzin.

“I tried. Some of the younger ones, like her and Kai, are resistant to tradition,” Tenzin defended.

“It probably doesn’t help that your definition of being a leaf is more rigid than being a steel beam,” Lin muttered. Kya and Bumi roared with laughter while Baatar and Lin chuckled lightly.

Lin sat up and looked around the room. Kya was close to beating Bumi for the tenth time. Baatar and Tenzin both watching, likely considering challenging one another to a game, and Masaru, still sat in silence, face to the Fire.

“Excuse me,” she whispered to Tenzin as she got up.

“Saru?” She asked as she approached him.

He didn’t respond.

“Brother?”

He said nothing.

She sat beside him on the stone work and turned to see his profile blackened by ash, and streaked with tears, washing away the grime to reveal his skin. He’d been crying.

“Do the flames tell your fortune?” Lin asked.

“Not usually,” Masaru replied.

“Then why keep staring? They’ll make you crazy. Why don’t we go for a walk? Down to the beach or something, come on. Get up.” Lin said, heaving him up off the stone work.

As soon as Masaru turned away from the Fire, it diminished down to embers, the wood in there long turned to charcoal and the flames only maintained by his constant release of energy.

“Sorry—” Masaru sighed.
“Don’t be! I got it!” Kya exclaimed, fetching another log from the pile beside the fireplace and grabbing the flint from the mantle.

“Don’t bother with the flint,” Masaru said, setting the fresh log aflame with a wave of his hand. “Save your energy for what’s important.”

Kya nodded.

They sat on the beach opposite each other with a fire in between.

“What are you thinking about?” Lin asked.

“Do you really need to ask?”

“Zumi will be okay.”

“I know she will be eventually. I’m actually more worried about the children— with Eiko. Leaving without a word. They were supposed to go to the castle to bring back books that could hold the answers we seek and then they returned and just— left without saying anything!” Masaru cried.

“They must have a plan!”

“Why wouldn’t they tell it to me unless it’s something they know I wouldn’t agree with? What if Su’s right? What if we can’t trust Tsuya on his own like that and—,”

“First of all, Su’s crazy. Second of all, you and Izumi and Takeo and Iroh ALL say that Tsuya, and Taemon for that matter, learn from their mistakes. They’re not going to take Eiko and convince her to help them blow up some country. Thirdly, Tsuya wasn’t on his own. He had Sasuke and Miyoko.”

“Who, as the Avatar pointed out, are a dissident and a lawyer. They’d be the perfect team to lead an uprising in any country.”

“Korra’s just paranoid after dealing with Amon and Unalaq and Zaheer and all of them.”

“And rightly so. I just— can’t stand not knowing. I checked with the League too. They lost sight of the children and Eiko over Makapu and couldn’t tell if they were heading North or East!” Masaru yelled. “And zumi’s right! What’s the point of having children only to let them go?”

“You didn’t have them to let them go. You had them to watch them grow. To help them. They’re not entities you can control. Not for long at least. They’re the ones to tell your story. They’re the mark you leave on the world. Trust in what you’ve taught them Saru. They have a plan.”

Lin rounded the fire and sat beside her brother.

Masaru leaned on her shoulder. “It’s hard— to be a Father,” he cried.

“I know,” Lin whispered wrapping one arm around his shoulders and the other around his head, holding him.

“No. You don’t. You get to love your children as much as you want. You get to hold them, and kiss them and scold them. But Fathers… have to keep a distance. I know there’s no written rules. There should be no roles no difference in a parent’s duty, but— the father’s— often bigger,
stronger, quicker to anger and lose control.”

“Maybe most fathers are like that, but you’re not. I’ve never seen you lose your temper—”

“Because if I did, I’d be dismissed as a monster, while you and Zumzu are simply strong Mothers.” Masaru replied. “I just want my children home. All of them. Where I know they’re safe, where I can watch them grow…” he cried.

“They’ll be back soon! I know!”

“Not all of them,” Masaru whispered.

Then Lin remembered, Taemon, and her heart broke for her brother.

The night was unbearably cold up in the sky, and somehow the morning, colder even with the sunlight.

Still, Eiko flew on, occasionally bending her head over her back to blow steam on her riders while they slept, warming them.

When they woke, they found themselves over an endless blanket of white.

“You’re cold,” Sasuke commented to Miyoko as they rode.

“I’m fine,” Miyoko insisted, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Yoko, take my coat,” Tetsuya offered, unbuttoning his black jacket.

“No! I’m a firebender! I can keep myself warm.”

“No, you can’t. Not in these temperatures, especially with your core exposed,” Tetsuya explained as he wrapped his coat over her shoulders and buttoned the front over her arms.

Miyoko warmed the inside of her coat with hands. “Thanks, Tsuya.”

“Any time,” he replied.

They looked out over the white that blanketed the earth below.

“Is this the South Pole?” Miyoko asked.

“North. South would take weeks to reach and we’ve only been riding for a night and half a day, maybe…” Tetsuya replied.

“Eiko, are you sure you know where you’re going?” Sasuke asked.

Eiko grumbled low and steady, in confirmation.

“And you’re sure Azula’s up here?” Miyoko asked.

Eiko grumbled again.
Izumi woke with her head pounding.

“Tea, milady?” Genkei offered.

Izumi smelled it and swatted the cup away. “Not jasmine, no—” she rubbed her head. “In Sasuke’s room, under the kettle, there’s a box. It smells of hibiscus and ginger with a little bit of chamomile and citron. Bring that to me, just the leaves. I have to make it.” Izumi asked, rubbing her eyes before noticing. “Where are my chains?” She asked.

“Gone. You destroyed them in the Fire yesterday.”


“You don’t remember?”

“There are gaps, I can feel them. But maybe if I see I can—” Izumi thought aloud as she tried to stand.

“Kya doesn’t want you standing until—”

“Kya can kiss my ass… she should have chained me,” Izumi said, getting out of bed. She pulled on a coat and left whatever room she was in and headed back to her wing of the house. Most of it was untouched, then she felt wind. The hallway ended revealing openness where only charred wood and clay drone the roofing remained in a mangled heap where her bedroom used to be. She braced herself against the wall as she felt her consciousness recede into her memory. They was so much yelling. And Masaru tried to hold her to stop her and she threw him. She watched him fly through four walls as blue filled her field of vision. She heard screaming and in her peripheral, saw Kuvira in the hall, falling.

“Kuvira—,”

“Masaru shielded her from the heat. She’s in the infirmary being treated for smoke inhalation, but suffered no burns, don’t worry.”

Izumi leaned her back against the wall and slid down to the floor and ran her fingers through her hair. “I hate being such a fucking burden on everyone!” She cried, leaning on her hand. “Why can’t it just end?” Izumi turned to Genkei.

“My Lord?”

She spotted what she needed, a blade. She raised her hand and with magnetic field generation, took it.

He lunged forward and grabbed the blade from her hand. She fought him. He whistled loud and high and Tadashi and Hiryur appeared almost instantly. Hiryur counteracted her magnetic field generation and Tadashi bound her from ankles to neck in cable while she seethed.

“Just make it end!” She screamed.

“But Zumi,” Baatar said calmly, standing over her. “Who will help me with this clock tower?”

Izumi sighed in defeat.
They reached a massive set of wide open steel doors deep in the middle of nowhere leading into a massive glacier.

“You’re SURE Eiko?” Miyoko asked.

She snarled in confirmation.

“Come on,” Tetsuya said, putting an arm over her shoulders leading her into the structure. It was simply a hallway that lead to an old lift.

“After you,” Sasuke said, holding the door for his siblings.

“How do we even know it works?” Tetsuya asked.

Sasuke shrugged.

“There’s something off about the doors being wide open to the elements, as if they were abandoned centuries ago,” Yoko commented, turning, pulling Tetsuya’s coat tighter around her.

“The craftsmanship on the lift is only about fifty years old. It’s only the elements eroding the finery that makes it look so old and forgotten,” Tetsuya said, stepping into the lift.

The light dimmed as they receded deeper and deeper into the glacial prison. The pressure in their ears changed and the world became so… dark. Miyoko pulled a hand out of her sleeve and lit it aflame.

“Use your inner flame, it will be easier to sustain with your arm back in the sleeve,” Tetsuya advised.

Miyoko pulled her hand back and they were in darkness again. “I don’t know how…”

“Just concentrate on what you need. Let your subconscious be the one to think.”

After a few more moments of darkness, Miyoko’s hair streaked green and three flaming green dragons appeared before them, warming and lighting the dark hallway.

The first few rooms they found were administration rooms of some sorts.

“It’s a prison,” Tetsuya realized, scanning the water damaged documents.

“An active one…” Sasuke added, opening a newer looking book. “Look! There’s your name!”

“Sweet Spirits!” Tetsuya gasped.

“If it’s a prison, where’s the warden?” Miyoko asked looking at the walls, wandering into a chamber just off the office with one of her green dragons.

It was a parlor, with a sofa, a low-rising table, some arm chairs, and a fireplace. Beside the fireplace, there was a stack of wet wood.

Miyoko pokes around in the soggy ashes and made a space for a fresh log. She vaporized the moisture and lit it aflame, illuminating the dark parlor. Standing, she noticed a mirror perched above the mantle and in its reflection, behind her, a figure.
Her screams may not have shaken the glacier, but her brother’s could still feel it ringing in their bones.

“Yoko!” Tetsuya and Sasuke ran into the parlor swords drawn. She had her back pressed to the mantle, flames licking her skirts where she stood.

They turned to face she was looking. A man had been secured to the stone stone by a metal strip, rather forcefully by the looks of it.

Tetsuya approached the slowly decaying body. The cold had preserved it and its clothes extremely well. “The warden.” Tsuya announced, wiping some residue off the man’s badge.

“How did he die?” Miyoko asked.

Tetsuya brushed aside some frost to get a glimpse of the flesh underneath. “Pleading.” He answered noting dark bruised areas originating from under the metal shackle around the neck.

“I wonder what happened here?” Sasuke thought aloud.

“I don’t want to know.” Miyoko said, turning away from the body. “Can we just find Azula and go?”

“Yeah,” Tetsuya said, ripping the keys out of the dead man’s hand, breaking off the ends of three fingers in the process.

The first thing they noticed were all of the following doors were intact with no mess nor sign of struggle anywhere. “So no one escaped,” Sasuke concluded.

“Or they were really good at escaping,” Tetsuya suggested, unlocking another door for them to move through as they descended deeper and deeper into the seemingly abandoned prison.

Finally, they reached a massive atrium that resembled the Boiling Rock in its interior architectural style.

“Did this place not have lights or something?”

“There’s a control room here. Looks like it’s source of energy ran out and no one bothered to hook up the back up generator,” Sasuke found.

Miyoko watched them wire it up and try to flip the switch but nothing happened.

“The fuel source is probably frozen,” Miyoko realized. She turned to one of her green dragons. Just concentrate on what you need.

Her Heart leapt through the generator, melted the fuel inside, and sparked the ignition of the generator and all of the lights in the atrium illuminated.

As they walked to the other side of the mid level of the atrium, they noticed there were no cell numbers, no guard posts or weapons stores or identification logs or cards anywhere every cell they peeked into was completely devoid of any signs of life. There were no leftover blankets or pillows or cups or other wares one might find in a prison.

It was in every respect, a place where the undesirable and forgotten were left to freeze to death.
“How long are we going to wander through this frozen wasteland?” Sasuke asked.

“Until we find Azula,” Miyoko and Tetsuya said.

“Eiko wouldn’t lead us to our deaths, that’s for sure. Mother would personally kill her.” Miyoko explained confidently. There were no branching hallways off the atrium from any level except the bottom, where they found yet another lift.

“Great, more darkness!” Miyoko sighed, lighting her hair green again and releasing her dragons as they emerged from the second lift. They came to face another, much heavier door at the end of a long tunnel with holes in the ceiling.

“Murder holes, for guards to drop rocks on the heads of escapees,” Tetsuya explained as they passed. Miyoko lifted her hand into one and one of her smaller dragons leaped up and into the tunnel above them to inspect. No one.

“None of the keys work for this door,” Tetsuya said, fumbling with all of them.

Miyoko pushes him aside and used magnetic field generation to lift the lock mechanism out of place, enabling the door to swing open. “Wait—” Miyoko whispered, seeing the hall continue, but flanked with heavy, marked cell doors. They heard movement.

Miyoko motioned for her dragons to go first she could see through their eyes. Or feel what they saw coming. It was strange.

There came breathing from inside the cells.

“Am I dreaming?” A voice asked.

“Dreaming?”

“What is a dream?”

“I see a world of green.”

“Green?”

“You’ve been meditating for too long…”

“I don’t meditate.”

“Can they slip into the cells?” Tetsuya whispered in Yoko’s ear.

She nodded and watched as one of the smaller dragons went under the door.

They heard a scream, “DRAGON!” followed by more screams.

“It’s not an actual dragon! Just a flame!” Miyoko cried, stepping forward, the fear in their voices hurting her.

The hall fell silent again. It slipped back into that eerie state of death. Miyoko’s Small happiness returned to her shoulder and her small daughter dragon out from that one inmate’s cell. Her largest, the Hate reached the end of the hall. It had found—or sensed something and was growling at a cell on the left. The three walked towards it, not knowing who or what type of criminals they were passing in these deep cells or how long they’d been there. That last cell door suddenly swung open with a thundering thud and a burst of blue flame shot out of it and severed Miyoko’s Hate in half.
Miyoko cried out in pain as she felt a part of herself go and fell to her knees. Both Tetsuya and Sasuke fell beside her. When they looked up, they saw her, standing above them, white-haired and wrinkling, looking rather perturbed by their presence, with Miyoko’s green dragon in the clutches of her claw-like hands.

“Great Aunt Azula,” Tetsuya gasped, recognizing those flaming amber eyes and that menacing glare. “You’re here? Why?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m repenting for my sins she said tossing the crippled flame at its source’s feet before returning to her cell and inviting her great nephews and niece in.

