Safe Harbor

by DarlingGypsum

Summary

Avatar Korra is broken, ravaged by her torture at the hands of Zaheer and the Red Lotus. Asami struggles to connect with Korra as she recovers from her injuries on Air Temple Island. (Character Study, Asami POV)
Casualty

Chapter Notes

Takes place during the Season 3 finale, in the two weeks between their final confrontation with the Red Lotus and Jinora's tattoo ceremony, and the days immediately after after that.

This piece will connect to my Equalist Asami piece, "Parts to Play". I've kept references to that AU mostly out of this work, so far, to keep it as a standalone. That background has little bearing on their relationship at this point in the series.

Air Temple Island was the busiest that Asami had ever seen it. Dozens of men and women in full air acolyte garb were hustling around the main courtyard. Some pulled carts of construction materials: carved stone and wooden beams. Others were repainting sections of the temple that had cracked or faded.

For decades, only Tenzin and his family had resided here. Though the Temple was not in disrepair, much of the temple had never been inhabited. There was plenty to do to around the island - rooms to clean and furnish, gardens to tend, storm-proofing the coastline. The beginnings of an entire nation now called the temple island home. And on top of that, Tenzin had announced that Jinora would be receiving the markings of an airbending master. Preparations for both permanent settlement and a celebration were well underway all around her. It was bustling and rowdy. Asami could only imagine how Korra was faring with a mob of her biggest fans now crawling over her home when she was trying to recover.

Four days had passed since they’d returned to Republic City. Four days of no word from Tenzin other than that Korra was awake. The scramble at Sato Industries to aid in reconstruction efforts had kept Asami busy, but she could have broken away at any time. The truth was, she hadn’t mustered the strength to sail to the island till now.

She couldn’t shake the memory of Korra’s broken body at the bottom of the canyon. Half delirious, her body shattered, her mind and soul ravaged by the poison flowing through her.

They had captured Zaheer that day and stopped his plans, but he had taken so much along the way that Asami was hesitant to believe that they had truly won.

Nightmares brought it fresh to her mind every night. There was nothing she could have done to save Korra from that pain. Asami needed to know that she was going to be alright.

Asami silently avoided meeting eyes with anyone as she made her way to the temple. Most of the acolytes and airbenders only knew of her by name, and she managed to slip past the crowd and make her way into the living quarters of the temple. Where once there had been the easy quiet of a home and the sounds of children, a ruckus of construction and strangers filled the halls.

Asami turned down a hallway, and Korra’s mother nearly collided into her with a tea tray.
“Senna!” Asami grabbed the other side of the tray to steady them both. She smiled at the woman, but only found a very exhausted mother looking back at her. “How is she?”

The older woman let out a measured breath. “Korra’s out of immediate danger. The healers have set all the bones, and helped manage the pain. She’s been resting.” Senna adjusted her balance on the tray. “I was just about to take her something to eat.”

Asami nodded gently, studying the tea set and bowl of soup and noodles. “Mako and Bolin said they stopped by yesterday, but they didn’t see her?”

Senna took another long breath. Asami recognized an attempt to not cry. She guessed Senna had been holding herself together like that for some time. “Yes. She...she wasn’t up for visitors.”

Asami saw that Senna’s hand trembled a bit under the tray, and she reached out again to support it. “I wouldn’t technically be a visitor if I’m bringing her lunch, would I?”

Senna managed a small smile.

“Please, Senna, go rest. Let me help with this so you can get a little sleep.”

Korra’s mother hesitated for a moment, but when Asami lifted the tray from her hands, the woman’s shoulders visibly relaxed. “That’s very sweet, Asami. Thank you. I’m sure a friendly face is something she needs right now, even if...” She trailed off.

Asami watched her eyes for a long moment. “Senna?”

“...Be patient with Korra,” she finally said. “She’s trying to process everything and she’s not quite there yet.”

The dread that had been creeping in the back of Asami’s mind reared its ugly head. She nodded and turned down the hallway towards Korra’s room, but it took some doing to force herself to move forward.

Asami slowly entered Korra’s bedroom, balancing the tray in her arms. The blinds were shut, leaving the room drenched in shadows. Only thin beams of sunlight pierced through the wooden slats over the window. Naga’s massive white form was curled up against the side of the bed. At the sound of Asami’s footsteps, the polar bear dog lifted her head for a moment and chuffed at the girl.

In the dim light, Asami could make out Korra’s form propped up by a mountain of pillows. She wasn’t asleep, though; the Avatar’s head reclined back as she stared up at the ceiling.

Asami stepped to a dresser without speaking, the stoneware teakettle clanging gently as she set the tray down. She began steeping loose tea when she heard rustling from the bed.

“Asami,” Korra breathed, “I...I wasn’t-” Asami glanced back to see Korra slowly sit up, pulling her blanket up further to cover her chest bindings. “Where’s my mother?”

“I offered to help,” she said, “I hope that’s okay.”
The two young women slowly met eyes. Korra nodded quietly.

A shell of a human stared at Asami from the bed. Korra looked so small, like a child, overwhelmed by a sea of blankets and bedding. Bandages spiraled down her arms and around her stomach, holding her fractured bones together. Her right arm was strapped in a sling to immobilize it. She looked trapped and restrained to the bed. Her dark hair fell down her shoulders, unkempt and loose. Her skin was a sickly pale. Her face sunken, dull.

This was not the girl that Asami had escaped the desert with, or fought off the Equalists side by side with. Zaheer’s poison and brutality had taken their toll. Korra had not survived their battle whole.

Asami didn’t mean to stare, but Korra caught the look, and dropped her gaze to the bed, embarrassed. “I kept telling Mom to rest.”

Asami tried to smile. “Well, then, it’s a good thing I’m here. Are you hungry?” She began pouring out herbal tea into two cups. “There’s soup here.”

“No.”

Naga craned up to rest her head on Korra’s lap and nudge her for attention. Korra’s fingers reached out of instinct and wandered through the soft white fur.

Asami cradled a half full tea cup in her hands, stepping to the bed and offering it to Korra. “What about tea?” she said, “Something to help you relax.”

“No.” Korra stared out at the window, as though she could see past the blinds to the bay. After a long moment the Avatar spoke, her voice hard, tired. “I can’t feel my legs,” she said.

Asami’s chest tightened. The words had left Korra with a heavy weight of finality. Asami had never heard her sound so defeated. “That’s what the healers are for,” Asami managed out. “It’s only been a few days, Korra.”

Naga whined softly when Korra stopped stroking her fur. She lay back against her pillows and returned to staring at the ceiling.

Asami lowered herself to the edge of the bed, taking a slow drink of tea from Korra’s cup. She sat in silence in what increasingly felt like an empty room.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoyed my first chapter! Thanks to reddit.com/r/korrasami for the months of encouragement and inspiration to write this. If you liked this piece, and would like to see more, I’d really appreciate feedback.
"Varrick’s been trying to convince Tenzin to let him show a mover out on the promenade in front of the Temple."

"It's a big project. I've seen his sketches: he wants to build this massive screen up against the main tower, and everyone can camp out on the lawn and watch it together. He’s pitching it to Tenzin as a way to celebrate the new Air Nation. It'd give everyone a break from all the construction and repairs, help the acolytes and airbenders get to know each other better. I think it's a great idea.

