Love & Corruption

by masksarehot

Summary

6 years post-Book One canon. In exchange for his brother’s freedom, Noatak agrees to hunt down his ex-Lieutenant Kwan, on one condition: that his partner on the mission is Avatar Korra. As the situation escalates, Korra, Noatak and Kwan must each face their demons, some more dangerous than others - and it’s amidst this chaos that unexpected feelings begin to blossom. [Amorra, Lieumon, Makorra]

Notes

Trigger warnings for this fic: partner violence (for political reasons), suicidal ideation, character death (past).

All romance will be 100% consensual and there will be some fluff, but the characters are grappling with issues, and there's going to be some heavy stuff as well.

If you're looking for a fluffier fic, I recommend going back to my profile and reading "The Cave" series instead. :)
Prologue: Source

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Korra didn't know how to feel when the bloodbending brothers were found half-dead, and so she felt nothing. Though the Council recommended that she attend the trial, she refused. Why should she acknowledge the man who had kidnapped her and the man who had terrorized her nightmares? So far as she was concerned, Tarrlok had died the day Amon took his bending, and Amon had died the day she had unmasked him in front of his followers, and she didn't have to acknowledge either of them ever again.

"Noatak," Mako had corrected when she had expressed this to him.

"Amon," she had replied. "Noatak was a victim. Amon was a criminal."

As a member of the police, Mako was involved with trial security, and so she heard every detail about the trial, even though he had been sworn to secrecy, even though she had no desire to know. He told her that Amon was quiet, his chin high, his face hard. Tarrlok wilted against his brother, not even responding when the lawyers addressed him. The trial was uneventful: no bloodbending, no words of defense, nothing but a quiet nod when Noatak was asked if he understood the charges.

To no one's surprise, they were sentenced to life in prison, and Noatak was ordered to have his bending removed.

That was the only time Korra saw him.

He knelt in the prison ward, hands bound behind him – a perfunctory gesture, given that it wouldn't stop his psychic bloodbending. His head was bowed, and she could see a bald scar across the back of his head, as big as her hand; it must still cause him considerable pain, even partially healed. She stood before him and as she looked down at him, she tried to feel anger or contempt or even pity, but she felt nothing.

"Look at me," she commanded.

He obeyed so quickly that for a split second, she felt as if their power balance had been reversed, that she was finally in charge. But then his eyes locked onto hers, and a shiver ran through her.

Even here, physically submitting to her, stripped of everything he had ever worked for, he still controlled her fear.

She lifted her chin to look down her nose at him. One hand pressed to his chest, her thumb to his forehead, as she closed her eyes and let the Avatar State flood her body.

On occasion, she had been asked to perform this punishment against gang members whose crimes far outweighed a usual prison sentence. Those times, it was a battle of wills, energy combating energy. This time, she felt no resistance. Her energy rolled over his like a wave on sand, eroding the particles in seconds.

When she opened her eyes, his were closed. With a slow inhale, she stepped back, hands clenched
in fists at her sides.

Amon's eyes opened, immediately finding hers.

One corner of his lips lifted.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she turned away, hurrying to the safety of the waiting room.

The look would haunt her. Why had he smiled? Was that gratitude? Was he somehow taking victory in the moment? It drove her mad, made her pace, because no matter what it meant, one thing was true: he had met her head-on, and this time she had been the one to retreat.

That wasn't how she wanted their battle to end.
I: Remnants

I

Remnants

Six Years Later

Noatak buries his face into his brother's hair, arms wrapped around him, as he sings their mother's lullaby. His voice is cracking – partly because he has no range, but partly from distress – but in spite of the flawed music, Tarrlok's whimpers gradually fade. By the time the song is over, the younger brother is quiet.

Though his arms are going numb, Noatak doesn't dare drop them lest he disturb his brother's peace. Instead, his eyes trace the small containment room: white walls, no furniture, and scarcely large enough to stand in. He never thought their normal cell would seem large or colourful, but he misses the bars and the grey stones.

The commotion outside the room has died down, and there hasn't been an explosion in several minutes, so the attack must have been contained. He didn't have a chance to see the attackers, but given that he and Tarrlok had been ushered to protection right away, he has a good idea who was behind it.

It has been six years, but the man's face never leaves his thoughts. Noatak's eyes close as he thinks of the way that moustache quivered when he smiled, how those lips flared when he was in ecstasy, or angry – but he can't think about the latter without remembering their last meeting, and so he stops the thought.

Tarrlok's clawed fingers finally drop from Noatak's arm; the marks are so deep that they're going to bruise.

"You okay now?" asks Noatak gently. The only response is a nod, the most communication he can get out of his brother. In the days after the explosion, the endless parade of doctors had been unable to determine if there was actual brain damage or if it was all psychological trauma, but either way, Tarrlok hasn't spoken a word since. It breaks Noatak's heart every single day, because the same thought always echoes in his head: he did this to himself because of you.

But at least he nods or shakes his head for Noatak; he won't do that much for anyone else.

Slowly, Noatak releases his brother and inches back, then loosens the man's hair ties. "Your braids fell out in the commotion. Here." They aren't afforded the luxury of combs, so he uses his fingers, gently detangling the chestnut hair, then rebraiding it. Tarrlok's shoulders relax, and Noatak feels a small moment of peace. Grooming his brother is akin to meditation.

Which is why he jumps when the door opens. Chief Beifong, Saikhan, and some meathead from the metalbending squad stand in the doorway.

Noatak's lip curls. This must be big.

"Cuff them," says Beifong.

He stands. "Unnecessary. We'll cooperate."

She eyes him, and he holds fast, relying on their history to convince her to back down. As
expected, she is the first to look away, but she does it with a small glare to let him know he didn't truly win this battle. He'll take it as a victory anyway; it's the closest he comes to combat these days. His arm loops through Tarrlok as he guides his brother from the room.

He expects them to return to his cell, but they are instead led to an interrogation room. The brothers sit on one side, Beifong on the other; Saikhan and the grunt flank her, standing. She drops a folder onto the table and opens it, and Noatak's heart flutters as he sees a glimpse of the mugshot. He surreptitiously leans forward, wondering what name they have for the man – he never did know the real one – but Beifong tilts the folder away from his line of sight.

"You and your lieutenant were close," she says, her tone heavy and unyielding, all earthbender.

"He was my second-in-command for several years," he replies, intentionally vague.

Her eyes narrow. "You were lovers."

He covers his surprise with a chuckle. "Is that so?"

There's no response, just a cold green glare, and he knows she's waiting for him to get nervous and start chattering. Well, she'll be waiting awhile. He's impervious to interrogation techniques.

"He's not going to say anything, Chief," says Saikhan after several minutes, and she leans forward, not yet ready to give up.

"You were lovers. For two decades," she says, emphasizing every word.

Noatak does his best to keep his face neutral. "You're trying to draw lines between dots to sketch a picture, but you have all the dots in the wrong place."

"Is that so?" Her eyes scan the folder. "You met at a whorehouse, of all places, and you lived together for several years while you did bodyguard work for Hiroshi Sato's illicit activities. At some point in the past fifteen years, you started building the revolution together, and then he confronted you for bending and you tried to kill him. And now he wants to extract you, either to exact revenge, or to forgive you – we can't tell which."

He doesn't know how to respond to this. His eyes close, but all he sees on his eyelids is a scene tinged red with panic: his beloved lieutenant's twisted body, hovering in the air, his frenzied pulse crawling across Amon's palm like a horde of insects.

"What do you want from me?" he intones.

"Your cooperation," she replies. "This man has been a thorn in our side for years, and his attacks are intensifying. We need to track him down and question him, get some solid leads going, before Republic City plunges into another war. We're setting up a task force, and we need someone who understands the way his mind works."

He leaves his eyelids closed, enjoying the darkness. He wishes they would just return him to his cell and let him sleep. "And you think I'll help. That I'll willingly go against a movement I helped create, led by a man you believe I loved."

"Yes, because we're prepared to offer you the one thing we know you want more than anything in the world." She pauses, as if for dramatic effect. "If you help us, we'll set your brother free."

Noatak's eyes fly open. He turns to look at Tarrlok, who is sitting beside him, hunched, gaze absent. He thinks of how much better life would be for his brother out there, in a world with
assisted nurses and rehabilitation counsellors who might help him reclaim his life. He swallows hard, but he isn't going to accept their offer without some bargaining of his own. If Tarrlok's well-being is at stake, he has to ensure that he will succeed.

He eyes Beifong and leans across the table, his hands clasped in front of him. "Not good enough," he says. "I have one more request."

"Dammit!" roars Amon's ex-lieutenant, the word not nearly strong enough to contain all the rage he feels. "A failure. Always a failure!" He plants a sidekick into a barrel, and it splinters, dark wine gushing out of it.

"Sir," says the woman behind him, "I really think you should-"

He whirs so quickly that she takes a step back, her yellow eyes wide.

"We were so close, Lieutenant," he snarls at her. "So close! And now they're going to double their defenses around him. When I find out who warned them we were coming, I'll wring his neck with my bare hands." He roars again and whips the kali sticks out of the sheaths on his back, then shatters another barrel, and lunges for a third.

"Kwan," she barks, half irritated, half concerned. At the name, the redness drains from his vision. He takes a deep breath and stands tall. Red wine is pooling around his feet like blood, and it's oddly comforting.

"Some of the officers are concerned that you're taking this failed extraction too personally," she continues, and he can't bring himself to look at her.

Of course he's taking it too personally. This is Amon, Amon, the man who stole his heart, his dreams, his life, and shattered all of them. The greatest traitor known to Republic City. The revelation of Amon's betrayal not only ruined the Equalist movement, but ultimately caused a massive backlash against non-benders as well: any legitimacy that belonged to them had been obliterated. They were just a bunch of petulant children, pining after their false god, following a bender like sheep, because that's all non-benders were good for.

This was supposed to be the beginning of the end: the day that they captured Amon and performed his public execution. The goal was two-fold: first, to show that they were a different breed of Equalist, and second, to silence the man whose knowledge of their secrets could undo them in a single breath.

Secretly, to Kwan, there was a third goal: to break the man who broke him. To relish in seeing his life drain away, drop by drop, until he was as hollow and empty as his executioner. He has dreamed of the moment ever since the day the truth was revealed; even in waking hours, it plays before his closed eyelids, a private vignette that brings him peace.

"Sir?" asks Kwan's lieutenant quietly. "You're talking to yourself." She hesitates. "Again." He can feel the faltering loyalty of all his followers in that single word.

Kwan glances at the woman, who is clutching her files to her chest, her eyes still wide, and smiles kindly at her. "So I am. I apologize, Lieutenant. Was there anything else?"

"You didn't really answer my question."

He waves her off. "I need a moment to myself, Lieutenant. We will debrief tomorrow morning,
Once our police contacts have reported in."

"Yes, Sir." She bobs her head and hurries from the room.

He turns back to the wine casks and lifts his kali sticks for a fresh blow.

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Korra wakes up to Naga nudging her hand. She groans and lifts her head, aiming a puff of air at the matted hair that falls across her face. "Sorry, girl. You probably need breakfast." She squints at the swimming numbers on the clock. "Or dinner."

She tugs a shirt over her head as she plods to the refrigerator in the kitchen, where she pulls out the second-to-last steak and tosses it into Naga's bowl. "Guess I'll have to go to the butcher tomorrow." The thought of getting up early and getting into queue behind citizens who will recognize her is exhausting. "Or ask Mako to stop by on his way to work." She scratches the eating polar bear dog behind the ears, then drags herself to the couch and collapses into it.

Her eyes drift automatically to the portrait on the mantle; it feels wrong not to tend to it. The first anniversary passed last week, and tradition dictates that she must no longer light incense or candles at the makeshift shrine: it's time to let the dead rest. She misses the dancing flames, because each time she lit the candles it felt, in a way, as if she were keeping the departed alive. Now, the portrait looks dead. It's as if, by not lighting the flames, Korra has killed her a second time.

These are dangerous thoughts, ones that will drag her deep into the dark pit in her mind if she lets them, but fortunately the sound of a key in the lock distracts her. Her eyes dart to the sink, and she realizes that the dishes he asked her to do are still piled there. From two days ago. She bolts to the kitchen and starts filling the sink.

The door pushes open, and Mako calls, "I'm home," but he's distracted by the letters in his hand. He hangs his police hat on a hook on the wall as he steps into the room, still not looking up.

"Oh, hi Mako," says Korra, as if surprised. "I was just about to start the dishes."

He looks up at her, and his mouth flattens. "You just woke up, didn't you?"

"Of course not," she says meekly, knowing that she's standing there in her underpants and a shirt with no bra, her hair still matted from sleep, and there's no excuse she could possibly come up with to hide the truth.

He slams the door so hard that she jumps. He's been losing patience with her little slump lately, but never angry, and defensive anger rises up in her throat in response. "Look, I had a rough night, and I'm doing the damned dishes, so you don't have the right to get angry."

He tosses the letters onto the table. "Calm down, Korra. I'm not mad at you."

"Yes you are," she says, more snippy than she intended. "I'm trying my best, Mako, I really am. It's just hard."

His hands grip the back of a chair and his head drops, a long, audible sigh sliding from his mouth.

For a moment, they're silent, but a bubbling white mass catches the corner of Korra's eye. The sink is overflowing. She yelps and turns off the water, quickly bending the spilt water back into the sink without thinking that it might be dirty from the floor.
She jumps as she feels Mako's hands on her shoulders, his lips on the back of her neck.

"I'm not mad at you, Korra," he says quietly. "I'm worried about you."

That makes her uncomfortable, so she ducks out from his grip. "You're sure acting angry." She dumps the dishes into the sink, and it begins to overflow again, and she curses.

Mako gently nudges her aside and pulls up his sleeve, reaching into the water to pull the drain. "I am, but not at you. Chief Beifong summoned me at the end of my shift. She wanted to discuss a special task force."

"That's good, isn't it?"

His yellow eyes pierce her. "She wasn't asking me to be a part of it; she was asking for you."

Korra snorts. "Doesn't she remember what happened last time?"

Mako's eyes flick down, and she knows he's conflicted: he wants to tell her that it wasn't her fault, but he can't.

"It's not you being on a task force that concerns me," he says. "It's that it's a task-force of two."

"Oh." She can't fathom why this has him so upset. "Who do they want me to partner with?"

He re-stops the drain and pulls his hand free, wiping it on a dishtowel.

She waits. "Well?"

"Noatak."

She's so certain that she heard incorrectly that she laughs, but the look on Mako's face stops her. "Noatak," she repeats, feeling the blood drain from her face.

His mouth twists. "The new Equalists hit the prison today, and they seriously wounded three officers and released almost a dozen prisoners. We managed to contain the attack and extract some information: they were targeting Noatak and Tarrlok, and there are plans for these attacks to escalate."

The words are sliding through her mind without real comprehension. She idly begins to scrub at the crusted food on a dish.

"The new leader is his ex-lieutenant," says Mako.

"Moustache Guy?"

"Yes. Chief Beifong thinks Noatak is the best person to decipher his strategy, get him to talk, as it seems they were...close." Awkwardly, he adds, "Our intelligence suggests that they were together for longer than we've been alive."

"As in business partners?" she asks, glancing at him.

"As in romantically." He looks a bit uncomfortable, and she feels discomfort crawl over her as well. The scene they witnessed six years ago between a heartbroken lieutenant and his traitorous leader is suddenly heart-wrenching, in retrospect. She doesn't want to pity either of those monsters.

She shrugs it off. "That's hard to believe."
"That they were in love?"

"No, that Amon's capable of loving anyone at all."

"Well, he loves his brother, and that's what convinced him to work with us." Mako lets out another long sigh. "But his demand was that you be his sole partner on this task."

"Why?"

"He won't say."

Korra sets the dish back into the sink and stares into the suds until her vision blurs. "What does Lin think?" she asks finally.

"She's willing to go along with it. The reports of the violence to come are pretty intimidating."

"Worse than the Revolution?"

"Yeah."

She closes her eyes and tries to picture herself working side-by-side with Amon, and goosebumps speckle her arms. "And I guess of all the people I could work with, it doesn't matter so much if I get a convicted criminal killed with my carelessness."

There's only silence behind her, and she can tell he wants to grip her shoulders again, but he's afraid of getting shrugged off. Her eyes trail across the dishes she's been ignoring, the home she's confined herself to for days at a time, the portrait of the woman she got killed, the animal companion she's been neglecting, and finally rest on the partner she's been slowly pushing away.

"I might as well do it," she concedes. She can't hide from the world forever.

He forces a smile. "Good," he says, but she can tell he's worried.
Mako sleeps on the couch again. He says it's so that he won't wake her when he leaves for work, but Korra can feel him pulling away - he has been, ever since the accident. She doesn't blame him; she would pull away from herself if she weren't physically attached.

It's a fitful sleep, filled with violent nightmares, and Amon's name is on her lips when she awakens to her alarm. She can still feel his warm fingers on the back of her neck, feel his bloodbending inside her body, invading her. Even a hot shower doesn't rid her of her goosebumps.

The sun is high in the sky, and she pulls her hood far over her face to shield herself from the light - and from recognition. She finds herself nodding off in the taxi, fragments of dreams taunting her, and it's a relief when the ride ends. As she leaves the car, a few passersby point and whisper; she hurries into the police station, unable to bear the admiration and curiosity on their faces. Even inside the lobby, there are murmurs and stares.

Lin nods a greeting at Korra, at once warm and blunt, and leads her to her office, then motions to a chair. "If you're going along with his demands, then you need to know who you're dealing with." Always straight to business. Korra appreciates it; she doesn't have the energy for small talk.

"I know Amon all too well," she says, sitting down.

"You might think you do, but you don't." The chief's mouth twists into a grimace as she slaps the file on the desk. Korra jumps at the sound.

"You have a lot on him." The file is several inches thick.

"Most of it gathered after his arrest. Turns out that while Amon kept a very private life, Noatak wasn't quite so secretive. Right under our noses, this whole time." The chief sits across from Korra and flips open the folder. "He came to the city at age twenty, and started working security detail for Hiroshi Sato soon after under the name Amon." She taps a grainy photograph of Hiroshi Sato, and Korra stares. The boy looks more like Tarrlok than Noatak: narrow jaw, tufts of hair in place of sideburns, darker skin. The eyes, however, are all Amon; even blurred as they are, she can feel their icy glare.

"Once Sato's plans for revolution picked up speed," Lin continues, "Amon started wearing the mask and disappeared. But Noatak did not. And neither did his constant companion." Her delicately wrinkled fingers turn the page, and Korra stares at the mugshot of a man she only recognizes by his moustache. He looks to be about her age, maybe a few years older, and she's surprised by his handsomeness: cocked brow, boyish grin.

"Amon's lieutenant," she says quietly.

The chief nods. "His alias is Kwan, real name unknown. Got picked up a couple times for street fights, but otherwise worked a security circuit around town, until he met Noatak at a local brothel."

Korra chokes on the word. "Brothel?"

Lin's face shows her disbelief as well. "The two men started a relationship that lasted two decades."
They went underground together shortly after Sato started funding the Revolution, surfacing occasionally with the pseudonyms Van and Kanno to visit their three favourite locales: a brothel, a lounge, and an underground fighting ring."

She spreads three photographs on the table. Korra stares at the patrons nursing drinks, cigar smoke curling around them in wisps, and tries to imagine the masked man with the icy eyes relaxing in such an establishment.

"They were at those places recruiting for the Equalists, right?" she guesses.

"Our intelligence on them during this time is limited," says Lin, "but suggests a very different Amon than was known to the public: a gambler and serial philanderer who spent most of his civilian time inside a wine glass."

The noise that leaves Korra's mouth is almost a guffaw. "Right."

"It's important that you understand this, because it supplements our psychologists' theories that he suffers from a dangerously hedonistic and self-obsessed view of life." Lin's eyes narrow. "You have seen his charisma for yourself, Korra, and his ability to twist people to his desires. He has a constant need for danger and attention, and he has been kept away from both for a very long time. You need to be prepared that he may try to use you to get what he needs."

Korra's heart flips as a flood of half-remembered nightmares washes away her smugness. *What am I getting myself into?*

"Anything else I should know?" she asks, pulling herself up straighter.

Lin's eyes drop to the file. "He hasn't been training much during his prison time, but he was exceptionally fit to begin with, so he might still pose a physical threat; don't take him lightly. As well, he still seems to favour the Equalist cause, but that's dwarfed by his loyalty to his brother."

Her lips purse. "The two are inseparable, and that's the only way we've been able to motivate him to cooperate with us. He's protective almost to the point of obsession."

*Tarrlok's all he has left,* thinks Korra. *And maybe he's fueled by guilt as well.* She remembers how weary and worn Tarrlok had been in that cell on the occupied Air Temple Island; it had broken her heart, and she hadn't even been the one to put him there.

Chief Beifong closes the file and stares intently at Korra. "Don't be afraid to use any of this to your advantage in order to keep him on a tight leash. We've all seen what he's capable of, and we're only enlisting his help out of desperation." Her voice drops, almost a whisper: "He and his lieutenant were lovers and co-conspirators for many years, and we can't overlook the possibility that this is all an elaborate attempt to reunite them. If at any point it looks like we've been led into a trap, do whatever you have to in order to stop them."

Korra's brows raise. "You mean kill them."

"Whatever you have to."

Her worry must show on her face, because Lin adds, "Are you sure you're up for this?"

She isn't sure, but she nods anyway. Even if she tried her best to keep him alive, she'd probably just get him killed anyway. "Take me to him."

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Whatever Korra expected, it wasn't this: Amon sits on a metal slab of a bed with Tarrlok's head in his lap, singing a soft song, its tune too broken to recognize. She studies him; though she saw his true face only briefly, six years ago, it's burnt into her mind, but now it's different, softer. His skin is noticeably darker than it was when they last met, and she wonders why that is.

She had expected Tarrlok to be fully catatonic, based on Mako's descriptions, but as she steps up to the cell, the ex-Councilman lifts his head and smiles at her.

Noatak stops mid-lyric; his eyes lock onto her, wide with an emotion she can't decipher.

Her arms fold over her chest to hide her shaking hands. "Amon," she says. "If I feel threatened for even one second, I won't hesitate to destroy you, and then your brother will rot in this cell."

"I don't doubt it." His voice is calmer than the dramatic oratory style she remembers. He eases out from under Tarrlok and places a soft kiss to the sleeping man's forehead, whispering something too quiet to overhear. Then he strides to the bars and stands opposite Korra, arms folded over his chest as well.

Their eyes lock.

He's not as tall as she remembers, maybe even a couple inches shorter than Mako; fear must have inflated him in her mind. He's still broad, however, with wide shoulders, a muscled neck, and a barrel chest that's visibly well-defined, even through the prison uniform. In his old outfit, it was his speed and dexterity that were the greatest threats, but now she realizes just how strong he was underneath the costume as well.

She had been so young then, so overconfident.

She squints to her left as if she is choosing to look elsewhere, when she's actually just ducking from his gaze. "For even one second," she repeats. "And that includes chi-blocking. I'm fully-realized now, and I have six more years of training than when you fought me last. I won't be an easy opponent this time."

"You were never an easy opponent, Avatar."

The words are almost respectful, and her brow furrows as she stares at him. His face is so blank that she wishes for the mask; at least it had a hint of an expression.

"Ready, Korra?" asks Chief Beifong quietly.

"One last question." Her eyes search his. "Why me? We hate each other."

"You must have realized by now that I am pragmatic above all else," he says. "My brother's fate is at stake; I must succeed at any cost. I have been weakened by captivity, so I cannot go without protection, but our party must be small if we are to be stealthy. You are the greatest weapon known to the world in a one-person package, and so you are my greatest chance of success."

"So you see me as a weapon, a tool you can use?" She snorts. "Flattering."

"It wasn't meant as a compliment." His hands clasp behind his back and he stands tall. "Shall we begin?"

Korra turns to nod at Lin. "Just let me say goodbye to Mako."

Mako is waiting for her by the door, and he lunges for her as she approaches. His arms tighten
around her and his nose snuggles against her neck.

"You don't have to do this, Korra."

"It's the quickest way to prevent another war," she says.

His sigh says he doesn't like it, but he agrees. He releases her. "I don't trust him."

"Neither do I. That's what will keep me safe." Her hand cups his chin. "It's time for me to be an Avatar again."

His jaw quivers. He bends down and plants a long, slow kiss to her lips.

Their hands trail as she pulls herself away.

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Noatak leans against the cell bars as he waits for the Avatar's return. He casts a sideways glance at Tarrlok. "You smiled for her, brother. You never smile for anyone."

Tarrlok's empty blue gaze stares through him.

"Not even me," adds Noatak quietly. He is certain now more than ever that the best place for Tarrlok is outside this cell, away from him.

He expects the Avatar to return with tear-stained cheeks and a worried expression, but she strides up to the cell, brow furrowed with purpose. He reminds himself that he underestimated her once before, and it cost him everything. He can't make the same mistake again.

It's only when he steps out of the cell that she folds in on herself, her arms crossing protectively over her chest.

He stares down his nose at her. "What assets do you have?"

"Whatever's in here," she says, holding up a bag.

"You haven't looked inside it?"

Her eyes narrow. "Look, I just got it a minute ago."

So she's as quick to anger as he remembers. He files that information away in case he needs it later. "Then we need a private place to examine the contents and discuss my plan."

She glances back at Chief Beifong, who cocks her head down the hall. The three of them walk to an interrogation room, the women leading. He could take both of them out in a few swift blows, if he wished, and he runs through the routine in his mind out of habit. A chi-block to the back of the Avatar's neck to knock her unconscious; six blows to Chief Beifong's flank as she turns to see what happened. How quickly they have decided to trust him.

Once they are alone inside the room, the Avatar takes a chair and dumps the bag's contents on the table. Noatak circles to the other side of the table and leans on it, palms on the tabletop, as he examines their assets.

"Useless," he says, examining a Republic City Police yuan credit note. "We'll need to use this at a bank to withdraw some real funds."
The Avatar looks surprised. "But that allows us to buy anything we need, and bill the police department directly."

"And be tracked doing so. Do not underestimate the breadth of the Equalist surveillance network, particularly if operations have expanded as much as Chief Beifong implies." Sifting through their supplies, he finds two false identification cards, and almost laughs. "A married couple? I didn't realize that the Republic City Police had a division that specialized entirely in useless clichés." He dumps the cards into the garbage bin.

"We might need those, you asshole." She lunges for the bin, but he covers it with a booted foot.

"Do you think that anyone would ever buy that you and I are in love?" he asks flatly. "And furthermore, do you wish to put on that act?"

He can tell by her hesitation that she hadn't considered that, but she glares at him anyway. "Well, at least let me keep mine," she says. "My real name draws too much attention."

"There's no point. You have the most recognizable face in the world, Avatar. There's no chance that trying to disguise you will work." He stops talking, because something he has said has made her mouth drop and her eyes well with tears; it's far removed from any expression he's ever seen her wear. He watches her, waiting for her to respond, but she's staring through him. Wherever she is, it's not in this room.

"Avatar," he says.

She blinks and her eyes snap to him. "You're right. I am too recognizable." Her throat clears as she leans away from the bin.

He studies her for a moment. Her bravado and confidence have been corroded by something; he expected her to be stronger than he remembered, not weaker. For the first time in years, he begins to fear for his own safety. "Are you fit for the field?"

"More fit than you." The venom in her tone is comforting: she still has fight in her.

He could press her, dig into her and root out whatever issue is eroding her confidence, but instead, he lifts a key from the table and studies the address. "Accommodation right in the middle of a bending district. Useless. Although it might work as a fallback if the original plan fails."

"What plan?" she asks.

Buying himself time, he finishes examining their assets. The only other item on the table is a first aid kit, which he pushes across the table to her; given that she's a healer, she's the best equipped to use it. He's still debating whether or not he should go into depth about his plan, or keep her in the dark, when she clears her throat.

"If you don't trust me, that's fine," she says, "because I don't trust you, either. But you need to tell me your damned plan, or I'm just going to be dead weight."

He gives in. "I will win Kwan's trust and coax him into revealing information to me. The quickest way to get him to trust me is if we head to a venue where he and I used to meet, under the pretence that I have escaped and wish to team up with him. I'll contact him, and he will arrive at eight o'clock tomorrow evening."

"Why tomorrow?"
"Because I need a night first to assess my situation," he says, skirting his true motives. "I have some instructions for you to follow. I don't suppose Republic City's finest thought to include a pen and paper in our useless care package?"

She raises a brow at him. "You're a lot more snarky than I was expecting."

"My bitterness has had time to ferment." In spite of his low expectations, a search of the discarded bag does, indeed, produce a pen and paper. He slides them toward her and begins to dictate.

"First, take that credit to a bank and take out enough yuans to cover meals and accommodation for two days. As well, I have a short shopping list for you. Four bottles of wine, two red, two white."

Her brow furrows as she writes it down. "Why-"

"To keep up pretences with Kwan," he lies. "To make it seem as though we're celebrating my escape. Maybe some cigars as well. Something from the Fire Nation, with a hint of spice to them, upper-middle-range quality. And I will need some clothing."

"I'm not buying you clothes."

"At least one set." He motions to his generic brown shirt and black pants. "He'll never believe that, having escaped from prison, I would have chosen this outfit to change into from my prison uniform. If we want any useful information at all, he has to believe, one-hundred-per cent, that I am there of my own volition."

She folds her arms over her chest and tries to stare him down. "You buy your own clothes. I'm not here to be your damned servant."

He relents; he'll shop for clothes himself in the morning. Besides, given her taste in clothing, she'd probably come back with nothing but a pelt, a blue smock and snow boots.

"Very well. We'll reconnect at the Sunset Hotel at the corner of 5th and Carriage. Ask for me at reception by the name-"

"Kanno," she interrupts.

His mouth closes. A hint of a smirk is on her lips, and his skin crawls. If she knows about the pseudonym, then the police force must have more information on him than he thinks. He almost changes it, just to throw all her intel into doubt, but Kanno is the pseudonym Kwan will recognize.

He stands to leave, and she does as well, but then she lunges forward and stabs his chest with her finger.

"Give me one reason, Amon, and I won't hesitate to take you down. I have the police chief's blessing to kill you if I see fit." Her face is scrunched with what he presumes is intimidation.

He stares evenly down at her until she finally withdraws her finger and marches from the room.

A sigh leaves his lips. He's already regretting his decision.

But when he thinks of Tarrlok's smile, he stands tall. *This is for you, brother.*
III: Wine

III

Wine

Korra curses to herself as she gathers Amon's supplies at the market. Just two days and one night to get through, she consoles herself. As far as Avatar-ly duties go, this one is minor. It will make for a good transition from housebound to hero. And, who knows? Maybe showing that she can cooperate with her enemies will raise her public image a bit.

She pulls out her front ponytails and keeps her hood far over her face, and neither the banker nor the wine shop owner recognize her, but that changes at the cigar stand.


The merchant peers at her, then a grin spreads across his round, rosy face. "Avatar Korra?"

She rubs the bridge of her nose. "Yeah."

"I thought you had left the city," he says. "How many do you need? My treat."

"No, no, it's okay. I have money. Just two."

He beams and begins to babble about the taste difference between two varieties, and she can tell he's droning on in order to keep her around longer. Is this how the public will react to her, once she comes out of hiding? She expected vehemence. Judgement. That would be what I deserve.

Her eyes dart to the left, then the right, as the drone of the crowd begins to flood her mind. Sweat beads on her upper lip and weight crushes her chest. She tries to stop her racing thoughts, but she can't: she's imagining the crowd closing in on her, shouting her name, looking to their fallen hero with hope, with admiration.

"I'll take those," she gasps, pointing at the cigars in the merchant's left hand. He looks startled to be interrupted, but nods and begins to slowly wrap the cigars in paper.

"No, no, don't wrap them. I'll just take them. Here." She rudely slams down a note on the counter and snatches the cigars out of his hand, and his startled look is beginning to pull into a frown, but she doesn't have time to act politely. She needs to get out of the market, now. The crowd's conversations are swarming around her like buzzard wasps.

As she turns to leave, he calls, "Wait! This is too much money."

"Keep the change," she yells, weaving her way between shoppers, propelled by the panic in her chest.

When she reaches the fringes of the crowd, the grip on her lungs finally releases. She takes a moment to breathe in and out, centring herself the way Tenzin taught her.

Once she has regained control, she wipes the sweat from her face and hurries toward the Sunset Hotel. It stands on a busy corner, boxlike and ten stories tall. It's so nondescript that she's never really acknowledged its existence, even though she's passed by this intersection hundreds of times. Anonymous: an ideal location for a secret love affair.
The thought of Amon in an intimate relationship with his lieutenant still makes her shudder. Keeping her head low to obscure her face in shadow, she says at the front desk, "I'm here to meet Mr. Kanno." As she says the words, it strikes her that she's voluntarily putting herself into an enclosed space with Amon, without anyone - even Mako - knowing where she is. She tries to tell herself that she has the Avatar State now, should he prove untrustworthy, but she trusts herself with the Avatar State almost less than she trusts Amon.

A clerk leads her to the elevator, and the elevator attendant takes her to the top floor, and then she's in the hallway, standing in front of a hotel room that contains Amon.

This whole mission is so surreal that she plays around with the words, turning them over in her mind. The hotel room that contains Amon. No big deal. Finally, she curls her free hand into a fist and raises it to the door. Pursing her lips for bravery, she knocks.

The door opens. It's still a shock to see that face without the mask, without any hint of a threat.

*Don't show him your fear. Act casually.*

"Hey. I got your stuff," she says, and she's horrified to hear her voice squeak.

Amon's eyes narrow briefly - is he amused, or confused? He steps aside so that she can enter, and she feels the blood drain from her face as she sees one bed.

"Where will I sleep?" she asks, fighting to keep the panic from her voice. Being in an enclosed room with Amon is bad enough, but being in the same bed is unthinkable.

He moves to the wall and opens what she assumed was a closet door. "Adjoining rooms," he says. "A new addition, thanks to recent renovations. Kwan won't suspect it. While I'm pressing him for information, you can listen in from the next room, and intervene if necessary."

It's a smart plan, and she feels a little better about the whole situation: Amon is crafty, and she'd much rather have him as an ally than an enemy. She'll be done her mission in less than twenty-four hours, and she can return home with a successful mission under her belt.

She sets her shopping bag on the floor and crosses into her room. It's a mirror of Amon's, down to a matching painting of yellow flowers above the bed.

"Avatar," he says behind her. She turns and reflexively catches the silver key he tosses at her.

"Goodnight," he says, the word more of a command than pleasantry, and the adjoining door closes.

It's still early; the light streaming in from between the curtains is red from the setting sun. She considers heading down to the market for a late dinner, but the thought of being recognized again saps her appetite.

Instead, she'll do what she does best these days: lay in bed and wait for sleep to drown out her thoughts.

.*.*.*.

Noatak uncorks a bottle of wine and is about to pour it into the dusty hotel glass, but he decides to wash it first. Prison life may have dulled his decorum, but he still has standards.

Stepping into the bathroom is a mistake. A full-length mirror is in the corner, and he can't avoid
seeing his reflection. He wants to ignore it, but his eyes betray him.

The six years have been kinder to him than he expected. It's still a shock to see his face unmasked, or unscarred - if he's honest with himself, he had managed to convince himself that the scar was real, in the later months of the Revolution. How badly he had wanted to believe...

His hairline is fringed with silver, and white hairs pepper his sideburns. There are fine wrinkles in the corners of his eyes and alongside his mouth that weren't there before, but he still looks a good ten years younger than he is. The cheekbones are more severe - he's lost weight since his days as Amon. Hesitantly, he lifts up his shirt. While he's still in good condition, he isn't quite as sleek and muscled as he was then, either. He looks softer. He is softer.

What strikes him most, and what he wants to consider least, is how dark his skin has become. He had always waved off his pallor as a result of living underground, only surfacing at night. But now, after being locked away for years without so much as a glimpse of the sun, his skin is as rich and brown as it had been when he was a child.

That's when he finally admits to himself what he knew, deep down, all along: he really was using bloodbending to take away bending. He had preferred to believe that he truly was using a gift from the spirits, but here is his proof. Bloodbending at all times, not just during a full moon, was considerably taxing on the body, drawing extra energy from one's own bloodstream. He had been doing it for so long that he had been, essentially, killing himself in the process. The fatigue, the shortness of breath - Kwan always tried to convince him that it was just stress, but deep down, Noatak knew. He had always known.

And it hadn't slowed him down one bit.

His eyes narrow at his reflection. "Hypocrite," he spits.

He shoves the glass into the sink and rinses out the dust, then marches back into the room and fills it to the brim with red wine. He pauses to inhale the scent, then takes a long sip. It's been so long since he drank that it makes him cough, but already, every cell in his body is remembering how much he loved it, how much he needed it.

Tomorrow, he will betray Kwan to save his brother, but just for tonight, he will give himself the oblivion he has been unable to find for six years.

.*.*.*.

Korra wakes up screaming.

She sits up, breathing hard, but even though she's awake now, she can still see terror-stricken green eyes...

But now there's a shuffling sound from the wall. Her hand fumbles for the lamp switch, and she squints as light floods the unfamiliar room.

"Avatar?" calls Amon's voice from the other side of the door, and even though she's awake enough to know where she is now, the sound of his voice still floods her with another wave of fear.

"I'm fine," she snaps.

The door swings open anyway. Amon is hunched in the door frame, one hand gripping it for support, the other wrapped around the neck of a nearly-empty bottle of white wine.
He squints at her. "Heard screams." The words slur, and even from across the room, the scent of alcohol reaches her nose.

"Are you drunk?"

He shakes his head, but the movement is too exaggerated. "Screams. Are you in danger?"

"No." She snorts and adds, "You look like you would have been a lot of help in a fight."

He squints at her for a few beats longer, and she prays to the spirits that he'll leave, but instead he stumbles into the room and flops to a seat at the end of her bed. He thrusts the wine bottle at her. "Here."

She stares at him with a wrinkled nose, trying to size up this sorry drunk who had once been her greatest nightmare.

"Thanks," she says finally, and she accepts the bottle. The intricacies of wine are lost on her, anyway, so there's no reason to savour it; she takes a long swig. "So this is why you had to meet with him tomorrow night? Scheduled a night to drink yourself unconscious?"

"I'm sad," he says bluntly.

The confession surprises her. "Well, you deserve to be."

"It's been six years since I attacked Kwan, and..." For a second, he's looking crestfallen, but then his speech trails off and he eyes her. A long look passes between them - his eyes are slightly unfocussed, but still intense enough that she feels herself recoiling.

She's already drawing comparisons between her nightmare and Amon's last encounter with his lieutenant, and she doesn't like the similarities. But this man seems so broken and sad, so unlike the Amon she remembers, that her natural tendency to befriend wins over.

"Chief Beifong said you two were lovers."

"Lovers? No." His eyes close, and he mumbles, almost to himself: "Every moment of our lives intertwined. Twenty years. To say 'lovers'...that's a disservice."

The word makes her skin crawl as she says it: "Soulmates?"

His eyelids part, and she recognizes the shame in his absent stare.

"Whatever it was, he trusted you, and then you betrayed him," she says, almost to herself. "You acted out of instinct, and immediately regretted it, but it was too late."

"You're speaking as if you could possibly understand," he mutters.

Her chin lifts. You'd be surprised. "You had to see the trust in those eyes fade as fear of you took over," she says, "and every time you close your eyes, you see that last tear that he shed not for you, but because of you. And every moment since, you've wondered what you'd say if you had one more chance to speak to him again. How you could convince him that you weren't a monster, even though, deep down, you know you were, and the fear in his eyes was the most honestly anyone had ever looked at you." She's not sure any more if she's trying to read him, or narrating her own nightmare; she takes another swig, then adds, "And now you get a chance to face him again, and I bet you're wonder just how he's going to look at you now. If he's going to remember only that moment of betrayal, or the twenty years before it. No wonder you're drunk."
He's studying her now as if he understands exactly what she means, and it makes her feel even worse. How far she has fallen, if this is the only person she can relate to. She's glad that he's so drunk. If he were sober, he would see right through her, and she's not ready for anyone to know just how heavily her guilt weighs her down. Especially Amon.

After another swallow of wine, she passes the bottle back to him. "Just be glad you get the chance to speak with him again. No matter how it turns out, you get a chance."

Looking away, he says, "You are surprisingly astute, Avatar."

She's not - she's the exact opposite of astute - but she lets him believe it. Anything to make him think she's more powerful than she actually is.

He, on the other hand, is showing his vulnerability, so she should take advantage of that to dig out a little information.

"Be honest with me," she says. "Is this all some elaborate scheme to get you out of jail and back into the Equalists? Maybe take me out of the picture in the process?"

"No." He drains the last of the wine.

"I find it hard to believe that you're helping us take down your ex-lover and the movement you created, and you're just going to go back to jail, all to get your brother free."

"Ah," he says, his voice strengthening and dropping in pitch. "But I won't be going back to jail."

She snorts. "Beifong will never release Tarrlok if you sneak away."

"No, I won't sneak away." He sounds almost sober now.

"Then what-" His eyes lock onto hers. "I plan to die."

The word floods her veins with ice.