It was a rather cozy cell with red velveteen blankets strewn about the floor and a tapestry with the royal insignia hung on the wall. There was a small altar with pictures of Sozin, Azulon and Ozai. Azula never did like to acknowledge her mother if she could avoid it.

“Tea?” She offered boiling a pot, handing the three each a cup.

“Thanks,” Miyoko whispered, keeping her head down.

Azula paused to study the girl, then continued her explanation, the sooner it was over, the sooner they’d leave, or so she hoped. “I’ve served my purpose, built my dear brother into a strong Fire Lord and then seared my dear niece down to her inner fire, making her even more formidable than her relatively weak Father. My time in society is over. I can finally rest and think on all of the sins I committed before Zuzu’s ascension.”

“You look different from how I remember,” Miyoko whispered, looking at Azula through the reflection of the tea in her cup.

“It’s called getting old, Love,” Azula replied with a lazy gaze directed at the youngest daughter of Izumi. She bent down and lifted Miyoko’s face with a nasty, overgrown fingernail “Now, dear child, it’s my turn to ask questions.” She released Miyoko and turned her back to them. “What have three bastards of Masaru and Izumi come looking for in a dingy, old shithole as this?”

“You actually,” Tetsuya answered.

Azula laughed. “Things must be really bad out there it you really think I can help. Ask your Mother. I’m through with helping your world where everyone is just so ungrateful.”

“Please, Great Aunt. It’s Mother!” Miyoko informed her. “It was my fault. I wanted to understand her-- to see what she thinks, if she really loves us. Tetsuya warned me-- told me I wasn’t ready, but I didn’t believe him and went into her head,” Miyoko confessed. “Just to see--”

Azula’s expression faltered. A flicker of worry flashed across her eyes in the green light of Miyoko’s dragons before being quickly masked by indifference.

“I can’t help you.”

“Please! She falls into these spells where she can’t even see what is in front of her. It is as if she is lost to her memories, as if she leaves the mortal world completely!” Miyoko yelled.

Azula muddled over her words for a moment before speaking.
“Let me get this straight, an earthbender decided to teach a firebender, how to use dark lightning?” Azula asked motioning first to Tetsuya then to Miyoko.

“Well, I didn’t want to, but she asked me to, and she is my little sister and— Wait! I’m not an earth bender!” Tetsuya exclaimed.

“You’re Rikuto, are you not? Zumzu’s second son with Masaru?”

“I’m Tetsuya, the fourth son.”

“But you are an earthbender— Your earth chakra at the base of the spine is open. I can feel it.”

“I bent both fire and earth, yes, but Mother took my bending last month and I—“

“Well then your mother was sloppy when she did it. You still have earth.”

“That’s not possible—”

Azula turned and bent a metal stip towards Tetsuya’s neck. He raised a hand and it stopped, inches from his throat.

“Earthbender,” Azula said.

The three siblings all froze.

“But mother would never make a mistake like that!” Tetsuya claimed.

“Of course she would, she’s human!” Azula scoffed, waving her hand and returning to her tea set.

“Regardless of what she is, she’s breaking and we need your help to fix her!” Miyoko yelled impatiently.

“You undid her? Why can’t you fix her?”

“Because I am still just learning precision and— don’t want to make things worse,” Miyoko explained.

“Precision bending.”

“Yes.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“You are STILL practicing PRECISION and you thought it wise to enter someone’s HEAD?” Azula asked.

“I didn’t think it was that complicated,” Miyoko explained.

Azula laughed again. “BOY!” She called Tetsuya. “Since you’re her teacher, tell me, what do you know of dark lightning?”

“You can halt or increase the conductivity of signals across the nodes and synapses of the nerve cells-- make people feel something or nothing at all. You can induce muscle contractions, control another’s movements, or paralyze them completely, temporarily or permanently. You can suppress
memories by identifying the active sites involved when that memory is recalled, and then severing
the brain’s connection to it or closing the gates between.” Tetsuya listed.

Azula waited. “Has dark lightning ever been used on you?”

“Yes,”

“Which kind?”

“Torture. As a Member of the Amber League, we had to pass regular endurance tests.”

“Who administered these tests?”

“Izumi.”

Azula laughed. “Your own mother?”

“Yes.”

“Did actually hurt you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“I--”

“Mothers cannot hurt their sons, for a more realistic test of endurance, the administer must be at
least two degrees removed.”

“What do you me-”

“Observe,” Azula said. She raised a hand, stilling Miyoko and Sasuke completely, suppressing
Yoko’s inner fire, causing all six green dragons to vanish, and then fired all of Tetsuya’s pain
receptors at once. He screamed, his voice penetrating the black confines of the concrete and
platinum prison shaking the glacial ice. He couldn’t see or breathe. It felt as if his entire body was
burning while his skin remained in tact. He tore at his own clothing, trying to tear his own flesh to
remove whatever was causing the pain. Everything.

“Stop moving before you hurt yourself,” Azula barked as she held the torture. When Tetsuya
continued writhing on the ground, she added dangerously softly, “or you can let me help you.” And
he too stilled. His body lay flat on the ground, his eyes closed, paralyzed while the pain still
wracked his being.

Miyoko tried to protest, but found her voice gone, her jaw and throat no more flexible than stone.
She felt no pain but could move nothing. She could only think, and exist in a shell of a body. It
wasn’t like bloodbending. She couldn’t pull against it in any way or feel anything. Every energy
pathway was just empty

Then Azula released them and lowered her hands. Miyoko dragons reappeared and she and Sasuke
gasped for a breath they didn’t realize they were holding. Tetsuya’s entire body curled up in fetal
position, trembling. His eyes flew open, bloodshot, his teeth chattered, and his hands shook.

“Tetsu!” Miyoko rushed to him. He flinched at the touch. “Tsuya!”

“You’re a monster!” Tetsuya croaked, his throat dry from screaming and then trying to while
unable to move anything.

“Guilty as charged,” Azula shrugged. “Do you know now WHY your mother never wanted you or ANYONE to learn dark lightning? Why she was so determined to find and kill Hisoki as soon as she could walk again? To keep FOOLS like you from meddling in things you will NEVER understand!” Azula yelled.

“That type of mentality is what lead the youths of our nation to rise up against the traditionalists. There are NO LIMITS to human understanding!” Tetsuya yelled, wild with anger and rage.

“There are no limits for human understanding for SOME but that group does NOT include you, dear Tetsu.” Azula clarified. “Now, I will help you set my niece straight, but after that, you BOTH must SWEAR to never use dark lightning again in any of its forms or I promise I will destroy you.”

“Who are you to judge who is worthy of such a power? You’re just an old hag camped out in some prison wasteland in the tundra!” Tetsuya yelled.

“Tsuya! Don’t make her change her mind!” Miyoko begged, falling by his side, helping to sit up again.

“An old hag who loves her niece more than she will ever fear you, a pathetic, earthbending bastard.” Azula replied, walking out of the cell leaving Sasuke, Miyoko, and Tetsuya on the ground. Miyoko and Sasuke helped Tetsuya to his feet and half dragged, half carried him back to the lift where Azula was waiting.

They found Eiko comfortably curled up in a circle inside the great entrance hall of the prison. She had bent a ring of rainbow fire around herself to keep warm while waiting for her beloved Mother’s children to return to her.

Azula parted the flames with a flick of her wrist and entered the circle, coming face to face with the battered dragon.

“Remember me, Eiko?” she asked with a sly grin. The dragon growled and moved away from her, but stilled when she saw Sasuke, Miyoko and Tetsuya coming up behind the disgraced Princess of the Fire Nation.

“Don’t worry, pet. Like you, I wouldn’t kill them,” Azula promised as she climbed onto Eiko’s back. Sasuke and Miyoko had to help Tetsuya up for his body was unbelievably weak after what Azula had done to him. Eiko noticed and eyed Azula again, angry. “He’ll recover eventually. He’s not as weak as he looks. That’s a good thing. Now, for Izumi… Take us to Ember Island” Azula ordered once everyone was on.

Eiko growled at her again, this time blowing steam in her face.

“I know, I know. You don’t have to tell me again at exactly what temperature I will burn if I singe as much as a hair on your beloved master’s head,” Azula cooed, patting the dragon’s scales. “Now get on with it already.”

Eiko huffed, uncurled, and flew out of the entrance hall and back south to the Fire Nation… home.

They landed on the far side of the island to hide their return and walked through the wood to the
house. It was rather easy to find their Mother’s new room undetected since most of the family did spend their days a safe distance away from her down at the sparring arena, the beach, or the village.

“Speak to no one. In case you’ve forgotten, I’m not supposed to be here, and you were not supposed to run off with your mother’s dragon when you could have just used your—” she stopped herself. “Yoko, you must use dark lightning to still your mother’s limbs. Keep them down and away from her head. Tetsuya, you put a cloth in her mouth lest she break her teeth during this process. It will not be quick or easy for any of us so you’ll have to be strong.”

“Great Aunt, where would you like me?” Sasuke asked, running to keep up.

“Can you stand your own against your Father?”

“I believe so as long as he doesn’t use his bending against me,” Sasuke replied.

“Good, you’ll need to. Your Father is weak, blinded by love, and he doesn’t like me much after—never mind that… just keep him away.”

“How?”

“Use your words. I heard you’re just as sharp as your beloved swords.”

“Her new room is this way,” Tetsuya said, feeling even the most subtle of vibrations through the foundation of the house.

Azula used magnetic field generation to undo the lock of the door then nodded for Tetsuya and Miyoko to go in while Sasuke stood guard. Tetsuya kicked the door open and Miyoko passed through grabbing her Mother immediately in a hold of Dark Lightning.

Izumi’s body fought harder than Miyoko expected and she struggled.

“Great Aunt! I can’t hold her!” Miyoko whispered in a panic as Izumi’s hair flickered blue, fighting her daughter.

“You will,” Azula said, putting a hand on Miyoko’s shoulder, sharing just the flash of a memory, a feeling, and a technique, teaching her in an instant, everything. Miyoko raised her hand, bent her wrist a certain way, slid her right foot forward, lifted her left hand and dropped the right then crossed her wrists and guided her mother’s arms away and body into position effortlessly while Izumi’s eyes widened with terror.

“Yoko!” Izumi whimpered, tears streaming down her face.

Scared, Miyoko threw her mother’s head back so she couldn’t talk.

“Careful, child,” Azula cooed softly, sliding her hand over Miyoko’s shoulder, approaching Izumi. “Remember to stay away from her head child, that’s mine!—Tsuya—”

Tetsuya jumped onto the bed behind his mother and forced a bit of cloth into her mouth to keep her quiet as tears poured from her eyes.

“What are you doing?” a quiet, reserved voice asked from the corner.

Not loosening their grip, the three turned to find Bataar Sr. standing over some blueprints he just rolled up, looking more terrified than ever. Azula walked towards him. “Saving my dear niece
from herself,” she said, touching his neck, zapping him unconscious and letting him fall to the floor.

Izumi’s body winced as Bataar hit the floor prompting Miyoko to strengthen her hold.

Azula climbed into the bed and stood over her niece. “You’re pitiful,” Azula proclaimed, two fingers to either side of Izumi’s head.

“She’s fighting harder!” Miyoko cried.

“Don’t worry, sweet child. She would never hurt you,” Azula replied as she prodded around Izumi’s head painlessly with her superior precision bending. She looked down at her niece’s special corset. It was an unusual make and shape. Azula removed one hand and touched her niece’s diaphragm and mapped her entire nervous system like she had done a thousand times before. Azula could sense the missing nerves where Izumi had burned right through herself. “Aww... did you hurt yourself?” Azula asked, watching with complete apathy, tears sliding down her niece’s face. “Let this be the last time—Tsuya is the cloth secure?”

“Yes.”

“Good, get off the bed.”

“Yes, Great Aunt,” Tetsuya jumped off.

Azula too climbed down and stood at the foot of the bed.

“Yoko, take a break,” Azula ordered.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Miyoko asked.

“Do as I say.”

Miyoko hesitated. As soon as her grip loosened, Izumi lunged out of bed at Azula, fists full of blue fire. Azula overpowered her and lowered her back down, and then took her head. They watched as their mother thrashed, reaching for her head but unable to get it. Her back bent far and her legs and arms twisted and she tried to pull away. Azula stepped around to the side of the bed and continued the process.

Tetsuya heard a sniffle. Yoko was crying. She did this. If it weren’t for her little investigation, her mother might not have been broken, and might not have ever needed fixing. Tsuya grabbed Miyoko instinctively trying to shield his little sister from the sight of their mother in such pain.

“Sasuke, son, why didn’t you come see me when you got back?” Masaru’s voice could be heard through the door.

“ Didn’t think I needed to.” Sasuke replied.

“Was the search for a solution that unsuccessful?” Masaru inquired.

“More or less...” Sasuke lied.

“Who’s in the room?”

“Only Uncle Baatar,” Sasuke lied again.

“Then why are you standing guard here like a sentry?” Masaru asked, pushing past his son.
“Father, wait!” Sasuke lunged for him, but the door was already open.

“No!” Masaru yelled, lunging forward, hand outstretched in Azula’s direction. Azula was faster and stilled the man where he stood, reaching. With one hand, she made him watch his wife as she writhed in pain on the bed, trying to end what could not be ended and touch what could not be touched and forget what could never be forgotten. And in the resulting chain of energy being exchanged between the three, Azula made Masaru see...

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“What are you thinking about?” a much younger Azula asked, sitting cross-legged on a stool beside the lab bench.

“All the ways I could kill Miu and the other sages,” Young Izumi answered with a terrifying glint in her eye. She stood in an unfamiliar room deep in the bowels of the Palace surrounded by alchemy equipment and fresh plant samples from the Royal Family’s poisonous plant garden. “I could be merciful. Give him a quick, painless death in his sleep. Only a drop in his morning or afternoon tea would take five hours to take affect. He’d only be drowsy and never wake again. I could be mean... start a reaction in the stomach acid...” she said, picking up a second poison and turning it over. She replaced it on the table and picked up a third. “Or one in the bowels. They’d write a song about him then... the Sage who shat himself to death...”