"To be honest, I'm pretty sure Varrick just wants to try out his new outdoor portable projector, but Bolin convinced him that framing it as an event for the Air Nation would be a good PR move. I bet it wouldn't hurt Bolin's chances with Opal, too. He got all flustered when I said anything about it.

"If Tenzin lets Varrick go ahead with it, would you want to go? Might be nice to get a little fresh air. How many of Bolin's Nuktuk movers have you seen already?

"Korra?"
"Oh, they took the bandages off today. That's great!"

"So Pema asked if we could take Ikki and Meelo off her hands while she took the baby in for a checkup. Probably best to keep them out of the construction team's way. I thought maybe we could drive out to the coast. Naga could get a good run in, we could pack a lunch and just relax. It's really beautiful out today, and a lot quieter than the Temple. Do the kids still enjoy swimming?

"I could always take them, instead. I don't mind. If you're not feeling up to it, yet, I understand. Just think about it, okay? Getting outside is a big part of this. Kya really stressed that yesterday. It's important to remember there's more outside this room than a healer's office.

"I'll get go get the tea."

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"I've decided to take some time away from the office."

"It's not permanent, just a few weeks. President Raiko is looking to hire contractors for the infrastructure repairs. If the spirit vines aren't going anywhere, then we have to come up with ways of building around them, or maybe even integrating them into our designs. That's a really exciting prospect. No one's ever done anything like this before; it could be huge for Future Industries and take us in an entirely new direction. It's totally uncharted territory, but it's more than even my father had imagined we could do.

"We're an obvious choice for the contract, and we still have to present our plans to get approved. So I have my board members running the day-to-day of the company, and I’m going to take a step back to work on the designs. They have to be perfect. I've been so entrenched in the business side, when the concept and the planning is what's going to put us over the top with this. I've missed the design side of my work. That big picture view. I'm really looking forward to drawing again, spitting out ideas onto the page and seeing what sticks. I've got all of Republic City to play around in. It's an incredible opportunity.

"Tenzin said I could stay on the island for a while. The Air Temple has the best view of the coastline. It'll really help with my sketches, and getting a sense of the city as a whole. He said I could pick any of the rooms available, and since he's managed to keep this hallway cleared out, I might pick something over in this wing. Your view is amazing. I want to get as close to that as I can.

"How are you feeling? You look better today."

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"Did you know that I could cry on command when I was little?"

"I had gotten it in my head that people were less likely to yell at me if I started crying. So I literally sat in front of a mirror and practiced until I could start to tear up without even needing to think of something sad. I must have been an absolute terror. My mother never bought it, though she did tell
me that she respected my dedication to mastering the art. She told me that I had developed a skill that required great responsibility to wield. A well placed cry by an six year old can bring people to their knees.

"But my dad always fell for it hook, line, and sinker. He would let me get away with *everything*. I had this habit of taking things apart in the house that I didn't know how expensive they were - I remember there was this grandfather clock he'd gotten in a business deal or something, with hundreds of little cogs right at a little kid's eye level. I still think it was sort of asking for it. Anyway, he caught me with a pair of pliers, elbow deep in clockwork. And I just needed the hint of a sniffle, and he'd be wracked with so much guilt at even thinking of raising his voice. We ended up just going for ice cream. Immediately. Like he'd been the one who'd done something wrong. My mother loved that about him, I think. He was such a pushover with me.

"...when she died, Dad just...he just shut down. He wouldn't work, he wouldn't eat. He barely said a full sentence to me for nearly two weeks. Everyone grieves in their own way, and I knew he had just lost the love of his life, but I was six. I was just a little girl; I needed my dad. But I couldn't get through to him.

"I’d beg him to read with me, take me to the park, to the zoo, show me how the new Satocycles worked. It didn't matter what it was, honestly. I wanted to be with him, to work through it together. But he just wasn't there.

"So one day, I went into his office, stood right up in front of him, and I cried. I mean big, ridiculous crocodile tears - to this day, I think it was the worst acting of my life - but it worked. It just sort of snapped him out of it for a bit, and he took my hand, and hugged me, and this sad man, this stranger, was my Dad again.

"It was slow going. He'd slip back into himself after a while. Get overwhelmed and close himself off in work to avoid feeling anything. I'd lose him for a little while, but I kept at him. Eventually, it took less crying. And then, none. We were just 'us' again. But boy if it didn't feel impossible sometimes.

"... I'm sorry, that was a really roundabout way of asking if you’d like to go to the park.

"Suppose a good cry’s not going to work on you, now. I really shouldn't have led with that part."

"*You haven’t let anyone else see you.*"

"Mako and Bolin miss you. And you've been avoiding Tenzin. They just want to be here for you. Senna told me that you haven’t left your room in two days. I thought you were feeling better?

"I know it’s hard right now, but there are literally hundreds of people out there who would drop everything to come help you if you asked. You know that, right? You don’t have to be ready today, or a month from now. We’ll give you all the time you need, but please don’t think that you’re alone in this.

"You have done some impossible things, Korra. At least, they seemed impossible. And this is just another thing. It might seem like more than you can handle, but you are going to push through it. You don’t have to believe that. But I do."
"Maybe you shouldn't."

Chapter End Notes

Oof, this chapter. I hate to continue with the angst, but I suppose the subject matter warrants it. I LOVE getting to just have Asami word vomit all over this chapter, trying to fill the dead air between them. Hope you guys enjoyed my flight of fancy of essentially writing her monologues.

I plan to have this work finished pretty quickly, while it's still fresh in my mind. As always, I appreciate any feedback and/or reviews. If you catch anything wrong, let me know! I want to avoid any glaring issues, if possible.
Crisis of Faith

Chapter Summary

Asami wants to know everything about Korra's condition. She may regret it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was Asami’s own fault for asking.

After a week, she'd resolved that she wanted to do more than just make conversation with the air. She needed to know how bad things were for Korra. How bad they were going to be as she struggled to heal. Despite how much time she’d managed to spend with the Avatar, Asami was mostly in the dark about her treatments. She'd sit with Korra and bring her meals, but for the most part, Asami was as much use as a piece of talking furniture. She was doing everything she could, but none of it seemed to help.

Which is why she had asked Kya to sit down and walk her through what the healers had determined so far. They sat in Kya's room, a massive parchment spread out between them on the bed. On it was a hand-drawn outline of a female form. Several pages of translucent paper were layered on top of the outline, each providing a different level of detail: ink lines traced musculature, organs, skeletal structure. It was the blueprint from which Kya was tracking Korra's recovery.

"The superficial damage is almost gone." Kya said. "Open wounds, cuts, and bruises were all closed in the first few days but there's a little scarring still. From the moment we got back, our focus was on the internal injuries she'd sustained. We had managed some in-the-field triage, to stop the internal bleeding, but she'd suffered a lot of trauma beyond that." Kya pointed out red and brown pen marks all over the pages where she and other healers had noted their observations and treatments. "That would be the skull fracture, five broken and one cracked rib. She had a dislocated hip and a ruptured spinal disc. Her right leg had been broken in two places, and her left forearm and ankle were each fractured."

Kya walked Asami through the details of Korra’s case with a clinical tone. The tragedy of what the Avatar had suffered was enough to overwhelm any of those close to her. But Asami had asked for Kya’s expertise as a healer, and they focused on the technical details. Kya was treating the drawing like a schematic, something familiar that Asami could latch onto instead of the constant heaviness in her chest that made it hard for her to breathe. She followed Kya's hand as it found each of the marked injury regions.