"Do not worry: I will complete my mission first," he continues. "And then I will seek the end that I was denied six years ago." His hunched shoulders and hard gaze reveal that he no longer fears death, and that concept terrifies her: sometimes, it feels like fear is all that keeps her from the temptation to give up. Pressure starts to build in her chest.

"I need you to leave." The panic strains her voice.

He stares blankly at her.

"Now," she barks. She lays down on her side, back to him. There is a long pause, but finally the bed shifts as he stands, and she hears clumsy, shuffling footsteps to the door. It slams closed, and there's a loud thump against the floor, then silence. She wonders if she should check on him, but decides against it.

Her mental state is fragile, and she doesn't want to risk that his plans of death will plant seeds in her own mind; as much as possible, she has to stay away from him.

She closes her eyes. All she can see is the terrified green gaze from her nightmare, and she can't stop drawing comparisons to Amon and his lieutenant.
The most honestly anyone ever looked at me.

"I'm sorry, Asami," she whispers.
IV: Final Day

Final Day

Noatak's headache pulsates so strongly that even the sound of his creaking mattress makes him cringe. He recognizes the decor of the Sunset Hotel, and for a second, his heart lifts. He's here with Kwan, and all that nonsense about bloodbending and unmasking and Tarrlok trying to kill him is nothing but a nightmare, and-

Reality is so jarring that he wishes he could bask in the daydream for a few minutes longer. Instead, he's left considering the memories of an unpleasantly revealing conversation with the Avatar. Revealing his cards to her so soon - and so honestly - was a poor decision. At least he won't have to regret it for long.

With a sigh, he sits up and pours himself a fresh glass of wine and tosses it back, then trudges to the bathroom. This time, he ignores the unfamiliar reflection in the mirror. He has had enough self-examination; today is a day to close doors, not open new ones.

The shower is warm, its pressure a gentle caress in comparison to the abrasive blast of the prison showers, and he feels his eyes slip closed. If he lets his imagination drift, he can pretend the running water is the soft caress of skin on skin. The mental images are so pleasant that his hand drifts down his abdomen to grasp himself. He can't hold back a groan; he had forgotten how good this felt, without having to worry about a prison guard walking by, or a near-catatonic brother turning around to face him at an inopportune moment. This isn't mere pressure release, it's making love to himself, and he stays in the shower until his skin is red and scalded, rediscovering the flood of hormones that was once so important to him.

Though he's tempted to stay there all day, eventually, the humidity is too much for him, and he ends the shower. A bit light-headed, he returns to the wine and takes a fresh glass of it, then tugs on his clothes. He'll head out to the shops for new clothes and some food, and then maybe he'll have a bit more private time. It's better than agonizing about what to say to Kwan, and much better than making small talk with the Avatar - especially after the embarrassing conversation the night before.

But he can't avoid her entirely; she still controls their funds. He knocks on the adjoining door. When there's no answer, he quietly opens it. The Avatar is on her stomach on the bed, snoring, with her limbs jutting at random angles from the tangled blankets. Various bits of clothing are strewn about the room, and the few possessions she brought with her are scattered on the floor, even her toothbrush. For the thousandth time, he considers how unjust it is that so much power and responsibility should come innately to this disorganized, naïve girl.

Noatak finds a wad of notes on the bedside table, and helps himself to a sum large enough for some modest clothes – nice enough to look presentable, but not too much that they would seem suspicious on a recently-escaped convict. He could probably use a haircut as well, and maybe a touch-up on his sideburns. He prefers to hold himself to a certain standard of grooming that was difficult to maintain with the limited resources available to him in prison.

The sunlight is still so foreign that he squints – it doesn't help his hangover, and the wine he had earlier isn't taking the edge off, either. He's craving more. It's as if his body is awakening after a six-year hibernation, remembering its old reliance on alcohol and orgasms.
He visits a clothing shop and finds a stylish olive-green shirt with a high collar and a dark cinch at the waist, brown pants that taper to the ankles, and knee-high boots. The seamstress fusses over his measurements, her cheeks glowing pink. She's near to his age, he guesses, and pleasantly curvaceous, with enchanting eyes. Her hands linger longer than they need to on his body, and she chatters and giggles a lot as she works. At first, he thinks he's imagining her flirtations, but when they exchange money, her fingers slide along his hand and their eyes lock. The attention is flattering, and it's been a long time since anyone touched him with romantic intent; he entertains the idea of acting on her advances, but he suspects that his guilt will whittle away his ability to perform.

Besides, everything he touches wilts.

He tips her extra for the alterations, and leaves, not sure why he suddenly feels so hollow.

The barber tidies his sideburns; he requests that his hair be left at throat length, and slicks it back off his face. While the barber retreats to the cash register to process the payment, Noatak stealthily grabs the scissors from the counter and trims his eyebrows. When did he get old man eyebrows? They seem to get bushier every time he looks in a mirror.

Finally, he feels like himself again: freshly showered, tailored clothes, groomed hair.

The mid-morning air is sweet and sun-baked, and he breathes it in, feeling the first flicker of happiness in years. He treats himself to a shot of hard liquor at a nearby bar to celebrate, then stops at a stand for some seaweed soup, the kind his mother used to make. As the broth hits his tongue, he closes his eyes and smiles, instantly transported to the sunnier moments of his childhood. He takes an extra serving of soup for later – it will be his last dinner.

If this is to be his last day among the living, then these few hours have been a fitting farewell.

All peace drains from him as he steps back into the hotel room and realizes that he needs to make a phone call, and at the other end is going to be a voice he hasn't heard since it was calling him a traitor.

He draws a long breath and slowly releases it, then sits on the bed and lifts the receiver. The number he remembers is probably disconnected, anyway; surely the Equalists wouldn't keep the same phone line. He didn't think this through.

He dials the number anyway, and it begins to ring.

"Hello?"

The familiar voice roots Noatak to the bed. He's using my old phone number. Why would he keep my old phone number?

Hope squeezes the air from his lungs, and his voice is faint as he responds: "Room 1013."

There's a long pause. "Who is this?" Kwan's voice, gravelled and deep, ripples down Noatak's spine.

"Room 1013," he says again, and it physically hurts him to hang up the phone.

Silence rings in his ears, and for the first time, he doubts his ability to complete his mission.

....
Kwan stares at the receiver in his hand, his jaw trembling. A howl bursts from his mouth and he throws the entire phone at the wall. It crashes to the floor with a horrible ringing smash, chunks of plastic flying off of it, but he barely notices; he's already raking his hands into his hair and doubling over.

He doesn't even realize he's still yelling until his lieutenant storms into the room and grips his shoulder. He swats her away, but stops yelling, starting to pace instead.

"What happened?" she demands.

"Amon," he growls. "He's free, and he wants to meet me."

Her yellow eyes are cold as she tracks him. He remembers when they were warm, back when she trusted him. "Where?"

He stops pacing and stares her down, because he knows what this is: she wants to set a trap to capture Amon. She thinks he'll fail, like the attack on the prison days ago, and now she doesn't think he can do it on his own. "I'm not telling you anything. Do you think I'm a fool?"

Her face falls. "Kwan, I just want to help you."

"No!" He looms over her. "You don't trust me. You want the location so you can go behind my back and take him out yourself, and get all the glory, and then push me out so that you can lead."

Her hand cups his jaw; he can't believe she's being so pedantic. "Can you blame me for not trusting you, Kwan? Have you taken a look at yourself lately?"

He has; it's hard not to notice the gaunt cheeks, the deepening wrinkles, the wild eyes. Stress is taking its toll on him. For a moment, his suspicion lifts, and he sees genuine sympathy in her eyes. He wants to fall sobbing into her neck, feel her arms around him. They've been friends for so long that she is family – if he can't trust her, who can he trust?

But then Amon fills his thoughts again – hand clawing the air, eyes cold – and his suspicion returns. He bats her hand away and resumes his pacing. "If I take him out myself, will that prove to you that my head is in the right place?"

"It couldn't hurt. If you think you're capable of it. I know what he meant to you."

He collapses into a chair and eyes her. "I swear on my life that I'll kill him, Qing. It's what he deserves."

The use of her old moniker seems to startle her, and then her face falls. "I have to tell you something."

"Look," she says quietly, "this may be your last chance to prove yourself. Your behaviour is getting so erratic that there have been some...meetings."

His stomach drops. "Meetings?"

"About replacing you as leader. Not me; I told them the only way I would replace you is if you asked me yourself. But the other officers are pushing for it, and I can't placate them forever."

He swallows a lump in his throat. "How many of them?"
Her eyes drop away. "All of them."

"All of them," he repeats. His hand rakes through his hair; has he really been comporting himself that poorly?

"What's more, we already knew Amon was free," she says. "I was to report back to the other officers if he contacted you so that they could stage an attack. They're hoping your reunion will precipitate events that will allow them to push you out with cause."

"You mean, they're hoping I lose my shit completely, right?" He really wants to yell and break everything in his room, but that won't help him look sane in front of his last ally.

"Yes, and there's more: he's working with Avatar Korra."

"What?" he growls. He has never hated Amon more than he does in this moment.

"The police promised to let his brother go free if he gets information out of you, and he requested her help." She takes a couple steps closer. "Still think you can take him out alone?"

His eyes slip closed. He sees two possibilities: his death, or Amon's. Either way, the question of Equalist leadership is addressed.

"Tell me where you will meet Amon," says Kwan's lieutenant. "I'll make sure you have enough of a head start to kill him before anyone else can, and we'll have your back if things go wrong."

"The old brothel," he lies. "Ten o'clock tonight."

She seems to buy it; she nods and grips his shoulder. "Good luck, Kwan." After an awkward pause, she adds, "I'm sorry."

He's not, because this new information has rekindled his focus. If this is his last chance to prove himself, then he is going to be calm and collected. He will look the man who betrayed him in the eye and, without showing any madness or fear, take him down. A cold, clean kill.

He pulls out his travelling bag and begins to pack supplies.

*.*.*. It takes a good quarter hour for Noatak to find the willpower to move away from the phone.

He knocks softly on the adjoining door. Still no answer. He pushes it open, and the Avatar's still in the same position she was earlier that morning. It's past noon now, and he shakes his head at her laziness. A divine creature, indeed.

Quietly, he moves to the bedside table to slip his change back into the pile.

"What the-" cries her voice behind him.

He whirls around just in time to see a flaming fist driving for his face. Instinct takes over; he dodges the blast and jabs his fingertips into his attacker's flank. The Avatar yells and jumps out of bed, dressed only in her shirt and underwear, and swings a flaming roundhouse kick at him. He ducks beneath it, fully in control of his senses again.


Instead, she falls into stance. Her eyes are glowing red, and black energy curls around her like heat
waves.

His heart pounds. He had studied writings about the Avatar State long ago, when she had been his foe, but he hadn't expected her to look so fearsome - the writings described a blue-white glow, not red, and said nothing of the shadowy energy. Taking a step back, he says calmly, "We are allies."

The glowing red eyes bore through him. He knows a chi point that will disable the State, but it's between her shoulder blades, and he's not sure he's quick enough to get around to her back unscathed. In this state, she's a wild card.

Then suddenly, she blinks, and her eyes are hers again. "Amon? What the hell are you doing in my room?" She doesn't apologize for the attack, and neither does he. He wonders if she is even aware that it happened.

Eyeing her warily, he holds out the money, and her eyebrows drop; she snatches it out of his palm.

"I'm supposed to be handling the finances," she snaps.

Though she doesn't seem the least bit ashamed to be standing around in her underwear, he half turns away to give her a semblance of privacy. "I required clothing and food, and I didn't want to wake you."

"How considerate." She tosses the money onto the side table, then yawns and stretches. He tries not to notice, in his peripheral vision, that her breasts are unbound beneath her shirt. "Glad you got food, though. I'm starving."

He glances at the take-out bowl that is plainly in view on his own bedside table. "You'll have to get your own."

Her face twists; is that a hint of panic he sees? "But I'll be recognized if I go out there." She pauses, furrowing a brow as if thinking, then adds, "We risk throwing away the whole mission if my cover is blown."

Whether that's her true motivation or not, she has a point. With a low sigh, he retrieves the bowl of seaweed soup and hands it to her. Her eyes light up.

"Just like my mother used to make," she says as she sets it on the table, and the parallel makes him uncomfortable. She pulls on her pants and sits to eat.

He stands in the doorway. "I have notified Kwan to meet me here."

"When?" she asks around a mouthful.

"Eight."

"So you woke me up this early for nothing."

_Early._ He glances at the clock, but decides not to comment. "I will convince him that I wish to join his cause, and use that to launch into an overview of the current Equalist capabilities."

She slurps the seaweed and looks up, speaking with her mouth full: "Do you think he'll trust you?"

"You'll be on the other side of the door, listening for any sign that he doesn't. If we can't extract the information through pleasantries, then we'll have to use force." He studies her as he says the words, looking for any sign that she'll find them as disconcerting as he does, but she only shrugs.
"Okay."

And that's the end of it; now there's nothing to do but wait.

He returns to his room and pours himself another glass of wine.
As eight o'clock approaches, Noatak sits on the bed, massaging his face with icy fingertips, as he
tries to convince himself that he isn't nervous about Kwan's arrival. The Avatar is in place on the
other side of the adjoining door, so he knows he is protected, but it isn't violence he fears the most.
Six years. Six years since he last caressed that moustached face, kissed that finely-lined forehead,
whispered tales of victory and war into that perfect ear.
Six years since he reached into the man's heart and twisted, forcing blood backwards through the
valves, felt it seize and shudder in his palm.
That the man survived was no surprise: even in the red fog of panic, Amon had remembered to stop
short to give him the chance to survive. If there was one thing his lieutenant excelled at, it was
clinging to a slim chance of survival.
But how will he be able to face him now? Even in that moment of confrontation, he wasn't able to
find the strength to look him in the eye, not until it was too late and instinctive self-preservation
had already overcome love. Now, he has time to prepare, to gather his courage, but time is only
eroding his courage instead.
He wipes sweaty palms on his pants and waits.
There is no knock to announce the arrival, just the soft click of a doorknob slowly turning. Noatak
forces himself to stand, hands clasped behind his back.
The man who steps into the room is ostensibly his former lieutenant, but his demeanour has
changed. The stance is confident, chest thrust forward, hands clenched at his sides. Once upon a
time, this man subconsciously copied his leader's stance, but now he makes no motion to shift from
his own.
Kwan's chin tilts, looking down his nose at his former leader. "Amon." No growl, no emotion, just
the cold, heavy word.
Korra has been sitting against the adjoining door for half an hour, and her thoughts are starting to
spiral out of control.
At home, at least, she has the option of going to sleep to escape her thoughts; if she falls asleep
now, she risks failing her mission. Even though she doesn't really care if Amon himself lives or
dies, his words haunt her:

_I plan to die._

She can't stand the thought of another partner dying on her watch. Asami's panicked face flashes
through her mind for the thousandth time this evening, and she shoves her fists into her eye
sockets, trying to physically blot out the image before she follows it down another rabbit hole. But
it's too late, and now she sees the purpling face of Asami's attacker, feels the Avatar State seeping
into her like ice water, hears the attacker's pulse beating in her ears as she claws her hand in the air...

"Amon," says a familiar voice in the next room.

The word saves her from her imagination; she jerks to attention and presses her ear to the door, straining to listen.

.*.*.*.

Noatak didn't expect this flood of emotions that presses down on him, trying to drop him to his knees. He wants to force his hand through the greying hair, kiss the fresh wrinkles in the corners of the steel grey eyes. His fingers knit together behind his back, the only sign of weakness that he will allow himself to express.

"What name do you go by now?" he asks, keeping his voice calm.

His former lieutenant's head tilts, just a fraction, but somehow pedantic all the same. "Kwan."

"Still hiding your true name?"

The eyes narrow. "If you want it, you'll have to take it from me. You didn't give me yours by choice, either, so I figure fair is fair." He examines Noatak from top to bottom. "You've grown weak."

"I have been imprisoned."

"And I've grown strong. I was once merely your lapdog, and now I lead."

"You were never just my lapdog," says Noatak quietly.

Kwan snorts. He strides across the room to the counter and uncorks the wine, helping himself to a glass. His back is to Noatak, who eyes him warily; Kwan was always a challenge to him when they sparred. Now, with his muscles atrophied and no bending to fall back on, a fight between them would end in his ex-lieutenant's favour, no contest.

The older man turns, gripping two glasses of wine, and holds one out. Noatak accepts it.

"To the past," says Kwan.

"To the future," replies Noatak by rote, and the glasses clink. He touches the liquid to his lips, but his stomach is churning so strongly that he doesn't drink it.

"That's good wine." Kwan finishes his glass, then refills it. "You know, Amon, I should be thanking you." His voice cracks, finally revealing the first hint of anger.

*Here we are. This is the point where the calm facade fades and reveals the turmoil beneath.* Noatak forces himself to hold the icy gaze, reminding himself that should he say the right words, the Avatar will come barrelling through the door. Clinging to the Avatar as a security blanket is a bizarre concept, but surprisingly comforting.

"Thanking me," he repeats, noticing that Kwan is waiting for a prompt.

"Thanking you." Kwan drains a second glass. "You see, Amon- Or should I be calling you Noatak?" He growls the name.
"Amon will be fine."

"You see, Amon, you made me weak. I spent twenty years clinging to you, thinking that you had all the answers, that you were a gift from the spirits, that my life had meaning so long as you favoured me. And then you broke me. But I clawed my way back."

He rustles through a bag at his side, and Noatak expects him to withdraw a weapon, but instead, he withdraws a mask. It clatters to the ground. Amon's old mask, splintered and broken along the chin. Without the smirk of the lips, the eyes look frightened.

"It felt so good to stomp on that face," says Kwan, his voice escalating. "I drove a heel through that mouth that fed me so many lies – why did I believe them for so long? I was a fool." He glares. "When you broke me, I learned that my trust in you had been holding me back – holding all of us back. We put everything into you, Amon. Every last resource was dedicated to your rise, to your success. And that is why my Equalists will succeed where your Equalists failed: you wanted to be a god. I only want equality."

There's a tell on his face: a small jumping muscle on his lip, near the left side, making the moustache quiver. Noatak knows exactly what that means, and it takes all his restraint to keep himself from reaching out to run a soothing fingertip over it. "You speak of success and leadership, but your face speaks of a man who is barely holding it together."

Kwan abruptly slams the glass on the bedside table. "Why did you ask me here?" he snaps.

Noatak stands tall. "I want to join you."

"And you think, after all you did, that I'll open my arms to you?" The steely eyes narrow. "You betrayed me. You took twenty years of love and trust and companionship, and you threw them in my face!"

Longing rises so violently in Noatak's chest that his words shudder: "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry!" Kwan gives a wry laugh. "You're sorry? You think you can wipe away all that you did with a simple apology?"

And suddenly, the dam breaks, and Noatak falls to his knees. Pride be damned, Avatar be damned, Republic City be damned, even Tarrlok's freedom be damned.

"I didn't expect it to hurt this much." The words are spoken both for his ex-lieutenant's benefit and the Avatar next door, and he is humiliated by a fresh shudder that shakes his body. Tears are welling in his eyes, and no, not like this, not like this. He stares at the ground, furiously trying to blink them back and regain some composure, but the more he wrestles, the stronger the pent-up emotions grow.

"I did what I thought I had to," he adds through clenched teeth. "And I've regretted it every single day since, Kwan. Every single day." He raises his glass to his lips, hoping the wine will steady him.

Boots step into his field of vision. "You are not the Amon I knew."

Slowly, he shakes his head. "No, I am not." He lifts his head. "Do what you will with me. I will not fight back."

There is conflict on the moustached face. Noatak closes his eyes, waiting for the impact of knuckles on bone, or worse. *Free me from my guilt.*
Instead, the man kneels before him and presses two fingertips beneath his former leader's chin, tilting it up. Noatak closes his eyes and feels warm lips press against his chin. Something between a gasp and a sob leaves him as he twists his fingers into the man's hair.

Then suddenly the lips are on his, lips he never thought he would taste again, and their tongues touch, rub, battle, and they both moan, and he dimly realizes that the Avatar must be overhearing at least some of this, but he doesn't care.

The kiss breaks and his former lieutenant pulls away just a fraction; the tips of their noses are still touching, the minty taste of his breath filling Noatak's mouth.

"I need you," growls Kwan. "I wish to the spirits that I didn't, but I need you."

"Then take me," says Noatak.

.*.*.*.

"Shit," mutters Korra under her breath, pulling her ear away from the door. The last thing she ever wanted to hear was Amon moaning with pleasure, begging to be taken.

*Using sex to win Kwan's trust is a viable strategy*, she tells herself, trying to stay mature and professional. She knows she has to remain here in case her assistance is needed, but right now, all she wants to do is curl up in the shower and rinse the echoes of his moan from her brain.

Her hands ball into fists as she waits, hoping they won't take long.

.*.*.*.

This isn't at all what Kwan planned, but he should have guessed that twenty years of chemistry wouldn't just vanish. For a few minutes, at least, he can cling to denial – just a few minutes won't hurt his objective. He forgot how good Amon's lips felt, soft and full, the teeth beneath them perfectly straight. And the taste, the taste, at once minty and smoky beneath the wine. Every muscle in his body is aching for him.

He ends the kiss and smooths Amon's lower lip with his thumb, then staggers to the bag he dropped on the floor and paws through it, trying not to show his desperation. He shifts aside weapons and maps, and triumphantly discovers the little pouch containing condoms and a small bottle. He doesn't get around much these days, but he's glad he didn't give up hope entirely and remove them from his bag.

His hands are shaking so badly that he spills the pouch's contents all over the floor, littering it with tiny paper packages. His fingers close over a condom and the bottle, and he turns to see that Amon has moved to sit on the edge of the bed, his chin bowed. The position of humility is unexpected; typically, he would be staring through him, challenging him: *Prove you're worthy of me, Lieutenant.*

Kwan marches to the bed. The power balance between them had always been a pendulum, and this time, he is in charge. "Strip," he commands.

Amon complies, revealing a body that, while a bit atrophied by age and disuse, is still fit and pleasing enough that Kwan already feels himself getting hard. The broad jaw lifts and the blue eyes are piercing, and now the man looks more like the commanding officer he remembers.

"Now you," rumbles Amon.
"When I'm ready." Kwan tangles a hand into the top of the man's hair, pushing him down until Amon acquiesces and drops to his knees. There is the sound of a zipper, a cool blast of air, and then a damp mouth so warm that Kwan groans and lets his head fall back.

He doesn't want to think, doesn't want to taint this with anything that might distract him, but as he experiences the last encounter he'll ever have with Amon, he finds himself reminiscing about the first.

*.*.*. *

The boy caught Kwan's attention as soon as he entered the brothel: tall, with broad shoulders; he looked to be of Water Tribe heritage, but with cropped hair and dress that was more of an Earth Kingdom style. His handsome face had a sharp nose and broad mouth, but the jaw was still narrow with youth. Kwan guessed he was maybe twenty, twenty-one.

Two fellows Kwan recognized flanked the boy – Hiroshi Sato's bodyguards. Probably a new recruit, then. The boy's eyes were wide as he looked around the lounge; clearly, he was new to this sort of atmosphere.

Kwan must have tensed, because the woman in his lap stopped kissing his neck and turned her head to follow his gaze. A smirk tugged at her ruby lips.

"Fancy that one, do you?"

He shrugged, trying to play it nonchalantly. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't do that, Kwan. I know you." She nipped at his earlobe. "Go buy him a drink, then see if he's interested in sharing a room."

It wouldn't be the first time she had helped him, but he still couldn't look her in the eye. Qing was the only woman in the whole establishment – and, so far as experience told him, in all of Republic City – who not only was tolerant of his tastes, but actively catered to them. He always tipped extra out of guilt, and maybe that was part of the reason she liked him so much.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

She shrugged it off with a pleasant smile and then stood. "Wave for me when you're ready."

His eyes drifted back to the boy. Though his companions were immediately greeted by women, the boy's nose wrinkled and he strode to the bar, sliding onto a stool. With a deep inhale, then exhale, Kwan drew himself to his full height and strode over to him. He sat, leaving a one-seat gap, and signalled to the bartender for a beer. With a casual glance at the boy, he added, "You look like you're new around here, lad. Can I get you a drink?"

"No," replied the boy without looking at him. His voice was surprisingly deep, and Kwan felt the word vibrate through his spine.

"Come on. I had a bit of a windfall today. Let me spread the joy."

With a shrug, the boy said, "Ice wine."

Expensive tastes, but this close, Kwan could see glimpses of perfect white teeth, and he found himself desperate to impress the kid.

Once Kwan had ordered the drink, he asked lightly, "You are old enough to be drinking, aren't
The boy finally looked at him, surprised. "I'm twenty-four."

"Right. And so am I."

That got a smile out of the boy. "You aren't a good liar."

"Neither are you."

"You'd be surprised."

Kwan grinned. "I'm sure I would. If I ask your name, are you going to give me another lie?"

The boy gave a small shrug. "I'm not going to give you an answer at all."

"Really? Not even after I bought you a drink?"

With a glance around him, the boy said, "You may be in the habit of expecting people around here to give you whatever you want when you toss a few yuans their way, but you'll find that I'm very difficult to buy."

Intriguing.

The bartender brought their drinks. The boy's throat bobbed as he drank, the movement almost graceful, and his exposed neck was thicker and more muscular than Kwan had first thought. His eyes trailed down the rest of his body, but the boy's physique was obscured by the baggy brown clothes.

"This is your first time here, isn't it, lad?" said Kwan.

"Not really my type of venue." The boy swirled the pale liquid in his glass.

"No, I don't imagine you ever have to pay for sex."

The swirling stopped, and pale blue eyes locked onto him, then slowly drifted up and down his body. Kwan felt his cheeks flush and a fine sweat break out on his forehead under the scrutiny.

Quietly, the boy turned back to his wine.

Being examined and then dismissed made Kwan even more desperate. "I can give you a taste of what this place has to offer. Buy you one of the ladies for the evening."

"How degrading for her," murmured the boy into the rim of his glass. "To be bought and traded like a commodity."

Kwan shrugged. "Look, I know it's not ideal, but most of these ladies are my friends, and I assure you, I treat them with respect. They're just non-benders doing what they can to survive in the world." When the words elicited a cocked brow - the closest thing to interest he had seen yet - he pushed on, "I'll show you the ropes, lad. My treat."

"You're eager to spend your money on me."

He shrugged. "Don't have many people to spend it on, and I just cashed in a major bounty."

The boy looked at him quizzically.
"I'm a mercenary for hire," said Kwan, puffing his chest. "Took down a big Triple Threat Triad member. Saved the lives of a few non-benders in the process." He grinned, not bothering to hide his pride.

A change came over the other's face: the eyes softened, and the sneer line beside his nose faded. "That's a cause worth celebrating. Very well. I'll take you up on your offer, Kwan. Just stop calling me 'lad'."

"Then what should I call you?"

A hand stretched out. "Amon."

"Kwan," he replied as he shook it, because if the boy wasn't going to give him a real name, then neither was he.

And so, a few minutes later, they sat a few feet apart on a padded bench in a private room, Qing between Kwan's legs, a sweet girl by the name of Lena between Amon's.

Kwan's head lolled to the back of the bench and rolled along it so that he could watch Amon, even though it was a blatant breech of bordello etiquette. The boy's head was tossed back and his torso was arched. His lips were flared, teeth clenched, eyes squeezed shut, and Kwan tried to memorize the tantalizing expression. The boy's hands fell to either side of his body and curled into fists, one of them so close that Kwan fought the urge to reach over and grab it.

Between his legs, Qing was moving slowly and gently, teasing him, and the ache was growing so painful that he gently began to thrust, letting her know he was ready to go faster. Beside him, Amon was alternating between holding his breath and gasping moans, and the sound spurred Kwan to echo them, feeling his mind dizzying. The boy's face was so twisted that he looked as if he were in pain, and with hormone-fuelled bravery, Kwan lay a hand on top of the clenched fist to soothe him.

Amon turned to face him so quickly that Kwan almost withdrew, but to his surprise, the clenched fist uncurled and the fingers twined with his, grip so tight that it hurt. Amon lay his cheek against the back of the bench, eyes locked on Kwan, mouth parted.

As they held each other's hands, each other's gaze, Kwan dimly realized what was going on: he's close, but he's waiting for me. At the thought, a wave of heat forced his back to arch.

They cried out together, their linked hands uniting their separate pleasures into one.

Their hands stayed linked as they lay there, sweating, panting. Qing stood and leaned forward to whisper into Kwan's ear: "You've never come that hard before."

Weakly, his eyes opened, and he released Amon's hand to pull out his wallet. He paid Qing a decent tip, but she smiled and handed him back a couple notes.

"Kiss him and be happy together," she said, just loudly enough for him to hear.

"What?" he replied. "I don't want-"

Her lips pursed. "Stop lying to yourself, Kwan. You've been lonely for too long." She kissed his cheek, and then the women left the room.

Awkwardly, he stood in front of Amon, who was staring at the hand that had linked them. He racked his mind for a smooth line to deliver, but wasn't even sure where to begin. Amon lifted his
head, and he could see a similar loss for words on the youthful face.

"Look," said Kwan, "I shouldn't have-"

"It's fine," said Amon.

"But-"

"I said, it's fine." Amon stood, and now they were less than a foot apart, both radiating heat, their faces flushed and damp. "Well, have a good night," blurted Kwan. He held out his hand for a handshake. Amon took it, but instead of shaking it, he lifted the hand for examination, his thumb sliding over the knuckles. Their eyes locked. 

*He's not frightened by my advances. He's not pulling away.*

Kwan's heart began to pound so loudly that he could hear it in his ears. He impulsively shoved his fingers into the hair at the back of the boy's head, pulling him forward, lunging for his mouth. They met in a deep kiss, hands sliding across jaw, raking through hair, clawing around neck. A moan passed between them, and then Amon pushed him backwards, not breaking the kiss, shoving him so hard against the wall that his head smacked into it.

The kiss broke, and Amon's mouth found his ear: "If it was me you wanted, Kwan, you should have just told me."

The rock-hard lump pressing against Kwan's thigh was clouding his brain – how was the boy already so hard again, so soon? But then he was surprised to find himself already responding, almost painfully so.

"Tell me," growled Amon.

"I want you," he gasped, shocked and aroused by the constant changes in the boy's demeanour.

"Here?" It was uttered like a challenge. 

_Someone will be here any second to use this room_, he thought, but his mouth only hissed, "Yes."

Amon pulled away and grabbed a bottle of lubricant from the shelf, and a condom from the basket below it. "Turn around," he commanded, and Kwan eagerly obeyed.

*.**.*

_He was so strong then_, thinks Kwan, smoothing a hand along the jaw of his submissive ex-leader. Amon's face contorts below him, eyelids heavy, doing that alternating-holding-breath-and-then-moan he's always done when he's close. Kwan drives into him hard, feeling himself spurred forward by both memories of the past and the sensations of the present. He hates him, and he loves him, and it feels so good.

But his mind won't let him forget that this is the end, not quite, and tears leak from his eyes as he thrusts. "I'm sorry," he pleads. "Amon, I'm so sorry."

If the man hears him, he doesn't respond. His throat is exposed, his head tossed back, and Kwan buries his face in it, teeth around the trachea. He doesn't want it to end, doesn't want it to end, but Amon is so tight and his body is so solid and real and those cries of ecstasy are only dragging him
They come together, crying the fake names they used for each other for so many years.

Kwan nestles into the skin, tasting pheromones and sweat, willing this moment to last.

But just like their names, all this is fake, and reality returns to him far too quickly.

He tilts his mouth up to direct his low voice to Amon's ear: "I'm so sorry."

Gasps are his only response, and he knows the man is too dazed to understand what he's saying.

Slowly, Kwan detaches himself from his former leader, peels the condom off and knots it, then tosses it in the garbage. He pulls up his pants and straightens his shirt, then begins to rustle through his bag.

"I know why you wanted to see me," he says quietly. "I know you're trying to get information from me." He selects a knife from his bag and hides it behind is back as he stands to face the man. As he advances, he says in a low voice, "I know the Avatar is with you."

That catches Amon's attention. He pushes himself up on one elbow, hair tousled and damp, but eyes wide.

His former lieutenant straddles him and rakes a hand into Amon's hair, then jerks him back down to the bed, pinning him in place. The man doesn't fight back. Tears are obscuring Kwan's vision, but he blinks them away.

*Do it, Kwan,* he tells himself. *You can't walk away from this. It must be done if the Equalists are to succeed. It is your duty.*

"You know all our secrets, Amon." He bends down to plant a slow kiss to the man's lips, his knife still behind his back. Pulling away just a fraction, his heart breaks as he whispers his final words: "I loved you."

*Do it.*

He drives the knife toward Amon's throat.

But at the last second, he panics, and buries it to the hilt in the man's shoulder instead.
VI: Unravelling

VI

Unravelling

For the past fifteen minutes, Korra has been huddled in a ball by the doorway, trying desperately to distract herself from the obvious sounds of pleasure next door. The moans and grunts and cries and the soft slap of damp skin is horrifying her on an intellectual level, but awakening some deep, primal arousal on a physical level, and that makes her feel even more horrified.

The only thing worse than getting guiltily turned on by it is the knowledge that these are two men she has always hated. They were easy to hate, before, because she saw them as monsters, not as people. To hear them so obviously enjoying each other's company adds a human dynamic to them that she would rather not consider; the second she starts seeing them as people, she's going to start connecting with them, and that's only going to make her job harder.

They're quiet now, at least, and she hopes that means they'll be discussing strategy and tactics soon. Her ear presses against the door.

.*.*.*.

Noatak had been willing to accept death, but now that he's looking it in the face, he realizes he isn't ready.

Adrenaline engulfs his mind as blinding white pain shoves through his body. Kwan leaps away from him, and Noatak tries to sit up, but he is pinned by the knife, and bleeding, and he's going to die. he's going to die.

His arms and legs flail, and his foot hits the wine glass on the bedside table. It topples to the ground and smashes.

.*.*.*.

The sound of a yell and shattering glass startles Korra to her feet.

She throws open the door, and has a split second to register a naked Amon bleeding out on the bed and his ex-lieutenant hunched over a bag on the floor. The moustached man yells and draws glinting metal from the bag, rushing at her with startling speed. She was prepared to see his kali sticks, but instead he's wielding two knives. She dodges just in time to avoid a slice to her throat, blasting flame at him in response, but he lands a clean hit on her thigh. The knife buries into her muscle, and she shrieks and drops.

He turns to run.

Before she can think, her hand claws into the air.

She flicks her wrist. Kwan slams into the wall, then falls to all fours, his body shaking under the strain of her bending.

His eyes lock with hers, wild and panicked, and she's sure hers look the same.

No, not again!
She can feel every vein in his body, can feel his quickened pulse, can tell that a good portion of his blood is still pooling in his groin from his escapade with Amon, leaving his brain sluggish. The world begins to tilt as her nightmares become reality.

_This can't happen. I'm not a bloodbender. I'm not a bloodbender!_

Flashbacks from Asami's death crowd her mind, disrupting her concentration. Her stance falters, and her bloodbending falls away. The ex-lieutenant gives something close to a shriek and scrambles from the room; the door slams behind him. She almost chases after him, but there is a loud gargle from the bed.

The mattress around Amon is soaked red; he's pale and shaking, and his eyes and cheeks are sunken. The knife is below his collarbone - no vital organs, but the blade went clean through, and he has already lost too much blood. She knows he'll die if she doesn't heal him. The objective was to get the lieutenant, it's true, but as much as she hates this man, she's determined that they're both going to survive this mission.

The knife in her leg is so deep that she can barely move; she can't remove it yet, or she might bleed out, too. She screams as she staggers to the sink, blinking back a veil of darkness that threatens to envelope her. She jerks at the water tap and streams the water into the room, gathering it in a blue glow at Amon's throat. It's a delicate balancing act, staying conscious and healing him at the same time, and she's afraid one or the other is going to give way.

The knife needs to come out of him. Removing it will probably kill him, but what choice does she have?

With sobbing breaths, she hobbles toward him, maintaining the blue glow on his wound. He's unconscious now, his breaths too quick. Her fingers wrap around the hilt, and she yanks.

A fountain of blood begins to squirt from the wound, and again, instinct kicks in: she claws her hand in the air and redirects the blood back into the artery, holding it in place while she mends the wound with her healing. His body thrashes, but the wound closes. It isn't pretty, and it's going to need a few more rounds of healing before he is mended, but at least he won't bleed out.

_Stop bloodbending_, her mind screams, but she won't let herself consider what's happened until they're both safe.

She jerks the knife out of her own leg with a howl, and then tries to heal her own wound, but there's so little energy left in her reserves that she can barely close it. The ground is pitching beneath her, and everything is dark and very far away. She feels herself begin to fall, and then she feels nothing.

.*.*.*.

At first, Noatak thinks he's dead.

His eyelids open, and his memories crash down on him. For a moment, he lays still, paralyzed. There is agonizing pain, just a few inches left of the hollow of this throat, but when he touches his fingertips to the wound, they come back dry. He vaguely remembers a blue glow. His body is cold and shaking, and realizes he must be in shock. Confusion is fogging his mind, and he fights it, trying to maintain focus for as long as he can.

His head tilts to the side, with great effort, and he sees the Avatar lying in a heap on the floor. Gingerly, he sits up. The mattress is soaked with blood - is that all his? He's dizzy and nauseated,
and black spots are swimming in his vision, but adrenalin gives him the strength to move to the Avatar and roll her onto her back.

Her skin is sallow, but her breaths are even. Blood has soaked through one thigh of her pants. His fingers crawl through the fabric until he finds a small cut. Knife wound. The blood here is still wet.

She's an invaluable tool to the mission - already, by healing him, she has proven how useful she is - so he can't let her die. He grits his teeth and gingerly pulls her pants off her hips, praying to the spirits that she doesn't wake up while he's doing so. The wound is small, but deep, and it isn't quite closed; it looks as if she passed out before she was able to finish healing it.

He hauls himself over to Kwan's satchel, and tries not to notice the condoms scattered on the floor. At last, he finds what he's looking for: a small pouch that contains a needle and thread. His trembling fingers trace the gold writing on it: "To K, This should be of use until you finally learn to dodge. -A." His chest aches as he remembers the good-natured punch on the shoulder he received upon presenting the gift.

The Avatar gives a small groan behind him, and he realizes he has to hurry: an unconscious patient is far easier to stitch than a conscious one. His hands are shaking so badly that he can barely thread the needle, and he curses. He needs to get all this done before the adrenalin wears off and he suffers the full brunt of his injuries.

It's a clumsy stitch job, but it will hold until she can heal herself properly. He quickly uses his discarded shirt to wipe the blood off her thigh - though it smudges it more than cleans it - then bandages the wound with more supplies from Kwan's satchel.

Once it's done, he scoops his arms beneath her knees and upper back, using all his strength to lift her. He drops her unceremoniously on her bed; she doesn't move.

He's shivering now from the cold, and he recognizes that his body needs some time to shut down and rest. No way he'll make it back to his own room. He falls to the bed beside her, pulls the corner of the blanket over his body and closes his eyes, finally giving in to unconsciousness.

. . . . .

Kwan flees the hotel, banks into an alley, and keeps running. He knocks over garbage cans in his haste, and puddles of mud spray up his body, mingling with bloodstains. Sobs choke him, so painful that he gasps for breath, but he still keeps running.

But no matter how far he flees, he can't outrun what he has done.

Exhaustion finally overtakes him in a dark alley a few miles from the hotel, and he collapses against the wall, sliding to a seat in the mud. He screws his eyes shut, but he can't erase the sight of the knife going into Amon's flesh. Words taunt him, sing-song:

He let his guard down, and you betrayed him, right when he was at his most vulnerable. All to try to retain your power. You're just as bad as he was.

The heels of his hands drive into his eyes, trying to block out the imagery and the taunting, and he realizes he is yelling. Across from him, a man in a chef's uniform stands in the doorway, petrified, a bag of garbage forgotten in his hand.

Kwan tries to apologize, but he can't control his sobs.

"You okay, pal?" asks the chef hesitantly.
Taking deep breaths, Kwan manages to regain control over himself enough to say, "I need to get to the roof." There's only one way to end this; he can't go back to the Equalists as a failure, he can't go back to Amon now that he's committed this atrocity, and there's nowhere else to go.

The chef is still hesitating. "Why do you need to get to the roof?"

But as he's speaking, Kwan's eyes lock onto a fire escape beside the man. It starts at about a foot above his head; he can easily pull himself up that distance. Shakily, he stands and approaches it.

"Hey," says the chef. "Whatever you're thinking-"

"Go away," Kwan's hands tighten onto the rail at the bottom of the fire escape, and he effortlessly pulls himself up to the platform, then begins to climb the stairs. Calmness floods him. No matter how much his mind is racing, soon it will all be quiet.

"I'll call the cops," yells the chef.

Kwan looks down at him. "I just need a vantage point," he lies.

The man doesn't look convinced, but clearly wants to believe him.

Mustering all his calmness, Kwan smiles. "It's okay. I just had a little breakdown, but I'm fine now. Sorry to have frightened you." Then he turns back to the ladder.