“Zumi?”

“Yes, Aunt Azula...”

“Must I remind you, that poison is a woman’s weapon...”

“Aren’t I a woman?” Izumi asked.

“You are, but if you want to fuck the hierarchy, you’d kill like a man with fire and blood. Make it known by all what you mean by it and don’t hide behind your own skirts...”

Izumi’s arms trembled as they held her over the table. She eyed the poison... heavily considering taking it herself.

...

“So... you didn’t do it?” Azula asked, back in that same room.

“Oh trust me, I wanted to!” Izumi spat, stashing away the prepared samples.

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because, a good friend once told me that one’s greatest strength lies in restraint,” Izumi replied, slamming the cabinet door shut, leaning on it with one hand, while the other hung limply at her side, tears dripping down her smooth, porcelain cheeks, like a perfect little doll, breaking.

“Then why are you still shaking. You made your decision! You’ve no reason to feel anything--”

“No reason? Anger and fear isn’t enough? Could you possibly be more blind?”

“What’s there to see?”

“That NOBODY CARES!”
“We care—”

“About my name! I’m no more than a figure head! A pawn in a game! Taught not how to live or think, only how to watch and obey, silently without so much as a blink of question!”

“You give your services and get fed and housed— What more do you want?”

“Time! To be a mother to my children-- the ones you all MADE me have! To learn how to rule! To try to make sense of all this abuse!”

“Pffft! What do you know of abuse? My Father pitched me against generals ten times my age since I could produce my first sparks to make me strong—“

“At least he did something--”

“--And let them have their way with me when I lost!” Azula yelled, shocking her dear niece.

Izumi fell silent for a long while. “At least you had the opportunity to fight, instead of being married off to a sadistic rapist... and paralyzed.” Izumi said, turning away from Azula, walking towards the stool by the workbench where Azula had been sitting in the last memory. “At least your Father was there to see your pain. At least he knew what he was doing to you.”

“Your father knows—“

“HOW CAN HE WHEN HE’S NEVER HERE!” Izumi yelled, flipping the lab bench, spilling several poisons in various stages of purification. Before the liquids could burn their flesh, Azula set the collection ablaze. She leapt through the blue fire and shielded her niece from the flames, hurrying her to the tunnel.

...

“What happened? Why are you covered in smoke and smell of soiled turtle duck eggs?” Mai asked as they emerged.

“Someone threw a little tantrum,” Azula answered quickly, scowling at Izumi.

“Zumi get bathed. We have guests in an hour, you knew that,” Mai ordered. Azula let go of her niece and she stormed off.

“She can’t go on like this...” Mai reminded Azula.

“I know, and I am working on a solution! I just need to test it on somebody!”

“Test it on me,” Mai suggested.

“You’re the Fire Lady. I can’t.”

“Zuko never has to know!”

“I already have several subjects at the penitentiary.”

“There’s no time! It has to be done now! Before they come!” Mai insisted.

...

“Iliana, leave us,” Azula entered Izumi’s room. She had been bathed, dress and now sat at her
dressing table waiting for Iliana to finish her hair.

“But--” Izumi whispered.

“I’ll do it,” Azula said, grabbing her niece’s long locks and a hair brush.

Izumi winced. Her fists were closed on her lap and trembling.

“This nervousness cannot continue,”

“I cannot help it,”

“I can.”

“How,”

“I can’t tell you.”

Izumi frowned.

“You just have to trust me.”

“I can’t trust anyone anymore,” Izumi whispered.

“Your loss,” Azula said placing the Crown Princess’s headpiece over her bun. Azula rested her hands on Izumi’s shoulders. The princess had no mirror to inspect her aunt’s handiwork, or see her aunt’s hands moving towards her head. Then nothing but blackness overcame everything.

............

Hisoki stood over her on the bed, “Bite the blanket--” just as the corner of the fabric came into view, there was a flash of white light and then nothing.

...

Izumi was sitting at a table, taking tea with Hisoki when a maid tripped and dropped an empty dish.

“How dare yo--” FLASH

...

Izumi and Hisoki were climbing the steps to the Ember Island house.

She paused to look back at the beach, remembering her time with Masaru there as a child. They were so happy and free, always getting into mischief with Eiko.

“Who’s this?” Hisoki called from inside.

Izumi turned.

FLASH

...

“Don’t forget to smile this time…” FLASH just as the shutter snapped.
Hisoki was dragging her by the wrist down an unfamiliar hall of an unfamiliar house. Both were dressed much more formally than usual. “Hisoki-- where are you taking me--” FLASH

“Where is my child?” Izumi demanded when she woke on the birthing bed. Hisoki turned, his face crestfallen, and angry. FLASH

“It has been decided that Ursa--” Zuko began to say--FLASH

Masaru staggered back as he returned to the present. Azula stood calmly, with her hands behind her back, finished with her task. And Izumi, lay unconscious on the floor.

“Was that--”

“Everything that needs to be suppressed for her to function, and where it is stored in case anybody ever decides to go exploring again,” Azula said, casting a glance over at Miyoko.

“But what about the defenses?” Masaru asked. “I can’t get in her head!”

“I had both Miyoko and Tetsu see it too,” Azula explained.

Masaru’s face fell. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Tetsu, sure but Yoko? She’s just a child!”

“I know! Don’t worry. She only saw the starts and the stops, not the ends that we know… that way she can help her mother once her mother kills me,” Azula explained, placing her hands up on Masaru’s shoulders reassuringly.

“What why would she--” Masaru began to ask before Azula shared another memory, one of her own.

Azula was standing behind Izumi, that same day, at the dressing table. “Why should I trust you?” Izumi asked.

“Because I love you, Izumi. And I would never intentionally hurt you. I am sorry for what you have had to go through, and I want to make amends for it… make it.. End.”

“You’ll make me forget?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know it will last?”

“I have been testing it on prisoners for months, using it to uncover their networks, then making them forget so once they were released, they could not return to their former life of crime.”

“It sounds too good to be true” Izumi said skeptically.
Because it isn’t true… Azula said only in her head that Masaru could see, observing this memory.

As soon as Azula let go of Masaru’s head, she screamed. Blue lightning danced across her eyes, her tears began to vaporize and her lips began to shrivel and die. She fell, rigid and clean, her skin old, wrinkly and leathery, her body, motionless, no longer breathing, heart not beating, fried from the inside. Izumi had pushed herself up onto her elbows, lifted a hand and ended her aunt in an instant.

“Mother?” Miyoko whimpered.

Izumi found her feet and eyed her youngest daughter curiously as if for a second she didn’t recognize the girl.

She reached out to touch her girl’s face, but the girl flinched away. “I understand why you wouldn’t trust me, now,” Izumi said quietly. “But I am still your mother, and if you have any questions, you need only ask.” She said sincerely. She looked up, tired, but all the way there. “And stay away from my head.” She looked to Sasuke and Tetsu. “Thank you all for your help, now go rest, and Saru,” she turned to her husband. “I’ll go prepare for her cremation.”

“Shouldn’t she have a state funeral? She was a princess of the Fire Nation after all?” Sasuke asked.

“She was a convicted traitor who as far as the world knows, never got out of the capital prison let alone became the primary advisor to the fucking princess,” Izumi replied, taking another step closer to the door.

“Ma,” Yoko called. Izumi turned, her patience waning. “Why did you have to kill her?”

“Because I don’t trust her around me… or you for that matter. She said this thing would work the first time, and it didn’t… it didn’t last. And I must prune away branches that pose a threat to the rest of the tree. I could not allow her to go on living,” Izumi answered, disappearing down the hall, leaving Masaru, Sasuke, Tetsuya, and Miyoko with Azula’s body.

“She’s right,” Masaru said to the three children.

“About what?”

“Nobody can know,” he said, looking down at Azula.

“That she died?”

“That she was ever allowed to live.”

Chapter End Notes

No Light, No Light in these golden eyes, (original lyrics say "bright blue" never knew daylight could be so violent
a revelation in the light of day
you can’t choose what stays and what fades away
I’d do anything to make you stay
No light no light
tell me what you want me to say…
**would you leave me, if I told you what I’ve done**
and would you need me, if I told you what I’ve become
Cause it’s so easy to say it to a crowd
but it’s hard my love… to say it to you out loud…)
-Florence Welch / Isabella Summers

These last two chapters were very loosely inspired by several Florence + the Machine "things"
-The music video for *Shake it Out*, and the songs *No Light, No Light*, and *Which Witch*

Last, but not least, thanks MusicPlayer81 for all of your help!
Chapter 8: New Normal

Even with being able to see the moon and the stars, she felt as though she were still imprisoned. She held her knees into her body as she stared at the scrapes she had etched in the opposite wall of the window sill where she sat. Thirty-one days had passed since she had felt almost free.

She was allowed whatever she wanted here. She could eat whenever she wanted, use the bathroom whenever she needed, stroll through the gardens and city unaccompanied. But she had no use for her newfound freedom since it seemed like everyone in Zaofu wanted her dead. Twice they threw pigchicken eggs at her, and thrice, rotten grapematoes. Every time Su simply responded “I’m sorry, why don’t you go wash up?”

She had once been captain of the guard in this city and such actions warranted a charge of assault in her time. But a lifetime had passed since then. It seemed she was no longer a full citizen entitled to any rights to protection in this cruel world.

She missed the beach and the heat of Ember Island and as surprising as it was, the overwhelmingly chaotic energy of the members of the Fire Family. Everything in Zaofu was unchanging like its surrounding mountains, and cold and hard like its infamous metal domes. She had been grateful for the silence and peace at first, but now it was unbearably lonely.

Footsteps by the door jarred her out of her thoughts, but letting her fingertips graze the floor saw that it wasn’t Bataar. Maybe it was a good thing that he took the threat regarding the imminent loss of his hands if they made contact with her ever again very seriously. But at the same time, she so very much longed for some company.

BaatSr. was off working on that damn train renovation he had been trying to complete for—shit, some four years, maybe. Suyin was flying between Ba Sing Se almost daily making absolutely no visible change for better or for worse. Huan was already buried in a new set of abstract sculptures, Opal was off travelling the world with Kai, Jinora, and Jiexue as part of the reborn Air Nomads, and the twins wasted what little brain cells they had playing endless games of power disk.

There was still her old dance class with its springy floorboards and unchanging routines, but being dropped in the group dance multiple times had spelled out a very clear message. In any other city, Kuvira could have learned a solo for the recital, but solos didn’t exist in Zaofu. It was bad form, according to the teachers, that promoted a type of narcissistic individualism. It was all so ironic, for a place that claimed to encourage everyone to reach his or her highest potential, they were very good at hammering down anyone’s attempts to become something that didn’t align with their backwards philosophy.

Taemon decided to take the long way back to the camp, by the river where he could have time to think. He looked up at the stars, missing the warmth they used to give and the hope they’d bring. Then he looked at his hands, so callused and rough, covered in blood, grease, and dust. He tried to wipe them off on his pants but only succeeded in tearing a blister and adding puss to the mess. He sighed in resignation. This was his new life, he thought as he bent down to the water to wash his hands. He would work to contribute to his great nation however they saw fit. He was a good worker now, so obedient and efficient. If he continued to behave, rewards could be placed on the table. His latest offer, if he could make it to the end of the week without receiving a single warning, would be a letter, to anybody.
The blister stung as he scrubbed off the caked grease and blood. He was torn between writing a report to his mother, or a letter to Kuvira. The former could check in on his welfare at any time with her clearances and connections. As for the latter— he hoped more than everything she wasn’t being treated too badly. Everyone deserved, if not love, at least mercy.

He dried his hands and applied pressure to the torn blister and the cut he forgot ever acquiring and continued his walk back to the camp, tin cup in hand, ready to receive his rations.

The queue was messy and loud as his fellow laborers lined up for their meal. He was known as the only one to say thank you. The server scowled at him. Here, you keep your head down and blend in with the others. Nobody wanted to deal with the pompous noblemen who were responsible for sending most of them to the work camps.

He took his meal alone in the small tent he shared with his two brothers, one of whom had been missing for a few days. They’d search when they could but couldn’t abandon their duties too much or they’d be noticed. If they strayed too far, they could be killed. They thought of their mother. She could afford to lose one son in this pit of misery, but not all three three. She loved so much that her sanity had begun waning.

Tetsuya was already asleep when Taemon arrived. He’d beat up a couple of the “friends” his twin kept, trying to get information but was unsuccessful. Tatsu was just... gone.

Taemon was torn again, between waking his brother and best friend, sharing the research the camp directors had him participate in or letting him rest. The younger, Tsuya was wasted on manual labor and relied on Taemon to keep his beloved head sharp.

Tetsuya rolled over on his thin mat on the floor of the tent and faced Taemon whose elbows rested on his knees, drinking his soup.

“I dreamt of mother... and the words her mother told her.”

“Refresh me.”

“Never forget what you were...”

“...Surely the world will not...”

“...Wear it like armour...”

“...And it can never be used to break what’s left of your heart...”

Taemon drained his soup cup and Tetsuya drained his water cup.

The younger looked down at it, crushed it and threw it across the way at the canvass flap of the tent.

“Tsuya! How will you get rations now?”

“I don’t need rations! My brother is gone! Idiot or not, he’s my brother!” Tetsuya cried. “If he is drowning, I have to save him or die trying!”

“Tsuya,” Taemon put down his cup and pulled his little brother into his arms. He had to protect him. He had to have someone to bring back to their family, should their Mother call another reunion.
Tetsuya cried. He cried like he never had before. All the years of pain, fear and frustration came like a torrential wave flattening whatever defenses he had built on the coast of his being. He knew prison was a place for suffering, a place to repent for one’s sins, but he never thought it would be like this.