"These ones in red were the most life-threatening," Kya continued. "The bones have mended, for the most part. By now, Korra should have been able to get around if she took it easy."

Asami tried to follow Kya’s example and disassociate the sketches laid out in front of her from the reality of the young Avatar, trapped each day between a bed and a wheelchair. She knew that the moment she fell asleep tonight, she’d see Korra in that canyon again: draped in her father's arms, tears of pain and shock streaming down her face as she faded in and out of consciousness. The
"But she still can't stand on her own," Asami said quietly. "What's wrong?"

Kya pulled back a couple of the thin pages back to reveal a spiderweb of lines criss-crossing the form, all radiating from the spine. "It's the nerve damage that we're concerned with now. The poison is out of her system, as far as we can tell. But it had plenty of time and plenty of adrenaline to get around quickly. It got the worst of its punches in before Su was able to extract it. That sort of healing is delicate work, and on top of that, it'll likely be followed by a tremendous amount of physical therapy."

Asami caught herself chewing on a thumbnail and rubbed at her face instead. This was a lot to take in. "Is this everything? Everything you told Tonraq and Senna?"

Kya nodded. "It doesn't help anyone to hide the extent of her injuries from them. Her parents need to know what they're in for."

Asami's mouth was a thin line. The last week, Korra had needed so much help. Asami had tried to stay out of the way, to not crowd Korra and her parents, but she had seen what their life would be for the foreseeable future. Yesterday Senna had to help Korra bathe because she didn't have full mobility. She'd watched Tonraq lift Korra into his arms and carry her to her bed. Korra had kept her eyes down, her face red and flushed. Asami could see it in her eyes; she felt humiliated every moment of every day.

"I want to believe that Korra will fight her way through this," Kya said, "But there is still a chance that she could be bound to that chair for some time. That's going to be a strain on her and everyone who's in it for the long haul."

"I am," Asami nodded softly.

Kya studied the girl's eyes. "She'll be dependent on other people to get around, bathe herself, dress herself. That's expecting a lot from someone as independent as Korra."

"We can handle whatever she needs till she's recovered," Asami said.

The older woman took a moment to respond. Her shoulders slumped as her detached, professional tone faltered. "I'm not sure what 'recovered' is going to look like for Korra."

Asami took that in. "You don't think she'll walk again."

"That's up to a lot of things. Most of all Korra."

"What about Katara?" Asami asked.

"We all wanted to take her directly to the South Pole after it happened, but Korra wasn't in stable enough condition to make the trip. She's out of the woods now, though, so we've made arrangements. We'll leave as soon as the ship arrives. Sometime after Jinora's ceremony." Kya began gingerly folding up the parchment.

Asami hauled herself away from the illustration of Korra's shattered body and stood from the bed. She crossed her arms, staring out at the night of Republic City. "Do you think that Katara will be able to help?" she asked.

At that question, Kya's voice softened. She'd stopped gathering up papers. "My father was once
struck a blow by a lightning bender, right through the back. My mother healed him physically, but he suffered through constant pain and doubt. He could have been lost if it weren't for my mother."

Asami kept her eyes locked on the skyline. She wanted to rebuild an entire city, but right now, she felt powerless to even help her friend. The thought of Korra in that chair for the rest of her life - lost, unfixable Korra - made a panic rise up in her chest. The lights of skyscrapers blurred at the edges, and the floodgates opened. Her hands clamped over her mouth to hold back a sob.

She heard Kya rise from the bed, and soon the woman's arms turned her around. Asami let herself cry for the first time in days. "She's slipping." Her hands were trembling as she brushed away her tears. "I look at her, and I don't see Korra."

Kya nodded, holding her shoulders steady. "It's a lot for her process, honey. When you survive something like this, it's too easy to get lost in your own fears and anger."

"But it's her eyes. She's just...gone. Zaheer broke her."

"No." Kya’s voice was stone. "I don't believe that."

"I thought I could handle this. I thought that if I was here for her, did anything she asked, stayed close...that somehow that’d be all she needed."

"You're doing more than you can imagine, Asami."

Asami stared down at the drawings, imagining Korra sprawled out on her bed, alone and in so much pain. “Some days I don’t think she knows I’m there. Or maybe she doesn’t care. I don’t know.”

Kya led Asami to the foot of the bed and sat her down. She brushed hair from Asami’s face, her words soft. “Korra is still finding herself again. Give her the time that she needs, and I promise, Korra will remember that at her lowest and darkest moment, you were there for her. She’ll know that she was loved. Unconditionally.”

Asami's throat closed up on itself. She’d kept the word to herself. Close to her heart. Protected. She tried to remember the last time that Korra had smiled at her. The bold, joyful smile of a bold and joyful woman. More tears burned her eyes.

"Oh.” Kya went quiet for a long moment. “Oh, honey..." Asami looked up and found Kya studying her face as though they’d never met before. "Does she know?"

Asami's face flushed. She balled her hands together to stop them from shaking. "That's not what she needs right now. She just needs us to be there."

Asami pushed down tears, and Kya pulled her into a fierce hug. "Asami, if there is one person in this world who can help the Avatar find peace and strength, it's my mother. She will do everything she can.” Kya pulled back, holding Asami’s face in her hands. “Do you hear me? She will move mountains for Korra."

Asami nodded, letting Kya pull her close again. Despite the welcomed confidence Kya had in what came next, the raging ache of panic in Asami’s chest would not settle.

She left the island to sleep in her own bed that night.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks all for reading! I promise that there's some light at the end of this angsty angsty tunnel. Reviews/comments are welcome and appreciated!
Days passed.

Back at the Sato estate, Asami managed to get some sketching in for the Future Industries contract proposal: a multi-tiered highway system snaking through the districts of the city, a public transit plan that she already had a business partner lined up to collaborate on, and three new administration building designs with reinforced foundations to counter seismic activity or sudden spirit vine growth.

She spent her dinners with Mako, Bolin, and Opal. She caught up with them, reassured them that Korra was looking healthier, but more importantly, delayed spending her evenings alone.

At night, Asami studied Air Temple Island in the distance while Korra's few but cold words crept up on her again. Maybe Korra didn't want her there. Maybe Asami was pressing her too much. Maybe she was trying too hard to treat Korra like nothing was wrong, when what the Avatar really needed was someone willing to admit that her life had been left in pieces.

Sleep was hard to come by. The massive house echoed, dark and empty. She'd grown used to the reassurance that Korra was only down the hall.

Asami's stomach was in knots the afternoon she stepped back onto the island.

The renovations to the Air Temple were winding down. The day had a pleasant heat, but as she climbed the path towards the main building, Asami prepared herself for a long day indoors. She hugged her large sketchbook to her chest, taking slow and deliberate breaths.

"Welcome back," Senna called. Asami looked up to find Korra's mother making slow headway towards towards her with Naga in tow. Strapped into her harness and saddle, Naga kept whipping her head around over her shoulder and whining, hesitating going any further.