The escape route goes up seven stories. Each rung is more and more soothing, and by the time he reaches the roof, he feels high, as if he has reached a state of zen that he never once managed to attain in all his years of meditation. It's a clear night, the moon nearly full, and stars are so thick and bright in the sky that when a tear blurs his vision, it looks more like a flowing field of clouds. He blinks away the tear and smiles, stepping onto the rooftop.

Wind caresses him, tousling his hair and fluttering his clothes, and he spreads his arms wide, trying to catch the wind and sail on it. Slowly and with determination, his feet pad toward the far edge of the rooftop. He can see the entire city from his vantage point.

_I won't trouble you any longer_, he apologizes to the city. His feet settle on the ledge, toes curling over it. _I'm sorry. I failed you._

His eyes close as he prepares to fall.

"Hey!" calls a woman's voice from below, so commanding and rough that he is immediately reminded of Qing.

His eyes open again.

A woman stands at street level. She looks about forty, with a portly figure, dark hair in a bun and an apron.

"Hey!" she calls again. "You get off my damned roof."

A sign. His arms spread further as he prepares to jump.

"Not like that!" she yells. "Climb back down the blasted ladder."

"It's too late for me." His voice sounds feverishly high, even to his own ears. "I'm beyond saving." His limbs are shaking, and her distraction is making him question himself. The wind suddenly seems threatening, trying to force him off the ledge, and the moon is cold and hard, as if Yue
herself is judging him.

"Look," yells the woman. "If you want to kill yourself, that's fine, but at least come in for a drink first. On the house."

He hesitates.

"Afraid I'll talk you out of it?" she adds. "I don't think you really want to do this."

She's right. He looks down, realizing the enormity of what he's about to do. The ground suddenly dips away from him, and he leaps back from the ledge, terrified. A wave of bile rises in his throat, and he doubles over. "Oh, spirits!"

She's waiting for him at the bottom with a mug of beer. "That's more like it."

"I've done something terrible," he confesses.

"Haven't we all?"

"I can't live with what I've done. I'm not the man I thought I was."

She waves him inside. "Then come drink for awhile, and maybe you'll forget to die."

Kwan recognizes the chef from the alleyway as they pass by the kitchen. The bar is almost empty, and the woman polishes the counter at the end, offering him a stool. He accepts it.

"I don't have any money," he says, unable to meet her gaze. He left the bag with all his possessions when he fled the hotel room - but thinking about the room sends a fresh wave of anguish crashing over him, and he wraps arms around himself.

She shrugs. "Pay me back when you can." She slides him a shot of clear liquor. "Take that, too. It'll help."

"Why are you helping me?"

Another shrug. "Bloodstains are bad for business. You want to talk about it?"

What can he possibly say without horrifying her? Miserably, he shakes his head.

"Then drink and forget. I'll be back in a few minutes." She taps the countertop as if patting his shoulder, then moves to greet another patron.
Visions

Noatak awakens to find himself face to face with a sleeping woman. He's naked and cold, his vision is blurred, his entire body aches, and the taste of old wine is thick in his mouth. This isn't an unfamiliar situation, but he can't remember what the occasion was that-

The face comes into focus.

The Avatar.

He pulls away and sits upright, his heart racing. For a panicked moment, he thinks the worst. As his eyes lock onto the wound on her thigh, his memory returns to him, but the truth is even worse: now he can only see the look on Kwan's face as the knife slid into his body. He touches his wound; it's inflamed, and he winces.

He's about to return to his own room, but the Avatar gives a small moan and curls tightly into a foetal position. Her body quakes with shivers.

This is only because I need to recover so that she can heal me in turn, he tells himself. He awkwardly loops his arm around her shoulders and knees and slides her further up the bed; laying her head on the pillow, he tugs the blankets out from under her and drapes them over her body.

The effort was taxing, and he drops to his knees to rest, panting, and watches her. Her face is so relaxed that she looks even more youthful than she is, her loose hair spilling around her face and pillow in waves. She's quite beautiful when she's not opposing him or getting in his way, and he studies that beauty, trying to decide what it makes him feel. Mostly, he's just numb, an after-effect of the stresses of Kwan's attack, but there's an unexpected note playing in his dulled emotions: regret.

In his youth, he had admired the Avatar for its power, but somewhere along the way, that admiration twisted into rivalry. He built her into a god to be torn down, an inhuman obstacle to surpass. As he stares down at the girl, wounded and human, he finally understands the Avatar's true strength: she wields powers stronger than any human will ever wield, but she is just as vulnerable as everyone else. She bleeds, her heart breaks, she loves and she hates. Her humanity is what keeps her powers in check, what helps her serve the world instead of dominate it - and also what fuels her.

That's what he underestimated six years ago, when he tried to attack the people she loved. He had hardened himself into a cold and unfeeling war machine; she had embraced her emotions, and that was what had given her the determination to defeat him.

His fingers rise to the wound at his throat. And now, that same woman, capable of so much love and so much hatred, who embraced her humanity where he rejected it, has elected to save him, and he can't quite figure out why.

All this self-reflection is making him uncomfortable, and he feels rested enough now to return to his own room. He strides back to it and closes the door behind him.

The bloodstain on the bed is still a bit damp, and his ex-lieutenant's bag lies on the ground,
condom packages littering the floor. The urge to fall into despair is as overwhelming and uncontrollable as the urge to fall unconscious had been earlier. He's not sure he can fight it. His fingertips skate across the stained mattress, and sobs rise so suddenly in his throat that he chokes.

Kwan was right: his time in jail has weakened him.

He misses being cold and detached.

.*.*.*.

Korra.

"Aang?" She struggles to open her eyes. "Aang, is that you?" There's nothing around her but darkness. She feels as if she's being pulled toward the ceiling, but her body is rooted to the bed, and the discordance makes her skin crawl.

Korra...hear me?

"Where are you?" No matter how hard she strains, she can't see anything but darkness. There's a moment of silence, long enough that anger has time to rise inside her. "And where the hell have you been? I've tried so hard to reach you for so long!"

His voice fades in, then out: ...

...long ago, a lion turtle...

So like his son, throwing parables at her when she all she wants is straight advice. She strains to hear him - she can feel the physical tug of it; it's ringing in her ears, louder and louder, until his voice snaps into perfect clarity:

"...corrupted and destroyed."

She awakens.

For a stunned moment, she blinks against the sudden brightness of the waking world.

"Aang," she whispers, but the ringing has stopped, and so has his voice. With a groan, she drops her forearm onto her forehead.

The clock reads four o'clock, and sunlight lines the borders of the curtains. She's in the bed in her hotel room, under the covers; she lifts them and sees a bandage wrapped around her wounded leg. Did Amon do that? She blinks at it, but has no memory of doing it herself. If he was able to bandage her and then carry her to her room, she must have healed him more successfully than she remembers.

The thought of Amon stripping off her pants, tending to her wound and tucking her into bed contradicts everything she knows about him, and she claps her hands to her body to make sure she's truly awake.

As she sits up, her head starts to pound and her stomach spins. Definitely awake, she thinks. Blood loss. She lifts the bandage. The wound has been stitched - did Amon, of all people, honestly stitch her wound for her? - but the skin around it is swollen and red. She'll need to do another round of healing for sure, and Amon will likely need more healing on his neck as well.

Her legs swing over the side of the bed, but then she freezes.

Through the closed door between the rooms, she hears the distinctive sound of weeping.
At first she thinks her ears are playing tricks on her, but then one of the sobs cracks with a voice that is unmistakably Amon's. She winces. Even though she hates the man, she can't help but feel sorry for him. Stabbing someone in the vulnerable moments after sex is just low, no matter what history was between them.

This mission was so much easier when she saw him as a symbol of her fear and failure, not a sobbing man with a broken heart. Not a man who, though wounded himself, would take the time to stitch and bandage her.

It's embarrassing to be an accidental voyeur of his private grief, and he'd likely be humiliated if he knew she could hear him, so she limps over to the bathroom and runs the water as loudly as she can to alert him that she's awake. In the shower, she does another pass of healing on her wound, then washes it. Amon seems to have done a tentative cleaning job, but there is still a lot of dried blood to clean. The water swirling down the drain is tinged red, and she stares at it, reminded of the thing she's trying the hardest to ignore.

*I'm not a bloodbender,* she thinks out of routine, but the evidence is getting harder to deny. Her instincts are telling her that it's why Aang was trying to talk to her, but all of this is too much to think about, and she just wants to focus on getting this mission done and getting back to Mako and Naga.

She'll contemplate the bloodbending later.

As she steps out of the shower and begins to bend the water off her body to dry herself, she notes that she can almost put full weight on her wounded leg now, but it's going to take a day or two until she's functional again. Likely, Amon is going to need a couple days to heal up as well. This mission is getting a lot longer than she hoped.

She leaves her hair down and pulls on her shirt. Her pants are bloodstained, and she cringes as she pulls them on, wishing she had brought a change of clothes. How optimistic she had been that this mission would be short.

At least she can hurry the process along by healing Amon.

There is no response when she knocks on the adjoining door, but no more sobbing, either. She calls his name. He still doesn't respond, so she pushes the door open.

He sits on his bed in a lotus position, his back to her, shirtless. The pool of blood on the mattress is dry, and she stares at it, shocked by how large it is. Lin is not going to be pleased when she gets the hotel bill.

He still isn't turning to face her, so she tries again. "Amon."

"Leave," he barks, his voice even more gravelly than usual.

"I need to check your wound."

"No." There is a tremble to the word, and the muscles of his back tense, as if he is humiliated by the tell. The tone paints an image in her mind of a red nose, bloodshot eyes, and dried salt streaks on his cheeks.

She hates this awkwardness, this embarrassment for the man she hates, and so she clumsily tries to rescue him from it. "Look, it's a common side effect that waterbending healing causes an emotional reaction a few hours later. It uses the body's adrenaline, and when that drops off, the mood dips, and sometimes the urge to weep-"
"Do not patronize me," he growls, still not turning around.

Well, I tried. She steps through the door and closes it behind her.

Her body is so drained that she flops back onto the bed and curls onto her side, trying to decide what to do next. She could call Mako - the Equalists clearly know where they are now, anyway, so it doesn’t seem risky to give away their position. Then she pictures Mako running to her rescue, and realizes she can't let that happen. She still has something to prove, to herself and to the world. Maybe, instead, she should eat something to help her body heal.

Her eyelids are so heavy that they close, and before she can make a decision, she drifts back to sleep.

.*.*.*.

Korra.

She opens her eyes. Her body is translucent, monochrome blue, and a figure in yellow and red stands before her.

"Aang!" she says. "Finally."

"Korra." She marvels at the kindness in his tone – how different they are. But there is a stern furrow to his brow, the same expression Tenzin wears when he's about to scold her, and petulance rises within her in defense.

"You haven't visited me once since before Asami died, and now you finally show up?" she snaps. "What the hell! Do you know how many times I've tried to reach you?"

"I am here now," he says gently.

His patience with her outburst shames her, and she bows her head to avoid his sympathetic dark stare. "What's happening to me? I don't understand it, Aang. I'm not a bloodbender. I never have been. It's not even a full moon."

"Korra," says Aang, pressing a hand to her shoulder. "Did you hear what I was trying to tell you earlier?"

"No, I could barely hear you."

"When I was a boy, I learned to energybend from a wise old lion turtle. It had these words of wisdom for me: in order to bend energy, a person's spirit must be unbendable, or it will be corrupted and destroyed."

Ice water floods her veins as she considers the words. "You think that's what's happening to me? I've been corrupted?"

He nods.

"And 'destroyed' means..."

"I don't know," he says quietly.

"But I haven't taken anyone's bending since Amon." She chokes on the name as she realizes her bloodbending has the same properties as his. "Oh, Spirits."
Looking down at her hands, glowing and blue, she claws and unclaws her fingers. She thinks about just how vulnerable and bendable she was when she took Amon's bending. His punishment had been the idea of the courts; she had wanted nothing to do with it, and she had looked down at him not with confidence, but with fear. She remembers how easily his bending slid from him.

Into her.

"It doesn't make sense," she whispers. "That was six years ago, and I only started bloodbending a year ago."

"A wound that festers deep beneath the surface can take time to erupt," says another voice; she recognizes Avatar Ryoku. He steps into view, and his face, though still kind, isn't quite as sympathetic as Aang's.

"This has been a war, deep within you," says the voice of Avatar Kyoshi as she stands with the others. "Each time you were under duress, you surrendered territory. The corruption is gaining ground, and momentum."

Korra's hands curl into fists and she lifts stares at the three former Avatars. They are looking at her with three different expressions - pity, disgust, concern - reminding her, as everything has for the past several years, that she is a bad Avatar.

"You didn't bother to warn me?" she growls. "You had six years!"

"The signs didn't begin to manifest until recently," says Aang gently. "And you have been cut off from your spiritual side for some time."

"Like I've ever been properly connected to it," she mutters. "So how do I get un-corrupted?"

Their apparitions are beginning to fade, and she hears that ringing, straining noise again.

"No, wait! What do I do?" she screams, and Aang is mouthing something, but she can't hear him.

"Will I be destroyed?" Her words echo in the emptiness.

Where the three Avatars stood, only a swirling black mass remains.
Korra awakens with a start. Amon stands in the doorway between their rooms, dressed in his prison-issued civilian garb, holding a paper bag. His collar covers his wounds, and he's standing so tall that if she didn't know he had been injured, she would think he was in perfect health.

"You should have knocked," she mutters, reflecting that it's a good thing that she fell asleep fully-clothed.

"I did." He holds out the bag. "Food and supplies."

She sits up, letting the covers drop to her lap, and rakes a hand through her loose hair. "You don't have any money, so how did you-"

"Kwan was kind enough to leave some behind." His eyes drop.

There's a long, awkward silence, but he looks so pitiable that she invites him in.

Perching at the end of the bed, he sets the bag on the covers and withdraws a brown paper packet, then hands it to her. She opens it to reveal barbecued meat wrapped in thin bread, and her mouth begins to water. He unpacks a food packet for himself, and a thermos of hot tea with two cups, but it's the small jar at the bottom that surprises her most. He holds it out, not making eye contact.

"For your wound."

"I'm a healer," she says, irritated that he would underestimate her abilities.

"I grew up in the Northern tribes, Avatar. I know what a grave injury does to a healer's ability to heal." He sets the jar on the bedspread. "I need you to get well so that you can properly complete my healing."

After a second to study him, she snatches the jar and limps to the bathroom. Once around the corner, she pulls her pants off her hips. The wound is hot to the touch, and not looking much better than it had earlier; it's a good thing she has a little help healing it. She slathers the ointment on the wound. It smells acrid, and it burns so fiercely that she yelps, tears springing to the corners of her eyes. But soon it fades to a sting, then a pleasant coolness.

When she returns to Amon, he's already eating. His eyes drop to her legs, and she follows his gaze to the blood on her thigh.

"I'll give you my other pair of pants," he says. "You won't blend into a crowd like that."

"Blend into a crowd? You have a new plan?"

He hesitates. "I'm working on it."

She's pretty sure he's only been mourning the past, not looking ahead, but she doesn't call him on it. The last thing she wants is to have an awkward discussion about his state of mind, especially after
those sobs she overheard. "I guess we need to heal first, anyway." She moves to stand in front of him. "Lift your chin. I need to do another round of healing."

He complies, and she pulls open his collar and inspects the wound. Not a clean heal – she had been in too much of a hurry. She vaguely contemplates re-opening the wound to seal it properly, but that's too risky.

"It's going to scar," she says as an apology.

He shrugs. "It'll be in good company."

For the first time, she notices a sharp line across his temple, another on the lower corner of his mouth. Curiously, she moves to sit behind him; he tenses as she combs her fingers through the back of his hair to reveal the scalp. The scar she remembers is still there, disguised by the length of his hair.

"There's a larger one between my shoulder blades," he says quietly. "My brother came so close to killing us both."

She never stopped to wonder what happened on that boat. "You didn't see it coming?"

"I did. I let it come." His shoulders take on a slight slump. "But just like when you unmasked me, Avatar, I learned that when instinct kicks in, when rational thought fades, I am an animal who will resort to any means to survive. Even the bending I despise."

*I know the feeling.* The sensation of Kwan's veins surges through her, and her breath catches in her throat as she thinks of her discussion with Aang.

Returning to stand in front of him, she musters what little bending energy she has in her depleted reserves, engulfing his wound in a glow. For good measure, she slathers some of the salve on it when she's done. He winces, the motion coupled with a sharp intake of breath that reminds her of the sounds she overheard when he was with his ex-lieutenant. Her face flushes.

The second she's done healing, she retreats to the head of the bed. Even though her stomach is rumbling, her appetite has vanished, and she has to force herself to choke back the food as quickly as possible. *He hasn't said anything about how I must have overheard the two of them. And why hasn't he said anything about me bloodbending? Was he too far gone to notice?*

Thinking about bloodbending is making panic swell within her, and she tries to swallow it back.

A voice echoes around her, from deep within her memory: Katara's.

*I will never teach you to bloodbend, Korra. Bloodbending is a dark art, one that leads people to madness."

Her discussion with the Avatars replays in her mind, over and over, and she wonders what happens when an Avatar is corrupted.

She wonders if she will be destroyed.

.*.*.*.

Noatak finds himself enjoying the Avatar's company.

They aren't saying anything – in fact, they're downright ignoring each other – but it's pleasant to
know an ally is near. Tarrlok, as important as he is, is too detached to be a proper ally. The last
time someone was really on his side was Kwan. His throat catches at the thought.

*I didn't expect it to hurt this much,* he thinks, the thought retreaded so many times that it has
formed a groove in his mind. Six years of healing erased by a single moment, and now he, too,
knows the pain of betrayal.

Behind him, he can hear the Avatar devouring her meal like a wild animal, and he deliberately
slows down his pace, stretching their shared meal as long as possible. He's not yet ready to go back
to that cold room, tainted with his blood and tears and the scent of sex. Once he is done eating, he
carefully folds and smooths his paper and places it back in the bag, and then does the same with
hers. She's scrutinizing him, no doubt wondering why he's being so meticulous with garbage.

Then there's nothing more to delay him, so he stands.

"Thank you for the meal," she says awkwardly.

He gives her a polite nod. "Goodnight, Avatar."

As he turns to leave, he hears her say, "You can't sleep in there. The bed is covered in blood." She
says it sullenly, as if out of obligation.

"I can sleep on the floor."

"You're injured; you need to rest."

He looks over his shoulder at her, a brow raised. She shrugs, plucking at a loose string on the
bedspread.

"You can stay here," she mutters.

The invitation is so unexpected that he can only stare.

She throws her hands into the air. "Look, don't make this weirder than it already is. You'll be on
your side of the bed, and I'll be on mine, and we'll get a good night's sleep so that we can heal,
finish this fucking mission and get the hell out of here."

The profanity startles him out of his shock. He nods.

He already showered while the Avatar was unconscious, but he returns to his room to brush his
teeth and hang up his shirt, then fetch his spare pair of pants for her.

Her eyes lock onto his bare torso when he returns, and he tries not to analyze the look on her face.
Likely she's wide-eyed because of the love bites Kwan left on his collarbone. She says nothing, but
only takes his spare pants, disappears into the bathroom, and returns wearing them. They're rolled
up several times at the cuff and far too large for her, but at least they aren't bloodstained.

He waits for her to invite him into the bed, but she only sets her jaw and crawls under the covers.

"You're leaving your clothes on?" he asks without thinking how forward it will sound; he only
meant that they would get wrinkled.

Her eyes narrow at him, and he sighs. "I meant-"

"I don't care." She flops onto her side, back to him.
No invitation, then. He crawls under the covers. The Water Tribe part of him itches to snuggle against her for warmth. It's nothing even remotely sexual – he and Tarrlok huddle together to sleep all the time – and given that she shares his heritage, she likely huddled with her own friends and relatives many times. But their past relationship is probably such that she'd rather freeze than share space with him. So, he restricts himself to the far end of the bed, carefully making sure that not one bit of him touches her.

He feels the bed shift as she turns out the lamp.

They do not bid each other goodnight, and he's surprised at how lonely that makes him feel.

.*.*.*.

For the first night in months, Korra's sleep is free from dreams. Her body is so trained to wake up from nightmares that she wakes up well before dawn anyway, as if by an internal alarm.

Since there's no need to get up and console herself, she stays in the drowsy realm of half-sleep instead, warm and relaxed. She snuggles up behind Mako, burying her face between his shoulder blades; her arm loops around him to stroke the soft hair on his chest. His arm closes over hers, their fingers interlacing, and she smiles to herself.

As she slowly finds consciousness, she begins to realize that this is wrong. The scent streaming off his skin is different – there's an almost spicy undertone to it, like cinnamon. The fit of their fingers is unfamiliar. His ribs are more barrel-chested, the fur of his body thicker, and rough scar tissue on his back scratches her face...

Shit! Her eyes fly open as she remembers where she is.

It's too dark to see, but she feels. She's huddled up against Amon. Snuggling him. He's dead asleep, his even breaths making his back rise and fall against her face.

Don't panic, she tells herself, but she can't help thinking at the fingers that are holding hers are the same fingers that gripped the back of her neck so he could take her bending, the same fingers that curled to lift her like a puppet into the air...

Worse still, with her newfound bloodbending senses, she feels the blood moving through his veins, feels every heartbeat, and – don't think about it, don't think about it – she's horrified to discover that his blood is rushing between his legs.

Don't panic. That's normal when men sleep. Just get out of here and don't panic.

Holding her breath, she begins to reclaim her arm, slowly unentangling one finger at a time, then extracting her arm from beneath his. He stirs and gives a small moan, and she has to bite her fist to keep from shoving him away. Once her arm is free, she slides back to her side of the bed, quietly climbs out from under the covers, and limps to the bathroom.

She closes the door, turns on the light, and then sinks to her knees, letting out a silent scream.

Amon. You were just sleep-cuddling Amon.

She falls to all fours, dry heaves wracking her body at the memory of that blood rushing between his legs, at the intimate scent of his skin rolling across her tongue.

The worst part is the growing ache between her legs, but she dismisses it. It's just because she thought it was Mako. It's been a few days and her body is neglected and that's the only reason why
it's responding this way: a physical reaction to a physical stimulus and a memory. It means nothing more than that.

But it's not going away, and she rationalizes that the quickest way to soothe her body is to release the tension. She makes sure the door is locked, then sits with her back against the bathtub, sliding her hands beneath her waistband. She tries not to let the dampness alarm her. A purely physical reaction, nothing more. She focuses on Mako, always Mako, on the way they make each other feel.

In her mind, Mako keeps morphing into Amon, and she grits her teeth, doubling her focus. But even though she manages to hold onto Mako, Amon is lurking in the background, giving that little smile he gave after she took his bending. Watching.

And as the rush begins to flood her mind, as she gets pulled away, Mako disappears, and it's just Amon, his spiced scent filling her mind as he rocks into her, the blood rushing between his legs at her touch, his lips tickling her ear as he makes the sounds of pleasure she heard through the door when he was with his lieutenant...

She hurtles back to reality as her muscles contract, and bites her cheek to stop herself from yelling. For a moment, she sits there sweaty and gasping, and wonders what just happened. Once it begins to sink in, the guilt almost chokes her.

Shakily, she stands and cleans herself up. When she finally musters the courage to open the door, she peeks back at the bed. Amon is in the same position she left him, but now the bed seems far too narrow to hold both of them.

*It's okay,* she consoles herself. *This is just a stupid crossed wire somewhere, and it will all be better in the morning. You're under stress and you miss Mako, so your brain latched on to the nearest available man, and this means nothing. It's all purely physical. All brain chemistry.*

Her stomach flips as she slides under the covers. Her side of the bed is freezing, but she doesn't dare move closer.

He rolls to face her, and her cheeks flush, as if he'll somehow know exactly what she just did – maybe he'll smell it, or sense it, or even just guess. She won't let herself sense the blood flow in his body.

But he doesn't awaken, and soon she falls back to sleep.
IX: Fallout

IX

Fallout

"Sorry hon," says the barkeeper, "but I think I'm going to have to actually kick you out now. We really need to clean that corner of the bar."

Kwan barely manages to lift his head. A row of empty shot glasses lines the bar around him like a fence, so many that he wonders if he's seeing double.

"You got a puddle of drool on my bar," adds the barkeeper. She leans closer. "Or is that vomit?"

"Sorry," he mumbles. "Thank you for saving me." He can't remember what she saved him from, exactly, just that she has been very kind to him, and he's been repeating himself a lot, and she's probably getting annoyed. He squints, trying to hone his dulled mind. A single word rises in his thoughts:

Amon.

So much for numbing his rage with alcohol; even barely conscious, it still boils in his blood.

"He's with the damned Avatar," he slurs at the barkeeper, waving an empty shot glass for emphasis. "And he fucking taught her bloodbending. He's a million times worse than I thought. A million times worse."

Her nose wrinkles as she plucks the glass out of his hand. "Yes, we've been through this. But you're about two drinks from passing out again, and you need to give your liver a break. I really can't do any more for you right ow."

"I won't kill myself now," he says loudly. "I promise. I'm going to get my revenge on that bastard, and-"

"Yes, we've been through this, too. Come on, love." She grabs his shoulders and steers him to the door. "Do you remember where you're going now?"

He stares at her blurred face. "The...hotel?"

"That's right. You're going to go to the hotel at the end of the block and ask for my aunt Mara. She can give you a place to sleep this off."

"You've been so kind," he says. "So kind. I don't deserve-"

"Stop. You've already thanked me enough." She gently pushes him through the doorway. "You can repay me by not killing yourself. Promise?"

"Promise," he slurs, and he staggers away from the bar and around the corner.

A few seconds later, the world slips out from under him.

He awakens with a splitting headache, a dry mouth and a kink in his neck. The scent of damp earth occupies his nostrils. When he lifts his head, he realizes he fell asleep in a drainage ditch, and it's early morning. His clothes are damp with mud and vomit, and the prospect of climbing back to
street level and cleaning himself seems so overwhelming that he lays his cheek back in the mud, closing his eyes.

The revolution will run itself just fine without me. Maybe I'll stay here. I've had a good run.

But his skin is getting itchy, and the knowledge that he failed to stop Amon is still heavy on his mind. The man knows all their strategies, all their secret bases, all their contacts; he could bring down their entire organization within minutes, if he chose. He has to be stopped if the new Equalist movement is to succeed.

When he thinks of the guilt he felt when he attacked Amon, he's not sure he can do it again. Maybe he needs a new approach - especially now that the Avatar is in the picture.

First things first: he'll go to the hotel, get himself cleaned up and spend a good hour or two meditating. Once he's calm and centred, he'll check in with his lieutenant.

It's becoming apparent that he's still too emotionally invested to do this alone.

.*.*.*.

For the second time in row, Noatak awakens to see the Avatar's face. As with before, her visage brings him face-to-face with uncomfortable truths about himself, and he's not yet awake enough to shove them aside - not without a little help, at any rate. Spirits, he needs a drink.

Her eyelids part, and now she's staring at him with fear flickering in her eyes, confirming the darkest thoughts floating through his mind: you're a monster.

Make that two drinks.

"Were you watching me sleep?" she demands, a bit more aggressively than necessary.

He eases out of bed and speaks calmly: "I was just about to return to my room."

She says nothing, only stares. He feels her eyes track him as he walks back to his room, pulls the cork from a wine bottle with his teeth, and pours himself a full glass.

"You're drinking?" she asks. "For breakfast?"

Swallowing the liquid too quickly to taste it, he turns to face her. She's hugging the blanket to her chest, head tilted, almost feline, and he can't figure out what the expression means. Is she judging him, or hinting that she wants some, too?

"There's enough to go around if you want me to pour you a glass," he says.

"It's not even noon." She glances at the clock. "It's not even ten."

So she's judging, then, not hinting. He pours another full glass.

"You aren't what I expected," she says.

The scorn in her voice almost makes him laugh. "And what did you expect?"

"A criminal mastermind. Disciplined and obsessed."

"Not wrong," he says, "but only one part of the picture. Amon is a carefully manufactured image, Avatar. You should disregard everything you think you know about me." He swirls the wine and
inhales the scent, half-turning to face her.

She's still studying him, and she stands, pacing across her room to lean against the doorway. "But you're not just a little different from that image, you're nothing like it. Like all the drinking, and the fact that you had this long-running love affair that ended with you completely disregarding your own safety just for a chance to sleep with your ex. And you shower and eat just like everyone else, you sleep and you snore."

"I don't snore," he interrupts, but she's still going.

"-and you get your heart broken just like the rest of us, and you weep, and you even have a mourning tattoo. You're so...human."

At the mention of the tattoo, he glances at his arm; it's been a part of him for so long that he almost forgets it isn't natural. A simple curving black band over his left bicep, its curled ends holding a white and blue orb; his fingers slide over it. He remembers the way, during clear nights when the moon was full, his mother loved to tell the story of Tui and La, and the moon-goddess Yue. The Avatar and Katara had always been among the heroes in that story; every time she told it, his father left the room, his face stony.

The ritual had disappeared once the brothers became waterbenders, once full moons were no longer cause for celebration, but for dread. How he wishes he could go back to those days, wrapped with Tarrlok in fur blankets, hot milk warm in their stomachs, the fire crackling beside them, the moonlight streaming in through the window and landing in a perfect glowing square around his mother's smiling face.

"Who is your tattoo for?" asks the Avatar, and he's not sure if she's being nosey, or just making conversation.

"My mother," he says quietly. His weight is suddenly too heavy to bear, and he sags to a lean against the wine table, staring across the room to where the Avatar stands in the doorway.

"Oh." She senses that the conversation is awkward, he can tell, but where normal people would shy away from awkwardness, the Avatar goes barrelling toward it. "But it's a mourning tattoo - I thought you left her when you were just fourteen, before she died."

It irks him, how much Tarrlok told her about their past. He prefers to have at least one or two secrets to hide, and between Tarrlok and the police, most of his secrets are already in the Avatar's hands.

Though if he's honest with himself, it's kind of relieving to not have to worry about which card to play when. Even before his literal imprisonment, the façade of Amon was isolating in itself; even around Kwan, he had kept his deepest secrets held closely to his chest. He's starting to realize just how alone he is in the world. Besides, he did enjoy the feeling of camaraderie the night before - even if it was with the Avatar, of all people. As ridiculous as it might have seemed a couple days ago, his loneliness nudges him toward honesty.

"As I said," he tells her, "you should disregard everything you think you know about me. I visited her, in her later years, once the man who fathered me was out of the picture, and Tarrlok was already here in the city."

Her eyes widen. "Really?"

He nods. "Three weeks, each year. I told Kwan and my followers that they were training and
meditation missions to commune with the spirits, but instead, I posed as a travelling merchant and returned to my hometown. I brought her pottery clay from the Earth Kingdom, and she bought it, then made bowls to sell back to me. She was so excited at the thought of her bowls travelling around the world.” He smiles and pauses for a sip of wine. "I always drastically overpaid her for those bowls. They were quite lovely, though, and I kept most of them.”

The Avatar is staring at him, bewildered, as if he has done something utterly unexpected, like burst into song and dance. "That's actually pretty sweet," she says begrudgingly, and for the first time in decades, he feels a bashful glow on his cheeks.

"I thought I was so clever and stealthy," he continues. "I slowly built up a friendship with her, over the years. She seemed genuinely happy to have someone to talk to." He remembers how her violet eyes lit up each time he arrived at the door, and his chest tightens.

"Did she ever figure out who you were?" asks the Avatar.

The corner of his mouth lifts. "I underestimated her, the same way I underestimated everyone who was not me: you, my brother, even non-benders. I should have known that a mother will always recognize her child, even when he has aged two decades, even when his skin has paled and his voice has changed.

"I returned one year to find that her home had been abandoned. The inside was littered with dried funerary shrubs; that was how I learned of her passing." He feels his voice losing strength. "A single envelope sat on the mantle, sitting in a finely crafted blue bowl. My name was on it, and it was still sealed. Inside was a letter that read, 'I never gave up hope. Thank you for more time together, however brief. I love you. -Mama.'"

The Avatar is still hovering in the doorway, her face drawn. "That's so sad," she whispers. "Why didn't she say something sooner?"

"I don't know. Maybe it would have been too much for her to bear, admitting out loud that her son had been alive for decades, but hadn't returned to her; not in the way she wanted, at least.” His fingers trace the perimeter of the tattoo. "I didn't take it well. I smashed the bowl to the floor, and it cracked into quarters." He remembers how he wept and tried to force them back together - the last bowl she had ever made for him. Her only legacy, shattered in a moment of infantile rage, just like her family years ago.

"Over the next few years," he says quietly, "during my travels, I buried each of those pieces in a different nation. Maybe she knew, deep down, that I was keeping all her bowls, not selling them around the world, but the thought of her pottery travelling meant so much to her that I felt it was only fitting." He bows his head. "If only I had been watching Tarrlok more closely, I could have learned of her illness before she passed. We might have sat together as mother and son, one last time, instead of both of us adhering to some unspoken game where neither of us admitted to my identity."

His voice fades, but the thoughts continue. If only he had openly confessed his identity to her, she might have grounded his growing lust for power before his revolution had warped. If only he hadn't left Tarrlok and his mother with that monster, everything might have been different. Or if only he and Tarrlok had told her about Yakone's training before everything spun out of control...

This line of thought is darkening his mood. He has never taken the time to properly deal with his mother's death and all the emotional baggage that comes with it. These are thoughts he thought he had successfully buried, but now they're engulfing him.
The Avatar is watching him with eyes shining with pity, but now his mood is sour, and his lips twist.

"Do not pity me." He wishes he hadn't shared such a personal story with her. Pity is a sign of imagined superiority. An insult.

"I'm just surprised," she says quietly. "I didn't think a person like you had any good inside him."

The words hit his worsening mood just the wrong way. "A person like me," he repeats.

"A villain." She either doesn't notice his growing anger, or has decided to ignore it.

"A villain." His voice drops in pitch. "A curious assessment, Avatar, given all that I did to fight for the rights of the oppressed during my days as Amon."

She snorts - just a small noise, yet so dismissive, and it brings all his worst fears about himself to the forefront.

The last of his patience fades.

"Everything I have ever done has been for the sake of what's right." He regards her with the cold look he perfected in his days as Amon.

Instead of wilting under it, she crosses the room, planting her stance a few paces away from him. "Oh, come on. You can't be that delusional."

He won't be intimidated. He drains his wine and sets the glass aside, then moves to stand in front of her. His hands, trembling, lock behind his lower back as he glares down his nose. "I regret many things, Avatar, but I do not regret my intentions. I always meant to save non-benders, and to save this city. If you refuse to see any good in what I did for this city, then it is you, not I, who is delusional."

.*.*.*.

Korra stares up at Amon, surprised that he can't recognize his own villainy. Lin mentioned that he was narcissistic - perhaps he is genuinely ignorant about his own evil nature. Something resembling her old fire sparks within her. This is what she has dreamed of, for years: the chance to tell off Amon. The chance to shatter him, to break him, the way he broke her.

"You started a war," she says, challenging him to deny it.

He shakes his head. "A revolution."

"No, a war. You can tell yourself that it was with the best of intentions, but at the end of the day, that giant mask you slapped on Aang's statue didn't do anything to foster equality. You wanted to dominate." Her voice grows in strength as she speaks. She has forgotten how good it feels to be confident.

"The mask was to inspire my followers," he says. "I only wanted to tip the balance back in favour of non-benders." The jumping muscle in his cheek reveals that she's getting to him - without his old mask, he can't maintain that same stoic façade that always made her feel like she could never faze him. The spark within her begins to grow.

"By using bending," she challenges.
"By using a spirit-given gift."

"...which was bending."

He gives a low growl, and she can tell he's getting dangerously angry, but it feels so good.

"You started a war, and you kidnapped Tenzin's family," she says. "They were just little kids."

"And they were not harmed. It was a necessary evil."

"Not harmed? You kidnapped children, and you don't think that might have traumatized them, just a little bit? And then you were going to end their entire culture, just to prove your own strength." She slowly circles him, peering up at him, and scoffs. "Not a villain! How deluded are you?"

"This discussion will end," he says, his tone leaden, but her delight and her anger are burning out of control.

"But the most cowardly thing of all - the one that shows how power-mad you really were - was when you took your own brothers' bending and kidnapped him." His eyes flash, and she takes a step back, realizing she has pushed him too far.

"I saved Tarrlok," he snarls, lunging forward to loom over her. "I rid him of our father's curse, then hid him away so that he would be safe from the war." His arm slices the air for emphasis, and she can feel how badly she's hurting him. She can taste it.

The Avatar State is beginning to pull at the edges of her consciousness, and that's when she realizes that her heightened emotional state is starting to run away on her. Is this me, or the corruption?

"You kept him hidden to keep him quiet," she snaps, but now the words are pouring out of her mouth without her control. "Rid him of the curse? You knew he was a bloodbender long before the war even started, and you didn't bother to remove it until it was convenient for you. Some saviour! You didn't want him to recognize you, because then he would be a threat to your quest for power."

"I had no choice. I saved him as soon as the opportunity presented itself," says Amon. "I could not reveal myself to him too soon, without prematurely escalating the revolution. Of course I wanted to help him, Avatar. I wanted to save him. And I did. You don't know what it's like to be a bloodbender. You don't know the enormity of that burden."

She starts laughing, a dry, humourless laugh. Red fog hazes her vision, and she tries to reel herself in, but venom is still spewing from her lips: "You know nothing. You have padded yourself with delusions and lies to cover up the fact that you climbed over everyone and everything you could, just to try to prove to the world that you were more powerful than me." Her lips twist. "And then you failed."

He growls and turns away, stalking back to his wine.

In the silence that follows, her victory begins to leave a foul taste in her mouth. Why did she let her temper run away like that? What would Tenzin say, if he heard her goading her enemy, being so intentionally cruel? What would Katara say? Aang? It's hard to take a victory from this argument when she realizes that she doesn't really hold moral high ground. Part of the duty of an Avatar is respect for all.

Besides, if there's anyone who can understand the horrors of bloodbending, it's Amon - she can try to push him away all she wants, but at the end of the day, he may be her best chance of learning to control it. She needs him as an ally, more than she wants to admit.
"I got a bit carried away," she mutters, her voice hoarse with the pride that she can't quite swallow. Her own worries weigh so heavily on the mind that she can't help asking: "But some of that was due to bloodbending, right? Katara told me that bloodbending leads to madness. It corrupts. Destroys." Her emotions, still heightened from earlier, are changing. Panic is rising inside her, but this doesn't feel like a typical panic attack - instead of the usual pressure on her chest, this time the Avatar State is closing in around her, pressing into her. It's exhausting to hold it back.

"It certainly corrupts," says Amon, "but the bloodbender is ultimately responsible for his own actions." He pours himself another glass of wine, oblivious to her internal struggle. "I'd like to be able to blame bloodbending for my actions, but I cannot."

"But it makes people cruel and detached," she says. "It drives them mad. Didn't you feel that go away, once I took your bending?" Once I stole it from you.

"To some extent," he says, swirling the glass. "There was a...calmness. It was like a wildfire inside me, one I had to fight to contain."

"All the time," she says. "A constant undercurrent." He nods and takes a sip.

"It's exhausting," she rasps. Sweat trails down her temple. "It's so tempting to give in."

"Amon," she begs. "Help me."

"Avatar," he says, more firmly.

"I am corrupted," she gasps, and whistling fills her ears. He can teach her. He controlled it for most of his life: he can show her how to do the same.

She will not be destroyed, not yet, but her sanity is slipping, it's slipping, it's no longer hers...

The Avatar State takes control.
X: Corrupted

X

Corrupted

Noatak stares, frozen in place, as the Avatar stalks toward him. Black wisps are swirling around her body again, and her eyes flicker with red light. Last time he saw her like this, the morning before Kwan's attack, he thought it was the Avatar State. Now he's not so sure.

"Help me," she pleads again; her voice echoes with distorted voices. Every hair on his body stands on end.

Slowly, not taking his eyes off her, he sets down the wine glass, then holds out a hand to steady her approach. "I will help you, Avatar," he says calmly, watching her for any hint that she might attack. "Tell me what you need."

"I can't control it." She is closing in on him, her eyes so bright that they leave green spots on his eyelids when he blinks. He takes a slow step back to maintain distance between them, then a faster one, then his back smacks into the wall.

She stops a few paces away from him, her stance hunched and inhuman. Black energy streams off her body like flames, and he feels his clothes and hair whip around him in an ethereal wind. His teeth clench and he stands tall against the wall, not allowing himself to show the fear that is jittering through his body.

No, this is nothing like the Avatar State he studied, and he wonders if the between-the-shoulder-blades chi block will work at all, or if this is a different beast entirely. It was just a theory to begin with, anyway, based on tales of Avatar Aang severing his connection to the Avatar State. If he's wrong, he risks enraging her and putting himself in further danger.

There's one weapon he can try first: charisma. Last time she was in this state, he managed to talk her down. Perhaps he can again. He swallows hard.

"Avatar, I am your ally," he says firmly. He has to shout to be heard over the gusting wind, and he squints against the force of it.

"You have corrupted me," she growls, still closing in.

"I don't understand."