Republic City still thrived even after becoming overgrown with spirit vines. It was a bittersweet return to the City that taught her how to be a rebel, a criminal, and a free being. She left Eiko on some public game hunting ground, and showed her the boundaries. Told her to run from any hunters, or burn them alive if running wasn’t possible. Either way, she’d be able to find food there for herself. Izumi took the train across the Earth Kingdom border and into the United Republic. It was only the second time in her life she was crossing a border as a civilian in need of a passport and a reason to enter a country.

“The Golden Seal of the Flying Boar?” the customs agent gasped. “It is an honor to serve one of the Beifong Family.”

“Oh it’s nothing, really!” Izumi dismissed.

“You’re too humble! Welcome to the United Republic! Enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you,” and Izumi continued, without any luggage, onto another train. She could stay at her Father’s old house here, in the Royal suite at the Fire Nation Embassy, in her mother’s family’s suite at the Four Seasons Hotel, at her husband’s apartments in the Earthen Fire Republic City Headquarter Building, or on Air Temple Island, with her best friend’s family… but that didn’t need to be decided immediately.

The first door was thrown open quickly by Suyin, then the next and the next.

“Wing, Wei, Kuvira! Best clothes! Hurry up!” Suyin called.

“Why?” Wei asked petulantly.

“Because Aunt Lin’s in Zaofu and will be joining us for dinner this evening!” Suyin explained.

“But it’s just Aunt Lin!” Wing protested.

“Yeah! And you’re the Earth Queen. So aren’t we like-- princes? Maybe she should be dressing up for us!”

Suyin frowned at her beloved twins. “Then at least bathe and put on something clean please.”

Kuvira still sat on the window sill, watching the scene in the hall unfold, and then the twins drudge back into their rooms reluctantly.

Suyin sighed and turned her attention to her foster daughter. “Do you need help choosing something?”

“I’ll be fine, thanks,” Kuvira replied quietly, swinging her legs over the edge of the wide window, stealing one last glance at the tally marks etched on the wall of her room like the ones she had back
in her prison cell.

Suyin lingered in the door regardless, watching as Kuvira approached her closet.

“You didn’t used to care how your children dressed, when anyone came to visit.”

“Things are different now,” Suyin explained with a tired sigh.

“How?”

“I— want to care,” Suyin replied as Kuvira pulled off her casual clothes in favor of a longer, more elegant new dress from the collection Lin and Suyin gifted her the day she arrived on Ember Island.

Kuvira didn’t believe Su. She knew the Matriarch of Zaofu was a habitual liar. “Are you afraid of your sister?”

“Of course not! What would give you that idea?”

“You’re shaking the foundation,” Kuvira replied, looking down at her feet, grateful for Rikuto, Huifan, and Jinkun’s lessons in seismic sense.

“I’m not—”

“It’s not the twins, and it’s not me,” Kuvira replied, choosing a necklace from a drawer of jewelry she’d never owned or worn before.

Suyin rushed over. “Wear this necklace instead! It frames your jawline better, and let your hair down! You’re home! You can relax now!” Suyin exclaimed, rushing over, snatching Kuvira’s necklace in her hands and replacing it before reaching for the former Great Uniter’s low bun and undoing it quickly.

“What if I like my hair up?” Kuvira asked, stepping away.

“What if I pull my titles and order you to let it down? It looks better that way. Makes you appear younger and more relaxed, don’t you think?”

Kuvira sighed and pulled the ribbon securing her braid off, running her fingers through the long, tumbling waves. She turned to the mirror. She looked younger, true, but she did not look at all relaxed.

“Do you think Lin will report my appearance to Izumi or something?” Kuvira asked, trying to reason why Suyin wanted so much input in how she dressed when before she was practically nonexistent.

“What?! No!” Suyin shrieked.

Nailed it!

“I just want to put on a good face for Lin.”

“You mean a fake face—”

“Why are you being so difficult?”

“Su, honey! Lin’s here!” Baatar called.
“Come on!” Su huffed, dragging Kuvira from the room by the arm.

Izumi remembered the Beifong House in the Ivory District well. Last time she was here, she and Kya were dropping off an eleven year old Lin home after coercing her into filling in for Rona on their pro-bending team way back in the day. Lin had made her and Kya leave her over a mile away so that Toph couldn’t see them coming and get them in trouble with their parents. Little did they know, Toph had her own personal security stalking her firstborn daughter at all times just as Izumi’s parents had done with her. It seemed only Kya had a truly free childhood of them three.

She laughed as she ascended the steps and lifted the heavy knocker hanging in the mouth of a massive gold-plated head of flying boar and let it fall, clanging loudly against the door.

An earthbender two years younger than Ursa opened the door. Huifan, Lin’s eldest girl.

Izumi smiled. “Are you living alone here now?”

“Hungjian has a room upstairs, but like Mom did, practically lives at the station now,” the young prodigy answered with a smile.

“And your siblings?”

“Jiexue and Xiaoyu are—I’m not sure where they are, actually. Kang lives on Air Temple Island with Mom and Dad, Jin makes his base out of the Beifong Estate in the mountains, but he spends most of his time traveling in the Earth Kingdom, making statues for old rich people.”

“My, you’ve all grown so much since— since everything.”

“Yeah, I guess we have. Come in, Aunt Zumi!” Huifan said, waving for her aunt to enter.

“So if Hungjian is with the police now and everyone else is traveling, what do you do?”

“I teach at the Beifong Metalbending Academy here in Republic City… well kind of… I teach the youngest group that comes in the afternoons and occasional seminars for the other instructors. Mom doesn’t think I should spend all day there or I’ll burn myself out. She says people, while they may seem fun and exciting after growing up so alone, are still—” Huifan struggled to find the words.

“Rather draining,” Izumi laughed. “She’s not wrong, that’s for sure.”

Huifan smiled. “So what have you been up to, Aunt Zumi? You’re walking well! Is your side—”

“Fine, thank you for asking. Once we got back to the Capital, I was able to get a skin graft and have the metal meshing removed. Kya and Sunako finished it off. Thank you so much for your help on Ember Island! I am so sorry you had to witness such a ghastly thing.”

“Eh… shit happens.”

“It does.”

“Can I get you anything? Tea?”

“That would be nice, thank you!”
“Are all of my fire cousins faring well?” Huifan asked, appearing genuinely interested, though Izumi knew she only really cared for Rikuto and Ursa.

“For the most part. Those who have contacted me seem healthy. The state doesn’t tell me much about the twins or Taemon, but I can’t do anything about that now. I severed all strings I could have pulled in that territory when I abdicated.” Izumi shrugged.

“I’m sure they’re doing fine. They’re strong, like you.”

“They were. People change when they lose such integral parts of their being... like civil rights and freedoms,” Izumi replied, looking out a window as she passed it.

Huifan turned away from the stove bringing a kettle. It would have been faster for Izumi to heat the tea, and likely more precise temperature-wise, but Izumi wanted her niece to have the opportunity to host somebody, and learn how to run her own home.

“So what’s this project you mentioned wanting my help with in your letter? Said I couldn’t even tell Mom?”

“Well, Lin I suppose you can trust because it *is* Earthen Fire Business and she is the owner and CEO of half the company, but we don’t want word spreading far anywhere-- especially within the family.” Izumi explained.

“Business?”

“Yes, I’ve been given a lab and have been recruiting a team to help me develop some— products that will help people who are— physically disabled, so to speak. Once perfected, it will eventually be made available for free, but we want it to be kept under wraps for now so that no other companies take it, commercialize it, and make it an exclusive for the elite.”

“Damn, Earthen Fire must be rolling in dough!”

Izumi smiled. “We’re not hurting, that’s for damn sure.”

“So other than things to help physically disabled people, what can you tell me about this project?”

“Nothing more about the project but I can tell you about your potential position. It is not a regular position. You’ll be a contractor on an on-call basis who will come and help test our products for safety. Most of them are made of metal but we want to make sure they are not bendable.”

“So they’re made out of platinum?” Huifan asked, leaning closer with her elbows on the table.

“Can’t confirm or deny. Their composition is confidential as well,” Izumi answered.

“Dang, okay!” Huifan said excitedly.

“In terms of compensation, the company will pay you a hundred and twenty yuans an hour—”

“Woah! That’s like four times what I make at the academy!”

“But it’s not regular. We’ll probably bring iterations about once or twice a month and require about five days of work each time, 8 hours a day…”

“That sounds amazing! I’ll do it!”

“Great! I have the non-disclosure agreement back at the Headquarter Office here in Republic City,
but with stuff like this we like to give our potential contractors a day to think before they sign half their life away,” Izumi explained dead seriously.

Huifan choked.

“I’m just kidding. Here’s the actual document to read through outlining exactly what you’ll be doing and what you can say and not say about it all as well as the consequences for sharing. Those weren’t decided by me, unfortunately— but if you have any questions, you can contact me—or your mother, I suppose. She won’t know anything about the project specifics, but can help you fill out the forms.”

“Great!” Huifan exclaimed, taking the stack of papers. “I’ll get back to you about it tomorrow morning.”

“Excellent! In the meantime are you busy? May an Aunt treat her niece to lunch, if she has time to spare?”

“I— Sure, I guess! Thanks, Aunt Zumi.”

“I know your Mother has always raved about Ding’s Dumplings before but I swear that wasn’t the only place we frequented as children. In the Ashen district there’s this incredible hot kebab place—can you handle spicy—or do you like it?”

“I like it.”

“Oh good!”

Our house on Air Temple Island is so small compared to Grandma’s house in the Ivory District, thought Huifan as she entered it for the first time in what felt like forever.

“Dad! I’m home!” she called. “DAD?”

“He’s out showing some new acolytes the lay of the land,” Kang informed his sister, running down the stairs to greet her.

“Are these ones actual acolytes or just fans?” Huifan asked with a smirk as she searched the cabinets for a snack. “Sweet Spirits, this place is empty when Ma’s not home to cook things!”

“I know, right! I wonder why we can’t just hire Mo back to do all of the shopping and meal-planning,” Kang said, flopping down in the chair at one of the heads of the dining table.

“You know why! It’s too bougie for the Air Nomad’s simplistic lifestyle,” Huifan explained, finding a package of dried seaweed.

“I call BS!”

“I’m right there with you,” Huifan agreed, sitting across from her baby brother.

“So, what brings you back to our humble island?”

“Dad called me.”

“Why?”
“Because I had a top-secret meeting scheduled with Aunt Zumi today!”

“Really? About what?”

“It is top secret!”

“But you’re going to tell Dad about it! Why can’t you tell me?”

“I am not going to tell Dad about the contents of the meeting. He just asked how Auntie was doing. If she seemed… stable after everything that went down on Ember Island.”

“Oh! That makes sense… So did she seem stable?”

“Yes! Just fine! After the meeting at the house, we went to lunch at this place called the Flaming Fillet that puts steaks on sticks and makes them suuuuuper spicy!”

“Ew! I can’t stand spicy!”

“Ha! Weak!”

“I’m not weak! I probably just didn’t inherit as much from Grandpa Satoru as you.”

“Hello!” Tenzin’s voice called from the front door.

“IN HERE!” Kang called. “Fa-Ni came home!”

“Hey Dad!”

“Ni! So good to see you!” Tenzin exclaimed, kissing his eldest daughter on the head. “Ikki, could you go bathe Rohan for me?”

“Why can’t Meelo?” Ikki groaned.

Meelo has to go feed all of the ring-tailed lemurs,” Tenzin answered.

“Daddy, If I get myself an army of bison, can I tend to those instead of bathing the baby?”

“I’m not a baby!” Rohan yelled.

“Yes you are!”

“I’m a big boy now!”

“Then bathe yourself!”

“Ikki, please!” Tenzin begged, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

“Fine!” Ikki groaned, scooping up her littlest brother and carrying him upstairs while he continued to whine and complain about being called a baby.

“Where did all of this attitude come from? She used to just be inquisitive. Now she’s just infuriating!” Tenzin exclaimed.

“Ikki is what… thirteen now?” Huifan asked.

“Twelve,” Tenzin corrected her.
“It’s called puberty,“

“But Jinora wasn’t like this!”

“Jinora’s like Aang reincarnated-- Ikki is her own thing!” Huifan replied.

“Shoulda seen Mom have to deal with two preteens and a teen way back when! It wasn’t pretty!” Kang laughed.

“I am forever grateful!” Tenzin sighed, looking up at the ceiling.

“Aren’t we all? So, can I give you my report and leave?” Huifan asked.

“Aren’t you going to stay for dinner?”

“Can’t. Aunt Zumzu filled me up on kebabs.”

“I should have known. So how does she seem to you? Any evidence of--”

“None. Teasing people is actually for fun again, and not some slightly sadistic past time for her.”

“That’s good to hear. And are all of her children faring well?”

“Uncle Saru, Cousin Rikuto and Cousin Sasuke were supposed to help Miyoko move out of the dorms and into an apartment near the university this weekend. Fire Lord Takeo is adjusting well to his new position and meets with Aunt Zumi about once every two weeks regarding social and political matters. General Iroh is stationed… somewhere, can’t remember… Aunt Zumi has no news on Tetsu and Tatsu or Taemon. She says she severed connection with all of her contacts when she abdicated.”

“And she didn’t blow up a building at the mention of their names?”

“She was the ones who mentioned them!”

“That’s-- great, I think.”

“Yeah.”

“Your mother will be pleased! Thank you for telling me.”

“Why couldn’t I just tell her directly?”

“She’s busy traveling right now on official Earthen Fire Business.”

“Ah, right. Learning the various branches of her new company.”

“Yes!”

“Speaking of Earthen Fire, I AM GOING TO BE A SUBCONTRACTOR FOR THEM!” Huifan exclaimed.

“That’s wonderful! Doing what?”

“Top secret stuff!”

“Seriously?”
“YEP!”

“Can you tell me the department at least?”