Asami followed the dog's attention to a garden in the distance with tall cherry blossom trees in full bloom. Beneath the trees, Korra stared out at the bay from her wheelchair, a blanket draped over her lap. "You got her outside."
Senna had a death grip on a lead tied hastily to one of the harness straps. She dug her feet in, battling Naga's efforts to head back to the garden. "Naga's been cooped up in the bedroom for so long that she's started taking it out on the furniture. They're still cleaning up the stuffing." Senna looked to the garden with a sad smile. "Korra agreed to get some sun to convince Naga to come outside with me. She has to work off some of this energy. I've been trying to convince Korra she could stand getting off the island, too, but I will take my little victories."

Asami sidled up to the polar bear dog. When Naga finally noticed her, she nuzzled a massive furry forehead into the girl's chest. "Naga's a lot to handle," Asami smirked, rubbing behind the dog's floppy ears. Naga pushed into her harder in response, nearly shoving Asami off balance. "Do you want some help?" she asked Senna, "I could take her out."

"Don't you want to check on Korra?" Senna asked.

Asami avoided looking back up to the Avatar at the top of the hill. "You should get to spend time with your daughter that's not just taking her to a healer." She shook up the fur on Naga's nose. "I think that we could both use a bit of fresh air." She reached out for the reigns on the polar bear dog's harness.

Senna's entire body lost some of its tension when Asami took the lead from her hands. "You're an angel."

"I don't know when we'll be back," Asami said, tugging Naga towards the dock. "Give Korra my best."

The ferry that had brought Asami was still waiting at the dock for repair materials to be unloaded. Naga pulled lightly at the harness, but relented after a few more scratches behind the ears. They boarded the ferry, and Asami's stomach settled the further they sailed from the island.

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If she added reinforcements to the stirrups, and a brace that supported from the sides, it would hold Korra's legs in place. She'd need to make it capable of securing with one hand. A harness attached to the saddle could strap in her lower body and keep her from sliding off. Would she prefer something more sturdy, like the woven fabric they used for parachute straps, or something more in line with the southern water tribe aesthetic? A dark leather matching the saddle, maybe, or a thick quilted rope...

Asami peeled her jacket off, letting the heat of the sun beat down on her bare shoulders. She squirmed on the hood of the car and slid her jacket underneath herself; a thin protection from the hot metal.

A wide expanse of fields opened up to her on the outskirts of Republic City, gorgeous and open. But her eyes were fixed on her sketches. She'd been designing alterations to Naga's riding harness all morning.

Laying back, she closed her eyes and breathed deep. In, and out. Letting the sounds of wind and grass flow around her ears. It felt like she hadn't been outside in weeks.

Naga seemed to agree. Asami listened to heavy footfalls and panting dart around the car. Naga was
playing in the grass.

“You do not get tired, do you?” Asami smirked. Sunlight shone harsh red on the back of her eyelids.

There was a loud thud in the dirt. Asami's eyes squinted open and she found Naga staring at her expectantly.

Asami waved her away. "Go have fun," she said. The dog quirked her head to the side, staring.

"Really, I'll still be here." Asami looked back down at her sketchbook. A means for Korra to get down on her own would be a nice addition. Maybe a short rope ladder or a ledge so she could lower herself into her chair.

Asami nearly fell over as a massive, furry head crashed into her stomach. She reached out and hugged Naga's head, trying to steady herself and keep from falling off the hood. "Careful!"

Naga chuffed at her, trotting away back to her spot on the grass.

"What is it?"

The dog bent her shoulders low, panting at Asami playfully. She let out a whine.

"What, you wanna play?" Asami asked. Naga tore away and spun, kicking up grass and dust around her. Her tongue dropped out and heaved happily. The polar bear dog ducked down again, and shook her saddled back. The bark she let out rumbled in Asami's own chest, startling her a bit.

Asami fidgeted on the hood of the car. "You want...me to come with you?" The polar bear dog let out another roar of a bark.

Naga didn't want to go for a run. She wanted to go for a ride.

"I...don't think that's a good idea, girl."

Sprinting forward, Naga propped her giant paws up on the Satombile's bumper and rested her head in Asami's lap. The metal creaked painfully at the weight. She shoved at the girl with a big, wet nose.

"Easy!" Asami chuckled, "Alright, alright..." She pat Naga's muzzle, pushing against it with little success. "Hop off. You're gonna dent it."

Asami slid off the roadster and tied her jacket around her waist. She stared up at Naga for a long moment. The dog was immense, all muscle and legs and snow white fur. "Just like driving a car," Asami tried to remind herself quietly, "With no wheels...or shocks." Asami breathed slowly as she reached up to grasp the riding harness and saddle. She slipped her foot into one of the stirrups and hoisted herself up. Naga squirmed in her harness, rocking Asami forward. The girl grabbed the edge of the saddle and dug her toes into the stirrup to keep from careening off the side. "Or seat-belts," Asami breathed.

She stared down at the ground, and held on tighter. Naga was a good six feet higher than her driver's seat. She'd flown in airships that flew thousands of feet in the air, but there was something about being strapped into a living animal that made that fall seem much more intimidating. Staring out at the fields ahead, Asami slid her driving goggles down, and the world tinted green. "Just go easy on me, okay?"
The moment that Asami managed to settle into the seat, Naga spun in a circle a couple times, chasing her tail. Asami clung to the hand straps on the saddle, fighting the momentum to roll off. She bit back a yelp when, without warning, Naga took off away from the car.

Asami's fingers went white, gripping the straps as the saddle rocked underneath her. The wind roared in her ears, blowing her hair wildly around her face. She clamped her jaw down, focusing on the movement and momentum of Naga's strides beneath her. Leaning into the motion of the dog loping forward.

It was strange and almost terrifying to do this without Korra. Naga was a giant, and despite the fact that they weren't moving nearly as fast as she knew they could go, Asami felt the raw power underneath her. Through her own legs, Asami could feel the mass of back and leg muscles flexing beneath Naga's fur, driving them forward. The dog picked up the speed. Asami may have been in a saddle, but she was very much along for the ride.

She had ridden Naga only once before on her own - trying to escape with Korra from the Red Lotus. Then, it had been a matter of life and death. She'd braved it because it was the best way to get Korra to safety. Even Naga had understood that. They were both focused on protecting Korra. The rush of adrenaline and panic had made that ride move so quickly that Asami could barely remember it, save for the sudden earthbender ambush that had trapped them in a cage of rock.

A deep, heavy growl rumbled beneath Asami, and Naga let out a roaring bark, startling her out of her thoughts. They were racing along a riverside. The fields were a blur of color. The sun warmed her shoulders, while the wind was cool against her face and chest. Every sensation was sharp, intense.

Asami ventured a tug on the hand straps and pulled them to the right. She felt muscle roll beneath her as Naga's shoulders shifted. They banked to the right and made a leaping run into shallow bank of the river. Water sprayed up around them, cooling the air. Asami wiped water droplets from her lenses, and smiled. She leaned low to keep their shape sleek in the rush of wind. She tugged Naga left, out of the river bank, and they followed the winding path along its edge.

The speed she was used to. But this was coming from another living creature. The power felt shared, somehow. They were moving together, connected by a primal urge to just keep running.

Asami grinned fiercely.

She leaned forward in the saddle, stretching out to get closer to Naga's head. She yelled over the roar of the wind.

"Go, Naga."

The dog sped off like a rocket, letting out a happy bark. Naga sprinted at full speed, tongue dangling out of her mouth and flapping.

Asami yelled into the wind, laughing. Her head was light, blood rushing to her ears, but the sensation of Naga's massive form beneath her, hurtling them both out into the open land, kept her grounded in the moment.