Lips curl to reveal both sets of teeth. "You passed your burden onto me, Amon, and it will destroy me."

Her hand lifts into the air.

In that split second, he realizes exactly what she means.

"Wait-"

Her fingers curl. His body, still weak with injury, screams in protest as the bending wrenches his limbs out of his control. Sweat beads on his skin and the crackling, crunching sounds of bloodbent fluids fill his ears. He's never known the terror of being bloodbent without the power to counteract
it; every cell in his body is betraying him. Even his thoughts are panicked and uncontrollable, roaring as loudly as the wind around him.

"Stop," he yells through clenched teeth.

"You say I don't understand the burden of bloodbending, Amon, but I know it all too well."

Her hand releases. Noatak falls to a seat against the wall, sucking in gasps of air. She crouches in front of him, peering at him with a feral expression. He can think of nothing more frightening than a bloodbender who has lost all self-control.

"Avatar," he pants, almost pleading.

For a second, a change comes over her expression: her eyes widen and the glow flickers.

"Avatar," he says, speaking to that flickering light. "Do not let it control you."

Her eyes search his. "Help me."

He keeps his voice calm. "I'll help you, but first, you need to stand down."

"I... I can't..." The red glow strengthens again, and he realizes that her control is slipping.

Diplomacy isn't going to work. He has to distract her long enough to reach the chi point, to knock her out of it before she loses control and kills him. His mind ticks between chi points that could subdue her so that he can reach around to her back, but he can't figure out any way of attacking her head-on without aggravating her.

Her hand claws, and a strangled yell leaves him as the bloodbending takes hold again. She forces him to a standing position. Sweat streams down his temples from the strain.

The bending drops, but her hand slams into his chest, forcing him flat against the wall. Their noses are almost touching; at this proximity, the glowing red engulfs his vision.

"Now you know the pain you inflicted on others," says the Avatar.

"And now you know how it feels to inflict it," he gasps.

She's still pinning him to the wall, but her expression softens, and that gives him hope that he might get through to her his time.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" he asks, searching the red glow for a sign that he's reaching her. "Utter power over another living body. You can feel my panic, can't you? My pulse fluttering in your palm, like an insect trying to escape a jar."

She still doesn't release him, but the knuckles of her free hand slide along his jaw. "You are the only one who understands me," she says, and the tone might be considered soft if not for the distorted ethereal echoes that accompany it.

He swallows hard, praying to the spirits that he hasn't just made things worse.

As she steps in close, he feels the black energy waves crackling along his body like tiny shocks of static. Her breasts press against his chest, just below the hand that holds him pinned, and he's shocked by how much the contact arouses him. He's always been attracted to power, true, but this is his sworn enemy, and so far as he can tell, she's about to kill him.
"This is what you wanted, isn't it, Amon?" she says. "To come face to face with the most powerful being in the world?"

He suddenly sees the path he must walk if he wants to reach that chi-point.

Slowly, his hand lifts, uncurls, and he forces himself to lay the palm against her cheek.

"I understand you, Avatar Korra," he says gently. "And I want to help you."

Her face flickers with confusion, but she doesn't pull away, and he prays to whatever spirits will listen that this doesn't completely backfire.

Slowly, he lowers his mouth to cup hers.

Her glowing eyes fly open. In that instant, he's certain his plan failed and he will die.

But then her eyes slip closed and she leans into it. The rush of unexpected success combines with the rush of a new kiss, and he's dizzy. The hand at his chest claws into the fabric of his shirt as she leans her body flush against his, forcing him against the wall.

This is his opportunity to trigger the chi point, but her lips are soft, and her body is warm, and it's flattering to be kissed back by such a powerful being. Her hair whips around his face, long and soft and scented with vanilla. His eyes close, and when her lips part for him, he doesn't hesitate to drag his tongue slowly along the tip of hers. She whimpers into his mouth, and a shiver runs down his back all the way to the tailbone.

Maybe it's not just flattery he feels.

But as much as he might like to explore, he can't waste this opportunity - and besides, she's not even herself right now, so none of this means anything. His free arm slips around to her back, ostensibly to embrace her.

His fingertips slide along her spine, moving to the chi point between her shoulder blades. One more favour, spirits: please let this work.

His finger snaps into the chi point.

The kiss breaks. She gives a small moan and slumps against him, and he lets her head fall to his shoulder. The ethereal wind dies, and his clothes and hair flutter to lie still against his body. He lets out a long slow breath. Thank you, spirits.

"I'm sorry," he whispers into the Avatar's hair.

"Amon?" Her voice is muffled by his shoulder. He releases her, surprised that she's still conscious. Yet again, he has underestimated her.

She steps apart from him, her eyes blue and very much hers as she blinks at him with confusion. "What the hell?"

But then her senses must fully return, because her mouth drops. "Oh spirits..." She begins to back away, her frightened gaze locked on him. "Oh spirits!"

His stomach churns. "The chi-point will re-open in about half an hour," he says quietly. "It blocks the Avatar State, but only temporarily."

For a second, it looks like she wants to reply, but then she steps back into her room. The adjoining
door closes behind her.

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Korra falls against the closed door and closes her eyes. She remembers everything, everything, and she wishes that she didn't. The kiss, the need to bloodbend, the need to kill. All three of them weigh equally heavy on her mind, and maybe that's ridiculous, but that kiss was with her sworn enemy, and she can't be kissing him, she can't, she can't.

It's risky to call Mako, she knows, but she needs to talk him, needs him. She lunges for the phone and dials their home number, shaking so badly that it takes three tries before she dials it correctly.

Maybe he's not home. What do I do then? I can't handle this alone, I can't, I'm not strong enough, not anymore...

"Hello?" His voice trickles over her like warm water.

"Mako," she blurs. "Thank the spirits."

"Korra? Are you okay?"

The words shatter her, and she starts crying. The more she tries to control herself, the harder she cries. Mako calls her name, over and over, and she can hear how panicked he is, but she can't stop weeping long enough to respond. She curls into a ball on the floor, rolling onto her side, and cradles the receiver to her ear like it's a teddy bear and she's a frightened child.

It takes a few minutes for her tears to slow enough for her to speak. "I'm sorry," she says, swallowing a few last sobs. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Things are just going so wrong."

"Are you hurt?" he demands.

"I'm sorry. I'm not hurt. Not really, it's just-"

He cuts her off. "Do you want me to meet you somewhere?"

She wants to, so badly, but that's far too risky. They have to maintain their cover-

She realizes, with a start, that they don't really have any cover left. Kwan knows they're here, and he could have easily stormed the hotel with an army of Equalists to finish them off while they were injured. With everything else on her mind, she hasn't given any thought to her immediate safety. She's just sort of implicitly trusted that Amon is thinking of these things for her.

Spirits, she's implicitly trusting Amon. Sobs rise in her throat again.

"Korra?"

"We have cover to maintain," she says.

"I understand. But this line could be monitored-"

"I don't care. I had to hear your voice." She sniffsles, and lowers her volume so that there's no chance of Amon overhearing through the door. "Mako, I can't work with him."

"It's that bad?" She hears layers of concern in his voice.

"He's getting into my head."
"I understand," says Mako. "We saw how charismatic he is. But you're strong, Korra. You can stand up to-"

"No, I mean, he's really getting to me."

"I don't understand," he says.

She curls tighter into a ball, and a fresh tear trails down her nose and drips off the end of it.

"Korra?"

"We kissed," she whispers.

There's a long silence. She's so desperate to fill it that she starts the story from the beginning. She relays the ex-lieutenant's visit, and the fight that ensued, though she downplays her wound. She talks about how they healed each other, and then their argument. Mako says nothing during any of this, but she hasn't heard him hang up, so she keeps talking.

"And I was so upset that I went into the Avatar State," she finishes. "And he kissed me to distract me so that he could chi-block me out of it."

Mako speaks for the first time since her confession. "So neither of you actually meant it." His voice is gravelly with relief.

The thought that Amon's kiss meant nothing makes her heart twinge, and she curses herself for it. "I don't know."

"He's gay, anyway," he adds. "It meant nothing. It's okay, Korra. Don't overthink it."

Her teeth clench. "No, Mako, listen to me. He's getting into my head. I think I'm getting feelings for him." She's furious that he's making her spell it out like this, and she keeps her voice low, praying to the spirits that Amon isn't listening in from next door.

"You're under a lot of stress, with all the expectations on you, and everything that's happened," says Mako. "It makes sense that you're feeling a bond with him; that's something that happens between partners on missions. It'll all go away once the mission is over."

"Mako, you aren't-"

He cuts her off. "Look, if it makes you feel any better, I've developed the odd feelings here and there for partners before, on missions like that. But it doesn't amount to anything once the situation returns to normal. The key is just to acknowledge the attachments for what they are - human nature - and not act on them, and trust that they'll disappear later." He's talking too quickly, and she realizes he's desperate to stay in denial.

The fact that he's dismissing her emotions so quickly frustrates her, both because he's downplaying what she's feeling, and because it means she's doing a lousy job of explaining the situation. She feels hopeless and alone, and all her burdens suddenly feel too heavy to carry.

"I'm a bloodbender," she blurs.

It comes out of nowhere; she never intended to tell him. Her hand claps over her mouth, and she screws her eyes shut, hoping he didn't hear her.

"What?" says Mako, his voice leaden.
She chews the inside of her cheek. "I didn't... I..." She can't think her way out of this.

"Did you just say what I think you did?" he asks, and she expected fury, but he sounds tired. So tired. That fatigue, the result of years of dealing with her worsening self-esteem, her increasing reclusiveness... It frightens her more than anger.

She owes him the truth, no matter what the consequences might be.

"I'm a bloodbender," she says, and she starts to speak quickly again. "Something went wrong when I took Amon's bending. I actually took it. It became a part of me, and at first it didn't do anything, but lately, it's eating away at me. Aang visited me and told me that I had been corrupted, and might be destroyed. I bloodbent in front of Asami the night she died. And I bloodbent the ex-lieutenant, and Amon. And I liked it, Mako." She expected the confession to lighten her burden, but as she recounts it, she feels it tightening around her like a noose. "I keep slipping into the Avatar State, only it's different, a corrupted version, and I think I'm really going to hurt myself or someone else, and I have to figure out how to stop it."

There's only silence on the other end.

"Say something," she pleads.

"Korra," says Mako, "you are very sick, and you need to come home."

The suggestion enrages her. "I can't. I have to see this through."

"Listen to yourself!" The pain in his voice physically hurts her. "You're losing your mind. You're kissing Amon, you're bloodbending, you're losing control. Don't underestimate how dangerous you can be."

Her blood starts to boil. "Don't talk to me like I'm a child."

"I'm not; I'm talking to you like someone who's concerned. I love you, Korra, but if you hide all this from everyone, and try to take it on yourself, in the end, that's what's going to destroy you."

Red tinges the edges of her vision, and she forgets that she was asking him for help in the first place. "I'm the Avatar, and I'm strong. I can deal with it once this mission is over."

"Why are you getting angry? What did you expect me to say when you told me all this?"

"I don't know. Something to help. I wanted you to tell me I could succeed anyway. That I was strong enough to handle it." She blinks tears. "I have to see this through."

"No," he says. "I can't sit by and watch you destroy yourself. Not anymore."

The surge of anger within her is irrationally strong. "No one never asked you to sit by and watch, anyway," she snaps.

"What-"

"If it's so hard on you, then just look away!"

"Korra-"

She slams the receiver, breathing hard. Her fingers rake into her hair.

*I'm out of control.* She almost calls him back to apologize, but she's too angry. Is this the
corruption, or herself? She can't tell any more where one ends and the other begins.

And speaking of apologies, she feels like she owes Amon one, and yet, she's not sure she can say anything to him without staring at the lips that were pressed against hers.

"Fuck," she mutters, curling into a ball.

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Kwan sits in his new room at the inn, taking in his surroundings. It's small, with just barely enough room for the bed and a side-table with a telephone. Aunt Mara turned out to be a sweet elderly woman who was more than happy to loan him a room in advance. He has promised to pay her as soon as his colleagues wire him money, but now he stares at the phone, wondering if he can get through to his lieutenant without being traced.

Worse yet, he wonders if he can even speak to her without breaking down.

By now, she's probably taken a team to the old brothel to look for him, anyway, and if she figures he has failed, then his leadership may already be in jeopardy. He takes a deep breath. What more does he have to lose?

He dials her number, and she answers after the second ring.

"Qing," he says.

"Kwan?" Her voice drops. "I've told you, stop calling me that. And where the hell were you? We went-"

"It was a diversion," he interrupted. "I'm sorry. I couldn't risk that you or anyone else would interfere."

He can almost see her pursing her lips. "Did you succeed?"

"I don't know. I wounded him, but the Avatar interfered. I'm pretty sure she saved him."

Her voice softens: "You sound troubled."

"Of course I'm troubled," he growls. "I had to stab a knife through the neck of the man I love." He catches himself. "Loved."

Too late. "You still love him."

He sighs.

"Please tell me you didn't sleep with him," she adds.

He's silent, because his eyes are starting to tear up again, and he knows that's going to show in his voice.

"Oh, Kwan." Her tone sounds like genuine pity, and he's starting to wonder if all his suspicions about her have just been paranoia.

"It's harder than I expected," he confesses, tangling and untangling his fingers in the phone cord. "I know I wanted to prove that I'm fit to lead, but..." He considers how close he came to suicide, then how he spent nearly two days drunk before passing out in a ditch. "I don't know if I actually am any more. So I think the best way to take out Amon is if I swallow my pride and get a team out
here to help me. Got to stop thinking about what's best for me, and think about what's best for the Equalists as a whole."

Now her voice sounds like it has a smile attached to it: "I think that's the sanest thing I've heard you say in months."

"I've done a bit of reflecting." He doesn't mention that most of it was done from the bottom of a shot glass. "So what do you say, lieutenant? Can you get this old fool a team?"

There's a long pause.

"I'll come alone," she says.

"What?"

"I'll leave Tallin in charge, tell him I'm going to take care of some civilian business, and come help you. We can still let the rest of them into think you're doing this alone."

He doesn't know what to say. "Why?" he manages.

"Because you're a good leader, Kwan. You just lost your footing for a bit. I want to give you the chance to prove that to everyone else. I've always got your back, remember?"

His throat tightens, and he clears it. It's too difficult to acknowledge her kindness directly, so he says, "I'll call Amon and invite him to my hotel room, tomorrow evening. You come over in the morning, and we'll analyse the room, maybe lay a few traps, and come up with a plan." They discuss a few more arrangements, and he goes into more detail than necessary, even repeating things a few times - the sooner he hangs up the phone, the sooner he's going to have to talk to Amon again.

Eventually, however, he runs out of things to say, and the conversation comes to a close. He sets the receiver in its cradle and stares at the phone.

Trying to work up the courage, he mutters bits of the conversation to himself: "Finish this properly...face to face...showdown."

He will not apologize, and he will not beg for forgiveness. The future of the Equalists still depends on him. He needs to stay strong.

Closing his eyes, he takes in a long breath, holds it, and reaches for the phone.
XI: Honesty

Chapter XI

Honesty

Even though the last thing she wants to do is talk to Amon, Korra knows that at the very least, she owes him an apology for attacking him.

When there's no answer to her knock, she calls his name. For a panicked moment, she wonders if he has done something to hurt himself. She throws open the door.

His room is empty; the window is open. Curiously, she pokes her head out and sees the fire escape nearby.

It's a dark day, cloudy and grey, like her mood, and she decides that even if he went down instead of up, she'll check out the roof first. Staring across the city and watching the clouds drift might help calm the anger and sadness coursing through her veins. She climbs onto the ledge, then jumps across to the ladder, landing with most of her weight on her good leg. The rungs are rusty, and green paint flakes off in her hands. At the top, she briskly rubs her palms together, trying to rid them of paint flecks and grime.

Amon is sitting on a short wall that lines the far edge of the roof, legs dangling over the edge, an open bottle beside him. He must have bought more wine when she was unconscious with her battle wounds, she realizes, because she's pretty sure that by now he has gone through all four bottles she purchased.

"Beifong warned me that you liked your alcohol, and I didn't believe her," she calls. He doesn't turn to acknowledge her, so she limps across the roof and sits a few feet away from him, dropping her own legs over the edge. It's ten stories down, and as always when she's at a good height, the urge to jump grasps her like the hands of the spirits, tugging her down. It would be safe - she would just reflexively bend herself to safety, anyway - but she doesn't want to test herself, especially in front of a suicidal man. Though she sure could use the shot of adrenaline right about now.

Instead, she sniffs and swabs at her eyes, no longer caring if Amon knows she has been crying. He has already seen the ugliest side of her now, so what's the point of pretending to be stronger than she is?

Still not looking at her, he holds out two cigars. "Take one. There's no way Kwan will share one with me now."

"I don't smoke." Glancing over at him, she notices that his face is drawn. "You're drunk again, aren't you?"

"You don't really smoke a cigar, just taste it. And I don't see much point in being sober," he replies, but his speech is cleaner than it was a couple nights ago.

"But Kwan might attack again. Maybe with backup." A drunk ally won't be much use in a fight.

Amon shakes his head; his hair is loose and messy from their altercation, and it falls around his face. With the sharp, angular hairline hidden, the planes of his face look softer. "He wants to take me out without any help, so he'll try to lure us somewhere to his strategic advantage. We're safe here." He's still holding out the cigars.
Well, why the hell not? She has already screamed at her concerned boyfriend, been kissed by her mortal enemy and used bloodbending. Is a little tobacco going to make things any worse? She accepts a cigar and spins it between her fingers. One end has been cut off, and even though it isn't lit, the smell is already pungent.

"I can't find any matches," he says quietly, and if she were in a better mood, she would laugh at the irony of using bending to assist Amon.

Instead, she says nothing as she holds out her index finger, summoning a small flame. He carefully lights his, rotating its tip in the flame, and she mimics the motion a moment later. She takes a first draught, then coughs.

"Don't inhale it," he says, still not making eye contact. "Swirl it in your mouth."

She tries again, and her nose wrinkles. "Disgusting."

With a sigh, he reaches out a hand to take it back, but she leans out of the way. "I didn't say I was done with it."

For a second, they're silent, staring across the city. There are people working in the offices in the high rise across the road, their lives more normal than Korra's can ever be. Her eyes trail a dark-haired woman in a red business suit carrying a stack of papers, and she sniffs again.

"How long have you been a bloodbender?" asks Amon quietly.

When she doesn't answer, he continues: "You were unable to resist my bending six years ago, so you learned sometime after that."

"Not by much," she mutters.

"Bloodbending is illegal, Avatar," he says, and she wonders if he's enjoying the irony of it all.

"It's not exactly an art I've been practicing."

Wind ripples past them. She lifts the cigar to her lips, then releases a long puff of smoke into the breeze, watching it drift and fade.

"This is absolutely surreal," she says. "Two broken-hearted bloodbenders, staring across the city we fought over, smoking cigars together." She meant to think the thought, not say it aloud.

He casts her a sidelong glance. "Broken-hearted?"

Maybe she should be guarding herself better than this, but she feels like her emotions are festering inside her. Keeping things to herself is not her way. With a shrug to downplay how much it has crushed her, she says, "Just had a fight over the phone."

"With Officer Mako?"

She nods. "How did you know that?"

"Deduction. I recall you being fond of him," he says with only a hint of bitterness.

"Well, I was - am. He was one of the few things that went right for me after your fucking war." The curse slips out; she's been carefully repressing her anger until now. "I screwed up everything else that came out of the war, so I guess it was inevitable that I'd screw this up, too. And now the Equalists are on the rise again, and we're probably hurtling toward another war, because yet again,
I let another Equalist leader slip through my fingers. So basically, nothing's changed from six years ago, except you're sitting beside me on a roof, and I'm the bloodbender.

For a few minutes, the only sounds come from the city below them: sales pitches from stalls, the rattle and pop of automobiles.

"You successfully stopped my brother and me, and you quickly undid all the equalizing I put in place," says Amon. "I would have expected you to be Republic City's hero. You are the Avatar, after all: you can do no wrong."

She snorts, feeling a flush of anger rise to her face. "Too little, too late is how the media approached it. You and Tarrlok were captured by the police, and the United Forces got the credit for combating the Equalists. And me? I hid while the city burned, lost my bending, let you escape and only mastered the Avatar State - and the ability to return bending - once everyone had already suffered, and dozens of your equalized benders had already committed suicide. I could do no right."

Amon drums his fingers along his cigar. "Several of the media outlets were Equalist supporters, and I don't doubt that coloured their approach to reporting the aftermath of the war."

"That explains a lot. They skewered and roasted me, every chance they got." The cigar is burning, forgotten, in her hand, and she almost takes another draught, then decides she'd rather spew toxin than inhale it. "But it wasn't just your supporters. Everyone, everyone kept comparing me to Aang. They forgot that he was this amazing prodigy, fully realized when he was the equivalent of twelve years old. Most Avatars don't even start training until they're sixteen, so I was technically a prodigy myself, but not compared to Aang. Spirits help the poor bastard who follows us both."

"Maybe I could have tolerated it better, if I were a stronger person, but it didn't help that I grew up in a compound where I was protected from failure. Every moment of every day revolved around building my skills and my self-esteem at my own pace. So when I joined the outside world, where I'm a human and fail just like everyone else, I just wasn't equipped to deal with it."

She realizes she's ranting; she glances over to see if Amon is bored, but to her surprise, he seems thoroughly interested. It feels good to get all this off her chest, regardless of the audience, so she continues.

"As things fell apart after the war, I began to crack. I started to question myself, and my self-esteem deflated. My friends and family tried to help me, but how can you save someone from her own thoughts? In the end, Chief Beifong tried to boost my image with a high-profile mission, and I screwed that up, too, and lost not only public support, but also a dear friend.

"I guess that's what this mission is supposed to be: another chance." She glances at him and finishes bitterly, "And it's going so very well."

Noatak studies the Avatar as she speaks. Her face and hands are animated, and he finds himself watching her mouth. It has a revealing tic, a flattening at the end of her sentences, that displays the bitterness she's trying to hide from him.

He's listening to her, too, of course - it's fascinating, from a tactical standpoint, to hear the weaknesses of the being he has always held as the pinnacle of all power. Moreover, much of what she's saying is resonating with him; he was protected from failure as well, not by any external influences, but by his own gifts as a child. Everything came so easily to him that he never learned humility or perseverance and he's quite sure the Equalist story would have played out very
differently if he had possessed those two key traits.

He has humility now - he has too much humility - but too late.

As she finishes talking and brings the cigar to her mouth, he studies the way her lips wrap around the base of it, and unexpectedly feels arousal trickle across his skin like warm water. Their kiss is going to go to his head, if he lets it. Taking a long swig of wine, he trains his gaze trained safely on the street below them. He wants to ask more questions about her bloodbending, but when he tries to think, he just sees her lips on that cigar.

"Your fear of being recognized," he says at length. "It isn't related to the mission; it's a fear of being judged."

She sighs. "I don't know. I guess a bit of both."

There's a long silence. He glances at her; her face bears that same distant stare he saw her wear back when the mission began.

"Avatar?" he prods.

"That last mission I mentioned, where I lost a friend..." Her voice is barely audible over the din of the street. She takes another puff of the cigar, and this time she airbends the smoke into curling wisps. He tries not to be impressed by the intricate design.

"You were recognized when you didn't want to be," he guesses, drawing clues from the context of her blank stares.

She nods. "And I lost my friend Asami because of it."

His heart twists at the name. "Hiroshi's daughter?"

She nods again, and Noatak thinks of how often Hiroshi wept over a portrait of his fractured family. His heart breaks for his old friend.

"What happened?" he asks, because she seems to want to talk about it.

"I was arrogant. I figured that, disguised as her accountant, I could be her secret weapon, smuggled into the middle of a deal. She was supposed to confront her blackmailers - we figured out early on that they were Triple Threat Triad members, and the police were eager to capture them. Asami thought I would be recognized and we'd be putting ourselves in danger, but in the end, she trusted my judgement. I'm the Avatar, after all." She rakes her fingertips over the rough brick of the ledge, over and over, as if feeling its ridges. "But she was right. It's like you said: I have a recognizable face. No hairstyle changes or makeup could hide it." Her words are so flat that he knows she's carefully guarding her emotions.

"They figured it out?" he asks, prompting her to continue.

"Yeah. They let us believe the disguise had worked, at first, and lured us into an ambush. Twenty benders with stun guns. Asami and I are both good in a fight, but not that good - they took me down and tried to take her hostage. As I was about to fall unconscious, the Avatar State triggered. But it didn't feel like the proper one; every muscle felt like a rubber band that's being stretched to its limit, about to snap. I wanted to overpower them. I wanted to kill." Her gaze flickers down. "I threw a wall of flame, and caught everyone in the room, even Asami - burnt the fabric off her forearms as she tried to shield herself from me. Killed more than a dozen gang members outright. I still hear their screams, sometimes."
"A few of the survivors grabbed Asami, and I guess she was too stunned by my actions to fight back - they dragged her to the roof. I followed them, stalked them."

She takes a long, slow puff of the cigar, and this time he's too engrossed in her story to watch her lips. Her free hand drums the bricks, the pulse rapid and erratic.

"When I got to the roof, they were threatening to throw Asami over the edge. I could tell they were just trying to hold my attention - one of them was sneaking around my back to take me down. I was their true prize. I guess that immediate threat of their attack combined with whatever was already burning inside me, because my vision went red."

Her drumming hand lifts as she gestures to act out the next part of the story. "I could suddenly feel each of their heartbeats, and it was like instinct: my hands clawed in the air. They floated in front of me like puppets, and I felt so strong, for the first time in years. One of them, I crushed from the inside out; I felt his pulse flutter and stop, saw his face turn purple, then grey. Another, I slammed hard into the rooftop. I remember laughing. Laughing! An Avatar enjoying the kill - it's unthinkable.

"And Asami, she was just staring at me, clutching her burnt forearms, her mouth hanging open. She was free, by that point. She could have run, she could have escaped, so easily. But instead she was frozen in place, horrified by what I had become."

Her voice trembles. "The last attacker, I flicked over the edge of the roof to drop him to his death. But I let go of the bloodbending too soon, and he grabbed Asami on the way down. She managed to catch the ledge as they fell, but he was dangling from her legs, too heavy for her grip to hold for long.

"The sight of her about to plummet knocked some sense back into me. I ran over to her and held out my arm for her to grab." Her voice wavers.

"In that moment, I saw red light in her eyes, reflected from mine; I saw black waves streaming off my skin. That was the first time I realized that something in me had changed. But most of all, I saw the look of horror on her face. She was staring at me as if I were a monster."

The Avatar's hand stretches out into the air in front of her, as if reaching out for the woman. By the anguish on her face, Noatak knows she's seeing the look on Asami's face, forever frozen in her mind.

"She was too afraid of me to take my hand," she says softly. "She wouldn't take it. I could tell, by her face, that she thought I was going to kill her, and there wasn't enough time to convince her that I was myself again. Her grip gave out and she began to fall. I panicked and bent an air cushion onto the ground to catch her, but I should have done it higher up." The Avatar's outstretched hand curls, then slowly falls to her thigh, and Noatak feels his heart drop with it.

"She hit a balcony on the way down," she whispers. "I could hear the crack of her neck. I felt it reverberate through me."

There's a pause for a deep, shuddering breath, before she continues: "She was dead when she landed. I tried to heal her, so hard, tried everything I could. I begged and I pleaded her to come back to life, until the police arrived and pulled me off her." Her eyes close, and a tear trails down her cheek.

"I'm sorry," he says, and he leaves it at that, because he knows there aren't any words that will help her.
"You say I don't understand the burden of bloodbending," she mutters, wiping her eyes. "You think I don't know what it's like to look into the eyes of someone I love and see fear and betrayal. Something happened to me when I took your bending: I wasn't strong enough. It corrupted me. It turned me into that...thing, the thing that burnt Asami and frightened her to her death, the thing that made me attack you. I understand your burden, Amon. I understand it all too well."

He's speechless. Slowly, he reaches out and covers her hand with his.

Their eyes lock.

The redness from her tears makes her irises a brilliant, crystalline blue; the lashes are clumped together, thick and dramatic, and her dark cheeks are red. This isn't the naive vulnerability he saw when he intimidated her under Avatar Aang's statue; it's the vulnerability of a soul that's been been abraded over and over until it has worn thin. She looks like a doll made of glass, and it's at once beautiful and heartbreaking. Noatak has the urge to hug her, but not too tightly, or the glass might crack. At the very least, he has the urge to squeeze the hand under his, but he isn't sure how she would react.

She pulls away before he has the opportunity; her shaking hand lifts the cigar to her lips for a puff. "Beifong warned me that besides being an alcoholic, you were also a philanderer," she mutters.

The tonal shift is unexpected; he can't tell if it's because she misread his empathy as an advance, or because of their kiss earlier, or because she is desperate to change the subject away from Asami.

"It surprised me," she says, "since you were with your lieutenant for so long, and he doesn't seem the type to take betrayal lightly."

His heart twinges. He stares across the city, wondering, at that moment, how many lovers are sharing a kiss, strolling hand-in-hand. They're probably taking it for granted, just as he always did, without realizing how quickly their happiness can be upended.

All he can think about, after her story, is how things ended with his lieutenant. He still sees that look of fear, as clearly as if staring at a photograph, and it's squeezing the breath from his lungs. I dedicated my life to you!

He clings to the conversation for distraction, because even talking about his sex life is more comfortable than dwelling on that look. "Is it still considered philandering if it's with permission?"

"I..." She stares at him, eyes wide. "He let you sleep around? Is that what you're saying?"

He holds her gaze.

Her lips twist with disdain. "That's sick! You can't go around sleeping with other people when you're with someone. That's cheating."

"There is a difference between love and sex, Avatar. It takes maturity to understand the distinction between the two. Often, they overlap, but not always."

"What? There's no difference."

"As I said, it takes maturity to understand it," he says. "So long as there is communication and honesty..." He loses his train of thought on the word. How can he, of all people, possibly preach the virtues of honesty in a relationship?

"Never mind," he says softly.
But the Avatar isn't quite ready to let the conversation go; he surmises that she is still looking for
distraction from Asami, and unfortunately, that means he has to stay in the spotlight. "So he let you
sleep with other men?" Her face is a mix of disgust and curiosity. "Or...women?"

The conversation has run away on him. "This is something that does not concern you, Avatar."

She shrugs. "No, I figured it does concern me, because I'd like to know if I should be worried
about whether or not that kiss you gave me meant anything."

The question flusters him - partly because, given their previous interactions, he expected that
neither of them would ever bring up the kiss, instead leaving it to fade as an unspoken memory.
Mostly, however, he's flustered because it's a question he has been asking himself, and he hasn't
quite figured out how to answer it.

But she wants an answer now, and he would rather round his answer one way than the other.

"It could have meant something," he says flatly, "but it didn't. It was a distraction to keep you from
killing me, and nothing more."

"Good," she mutters.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watches her lips cup the base of the cigar, and his pulse races.

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*It could have, but it didn't*, repeats Korra in her mind. There is her answer: *I am interested in
women, but not you.*

Her emotions are bouncing all over the place. The cigar is making her dizzy, and she's starting to
regret accepting it. When she closes her eyes, her head is a swirling mess of Asami's frightened
face, of the distinction between love and sex, of her yelling at Mako on the phone, of the crack of
Asami's neck, of the broad softness of Amon's lips, of her slick fingers sliding between her legs in
time to his imagined moans.

She wishes she didn't pull her hand away from his, because she's spinning and she desperately
needs an anchor.

She wishes she didn't notice the desiring glances he has been giving her, didn't feel his pulse rise
when he said the kiss meant nothing.

She wishes she wasn't becoming more and more aware of every little movement he makes: the soft
puffs of his breaths, the small shifts in posture he makes as he listens to her, the graceful way he
holds and moves his cigar. He's leaning back on his hands now, the fingers of one of them arced to
hold the cigar. His head tilts back, just slightly, unconsciously allowing his face to catch more sun,
and his muscled thighs are lolling to either side. She holds them in her peripheral vision, and she
can't stop imagining herself straddling that lap, grinding into it.

*That man is Amon*, she reminds herself. *Amon. Amon.* She glances at him, trying to imagine him
attacking her and terrorizing the city, but she can't see anything but a drunken, lonely man, full of
weakness and regret. He listened to her most shameful story, one that no one else knows, and he
reacted not by recoiling, but by reaching out to hold her hand. Her heart pounds so loudly that she
can hear it in her ears.

She clings to Mako's words: it's normal for partners to bond, and it's normal for temporary
attachments to form under stress. Whatever inappropriate things she's feeling, this will all go away
as soon as they capture Kwan, get his information, and Amon returns to jail.

He glances at her again, and she realizes she has been staring. Her impulse is to cower, but instead, she holds his gaze. Amon, Amon Amon Amon, she thinks, but she doesn't turn away, and neither does he. She can't read the expression on his face. His lips are parted just a crack, and she feels a pull toward them, as if she's standing in a receding wave and it's trying to pull her out to the ocean. She knows the gentle lapping pull will become a raging undertow if she moves closer, and she knows it will tug her out to sea or pull her under and drown her, but spirits does she want to give in and let the current take her.

He turns away and refills his wine glass, and the spell breaks. She wonders if he turned away because her lust accidentally showed on her face, offending him. Embarrassed and irritated with herself, she leans forward on her elbows and stares down at the street below them.

"All that stuff I told you about Asami is confidential," she says, swallowing a lump in her throat.

"Understood." His voice rumbles through her.

"I didn't mean to dump it all on you like that. It's just been weighing on me for a year, and-"

She stops mid-sentence as she sees, on the street below them, Mako stepping out of a taxi.

"Mako? What the hell?" she mutters, her stomach dropping.

In her periphery, she sees Amon follow her gaze, every muscle stiff.

There's no mistaking Mako - he isn't in uniform, but the red scarf is clearly visible around his neck, and the determined march is all his. He strides through the front door of the hotel and disappears from view.

"How did he find us?" she asks. "I didn't tell him where we were staying. Shit!" She stands. The mission can't end, not yet. She still has to prove she's a good Avatar, and she has to figure out what to do about the corruption. Besides, the crime of bloodbending carries life imprisonment; sure, she's a special case, but how will the law handle her?

Amon stands as well. "I have no intention of returning to jail," he intones. "And I have no intention of facing Kwan without your protection, so I recommend that you think of a convincing way to deflect him." An implied threat shows in his words.

"I'll think of something," she says without any confidence. She hands him her cigar and runs for the ladder.

.*.*.*.*.

The phone rings seven times, eight. Kwan quietly sets the receiver back in its cradle. He's tried twice now, to no avail.

At least he knows Amon and the Avatar haven't left the hotel, because the front desk connected him with the room, after all. It never occurred to him that he might not be able to reach Amon; his whole plan is contingent on it. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, trying to keep panic at bay.

He'll try again in the morning.
XII: Betrayal

XII

Betrayal

Korra's wounded leg is screaming at her by the time she returns to her room, and she realizes both she and Amon are overdue for a fresh round of healing. She is just debating if she has enough time to heal herself, when a knock sounds at the door.

She isn't sure how she's going to feel when she sees Mako - angry, or repentant, or embarrassed. She throws open the door, and discovers that anger is the first emotion to bubble to the surface.

"Mako, what the hell are you doing here?" she snaps. There are heavy bags under his eyes even though it's early afternoon, and she wonders how long they have been there. Were they there all along, and she never noticed? He looks so tired.

Turning her back, she hobbles away from the door. He closes it behind him and follows her inside.

"Well?" She sits on the corner of the bed, but he starts to pace. Her anger starts to fade, and concern takes it place.

"Mako?" she asks quietly.

He stops pacing and faces her, his hands balled into fists. "I had to track you down," he says. "I'm here to take you home." He winces at his own words. "Not home. But away from here."

Red haze is in the fringes of her vision, and she is glad that Amon chi-blocked her, because the last thing she needs is to go feral on Mako. "What are you talking about?"

He shrugs. "I had a long talk with Tenzin a couple days ago, Korra, and I realized I haven't been fair to you. I haven't been helping you get well - I've been enabling you. You've cut yourself off from everything it means to be an Avatar, and I've stood by watching and just letting you do it."

His head bows. "I'm not what you need right now. So we're moving you back to Air Temple Island. I was going to wait until after the mission to-"

"Back to Air Temple Island?" She stands up, her teeth clenched. "You're kicking me out?"

"No- Well, yes, I..." He looks panicked, and tries to steady himself. "I'm not any help to you, Korra, but Tenzin can be. He can help you reconnect with your Avatar roots, and they have herbs and rituals that can help you get control over your life again."

She feels rage bubbling up inside her. "Is that how you see me? Someone who has lost control over her life?"

"Yes," he says quietly. "It is."

She stands rooted in place, stunned by his admission. Of everyone she knows, she thought Mako had faith in her.

There's a long silence, and after all the awkwardness and tension on the rooftop, she's had quite enough of long silences for one day.
"I'm having problems," she says, "but I haven't completely lost control." Lies, her mind tells her.

He won't look her in the eye. "You're bloodbending," he says quietly. "You kissed Amon. And it's not just that. The way you've hidden away from all your responsibilities-"

"Asami died because of me, Mako," she snaps. "I'm not just going to forget that overnight. It's taking me awhile to get back on my feet."

"It started before that."

She lets the words hang in the air, because she knows they're true, and she knows she needs to hear them. With a sigh, she sinks to seat on the corner of the bed.

"So you're kicking me out," she says dully. "And you think that will help me?"

"I've tried to help you every way I know." He still won't look at her, and she's had quite enough of people not looking her in the eye, too.

"Mako, look at me."

He lifts his head, and she's startled to see tears in his eyes. The sight should make her sad, or guilty, or worried, but instead, she feels hollow. It's as if her insides have been scrubbed clean with a wire brush, and there's nothing left but an empty sting.

"You look tired," she says quietly.

"I am tired."

"You aren't just kicking me out of your home, are you?" Her throat tightens. "You're kicking me out of your life."

His eyes close. "Korra..."

"Tell me I'm wrong."

His lips purse until they turn white, and he doesn't answer.

"I understand," she says. She still feels no sadness, just anger, though there seem to be tears welling in her eyes. "It's hard to keep loving someone when dealing with her is so exhausting. I would have left myself months ago."

He hesitates. "Maybe we just need some time apart."

"You're just saying that so you don't hurt my feelings."

He gives a long, shuddering sigh, and she thinks it's unfair that he looks so sad and alone when she's the one being dumped. There's a heavy weight in the pit of her stomach, and that red is still fringing her vision. She wonders how long she was on that roof talking to Amon - time kind of slipped away. She's still chi-blocked, isn't she?

"Come on," says Mako softly. "We can talk more about it on the way to the Island."

She bristles. "Excuse me?"

He looks taken aback. "I though you agreed. You're going back to Air Temple Island."
"I didn't agree to anything. I'll go once the mission is complete." She feels anger broiling inside her, and this time, she recognizes what it is. "Mako, you have to leave."

His eyes narrow. "Korra--"

"No, please, you have to leave." If she loses control and attacks him, she'll never forgive herself.

"I'm not leaving without you," he snaps.

"Yes you are. I have to see this mission through. It's my chance to redeem myself."

"Korra, I'm not leaving you with a madman's curse running through your veins, in the care of the man who gave it to you." His eyes flash, and she finds her anger rising up to meet his.

"Did you tell anyone?" she demands.

He looks confused. "Tell anyone what?"

"That I'm a bloodbender?"

"Of course not! I don't want you thrown in prison." He takes a step toward her, and she falls into stance.

"Stay back," she growls, because she's not sure she can hold the Avatar State at bay much longer. "Mako, please. You have to leave."

.

As Noatak climbs in through the window, he hears the couple arguing, and he recognizes the strain in the Avatar's voice. Glancing at the clock, he sees that the chi-block certainly will have worn off by now. He curses under his breath and strides for the adjoining door.

When he opens it, two sets of eyes - two yellow, and two thankfully still blue - lock onto him. The first set narrows.

"You!" yells Mako, and he takes a step into stance, firing bolts of flame. Noatak ducks and rolls out of the way, the movement bringing him into the room, next to the Avatar.

"Don't attack him!" she cries, but the officer has snapped.

"You did this to her," yells Mako. "You gave her this curse and seduced her!"

Noatak knows enough about the inner workings of the human mind to understand exactly what has happened. Mako is upset about the Avatar, but loves her too much to pin the blame on her directly. A criminal - one with a history of attacking them both - makes a convenient scapegoat. It's a shame he is having second thoughts about death, because the mission ending in his death at the hands of an officer would not only likely secure Tarrlok's release, but also net him a hefty settlement.

"Calm yourself," says Noatak. "I have done nothing."

The officer is too rage-filled to be reasoned with; he darts forward, shooting another bolt of flame. Korra steps into the line of fire and deflects it. "Don't hurt him."

The two lovers stare at each other, eyes locked.
"Why are you defending him?" asks Mako, breathing hard.

"None of this is his fault. It's all me." Is her voice gaining an echoing quality, or is Noatak imagining things? She's only a few feet in front of him, and he could land a chi-block easily in about two seconds, if he wanted, but he doesn't see any of the shadow flickers, and there's no wind.