“Yep! Prosthetic Device Testing in the Biomechanical Division,“

“Biomechanical? Never heard of it. Or prosthetic…”

“Biomechanical is just--- bio--life and mechanical stuff like machines and moving parts, I think. I’m not sure the specifics. And prosthetics are… I’m not sure what they are. You’ll have to ask aunt Zumi about it. She’s the head of the R & D team.”

“R & D?”

“Research and development!”

“Ah, I see. Well, will do. Do you know where she’s staying while she is in the city?”

“Nope! She said she had options though, the Penthouse of Earthen Fire Refinery has a massive apartment suite complex thingy where Masaru stays when he comes to the city. Her mother’s family has a penthouse suite in the Four Seasons Hotel in downtown. I offered her a room at Grandma Toph’s old house, but she said she could also just head back to the hunting ground and sleep with Eiko under the stars… like old times…”

“Aunt Zumi is… interesting…” Kang thought aloud.

“She is,” Tenzin agreed.

Just then, the door of the main house flew open and in walked the dragon herself followed by her elemental other half.

“Zumi? Kya?” Tenzin gasped as the two women clamored into the house, each laden with bags of groceries.

“Kya told me what you’ve done! Tenzin! How could you?” Izumi exclaimed, setting the bags down on the kitchen floor.

“How could I what?”

“Let the fucking fridge empty?” Izumi asked, throwing another door open.

Both Huifan and Kang bursted into a fit of laughter while Tenzin rouged with embarassment.

“I-- well I figured we could all eat with the other air acolytes in the dining hall and--”

“Hell no,” Huifan whispered.

“Especially not with the new flock of fangirls I saw walking in,” Izumi laughed. “Kya, is Bumi joining us for dinner?”

“Should be,” Kya answered.

“He’s retired and has no excuse not to,” Izumi said sternly.

“He’ll come,” Kya assured her.
“Zumi, will you be staying with us while you’re in the city?”

“No, in the main house,” Izumi answered.

“With me!” Kya clarified for her little brother, snaking an arm around the Fire Nation woman’s waist and sneaking a kiss on the lips as she unloaded the groceries while Tenzin averted his eyes.

Huifan beamed while Kang laughed.

“Oh please! Don’t be surprised! I heard Korra has resumed her airbending training. Surely you see her and Asami sucking face all the time!”

“Yeah, but neither of them are MARRIED to someone ELSE!” Kang replied.

“Uncle Saru’s only wish is that I’m happy,” Izumi explained.

“Don’t worry Tenz, we’re only here to make the kids dinner. We have 8PM reservations at Kwangs Cuisine and then we’re going bar hopping!” Kya reassured her brother.

“Isn’t that what young people do?” Huifan asked.

“It’s what anyone old enough does when they’re in dire need of a lot of drinks,” Izumi clarified eliciting more roars of laughter from Huifan and Kang.

Kuvira was surprised to hear the Beifong Sisters exchange such civil small talk after everything that transpired on Ember Island. She expected Lin to interrogate Suyin, or Suyin to pull her still relatively new titles on Lin. The youngest Beifong of her generation, despite being the matriarch of Zaofu, had no power on Fire Nation soil, but here, she was the sole person on the highest rung of the society.

Kuvira sat silently by the door while the sisters exchanged rather uncharacteristic pleasantries. “You look different with your hair down,” Lin commented to Kuvira.

“Uh-- thank you?” Kuvira replied hesitantly. “You look different in a suit.”

“Do I? As opposed to what?”

“A set of armor or a gown,” Kuvira answered.

Lin laughed and then sighed. “I suppose it has been a while.”

“So, Lin! Spent the day at Earthen Fire Companies?” Suyin asked.

“Yes! The operations here in Zaofu are absolutely astonishing! The scale and efficiency is probably twice that of Makapu’s. I admire your people’s work ethic greatly!”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Is Baatar here?”

Baatar? Kuvira thought. Sr. or Jr.

“Unfortunately no. IN fact, I was going to ask you if you knew anything about what he’s doing,”
“Sorry, I haven’t spoken with him since Ember Island. Why? What has he done? I thought he was renovating the train station.”

“Apparently he’s abandoned that project, handed it off to his vice chairman and stepped down as CEO of Zaofu City Works and taken up a position in Earthen Fire’s new Biomechanical Division as a research assistant.”

“I’ve never even heard of such a thing. I’m still learning the ropes, you see. Saru might have an idea of what that is since he’s been running both halves of the company since he was like… twenty.”

Suyin frowned. She seemed to like her half-brother less and less each day that passed regardless of if he were present.

“Sorry if that wasn’t what you wanted to hear, but it’s the truth,” Lin shrugged, passing Su. “So who is cooking? Is it Mo still? I had lunch with my old Chef from the estate in the Foothills of the United Republic. He served the King of Omashu now and I couldn’t be more proud.”

Suyin furrowed her brows as she followed. “Question, Lin. In your opinion, should the Kingdom of Omashu be allowed autonomy while remaining a part of the Earth Kingdom?”

Lin paused. Her sister was baiting her, surely. After all, she was the Earth Queen now. But at the same time, Lin wasn’t to be discounted either. She held the Earth Kingdom half of Earthen Fire Refineries. If anything happened to her, Kuvira had no doubt Masaru would retaliate. He may not have the authority to invade the Earth Kingdom with a formal army, but his Numerous branches of the Amber League could probably do a lot of damage from the shadows.

“Omashu has thrived on it’s autonomy since it’s creation. For its first few centuries, the Earth Kings of old did not even know it existed. It has never risen up against anybody, only stood on its own and protected its people against invaders. I’d leave it alone if I were you.”

“Hm. Thank you for your opinion.”

“So, then. When was the last time you were in Ba Sing Se presiding over the kingdom you now rule?”

“A year maybe. Last I was there for work was before Pema was incarcerated.”

“Curious. Who rules in your stead while you stay here in Zaofu and come on our family vacations?”

“I don’t know. A council of sorts, I presume.”

“Ah!” Lin did not need to reply for her disapproval was only too evident on her face as she sat down at the dinner table.

Before any more looks or remarks could be exchanged, Suyin’s chef arrived to present that night’s meal.

“A decadent saber-tooth moose lion steak braised in only the finest, hand-crafted molasses sauce in the world with a side of fresh picked greens and a bit of sweet yam to recalibrate your senses after each bite. Enjoy!”

“It looks beautiful, thank you!” Suyin told her chef. “Well, everybody, dig in!”
It was almost like old times. Neither Baatar was present, Huan remained silent, and Wing and Wei wolfed down a few bites then fled to go play another useless game.

After the decadent dinner, Kuvira found herself alone with the Republic City’s former Chief of Police strolling through Suyin’s Gardens.

“So Kuvira, I just wanted to ask, how have you been? You’re eating enough, but... haven’t been exercising, that much I can see.”

“Is that your way of saying I have gained weight?” Kuvira asked.

“No. Your muscles have atrophied some. You’re thinner. You haven’t been training as intensely as I’ve seen.”

“I’ve nowhere to train.”

“Didn’t you used to attend a dance studio in the city?”

“Every time I leave the estate, I’m pelted by week old veggies. The days I do get to the studio, they reject me from every routine.”

“And Su does nothing?”

“Why should she? I deserve it, after all.”

“Maybe the old you does, yes, but you’ve changed. The rest of us can see it even if this backwards city can’t.”

“Well, it is what it is. Why do you even ask?”

“Guess.”

“Izumi asked you to check on me?”

“Close, but no.”

Kuvira paused. Lin wouldn’t come all this way to check on one niece or nephew. She had ten children at home to worry about and an international company to run. “Then who?”

“Taemon,” Lin answered, pulling out a torn scrap of paper.

Kuvira,

I hope you are well: eating, drinking, breathing, sleeping soundly, and able to walk with some confidence again. I can’t imagine life at the Beifong Residence in Gaoling as being very easy, but at least you’ve the freedom to dictate how you spend your time. At the present, I am working on refining a design for part of an airship engine for the Royal Fleet. As a reward for good behavior as well as thanks for my contribution to the project, I have been allowed a letter. I guess I just wanted to say: I hope you find that even in apparent isolation in the confines of a house, company in a good story. Sometimes it helps to distract from whatever ails oneself.

--T. M. Yamakatsu
“The bottom is torn,” Kuvira noted, running her finger along the soft, torn edge of the paper.

“The other half was addressed to Izumi, telling her not to worry since he and the twins are still breathing-- literally,” Lin explained, allowing Kuvira a glimpse of the remainder of the letter. “He asked that it be torn on the inside of the envelope so that the single piece allowed could still be received by multiple recipients.”

“And one of them was me,” Kuvira thought aloud.

“Yes. Now, if you excuse me, I should probably sleep. I have to be back in Republic City by morning and the air ship leaves at some ludicrous hour before sunrise.”
Masaru waited curiously outside the lecture hall for his daughter. He hadn’t stepped foot on the university campus since he was eighteen years old and deciding between studying or joining the army immediately after his compulsories. He wondered how many of the passing students exiting the hall knew of his daughter. She was, by all means, famous on campus and in the student community being Vice President Of the Students for True Freedom in the Fire Nation. She spoke at rallies that gathered tens of thousands of people in public squares, stadiums, and convention centers. She waved beautifully gory signs when she fronted the marches on the capital demanding change. She was known as one who held love only for the people, and only contempt and distaste for their former sovereign. However, since the new Fire Lord has been appointed, she’d gone quiet, her anger assuaged. Unbeknownst to the masses, she got her true wish granted: her mother replaced.

“Yoko!” Masaru called, running after his daughter as she fled the lecture hall among hundreds of school mates.

She turned and covered her face with one hand, visibly irked. “Father, What are you doing here? You promised not to come to school! Not since they started calling me the bastard of Earthen Fire Refineries in the eight grade!”

“I’m sorry! I just had to see you!”

“What could possibly be so important that it couldn’t wait until dinner?”

“I heard a rumor that the Imperial Reformation Party’s student group is arranging for Governor Takeshi Hideyoshi to come speak at their rally in a week.”

“Yeah, What about it?”

“I was wondering if you might consider meeting with their group’s president or whoever handles these events and propose a debate instead of just a rally.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because I know who can speak on your behalf, roast Hideyoshi AND help the Students for True Freedom in the Fire Nation reach most of their goals.”

Miyoko considered his words for only a fraction of a second before declaring, “No!”

“Yoko!” Masaru called, running after her.

“I won’t!” she yelled, waving her hand.

“You didn’t even stop to think!”

“I did! For a second! Now leave me alone! I have a class to get to!”

“Denkuo gave me your entire week’s schedule; You’ve nothing until three! Join me for lunch.
Just then a student intercepted Masaru and pushed him back. “Hey old man! Leave the girl alone!”

“Yeah? And how do you propose to make me do that?” Masaru asked curiously. The student slipped into a sparring stance while Masaru simply raised a brow.

“Kitashi, don’t bother. He will destroy you in half a pass,” Miyoko warned her friend.

“How do you know?”

“He’s my father,” the girl begrudgingly confessed.

The boy stood down. “Masaru Lee?” He gasped, fell to his knees and bowed, touching his head to the ground. “Sir, I’ve followed your work since I could read! Your advancements in the combustion engine and the textile industry are absolutely—”

“UGH!” Miyoko groaned, grabbing her father’s wrist and dragging him away, leaving the business man’s fan swooning on the pavement.

They stopped for lunch at a rather expensive tea house between the university and Miyoko’s new apartment. Usually, Miyoko didn’t like frequenting such establishments that were considered so ‘bougie’ but it was the only way to guarantee privacy from the prying eyes of ambitious, but financially challenged students at the University.

“So— the debate—” Masaru began.

“I still haven’t agreed to anything! I would be risking my life’s work associating with her!”

“Yes… your life’s work of what… five years?” Masaru asked.

“Fine! I’d be risking my future. If my people find out I have had so many opportunities to sabotage the last Fire Lord and took none of them because SHE IS MY MOTHER! They’d shun me forever!”

“Nobody has to know she’s your Mother.”

“Oh, and you think they won’t just see it? The way we walk and talk— if we are next to each other, it’s only too obvious!”

“She can just not be next to you! I can ask her to be indifferent to you the whole day. Besides, we only recently married which still leaves your true parentage a mystery. You could still be just the ‘Bastard of Earthen Fire Refineries’, the daughter of a kitchen wench and a serving boy that I took pity on and decided to keep for myself.” Masaru suggested.

“That sounds so wrong.”

“My point is, it could work!”

“I still know it’s a dumb idea!— so why do you want so badly to do it?”

“Your Mother has been attending your rallies for years, longing to participate in them. To give the middle finger to the Council of Advisors and the Fire Sages for decades. It’s an opportunity to do
that. To officially show her true side AND get to spend a day with her daughter. It’s a win-win situation. You wanted her out of a job so she can spend time with you. Now’s your chance—”

“What are her exact words on this plan of yours?”

“I haven’t told her.”

“Then what incentive do you have for me to go through with this plan because I don’t want to be seen in public with either of you ESPECIALLY after today!”

Masaru sighed. “I can help you cover up the fact that your apartment has been empty the past few days and that the chefs at the Soren Residence have had an extra mouth to feed,” Masaru answered with a smirk.

Miyoko’s jaw dropped.

Air Temple Island, Republic City, United Republic

Izumi woke entangled in a series of blankets the color of the ocean. It was a strange, but pleasant change from the dreary blood-covered bedding of her country. Her head felt a dull aching in her head and her memory of the previous night was somewhat vague. She remembered cooking for Tenzin and the five children that weren’t traveling and then going out with Kya. She hadn’t had that much cactus juice in a long while. She did remember the band that played. Fa-Ren and the Seaweed Factory. Their lead singer was a Fire Nation ex-pat who fell in love with a Water Tribe Woman, moved to the North Pole and started a band with her. Izumi wondered for a moment how things would have been different if she had eloped with Kya during that first vacation they took together on Oogi. They wouldn’t have had any children. They might have started a band, or a gang. Maybe they could have been ‘good’ bandits who terrorized the thieves and human traffickers of the Earth Kingdom, oceans and seas.