Korra had tried to describe what it was like to ride Naga back home. The South Pole was covered by wide snowy plains that went on for hundreds of miles. Korra's eyes had lit up at the memory of days spent out with her best friend in what looked like a cold wasteland. What it really was, though, was freedom. The rush of speed and possibility. The whole world open in front of you. Connecting with another life. Fueling and feeding off of each other's excitement, power, and trust.
This was what Korra had felt. This was what Asami had to fight for. To bring Korra back to share in this moment. To get her back into the saddle. It wasn't going to be tomorrow, or a month from tomorrow, but Asami was going to fight with every ounce of strength that she had to help Korra push through the fog and find her way out and back to this feeling.

They did not stop running till Asami ventured a glance up at the sky and noticed how high the sun had gotten. A few pats from Asami’s leg slowed Naga down to a trot. They paused at the riverside, Naga taking massive panting gulps, before they turned back for the car, keeping a brisk pace.

Asami's shoulders stung, red from the sun and sore from the ride. Her leg muscles burned, her hands chafed from the straps. But she didn't care. Every fear and frustration had melted away, left in the dust. She breathed heavily, as though she had been the one sprinting across the plains, a weary smile on her lips.

The tiny silhouette of her car got bigger and bigger as Naga sped them back to the outskirts of Republic City.

Asami hopped off the dog's back, her legs nearly giving out on her. Naga collapsed onto her side, breathing heavily but grinning like a puppy. Asami crumpled to the ground after her. She leaned back against the dog's massive, rumbling chest.

She tugged her goggles away and chucked them onto the grass by her feet. Sweat beaded down her face, into her eyes. Her head was buzzing, her face too exhausted to do anything but smile from the rush.

Naga curled up against her, tucking her head onto Asami's lap. The polar bear dog's rib cage swayed Asami back and forth with each breath. She wanted to just sink into that feeling for the rest of the day.

Asami threw an arm around Naga's neck and held her close. It was the first moment in two weeks that she felt tethered.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for continuing to read my piece! As always, reviews or comments are welcome and appreciated! Hearing from the folks that enjoy my work keeps me excited to write!
Asami steps into Korra's life again, determined to find a way to reach her.

This might skirt the Teen rating a tad. :P It's intimate, but tasteful.

"You know, nobody expects you to bounce back right away. It's only been two weeks - you need time to heal. I want you to know that I'm here for you. If you ever want to talk...or...anything."

The night after Jinora's mastery ceremony, Asami wheeled Korra silently down the hallway towards her bedroom. It had been a long day of rituals, congratulations, and navigating the Avatar away from her vocal, adoring public. Even Asami was just about on the brink of sleep.

The wheelchair was taking its toll on Korra. Hauling herself into and out of it was an effort of sheer will. Asami could tell it was tiring, painful, and above all, it was embarrassing. Korra didn’t want to be useless. And now, worse than that, the Avatar found herself dependent on other people for every aspect of her life.

Korra had become quiet. Asami had returned to a Korra in slightly better spirits, due in part to her getting outside more often. They’d spent a day and a half together now, carefully circling each other in what almost counted as conversation. Korra's mood had lightened, or at least her bitter anger had cooled some. At least Asami could make an effort to reach her without getting bitten in the process. Asami would take what she could get.

Despite how grateful she was to be on speaking terms again, Asami’s mind kept wandering back to the ship she’d seen docked against the island. Korra would be leaving for the South Pole tomorrow. Asami was afraid that there hadn't been enough time to prove that she wanted to see this through to the end. What if Korra only remembered her absence? The fact that when things had gotten really hard, Asami’s gut reaction had been to escape from it?

Korra's bedroom was dark, save for the lanterns lighting the pathways outside the window. After locking the door behind them, Asami rolled Korra a few inches from the bed, offering her hands.
"Ready?" she asked. She gave her most supportive smile.

A few quiet breaths later, Korra reached out and braced herself using Asami for balance. Slowly, she hauled herself up from the seat of her chair. As she put her weight on Asami's right shoulder, Korra stumbled, wincing.

Asami tightened her grip on Korra's arms. "What's wrong?"

"The chair," Korra muttered. "My back cramps up after a few hours."

They stood motionless for a minute. Korra held her breath, wobbling against Asami's arms. Asami strained to hold them both up, her arms burning at the effort. She waited patiently for Korra to decide if she wanted to return to the chair.

"I can ask Kya or one of the healers to come back."

"No," Korra breathed out, "It's not that bad, I just-" She rolled her right shoulder experimentally and bit back a yelp.

"If something hurts that badly, you're supposed to say something." Asami inched them closer to Korra's bed, step by careful step.

Korra was silent as Asami lowered them both to sit on the edge of the bed frame. She slipped out of Asami's arms and collapsed back onto the mattress with a loud huff. "Everything hurts," Korra whispered. Her voice was tight.

"What do you need?" Asami asked.

"Here..." Still laying back, Korra reached back over her shoulder, and immediately cried out. Her back spasmed.

Asami reached down to straighten Korra's arm. "Careful," she said, "You're going to hurt yourself more like that."

"I can't reach it. It keeps throbbing." Korra frantically squeezed her hand open and closed again, mimicking the muscle. She froze rigidly on the bed, her eyes going glassy before she clamped them shut. "Ow, ow..."

The room fell silent. Neither of them spoke for some time. Korra struggled on the bed to find her breath. Asami watched anxiously, struggling to find the confidence to suggest how she could help.

In the end, Asami decided her own self-consciousness was not worth letting Korra suffer. "Let me help, then. Just...turn over. Gently."

It took Korra a few seconds to find the will to move. Asami helped her roll onto her stomach, careful not to make the Avatar put too much weight on her shoulders. They pushed away the pillows to leave a flat soft mattress for Korra to lay on. Asami stared at the back of Korra's dress for what started to feel like too long. Korra's dress opened from the back with a series of soft ties she would have to undo. Asami's hands hovered over the tiny knots.

"Asami?"

She looked up, but Korra rested on the mattress, turned away.

"I...I need to open the back to get to your shoulder." Asami watched the back of Korra's head for a
long silent moment.

Without a word, Korra nodded gently.

Asami’s fingers rested on the first tie. Slowly pulling the threads apart as if going slower would somehow make the effort seem more casual. She got to the second tie after a mental ice age. Korra had stopped wearing her bindings; it was too much effort to wrap and unwrap them with another person needing to do most of the work. Asami had hoped that it would ease some of the strain on Korra’s back. With each tie loosened, more bare skin opened to her. Asami quickly undid the rest of the ties, and she slipped Korra’s arms out of the open top and let it rest on the bed beneath her body.

Her eyes scanned Korra’s exposed back as she lay there quietly. Broad, toned back muscles were riddled with vicious pale scars. The healing was still in process, and it would take more sessions for any of the marks to fade fully. Worse were her shoulders and back, blotched with dull bruises where she’d continued leaning into the chair. They were older, and shouldn’t cause much pain if they were pressed, but Asami made a mental note all the same.

"Just breathe. I’ll be back, alright?" She encouraged her to lift her arms above her head on the mattress. "Is that any better?" she asked.

Korra nodded, murmuring into her pillow something that sounded like a 'yes'. She pushed back long dark hair that had draped over her eyes. Asami had undone the bun and taken out the pins hours ago, when Korra had grown weary of being dolled up for a crowd.