"He's the reason you bloodbent," says Mako.

"I took his bloodbending from him because I wasn't strong enough." She takes a step forward, and Noatak moves to maintain the distance, eyes locked on the location of the chi point between her shoulder blades.

Her voice has a strong echo to it now. "I am the one who has abused bloodbending, and who has lost control over it. He kissed me not out of a desire to manipulate, but only to protect himself. And the way I feel about him is my fault alone."

The way I feel about him. Noatak's muscles stiffen; he forgets about the chi point as the unexpected words root him in place.

"You will step down," she commands, still closing in on Mako. "You will return to your home, and tell no one of our whereabouts. You will not interfere with the mission, until it is complete. Then and only then will I return to Air Temple Island."

"No," says Mako. "You will come with me now, Korra. This has gone too far."

Her hand claws in the air, and he yells.

Noatak curses to himself. He was too hung up on her words, and let it go too long. The wind is already kicking up around them, and by the black waves of energy around her body, he knows the state has fully overwhelmed her. Quietly, he darts toward her back.

Korra glances back in his direction, red eyes wide.

The vice of psychic bloodbending tightens around him, squeezing the breath from his lungs. His yell of protest comes out as a wheeze. She's going to kill us both. His pulse beats in his ears as he holds eye contact with her, willing her to come to her senses.

Instead, she turns back to Mako.

"You will step down." Her arm rises into the air, and Mako float toward the ceiling. Noatak recognizes the panic and anger on his face - it's the same expression Kwan wore on the day, the moment, that the Revolution ended. Oh spirits, this situation is exactly the same. Mako coming to confront her, just as Kwan had. Korra reacting defensively, bloodbending the man she loves. Noatak feels tears building in his eyes.

There has to be a way out. This situation has to have a better ending.

"Avatar," he says, his voice croaking with the strain of the grip on his body. "Let him go."

She ignores him. "You will return to your home, and tell no one of our whereabouts." She flicks her hand, and Mako slams sideways into the wall.

"Korra, stop," pleads the officer. "It's me."

"Avatar," barks Noatak, and a gasp leaves him as the bloodbending pulses around him. A threat.
"You will not interfere with our mission, until it is complete," she says to Mako, and she just starts to flick her hand - the officer's body moves about a foot to the side- when Noatak calls out,

"Korra!"

At her name, she turns, eyes boring through him.

Noatak's breaths are harsh, and he can barely form the words. "You don't want to hurt him. Let him go."

She's still staring at him, her loose hair dancing around her in the wind. Mako hovers mid-air in front of her, looking at her with panic in his eyes, a tear trailing down his cheek.

Exactly like Kwan.

Now Noatak is determined to free the officer, as if saving him will somehow undo all he did to his lieutenant six years ago. His voice strengthens. "Officer Mako is a reasonable man, who will agree to a reasonable deal. Tell him you will release him and let him leave without fuss. In exchange, he will tell no one what happened here, and allow you to continue the mission. Tell him that if he betrays you, you will find him and you will make him suffer." Not a kind thing to add, but he has to ensure that the officer won't just shut them down once he's free.

Mako is watching him now, brows pinched with confusion, and as Noatak stares at that face, he can only remember his own regrets. "And tell him that you're sorry you have to do this," he adds quietly. "You're so sorry. You love him, and you wish it didn't have to be this way, but sometimes a person's calling and love come into conflict."

His eyes close under the weight of all his memories.

"You heard all that," says the corrupted Avatar. "Are you going to betray me?"

"No," yelps Mako, his voice that of a child, not an adult.

"Then you may leave."

The bloodbending falls away. Without it holding him upright, Noatak falls to all fours, gasping for sweet air. He hears the sound of hasty footsteps and a door open, then slam, but it's another minute before he can bring himself to lift his head.

The officer is gone. Korra looms over him, still in the corrupted Avatar State. Slowly, Noatak rises to his feet.

"I didn't want to do any of that," she says, voice still echoing. Her glowing eyes pierce through him. "I didn't want to hurt him."

"I understand." The words aren't strong enough to convey just how perfectly he understands, how alike they are at their cores.

"Make it stop." Her voice is surprisingly small.

He steps forward, eyes squinting against the wind, and embraces her. His fingers find the chi-point immediately, and he presses it.

Korra slumps against him, and his arms tighten around her as the wind fades.
XIII: Warmth

XIII

Warmth

It takes Noatak a moment to realize that Korra is unconscious in his arms. Given all she's been through today, it makes sense that she's exhausted, but he can't help being concerned all the same.

He hooks one arm under her knees to cradle her to his chest and carries her to the bed, laying her on top of the covers. Her hair is badly tangled, and he fights the urge to comb through it with his fingers the way he always does to soothe Tarrlok.

Instead, he sits on the bed beside her and studies her face. It's completely relaxed and peaceful, and his stomach twists, because he knows that's going to change the second she awakens. He's never felt this much empathy for another soul before - he might have, as a kid going through hardships with Tarrlok, if he hadn't hardened himself so much back then. He's soft now, so soft, and he hates it.

As he watches her, he tries to remind himself that this is the Avatar, who thwarted his plans and stands for everything he ever fought against, but all he can see is a reflection of himself. That, and a woman, half his age, beautiful and troubled. She carries the weight of the world on her shoulders - by birth, not by choice. How strong she must be, to have survived this long without crumbling. Especially with all the measures he and his Equalists put into place to pressure her.

His throat tightens, and no, he is not going to weep on behalf of the Avatar. Kwan's bloodbent face rises in his mind, too, still a freshly opened wound after the encounter with Mako, but he's not going to weep over that, either, because he has before, so often, and it hasn't changed a damned thing.

Besides, there are other needs to take care of before he succumbs to emotion. They need food; Korra especially. He remembers how famished he always was when he used bloodbending, and he imagines combining it with the Avatar State, however corrupted, will only make it more energy-intensive.

He grabs more money from Kwan's bag, which still lies on the floor, condoms and his old mask scattered around it. He ignores it all, zeroes in on the money and leaves. He must always look forward, never back, or he'll break down.

There's no sign of Officer Mako in the lobby or outside the hotel. Noatak's pretty adept at reading people - it's the reason he was always so good at manipulating them - and he feels confident that the man will take their threats seriously. Even so, there's a chance that time will wear down Mako's initial fear and shock to reveal his underlying sense of duty, and he'll start to consider taking action, so they should probably find a new base of operation in the morning. The last thing they need is to be swarmed by police before their mission ends.

He finds a seafood stand and orders two large rice bowls, splurging on extra shrimp and scallop-crabs for Korra's order to help her recover. The smell makes his mouth water.

Then he strides into the wine store, because he's almost out of wine again. As he peruses the bottles, he idly calculates how much alcohol he has consumed over the past three days, and the answer disturbs him. The row of wine bottles on the rack before him suddenly feels like the bars of
his prison cell, and he takes a step back. He doesn't really need it, not yet, but it's going to be more than just a psychological desire if he keeps this up. The agony of withdrawal is so vivid in his mind, even nine years later, that he shivers and walks out without buying anything.

Korra is no longer on her bed when he returns to their rooms. The bathroom door is closed, and he hears loud, ugly sobs from the other side. He hesitates. She had the decency to offer him feigned ignorance when their roles were reversed yesterday - has it really only been one day? - so he'll repay the favour. He pads back to the door, then opens it and slams it loudly.

"Avatar?" he calls, as if just arriving.

The sobs have stopped.

"I brought food," he continues, walking up to the bathroom door. He hears her blowing her nose, then the water tap runs.

When she opens the door, her face is blotchy and her eyes are red, but dry. She stares intently at the floor. "Don't say anything," she mutters. "Please. Not a single word. I'm barely holding it together, and the tiniest phrase of sympathy or concern is going to make me break down."

Respecting her request, he silently holds out the bag containing her food.

"Dammit!" She claps both hands to her face and sinks to the ground, her shoulders shaking.

Noatak stands awkwardly above her, food still extended.

"Why do you have to be nice?" she asks, hiccups interrupting the word.

"I..." He trails off as he realizes he doesn't know how to respond; he sets the food beside her. After a few minutes, she's still weeping, and he figures his presence is harming more than helping. He begins to walk back to his room.

"I hated you," she sobs behind him, and he stops. "I hated you for so long, because I thought everything you did was inexcusable. And now I've done to Mako what you did to Kwan, and Asami's dead, and everything is going wrong. At least you had a cause to hide behind, even if you went insane with it. My cause is that I want to be liked, the way Aang was. I want to be popular. How shallow is that?"

Noatak swallows hard. He turns to look at her; she has curled into a ball, slowly rocking in place, and her fingers are clawing into her head. He gives a low sigh. As much as he wants to walk away, he's reminded of his own private breakdown six years ago, when their situations weren't all that different.

Softly, he settles to a seat beside her on the carpet. "You need to eat. Bloodbending drains the body's energy."

She sniffles again, then flips her hair out of her face and sits up, swabbing at her cheeks. "Stop being nice. I don't deserve it, and it's making me feel worse."

"I'm not; I'm being practical." He opens his own package and pulls out a pair of chopsticks. Her eyes lock onto him as he lifts a juicy prawn and starts to eat it tail-first.

Her fingers fidget in her lap. "I can't stop seeing Mako's face."

He points at her food with his chopsticks. "Eat."
She opens the package, then stares at it. "So much seafood. This must have cost a fortune." Her lip wobbles.

"Not because I'm nice," he says before she can start crying again. "Practical. You need to replenish."

After a tentative bite, she begins to gulp down the food so quickly that he's not sure she's even chewing. She finishes before he does, and she leans back on her palms and lets out a soft series of burps. His nose wrinkles. Soft burps are a sign of appreciation in their culture, but he's been living in the city too long.

A lot calmer now, she glances over at him. "You know, I barely recognize you without a wine bottle attached to your lips."

He feels his cheeks flush, but doesn't acknowledge her statement.

Once he has collected their packages and deposited them in the garbage bin, she breaks the silence.

"How long can you make this chi-block last?"

He settles cross-legged on the floor, facing her. "An hour is reasonable. Two to four hours, if I really bruise you."

"Not any longer than that?"

"Not without my bloodbending."

As he says the word, their eyes lock, and he knows she's having the same realization he is: maybe, if she gives him back his bending, she'll no longer be corrupted.

Neither of them suggests it, but he can tell she's weighing the potential outcomes. Returning dangerous bending to a dangerous criminal might be worth it, if it spares the Avatar from destruction. On the other hand, it's likely that the act of taking it was what corrupted her, not the bending itself.

Besides, he doesn't want it back. At least, he doesn't on the surface, but he doesn't want to acknowledge how he feels about it deep down. The bloodbending is like the alcohol: as free as he is without it, his mind still cries out for it. It's no longer a physical dependence, but it's still a psychological one.

"We should change locations tomorrow," he says to drown out his thoughts. "There's a chance that once Officer Mako has the night to think about it, he might..." He trails off as he notices her face collapsing, and realizes the topic of Mako is still too fresh.

"It might be strategically advantageous," he says instead.

"No, I..." She nods. "Yeah." With a sniffle, she wipes her face again. "I think I need to go to sleep."

It's still early in the evening, but he's surprised to find that he's exhausted as well. Being bloodbent twice in one day seems to have an ill effect on the body. He thinks back to all the benders he equalized, and how they often collapsed from the exertion; now he's getting a taste of that feeling. I probably deserve it.

He retreats to his room to shower. Now that alcohol is out of the picture, it's tempting to fall back on other old addictions, but after a few half-hearted seconds of fondling himself, he decides he
really isn't in the mood. Besides, the image of Korra's lips on the cigar is still fresh in his mind, and
the last thing he wants to do is masturbate to the Avatar, especially when she's right next door.
Aside from the risk of being overheard, it seems oddly disrespectful after all they've shared over
the past few days.

He towels off and pulls on his pants, then brushes his teeth. No point slicking his hair back, if he's
going right to sleep anyway; he lets it fall, still damp, along either side of his face. By habit - how
is it already a habit? - he walks over to the last bottle of wine and picks it up. It's only about a third
full.

He sets it down again; he might need it in the morning, if the past few days of continuous drinking
catch up to him over the course of the night.

Instead he takes a moment to examine at the fractured mask that Kwan left behind. He squats down
to pick it up, his thumb running over the straight edge of the nose. It's been a long time since he
allowed himself to consider the good points of being Amon, and now he remembers the roar of
crowds thousands deep, the loyalty of an army, the sensation that he was actually, actively fixing
things. He remembers rallies, with Kwan at his side, sharing in the revolution that the two of them
had birthed.

But at the thought of Kwan, he starts to think about how things started to spiral beyond his control.
He would give anything - anything - to be able to go back and tell Kwan the words that he had
spoken on Korra's behalf to Office Mako. Maybe he could have lessened the sting for his beloved
lieutenant if he had only been thoughtful enough to apologize for what he was about to do.

And as for Korra herself... He remembers how he celebrated when he took her bending, how he
became so obsessed with that one action that nothing else mattered, not even the man he loved. He
glances at her room. If he had known her as he does now, all else being equal, he doesn't think he
would be able to do it again.

With a frown, he sets the mask on the bed.

Korra is still in the shower when he returns to her room, so he crawls under the covers. He folds his
hands behind his head and stares at the ceiling, his mind whirling with all the information of the
day. It's too much to process, so he tries to still his mind. He focuses on the steady sound of the
shower, then the rhythmic sound of Korra brushing her teeth. His eyes close and he begins to drift.

The squeaking hinges of the bathroom door startle him awake. Korra steps into the room. Her hair
is down, but untangled now, and floats as if freshly cleaned. She's dressed again, still wearing his
pants, ridiculously large on her. Her hands are up, palms facing each other, and an orb of water
dances between them.

"Sit up," she says, and he complies. She sits beside him, legs crossing beneath her body, and brings
her glowing hands to his injury. Her face is close to his as she peers at the wound, and he subtly
breathes in the vanilla of her shampoo. He's surprised at how calm she is, but then again, that's
how grief works: in waves. It's only a matter of time before a fresh wave hits her. He hopes she'll at
least get a full night's sleep first, because grief is harder to handle when it's combined with fatigue.

The healing glow fades, and she gives a soft sigh. "All the bloodbending made your injury worse
internally. It's going to take even longer to heal now." After a pause, she adds, "Sorry."

He nods his acceptance. Her jaw wobbles, and he expects her to break down again, but then she
clears her throat and pulls back to her side of the bed. She tugs her pants off her hips and throws
them onto the floor, stretching out her injured leg. The wound is still swollen, and purple bruises
radiate from the original injury. Noatak internally cringes as he remembers how hard psychic bloodbending was on his own body, thinning his blood; it's taking a toll on her as well. If she keeps it up, she'll start to feel the aches and fatigue that he once did. The colour will drain from her skin, and her emotions will harden. He's surprised to discover that prospect bothers him.

She tucks her other heel against her body and retrieves the container of salve from her bedside table, then begins to dab it around the wound.

Noatak tries not to watch her, but his eyes are drawn to the inside of her bent leg. There's a divot there, where inner thigh meets groin, that he's always found appealing, and she's so muscular that it's especially apparent on her. He closes his eyes, but too late; he's already imagining nuzzling that divot, settling his tongue into it, then drifting closer to centre...

This is not a productive line of thought. He falls back to the bed and curls onto his side, his back to her. If she's becoming proficient as a bloodbender, she'll be able to sense her element, and the last thing he needs is for her to sense that he's getting turned on by her. They both have enough on their plates already.

He hears her screw the cap on and set the salve on the table, but she doesn't pull her pants back on. Instead, she crawls under the covers. The lights turn off.

"Goodnight Amon," she says.

He half-rolls toward her to acknowledge her. "Goodnight, Avatar."

She hesitates. "This is probably going to sound strange, but: thanks."

It does sound strange. "For what?"

"For listening. For bringing me food. For still treating me with respect even though I bloodbent you twice." Her voice shrinks. "And for not judging me."

He considers. "I don't think I'm in any position to judge any of your actions today."

"No, I suppose not."

Noatak waits, but she doesn't say anything else, so he returns to lying on his side with his back to her. He nuzzles into the pillow and closes his eyes.

He's just about asleep when he feels the feather-light contact of her foot against his, under the covers.

His eyes fly open.

It's still there, her toes just barely touching the ball of his foot. The cadence of her breaths suggests that she's awake, and the bed is wide enough that it must have been a conscious choice to put her foot there. It's as if she's seeking contact. As if she needs the reminder that he's there.

At first, he doesn't know how to react. He wants to write it off as the instinctive Water Tribe need to share body heat, but her words to Mako echo in his mind: the way I feel about him.

Before he realizes what he's doing, he inches his leg back toward her, pressing the ball of his foot firmly against the top of hers. It's ridiculous that this one tiny patch of skin-to-skin contact should make his pulse race, but his heart beats loudly in his ears.
Her toe shifts back and forth, just once, as as if subtly stroking him, and he's left guessing if it was deliberate or accidental. He struggles to keep his breaths quiet and even.

_Do you really think she's actually playing footsies with you?_ he tells himself. _You're too old for these games. Go back to sleep. This will seem ridiculous in the morning._

But he doesn't pull away, and neither does she, and as he begins to drift back to sleep, he revels in that contact, that tiny link of warmth between them.

.*.*.*.

Kwan shivers, curling into a ball. The little room he has been given has no heating, and the blanket is too thin. He's exhausted, but the chill is suspending him in the drowsy realm of half-sleep, where thoughts flow without restraint. As always, his thoughts go to Amon. How could they not? The man has consumed his mind for twenty-six years.

He remembers a chilly night long ago, when the plans for the Revolution were in their infancy. He and Amon were just simple bodyguards for Sato then, sharing a townhome, with a small workshop in the basement. There, Kwan would tinker with electronic weapons, piecing together discarded parts given to them by their employer. Amon would sit in a chair in the corner, devouring books on leadership and strategy. His favourites were the ones written during the Fire Nation's rule. That always sat wrong with Kwan; his mother's family had been displaced to the Earth Kingdom after the Fire Nation razed her village to the ground. Amon always insisted that the Fire Nation was wrong in its brutality, but "that's benders for you" - their military principles, he said, were sound at their core.

Maybe it was an odd way to spend time together, both of them engulfed in separate activities, but just being in the same room together, pursuing their individual passions, was enough.

One night, Kwan was in his workshop alone; he doesn't remember what he was working on, exactly, but it was soaking up his concentration. Amon returned from his night shift two hours late.

"Stopped for drinks?" asked Kwan, not looking up from his work. These were the days shortly before Amon's drinking became a problem, before Kwan would have to dedicate most of his time to keeping up appearances that Amon was well, while fighting behind the scenes to hold together not only their own lives, but the Revolution they were trying to create.

"Gentlemen's club," replied the younger man, his words slurring, as he circled around to stand behind him.

Then Kwan felt kisses up the back of his neck, warm hands tightening into his shoulders. He set down his screwdriver and leaned back, relishing the attention. "Mm, you're enthusiastic. Guessing they had a good roster tonight."

"There was this one girl, Fire Nation," murmured Amon, nuzzling the back of his ear. "Most muscular thighs you've ever seen. Cracked a coconut between her knees."

"Mm," said Kwan again, closing his eyes at the sensation of the sharp nose behind his ear. "Did you come here for permission to fuck her?"

"Yes." The man nipped his earlobe. "But now that I'm here, I'm remembering how muscular your thighs are." His hand dropped between Kwan's legs, roving higher.

His voice hitching, Kwan said, "Sorry, love, but I don't think I can crack a coconut between my knees."
"Maybe not. But you have other talents." A kiss to his neck. "And so do I."

Suitably intrigued, Kwan pushed his chair away from his desk, and Amon knelt between his legs.

And so began one of those rare long and glorious nights where Kwan was somehow able to keep up with the younger man's substantial drive. They made love in the workshop, on the stairs, in bed, until his body was raw and numb and he had nothing left to give. Amon was still eager - he was always so eager. And restless. Even when it was finally over, while Kwan lay splayed and panting on the bed, his partner paced restlessly toward the window.

He remembers it so clearly, even now: Amon's silhouette fringed with blue light, the full moon perfectly framing his head like a halo. The man had a habit of becoming distant and pensive during full moons, wearing a look of longing, or perhaps regret. The mood in the room dampened.

"Kwan," he said, not looking back at him, "what would you say if I told you that I was the reason you lasted so long tonight?"

Rolling his head along the pillow to watch him, Kwan furrowed his brow. "Hey, don't get cocky. Maybe I was picturing that handsome guard from third shift this whole time."

Amon turned to face him, and there was a hardness in the icy eyes that made his skin crawl. "What if I told you I reach inside you and play with your organs, forcing you to rise for me?"

He can still feel that wave of coldness that washed over him. "Okay, just how much did you have to drink?" he asked quietly.

The younger man turned back to the window, then suddenly gripped the handle and threw it open. A flood of frigid air made Kwan shiver; he scrambled under the covers. "What the hell are you doing? It's freezing out there!"

"She watches," said Amon, pressing his palms into the window ledge. "The former Princess Yue, ascended to the spirits. My mother always said she watched over us, protecting us. But she lied. Yue did nothing to protect us against that bastard Yakone! She watched as he destroyed my family, as my brother and I-" He suddenly cut himself off.

At the name of the infamous criminal, Kwan sat up, drawing the blankets tightly around himself. "Yakone?"

Amon's head sagged and he cursed under his breath.

Bringing the blankets with him as a robe, the older man paced toward him. "You told me a firebender destroyed your family."

His partner still wouldn't look at him. "A lie that sounded better than the truth."

Gently, Kwan reached over the other's shoulder and closed the window; he pressed himself against Amon's back, wrapping them both in the blanket. They shivered together.

"Whatever secrets you have, Amon," he said softly, "you can trust me to keep them between us."

Their hands entwined.

And so, he listened as Amon spun yet another elaborate web of lies: this time, his father was a waterbender with gang ties, and when he tried to leave the gang to be with his non-bender family, Yakone fought back.
Kwan swallowed every word without questioning it.

"I was just a boy," said Amon. "Yakone killed them all: my father, my mother, my brother. I concocted the lie, because I didn't want anyone to assume that I had gang ties myself; I wanted to make sure no one could track my history. They might assume the worst. I told the same lie so often that I started to believe it.

"Besides, it's a lie that it makes sense to perpetuate. A defenseless non-bender family is something other non-benders can relate to, something that makes the story more poignant. We've talked about the Revolution needing a figurehead - if that is to be me, then I need to be the personification of non-bender suffering. I need to have a tragic history that is common enough to be relatable."

Recalling the memory now, Kwan's fist tightens as he remembers what he did next. He wrapped his arms around the man and told him, "I understand, and I agree. Thank you for trusting me with the truth."

If only he had known how far from the truth it was.

In that frigid room, more than two decades ago, they curled up together, radiating heat.

Now, Kwan is cold and alone, and the memories leave him feeling colder still. It strikes him as unfair that after a normal failed relationship of two decades, couples have at least some pleasant memories to keep them warm when they're lonely. He has nothing; everything he held true was false.

The worst part is that he would give anything to believe the lies again if it meant he could have that warm body next to him for just one more night.

He pulls the thin blankets tighter around his shivering body.
XIV: Comfort

XIV

Comfort

Noatak awakens in the night to find he's alone in the bed. His arm searches Korra's side of the bed and finds it cold.

He sits up. The bathroom light is on; faintly, he hears her crying. He frowns. The newest wave of grief didn't even give her the courtesy of a full night's sleep before it tried to drown her.

It would be easy enough to roll over and go back to sleep, but he thinks of how fragile she looked on the rooftop, and how warm her foot was against his as they fell asleep, and he realizes that he has unwittingly fallen into the role of her confidante, a source of comfort. As unbelievable as it seems, he's all she has right now. Even more unbelievable is that he likes the role.

He stands and moves toward the bathroom. With one knuckle, he raps on the door.

"Avatar?"

There's no answer except for more sobs; she's not even bothering to hide them from him any more.

His stomach twists. "I'm coming in."

When she doesn't protest, he turns the knob.

The lights are blinding, and he squints. His eyes adjust to reveal a miserable Korra. She has squeezed herself into the small space between the toilet and the bathtub, hugging her knees to her chest, still dressed only in her shirt and underwear. Her face is streaked with tears and mucous and she's full-out bawling. At one time, he would have reacted with disgust, but now, his heart aches for her. His emotions are constantly surprising him tonight.

Wordlessly, he crouches in front of her and reaches out to grip her forearm.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I'm sorry. Everything is just so wrong." She cries harder.

He reaches over her head and rolls out the toilet tissue, tearing away a large section for her. She accepts it; he turns away to give her privacy as she blows her nose and wipes her face. She's still sobbing, and fresh tears spill onto her ruddy cheeks.

"Come here," he whispers, and he tugs her arm to coax her out of her little alcove. Reluctantly, she allows him to lead. He sits with his back to the bathtub and guides her to a seat beside him; his arms wrap around her. She clings to him and cries into his neck.

Closing his eyes, he rests his cheek against the top of her head. His first instinct is to sing a lullaby for her, the way he does for Tarrlok, but that seems too intimate. Instead, he finds himself trying to give her a story to relate to.

"After you defeated me," he says softly, "and just before I escaped with my brother, I had a moment where I broke down. The weight of everything I had done collapsed around me, and I started to realize that not only were my dreams dead, but it was my own fault. I realized how badly I had hurt not just Kwan, but my brother, all of my followers, and the City I claimed to love."
Her sobs are fading into whimpers as she listens. He smooths the back of her hair and continues.

"There's a cliff on Air Temple Island, a perfect lookout across Yue Bay to Republic City. After my retreat, I curled up there and sobbed and spat and swore, then started pacing like a madman, hurling rocks off the cliff and into the ocean. I would have continued all night, if I hadn't seen something something that stopped me."

She sniffles. "What did you see?"

"Yue," he replies.

She looks up at him, her eyes red and watery.

"The moon is so rarely visible by day." He delicately smooths her arm. "My mother used to say that it only appeared on special occasions, when Yue was offering a lost soul extra light in times of darkness. Maybe it's infantile, but in that moment, I honestly believed it was a message from my mother, through Yue. I knew I had to free Tarrlok and start over."

"I don't think that's infantile," says Korra, and he reflects that of course she wouldn't. She's the Avatar; it's her job to look for signs from the spirits.

He ends his story there. The reunion with Tarrlok and the ensuing explosion is another source of anguish, and he doesn't want to relive it. There's more than enough to be miserable about already.

Korra sniffles again and stretches her arm to grab a new section of tissue. "You know, I think you just described my crying spot. The cliff. I can't count the number of times I broke down there." She blows her nose and wipes her face. "I wish I could be there right now. It was somehow comforting, to look out at the city and the stars and the ocean, and feel so small and insignificant. Maybe you understand how nice it can be to feel unimportant sometimes."

Discomfort washes over him as he pictures her on that same cliff, weeping like this, because he knows that, for a time, he was the cause of her grief. She was so powerful that he did everything he could to strike fear into her, hoping to cripple her psychologically; it was the only defense he had against her without revealing his bloodbending to the world. Yes, he does understand why she would want to be unimportant. Being important has only ever brought her unhappiness, and he caused much of it.

His arms tighten around her, and he feels an apology on his lips, but he can't quite voice it. He did what he thought necessary, and an apology won't change that. Besides, he doubts she would ever apologize for the trouble she caused his movement. They had been major players on opposite sides of a war.

It's different now.

Korra is quiet. He feels her breaths against his arm, and the heat radiating from her body is a strong contrast to the chill of the porcelain at his back. Sitting together like this, pressed close together, is a bad idea. The more he humanizes her, the more difficult it is to remember that she is the Avatar.

But it's been so long since he was able to talk freely like this, and so long since someone trusted him enough to do the same. His eyes close as he allows himself to savour it, if just for a moment.

"You should get some sleep," he says, releasing her.

She nods and swabs at her tear-stained face. "Just give me a minute to clean up."
They stand, and he's just stepping out of the bathroom when she says, "Amon."

He stops in the doorway.

With a shy smile, she says, "Thank you."

It's the first time he has seen that smile in person; it's slightly crooked, and shifts her entire face upwards, wrinkling the corners of her eyes. He opens his mouth to reply, but can't find his voice.

Quickly, he steps into the dark room. He feels a cold hollow where she was pressed against him, as if she had taken not just her own body heat with her, but some of his as well. *We were enemies,* he reminds himself, but it doesn't seem fair that an enemy should feel so warm and soft in his arms. She's such a strange mix of power and vulnerability, of strength and softness, that he feels dizzy.

*You need to focus on the mission,* he tells himself, but all he can think about is how badly he wants to see that smile again.

He's still hovering outside the bathroom door when she steps into the room. Her hand freezes on the light switch as she notices him.

Noatak swallows hard and lifts his chin. "You need rest."

"So do you," she says, but her eyes don't match her words. They're large and frightened, but somehow still strong, somehow boring straight through him.

Their shared gaze is a beat too long, then two. He feels his heart accelerate, feels blood pooling between his legs.

*Don't do this,* he tells himself. *Don't fall for her. There's too much history between you.*

But even as he's thinking it, he holds out his hand.

She's still frozen in place, still caught on the light switch, her eyes boring through him. He hears her swallow.

After an agonizing pause, her free hand reaches out for his.

They meet palm-first; their hands rotate, as synchronized as if it's part of a dance, so that their fingers can interlock. Her fingers are so narrow compared to his, and, unexpectedly, immaculately groomed. He stares at the union.

The path that stretches before them is one that can only end with regret, but his logic is drowning beneath the sound of the heartbeat in his ears. Past, present, he wants to forget it all.

He wants to leave himself behind.

*...*

Korra turns out the light.

She steps toward Amon in the darkness, their hands still joined.

*This isn't real,* she thinks as she closes the distance, laying her cheek against his collarbone. *This is a dream. A hallucination.* She breathes in the scent of his skin, its soft spiciness making goosebumps erupt down her back.
His free hand rises to cup her cheek with gentleness that would have seemed out of character before all the events of the day.

*This is Amon, the man who used these hands to rip your bending from you.*

She gives a soft whimper and rotates her head to breathe in the scent of his fingers.

*He destroyed the city. This is spiritual suicide, an abandonment of everything the Avatar is supposed to stand for.*

Amon presses two fingers under her chin, tilting it up, and she feels his nose slide against hers, but he doesn't kiss her. She slowly begins to nuzzle him, her lips parted, drinking in his breath, and she feels him do the same. The energy between them is warm and damp and it tastes like mint. Their lips skim, and again, and she doesn't know if he's teasing her or if, like her, he's intimidated by everything that a full kiss would represent.

She feels a surge of rebellious bravery, as if she's standing at a ledge and about to jump. *If I'm going to fail as the Avatar like everyone expects, if I'm going to be corrupted and destroyed, then I'll do it as spectacularly as I can.*

She stands on her toes to close the gap.

Their lips meet.

His mouth is as broad and soft as she remembers, but this time, there's a hunger behind his kiss, a firmness, a tingling sensation that passes between them. It feels so good, oh spirits, so good.

Their joined hands separate; blindly, her palms smooth his chest and neck. His hands rake into her hair, and the kiss breaks so that he can tilt his head for a better angle. This time, she opens her mouth for him. Their tongues touch, and his groan vibrates through his mouth and into hers. She feels herself echo it, feels her thoughts fading. She coaxes his tongue into her mouth, because already, she needs to have him inside her any way she can. He pushes deeper, his teeth digger into her lips, and she opens her body tight against him, but it's still not close enough. She needs to be closer.

This is all moving so fast, too fast, but she feels herself propelled forward both by the ache between her legs and by the desire to reject everything that has ever been expected of her. Her hand rakes down his back to grab his muscled rear, and she pulls his hips tightly to hers; he breaks the kiss with a gasp.

He's already hard, and she's suddenly paralyzed by the thought: *Amon wants me. Amon wants the Avatar.*

A few seconds later, his breath is in her ear. "Avatar?"

"I..." She can't find words. She realizes that she's standing, frozen, her hand clawed into the ass of the man who destroyed her life, and the most ridiculous part is that she doesn't want to stop there. "Keep going," she whispers, because these doubts will disappear if she's carried away by the rush.

He bites her ear and trails kisses down her neck, and she cries out and grinds against him. His hands drop to grip her hips, encouraging her movements. He's surprisingly vocal, and every gasp, every grunt, every moan sends sparks running up and down her skin. These are sounds she heard when she fought him, and sounds she heard him making with his lieutenant. And, if his reputation is to be believed, they're sounds he made for countless lovers. Now they are hers.
They're still not close enough together; she needs to feel his weight on her. She begins to walk him toward the bed as they kiss. It's hard to find her way in the darkness, and Amon bumps into the bed sooner than she expected. He must read her momentum, because he deftly lowers her to the mattress, crawling over her as she moves back to give them room.

She lies on her back, heart pounding. From the heat streaming off his body, she knows he's on all fours, directly over top of her in the darkness. His harsh breaths flood her face; she tilts her head back to drink them in. The pause before he lowers himself onto her is agonizing - it seems that even in the bedroom, Amon is a man of patience and control. His body lowers slowly, so slowly, and her fingers claw into the covers. Even through her clothes, he feels so good. His frame is broad and heavy with muscle, and she is secure and helpless at the same time as he traps her against the bed.

The thought of helplessness floods her body with a rush of adrenaline, and she's surprised at herself. He's a dangerous man, she thinks, exploring the sensation, and you're just another in a long line of conquests. It makes her feel worthless and unimportant, a far cry from all the pressures of being the Avatar. She has never felt such a strong thrill in her life.

His hand twists into her hair to gently tug it, and he kisses her neck again, suckling at all the spots that make her gasp. He knows exactly what to do, exactly how to play you. He's using you, like he used all the others. You are nothing to him.

She shrieks and wraps her legs around him, writhing.

She's still in her underwear and shirt, and he's still in his pants, but she can feel the shape of him between her legs. She can feel how badly he wants to use her.

They begin to rock together. His mouth slackens at her neck, and she feels his muscles tense as the friction begins to carry them both away. It would be enough for him to just keep grinding like this, she can tell, but she doesn't want to stop here.

Her mouth finds his ear. "I need you," she breathes.

He gives a deep, pleased hum and stops rocking. His kiss is hard, almost desperate, then he pulls away and stands.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"There are still condoms in my room."

She starts to panic. If he leaves to retrieve them, it will give her just enough time to think her way out of this.

But she knows they can't do this unprotected, so she turns on the light for him. The sight of the bulging pants - bulging pants connected to Amon - makes her breath catch, and the second his back is turned, she sits up and rakes her hair back from her forehead. Shit. What are you doing, Korra?

As expected, the seconds when he's out of the room fill her head with doubts.

This is the man who took your bending. He started a war.

He's just using you.

Why do you like the thought that he's using you? That's not healthy.

You are a horrible person who does horrible things, and you don't deserve even a few minutes of pleasure.

Korra feels pressure start to close in on her, and she gathers her knees to her chest. The voices chant
in her head until tears prick at her eyes.

Amon returns with a paper package in his hand. His lips are tight, and as their eyes meet, she sees that he's having second thoughts, too. But her gaze drops to the physical proof that he wants her, and she decides her doubts will take care of themselves if she pushes ahead.

Unfurling from her defensive position, she rotates to drop her legs over the edge of the bed. He approaches her without hesitation; maybe he's pushing forward through his doubts as well. She grabs his hips, guiding him to stand in front of her. Slowly, she unbuttons his pants, and they work together to strip him.

Now he's standing before her, naked, and she drifts her fingers down the soft fur of his abdomen, finally allowing herself to admire his physique. How does a man imprisoned for six years stay so fit?

As she gets braver, her fingertips trail down, reading the indentation of the imprint his waistband left on his skin, then lower. Her fingers flutter lightly around him, teasing him, as she senses his blood flow. She hears his breath catch in his throat, and feels hers do the same. When she lifts her gaze, she sees that his eyelids are heavy, his lips parted and slightly flared.

"Do you want me?" The words leave her mouth in a throaty growl, surprising her.

"Yes," he rumbles.

A flood of warmth nearly overwhelms her. Her nemesis wants her, Amon wants her. The doubts are still in the back of her mind, but he is already opening the condom package, and she justifies it to herself: it would be a shame to waste a perfectly good condom.

Amon holds out the condom, offering it to her. She realizes, with a bit of shock, that the gesture is giving her full control over whether or not they proceed. It's hard to convince herself that he's just using her when he's treating her like an equal partner. Somehow, that makes her feel even more conflicted than she already was.

But she unrolls it into place, then reaches over to turn off the lamp as he climbs on top of her.

He kisses her again, so hard that his stubble rakes her face, and then he is pulling her underwear off her hips. The air hits her, cold against damp flesh, and she's glad for the darkness, because she feels too exposed. She gasps with impatience as his fingers gently explore her.

"Please," she begs.

Another kiss, then he is inching into her, so slowly, and they both cry out. Once they are fully connected, he pauses, as if savouring it, but the wait is so long that she grips his biceps, another plea on her lips.

He thrusts, and she counter-thrusts, and then his mouth is on hers and their bodies are sliding together. She wishes she took the time to remove her shirt, because she wants to feel that furred chest rubbing against her bare skin, but it feels so good to rock together that she doesn't want to interrupt. Gone are all thoughts of him using her, or of guilt, or of their history; all that matters is their moans and the way their bodies are moving.

But one thought is growing on her mind, and it's starting to distract her: she's never been able to climax like this, not without touching herself, too. Should she say something? Should she just start doing it? Should she forget about it altogether, or fake it? This is her first time doing this outside of a relationship - no, don't think about Mako, not here - and she's not sure about the proper etiquette.
Her mind whirls, and it's starting to distract from the pleasurable sensations.

He slows their pace, and she wonders if her distraction has shown. Her cheeks warm; she's no good at this. Her self-doubts begin to creep back.

But Amon's hands cup either side of her face and he gives her a soft kiss, then leans to one side on his elbow. His other hand shoves between their bodies, settling between her legs. The angle seems awkward, and it can't be comfortable for him, but he starts to move his finger back and forth, gently stimulating her. His hips thrust with torturous slowness.

"Tell me when you're about to come." His voice is utterly unlike the man who haunted her nightmares.

At first, Korra is stunned. She expected that sex with Amon would be hard, selfish and fast, but now he's tending to her with care. The gentleness contradict everything she's ever known about him. Everything about this mission contradicts it.

Then his lips find her neck, and her eyes flutter closed. The rhythms of his finger and his body are unrelenting. Pleasure is crashing over her like little waves, infrequent and small at first, but growing in frequency and intensity.

Her hand clumsily reaches for his face, smoothing his stubbled jaw. He abandons her neck and takes her thumb into his mouth, sucking on it, sliding his teeth across the pads. She moans and begins to thrash, trying to jerk away from him or toss him off or pull him closer, because all these sensations are too much to take, but she wants more at the same time. Then she's rising, she's rising, and she's gasping for air, and she's just about to break through to the other side.

"I'm-" she starts to say, but the rest of the words are lost; her mouth is contorting.

Amon pulls his hand away.

She cries out in protest, hips rising to try to follow it.

But then he centres his body over her again, and this time, he's moving with a grinding, rotating motion that she's never felt before. She's still so close, and she whimpers in frustration, because this isn't going to work. But he doesn't stop, and the contact is almost enough, it might just be enough, and she begins to feel herself tip over the edge.

A wailing yell bursts from her mouth, and she tightens her arms and legs around him. He loses restraint and drives into her. He's holding his breath, then gasping, holding, then gasping, and she meets him thrust for thrust, lost in her bliss. His face buries into the pillow beside her head, his arms shoving roughly underneath her body to wrap around her, and he's squeezing her so tightly that she can barely breathe. Just as the last whimpers fade from her, he shouts into the pillow. She feels him spasm, hears his muffled cries, and he holds her possessively as he gives a final deep stroke.

They lie together, limbs entangled, skin flushed and damp. The silence rings in Korra's ears. For a few minutes, they lay there, breathing hard, engulfed by the afterglow.

Then he rolls off of her, and her glow begins to fade. Without his body shielding her, all her negative thoughts return, and they start to crush her.

You just slept with Amon - Amon! - the same day you broke up with Mako. You let him use you for his own pleasure. Do you not remember what this man did to you, to your friends, to the city? What is wrong with you?
Korra squeezes her eyes shut, trying to block out the thoughts and go back to the bliss she felt a minute ago. She slips under the covers - even though she still has her shirt on, she suddenly feels too naked, too vulnerable.

She feels the bed shift beside her. The lamp on Amon's side of the bed turns on. He sits at the edge of the bed, back to her, knotted condom in his hand. Red lines score his scarred back; she must have raked him with her fingernails. Bile rises in her throat as she examines the thought in her mind: she was so lost in her passion with Amon that she raked up his back. Oh spirits.

He turns to look at her, and their eyes lock. He's still breathing hard, but she sees her panic echoed in his eyes. He rakes damp hair out of his face, and his body language is clear: he's asking himself what the hell he just did, too.

*You really fucked up this time, Korra.*

"Look, this..." she says, but she stops there, because what can she possibly say? "It didn't mean anything," she finishes lamely.

His jaw sets. "No, it meant everything."