They were given a week before officially being declared as having gone on the run, at which point the Avatar himself came after them to get his son’s bison back at least. The rest of the night was strange. There was dancing, singing, maybe some karaoke. Bumi may have shown up at some point, but one thing was for certain, Kya never left her side.

“You’re finally up,” Kya commented with a lazy smile as she appeared in the doorway with a large glass of water.

“Do I even want to ask for a recap?” Izumi asked, taking the glass.

“You’d just get mad at me for letting it happen then swear off partying for the rest of eternity. Don’t worry. I only had to save you twice from cactus juice poisoning,” Kya reassured her.

“Have I ever mentioned how grateful I am that you’re a waterbender?”

Kya placed a hand on her bare leg and leaned in for a kiss. “You could bear to mention it again.”

Izumi would have gladly obliged if it weren’t for the black ribbon messenger hawk that landed on their window sill.

“Fire Lord needs something?” Kya asked, going to receive it.
“FUCK! Keyo! You can deal with it yourself! Let Mama sleep!” Izumi yelled, rolling over in bed, burying her head in the seafoam green pillows.

“Dear Mother, I just wanted to confirm that you did indeed get the invitation from President Zhu Li requesting your attendance International Summit of World Leaders that is happening today at 10AM in Republic City’s City Hall…” Kya read aloud.

Izumi screamed into her pillow. “Must I go?”


Izumi sighed as she got out of bed and drained her water cup. “World’s Weapon and regretting it more and more each day.”

“So you’re going?” Kya asked.

“I suppose. If I don’t, I will make my son look like a fool who can’t even wrangle his own mother let alone a country,” Izumi answered, shedding her soiled clothes from the previous evening.

“Then you better hurry,”

“Why?”

“The Summit is in twenty minutes, and AAAAALLLL the way in the Center of the City.”

“Fuck! Help me,” Izumi asked, holding out her arms revealing all of her naked glory for Kya to see.

The waterbender stood and smirked. “Thought you’d never ask!” she laughed as she bent the water from her cast through her lover’s hair and over her skin, effectively washing out all of the glitter and grime from the last night right where they stood in the bedroom.

Izumi whistled out the window for her dragon then steam dried herself in an instant before rushing to find her more formal costume among her haphazardly tossed bag in the corner of Kya’s room.

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City Hall, Republic City, URN

Everyone had already been seated. At one head of the table, President Zhu Li sat with her husband, Varrick standing behind her. At the other end, the Avatar Korra sat with her girlfriend Asami standing behind her. Along one side of the long table, Tonraq of the Southern Water Tribe, Chiefs Eska and Desna from the Northern Water Tribe, and Tenzin representing the Air Nomads. Across from them, Fire Lord Takeo sat alone with Genkei standing behind him, waiting in silence for his mother.

“She’s still not here,” Zhu Li commented impatiently, adjusting the glasses on her face and the stack of papers before her for the hundredth time.

Takeo checked his watch. “This meeting is supposed to begin at 10AM, is that correct?”

“Yes,” Zhu Li responded stiffly.

“She has three minutes, so cool it,” Takeo reminded the President, looking beyond the water Tribe
Chieftans at the great double doors leading to the council chamber.

“My Lord, I would recommend not commanding your equals,” Genkei whispered in Takeo’s ear.

“Right, of course. Sorry,” Takeo whispered.

“One minute left,” Desna droned.

“Thirty seconds,” Eska whispered.

Just then the doors were thrown open and Izumi entered, Eiko, curiously peering in from the entryway.

“How the hell did she get into the building?” Genkei asked himself, stifling a chuckle as he eyed Eiko curiously analyzing the council chamber before backing out of the entryway of City Hall.

Takeo couldn’t help but smile as he watched her commanding presence enter the room. Everyone stood at the table simultaneously to receive her as if she were still the imposing Fire Lord she was before she retired. “You all look so disappointed. It was supposed to begin at 10 AM, no?” Izumi asked checking her wrist watch, letting her three-quarter sleeves slip up to her elbows, revealing just how many darts and knives she had stowed in the gauntlets under her sleeves. It was a tactic, no doubt, to ensure nobody messed with her at this meeting.

“Yes, 10 AM,” Zhu Li replied.

“Then why the long face?” Izumi inquired.

“I was hoping to get started early,” Zhu Li explained.

“Then you might have wanted to disclose that in your correspondence regarding this meeting,” Izumi replied.

“Of course, Lady Ido,” Zhu Li said, taking her seat as Izumi found hers beside her son.

“My Lady, I recommend you don’t conduct yourself as you usually would. The President’s husband is a filmmaker and will be recording the proceedings. He can cut the footage to make anyone look like anything he wants them to be to bolster his wife’s favor with the people,” Genkei whispered as Izumi smoothed her coat.

Izumi turned to Zhu Li. “Before we begin, Madame President. Might I confirm this is indeed a closed session?” Izumi asked, skimming the list of official attendees on the meeting agenda.

“It is,” Zhu Li confirmed.

“Which means, only the slated attendees may be present. No additional staff, reporters, or recorders may be present during the proceedings.”

“But Varrick is my husband.”

“And Masaru Lee is mine, but he knows his place. In the constitution of your country that my Father, Avatar Aang, and Sokka of the Southern Water Tribe co-authored in 120 AG, it is stated explicitly in Article 12 Section 9B that non-compliance to that rule would result in a conviction of conspiracy to be tried by an international tribunal.”

“I wasn’t aware,” Zhu Li said in her defense, adjusting her glasses. “I shall look into it later--”
“Wasn’t aware?” Izumi asked, using magnetic field generation to tear out the microphones mounted to the underside of the table before each seat. “You’re the president of the United Republic and don’t even know its constitution? Pity.” She cast the destroyed microphones onto the table in a mangled heap of metal. Takeo sighed, Tenzin shifted uncomfortably, Tonraq cocked his head to the side, Eska and Desna sat up a little straighter, and Korra shrunk back in her seat. Only Zhu Li seemed unperturbed.

“Varrick, Asami, I’m sorry but you will have to leave. The Lady is right,” Zhu Li said finally.

“Ah come on! Lighten up a little,” Varrick said, clapping his hands on Izumi’s shoulders as he passed the back of her chair on his way out. She flinched under his touch.

“Genkei, you have to go too,” Izumi said without turning, her eyes closed.

“You’re alright?” Takeo asked, placing his hand over hers for a moment.

“Fine. The sooner we can get this over with, the sooner we can leave,” Izumi whispered, opening her eyes again, slowly, looking down at her hands in her lap.

“I, Zhu Li Moon call this meeting to order at 10:03AM. Will Tenzin Yeshe do roll call please?” Zhu Li asked.

“Desna of the Northern Water Tribe.”

“Present.”

“Eska of the Northern Water Tribe.”

“Present.”

“Izumi of the Fire Nation.”

“Present.”

“Korra of the Southern Water Tribe.”

“Present.”

“Suyin of the Earth Kingdom.”

“Absent,” Tonraq answered for her.

“Takeo of the Fire Nation.”

“Present”

“Tenzin of Air Temple Island-- Present--Tonraq of the Southern Water Tribe.”

“Present”

“Zhu Li Moon of the United Republic?”

“Present.”

“Before all of you, are the minutes for our last international summit. If there are any corrections or appendices that need to be made that you can see?” Zhu Li asked, adjusting her glasses yet again as
she lifted the minutes to glance at again.

“No, Madame President,” Tenzin said.

“If there are no further corrections or objections, the minutes for the last meeting shall stand as approved and read. Next on the agenda we have a debrief of the full capabilities of the World’s Weapon from Lady Izumi Ido of the Fire Nation,” Zhu Li said turning to Izumi.

Tenzin and Korra both shifted uncomfortably. Tonraq and his nephew and niece both seemed rather intrigued.

“First of all, I would like to make an amendment to this agenda,” Izumi asked.

“Which is?” Zhu Li asked.

“I would like ‘The World’s Weapon’ to be removed.”

“Why when it is what the papers call you?” Zhu Li asked.

“The papers print fallacies that sensationalize even the littlest of things. The intrigue is meant to help the agency make as much profit as possible with no regard for the subjects of their publishings. Your husband is an industrious businessman. Surely the two decades you served as his assistant made that much obvious,” Izumi snapped.

“I--” Zhu Li started to say.

“Mother--” Takeo whispered, squeezing her hand for comfort.

“I am not a Weapon, President Zhu Li. I am a human being who has pledged herself to defend the masses from instability and imbalance,” Izumi hissed.

“Mother, please restrain yourself!” Takeo asked, pulling her hand to silence her.

“We would only like to know your capabilities so that we know in what events we may request your assistance,” Zhu Li explained civilly.

Izumi took a deep breath to think before formulating an answer while Takeo watched them both very closely. The President wanted to use his mother for something. That much was certain. She wouldn’t have asked the Water Tribe chieftains to travel all this way just for her to interrogate the Fire Nation Lady.

“Let me make something very clear,” Izumi began. “I am not a beat cop or a private in your army. I serve the masses as I see fit. I am not a servant you or anyone can exploit or command.”

“Then how will you know when the masses need help if we don’t tell you?” Zhu Li inquired.

“Unlike most, when I read the news, I can see through the lies designed to make the papers sell.”

And she gets the original crime reports from the Amber League, Takeo thought to himself.

“Is what you are rumored to be able to do with fire something you can teach the Avatar?” Zhu Li asked, keeping her face more stoic than the legendary Lin Beifong, without shaking.

Izumi turned to the Avatar shooting daggers with her eyes. Is that what this is about? Takeo realised. The Avatar got a glimpse of Izumi’s Inner Fire on Ember Island and wanted it?
“Why would she need her inner fire when she has the Avatar State?” Izumi asked.

“As the **Avatar**, she can use every skill she can learn to more effectively defend the world so you won’t have to--” Zhu Li explained.

“She’s not ready for something like this,” Izumi dismissed firmly, leaning back in her seat.

“But--” Korra interjected.

“I agree with the Fire Lord-- I mean-- Lady Izumi!” Tenzin expressed.

“You do?” Korra asked.

“As a witness to the battle between the Rogue League and her then-lordship Izumi, as well as the subsequent show of arms, I believe it would be unwise to entrust that sort of power to Korra.”

“What? WHY?” Korra yelled, standing up. “Tenzin! This is ridiculous. You were my Airbending master! You KNOW I can handle it.”

“I was your airbending master for less than a year before you claimed to have obtained mastery without my help and proceeded to run off to the Southern Water Tribe to get involved in a civil war between the North and South--”

“True masters know when they’re ready to learn something, and when they must wait, Korra,” Izumi said sternly.

Korra slammed her fists on the table. “This isn’t fair!”

“Exhibit A,” Eska muttered, leaning back in her chair to enjoy the show before her.

“All the power in the world has been granted to a petulant young woman who still throws tantrums like a child at the age of twenty.” Izumi shook her head.

“Oh and where were you at twenty? Ruling the world?” Korra asked.

“If you paid attention in your Fire Nation History Lessons, you’d know!” Izumi shot back, folding her arms.

“Mother, silence yourself!” Takeo yelled over his Mother. “Korra, will you please sit down?” Takeo asked more civilly.

Takeo stood. “Since the days of Fire Lord Sozin, the status of the world has always been the nation’s top priority....”

“Are you trying to justify the Genocide of the Air Nomads?” Korra asked, reeling.

“Did you ignore your earthbending training, as well? Is that why you are so unable to just wait and listen?” Izumi asked.

“Mother, for the last time, silence yourself!” Takeo ordered. Izumi seethed, but did not reply.

“During the Reign of Fire Lord Sozin, the Fire Nation experienced a period of great prosperity. Our crime rates reached an all time low, food and steel production an all time high. Fire Lord Sozin saw the rest of the world experiencing wars between various factions leaving whole regions plagued by violence and famine. He founded the colonies to establish order and share the wealth and prosperity of our nation with others. He even built most of the infrastructure that the United Republic still uses today.
“But, not unlike a certain Great Uniter, his methods were undoubtedly flawed. Left unchecked, he became rash and brutal in his methods to maintain control. His legacy ended in disaster despite it having initial good intentions. In the recent past, and as I hope will be in the future, international defense efforts shall be a collaborative effort with open lines of communication between powers so that the world does not fall out of balance. We exist to look out for the needs of our nations and our peoples, and to advise each other, not to exploit one’s offer of aid. My mother will not serve any one nation. She will not train someone to control his or her inner fire if she does not deem them worthy. She is a human being, not a weapon to be used, abused, or traded even if only temporarily. Am I in any way unclear?” Takeo asked.

“Not at all,” Tonraq of the Southern Water Tribe expressed with a nod of approval. Izumi’s arms relaxed but only slightly. Korra seemed disappointed by his decision, but was, in this setting, powerless.

“Was there anything you actually wanted to discuss during this meeting pertaining to world or domestic defense, or did you only wish to grill my mother on the extent of her abilities?” Takeo asked Zhu Li, boring into her blue eyes with his golden ones.

Zhu Li sighed in defeat. “That was all.”

“Then can we adjourn this meeting? I am certain we all have countries to run,” Takeo asked sternly.

Zhu Li took the gavel in her hand. “Meeting Adjourned at 10:09AM.”

“Mother, we need to talk,” Takeo said, quietly standing, offering her a hand.

Izumi looked back at the Avatar and Zhu Li who were clearly planning something.

“Before you disappear Lady Lee,” Eska said, appearing with Desna at Izumi and Takeo’s side. “I must compliment you on your new look.”

“It is positively terrifying,” Desna added.

“Um… thank you,” Izumi responded, somewhat confused as the two chieftains of the Northern Water Tribe bowed and headed off to their temporary offices at the City Hall.

“Izumi,” Tonraq called.

Izumi nodded for her son to allow her a moment. “Forgive me, Chief Tonraq for slighting your daughter.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes she deserves it, but it is hard to contend with her when she IS the Avatar. Izumi thought of Taemon. “It is.”