Asami shuffled off into the bathroom for a few minutes and returned with a basin of hot water and a few towels draped over her shoulder. The water was far too hot right now, but if she let it settle, she hoped it would be a soothing heat by the time she needed it. She set the heavy basin and towels on the dresser top. Removing her jacket and hiking up her shirt sleeves, Asami turned back to the bed.

Korra’s nightstand was a clutter of oil and salve bottles: The remnants of a dozen or more attempts to ease the constant aching that seemed to travel down to the Avatar’s very bones. Asami could see plainly that she felt every ache, every wound that the Red Lotus had dealt her, even if they were no longer visible. The poison had stripped her raw.

Asami knelt up on the mattress and settled beside Korra's back. "Where does it hurt the most?" she asked. She took a simple, non-medicinal oil and dotted her palms with it.

Korra drew in a breath, reached back, and pointed at a spot along her spine near shoulder blade level. She exhaled sharply, pulling her arm back above her head.

"Easy..." Asami rubbed her palms together to warm the oil and coat her hands. She reached out slowly, her fingertips following the line of Korra’s spine but not yet touching. Asami’s hands trembled for a long second, her chest tightening.

This was not the first time she’d been near Korra: they sat close while riding Naga, wished each other luck with a hug or a held hand. But this was different. Intimate. For a brief, panicked moment, Asami feared that this wasn’t okay. Korra was recovering. She was still wounded, trying to find her right mind. And Asami was getting nervous at the prospect of Korra’s body exposed in front of her. Trembling at the thought of touching her. Was this too much?

Lying flat on the mattress, Korra said nothing. Asami couldn’t see her face, but Korra had asked her to keep going. She hadn’t pulled away.
And this was going to help Korra relax, help her rest. Ease her pain. Asami reminded herself that the nature of Korra's injuries meant getting closer to her. Helping her in personal, exposed moments. Being there in whatever capacity she needed and not shying away.

Testing, Asami let her hands drop to the middle of Korra's back. Shaking fingers connected with cool, smooth skin. The oil on her palms smoothed the way up Korra's back muscles. Asami followed the path up to the base of her neck and down to her lower back. She traced the streak of oil once more, focusing on where her muscles began and ended. Where they connected and weaved, over and under each other.

Korra's skin broke out into goosebumps. Asami watched her hands fidget with fistfuls of sheets. She paused at Korra's shoulder blades. "Is this okay?" she asked softly.

Another long quiet moment passed. Korra nodded, flattening her palms against the bed. "Tell me if it's too hard." Asami halved the weight she was putting on her back, letting her fingertips follow the curve of muscles. She traced along the bottom of Korra's shoulder blade a few times. When Asami risked adding pressure, a knot gave way, rolling against the heel of her palm.

Korra let out a quiet moan into the mattress, and her entire body went slack.

Asami's hands froze at the sound. Her faced flushed. She gave silent thanks for the dim light of the room. "Are you okay? Was that..."

"Right there." Korra said quickly into the mattress. "Don't worry. It felt good."

Asami ran her thumbs over the same spot again, pressing the muscle till it stretched and flipped beneath her fingers. Korra sighed, gripping the covers above her head.

Asami had attended several of Korra's healing sessions, and watched what the healers had called 'therapeutic massage'. It was not meant to relax; the goal was to increased circulation and work out tension from a body that had been wracked from abuse but was technically healed. They often took hours and even left her sore at their most intensive. Nothing about her physical therapy was relaxing. Every second of it was arduous work that took more focus and endurance than Korra could sometimes muster. She needed a respite; a moment or two where she could let herself drift off and ignore the pain, and the work she faced ahead.

Time fell away as Asami fell into a gentle rhythm, forgetting the sensation of her heart beating hard in her chest. She let her hands follow the natural form of Korra's back, memorizing the peaks and dips along her muscles, learning where she held the most tension, which motions made Korra exhale or flinch. Asami returned to that spot under her shoulder, rolling the muscle. Getting her to make that noise again.

As she rubbed the oil into Korra's skin, the friction from Asami's hands began to build again. Her fingers and her wrists were sore. Asami reluctantly pulled away and stretched, letting Korra rest for a minute.

After a while, Asami headed for the dresser. She dunked a towel into the water, which was now just shy of too hot. Wringing it out, she walked over to Korra and draped the towel out over Korra’s shoulders. The Avatar’s mouth fell open and she breathed out with the heaviest sigh Asami had ever heard. It was encouraging, so she repeated the process until hot towels lined Korra’s exposed
body, from the base of her lower back up to her shoulders. She brushed away Korra's hair to rest a final one around the base of her neck.

The heat from the towels was therapeutic in its own way. It would loosen her muscles, provide some much needed pain relief. Asami had had her share of massages in her day, and this had always been her favorite part. Letting the world fall away as you drift in a little bubble of warmth and soft pressure all over.

"I'm going to take these off in a few minutes, alright?"

"Mmmh," Korra mumbled. She sounded half asleep.

Asami rubbed her hands together, working the aching muscles in her own palms and fingers. Her plan seemed to be working. Korra's entire body had melted into the bed. She seemed calm, relaxed. Nearing sleep, as a matter of fact. Asami smiled quietly as she watched Korra's back rise and fall with heavy but peaceful breaths.

The towels went cold eventually, and Asami peeled them off one by one. Korra shivered a bit at the air over her skin, breaking out into bumps again. A thin sheen of sweat mixed with what remained of the oil. The lantern light from the window shone over the curves of her skin.

Taking a quiet inhale, Asami splayed her hands out over Korra's back again, this time with very little pressure. She let them glide across Korra’s back, down her arms, pausing at Korra's hands to rub gently at her palms, between fingers.

Everything at the healing sessions had a purpose, a focused goal, something Korra had to concentrate on to help the healing process. Even if that concentration was meditative, it left her ragged. Her body and mind were exhausted, doubly so from the effort of trying to recover.

This was not focused in the same way. Asami had stopped seeking muscles. She didn’t want Korra to feel ache or pain. She wanted Korra to feel another person. Human contact was a primal need. It grounded you, calmed you, and even eased physical pain. It was as vital a sensation as a fresh breath of air.

Asami ran her palms around the expanse of Korra's shoulders, down her sides, and back up the center of her back, when she felt Korra's body tremble for an instant. Korra choked back a sound into the bed. Asami pulled away quickly. Oh god, had she hurt her? Korra hadn't said anything, but maybe she was being polite, or maybe she'd been too nervous. Oh god...

"Korra?" Asami lowered herself down beside her and rested her head on the mattress, now a little damp with cool water. She reached out and rested her hand on the top of Korra's head.

Korra turned slowly to meet Asami’s eyes. Thick tears streaked down her cheeks. Asami ran her fingers through Korra's hair, brushing it away from her face.

"Did I hurt you?" She asked, searching Korra's face. "I'm so sorry."

"No." Korra shook her head, swallowing back to keep from sniffling. "It's okay. I'm okay."

Asami realized she'd been holding her breath. She took a knuckle and gently caught a tear from Korra's cheek as it fell. She wiped it away, letting her hand fall between them on the mattress.

"That can happen sometimes," she said quietly.

"Yeah?"
Asami nodded. "It's a release," she said, "We don't always get physical contact like that. Sometimes your body just lets go."