Her breath stops, because he's right. It meant both of them abandoning their ideals, their politics. It meant shoving aside their conflicted love for their long-time ex-partners, and putting aside more than six years of enmity. It meant far, far too much, more than she can bear to consider. Her lips quiver.

Amon looks away. He stands and pulls on his pants, then stalks to his room, shutting the door behind him. She stares after him for a moment, then buries her face in her hands.

Noatak plods to the bathroom and tosses the condom in the garbage bin. He plants his palms onto the countertop and stares at himself in the mirror. His cheeks are still flushed with pleasure, eyes wild, lips swollen.

*That was the Avatar, you asshole.*

He thinks of all she did to ruin his life, all he did to try to take her down, and rage wells in his chest. He's fallen so far from what he once was. He is a fool, he is weak, and he has thrown out every principle he ever believed in, because, what, he was flattered that she showed signs of liking him? Because he is so drawn to power that he can't resist it in its purest form? Because he's a barely-recovered sex addict who will hump anything that agrees?

But that's the worst part of it. That thing they just did, that wasn't just sex. That was making love. He made love to the Avatar, with nothing to gain, no ulterior motives, only because he wanted to. There were so many opportunities to stop it, so many pauses and chances to back down, but he kept going. Even when his doubts were echoing loudly in his mind, he kept going.

His hands curl into fists, and he's so close to smashing his own reflection that he whirls away.

This is going to change everything, *everything.*

The worst part is that when he closes his eyes, he can still hear the cries of her climax, and they ripple through him like flame.
XV: Games

XV

Games

Korra sits up with a start. Her neck aches, her back is stiff, and she's cold. The last thing she remembers is falling asleep in the bathtub, and before that, lots of crying...

The sensation of Amon's hands between her legs makes her cheeks flush. *Oh, right. Shit.*

Now all of yesterday's memories come rushing back, and she gives a small sigh and lets her head fall back against the rim of the tub. Would anyone notice if she just laid here for a few days? She doesn't have the energy to face a world where she bloodbent the man she was supposed to love, then slept with the man she was supposed to hate.

The crick in her neck is making her temples tingle, and she decides that there are better places to sulk than a bathtub. She climbs out of the tub and accidentally steps in a pile of used tissue, soggy with tears. She grimaces. Disgusting.

Dumping the tissues in the garbage, she examines her face in the mirror. Her nose is red and swollen, and her eyes are bloodshot and lined with purple. She glares at the sorry wreck of a woman in the mirror. What she wouldn't give to go back in time just a few days; she could refuse this stupid mission, and none of this would have happened.

Her eyes are drawn to a scorch mark on the countertop that wasn't there before, and she trails it to a smashed soap dish, then a crack in the mirror. The towels are scattered around the bathroom. Did she go into the Avatar State again and not even realize it? Her heart pounds as she wonders if she left the room.

A responsible Avatar would rush outside and make sure she didn't do anything terrible, but she has already proven, many times, that she's not a responsible Avatar. Delaying the inevitable, she strips and has a long shower; maybe routine can soothe her anxiety. As her hands run over her body, slick with soap, she finds herself recalling the way Amon touched her, smoothed her, caressed her. Her body betrays her, humming with energy at the memories. Last night, she thought she was committing spiritual suicide, but she didn't stop to consider that unlike the real alternative, she would be alive to face the consequences of her decision once it was over.

The shower over, she violently bends the water off her body and jerks her hair up into its usual three-ponytail style.

Next, she props her foot on the counter and examines her wound. Writhing against Amon's naked body certainly didn't help anything - *stop that, stop thinking about that* - and the wound is looking a bit angry again, but at least the bruises around it are starting to fade. She runs the tap and pulls out a stream of water, wrapping it around her hands. Centring herself, she guides the water to her skin, waiting for it to sink in and begin to glow. Nothing happens. The water floats around her skin, but it won't absorb.

She frowns and tries a couple more times, then shrugs and lets it fall back into the sink. She must be more frazzled than she thought. At least she has the healing salve to tide her over until she is better able to focus.
Once she's fully dressed and her teeth are brushed, she has nothing more to delay her from surveying the damage she might have caused in her corrupted Avatar State. She finally chances a peek into the hotel room, expecting to see scorch marks, smashed furniture, maybe even a badly hurt Amon.

With a long sigh of relief, she steps into the empty, untouched room. She must have contained her tantrum to the bathroom.

That's one bit of damage assessed; now it's time for the other. The next room is so quiet that it's possible Amon sought solace in a bottle and couldn't find his way out again. Or maybe he decided to abandon her entirely.

Korra pulls herself to her full height and forces herself to knock on the door to his room.

"Yes?" says Amon from the other side of it. She is disturbed by how happy she is to hear his voice, even though it cracks with fatigue.

"You didn't come back to bed," she says, an observation with no emotion attached. It's the closest she can come to asking if he's all right.

"Nor did you."

There's a pause.

She clears her throat and speaks at the door again. "We really need a new place to stay. With two separate bedrooms," she adds in a mutter.

"That would be wise." His voice is distant; he's still not answering the door.

"Are you drunk again?" She pushes the door open.

Her hands curl into fists.

Amon sits on the bed, still shirtless, studying a mask in his hands. Even from this angle, she recognizes his old mask, or at least part of it. Her heart pounds in her throat.

"What are you doing with that?" She fails to keep the waver out of her words.

"Reflecting."

She hesitates, then slowly works her way closer. He doesn't resist as she pulls the broken mask from his grasp. The red circle at its centre glares at her, positioned right over the chi point he used to take his victims' bending. Once upon a time, she thought it was a dawning sun, but now that she knows his history, she sees a full moon, tainted red with blood.

Her thumb runs over the mask's sharp nose, shaped so like the one that was nuzzling hers last night. As hard as she tries, she can't equate this mask with the man she slept with. It's too severe, too evil.

A dizzying hope pushes her logic aside: maybe this has all been a mistake. Maybe this man never really was Amon.

She crouches in front of him. He doesn't move as she fits the mask to his face with trembling hands, then loops the knotted leather cord over the back of his head.

He finally looks up at her, but this time it's with Amon's eyes, not Noatak's, and panic overwhelms
The scent and weight of the mask are so familiar, even fractured as it is, that Noatak is instantly transported to the time when he was Amon. He stands and looks down on the Avatar as she shrieks and scrambles away on all fours. He takes a step closer; her back hits the wall. She huddles there, hyperventilating.

This spirit-woman, the most powerful being in the world, is cowering at the sight of him. This fear is his doing, and his alone. He's horrified to feel a rush of pride.

Her eyes flicker with red light.

She is dangerous. He tugs off his mask and sets it aside.

"We are still allies, Avatar," he says. His pride is still clinging to him like wet fabric, slimy and cold, and he wishes he could tear it away as easily as the mask.

Korra's fingers claw into the carpet, and her breaths are harsh, but her eyes return to blue.

"I slept with you," she says. "Oh spirits, I fucking slept with you." She hugs her knees to her chest.

There's no reason her reaction should offend him - shame kept him awake all night, after all - but he feels offense anyway. Offense, pride, shame: he has to get away from her. He has lost control over his emotions, and that is unacceptable. Pulling on his shirt, he strides for the exit. She doesn't ask where he's going, and he doesn't volunteer the information. The door slams behind him.

Though he physically leaves her behind, he can't shake the memory of her from his skin. The thick shirt is rough against the scratches she left on his back, and his inner thighs and everything between them are chafed from grinding too vigorously through clothes. The taste of her neck is on his tongue, and his fingers - he doesn't even want to consider the sensations replaying across his fingers.

He takes a deep breath in, then out.

It's a beautiful morning, blue sky and sunshine, with a crisp breeze in the air that smells of the ocean. Even as he's trying to take it all in, even as he's trying to distract himself, he finds himself glancing up at the rooftop to the ledge where, just yesterday, he and Korra were smoking cigars together.

Korra. When did she become Korra to him, not just "the Avatar?"

It was just sex, he tells himself. You're mature enough to know how to separate sex and love.

But he isn't; that's always been the problem. It's why he almost lost Kwan many years ago, why the parameters of their relationship had to change so drastically, closing off what had once been open. He was foolish to think that age had changed anything. It makes perfect sense that a runaway from an abusive home would seek love and acceptance in every single attachment he ever formed, but even if it makes sense, he wishes he could finally evolve past it.

He tries not to let his heart sing with the birds as he buys their breakfast. When he returns to the hotel and discovers Korra isn't there, he's furious at how his stomach drops. He is supposed to be better than his emotions.
Maybe meditation can help soothe his rising temper. He sets his meal aside and sits in a lotus position on the bed, his eyes slipping closed.

The phone rings. With a curse, he snatches the receiver. "What?"

"Boulevard Hotel," says a deep voice so familiar that his breath catches. "Room 103. Six o'clock."

"No," says Noatak.

There's a long silence, then Kwan says, "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean listen carefully," intones Noatak, "because this is how it's going to play out. I'm going to come to you on my terms, not yours. This time, I'm not going to break down, and I'm not going to kneel in front of you and beg for forgiveness. Be warned, Kwan, I will get what I came for, and if you so much as lift a finger against me again, I will not hold back. You know what I'm capable of, and now you know what she's capable of, too. Think carefully about how you want this to end."

He slams the phone back into its cradle.

Kwan is still staring at the receiver in his hand when his lieutenant enters the room almost half an hour later. She doesn't even knock, preferring instead to pick the lock; he knows it's her the second the bolt clicks over. So like her to be needlessly flashy.

"Lieutenant," he says in greeting, still staring at the phone. It's beeping at him.

He complying and lets out a low sigh. The bed shifts as she sits beside him, but he can't look at her.

"Call didn't go so well, I presume?" she asks.

Shaking his head, he says dryly, "You'd almost think stabbing him pissed him off."

"It tends to do that to people."

The guilt is too heavy to bear alone, and he finds himself confiding in her: "Especially when you stab them right after sex, when their guard is down."

"You didn't."

"I did. Looked him right in the eye."

"That's pretty low," she says, shaking her head.

"I'm kind of a low guy in general right now." He wonders what she would say if she knew he had tried to kill himself. His death would solve any problems the Equalists are having, so maybe she would feel it was a missed opportunity. Though if he knows Qing, she'd most likely smack the back of his head and scold him.

He shrugs and stands. "So now that I've poked the angry buzzard wasp, we get to sit here and wait for the stings. On his terms."

"Then we'd better set a few traps." With a grunt, she drops her backpack on the floor; it lands with
a heavy clang, and metal bits and pieces spill out of its open top. He stares at them, and his eyes close as he thinks of Amon stepping into a trap, face twisting with pain...

His lieutenant's hand claps his shoulder. "You sure you're ready for this?"

Instead of answering, he crouches down and takes a battery into his hands, tracing the trip wire with two fingers. "He'll expect these."

"Maybe. The Avatar won't."

"So we can have a pissed-off Avatar on our hands, too?" He glances up at her, but she shrugs.

"I fought her hand-to-hand before. Scariest thing about her was her dog."

"That was six years ago." Kwan sets a pressure plate on the ground and depresses it with his hand, hearing the click that will be connected to a gas nozzle. "She's different now."

"Yeah." Qing sits cross-legged beside him and begins to sort wires by colour. "She's broken-down and an outcast."

"No," he says. "She's a bloodbender."

Frightened yellow eyes lock onto him. He knows she's remembering the state his body was in, six years ago, when Amon tried to crush him from the inside.

"Exactly. Imagine that, combined with the Avatar State," he says. "We have to take her down fast. You'll have to chi-block her." He turns back to the pile of components and collects a few resistors that have fallen off the main pieces. "Still want to help?"

"That means it's up to you to take out Amon."

"I'll do my best," he says, "If I can't take him out, then you have to do it. At this point, the most important thing is that our secrets stay safe." He glances at her. "You didn't answer. Still want to help?" He knows he could order her to do it, and she would obey; she is nothing if not duty-bound. But he could never take advantage of that. Qing is like a sister to him - well, maybe that's not the right comparison, given their professional history before the Equalists, but it's accurate in terms of their closeness. He would sooner fail than see her hurt, and that's going to be a very real possibility in this battle.

She nods. "I was there for the beginning, and I'll be there for the end." Her hand grips his shoulder again, a sign of camaraderie. "Come on, let's start setting up."

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Korra pulls the cowl of her cloak far over her head, shielding her face, as she winds her way through the morning crowd. She's not sure why she's returning home. Mako's at work, and what would she do if he was home, anyway? Apologize? Confess that she slept with Amon?

Mainly, it just seemed unfair to her that Amon should get to escape the scene of their crime, and she should be stuck wallowing in it. She needed to get out of the hotel, and the home where she has spent the past year is the only other place she really knows any more.

Once she arrives at the townhome, she slips her key into the lock and quietly opens it, the door just barely squeaking on its hinges.
Immediately, she notices something amiss: Naga doesn't run to greet her. Concerned, she steps into the room and turns on the light.

The living room is a mess of bare shelves and piles of their belongings; she would think it was a break-in, if not for the stacks of boxes. Dozens of them. Her hand shakes as she kneels down to lift open a flap and sees books that Katara sent her from the South Pole.

"Oh spirits," she whispers, reality sinking like stone in her stomach.

Not only was Mako serious about kicking her out, but he must have started the moment she left. There's too much progress to have accomplished overnight. He's clearly been planning this, and she wonders for how long. Was he just waiting for an opportunity? Has he been secretly feeling trapped, waiting for a moment to free himself from her? Was it only guilt keeping him by her side? She thinks about how strained things had been lately, how they hadn't been intimate in weeks, and she feels sick to her stomach. The last thing she ever wanted was to be someone's burden.

She runs to the kitchen. All the cookware her mother gave her is boxed up, too, along with Naga's food and water dishes. Upstairs, the bedroom and the bathroom are in disarray. She falls to a seat on the bed, feeling the urge to sob, but her well of tears is dry. Everything is such a fucking mess. Mako was right in his earlier assessment: she really has lost control over her life.

A key rattles in the front door, and she tenses. The last thing she wants to do is talk to Mako now that she knows just how unrecoverable their relationship really is. She hurriedly closes the bedroom door, leaving it open just a crack so that she can listen for an opportunity to escape.

"-sit right down over here, bro," comes Bolin's voice.

Bolin. There's something she didn't consider - attacking Mako meant losing not only him, but his brother's friendship as well. Her heart sinks.

She hears shuffling, then the heavy sound of couch springs. "Attaboy. I'll get you some more water."

There's an indiscernible mutter in response, and Bolin says, "You need to drink it, or you're going to be hung over." After angrier-soundings muttering, he says, "Fine. Then I'll at least get you a clean shirt."

Shit. Korra glances frantically around the room for somewhere to hide, but most of the room has been stripped, save for the closet - exactly where Bolin will be heading. She crawls under the bed, only realizing too late that with the bed cover removed, she's fully exposed.

She sees Bolin's feet move into the room, then stop. He crouches down, an incredulous look on his face.

"Korra?" he says; she smells alcohol on his breath.

She holds a finger to her lips. "Close the door," she whispers.

As he softly closes the door, she crawls out from under the bed, brushing dust off of her elbows.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to scare you, I just had a break from the mission; I needed to come home, just for a second, and I thought Mako would be at work..." She's babbling, and she wishes Bolin would interrupt her, but he's staring at her with wide eyes. He looks terrified of her, and she can't dance around the issue any longer.

"How much did Mako tell you?" she whispers.
"Korra, you have to leave."

"Bo," she pleads, but he shakes his head.

"You attacked the man you're supposed to love! To, what, protect Amon?"

The wave of guilt is so strong that it's nauseating. Here, in her own room, she can't even picture kissing Amon, let alone all that she did with him last night. "Bolin, please, I'm your friend."

"He's my brother!"

"I know, but I would give anything to take it back." Her arms fold over her chest and she caves in on herself, shivering.

Bolin sighs. "Well, you can't. Please leave. And not by the front door, or you're just going to upset Mako again, and I finally got him to calm down." He points at the window.

With a sigh, she relents. "Just one more second." She grabs a clean set of clothes out of the closet - at least she won't have to wear Amon's oversized clothes any more - then trudges toward the window. Once it's open, she looks back at him. "Is Naga okay?"

"Of course. She's with Tenzin." He frowns, but he doesn't look angry, just sad and disappointed. Somehow, that's worse.

"I really am sorry," she murmurs. "You know that, right?"

His eyes drop and he turns away.

She's never felt so alone. Her heart heavy, she climbs out the window and airbends down to the street.

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When she opens the door to her room, she sees her breakfast waiting for her on the bed. Amon sits at a table by the window, the phone beside him, flipping through a rental listing. For a moment, she stares, waiting for him to respond, but he doesn't even lift his head.

*Say something,* she tells herself.

"I didn't expect you to be the type to provide breakfast the next morning," she blurts, because an awkward joke is easier than awkward silence.

He gives her a sidelong glance, his face neutral, and she cringes. Now she feels even worse. Sullen, she sits on the bed and begins to shovel the food into her mouth. He's still silent, but he isn't flipping the pages; she feels him watching her in his peripheral vision.

"I went home," she says dully between mouthfuls, even though he didn't ask. "Looks like Mako started moving me out the instant I left for this mission." She pauses for a mouthful of noodles, then swallows. "I have nothing left. No respect from my people, no friends, no boyfriend, no home. This is officially my rock bottom."

Amon doesn't reply, and she glances at him. He's staring absently at the table, as if through it. It's a strange thing to miss, but she thinks about how easily they spoke before they fell into bed together. She remembers how strong his arms felt around her when she was crying.

His frosty demeanour is telling. How foolish she was to think this man was capable of caring for
her. She sees it for what it really was: he was trying to get on her good side to sleep with her. Now that she's another conquest, he's not bothering to pretend. The night before, the thought of being used was alluring, but now it just makes her sick.

"Good chat," she mutters angrily, and she lifts the bowl to her lips to suck back the rest of the noodles.

When she lowers the bowl, he's dialling a number. All her anger and sour thoughts haven't even made a crack in his neutral expression. She slams the bowl onto the side table, but since it's plastic, it barely makes a *skiff* sound. A resounding smack would have been much more satisfying. To make up for it, she storms to the bathroom and slams the door behind her.

She takes several deep breaths and then runs the tap to try to heal herself, yanking down her pants. Just as before, the water won't sink into her skin, and she growls and splashes it back into the basin. Why can't she heal?

When she looks up at the mirror, there's red light in her eyes.

It comes on so easily now.

She quickly pulls on the new clothes she brought from home, then storms back into the room. Amon is just hanging up the phone.

"I need you to chi-block me again," she says, turning her back.

She hears footsteps; he stands behind her and secures her with a hand on her shoulder. At that grip, at the warmth of his body heat wafting toward her from behind, her eyes slide closed. Instantly, she recalls his moans in her ear, remembers how safe she felt under his weight. Her teeth clench.

As his fingers jab into her spine, the feral portion of her rage slackens and falls away, but she's still angry. She finds herself wishing that the hand holding her fast would linger a moment too long, or give her a small caress, or show any sign at all that he cares for her. Instead, he withdraws it, and she feels cold and lonely and used. She can't even bring herself to thank him for the chi-block.

"I have found a new base of operations," he says behind her, and his voice sounds more like Amon now than it has this entire mission: emotionless and deep. "Kwan is staying at the Boulevard Hotel. Our rental is only a few blocks away."

She doesn't ask how he knows all this, because she doesn't care any more. What does she have to return to, once the mission is over? Whether it's because of the corruption or just her own stupidity, she's spiralling towards her own destruction, and that's the end of it. That's all that her life has become.

"Two rooms?" she says.

"Yes."

"Good." She begins to gather her things, but he isn't leaving. She turns and sees him watching her. Is that a wistful look on his face? How dare he look wistful! She can't make up her mind if she's angry at him for using her, or angry at him for being Amon, but she's angry.

"What number was I?" she asks, trying to wound.

His brows perk, just slightly, with confusion. "Number?"
"How many people did you lure into bed before me?"

A troubled look passes over his features. Without saying a word, he stands, returns to his room, and closes the door behind him.

Korra's heart sinks as she stares at the closed door, wondering, for the first time, if she has been reading him incorrectly.
Noatak presses his hands to his face and takes a deep breath as he sinks to a seat in the hotel lobby. Insisting that Korra join him on this mission was the stupidest bargain he has ever made in his life. Jail time dulled his strategic acuity. Yes, he was correct that she makes a powerful ally, but that was making the assumption, the colossal leap in logic, that they could put aside past differences without making any new ones.

He thought they had successfully escaped the hotel and could leave this whole mess behind them, but as they checked out, Korra made the mistake of mentioning that there was some damage to the rooms. A suspicious clerk had called the manager to inspect. Now Korra is standing at the front desk, using the Republic City Police credit note to cover the repair expenses for their rooms. It would have been far better to use cash to maintain their anonymity as long as possible; Noatak is still of the opinion Kwan is acting alone, and the Equalists will be able to figure out what is going on by the trail of clues that they're leaving behind. But when the manager threatened to call out the police to arrest them, a waving credit note in his face was the only thing that would placate him.

Noatak's mouth curls into a smirk as he pictures an irate Chief Beifong receiving the bill. What he wouldn't give to be a fly on the wall.

As the discussions continue, he watches Korra talk to the manager. She's using hand gestures, far more animated than she has been the past few days. The bag of supplies from the police is slung over her shoulder, and beneath her cloak, she's wearing a new set of clothes: dark brown pants and a pelt, and a fashionable blue shirt with an asymmetrical collar. The shirt is tighter around her waist than the one she was wearing before, and - no, he's not going to allow his eyes to linger, he tells himself as they do just that.

Several minutes later, she walks toward him, shaking her head. "That was painful."

"Did you work everything out?" he asks.

She nods. "Let's get the hell out of here."

As they step into the street, Noatak hails a cab. He holds open the door for Korra out of habit - it's something he would do for anyone - and she looks so surprised at the gesture that he wishes he had refrained. He gives the driver the address, and then there's nothing to do but sit quietly in the back seat.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Korra sitting stiffly upright, facing forward. Then her head tilts, just slightly; he can tell she has angled the cowl in order to look at him. Maybe she's trying to think of something to say to lessen the tension of this enclosed, shared space.

Trying to pretend he doesn't notice her watching him, his gaze drifts; it lands on her hand, resting beside her thigh on the seat. Noatak eyes the smooth knuckles, the slender fingers, the rounded nails. His back shifts slightly against the seat to feel the sting of last night's scratches, and heat rises to his cheeks.

This boyish shyness is making him uncomfortable. He has to regain some control. His eyes lift to
meet hers, intending to embarrass her by catching her staring.

When he was a child, his mother would spook him with tales of monsters and spirits who would swallow whole the souls of anyone who dared looked upon them. Now, he mentally adds the Avatar to that list, because he feels her gaze wrenching his soul from his body. She's pulling him in, and spirits, all he wants to do is lay her down on the seat and crawl on top of her. He wants to slip two fingers down the front of her pants and make her scream the way she screamed for him last night.

He tears his gaze away, trying to keep his breaths quiet even though instinct is trying to make them ragged. His plan to regain control could not have possibly gone any more poorly.

"Amon," says Korra quietly, the first word of a sentence, but then the cab pulls to the side of the road.

"Here we are," says the driver.

Without even waiting to see what Korra has to say, Noatak steps out of the car, away from that overwhelming tension. He stands facing the brisk wind and feels it batter his body, waiting for it to erase the warmth burning through him.

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Korra frowns. The way Amon exited the cab, it's like he's allergic to her.

Once she has paid the cab driver, she steps into the yard of their new home. They aren't far from their previous location - maybe fifteen minute's walk - but they are higher up one of the hills that fringes the city. The wind tears at her clothes, whipping her ponytails into her face; she smooths strands of hair out of her mouth as she examines the building. It's a small, two-story brick house, with dark blue shutters and a well-kept lawn. Her eyes still on it, she moves to stand by Amon.

"Looks nice," she says meekly.

He turns to point out a row of high-rise buildings, only a couple blocks away, but at a much lower elevation. "The one with the black roof is where Kwan is staying."

"Are we going in today?" she asks, but he shakes his head.

"Neither of us is at full strength yet. Tomorrow, if we're well enough."

"And what's the plan?"

"We will discuss it tomorrow," he says firmly.

His hair and his clothes are whipping around him in the wind, and Korra studies him, wondering why she's feeling such a strong sense of familiarity. Their eyes lock, and she instantly places it: when she escaped the basement of Tarrlok's cabin, six years prior, she burst from the house only to see Amon blocking her freedom. Their eyes locked then, too, the chilly wind whipping around them. Goosebumps erupt on her skin at the memory: it was the first time she actively outmanoeuvred Amon.

Now that she knows what he was capable of, she recognizes that he could have easily caught her - even without bloodbending, he could have used waterbending to follow her as she propelled herself down the hill. To this day, she remembers the entire encounter, beat by beat, and she recalls his unexpected hesitation before he began to pursue her. That hesitation always puzzled her, but now
that she knows him better, possible explanations begin to surface. Maybe he was sizing her up. Maybe he was even intimidated.

She remembers his words when they first started this mission: *you were never an easy opponent, Avatar.* Is it possible that the whole time she was afraid of him, he was afraid of her, too?

She realizes she has been staring into those icy blue eyes for far too long without saying anything. "Did you bring your mask?" she blurts.

There's a pause. "Yes."

"Why?"

He seems to be chewing the inside of his cheek as he turns to look across the city. "Because I can't stop wondering what Amon would think about what Noatak has become."

This feels like what Tenzin would refer to as a Teachable Moment. "Maybe that's not the right question," she says, hiking her bag up her shoulder. "Maybe you should be wondering what young Noatak would think about what Amon would think about what old Noatak has become."

He glances at her, and she's surprised to see amusement flickering in his eyes. Not what she was going for, but it's better than discomfort or tension.

"You know what I mean," she says, marching toward the house. "Where's the key?"

"In the urn."

Korra peers into a giant urn next to the door; it's filled with water. She pulls it into a quick whirlpool, revealing a key at the bottom.

"I think our new landlord is a waterbender," she says. "You going to be all right with that?"

"I'll manage," he replies dryly.

She smiles to herself as she inserts the key into the lock, happy they are back to bantering instead of dwelling on the strangeness of the night before.

The inside of the house is as simple as the outside: hardwood floors, bare brick walls, minimal furniture. Some of her awkwardness returns as they climb up the stairs to the bedrooms; she's trying not to acknowledge the part of herself that is going to miss sharing a bed with him.

"I'll take this one," she says, claiming the one closer to the stairs, because the sooner she claims a bed, the less likely she is to try to work her way back into his. She briskly steps into the room and drops her bag on the bed. The walls are lined with bookcases, each overflowing with books, and there's a small desk by the window. It feels cozy. As she closes the door, she lets out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. Safe and isolated.

As she falls to a seat on the bed, anxiety begins to tie her intestines in knots. This mission is teaching her one thing about herself: she needs to be constantly distracted from her negative thoughts. Any time there is an immediate objective - fighting Kwan, packing, travelling to visit her old home - she is too busy to overthink things. She'll have to remember that, once the mission is over.

Desperate for a distraction now, she begins to read the spines of the books. She pulls down a book about traditional Earth Kingdom martial arts and begins to read, but that only holds her for about
an hour, then her eyes keep crossing and the words keep blurring. She's tired, but she can't bring herself to sleep in the middle of the day. Panic starts to rise in her chest; the second she gives herself a chance to overthink, she's going to start crying again. She's sick of crying.

Opening the door, she pokes her head into the hallway, listening for Amon. She hears him moving around downstairs; every few seconds, she hears a grunt, or a snap of fabric. Is he training?

Using every bit of her airbending skill, she creeps noiselessly to the top of the stairway. From this angle, she can just barely see his feet on the living room floor, shifting between stances. Watching someone train is more interesting than trying to read about it, she decides. Quietly, she works her way down the stairs and sits at the bottom. He eyes her briefly to acknowledge her presence, but doesn't interrupt his rhythm. His shirt is off and his muscles are rippling as he moves, but she finds her eyes drawn to the movements themselves, admiring his skill. The stances are so circular and evasive that it almost looks like airbending. Each line of motion ends with thrusting knuckles or extended fingers.

When he finishes, he does a bow to close off the pattern, his thumbs and index fingers forming interlocking rings. She's never seen anything like it.

"I didn't realize that chi-blocking had forms," she says.

He rakes his hair back from his forehead. "What you know as chi-blocking is only a portion of an ancient art, Avatar. Bending is only a drop in the ocean of martial arts."

"Oh, I know that. I had lots of non-bender mentors, back at the South Pole."

His brow cocks with surprise. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty good." She hops to her feet, suddenly feeling the urge to cheer herself up through violence. "I can demonstrate, if you feel up for it."

Intrigue flickers across his face.

"Come on." She struts toward him. "No bending. No chi-blocking, either. Just simple hand-to-hand sparring. What do you say?" She plants herself squarely in front of him, arms folded over her chest. This close, she can smell his sweat: sweet and musky. She subtly takes a deep breath of it.

"You're injured," says Amon, but she can tell he's interested.

She stands on her injured leg, bouncing up and down to test it. It twinges a bit. "It'll hold. Besides, you've been in jail for six years, so you're probably all flabby and weak. I figure this evens us out."

Amusement shines in his eyes again. "Very well. Turn around."

She complies, and his thumb drives into the point between her shoulderblades. It's starting to get bruised from overuse, and she winces, but doesn't complain. It's probably a good idea to block the rogue Avatar State. The last thing she needs to do is bloodbend anyone else.

Whirling to face him, she falls into stance. "Let's go."

He stands upright, eyes locked on her. Impatiently, she begins to circle.

"Come on. Get into stance."

"I am in stance," he says, and she shakes her head a little, because he is leaving himself wide open.
She throws a quick jab. He sprints out of the way. So he's still slippery even without his bloodbending, then.

Her eyes hold his, but she focuses on his whole body with her periphery, the way Sokka taught her many years ago. Testing him, she throws a quick left-right combination and studies his movement as he darts out of the way. Sooner or later, every sparring partner reveals a tell; once he reveals his, she can use it to read him and defeat him. Sokka always said that there were two major ways to get an opponent to show his tell: distract him, or tire him out. The former seems easier.

"Sparring usually involves throwing a punch or two," she taunts.

He stands tall. "In our time as adversaries, did you learn nothing about my fighting style?"

"I learned that you disguised bloodbending as skill." She follows fresh punches with a low kick, still trying to read him; he flips over her leg with a butterfly kick, and she ducks just in time to avoid a bare foot to the face. "Still pretty nimble, I see," she says as she throws a lazy follow-up kick.

Dodging to her side, his mouth is suddenly by her ear. "You have no idea, Avatar."

Even with the warning, she barely ducks in time to avoid his punch; it snaps out so quickly that it grazes the top of her head. Her teeth clench. Jail hasn't dulled his speed.

When he spins behind her, she anticipates the punches he aims at her flank; she meets him head-on, blocking them with her forearms.

"I've only been sizing you up so far, you know," she says, and she drives a fist at his stomach at full speed.

He blocks it.

The unexpected contact jars her to the bone, a shiver running all the way up to her shoulder. Their eyes meet, their forearms still locked.

"I've only been sizing you up, as well," he says.

Her eyes narrow.

The speed and force of their attacks begin to intensify. They circle, he spins, she dodges, they trade blocked punches. Their taunts fade as the match becomes more and more serious, replaced with the occasional grunt or yell. It's growing apparent that they are an even match, and Korra feels sweat bead on her forehead. Her wounded thigh aches, and the temptation to use bending is increasing.

Logic dictates they should probably stop here before they wear themselves out and delay the mission even further, but the fight has become a whirling, feverish dance, every bit as instinctive and uncontrollable as their passion the night before. This is six-years-old history re-enacted, a six-years-old power struggle coming to a head.

She can't lose to Amon. She won't lose to him.

_Come on, you bastard, give me a tell._

His cheeks are flushed. Sweat streams down his temples and his neck, plasters hair in whorls across his chest. He's more fit than he let on - he must have trained regularly in prison, maybe in secret - but she can tell that his stamina is starting to wane.
There! Finally, he's showing a tell: when he's about to dodge left, his left hand drops; barely a twitch, but it's there.

Korra grins. *You're mine now.*

She changes stance, left foot forward, and begins to pressure him with jabs. He parries every blow, but he's flagging; she has youth on her side and an end goal in sight.

Setting the trap, she swings her left elbow toward his ear, clearly telegraphing the blow.

It works. His left hand drops as he prepares to dodge.

*Now!* Her back leg whips forward and drives for his head just as he begins to move toward it. She sees his eyes widen as he bends to avoid it, but he's so fatigued and the angle is so severe that his legs buckle and he loses his balance. He falls onto his back.

Triumphantly, Korra drops onto him and pins him by the neck, her other fist driving for his face. She stops it an inch from his nose, and delights in his wide eyes.

"Ha!" she yells; she wants to add more, but her breaths are too harsh.

"Spirits," he pants, closing his eyes. All his muscles relax beneath her as he sinks into the floor, and she realizes with some embarrassment that she's sitting on his stomach, and that probably isn't appropriate. She rolls to lie on her back beside him, staring up at the wooden cross-beams of the ceiling.

"Not bad for an old guy," she says, looking at him. His head is in perfect profile from this angle, and her breath catches as she sees just how closely Amon's mask mimicked Noatak's face.

He turns to face her. "I see now that I was mistaken in thinking that all your danger lay in your bending." The corner of his mouth lifts.

That smile, that same smile she saw when she took his bending. That smile has tormented her for years; she hasn't been able to stop picturing him wearing it behind the mask as he took her bending, as he goaded her to save the captured airbenders, as he took Lin's bending.

Yet here, it's different. His eyes are warm. It almost looks like respect, or even admiration. She's confused, so confused, and it's all that smile's fault.

She wants to swallow it whole.

Quickly fixing her gaze back on the ceiling, she clears her throat. "See," she says, "we can still be civil around each other, even after everything that happened. We just needed to beat the shit out of each other first." For a second, she freezes, wondering if coming *that close* to acknowledging the sex is just going to make things awkward again, but he surprises her.

He gives a soft laugh.

Her gaze snaps back to him, and this time, he's actually grinning, his top row of teeth exposed, eyes wrinkling at the corners. *Handsome* is the first word that rises in her mind, and she shoves it back below the surface. This is all endorphins from the exercise - his smile, this warmth she's feeling for him, everything. All false.

She sits up. "I suppose we might have a few new bruises to heal now. I'll go get some water."
Noatak sits up, gathering his knees in his elbows. "I could use some water to drink, too."

"Get it yourself," she says as she walks to the kitchen, limping a little. The last thing she needs right now is the intimacy of guiding water into his mouth with waterbending. As she runs the tap water, he appears by the cupboards and retrieves a glass. At least healing should be no problem this time; after their sparring, she's relaxed and centred.

Concentrating, Korra wraps the water around her hands and wills it to absorb into her skin.

Once again, nothing happens.

"Shit!" she yells, throwing the water into the sink so violently that it splashes back at her. Her hands grip the edge of the sink and her head sags.

She feels Noatak's questioning gaze on her.

"I've lost the ability to heal," she mutters. The warm haze of battle drains from her as her heart begins to pound.

"When a healer is fatigued-" he begins, but she cuts him off.

"This is the third time today that I've tried. It's not that I'm tired, it's just that it's gone." Tears are welling in her eyes again. "Is this how I'm going to be destroyed? Losing my bending powers, one by one?"

A firm hand grips her shoulder, but no, she doesn't want Amon's pity. He's the root cause of all of this, after all. Or maybe Aang is, for letting Yakone escape. Her thoughts whirl. What happens if she is destroyed? Is the next Avatar born normally, or is this corruption at a deeper level, a blight on the entire line?

"Avatar-"

"I need a minute," she snaps, and she marches from the room.
History

Noatak's forehead rests against the shower wall as both his hands work to bring him release. He knows it's foolish; dwelling on Korra like this will not help his inappropriate attraction, but skill has always been a potent aphrodisiac for him. When he thinks about the fire in her eyes as she launched her attacks, or the way the sinews of her shoulder muscles rippled, his head floats. She is a perfect machine of power and dexterity, and spirits help him, he wants her to unleash that on him in every way possible.

He presses a bruised knee into the tiles and feels the dull ache wend a path all the way to his groin, and he can't fight it off. His teeth clench as he goes under.

It's not enough. It's like scratching the skin around an itch instead of scratching the itch itself. He wants to keep going - maybe the next one will be stronger - but without bloodbending at his command, his body can't quite keep up with his drive.

Guilt forces his eyes open as he remembers himself. Korra barricaded herself in her room shortly after the fight and hasn't emerged all afternoon. He decided to give her some space, which, for him, translated into periods of masturbation alternating with periods of trying, and failing, to focus on the mission. She is suffering, and here he is stroking himself like a teenager just because she beat him up a little.

Part of it, he's sure, is that focusing on the mission is too depressing, as the original plan was to help Korra capture Kwan and die in the process. Death is no longer desirable, but neither is going back to jail once the mission is over. Failing is not an option, and neither is running away, since Tarrlok's freedom depends on full compliance with the police's demands. Every single option is bleak.

Beneath all that is a reason he doesn't quite want to acknowledge: he's growing attached.

With a long, low sigh, he turns off the shower.

He rubs a towel against his wet hair as he stands in front of the bathroom mirror. His wound is looking uglier again, and he twists his body for a closer view. Dark violet lines radiate from the scarred centre. He traces them with his fingertips, frowning. Being bloodbent twice took its toll. As much as he tried to hide it during his sparring match with Korra, the range of motion on his left
arm was severely hampered by the injury, especially as the fight progressed.

A twinge of worry furrows his brow. Even before she lost the ability entirely, her healing wasn't operating the way it should have. If the wound had been properly healed in the first place, it wouldn't have been so easily aggravated by bloodbending.

He dresses and slicks back his hair, then returns to his room and sits on the bed to stretch out his sore muscles. If his mind is going to be strained, he might as well try to keep his body relaxed.

The door of Korra's room opens and footsteps echo down the hall. She appears in the doorway, slumping against the frame.

As he looks up to greet her, he's stunned by the dizzying flutter in his chest. For a moment, he struggles to spin the sensation into some sort of lingering guilt over fantasizing about her.

He clears his throat. "How are you?"

She shrugs and holds out the container of healing salve. "I guess you'll need this."

As he walks up to her, he studies her face. Her eyes are sunken, the eye sockets bruised. The flutter drops to his stomach, and he almost asks if she's all right, but there's no point. The answer is clear.

As his hands close over the salve, he stares at the difference between their skin tones: her skin is still rich and dark, but it's a shade paler than his now. Alarmed, he palms the salve and grips her fingers.

"Your skin," he says. "It's paler."

Her fingers jerk out of his grasp, and she holds both hands in front of her face, examining them, front and back. "What? How?"

"A side effect of bloodbending without a full moon," he says quietly.

"Oh, spirits." Her lip wobbles. She won't stop looking at her hands, and he remembers exactly how she feels: like she's fading away with it.

"We need to get you some food," he says. "Red meat will help, and your colour will return in time. My pallor was far worse, and I have recovered."

The words go unnoticed; her mouth is trembling and her hands have curled into fists. She's going to fold into herself again, if he lets her.

"Look at me." His hands drop onto her shoulders. She looks up, her eyes rimmed with tears.

"We're going to head into town for a meal," he says. "You need to replenish your strength."

Her brows pinch with what looks like gratitude, but she only says, "I'll be recognized."

"Good. The game has changed. We are in Kwan's territory now; we want him to know that his end is coming at any moment, on our terms. We want rumours and whispers to drown him. We want him to marinate in his own fear." Too much hatred slips through with the words, and he's surprised at his own bitterness; he clears his throat and retracts the growl from his voice. "Once we've eaten, we will come back here and figure out how to approach this corruption."

Hope flickers in her eyes. "You have some ideas?"
"Between the two of us, we should be able to work something out. We were once Republic City's two greatest powers, after all." He gives her shoulders a reassuring squeeze, then immediately wonders if the gesture was too intimate.

"There you go, being nice again." Her eyes search his, and he swears he can feel them probing into his skull. "I keep thinking I've figured you out, and then you keep contradicting everything."

"I never stopped wearing a mask, and I rarely drop it."

"But you do, sometimes, don't you?" she says, studying him so intently that her eyes squint. "These little flashes of niceness, those are the real you, aren't they? I thought they were just manipulation, and maybe some of them are, but they keep slipping out."

He opens his mouth to respond, but he's too transfixed by the piercing blue gaze.

"Tell me one thing," she says quietly. "All that talking we did, and the smoking cigars on the rooftop, was that all just to win my trust so that I could be another conquest for you?"

He almost laughs at the absurdity of the suggestion. "Did I react as if anything that came of it was intentional?" Deciding to come clean, he adds, "My reputation as a philanderer may be a bit exaggerated."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning my life hasn't just been a string of conquests, as you seem to think."

She looks confused. "But you were preaching about the difference between sex and love--"

"In the early years, yes, we saw other people. Kwan liked the thought of me having other partners, and I was eager to please. It didn't last; there were too many complications." Before he can think better of it, he says, "It takes maturity to separate love and sex, but I have never been mature enough to do so. One inevitably leads to the other." His throat tightens as he realizes what he has admitted to, and by the way her body stiffens, he knows it didn't go unnoticed.