“I wanted to congratulate you on your marriage, and this new chapter, Lady Lee,” Tonraq said with a handshake and a bow, acknowledging her marriage by using her new name.

“Thank you, Chief Tonraq,” Izumi replied politely.

“And— sorry about this whole pomp. If I had known it was just going to be Zhu Li asking you to train Korra, I wouldn’t have come— to the meeting. I’d still probably visit the city for her, but I
agree that she is not ready.”

“I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Do you have any commitments after the summit?”

“I believe—my son wanted to speak with me,” Izumi replied, motioning to Takeo.

“I should probably get back to my daughter then too. See you, Izumi,” Tonraq said with a bow.

“See you!” Izumi responded before returning to Takeo.

“This way,” Takeo said, taking her hand, leading her from the hall as imperial firebenders and Amber League guard’s fell into formation behind them.

“Why are you rushing?” Izumi asked, surprised. Takeo always had such an easy-going disposition. He was a good boy with a gentle heart, all of his senior officers in the army raved about his care and precision in every operation both during planning and execution.

Another guard opened their day office in Republic City’s city hall. And they entered alone as the guards took positions outside.

Takeo reaches under the desk and pulled out the microphones mounted underneath, crushed them in his hand and threw them out into the hall.

“What was that spectacle in there?” Takeo asked.

“Spectacle? What spectacle?”

“You come in late, break things, kick out the President’s husband and Avatar’s girlfriend—”

“I did it for our protection! You saw how they had us seated! It wasn’t a summit it was an interrogation.”

“If you’ve done nothing wrong, what is there to hide? You let the world know your inner fire exists! Of course they’re going to want to know more about it.”

“This is exactly why I hid it. People—can’t be trusted.”

“You don’t trust them and they don’t trust you! You could have said as much. My issue is with you personally insulting the Avatar and the President!”

“They deserved it!”

“It was petty and uncouth! Mother, you know better!”

“Keyo—”

“I should have you punished for this. Apparently grandfather hasn’t taught you well enough when to hold your tongue!”

“I beg your pardon? I’m your Mother!”

“And I am your Fire Lord. As long as your eyes are golden and Sozin’s blood runs through your veins, you are Fire Nation. No matter what neutral declaration you make, you still represent us and will conduct yourself as such or there will be repercussions!”
Izumi remained silent. He was right. The insults were unnecessary. There were so many ways she could have made her point that she didn’t use. Maybe it was the hangover talking.

“It’s not like you to just be stupid,” Takeo said pensively, staring at the empty hearth in the room.

Izumi remembered the previous night— or what she remembered from the previous night. *I only had to save you twice*, Kya told her that morning.

“I’m sorry,” Izumi sighed, leaning her hands on the back of the chair facing her son. “I’m sorry for embarrassing you and our nation.”

“Sorries don’t repair reputations.” Takeo said turning to her.

“You’re right they don’t.”

“You told me on the day of my coronation to project strength when acting in the best interests of my people…”

“I did,”

“And to not let anyone treat me like a child.”

“I was referring to the other world leaders.”

“Then you should have said so. From this point forward, you will be followed at all times, to ensure you don’t further besmirch our Family or our Nation’s reputation with your— ferocity.” Takeo said, sitting down at his desk.

Izumi turned away. It was like her freedom lasted only a couple of months before being stripped away.

“If you will excuse me, Mother, I have work to do and I’m sure you have your lab or your girlfriend waiting for you.” Takeo said.

Izumi felt as if she had just been struck. She felt angry, suffocated, she felt everything she did back when she wasn’t even Fire Lord but a Princess. The expectations, monitoring, constant worry about her family’s reputation. Her breathing increased and her stress levels peaked.

Takeo watched, waiting to see if her hair streaked and he needed to evacuate the building. It didn’t. He didn’t like seeing her hurt, but she needed to know freedom didn’t mean being granted the freedom to be an cruel idiot.

“Genkei, will you take my Mother to the Embassy where she will wait under the supervision of allies until Kya of the Southern Water Tribe can receive her?”

“Yes, My Lord,” Genkei responded with a stiff bow, leading Izumi from the office. Her old guard minus Sunako had come together again, for her own protection, and imprisonment.

Izumi steeled her face and allowed them to guide her out of the City Hall and into a car with diplomatic plates to go to the Fire Nation Embassy.

“But Eiko is waiting for me,” she whispered, peering out of the tinted windows at the roof of City Hall where Eiko was resting, coiled on some spirit vines in the shade of a great tree.

“She can find you later,” Genkei responded.
Only a few blocks away, Izumi spotted it, her way out. The Earthen Fire High Rise! She used magnetic field generation to slip the car door lock up and turn the handle while still holding it shut. Then as soon as the car slowed to a stop at a red light, she ran for it.

“My Lady!”

“Fuck!”

She flew through the front doors fumbling for her badge.

“Ma’am! Employees only on this site!” Security yelled.

“Yes, I’m aware,” she said finding it. “Izumi Ido, Bio Mechanics, Fire Nation Branch—I have a lab here on the basement level 4,” Izumi explained.

“Thank you,” He said, waving her through.

She ran through the long to the lifts as her League was halted by security. Instead of going down to her lab, she decided to go up, entering the special access code to the penthouse suite reserved for Lin and Masaru.

All of the running left her side feeling a little tender, the graft, healing but not completely sealed at the seams. Just to ensure it hadn’t come undone. She’d make a pot of tea, and then call Kya, tell her she would be waiting at Earthen Fire Companies’ Headquarter Building, ask her to bring Eiko.

“You better not be picking at that damn thing, Zumzu,” a familiar voice said behind Izumi.

With a gasp, Izumi turned to find Lin sitting in a lounge chair by the kitchen space of the penthouse, one leg perched on the other knee, hands clasped, relaxing as she watched the spectacle that barged into her room.

Izumi dropped her hands, coat undone, shirt up, chest heaving, defeated.

“I thought you were in Zaofu,” Izumi said, tucking in the dark burgundy shirt and fastening her black coat again.

“Our new flagships fly faster than ever before. Arrived just this morning,” Lin replied, getting up to put on a pot of water.

Izumi pulled the golden flame out of her bun and let her hair down.

“Rough morning?” Lin asked.

“Yeah,” Izumi replied, sitting at the table in the kitchen space, leaning her chin on the surface miserably.

Lin places a hand to her friend’s forehead then poured for her a glass of water then walked over to her desk while the kettle heated.

She pressed a single button on the phone.

“She’s just dehydrated and hungover,” Lin explained. Izumi’s jaw dropped as she looked over her shoulder.

“Thank you, Auntie!” Takeo’s voice came across the speaker phone.
“HE CALLED YOU?”

“Zumi, you trained him and he knows you! He’s smarter than you remember him being. Head a hunch you weren’t in the right headspace and wanted you to get to a safe place. Why else did he have your car drive by Earthen Fire if the Fire Nation Embassy is in the opposite direction?” Lin asked.

“It is?” Izumi asked, looking out the window of the penthouse.

“Yeah, see there’s city hall. And there’s the Embassy,” Lin said.

“Spirits, I’m fucked,” Izumi said, holding her head.

“Just— drink more water and get a few naps in,” Lin ordered as she went to steep the tea.

Lin was scribbling away at some paperwork while Izumi slept on one of the lounges in the living space when the door was thrown open.

The candle on the low-rising before the couch flared, it’s flames licking the ceiling as Izumi woke up shaking at the noise.

“Korra, did no one teach you to knock?” Lin asked.

“How’d you know it was me?” Korra asked. Lin lifted her foot above her desk and then replaced it beneath.

“Right, earthbender, seismic sense— I didn’t realize you were back already. I was just looking for __”

Lin motioned with her pen to Izumi whose couch hair covered half her face and clothes had been strewn about the living space of the penthouse.

“You’re brave to come after me after this morning,” Izumi said, rubbing her eyes.

“Fire Lord Takeo said you weren’t in the right headspace at the meeting.”

“Did he think I’d be that much better already? Pfft… seems my son doesn’t know me as well as you say, Little Linny!” Izumi yelled over her shoulder.

“Please don’t call me that while I’m at work,” Lin asked.

Izumi groaned and reached for a cup of water. “I still won’t train you in dark lightning or teach you how to access your inner fire.” Izumi said. “I could have justified it better with a clear head but the overall answer would have been the same.”

“Is it clearer now?” Korra asked.

“Nope,” Izumi replied, laying back down.

Just then the phone rang and Izumi rolled over, facing the back of the couch and covered her ears with a pillow.

“Hello?” Lin asked, picking it up.
“If that is the case, the security threat is in my office now— thanks for telling me— Bye— KORRA YOU FROZE THE ENTIRE FIRST LEVEL?”

“They weren’t listening!”

Lin pinched the bridge of her nose. “Your avatar title might mean something to some people, but not this company. You can’t come in here and harass my employees like you own the place."

“Izumi is one of your—” Korra turned, surprised. Izumi held up her badge and dropped it on the table into one of her cups of tea on accident.

“That’s beside the point—”

“Yeah, your right— it IS beside the point! The point is, I am still the Avatar! I’m supposed to be the world’s protector! Not HER! How can I be the world’s protector if I can’t beat her?”

“What makes you think you can’t? Have you even had the opportunity to fight Zumi?” Lin asked.

“And why do you even need to worry about being able to beat me if we don’t fight in the first place?” Izumi groaned with her eyes closed. “As long as you don’t do anything stupid, you have nothing to fear.”

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**Giangxi Iron Mines, Kioka Province, Fire Nation**

Tetsuya stopped by the Chief Warden who had come to inspect the order the guards maintained in the camp. “Is there a problem, 48516?” the warden asked standing up a little straighter, though still not meeting Tetsuya’s height.

“Yes,” Tetsuya replied, curling his fingers into a fist in his oversized, but threadbare sleeve, out of sight. “Where is my brother?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know who you are talking about,” the warden asked.

Tetsuya could feel the lie through the earth. “You do. He is a son of Masaru Lee, Co-Owner of the Earthen Fire Companies and Izumi Ido, the World’s Weapon, and you, Sir, had instructions to NOT separate us,” Tetsuya explained.

“You think you can flaunt your lineage and get what you want, boy? Let me tell you something: you fucked up and you and your brother are going to pay for what you’ve done however the state-- I, see fit. Before you even try to protest again, realize that surely your parents agree, else they wouldn’t have left you for naught in this dump after all! If they truly cared about you, they would have shown you mercy, and let the executioner swing his sword,” the Chief Warden said, spitting on Tetsuya’s feet. “Get back to your tent.”

Tetsuya drew a breath, and reluctantly retreated through the dust and dirt to his dodgy living quarters to find Taemon had returned early.

“I hope you’re not picking fights now, too,” Taemon sighed, taking a sip of sandy water.

Tetsuya dropped onto his bamboo mat and sighed. “It was just a question!”

“I think you’re lying.”
“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Tatsu knows his way around. He’ll be alright.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I know he is a better fighter than all of us.”

“But he’s not smart. Wear him down and he’s done for. The warden knows that. Probably sold him to the gladiator rings. The only question remaining is why. He knows we’re not to be separated. Mother-- even Takeo would destroy them if they knew.”

“All the more reason you should lay low. In case there are indeed ulterior motives they have for separating us.”

After Taemon had gone to sleep, Tetsuya snuck out of their tents and into the officer barracks where the Chief Warden was hosting somebody. “Did the one I just sell you die already?” the warden asked.

“No, he’s great-- amazing, actually! I wanted to know where the state picked him up and where I might find another like him. He’s clearly been trained!”

“He’s the Former Fire Lord’s Son! A convicted traitor among some other things.”

“No kidding! And how’d he get himself locked up for life?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. His papers were incredibly vague for someone with a life sentence and none of my friends were at the hearing. He does have a twin brother here and one other who was also involved in the same operation.”

“A twin brother?”

“Identical twin brother!”

“How much for the brother?”

“He’s not for sale! Not yet, at least! I told you! I can’t sell you more than one a month without anyone noticing! Especially the Fire Lord’s other son.”

“FORMER Fire Lord’s son. Besides, she-- or the family for that matter, obviously doesn’t want them if they’re content locking ‘em up in here for an eternity. Surely you can part with another wayward man.”

“I don’t know. The brother’s not much of a fighter.”

“Even better. He’ll be easy pickings for the legendaries. How about this? I double the pay and throw in free tickets to his first tournament! Will you give him to me then?”

The Chief Warden raised his head. “Maybe. Give me a day.”

Chapter End Notes

Included locations of some/most scenes in this chapter, since we're travelling all over
the world now to keep up with everything:)))

Also, went beta-less for this chapter :P

And as always, all feedback is greatly appreciated.
Under the blistering sun, suffocated by a burning dust, Tetsuya marched on, heaving crate after crate onto trucks. All of this could be automated by cranes and other machines, but why should it be? It would put people out of work, and the most dangerous men in any country were those who were bored. He knew the system and the psyche well. He had been there before… bored, restless, and planning insurrection. Sometimes he wished he had been born simple and incapable of retaining information, incapable of processing. To him, it seemed there was a painlessness that came with a lack of awareness. What people don't know can't hurt them... right?

As he turned to bend down for the next crate, a body rammed into him with enough force to make him fall, and took his place, bending and lifting crate after crate, not missing a beat. "What in spirit's name-" Tetsuya squinted as he looked into the sun, seeing through the dusty haze, the back of his own head casting a shadow over his face.

Then his own profile, cast him a side gaze and spoke quickly. "Behind the guard house in sector B-16, there's a gap in the walls of the encampment. Swim to the Sun Warrior's old civilizations. There are the gladiator rings. You know under ordinary circumstances, I would not back away from a fight... But with their system... I cannot keep winning without it killing me. You know I depend too much on strength. You know it is my greatest weakness. For Mother's sake, we both must live, so spare me." He practically dropped the next crate onto the trailer as he broke at the waist, spitting up blood into the dirt and taking a knee.