Korra forced a breath that sounded like she'd been keeping in for a very long time. "Thank you," she managed out. With a mind of their own, Korra's eyes began drifting closed. She looked exhausted. But, for the first time Asami could recall, it seemed like the pleasant kind of exhausted.

"Do you need anything else?" Asami asked softly.

Korra sucked in air, her eyes blinking open. She had already drifted asleep for a moment. "Are you going home tonight?" She breathed.

Asami watched her in the warm streaks of light from outside. "I can stay, if you want."

Korra nodded, squirming closer to her on the bed. Asami's hand rested between their faces.

"I'll be right here," Asami promised.

She watched Korra drift off again, and soon, Asami joined her.

Asami woke up with a start. The lanterns had gone out at some point, leaving Korra's bedroom lit by the blue moonlight low in the sky. How late was it? She was still in her clothes from the ceremony, curled up on Korra's narrow bed. She felt the Avatar's warmth beside her. Her breathing slow, smooth. At peace.

She moved to rub at her face, and found her hand pinned by something. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light, and found Korra's fingers wrapped around her own.

Asami's breath caught. She closed her eyes, feeling a slight pressure building. She might have begun to cry, if a wave of relief and sleep hadn't overtaken her.

At that moment, Asami would not have moved for the world.

Chapter End Notes

Due to popular demand, there will be one more chapter, in the form of an epilogue! Sneak Peek, the title will be "Three Years". Thanks to everyone for your support and comments!
Three Years

Chapter Summary

Epilogue: Asami waits, and works, and survives.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Year One

In the mornings, Asami runs. She follows the winding river bank on the outskirts of the city, clings to that sensation of riding Naga out towards the mountains. She sprints until she can't breathe, until all she can do is fumble to the ground and stare up at the sky. Her mind is clear in that moment, save for the pressure and sound of her pulse, save for her body gasping for air. Visceral needs. They ease her mind.

A week after Korra’s gone, Asami writes to her.

'Dear Korra,

I hope you're well. You and Katara have a lot to work through, but I know you can do it. I want you to know that we're all rooting for you here. Be safe, and be strong, and we can't wait to see you again...'

She offers her estate to Mako and Bolin's family - the whole crowd of them. The boys have been trying their best to house them, but they are running out of options. Asami is more than happy for the company. In an instant, the house transforms from an empty shell into a bustling sea of bodies and voices. It’s the massive rowdy family that she never had. They are welcoming, and loud, and grateful.

Asami returns to Future Industries, closing herself up in her office for privacy while she works. The presentation to Raiko is getting closer than she's comfortable with. Her days are filled with board meetings, contractor inspections, sessions with her engineering teams. It's tiring, but it keeps her focused on her goal. She needs to be ready for the proposal.

President Raiko accepts the plan, and they move forward immediately with construction. The plan will take two to three years to complete. Asami doesn't stay at the estate anymore; playing hostess to dozens of people takes it out of her. Sleeping at the office helps her get her work done.

Asami sends another letter after the first month.

'Dear Korra,

I miss you. It's not the same in Republic City without you. How are you feeling? Things are going well here. I just got a big contract to help redesign the city's infrastructure, so I'll be keeping pretty busy for a while...'
Korra does not write back.

Asami and Naga keep a routine. They ride out to the edge of the city, and run as fast as they can. Faster and farther each day. They can almost reach the mountains before either of them is too tired to go on. They sleep in the grass. Being the CEO has its benefits; no one questions when she’s late to the office. Naga stays at the Sato Estate. It gives her more property to stretch her legs, gives Tenzin one less thing to worry about, gives Mako and Bolin's little cousins someone to play with. Asami likes having her close.

She writes to Senna. Korra's improved under Katara's guidance, apparently, but they've hit a wall in her recovery. She can stand, with some help, but she hasn't been able to walk on her own. She's tired; they all are. Being home has been relaxing for Korra, though. There's less pressure to be the Avatar. She can just be their daughter. She can focus on resting.

Asami writes to Korra again. Gently probing, hoping to spark a response. To learn something. To hear something. Does she have the energy to write back? Is she embarrassed to admit that moving South was not an instant fix? Does she even read Asami’s letters…

There is something oddly comforting in the fact that no one hears from Korra. Mako writes a few words of worry. Bolin...pontificates. Asami pleads for some sign of life. Silence is the worst reply she could receive. She imagines Korra in her chair: sad, quiet, and lost. Asami keeps the memory of their last night close: Korra's hand in hers, that feeling of letting the world just fall away. She should never have let go. She shouldn’t have accepted Korra’s ‘no’ when she’d asked to go with her.

Korra does not write back.

Asami’s assistant brings her a letter. It’s not from Korra. Her name is written on the envelope in her father’s scrawl. She doesn’t waste time wondering why Hiroshi is reaching out to her. The letter ends up in the bottom of her desk drawer.

She runs with Naga in the mornings. In the evenings, Asami returns to the Sato house and does laps in the pool. She pushes herself until she’s ragged.

Construction on the highways begins. She sketches another proposal to Raiko: additions to Republic City Park. She sketches a central statue from memory. Avatar Korra Park. When it's finished, she doesn't write to Korra about it. It looks too much like a memorial. Asami had wanted a tribute.

She has dinners with Mako, Bolin, and Opal again. Everyone is tired. The conversation doesn't turn to Korra.

‘...Please let me know that you're alright. We're all thinking of you ...’

Korra does not write back.

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Year Two
Gaiden is charming. All bright smiles and gentle words. He owns and operates a trio of fishing tankers that run between Republic City and the Fire Nation. He is tall, his hair buzzed short and bleached blonde. He knows that he's handsome. Work is his life; he shows little interest in political or current affairs. He doesn't know, or care to know, much about the Avatar. He doesn’t ask many questions. It's simple. His ships dock for several days, and then he’s gone for several weeks. Asami does not share Gaiden with her friends. They don't go on dates. They stay at his home off the docks, hiding from the noise of the city in their own little pocket of the world. He beats her at Pai Sho, but only just barely. It's quiet, but not lonely. He is just hers. She doesn't have to explain, or justify, or overthink. He understands how important Asami's work is, to the city and to her. He doesn't get the appeal of fast cars, but he keeps it to himself. Their time together is always brief, but Asami looks forward to the nights when she does not sleep alone.

Bolin leaves to join Kuvira's peacekeeping efforts. Asami has watched him struggle to find a place he can help. He knows if he joins up with the Earth Kingdom forces, that he can make a difference for his people in a meaningful way. Asami's proud of him for finding an outlet to feel part of something important. Dinners are quieter than usual without him. She doesn't see Mako and Opal as often.

Asami's assistant brings her a letter from her father. She tosses it in a drawer with the other. Asami meets with President Raiko and his civic council every other week to discuss the construction efforts. The contractors keep her busy. She spends hours driving the new city streets as each is completed, memorizing them, getting a feel for the city as a living, breathing thing. The spirit vines - intertwining with load-bearing pillars and breaking up through the old pavement - make that image all the easier.

She takes Naga on a ride every week, but running the company takes most of Asami's time. Her office at Future Industries doubles as an apartment. She takes her meals over her desk, going through budgets and weekly progress reports. The roads are tricky when the vines decide to grow over their work. They abandon a few paths and have to re-plan and rebuild. Most days, she's up from before the dawn, till long after the sun has gone down.

Her assistant knows which drawer to leave the letters from her father. It’s a pile now.