The heat between his palms and her shoulders is suddenly burning him. His hands fall away.

She draws in breath as if she's about to say something, but then she's silent. "Korra," he says, but he can't figure out how to apologize for a tiny almost-confession he doesn't even want to admit to himself.

At her name, her brows pinch.

Then she's leaning forward, standing on her toes, and her chin raises as her mouth reaches for his. He wants so badly to kiss her that his chest aches, as if she's physically wringing his heart.

As their lips are about to graze, he grabs her shoulder to stop her.

"Don't," he says softly.

She jerks away from him, and he can't tell if she's hurt, or angry, or embarrassed.

"I can't figure you out," she says quietly. "You're equating sex with love, the day after we slept together. You're calling me by name, and that's breaking the rules. We're supposed to be 'Amon' and 'Avatar,' that's what's safe. That's the way it's always been."

Is this really the first time he has called her by name? Maybe the first time she is fully conscious,
now that he thinks about it. He gives a low sigh and tries to explain himself:

"There is too much history between us. You know this as well as I do - don't forget that this morning was your 'rock bottom.'" He doesn't realize how much the words actually hurt him until he says them aloud. Is this really what he is now, so soft that he lets the Avatar's words wound him?

"Oh," she says, looking taken aback. "That was about my corruption, and Mako. It had nothing to do with you."

He raises a brow, remembering how quickly she scrambled away from him after she placed his mask over his face.

"Okay, maybe a bit to do with you," she concedes. "It should be wrong, the Avatar and Amon. It's just, the more time I spend with you, the more I forget that I'm supposed to hate you. So I've been thinking, maybe it's because that story belongs in the past. Maybe the Avatar and Amon's story ended when she took his bending, and Korra and Noatak are a different story." Her inflection rises at the end, and she's looking up at him with shining eyes.

He's tempted, so tempted, to pull her into the room with him and close the door behind her, but one of them has to be an adult about this.

"Korra," he says, and he tries to ignore the way her face lights up when he says her name. "I am twice your age and a convicted criminal who, once this mission is over, will either be dead or back in prison. You are the Avatar, and you need to focus on overcoming this corruption and returning to your duties. What happened between us last night was a lapse in judgement, and nothing more, and only harm will come if we pursue that."

"That's a lot of reasons right off the top of your head." Her brow arches, challenging. "Almost like you've been thinking about this."

"Of course I've been thinking about it; our lapse has severely compromised our mission. We have to be stronger than our..." Trailing off, he realizes that admitting to mutual feelings isn't going to help anything. "We have to be stronger than what happened."

"Why do you keep doing that? Talking about love like it's some big failing."

His disbelief must show on his face.

"You do," she insists. "Saying it takes *maturity* to separate sex and love, and implying that giving in to feelings for someone is a bad thing. Saying we have to be stronger than them." She leans in close. "You're afraid of love."

The rise in his temper is disproportionate to the words. "I was in a relationship for twenty years!"

"And it ended when you tossed him aside, like he meant nothing after all that time. It was easier that way, easier than explaining yourself and asking for forgiveness." Her eyes narrow. "You're so afraid of love that you cling to it whenever it's easily available, and push it away the second it looks like it might not be."

Anger boils in his blood, but he takes a deep breath. He's not going to let this petulant child get a rise out of him, and he's not going to yield to her persistence.

"This line of discussion is going nowhere," he says flatly, drawing himself upright. "We need to eat and then discuss our next move. There are several restaurants one block over. Are you coming?"
She folds her arms over her chest and shrugs. "You go ahead and get a table somewhere. I need a quick shower."

"Very well." He edges past her and begins to stride down the hall.

"Wait."

He turns. Her back is still to him as she adds, "I need you to chi-block me again."

"Very well," he says again. His hand drops onto muscle between her neck and her shoulder, and he can't stop imagining himself laying soft kisses along the skin beneath his palm. The urge infuriates him even further.

Yet even through his anger, it's so difficult to walk away once the chi-block is done that he doubts his ability to resist his urges until the mission is complete.

.*.*.*.

Working side-by-side with Qing reminds Kwan of the days when he was an Equalist out of passion, not obligation. They sit cross-legged on the floor, the lamps in a circle around them for maximum light as they hook wires to components, just as he and Amon used to do long ago. He curses as his thick fingers fumble and drop a resistor. As much as he hates to admit it, he's getting on in age, and he isn't as dexterous as he used to be.

"I don't understand why you didn't just bring weapons," he mutters, mostly to provoke her. He enjoys their banter.

"Do you know how hard it would have been to get a weapons requisition for all this without drawing suspicion?" She squints as she threads a wire through a slot and twists it into place. "Smuggling a pile of scrap was far easier. Hardest part was trying to tell Tallin and Wong that I was going to be gone for a few days without them suspecting that I was coming to find you."

He sifts through a pile of coloured wires, looking for the thickest gauge. "What did you tell them?"

"That I was shacking up with a new beau." She winks at him.

His stomach drops. Surely she doesn't think...? "Qing," he says, "while I value your friendship-

Her brows lower. "Oh, get over yourself. I knew from the moment I met you that you had no interest in women."

This is news to him. "You did?"

"Sure. We all did."

"Oh." He stares at her, not sure how to process the information. Ever since he was young, he has worked hard to hide himself - Republic City today is much more accepting of such things, but he's from a small village, where young men tilled the fields, then married young women, then produced more young men to till the fields. He emulated the most unquestionably straight role models in his life, and as he got older, he spent time in unquestionably straight entertainment houses, proving himself to all his ancestors and relatives.

"What gave it away?" he asks.

She smirks. "You looked at our eyes when you were talking to us, not our chests - and not only
"Oh." He shrugs, a little embarrassed at such an obvious oversight. "I didn't mean to offend."

"Offend? Why do you think we all liked you so much? You liked us for more than just our bodies." Snapping a metal clip over the wired plate, she fishes through a pile of parts for a button. "Of course, I benefitted the most from you being gay."

He's wondering if the half-empty bottle of ale at her side might be hitting her a bit more strongly than she knows, because they haven't chatted this freely in years. "What do you mean?"

"Well," she says, "it meant I could actually have sex with you, and charge proper sex fees. It was much more lucrative than the steady stream of blow jobs that my life was before we met. And easier on the jaw."

A flush rises to his cheeks, part embarrassment, part anger. He hates remembering a time when she was forced to live that lifestyle in order to make ends meet. "I don't follow."

"I told you I've got some firebending scars on my body, but I never told you how bad. Intimacy - the usual kind - isn't a possibility. Not with clients, anyway. There's no way anyone would pay for damaged goods. But I could actually sleep with you; you insisted on absolute darkness, and never once made me undress or touched me anywhere personal. It was never about my body, just the act itself. Let me keep myself private. It was the perfect arrangement." She grabs a screwdriver and begins to screw a hinge to the plate.

He sets down the mechanical parts and stares at her; she is keeping her eyes trained on the hinge, and her hand is trembling. Not only did benders force her into an unsavoury profession in the first place, but they made sure she wouldn't even be able to succeed at that. No wonder she's such a driven Equalist.

"This is why we have to succeed," he says. "This is why we have to silence Amon before the next phase rolls into action. We suffer so much, and they don't even care. They don't even know."

She looks up at him and gives him a shy, closed-mouthed smile. "You're a good man, Kwan."

"I try. Lost sight of what was important for a little while." He returns the smile. "And for what it's worth, I'm sorry I used you, all those times."

"No, it was my job, and you compensated well. Besides, your friendship and generosity kept me going whenever things got tough. It was fine." Looking down, she clears her throat. "And I repaid you by setting you up for nothing but pain. You don't know how many times I wish I had never insisted you chat him up."

"Amon?"

She nods. "That night you first met him, I shouldn't have tried to play matchmaker. I just thought he was just some good-looking kid. Didn't realize I would be dooming you to all this."

With a sigh, Kwan picks up his own ale bottle and drinks about a quarter of it. Setting it down, he says, "We are where we are now because of him. Besides, he had plans of revolution before he even arrived. The lies would have happened even if we never met." He has thought through this a thousand times, and has come to the conclusion that there's no point in dwelling on what might have been. What happened, happened. Sure, some of the details that helped make their movement a success were Kwan's brainchildren, but Amon is brilliant enough that he would have succeeded even without Kwan, just with changes to the details. The bloodbending was at the root of it, and
that was unchanging.

That fucking bloodbending. His brows drop. He might have been able to accept that Amon was a bender, just as he accepted every other truth as the lies unraveled. Hell, he might have even accepted the bloodbending, if Amon had been up-front about it. It could be considered spirit intervention, after all - a spirit's gift, the ultimate irony: using bending to permanently end bending. There is nothing they couldn't have overcome, if they had been equal partners until the end.

But ultimately, Amon had made the choice not to trust him, and that only got worse. As the Revolution proceeded and they spent more and more time apart, and as Amon got caught up in the power rush of being a god to their followers, the power balance between them shifted.

_You served me well, Lieutenant._

Used up and cast aside like a discarded food wrapper.

His vision is blurring and his hands are shaking. He lifts the bottle to his lips again. When he lowers the bottle, Qing catches his arm.

"You okay?"

He shrugs, but his hand is still shaking, and there's no way she can miss it.

"I shouldn't have brought it up." She stands and cracks her neck. "Let's take a break and get a bite to eat. It's getting close to dinnertime, and there's a really good noodle house down the block. My treat."

His stomach twinges with rumbling nausea, and he suddenly realizes how hungry he is. He drains the last of the ale, then sets the bottle down and stands, eager to leave his memories behind.
A/N: This chapter went up at the same time as the previous one, so please make sure you read that one first. Thank you for reading!

Noatak storms down the street, barely resisting the urge to mutter to himself. The arrogance of that child! Why does she always insist on trying to read him? He's been called intense on many occasions, so he's no stranger to coming on too strong, but her persistence is on a whole new level.

The worst part is that deep down, he agrees with everything she has ever said about him. He's aware of his own failings. His susceptibility to getting caught up in power is one; his desperation and fear when it comes to love is another, and the two often intertwine. It's easier to be angry than to reflect, however, and it's easier to do either of those than to admit that, deep down, his anger stems from his frustration that he stopped her before their lips met.

"You're almost fifty years old," he mutters to himself, as if to remind himself that he's more mature than all this angst, but it doesn't matter: when he's around her, all his years of experience fall away. He reverts to being some kid fumbling over an awkward first crush. The last time he felt this way about anyone was Kwan, and even then, Kwan was more than happy to hand the reins to him and let him lead. Korra meets him head-on, and he's not sure which of them is steering, or where it's heading. Uncertainty makes him nervous. He needs control.

As he rounds the corner, he discovers that the street is crowded, and curiosity distracts him from his anger.

The barbecue house he had in mind is having a special promotion, and hopeful patrons have lined up outside the door; he can hear a live string instrument wailing inside. Perfect. The noise means we won't be able to talk, he thinks as he steps into line.

After several minutes, the queue hasn't budged. Noatak can be patient in the right setting, but not when his stomach is growling, and not after a strange almost-argument with a stubborn Avatar. He clears his throat to get the attention of the person ahead of him. "Have you been here long?"

The man nods. "It's taking about an hour to get in," he says, then he turns away. That's it: no you look familiar or don't I recognize your voice from somewhere? He hasn't been recognized once, this entire mission. Sometimes, he really does think he could just disappear into a crowd and begin a new life, even after all that's happened.

At any rate, an hour is longer than he's willing to wait. There must be other restaurants on this block. He steps away from the queue and begins to push through the crowd, his eyes travelling down the road.

His eyes lock onto Kwan.
Noatak freezes.

At first, he thinks his eyes are playing tricks on him, but no, that's really Kwan. He's in the crowd at the end of the block, laughing as he talks to someone - is that Qing?

Kwan's eyes lift, and the smile fades from his face. Noatak's stomach drops as everything around them dims. He can feel the crowd bumping into him, jostling his shoulders, but everyone else is just background noise. It's just the two of them, their gazes entwining in stunned silence.

Then Kwan's brows drop and he begins to advance.

*Shit.* Spinning on his heel, Noatak pushes back through the crowd.

It has been years since he's had to formulate a defensive strategy, and his mind groans like a rusty door as he hastily analyses the situation. Kwan is dangerous up close, but Qing is dangerous from a distance: he has to maintain distance from Kwan, but lose Qing entirely. She excels at speed and stealth, so he can't outrun her. There has to be another way.

He glances back. Kwan and Qing are in pursuit, moving at walking speed as well so as not to draw attention. They want this fight to be private.

Chewing the inside of his cheek, he calmly works his way through the crowd, his eyes ticking around their surroundings.

His gaze fixes on the rooftops. *Upper-body strength.* It was always Qing's weakness, and that's likely gotten even worse with age, given the changes women face due to menopause, and the toll of years of heavy drinking. He has to go up, somewhere she won't be able to reach. Resolutely, he picks up his pace, heading for an alley ahead.

Once he reaches it, he banks around the corner and breaks into a run, scanning the walls for a fire escape that Qing won't be able to reach. He hears footsteps behind him, increasing in speed, but only one set. By the long strides, he can tell it's Kwan. *Where is Qing?*

His eyes snap onto a suitable fire escape. With a wild leap, he barely catches it, the force jarring his shoulders, and pain jolts through his previous injury. He kicks off the wall and pulls himself up onto the ladder, then runs up it two rungs at a time.

He's just leaping onto the roof when he hears the ladder slam against the wall behind him with Kwan's weight. Without looking back, Noatak runs across the rooftop. His legs still ache from the sparring match with Korra, and fire burns his lungs.

Half a block away, he can see the house he's sharing with Korra, but he can't lead them there. He is quickly running out rooftop; the next one is close enough to jump, but about a one-story drop. He leaps and rolls the landing, darting forward again the instant he finds his feet.

"Face me, you coward!" yells Kwan's voice behind him, and the familiarity of the voice makes Noatak's heart twist, but there's no time for emotion. An apartment building is in his path, broad and square, several stories taller than the one he's on now. No ladders or fire escapes. He veers toward a series of window ledges that should support his weight, then jumps.

He misses the window ledge he aimed for, and barely manages to grab the one below it. The bricks are slippery, and he scrambles with his feet to propel himself up to the next ledge before his grip drops entirely. He catches the new ledge and takes a moment to secure his grip, breathing hard. Eyes fixed on the roof, he begins to climb.
A whirring noise sounds to his left. He flattens against the window just in time to feel a set of bolas fly past the back of his head. Glancing down, he sees Qing on the street, brows low and teeth bared.

"Shit." That was too close. He picks up his pace, hurriedly climbing for the roof.

Once he has safely reached his goal, he rolls over the top and presses against the short wall that lines the roof. He peers over the ledge to survey the situation.

On the previous rooftop, Kwan sighs and lets his backpack drop to the ground, frustrated.

Satisfied that he has bought himself some time, Noatak stays low and begins to run for the far end of the roof, but he skids to a stop. The next roof is too far away to reach by jumping, and there are no ladders or fire escapes on this side of the building.

He's trapped.

The clang of metal on stone attracts his attention from the way he came, and he sees a grappling hook, too far away to intercept.

Swallowing hard, he pulls himself upright and waits for Kwan, knowing that in his current state of exhaustion, this is going to be a short fight.

For the second time since the mission began, he faces what promises to be his death and realizes he isn't done living.

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Korra shoves her hands into her pockets as she works her way down the street, trying to hide her heavy limp. Her hood is pulled far over her face, and she's wearing her hair down, but the crowd of people ahead still makes her pace slow to a halt. She frowns. It's great that it'll help their strategy if she's recognized and all, but it's not going to help her anxiety. Not one bit.

Movement on the rooftop of the building beside her catches her attention. Normally, something so innocuous wouldn't warrant further investigation, but she's desperate to put off going into the crowd and then sitting down to dinner with the former enemy who rejected her. Curious, she creeps back up the street for a better vantage point.

Her eyes widen as she sees Noatak scramble over the ledge of a tall building, and Kwan standing below him, rustling through a backpack. Nothing like some unexpected excitement to make it an interesting evening.

*Looks like it's time for bending to save the day yet again. You owe me.* She twists her body, preparing to launch herself onto the roof with a column of airbending.

Nothing happens.

"Come on!" She tries again, and again, and her body won't respond. It's as if she never learned to airbend in the first place. With a yell of frustration, she begins to sprint along the street toward the other side of the building, heavily favouring her good leg.

Squinting up at the roof, she sees Noatak standing near the edge.

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Noatak watches Kwan advance, and the whir of kali sticks makes his heart pound. His eyes dart around the man's body, seeking targets for chi-blocks - even though he's going to be too fatigued and sluggish to reach them before Kwan takes him down.

The only vulnerability he finds is in Kwan's eyes.

"You don't want to do this," he says, keeping his voice even.

"Like hell I don't!" snaps Kwan, but he stops a few feet away. "I'll do whatever it takes to keep myself alive and the Equalist cause rolling forward."

The words ring with a discordant note, and it takes Noatak a moment to place it. *Keep myself alive.* "I'm not here to kill you."

There's a long pause. Kwan stands upright, his eyes flickering with confusion. "Then why are you and the Avatar pursuing me?"

"Information. You have the power to end this right now."

"Information?" He looks bewildered.

Noatak studies him. *Why would he be bewildered? Unless he doesn't understand why I could possibly need his information.*

*Because I already know it.*

The puzzle pieces fall into place. The Equalists keeping the same phone number. The way Kwan so honestly made love to him before he tried to kill him. Even the attack on the jail. He thought Kwan was trying to kill him for revenge, but he had it all backwards: Kwan is just trying to keep the Equalists moving forward. He's trying to root out Noatak and silence him, because all those old secrets still apply. All that effort they put into compartmentalizing the Equalist movement, to keep the rest of it moving should a few pieces be exposed, it all worked.

This whole mission - this whole blasted mission, with all its unforeseen complications - didn't need to happen at all. He can give Chief Beifong all the information himself, and Tarrlok will be free.

Noatak's lips spread into a grin. "Thank you, Kwan. You just told me everything I need to know."

Kwan bares his teeth, and he looks so distressed that Noatak has to drop his gaze.

He takes a step closer to the ledge and looks down. His heart skips a beat as he sees Korra standing at the mouth of the alley. She gives a wave, signalling that she sees him, then determinedly stomps the ground. A platform of earth, more than large enough to support him, separates from the street and begins to rise toward him.

Triumphantly, he steps onto the ledge of the rooftop. "And this, my dear Kwan, is how our story comes to a close."

"Wait! What are you doing?" Kwan steps forward, brows pinched, but the sticks are still whirring.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Noatak pitches backwards.

He hears an anguished cry from the rooftop. Kwan rushes to the ledge, and his anguished expression turns to anger as he sees that Noatak is resting safely on the floating earth.

As the platform sinks toward the ground, their eyes hold.
I'm sorry, thinks Noatak, certain this will be the last time they will ever see each other. I loved you, and I threw that away.

His throat tightens; they were so good together for so long. If only he had walked away from the Equalists before everything spun out of control; he and Kwan could have settled down somewhere, grown old together. Kwan often talked about wanting to run away and raise goats in remote fields of the Earth Kingdom. Noatak always gave him a hard time about it, calling it the unambitious dream of a simple farm boy, but now he thinks about the two of them standing in a rolling green field, bathed in sunlight, wrinkled hands joined as they survey the life they built together, and his stomach twists until it aches. It could never have worked, but it still hurts to admit that the door is permanently closed.

He breaks their gaze to look down at Korra. She's lowering the platform gently, her brow furrowed with concentration, and his heart swells with admiration. The direct comparison of the flutter in his chest when he looks at Kwan and when he looks at Korra is undeniable.

Finally, he admits it to himself: I am utterly, helplessly in love with this woman. Thinking the words is like releasing a breath he's been holding for days, and relief washes through him.

The relief is short-lived as he realizes that when the mission ends, so does his time with her. Maybe he doesn't need to give his information to Chief Beifong just yet. They still need to figure out how to fix Korra's corruption, after all.

He's only about two stories away from the ground now. He can't stop himself from smiling at her, and she does the same.

Suddenly, she yells. Her stance drops, and so does the earthen platform. Noatak slams into the ground.

Everything goes black.

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Korra curses as a pair of bolas fly into her field of vision. She dodges, but they catch one wrist, jerking it unnaturally behind her back. She shrieks as her shoulder wrenches out of its socket.

The earthen platform lands with a crash. She sees the dust settling around a crumpled Noatak. As she sprints toward him, she looks behind her, seeking her attacker.

A woman crouches in the street, swinging another set of bolas. She looks to be about Tenzin's age, with a lithe form and bobbed salt-and-pepper hair.

As Korra runs, she lifts chunks of earth from the road and flings them behind her, then watches out of the corner of her eye as her attacker dodges them with ease. With a growl, Korra skids to a stop and plants herself protectively in front of Noatak.

The woman is still running for them, and the bolas leave her hand so quickly that Korra doesn't notice until they're almost upon her. She throws up a shield of earth, but it's so weak and sloppy that it crumbles with the force of the weapon. The weighted balls wrap around Korra, securing her with rope that's too strong for her to break. She tries to writhe out of it, but her shoulder is throbbing so strongly that waves of nausea drop her to her knees.

Her attacker slows, pacing toward her, no doubt waiting for the Avatar State to kick in. If only I hadn't asked Noatak to chi-block me...
"Just as I thought," says the woman, her voice gruff. "You're weak." She lowers her backpack to the ground and begins to rustle through it.

"What do you want from us?" barks Korra.

The woman pulls on an Equalist glove and flexes her fingers, electricity encircling her wrist. "If I told you that, I'd spoil the surprise." With narrow eyes, she begins to advance.

Korra tries blast the woman with a breath of flame, but it's barely a puff.

Desperation kicks in.

Her eyelids flare.

The woman seizes, and her eyes lock on Korra, wild with panic. Korra lifts her chin, and the woman floats in the air, her arms twisting behind her. The crackling sound of grinding joints and cartilege should make Korra sick to her stomach, but instead of horror, she feels control. She feels the racing heartbeat, feels the fear pouring through her veins. This woman is her puppet.

"Be warned," growls Korra. "This is only a taste of what I'm capable of. If you attack us again, you will suffer."

Her eyes narrow as she delivers a pulse toward the woman's brain. The woman groans and slumps into a heap.

For a second, Korra stares at the unconscious woman, dizzy with joy. This is her first time experiencing bloodbending without the corrupted Avatar State, the first time she can truly revel in it. This is true power: efficient and ruthless, worthy of fear and respect. This corruption might have its downsides, but this is a real perk. She grins. The first bloodbending Avatar, stopping bad guys in their tracks with a mere thought.

But Kwan is still working his way down here, and the woman won't be unconscious for long. She wiggles her way out of the bolas, gasping at the pain from her dislocated shoulder, and lets them clatter to the ground. Crouching by Noatak, she is relieved to sense a normal pulse. He's not conscious yet, but his eyelids are fluttering.

"Noatak," she whispers, patting his cheek. He gives a soft groan.

Feeling experimental, she reaches into his body and stirs the blood around his brain, hoping to get it just a bit more oxygen.

His eyes fly open and he sits up with a gasp. "Korra?" He clutches the back of his head as he looks at the rubble around him.

"Sorry, I dropped you. Think you can run?" As she says the words, she wonders if she's going to be able to run, herself. Sweat is dripping down her temples from the pain in her shoulder, and she feels as though she's going to vomit.

He nods. She reaches out her good hand to help him up. As they pass the fallen woman's body, Noatak frowns.

"What did you do to her?"

"She'll be fine. Who is she?"
"Later."

They bank around the corner, and Korra starts to head for their house, but he grabs her good shoulder. "No. This way." He leads her into the next alley, then they begin to zig-zag between different streets and alleys. Several minutes later, they come to an alley that is dotted with garbage cans.

"Lay low here for a minute," he whispers. They settle against the wall beside a row of four cans; the smell makes her stomach heave, and it takes all her willpower not to vomit.

"Give it a few minutes to make sure we lost them," whispers Noatak. "You okay?"

She shakes her head, barely holding her tears at bay. "My shoulder."

Still crouching, he moves to get a better view, then winces. "Find something to bite into."

Pulling off one of her cloth wrist guards, she folds it and sticks it in her mouth, then nods at him.

Gripping the affected arm, he holds it out, carefully gauging the angle, and, with practiced precision, jams it into place. The pain makes her vision flash white, and she yells into the wad of cloth, breathing hard.

When the whiteness finally fades, she wipes the sweat off her forehead, then pulls the cloth bracer back into place. "Thanks," she whispers, flexing her fingers. "Not the first time you've done that."

"Kwan dislocated his shoulder a few times a year. Make sure you ice it tonight; it's going to be sore tomorrow." He slowly lifts his head over the row of garbage cans, then twists his ear toward the alley. Lowering himself back into place, he holds his finger to his lips. She nods.

Soon, she can hear strains of a conversation.

"-over here-" says Kwan's voice.

"-looked, and I didn't see-" says the woman.

Then Korra holds her breath as the voices come into perfect clarity: "They could be anywhere," says Kwan. "Fuck! We were so goddamned close. I had him, I fucking had him."

Beside her, Noatak is tense as well. Her hand finds his and she laces her fingers through his. He clings to it, not looking at her.

"We got them backwards," says the woman. "I should have been on him. And you were right about the Avatar, for the record. I underestimated-"

Then the voices begin to fade away again as they keep walking past the alley.

Korra lets out a low breath. "We did it," she whispers, feeling a surge of pride that's no doubt amplified by adrenaline. "That's what you get for trying to outsmart the best damned duo in Republic City, you fucking Equalists." She wants to jump up, pump her fists in the air and scream; she turns to Noatak with a grin on her face, looking to share their triumph.

Noatak grabs the back of her neck and lunges for her, kissing her so hard that her shoulder blades slam into the brick wall. The blow knocks a surprised grunt out of her. His full weight is on one side, the wall on the other, two immovable forces pinning her in place. Recovering from the shock, she relaxes her mouth against his, feeling their lips meld together.
He pulls away too soon, leaving both of them breathing hard. She stares at him. His eyelids are low, his look almost predatory, and a shiver runs down her spine and settles in her tailbone.

"That thing I was saying before about mixed messages..." she hisses.

He clears his throat. "Consider that a lapse due to getting caught up in the moment," he whispers, but his hand trails her ear and jaw before it pulls away. The contact makes her eyes flutter.

"So what, you're just celebrating our escape?"

"I must confess that skill has always been a potent aphrodisiac, and you, Avatar Korra, just demonstrated considerable skill in saving my life." His cheeks are dark, but he's still looking at her like he wants to devour her, and the candor is so unexpected that she falls back on sarcasm:

"Well, keep it in your pants, because we're sitting in a pile of garbage. And besides, we still need to eat, and strategize, and..." She trails off. His eyes are searching hers, and spirits, they're such gorgeous eyes, pale irises with dark borders.

Unable to resist the urge, she grips the collar of his shirt and yanks him in close for another kiss. Their lips part, their tongues meet, and he presses her into the wall again, but more gently this time. She's beginning to think that making love in a pile of garbage would suit her just fine.

The kiss breaks. "We should probably leave," she whispers, and she steals another quick peck. "They might find us here." Her forehead rolls against his and their lips meet again.

"We need to give them a few minutes. Put some distance between us." He kisses her jaw, then begins to trail kisses down her neck. She lets out a soft, shuddering breath, and her fingers claw into his back. When he reaches her collar, he traces back up to ear with his tongue, and her eyes squeeze shut.

"If you want me to stay quiet, you should stop that," she whispers.

"Nothing is ever quiet with you, is it, Avatar?" he rumbles into her ear, and this time, the title feels more like a pet name than a barrier. "Every bit of your life is loud and vivid, wild and untamed."

Spirits. Her mouth finds his again. She knows the damp ache between her legs is only going to get worse if she keeps kissing him, but his lips are so broad and soft that she doesn't want to stop.

What stops her is when her hand, raking through his hair, accidentally finds a goose-egg, near the border of the scars on the back of his head. She feels him wince.

"I'm sorry. You're hurt." She delicately palpitates the bump, noting that his pupils, at least, are the same size, so it's unlikely a concussion. "I really wish I could heal this for you. And my shoulder." Her mood starts to dip as she remembers just how many things are going wrong right now.

His fingers curl around her wrist and he pulls her hand away from the bump. "A good meal might restore your abilities. We've probably given our pursuers enough time now, and we both need to refuel."

Now that they've stopped kissing, there's a lingering awkwardness between them. She jumps to her feet a little too quickly and reaches out a hand to help him up. Their hands stay linked for several beats too long as she stares dumbly at his face, trying to figure out what to do or say. He's staring at her as well, his face blank, and she thinks it's funny how they can keep a cool head while they combat each other, but a little show of affection can so thoroughly disarm them.
"One more kiss," she says, because if she gives him permission and he does the work, then neither of them has to surmount that awkwardness alone.

He bends down to kiss her, and as her body folds against his, she can feel that he's as aroused as she is. When she pulls away, she can't stop sensing the blood flow in his body. She secretly does a tiny pull, just a little extra blood between his legs, and revels in the tortured wince he can't quite keep off his features.

"Ready?" she says innocently.

"We should lay low, in case they're still around," he says. "Follow me, and stay alert." He begins to walk toward the opposite end of the alley.

Korra falls into step behind him, wondering how she's going to focus on anything at all with her pulse beating in her ears and hormones fogging her mind.
"She bloodbent me," blurts Kwan's lieutenant. Kwan's chopsticks stop halfway to his mouth as he watches her. She won't meet his eyes, and he frowns. He knows that fear all too well, that powerlessness.

"You okay, Qing?"

"It felt like my body was trying to turn itself inside out." She takes a large swig of wine, then adds, "I can't imagine how heartbreaking it must have been when Amon turned on you with it. I knew it was uncomfortable, but that was unbearable. It makes me hate him even more."

Kwan pushes the noodles to one side of his bowl, then the other. Ever since that heart-wrenching moment when Amon crossed his arms over his chest and began to pitch backwards off the roof, he's come to the surprising realization that, unlike Qing, he doesn't hate Amon. Even after all that the man has done to him, he can't shake the twenty years that came before it. He always used to ask himself why Qing has never overtly blamed her ex-husband for the firebending scars he left on her body, or why his brother stayed with his wife even though she constantly stole money from him and gambled it away, and yet here Kwan is, mentally defending a monster who misled him for years and then nearly killed him. Love is complicated, and he wants nothing to do with it ever again.

He has to finally allow himself to let go.

"I've been thinking, Qing," he says, "And after this mission is over, I want you to take over as the leader of the Equalists."

Her wide eyes snap onto him. "What?"

"I can't do it anymore. It's all too intertwined with Amon. I've tried to bury myself in my work for the past six years, but it's like reopening a wound every single morning I wake up in that compound. All it did is make me paranoid, untrustworthy and suicidal." He drags a prawn around the perimeter of the noodles, too distracted to raise it to his mouth. "And being a leader - I was doing it because I sort of ended up there, not because I wanted to. I hated every second of it. I'm a follower, not a leader. I think... I think I'm done."

When he finally looks up, he sees that she's smiling sadly at him. "You've more than earned your retirement."

He nods his thanks. "Problem is, I don't know where we go from here to actually finish this mission. Amon's figured out how valuable his information is, and he claims he's not trying to kill me. Said that our story had ended. I think we may have missed our last chance to get near him."

Qing slurps up a mouthful of noodles. "He's just trying to get your guard down. We have their mission objectives, straight from our police source: to capture you and bring you in for questioning. Besides, he knows enough to do a lot of damage, but he doesn't know everything, and that's going to eat away at him. Amon's a control freak - he's not going to stop until he's sure he has every last bit of information."
"He seemed pretty convinced that he had what he needed."

"Oh, sure, until he lies awake in the middle of the night and starts getting paranoid, starts trying to over-analyse everything. Trust me, he was knocking on my door for midnight drinks and anxious discussions more often than you know."

Kwan's lips flatten; he does know, and he doesn't want to talk about it. Qing and Amon were a bad influence on each other when it came to alcohol, and he still hasn't quite forgiven her for all those times she enabled their leader's alcoholism when Kwan was trying to encourage him to curb it.

"Sorry," she mutters, realizing it's still a sore point.

He leans back in his chair, his hands behind his head. "So what now? Expect him to turn up at the hotel any day? Keep working on the traps?"

"Seems like the best plan to me. For now."

They're silent.

With a small bob of her head, she says gruffly, "You know, it's not going to be the same without you around, Kwan. I'm going to miss you."

He hesitates, knowing the suggestion might come across the wrong way, but loneliness spurs him to say it anyway. "You could come with me."

Both brows shoot up. "Come with you?"

"Think about it," he says. "We could settle in a small village somewhere, start fresh, assume new identities, maybe as brother and sister. Start a small business, just enough to live comfortably. Fight over handsome fellows at the local bar. It would be good to have a friend. I get the feeling you're getting sick of all this Revolution nonsense, too. We're getting old, Qing, and it's time to hand it over to the next generation. Revolution is a game for the young."

Her finger traces the rim of the wine glass. "I'll consider it," she says, deep in thought, and he smiles.

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Noatak steps into the street, glancing around, then waves Korra forward.

Pulling her hood tightly over her face, she follows him into the crowd, keeping her head down and her eyes trained on his back. As they weave through the busy street, it quickly becomes apparent that she doesn't need to bother watching him for guidance; with her bloodbending, she can sense the people around her without even looking, the way she can sense any other element in her proximity. No wonder Amon found her so easily when she was trying to hide from him, years ago. Since she no longer needs to train her eyes on his back, she finds herself watching his rear instead, enthralled by the way that it flexes with each step. Maybe it's inappropriate, but then again, so was kissing behind a garbage can, so the evening's off to a strange start, anyway.

He leads them into a busy restaurant at the end of the block, but instead of stepping into the queue, he pushes his way to the head of the line and pulls the host aside. Korra peeks out from under her hood, mystified by the way he's drawing attention when they're supposed to be lying low.

"I need a word with your manager," says Noatak quietly, holding out a folded note.
"Right away, sir." The host pockets the money, then disappears into the restaurant.

Korra leans into Noatak's side. "What are you doing?"

"Buying us some privacy." As he looks down at her, his head cocks a tiny bit, as if he's baffled that she's questioning him.

A short man in a black suit stands before them, a smile on his wrinkled face. "Can I help you?"

Before Korra realizes what he's doing, Noatak pulls down her hood, revealing her face. She gasps and scrambles to pull it back up.

"I am the Avatar's bodyguard," he says, "and she is in need of a private, secure place to dine - no one is to disturb us, save for your staff. We are willing to compensate you for your trouble."

Korra looks up at Noatak, her mouth hanging open, but he ignores her.

The manager's eyes are wide; he bows his head. "Avatar Korra, it is an honour to have you in our humble establishment, but I'm afraid we are not equipped for privacy."

"I'm sure there's something you must be able to do to accommodate her. The safety of Republic City relies on our esteemed Avatar, after all." Noatak draws a small fold of bills out of his pocket and idly counts them. "Perhaps a rooftop table?"

The manager's eyes light up. "Yes, of course! You must excuse me for being so slow to think of the idea. I am not myself tonight. It's been so busy-" He won't stop bobbing his head, and Korra's skin crawls with embarrassment at his grovelling.

"It's okay," she says. "Really."

"It'll just be a moment." The man hurries away and starts barking orders at the staff.

With a huff, Korra jerks the hood further over her head, trying to disappear into the fabric. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she growls at Noatak.

"Exactly what I said: buying us some privacy. We need a secure place to eat and plan, and I'm not convinced it's safe to head back to the house yet." His eyes are darting around the restaurant, and she wonders if he ever lets his guard down. "They could be tailing us. We can utilize the restaurant staff as our eyes and ears."

"I did not give you permission to use me like that," she snaps, and he looks down at her, lifting an amused brow.

"You've never taken advantage of your celebrity?"

"Of course not! Not like this, anyway. Look at the poor guy." The manager is still barking orders, his skin red and glistening with sweat. She glares up at Noatak. "Is this how you treat people?"

"I simply asked a favour; he could have said no. Any resulting stress is not my responsibility. You'll find that people will stretch themselves to great lengths if you can offer them the tiniest incentive."

His self-satisfied expression shows that he genuinely doesn't believe it's wrong to use people to his advantage. She tries to recall where she has seen that expression before, and suddenly places it: Tarrlok wore it when she faced him down in his office the night he kidnapped her.
Folding her arms over her chest, she says, "You know, you and your brother are a lot alike, with all your manipulation, and your decadence, and seeing the people around you as nothing but players in a game."

Noatak's eyes suddenly lose focus, as if he has fallen deep into thought. "I suppose we are."

A server hurries over to them and leads them through the kitchen, then up a staircase at the back of it - Korra keeps her head low, mortified by all the stares from the kitchen staff. On the rooftop, the staff has set up a small table with two chairs and several candles at its centre, and a bottle of wine is waiting for them on ice.

"Compliments of the manager," says the server, pulling out Korra's chair.

"This isn't necessary," she sputters.

"Please. It's an honour to have you in our establishment, Avatar Korra." He turns to Noatak. "I understand you are Avatar Korra's bodyguard, sir - I trust the arrangement isn't too intimate?"

"It will do, thank you." Noatak settles into his chair and opens a menu. "We ask that you keep would-be onlookers away, and report any suspicions directly to me. We can trust you to do that, can't we?"

"Of course, sir. I'll be back in a few minutes to take your orders." The server bows and hurries back down the stairs, the door closing behind him.

Korra is still glaring at Noatak. He cocks his nose at her menu. "You should select your food."

"I still say you're wrong for treating them like servants."

"Privacy is important, given that Kwan could still be lurking around. Besides, they wouldn't have gone to these lengths if they didn't view you with such prestige, so they clearly want you to be here. Everyone benefits." He studies her for a moment, then sets down the menu. His hands fold together and his eyes soften. "That's not the real source of your anger, though, is it, Korra? Deep down, it's rooted in self-loathing. You've spent so much time convincing yourself that you are worthless that it makes you uncomfortable when others treat you as if you have value."

Her skin crawls at the accuracy of his words. "Maybe."

"You are wise to be resistant: the admiration of others becomes addictive when you have no self-worth. You come to rely on it, and it can quickly consume you. But once in awhile, it's good for the self-esteem." He motions around them. "For tonight, just enjoy it and relax, knowing that we can take a couple hours to ourselves to breathe. It's a beautiful night - look at the view."

As she looks around, she has to begrudgingly admit that it's a great location. Because they're on the hill, the entire city drops away in front of them, glowing yellow and orange. The sun has just set, and the sky is bright blue, but fading, and a few stars are already in the sky. There's a gentle breeze that sets the candle flames dancing, and the chatter and music from the street just barely rises to meet her ears, a warm drone in the background.

"It's pretty nice," she concedes.

He gives a small tip of his head, thanking her for the acknowledgement, then returns to perusing the menu. "As I said earlier, red meat will help with your symptoms, as will leafy greens. It won't pair well with the wine they've provided, but I'd be happy to order another bottle if you feel like indulging."
"Nice view, dinner, wine; this is a date," she mutters. "This is a fucking date. I'm on a date with Amon."

His brows raise as he looks at her, something between amusement and discomfort playing on his face. "Let's call it a business dinner." He lifts the wine from the ice and holds it out, offering to pour.

"Oh spirits, please." She holds out her glass.

A silence settles over them until the server comes to take their orders, then lingers for a few minutes longer. Korra's eyes trace the horizon, which is rapidly fading as the sky darkens. Her fingers trace the back of her hand, thinking of her paling skin, but she doesn't want to talk about that just yet.

She turns to Noatak to ask him a question, but hesitates. The candlelight dramatically accentuates his face: it sharpens the hard edges of his jaw and his nose, and the shadows carve deep lines in his cheekbones. His pupils are large in the darkness, and the pale blue of his eyes seems to glow orange. She feels herself getting a bit dizzy as she takes him in, and realizes she has forgotten to breathe for several seconds.

Clearing her throat, she tries her question again. "Who was she?"

"The woman who was with Kwan?" he asks.

She nods.

He props his elbows on the table, folded hands resting against his mouth. "If Kwan was my right hand, then she was my left: my chief coordinator, and a skilled chi-blocker. Her real name is Midori Aoki, but Kwan and I always referred to her by her stage name, Qing." Maybe it's her imagination, or an illusion of the candlelight, but he looks sad.

"Another nickname? Do any Equalists use their real names?"

"Some do. Kwan never did." His voice fades. "Twenty years, and I have no idea what his real name is. What kind of relationship survives two decades without either person knowing the other's name?"

"One built on lies," says Korra without thinking.

His eyes lock onto her with razor-sharp focus, and she quickly looks down.

The door swings open behind her, and the server hurries in and tops up each of their wine glasses, then sets another bottle on the table. "Your food won't be much longer. Our apologies for the wait."

"No rush," Korra assures him, and the man thanks her and scurries away.

Noatak hasn't moved, his mouth still pressed to his folded hands, but he's staring through her now, his eyes glassy.