"Tatsu!" Tetsuya cried out, throwing his arms around his identical twin.

"I'll be fine-" he sputtered. "Taemon will be able to help me. You must hurry, before they notice I'm gone! The consequences are far greater for being caught.

Tetsuya nodded and ran.

It was easy to slip past the guards and dogs, so much so, Tetsuya found it almost laughable. It was clear that the camp's security was designed for low-class hitmen and assassins, not former members of the Fire Lord's Amber League. The only reason Tetsuya hadn't attempted to escape before was because there was nothing left on the outside of the walls for him. Nothing except his family. For their sake, he had to exhibit good behavior after his sentencing.

It only took one street sign in the local village for the former government worker to orient himself in his country and know in which direction to start swimming.

Izumi watched through the window of the cleaning closet with a smile as Miyoko argued with her club's president over her chosen speaker for the debate at the rally that day. "They're cute together," she admitted to Tadashi by her side.

"Cute?" Tadashi choked with surprise, trying not to reveal anything.

"Please, don't think I don't know she hasn't been staying at that apartment," Izumi laughed lightly.

"You-"
"I don't need spies to see what she has been doing. All I have to see are her eyes. She loves him. And he seems decent."

"We thought you'd be mad," Tadashi confessed. "Or at least worried for her virtue or-"

"You all can't really think I am so traditional! Tadashi! I had not one but two lovers when my husband disappeared. Then I let Ursa galavant around the world in lieu of formal education when she was thirteen. If she found a boyfriend or girlfriend I'd be happy for her. Same with Yoko. As long as they're safe and happy and not hurting anyone, it's okay." Izumi explained.

Tadashi let out a sigh of relief just as the door to the cleaning closet opened.

"Fire Lord-" Itka Soren stammered, bowing his head.

"-Former, as everyone seems to keep forgetting," Izumi interrupted him, casting a sideways glance at Tadashi. "We can stop pretending, finally."

Ikta eyed her suspiciously.

"Miyoko, is it time?" Izumi asked.

"Yeah sure. Go ahead. Tadashi, you remember where it is, right?" Miyoko said, nodding in the direction of the campus convention center.

"Yep!" Tadashi exclaimed, leading the way.

Izumi smiled as they walked away. Something about the boy's sheer terror was just so amusing.

"Did she tell him I am-" her mother? Izumi guessed.


Izumi laughed.

It was heartbreaking to see what had become of the ancient Sun Warrior's Civilization. Before the great pyramid, a gladiator pit had been carved out of the city square, with a massive iron cage constructed over it as if the fighters could fly away. Only eighteen years prior, Tetsuya had come here with his father and his twin, to learn firebending from the original masters, Ran and Shaw. The dragons granted him his fire instantly, sensing greatness in the boy, and spent a while deliberating over Tatsu, wondering if he possessed the maturity to handle the true nature of the flame or if he would abuse it with his impulse and more aggressive had made them a promise to keep his twin reined in.

It only took a few minutes of waiting before Tetsuya was "recognized" by who he presumed was a guard of the gladiator rings and was lead underground to a winding network of holding cells carved out of the ancient living spaces.

"The Champion!"

"The Dragon!"

"The Black Blade of the West!"

"The Great-" something the other prisoners murmured as Tetsuya passed. It seemed his brother had built quite the reputation in the few days he had been away. But at what cost? What was their
game. Why was Tatsu spitting up blood and collapsing while heaving crates. Sure, he must have been exhausted after such a long and arduous swim between islands, but they were both stronger than that.

"Please!" a shrill voice cried from a cell to another guard passing. "There has been a mistake! I am a smith! Not a fighter! Mercy! Please!"

The guard struck the door with an iron bar. "Quit wasting your energy! You'll need every ounce of it once you're thrown in the ring!"

The destitution weighed heavy on the men locked in this place. Their condition was miserable. Tetsuya examined the way their eyelids sagged, their necks bent and shoulders hung. It was starvation. So that is their game. It brought out the beast in men, reminded them of their mortality… and their weakness. It made even the strongest and bravest learn to fear again.

Tetsuya sat down in his cell, crossed his legs and closed his eyes. His former fire came from the breath, but his strength always came from restraint. Just before he could completely close his mind to the world around him. A familiar voice spoke. "Him."

Tetsuya turned to see a former colleague, and member of the Amber League pointing into a cell.

"Him?" an accompanying guard— asked the man in the fancy suit. "He hasn't eaten in nine days."

"And yet he still cries for mercy." the member of the Amber League said. "Excellent." the game maker said, bending down to get a better look at the groveling smith with a cool nod of his head. "Put him in the next round against the Butcher. The spectators do love the sound of terror."

Tetsuya seethed. And we were declared the Rogue League. We who fought for freedom in the Fire Nation…. While these people imprisoned their compatriots, starved them, and fought them in rings for entertainment.

The smith would be the first Tetsuya buried, but the former colleague, the first he killed.

"And what makes you think this is a good idea? She's a conservative!"

"She claims to be a progressive who has been oppressed by the institution just like the rest of us-"

"That doesn't make any sense since the Fire Lord has absolute rule to do however they chose- she could have changed things soo-"

"She wanted to, but claims too much change too fast only causes chaos and social unrest." Miyoko repeated for the fifth time as she and Ikta arrived at the convention center through a back door.

"Okay maybe, but how do you know she won't make a fool of herself and disgrace our organization once on stage? She was our primary enemy until she abdicated. That- privileged noblewoman of old-"

"The stakes are too high for her to fuck up,"

"And what stakes are those?"

"Me," Miyoko stated.

"What makes you so important to the former Fire Lord?" Ikta asked incredulously in a whisper far too loud to be considered a whisper.
"You know how they used to call me the Bastard of Earthen Fire in grade school?"

"Yeah?"

"And you know the former Fire Lord recently remarried, shortly before abdicating?"

"Yeah. To your father. But people don't typically care so much for their step children"

"I'm not a stepchild. I'm also not a bastard anymore." Miyoko whispered.

Izumi covered her mouth to keep from snickering.

"You alright?" Tadashi asked placing his hand on her upper back to use his seismic sense to check her heart rate and breathing.

"I guess she hadn't told him until just now," Izumi replied, taking deep breaths to restabilize her own emotions.

"Impossible," Ikta dismissed.

"Believe what you want to," Miyoko responded, leaving him to check on her mother who she saw was gazing intently at the master of ceremony giving introductions, not realizing the woman was completely not listening to him.

"You ready?" Miyoko asked, unsuspecting.

"As I'll ever be," Izumi replied with a smirk. "So you finally told Ikta who you are?"

"You heard?"

"He's not a good whisperer," Izumi explained. "You'll have to teach him else his family and staff will hear everything you say in bed at night-"

Miyoko's eyes went wide with fear. "Father told you-"

"No, you did. I just now." Izumi said with a smile, pulling her stunned youngest child into an embrace. She planted a kiss on the girl's head and turned to see Ikta's even more stunned face.

"Please give a respectful welcome to Lady Ido of Ruyiao Jing…" the master of ceremony announced.

"And I don't even get the honor of having a first name?" Izumi whispered to Tadashi before leaving them and heading onstage to greet a booing crowd.

Tetsuya peered through the crack in his cell to find the gladiator pits on the other side. The stands were filled with bloodthirsty businessmen, politicians, and industry magnates all cheering so enthusiastically for the blood of the civilians they were charged with serving and protecting. And yet they used their power, influence, and finances to make a game where they starved their gladiators for at least five nights and five days before throwing them into an arena with a table laden with enough food for a family to feast. The hungrier the man, the meaner the beast and the more entertaining the subsequent fight seemed to them.

The Smith tried to negotiate with The Butcher. "Don't fight!" He cried. "We can split the feast! There's enough for both of us! Please!" he said with both hands up in surrender.
"Okay," the Butcher said, lowering his hands. He smiled and walked towards the Smith who smiled nervously. They shook on it and headed to the table with the food. "You go first."

The Smith reached with shaking hands for the wine. He took a sip, savoring the sweetness and the fluid. Then in a single motion, the butcher grabbed his arm and swung him over the shoulder into the opposite wall of the arena earning himself a roar of applause.

Tetsuya clenched his fists so tightly, he could feel the palms of his own hands bleeding while his untrimmed nails dug into his skin.

The Butcher walked towards the corpse and picked it up again throwing it back towards the table of food. He lifted the arm and picked up a knife.

Tetsuya turned away as the blade hit the table.

He sat back down and crossed his legs. He would need to reserve as much of his energy as he could, not knowing how long they would starve him before letting him into the ring to fight.

"Question: should the Fire Nation withdraw its troops from the United Nations Army? Mr. Hideyoshi?"

"Yes, I believe they should. Our men, our soldiers especially should be available to serve at our new Fire Lord's beckoning hand. As a sole, unified nation, we must take care of ourselves before we can be in any position to aid the other nations, who have turned their back on us time and time again over past misdeeds, in whatever skirmishes or even civil wars they are having. Crime is still unbelievably high domestically with human trafficking leading this list. Such problems could be eradicated with increased domestic law enforcement and personnel comprised of highly-trained, and specialized forces currently trapped over seas and made to serve as puppets to the President Zhu Li"

"Lady Ido?"

"Firstly, during the establishment of the United Nations Army, Earth King Kuei and Fire Lord Zuko included clauses that would maintain their and the Water Tribe's authorities to withdraw their troops at any given moment. Section 2 of the official order drafted in 119 AG. This implies the soldiers are not trapped within the UNA, and by all means are still at the Fire Lord's beckoning hand in case of conflict."

"A good friend once told me that while the lone wolf dies, his pack survives. Isolationist and imperialistic tendencies never work. The nations need each other. When the Fire Nation was alone, we grew continually until we couldn't fit on our islands anymore. We reached for new lands, but in the end, we were outnumbered by those we subjugated and nearly destroyed. Alone, with nothing but our own thoughts and beliefs echoing off the walls of a chamber, we boil and blow over, creating nothing but devastation in the wake of our activities. We need other nations to provide varying perspectives and assistance to keep innate militaristic ambitions at bay."

"You assume then that we've no control of our power?" The governor yelled, stepping to the side of his podium. Izumi remained where she was.

"Most of you, yes," she replied, remaining still.

"You're a traitor to your own kind."

"And you're exhibiting my point exactly."
"Next question: Given the personal rights granted in the Free Will Edict of 102 AG, is the formation and continued usage of the Amber League illegal?" the MC asked, ignoring the previously prepared next question in what was no doubt an attempt to unnerve the former Fire Lord.

"No, I fully believe it is completely illegal. " Hideyoshi answered, "Desperate ones call for desperate measures. If surveillance on civilians is required to ensure that no threats exist at home or abroad, then it is a necessary precaution to maintain the peace and stability we have worked so hard to achieve."

"The representative of the conservative party stated that the Amber League is a viable and needed solution to the issue of possible threats arising within the state. Does this not seem contradictory? One minute he claims our nation is a wreck in dire need of its foreign troops residing within the UNA to join the law enforcement and solve all the pressing domestic issue, and the next moment he proceeds to claim that our nation lives in peace and merely needs routine observance as opposed to full-time monitoring. The Amber League is only unconstitutional if used against the civilian population; however, its observations collected are used to make decisions on how to treat the noble classes which have a historical tendency of abusing and exploiting their positions for personal pleasure. And since the treaty with the New Ozai Society drafted in 114 AG, they, the noble classes, and the other upper classes are not granted the same rights as the civilian class such as ultimate privacy from the government without warrant. Therefore, the existence and usage of the Amber League is not only constitutional when used to gain intel on the illicit activities of the nobles which far exceeds that of the civilian population in the recent years, but essential in maintaining the safety and stability of the people of our nation."

By the end of it, the Governor, Hideyoshi and the MC were practically steaming and Izumi, was perfectly cool and collected. Izumi had ran circles around the Governor, pointing out his inconsistencies and his misconceptions. All of her sources were cited and able to be checked for accuracy at any library or archive with a law or government resources section.

Everybody clapped respectfully but nobody hooted or hollered or booed anyone as they had done at the beginning. It was as though the crowd of primarily conservatives were considering changing affiliation but also somewhat afraid that there might be consequences if they expressed such a thing. Meanwhile, the few progressives in the room, who formerly saw the Fire Lord Izumi as their enemy began to consider the possibility of the Former Fire Lord, Izumi as an ally.

"You see, children? I was never against you, I just couldn't be so overt about it or the Fire Sages would have either disposed of me and our dynasty entirely or forced me to marry someone who would better serve their agenda. They could have named Iroh Fire Lord at any time and declared whoever became his step father regent, effectively stealing the country from our line and plunging it back into darkness rather than guiding it towards something a bit more- bright" Izumi explained to Ikta and Miyoko.

"You're a brave woman, Lady Ido. Thank you," Ikta expressed with a low and respectful bow.

"Thank you Mr. Soren," Izumi nodded.

"Mother, would you like to join us for dinner later or- interrogate Ikta or something?" Miyoko offered.

"What? Your Father told?!” Ikta gasped.
"He didn't have to. And while I'd love to join you for dinner, I don't want to be that embarrassing mother that hovers too much. I trust you, Yoko and your judgement. You both have fun. Be safe and don't do anything stupid. That's my job! Now I can tick Takeo off!" Izumi said with a wicked grim.

"Thank you, Mother!" Yoko exclaimed, hugging her mother for the first time in public in what felt like their entire lives.

"If there's anything you need, please, just call me. I have to return to Republic City, to Uncle Baatar and the lab by tomorrow morning, so we'll probably head out soon. Work hard, play hard, and do what makes you happy. And YOU!" She turned to Ikta suddenly. He jumped. "I'll let you imagine the consequences of hurting my daughter."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it is short! (it is was also so frustrating to write, boring, but kind of needed for... reasons :P)

As always, ALL feedback is greatly appreciated! *hearts*

End Notes

As always, all feedback is greatly appreciated!!! :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!