Eiko is joyful. A erhu violinist who plays at a jazz club downtown. She is bold, and passionate, and lovely. Her eyes are a bottomless dark blue; they never tire of watching Asami while Asami watches her play. She asks wonderful questions, like where to take Asami dancing, and where in all of Republic City would she most like to be kissed. Her music brings Asami to tears: It's gorgeous, and human, and sad. Her son Ren is adorable. At five years old, he thinks Naga is the most exciting thing that he's ever seen. He shares time between Eiko and his father. He seems to like Asami. Asami laughs more with them than she has in a very long time. Asami takes half days off at work, and the three of them spend the summer going to the park, and to the movers. Eiko does not want anything serious. Asami says she understands.

Naga returns to Air Temple Island. There's plenty of room now that Tenzin has organized the airbenders into a peacekeeping force. Tensions are high with the Earth Kingdom’s authority crippled. Opal's gone much of the time, travelling throughout the Earth Kingdom to help maintain peace among the smaller villages.

Asami has dinners with Mako. It’s more for the company than for the conversation.

Before the sun rises, Asami runs alone, past the point where she wants to fall to the ground and
sleep. She swims in the river.

President Raiko presents her with a commendation for Future Industries’ efforts with the reconstruction. They completed months ahead of schedule. Another contract is drafted, this time to improve existing infrastructure. The process begins again. She sleeps at her desk, drafting plans.

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**Year Three**

Rina is a distraction. She's beautiful, young, and confident. They spend their nights downtown, avoiding the jazz clubs, or at the coast, avoiding the docks. She has too many friends, and always wants to introduce the ‘gorgeous heiress’ on her arm. Asami doesn't know what Rina does, or where she lives. She’s simple. She asks Asami where she seems to always drift off to. Why she doesn’t laugh until her fourth drink or so.

Mako finds a position as security for the Earth Prince Wu. He pours himself into his duties, or rather, his duties seem to take over. He hasn’t left the city, but Asami doesn’t see much of him. They speak on the phone instead of going to dinner. His family is doing well. Asami doesn’t see much of them, either.

Asami has her dinners brought to her desk.

It's morning, and her assistant brings her a letter. Asami tosses it into the drawer, but the handwriting on the envelope catches her eye. She stares at her name for a long minute, written in Korra’s hand.

'Dear Asami,

I'm sorry I haven't written to you sooner, but every time I've tried, I never know what to say. The past two years have been the hardest of my life. Even though I can get around fine now, I still can't go into the Avatar State. I keep having visions of Zaheer and what happened that day. Katara thinks a lot of this is in my head, so I’ve been meditating a lot, but sometimes I worry I'll never fully recover.

Please don't tell Mako and Bolin I wrote to you and not them. I don't want to hurt their feelings, but it's easier to tell you about this stuff. I don't think they'd understand.'

Asami reads the letter three, four, five times. She pushes back tears. Korra has only written her. She trusts her. The letter shatters the wall she's built around herself. That night, she responds.

'Dear Korra,

I know how difficult it is to feel alone in your thoughts. Republic City is full of people, so how is it I feel like there’s no one to talk to? Everyone here is drifting apart. I miss you. Tell me you'll be home soon...'

A week later, Korra writes she's taking more time. She wants to come back to Republic City, but she still has to work though some things.
...Katara thinks that a retreat will help me center myself. I'll be heading to the southern spirit portal. I will be out of touch, but I will write as soon as I can..."

There is no one else.

In the mornings, Asami drives out to the river and runs till she loses her own balance.

Tensions are high in the city. Protesting Wu's legitimacy. Kuvira's supporters become more militant and violent with each passing week. Asami and Mako are worried for Bolin, but he reassures them that things will work out.

Tonraq arrives back in Republic City. He hasn't seen Korra in six months. She said that she'd been here, in Republic City.

Asami doesn't want to be mad at Korra; what happened to her was never her fault. But this - leaving without saying anything, lying to them - is callous. Hurtful. Doesn't she know that they've all been waiting for her? Doesn't she know that they want to help?

Asami goes back to work.

Another letter from her father is added to the stack. Another letter that she didn’t ask for, or spend years waiting for, praying for. Asami breaks and goes to see him, to yell at him, to demand that he leave her alone. Alone is all she's been for years, but she can't trust him, anymore than she can trust the letters from Korra, or trust the fact that anything she did made any difference. Hiroshi knows better than to ask for forgiveness, but she can tell he desperately wants his daughter back.

Well, 'his daughter' is exhausted, and wounded, and...and lonely.

If there is one thing in her life she can try to piece back together, she may as well try.

Asami makes time to return to the prison every week. She's grateful for the company.

Months pass with no word of the Avatar. The airbenders are on high alert for any sign of Korra, but they’ve come up with nothing. Asami's anger cools some. Korra's not ready. And as much as Asami wish it weren't true, she's not sure when Korra will ever be ready.

In the mornings, she runs.

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Day One

Asami stared at the magazine in her hands as if she was actually reading the articles. Her eyes glazed over the words. She was trying to look busy. Trying to pretend like her stomach wasn’t knotting up inside. She'd been pretending like that for weeks. She put on a brave face for Mako and the others, as if the prospect of Korra coming home didn’t leave her nervous out of her mind.

The kids had found Korra safe and in one piece. But which Korra would be coming home? She’d spent three years trying to walk again, trying to find her spiritual center, trying to reconnect with herself as the Avatar. How successful could Korra have been when the last honest words Asami had received from her were that she was afraid she’d never be whole again? Would Asami see that now familiar memory of defeat in Korra’s eyes? Walking or not, was there still anything left of her
friend to reach for?

She wanted to yell at Korra for leaving in the first place. It was a petty and unfair impulse, Asami knew that, but if she had gotten on that boat with Korra, maybe things would have been different. Maybe Korra wouldn’t have felt like she had to run away. Maybe Asami wouldn’t feel like she’d had three years stolen from her. Three years of clawing her way back up into some sense of normalcy. And now Korra was back. Was there anything to come back to? Had some doors been slammed in their face? She wanted to run out the door before Korra showed up. Would any good come from getting the answers that she’d begged for?

"I hope you haven't been waiting long."

Asami forced her eyes up from the magazine, and found Korra staring back at her. Asami memorized every detail of that moment. Korra was taller. Her hair was trimmed short; Asami loved being able to see her face better. Her eyes were bright and present. There was nervousness there, but her smile was genuinely happy. She was happy to see Asami. She was smiling.

It was the most beautiful thing Asami could think of.

There you are.

For a moment, at least, the fear and anger and anxiety all slipped away. Asami managed a smile back and climbed out of her seat. Korra’s arms opened for her, and Asami’s smile shot all the way down to her toes.

"Only three years," she said. Asami wrapped her arms around her neck and pulled her close. Warmth, and home, and Korra, welcomed her. Korra's arms circled around her middle and held her. Time hung still in the air, but not for nearly long enough.

When they gently pulled apart, Korra's smile was still there, broad and joyful. Peaceful. And all for her.

Asami was done for.

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap! Thank you everyone so very much for reading and encouraging me through this piece. It's been such a great experience.

PS: Anyone curious about what an erhu is, you've definitely heard it on the Korra soundtrack. Watch these to see the erhu in action! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhic2cE57iM or here for a faster number https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQHq2acaxFI

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!