"You still love him," she guesses, because now that she has been through heartbreak, she recognizes it in others.

He takes in a slow breath, then lets it out. It's clearly a yes, and she examines herself, trying to decide how that makes her feel. With Mako, she was always jealous - first when he was with Asami, of course, but even later, whenever he talked fondly about anyone who could be perceived
as a threat. It used to infuriate him, because he claimed she didn't trust him. The truth was that she couldn't imagine why anyone would stay with her for so long, and she was afraid that one day, he would wake up and see what he was missing by staying with her.

She thinks of the packed boxes. And he did.

It's different with Noatak. She doesn't know yet what they are, but he's already seen her at her worst. She's exposed more of herself to him than to anyone she has ever met, and here he is, with a rooftop dinner, candlelight, wine. Maybe it's because they came together already thinking the worst of each other, and they were both in love with other men. Now that things are changing, every new feeling and sensation is a genuine surprise, building on a base of no expectations. They can only grow together.

Admiration swells within her. Admiration! She actually admires him: his skill, his intelligence, his unexpected tenderness. She thinks of the way he was singing to Tarrlok when she first saw him, and of the numerous times he has comforted her, and all that niceness no longer feels surprising; it's just another aspect of who he is.

It's not that she thinks he's a good man - he's manipulative, hedonistic, and there's no excusing all he did during the war. But she's not exactly a good woman, either, and maybe that's why she has grown to like him so much. Maybe it's because he's showing her that dividing the world into good and bad is too simple, and she doesn't have to label herself as one or the other: she, too, can be as complex as he is. She can make mistakes and bad decisions and still, at her core, have traits that could be considered good.

Overcome with fondness, she reaches out her hand and lays it palm-up on the table. He stares at it for a moment, then lays his hand atop hers. His thumb gently sweeps back and forth across her pulse-point, and she wonders if he can feel her heart rate accelerating.

She swallows hard and looks up at him, and their eyes hold. This time, he's not guarding himself the way he usually does, and she's entranced by the raw emotion in his eyes: admiration, fascination, even a bit of nervousness. She squeezes his hand, and the corner of his mouth lifts into a hint of a smile.

The door creaks open, and Korra jerks her hand away, wiping sweaty palms on her lap. The server brings in their plates of food, and her mouth waters at the scent of roasted meat.

For a long time, the only sounds are knives on plates and the occasional small-talk about the delicious food. Korra normally wolfs down her meals, but the spices are so delicate that she takes extra time to savour them, letting the flavours sweep across her palate. Something about being around Noatak makes her want to prove that she can be sophisticated. He's clearly in his element, eating with precision and good manners, and she tries to emulate him without drawing attention to her inexperience.

Once the meal has been cleared away, they continue working on the second bottle of wine.

"I shouldn't be drinking again," says Noatak, breaking the silence. "I've always had a problem with alcohol."

"It's just for one night." She immediately feels terrible, because it sounded as if he was about to open up to her with a personal story, and she shut him down before he could even start. She's trying to figure out how to gracefully revert the conversation, but he's already moving on.

He shifts in his chair to lean forward. "This corruption..."
"Right." Her stomach drops; she's not quite buzzed enough yet to mask her despair.

"Tell me more about it. How did it begin?"

As best as she can, she relays everything she has experienced, even repeating the information he already knows. She starts with the unusual sensation of taking his bending, then talks about her vision from Aang. She skims over the part where she bloodbent Mako - denial is keeping that wound closed for now, and she wants to keep it that way.

"I couldn't airbend, tonight, when I tried to aid you against Kwan." She pinches the stem of her wineglass and bends the wine, making it dance in the goblet. "It was as if I couldn't airbend at all. It's like I'm losing all the bending that came hardest to me, bit by bit."

At the mention of airbending, his brows drop and his face glazes over. She knows exactly what he's remembering: the time he took the other elements from her, but accidentally unlocked her airbending, leading to his defeat. There's a question she has always wanted to ask, and even though this probably isn't the appropriate time, it bubbles to the surface.

"How did you do it?" she asks.

"Do what?"

"How did you take bending?"

He studies her for a moment, as if deciding whether or not to share, then says, "Dumb luck."

"What does that mean?"

His voice is low and sardonic. "It means that the great Amon, the saviour of all non-benders, discovered that he could take bending not through a revelation from the spirits, but completely by accident." He pauses for a sip of wine. "Kwan and I were downtown late one night when we were swarmed by a gang of would-be muggers, waterbenders. I deflected their attacks as subtly as I could, but there were too many of them for the two of us to handle. They overwhelmed Kwan and hurt him so badly that I lost my temper. I knew I couldn't bloodbend them overtly without revealing my skills, so, in my rage, I started pulling blood into the chi points as I blocked them. I wasn't trying to take anyone's bending; I was trying to kill them in the most excruciating way I could imagine. I wanted them to suffer.

"No one was more surprised than me when I accidentally blocked the bending of one of my attackers. Took me about a year of practice to replicate it consistently." His mouth flattens. "So if you're going to ask me how it worked, I can't tell you. I can explain the chi points I used, and the timing of the blood pulls, and that's all I know. I called it spirit intervention so often that I started to believe it."

She stares. "I thought you developed the technique on purpose, so that you could take bending like an Avatar. Tarrlok made it sound like you wanted to be more powerful than Aang."

"That is true, to an extent. All my years of chi-blocking study were undertaken with that goal, but I thought the answer would lie in the art itself, with no bending required. I had originally hoped to develop a technique for permanently ending bending that all Equalists could learn, not just me. Once it became apparent that bloodbending was required at the contact points, the plans took a new direction. I announced my newly-forged connection to the spirits, and Amon began his ascent as the Equalists' saviour." His mouth twists, and she can tell he has conflicted feelings about it.

Her heart beats in her throat. "When was this?"
"About five years before the Revolution began."

She's almost afraid to ask. "Before you discovered that solution, what were you planning to do to benders?"

He doesn't respond, but his gaze rises to meet hers. Even in the dancing flame, his eyes are ice.

Her stomach drops. "Genocide?"

"If it came to it," he says quietly.

She thinks of all Hiroshi Sato's war machines. They weren't just built to immobilize benders; they were built to kill them. And this man she slept with, this man she was frantically kissing behind a garbage can, this man she's sharing dinner with, he was at the helm of it.

"And now that the Equalists don't have your solution?" she asks.

"I can only assume they reverted back to the original plan."

Korra curses under her breath, and for a moment, she wants to sink through the chair and disappear from the world.

No. Her hands curl into fists. She has hidden herself away for long enough. "Then I have to stop them. We have to figure out how to get me well, so that I can be there to protect the city from war."

Sitting upright, she says, "Do you have any thoughts about how to fix my corruption?"

"Only one." He takes a long sip of wine, then sets down the glass. "Taking my bending is what caused it in the first place. Perhaps if you were to transfer it back to me, the effects would be reversed."

The words hang between them, and Korra's fists tighten.

"You just told me that you once planned to commit genocide, and you think I'm going to give you back the most dangerous form of bending that exists?"

He stares into the bottom of his wine glass, just barely swirling it.

"This was your plan all along, isn't it?" She feels animal rage tug at the fringes of her consciousness. "That's why you smiled at me after I took your bending: because you knew you were going to get it back one day. And it's the reason you wanted me to join you on this mission so badly; it was so that you could manipulate me." Her voice escalates. "You've been grooming me this whole time, haven't you? Building my trust. You think you can fool me into giving you back your bending, and then you can go right back to the man you love and start your crusade all over again. Well, you played your cards too early, Amon. I see what you're trying to pull, and I'm not going to let it happen."

His hand is frozen on the stem of the glass, and his face is stone; he isn't breathing. A jumping muscle in his cheek is the only indication he's still alive at all.

Korra gasps for air, and as she lifts her wine to her lips, she catches her reflection. Her eyes are glowing red. She closes them and takes a long sip of wine, trying to calm herself. Her words echo in her mind, and they're so cruel, so angry. Were those words really mine? What am I becoming?

She counts slowly to sixty, taking even breaths in through her nose and letting them out through her mouth, until the rage finally subsides.
When she opens her eyes, Noatak has left the table; he stands at the far edge of the rooftop, his back to her, hands in his pockets.

With a low sigh, she limps over to him, but she's too ashamed to stand beside him, so she hovers behind him instead.

"I'm sorry," she mutters.

He doesn't turn around. His voice is deep and flat. "There are three things you will understand about me, Avatar. The first: I abhor bloodbending, and I would only ever agree to take it back if I believed something much greater was at stake. If I smiled when you took it, it was only because I was relieved. The second: My role in the Revolution played out in such a way that it doesn't matter if I still believe in the Equalist cause; I can never, ever go back. Do not count that as a possibility. And the third: over the past few days, I have, by accident, revealed more of myself to you than to any other person in the world. I have given you the power to wound me in ways that others cannot. Do not make me regret it."

"I understand," she says quietly.

He nods, but doesn't move; he's still looking out over the city. She cautiously pads up to him and lays her cheek along his spine, her arms wrapping around him in a hug, her hands clasping over his abdomen. His muscles tense, at first, but then they relax. She feels his pulse slow.

"No one else knows about my corruption," she says. "Not all of it. No one else knows what really happened with Asami, or just how dark my thoughts have gotten lately." She breathes in the warm scent of his shirt. "The reason I'm so scared that you're manipulating me is because if you are, I've already fallen for it. I've given you the power to wound me, too, and it's terrifying."

His hands close over hers as he leans back into her embrace.
XX: Refuge

Chapter Notes

This chapter and the previous one went up at the same time. Thanks for reading! :)

XX

Refuge

Shortly after they return to their table, the server surprises Noatak and Korra with two bowls of a shaved ice dessert and yet another bottle of wine, and the mood livens considerably. Conversation begins to get silly as the sugar and the alcohol sneak up on them. Korra tells him about the time she slipped away from the Avatar training compound to chase a fox-hare and caused a night-long panic among the Order of the White Lotus. Noatak tells her about one late drunken night when the girls at the brothel insisted on dressing Kwan and him in drag for giggles, but it ended in an explosive argument, and Noatak stormed out into public forgetting that he was wearing a dress.

By the time they leave the restaurant, they're both flushed and laughing. The streets are already starting to empty, even though the moon is still low in the sky. Noatak leaves a generous tip for the restaurant staff, and the manager is beaming so widely that Korra no longer feels guilty for putting him out. Truthfully, she doesn't feel anything over the glow of the alcohol. The street lights are hazy, and she stumbles against Noatak as they walk, hearing shrill giggles leave her mouth.

"We have to be stealthy," he reminds her, and she nods solemnly and tries to slink close to the ground. Then her world pitches, and she's lying on cold cobblestone, laughing, staring at blurred stars in the sky. Noatak's face comes into view above her; he smiles as he speaks. She can't make out the words, but he's clearly mocking her, and she swings a sloppy fist at his face, missing wildly.

His arms scoop beneath her, and she tries to protest that she can walk, but he carries her down the street. Korra has never been a fan of the idea of being a damsel in distress, but his strong arms are comforting, and warm, and she leans her head against his shoulder and relents.

Then he's laying her on her bed.

"No, lay me on your bed instead," she slurs. "Then lay me." She laughs at her bawdy pun.

He clumsily pulls the covers up to her shoulders. "You're drunk."

"No, you're drunk."

"Indeed I am, so I am returning to my own bed like a gentleman. Goodnight, Avatar Korra." He turns to leave.

"Wait! You gotta kiss me goodnight."

Turning back to her, he arches a brow. "Is that so?"

"We had a date-"
"A business dinner."

"-so we have to kiss. It's the rule." She tries to smile sweetly at him, but her face is too numb to obey her demands.

"Far be it from me to break rules." He braces himself on the wall for support as he bends down and plants an unsatisfying kiss on her forehead.

"Asshole," she mutters, and her eyes close, and that's the last thing she remembers before falling asleep.

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Korra opens her eyes. Her head is pounding, and she rolls over, sparking a bolt of flame so she can view the clock in the dark. It's just barely after one. She's surprised; it seems much later. Her head is still spinning a little, but she feels much more in control now. She hasn't been that drunk in years, and she cringes as she remembers flashes of bad jokes and embarrassing behaviour.

As she shuffles toward the bathroom, she glances at Noatak's room. The door is closed, and even though the light is on, she can hear faint snores from the other side of it. She's disappointed. It's been a strange day with wild extremes, and she hoped one of those extremes might lead to them sleeping together again.

*You blew that when you agreed to open that third bottle of wine.*

She runs the shower hot and strips, then steps in and closes the door. The steam caresses her body, rejuvenating her. Experimentally, she tries to pull the water into her skin, and her heart leaps as she discovers that she can heal again. It seems the food really did do her some good.

She uses her healing on her shoulder, then her wounded thigh - it's weak healing, at best, but it's better than nothing. While she's at it, she also uses the healing to get rid of the early stages of her hangover.

Now she has an excuse to wake up Noatak. Her heart pounds.

"Don't get your hopes up," she mutters aloud to herself. "After that awful 'lay' come-on, you'll be lucky if he ever wants to touch you again."

But just in case, when she steps out of the shower, she takes the time to brush her teeth and pull her hair into its ponytails. Her hands are shaking.

Relax, she tells herself. *Just going to try to seduce the man who was once your greatest enemy. No big deal.* She tests out a few sexy pouts in the mirror, then takes a deep breath, gathering her confidence.

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Noatak jerks upright as a knock sounds at the door. "Korra?" he asks, his voice croaking with fatigue.

"I can heal again." She sounds surprisingly sober.

The bedside lamp is on, and as he looks down, he realizes that he fell asleep with his hand down his pants. *Charming.* He quickly withdraws it and crawls under the covers. Thankfully she knocked before she entered, or that could have been awkward.
Combing a hand through his hair - he can feel it sticking in all directions - he invites her in. The door swings open, and she steps into the room carrying a glass of water. She's dressed in her shirt and her underwear, and his eyes are drawn to the strong curves of her legs.

"I know it's late," she says.

"It's fine. How are you feeling?" He moves over to one side of the bed, leaving room for her.

"Much more sober, and a bit sheepish about some of the things I said." Her cheeks darken.

He knows the feeling; he can't believe he told her the story about the dress.

She sets the glass on the bedside table and bends the water out of it. "It's really weak, but it's still healing, so it's better than nothing."

As she settles on the bed beside him, her proximity makes every hair on his body stand on end. She smells of mint and soap, with a faint aroma of wine beneath it. Neither of them speaks as she heals the goose-egg on the back of his head, then the wound at his neck. Her hands rise to his temples, too, and he's surprised to feel the after-effects of the wine fade away.

She pulls away. "I can heal some of the bruises from our sparring match, too."

"Thanks." He allows her to heal the bruises on his forearms, then crawls out from under the covers and rolls up his pants so that she can heal his bruised knee.

He studies her face as she works. She's so expressive that he has rarely seen her face in a state of calmness, and he finds himself admiring the rhythm of her features: the snub of her nose matches the angle of her lips and the curl of her dark eyelashes. One brow is just slightly creased with focus, and he has the urge to soothe the wrinkle with his fingertips.

Then her tongue darts out, subconsciously dampening her lips, and he's reminded of the way her lips looked around a cigar. His thoughts begin to take an inappropriate turn, and he feels himself hardening so quickly that he would suspect she was using bloodbending on him if he didn't know how averse she was to the art. She must notice - the fabric of his pants isn't heavy enough to hide himself - but she doesn't react.

When she finishes healing him, her eyes flit up to meet his, and he feels his cheeks flush, knowing he has been caught staring at her.

"Done," she says. "Unless..." After a moment's hesitation, she finishes, "there are those scratches on your back."

"No, that's fine." Truth be told, he likes having them there.

She doesn't leave, and he doesn't want her to. His eyes search hers as he tries to gauge how she'll respond if he makes a move. "Did you heal your shoulder?"

"Yeah."

"Mind if I take a look at it, just to see how it's coming along?"

Her eyes squint a little as she tries to read his intentions, but she nods again. "Okay."

"Sit cross-legged and upright," he says, and he settles to a seat behind her, his folded shins pressing against her rear. His hand smooths the healed shoulder, then slides down the length of her arm; his
fingers interlock with hers.

"What kind of examination is this?" she asks, and he can tell she's trying to sound playfully suspicious.

"Chi flow analysis," he says, not bothering to hide the blatant fabrication from his tone. Slowly, he raises her arm with their joined hands. He gently tests the full range of motion with her straightened arm, then guides her through a series of slow, arcing motions. The only sounds are their breaths and the occasional whine of a mattress spring. After a few minutes, the fingertips of his free hand rest gently on her elbow as he guides her to bend her arm. Their interlocked fingers guide her through the motions again, this time with her arm bent. It's calming to move in unison with her; it feels as if they are training or dancing together.

He leans close to murmur in her ear: "Any pain?"

"No."

He keeps his lips by her ear as his hand releases hers; he trails fingertips up the inside of her forearm. "How about now?"

"I'm definitely feeling something."

His fingers slow. "Pain?"

"No. A warm tingling."

"That's good." He slides his palm along her biceps and then delicately squeezes her shoulder, his other hand rising to the other shoulder to mirror the motion. "Do you feel any difference between the two?" he asks as he slowly rubs both of them.

"I'm not sure." Her voice is barely a whisper. "Keep going."

He squeezes a little harder; he has never felt such muscular shoulders on a woman before. "Flex, then relax," he instructs. As she complies, he briefly closes his eyes to focus on the sensation. *Spirits, is she strong.*

"Feel any difference between them?" he asks.

"About the same."

"Good." His fingers graze either side of her neck, then back down to trace her collarbones through the fabric of her shirt, and she gives a low hum.

"Sorry; it slipped out," she says, and he can see her ears darken.

"That's fine. There's no need to restrain yourself." He repeats the motion, and he revels in the way her breath changes pitch.

"Are you still testing my shoulder?" she asks, her voice low and relaxed.

"It seems to be healing well. Do you want me to stop?"

"No," she says softly.

He unfolds his legs and stretches them along either side of her body, then edges forward until his abdomen nestles against her back. He fans his fingers and traces lines between her shoulders and
neck, and she gasps.

"I'm really sensitive there."

"Here?" He retraces the lines, and she gives a small shiver.

Once upon a time, he clamped his hand to the back of her neck out of hatred, but now he gently rests it there to bring her pleasure, his thumb stroking her skin. She gives a moan so faint that it's barely audible. His other hand tugs her collar toward her shoulder as he bends forward. His lips gently close over the ridge of muscle between her shoulder and neck, and this time, her moan is louder and a shiver runs through her body.

Intrigued by her responsiveness, he drags his mouth up her neck, releasing hot breath against her skin as he goes. She squirms, and the friction makes him ache so painfully that his hands drop to her waist to hold her still. There's a spot just below the nape of her hairline that makes her gasp, and he discovers she wasn't lying about being sensitive - as he lingers there, suckling at her skin, she cries out, and her abdominal muscles start flexing wildly beneath his hands. When his mouth finally pauses, he pretends it's to give her a break from the torture, but it's really because he's seeing spots in his vision from holding his breath with her.

"Don't stop," she whispers.

His hands rub the curves between her hips and waist; he means for the motion to soothe her, but her shape makes him throb. Hips have always been his favourite part of the body; aside from showcasing each gender's unique beauty, they house raw power and strength. Korra's are especially shapely and dense with muscle. He wants to tell her how beautiful they are, how attractive he finds them on a primal level, but the words get stuck in his throat and escape as a groan. Instead, he kisses her neck again, and he's rewarded with a soft whimper.

Eager to feel other curves, he slowly slides his palms up her abdomen. When he reaches her breasts, she suddenly cries out. Her hands drop to either side of her body and grab his thighs so hard that he's sure he's going to bruise.

He expected traditional water-tribe bindings beneath the shirt, but he's surprised to feel the shape of a modern brassiere through the fabric. He squeezes a breast in each hand, and she arches into his grip, her fingertips clawing into his thighs. The motion presses her ass firmly between his legs, and his eyes flutter closed as he begins to grind against her before he knows what he's doing. That same raw instinct as last night is demanding to take control.

But this time, he wants to savour her. He wants to see her reveal her body to him, one article of clothing at a time, taste her breasts, her navel, her groin. He wants to breathe in the sweet scents that are unique to a woman's body, to hear her cry out for him over and over. And before any of that, he wants to touch her properly, the way he couldn't from his awkward angle last night.

One hand stays on her breasts, and the other nestles between her legs. He carefully kisses the length of her neck, giving her an opening to show hesitation if she needs to, but she only squirms a little with impatience. Two fingers begin to move in small circles on the fabric. Her head lolls back onto his shoulder, mouth open, eyes closed. As his fingers persist, her body weight slackens. He leans forward to support her better, and his legs bend to hug either side of her body. He can't quite kiss her properly while he's sitting behind her like this, but there will be time for that later. Right now, she's so warm, leaning up against him, that he's content to envelop her.

But he doesn't want any more barriers between them. His fingers slow and drift back up to her hip. As he edges his fingers beneath the waistband of her underwear, his heart beats so strongly that he
wonders if she can feel it pounding against her back.

"Korra-" he whispers, but she cuts him off.

"Please."

As he slides his hand beneath the fabric, he listens for her response; her breaths are harsher, faster. His body quivers, so impatient that it's painful, but he clenches his teeth, determined to take his time. He plants a kiss on her temple, and his fingers settle into a steady rhythm. Korra's head is rolling now, her mouth slack.

"Noatak," she whimpers.

His fingers halt.

Noatak. He closes his eyes and takes in a long breath, holds it, then releases it. No one has ever used that name, not in this context. He has always been Amon, since the very beginning. Amon is safe: Amon can be rejected, and that's okay, because Amon is a persona. Noatak is a vulnerability.

Korra must have realized her mistake, because she's tense in his arms. "I'm sorry." Her voice wavers, and he realizes he is shutting her out.

"You're afraid of love."

He decides to give the name a fair chance. "Say it again."

A bit uncertainly, she says, "Noatak."

The word rises to his head like champagne bubbles. "Like you mean it," he growls, and his fingers begin to move.

She moans his name this time, and again, and his other hand plunges beneath her waistband to join the first, because he needs to reach into her soul the way she is reaching into his. This is the most perfect acceptance he could ever have: the Avatar panting his name, her body tightening around his fingers.

Her cries begin to rise in pitch, and her body stiffens. His name is fading now, blurring into instinctive yells. He hangs on to every sound. This is the first time that someone will come for him, for Noatak, knowing all his secrets and downfalls, and she looks so pained and tortured and beautiful that he needs to release her, he needs to release her...

She lets out a shriek and doubles over. He folds tighter around her, his eyes squeezing shut as he almost loses control with her.

There's a long pause while they sit doubled over together, his hands unmoving. He's having troubles thinking; his mind is caught on her shriek, replaying it over and over.

Korra gives a soft groan and stirs, bringing him back to himself.

His hands slide free of her underwear, and he absently brings his fingers to his lips as disentangles himself from behind her. As he stretches out beside her, he feels her eyes tracking him. He can't figure out what she's staring so intently; it takes him a moment to realize that he's still suckling his fingertips. Embarrassed, he drops his hand.

"Did I see that right?" she murmurs. "Did you just lick your fingers?"

He feels his cheeks warm, unsure if the gesture came across as sensual or perverted. His brain is
too sluggish to think of a charming explanation, so he just says, "Yes."

"Fuck," she whispers, as if it's the hottest thing he could have done, and he feels a wave of relief. She rolls to face him and grips the tip of his chin, pulling him in for a lazy kiss. He's still coiled so tightly that he groans into her mouth, and she gives a surprised hum at his enthusiasm.

Then she rolls on top of him, her hands raking into his hair as she deepens the kiss, and it's his turn to be surprised, because he expected her to need a minute to recover. His arms wrap around her as he slides his tongue along hers. Every tiny squirm and twitch of her body sends heat rocketing through him, and he's quickly coming to the realization that in spite of all the day's self-stimulation, he's not going to be able to last long enough to do everything he wants to do with her.

He breaks the kiss, and his lips move to her ear to warn her. "I want to keep you up all night, but my restraint is failing."

Propping herself up on one elbow, she studies him, her eyelids low. "Then we should take care of you now, then give you a little time to recover. You brought the condoms and lubricant, right?"

"Back pocket of my bag."

"Wait here." She gives him a heavy kiss, her teeth digging into his lips. Then she moves to his bag, propped neatly by the door, and begins to rifle through it. He waits, anticipation dancing in his stomach.

When she stands up again, a change comes over her posture. Her shoulders and hips are in heavily angled contrapposto, and her brows are low, her lips open an alluring crack. He props himself on an elbow to watch her; she walks confidently toward him, her body swaying, and he feels his throat tighten. It's as if he is her prey, and he has never, in forty-six years, felt this strange mix of lust and helplessness. At this rate, he's not even going to last until she touches him.

She sets a condom and the lubricant on the bedside table, then pulls out her ponytails, messily raking her fingers through her hair. Her hands curl into the bottom of her shirt. "Should I take this off?"

Still caught off guard by her sudden confidence, he can only nod.

She slowly peels the shirt up her body, revealing a defined abdomen, a dark blue bra, and the most beautiful cleavage he has ever seen. The swell of her breasts, the deep lines of her breastbone, the subtle ripples of muscle: all three meet and blend in perfect harmony. He raises a hand to trace it.

"Does this taste as good as it looks?" he rumbles.

Her cheeks darken, and she looks so shy for a second that he's afraid he has interrupted the mood, but then she says, "Come here and see for yourself."

His legs swing over the side of the bed and he sits up; his hands catch her hips, and he gently pulls her forward. He nuzzles into her breastbone. Her scent has gathered here, trapped between her breasts, and it's so sweet and heady that he feels his eyes roll back. He breathes in, his lips just barely skimming her skin, and he can't stop the moan that escapes when he finally exhales.

She reaches behind her back. Her bare breasts fall to either side of his face, warm and round, as her bra drops to the floor. He reaches up to squeeze them and kisses across to a nipple, taking it into his mouth. Her body suddenly writhes and she gives a soft moan, and he lingers for a few minutes, enjoying the sounds she's making.
When she eventually pulls away, she takes a step back. Her hands drop to the waistband of her underwear. She pulls them off and tosses them aside, then slowly stands upright, like a flower unfurling.

Noatak takes a moment to study her body. He has met many beautiful women in his life, but none has aligned with his idea of beauty so well as Korra. Her frame is thick and built with strong curves, and the lines of her muscles are deep and smooth. Her youth shows in her skin; it's soft and healthy, and he wants to touch all of her at once.

His eyes lift to meet hers, and he's surprised to see insecurity flickering in the blue irises.

"Is my scrutiny making you uncomfortable?" he asks. Long ago, when he was young and inexperienced, a lover complained that he was too intense in the bedroom, and he has never been able to shake that worry from the back of his mind.

"No, it's just..." She shrugs. "I'm worried I'm...unattractive."

At first, he can't figure out what she means, but then her eyes subconsciously flick to his groin, and he realizes that he has gone soft. He almost plays it off as an unwanted side-effect of age, or maybe even playing with himself too much, but this whole evening has been built on a foundation of honesty, even when truths were difficult.

"Intimidation can sometimes have unflattering side effects," he admits, both to her and to himself.

"Intimidation?" She looks bewildered. "Are you saying that I intimidate you?"

He strokes her abdomen with his knuckles, following the motion with his eyes. "Korra, my entire life, I regarded you as the most perfect and powerful being ever to exist, a human with one foot in the spirit world. Now you're standing before me in all your beautiful, natural perfection, but everything's backwards, because you're looking at me as if I am the spirit. As if I am the wild one, and you are here to tame me." He grips her hips and looks up at her. "Yes, you intimidate me, Avatar. You terrify me. You always have."

Her jaw quivers and she presses a hand to his cheek; her eyes are so glassy that he's worried that she's going to weep. Instead, she swallows hard and smiles. "This is going to sound ridiculous, but that's the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me."

It doesn't sound ridiculous, because he knows their history as well as she does. He has formally yielded any power he ever held over her, washed it away by admitting that it never existed. His heart beats in his temples and he feels dizzy.

Her hands hook around his waistband, and she looks at him for permission. He nods, and she pulls off his pants, leaving him naked. "Lie on your back," she whispers, and when he complies, she grabs the bottle of lubricant and kneels between his legs.

"There's something I want to do for you," she says, "but I'm not very good at it." Her cheeks are darkening again. "So I need you to tell me what feels good."

"Of course." He can't help wondering how she could go six years in a relationship without developing the skill he thinks she's alluding to; he's intrigued by the idea of helping her learn. He has been a mentor in many capacities, but never in the bedroom.

"I, um, was also thinking I might," she blurs, and then she holds up the bottle. "If you're comfortable with...I mean...I know you probably sometimes...in the past...um...were used to a specific type of stimulation...and I've always wanted to try..."
She seems so flustered that he wants to rescue her, but it takes him a minute to figure out what she's asking. When she starts awkwardly miming a hooked finger in the air, his eyebrows shoot up. She's clearly more knowledgeable about male anatomy than she claims to be. He catches her wrist to interrupt her.

"Yes, I'd like that," he says.

She looks so mortified that he sits up and pulls her in for a long, deep kiss. When it breaks, he presses his forehead against hers. He can feel her breaths trembling against his damp lips. Sometimes he forgets how much younger than him she is, how much less life experience and confidence she has.

"I'll talk you through it," he says softly.

"Okay." She still sounds a little unsure of herself, and he wishes he could give her back her earlier confidence to help her relax. She gives him another quick kiss, then pulls away. "Lay down again."

He complies, and she trails kisses down his abdomen. Her mouth is warm, and he can't hold back a soft, pleased growl. While she's initially a bit clumsy, her enthusiasm makes her a quick learner, and after she incorporates his few small suggestions, he finds himself losing the ability to speak at all. He wants to watch her work, but it feels so good that he can't hold his eyes open. Time becomes meaningless, and he loses all senses except touch; he can feel everything at once, in perfect detail - her mouth, the fabric of the blanket beneath him, the air against his skin.

There's a pause, just long enough for him to start to come back to himself. His eyelids part and he watches her open the bottle, then close it again and set it on the bedside table.

She presses too fast, and he winces. "A little slower," he whispers.

Suddenly, she moves across the spot she's looking for, and he cries out as a spark of electricity shoots through his insides.

"There?" she whispers.

"Back just a little-" His sentence ends in a groan as she finds it again. "There. Just a bit softer."

"Like that?"

He opens his mouth to reply, but he has forgotten every word he ever learned. She murmurs something - he can tell by the tone that it's erotic, but he can't grasp the meaning - and then he feels the warmth of her mouth again. It's too much for him to bear, as if she is massaging him both inside and out. He feels his head toss from side to side and hears himself cursing and groaning, and his fingers curl into the blankets. He can't keep his hips still, but she's working with his movements anyway, and he suddenly realizes that he's seconds away.

"Korra," he gasps, trying to warn her.

She gives an encouraging hum; it vibrates through him, and his world explodes. He tenses so hard that his back lifts off the bed, his muscles shaking. This is the release he has been chasing all day, burning white-hot through every inch of his body, wave after wave. As it finally begins to subside, he collapses into the mattress, hollow and panting.

After a moment, he feels the bed shift as Korra stands up. His eyelids crack open. She's standing by the handbag, using a handkerchief to clean up her hands. She gives him a shy smile. "Not bad, for a beginner?"
It's an understatement, but he hasn't regained control over his language yet, so he nods, and she beams.

Weakly, he sits up and runs a hand through his hair, then wipes his damp forehead with the back of his hand. He can't remember the last time he came that hard, and his fingers and toes are still tingling. As she returns to the bed, she studies him, searching for the shame that sometimes crushes him after climax, but instead, he only finds the urge to kiss her again. He grabs her hand and pulls her forward to sit in his lap.

They spend several minutes kissing, and it's freeing to explore her mouth and jaw without the urgency of arousal. Her hands smooth his neck and chest, and they feel like silk against his sensitized skin. Then she leans in closer, pressing her chest against his; the motion makes her shift in his lap, and she's so warm and soft that he feels his body reawakening. It's surprisingly soon after all the day's activity, even for him, and suspicion sparks in his mind, but he dismisses it. There's no chance Korra would abuse bloodbending the way he did.

Korra must notice his recovery, too, because she bites into his lower lip, then pulls back to look at him. "Ready for more?" she asks a bit shyly.

His palm slides slowly down her spine. "Yes."

Her head cocks at the bedside table; he reaches for the condom, and she leans out of the way to give him room to put it on. He originally planned to lay her on her back and spend some time exploring her the way she explored him, but that will have to wait, because she's already impatiently centering herself over him.

Their bodies lock, both still sitting upright, and he rakes a hand into the back of her hair and pulls her in close.

His lips find her ear. "Touch yourself if you want to." She seemed to be waiting for permission last time.

"Okay," she whispers.

Then they begin to rock together, and the motion is gentle, almost soothing. He buries his face in her neck, and he can taste her sweat, its sweetness rolling across his tongue with each breath. Her head lolls against him, and one of her hands slides between their bodies and settles between her legs. His ears strain to hang on to every soft breath and gasp that leaves her mouth. They're almost musical, as if she's playing her body, making it sing.

Warmth is building between them, but this isn't the frantic build of last night; he feels himself losing focus, drifting with her away from their bodies. He clings to her, and as they are pulled further and further away, his teeth sink into the skin of her neck to anchor them together. Her free hand claws into his hair until his scalp aches.

Then her cries begin to rise in pitch, and she arches her back so violently that she pulls away from him. He can tell she's close, and he falls back on his elbows for a better view. She grinds into him, her speed increasing, and suddenly tosses her head back, giving a wailing moan. It resonates deep within his body, the most beautiful sound he has ever heard. He barely hangs on long enough to watch; her wail is just fading when he feels his mouth spread and his eyes screw shut. It's not the explosive climax he had earlier, but one as gentle and rolling as the lovemaking that preceded it.

Slowly, he remembers to breathe again. He sinks back into the mattress. Korra falls to the bed beside him. He knows he should probably remove the condom and wipe the sweat off his brow,
but instead he rolls onto his side to face her.

Her eyes search his, and he sees a growing hint of worry there. His glow fades. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"Mostly. That was amazing."

"But?"

"A tiny part of me wonders what the hell we think we're doing," she whispers.

His throat tightens, but he speaks confidently: "We're taking a night to ourselves. Everything else can wait."

She hesitates. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin the mood."

"It's fine," he says, and she leans forward to give him a soft kiss, but as their lips touch, he feels a wave of anxiety drown his contentment. It doesn't matter if they try to take a night to hide from it all; it won't make any of it go away. There's still Kwan, and Tarrlok's freedom, and inevitable separation. And above it all is the knowledge that she is being corroded from the inside, because of him - it's not his fault, exactly, but he is the seed from which the corruption has grown. He is the reason she's fading away.

His arms suddenly wrap around her and he pulls her against him so tightly that her breath escapes in a blast. She paws at his chest and pushes back so that she can study him; her brows are pinched.

"Noatak?"

The name makes the his throat twist even tighter. "You have to try giving me back my bending," he says with authority. "It's our best chance at saving you."

Her eyes narrow so faintly that it's almost indiscernible, but he's observant enough to catch it.

"If it doesn't work, you can take it right back again," he says. When her expression doesn't change, he adds, "I promise, there is no ulterior motive. I want to help you."

Her eyes flicker. "I'm exhausted."

"Tomorrow morning. We should sleep first anyway."

She holds his gaze for a few beats longer, then says, "Okay."

Her suspicion is bothering him - it doesn't seem to fit after how honestly they discussed his feelings about bloodbending at the restaurant - but it's his own fault for bringing it up when he did. Maybe, thanks to his poor timing, she's even looking back on this entire night, trying to decide if this was all part of some plan to manipulate her. You've tainted something amazing - you do have a knack for doing that, don't you?

Hesitantly, he leans in for a kiss, and to his relief, she is just as open with her kiss as she was before he brought all this up. When he pulls away, her eyes are warm again. She still trusts him.

Now her suspicion seems especially out of place.

He excuses himself to clean up. When he returns to the bed, she's already under the covers, snuggling into a pillow.
"Is it okay if I stay here tonight?" she asks. Her cheeks are glowing and she looks so content that he wonders if he was just imagining all the oddness a moment ago.

"I would like that." He crawls into bed and turns off the light, then spoons behind her. Her skin radiates heat, and he holds her close, planting a soft kiss into the sensitive spot at the nape of her neck. Their fingers lace together over her bare chest. As they whisper their goodnights, he marvels that it was only yesterday that a night of lovemaking left them with anger and tears; it seems so long ago. He feels as if he has lived years in the days since he was released from prison. He feels happy and safe.

But his mind won't stop lingering on the bloodbending. As he's just drifting to sleep, an image rises in his mind of the suspicious flicker in her eyes, and his paranoia whispers disconcerting words:

*Maybe it's not that she doesn't trust your intentions.*

*Maybe it's that she wants to keep it.*
Noatak awakens in a state of complete relaxation. It's such a strange contrast from every single morning over the past thirty-two years that he takes a moment to bask in it. He's sprawled on his stomach, one arm hanging over the side of the bed, the other haphazardly draped over a slumbering Korra. His pillow is damp with drool. He carefully collects himself and sits up, stretching, then runs a hand through his tousled hair.

Korra lies on her side, facing him, softly snoring. Her brow is furrowed, and he runs a knuckle over the wrinkle. She shifts and gives a small moan, then curls into the pillow. Fondness floods his heart, and it's suddenly difficult to swallow.

Leaving her to sleep, he eases out of bed and pads to the bathroom, brushes his teeth, then steps into the shower. For several minutes, he lets the warm water trickle down his body as he reminisces about the night before. He catches himself grinning, and scolds himself.

*You are only hurting yourself by encouraging your feelings for her like this. It will come to an end, and soon.*

His smile fades.

After last night's discovery that none of the Equalists' information has changed since he was their leader, the end is in sight. If they were to go to Chief Beifong right now, if Noatak were to disclose everything he knows, it would be enough to shut down the movement, or at least severely hamstring it. Tarrlok and Kwan would be free, Noatak would not, and Korra would return to her life.

Though she would still be corrupted.

His frown deepens. He wants to help her. He *aches* to help her. She has absorbed his curse, and so he feels like it's his mess to clean up. The more he thinks about it, however, the more he realizes that he is underqualified. Returning his bending is the only solution he can imagine, and beyond that, he has no ideas, no skills. She has several powerful figures in her life who may be able to help, experienced healers and spiritualists. Who is he, a broken criminal, to think he can heal her?

There's no denying the truth: if they were to return right now, everything would fall into place, and everyone would be better off for it, except for him.

*Surely I have evolved. Surely I'm not the selfish man I've always been, who would put his own wants above everyone he has ever cared about.*

After his shower ends, he returns to the bed, crawling under the covers. Korra is still asleep, and he settles into the pillow to study her face. This affair is ephemeral, and he wants to hold every detail about her in his memory.

His thoughts drift to the first time he studied her face this closely, under Avatar Aang's statue, when he held her jaw with clawed fingers and delighted in her frightened tremble. It was the purest surge of power he had ever felt, more dizzying and overpowering than orgasm, more euphoric than
the rush of any drug. It makes his stomach twist now to remember it.

*I'm not the same man I was back then.*

He breathes in the gentle fragrance of her breath and finds it the sweetest scent he has ever smelled, no doubt a trick of pheromones. No matter the impact to her or to Tarrlok, he feels entitled to just one more day with her before they go their separate ways.

*I'm not the same man, but I'm not a new man, either. I'm still selfish.*

Even one more day doesn't feel like enough. He wants to wake her and crush her body against his; he wants to slip inside her and make her yell his name over and over like she did last night, to wear the sound so deeply into their memories that neither of them can ever forget it.

Instead, he lets her sleep. There's intimacy in sharing a bed like this, too. Sex can wait; the whole day is theirs.

But his racing thoughts won't let him rest with her. The present is too conflicting, and he has retread their shared past more times than he cares to consider over the past few days, so he finds himself drifting even further into the past.

No one alive knows this, not even Kwan, but the meeting on Avatar Aang Memorial Island is not the first time he laid eyes on the Avatar.

*:.*:*.*.

Noatak sat on the rooftop, his legs dangling over the edge, his teeth tearing into the loaf of bread. Nearly a year had passed since he left home, and the elements had taken their toll on him: he was wasting away, more and more emaciated each day.

At least in the backwoods of the Earth Kingdom, he had been able to find warmer shelter: the mud and the hay of barns was much easier on his body than the makeshift snow shelters that helped him out of the North Pole. What's more, apple trees grew wild, and it was easy to snatch a cob of corn or dig up a yam from a farmer's field unnoticed. While crossing the farmlands, he had lived like a king on stolen bounty.

In Ba Sing Se, things were difficult again. Food had to be bought, not stolen, but he had no way of getting funds. No one wanted to hire a kid who was obviously so young, especially when he claimed he was a non-bender. What else was he supposed to say? He was through using bending at someone else's behest.

*I never want to bend again.*

The thought, as always, sparked conflict in him. It was a constant war between the powerful side of himself that wanted to maximize his power, and the weak side that wanted to abandon it entirely. Desperate to fill his stomach with something other than turmoil, he violently tore another chunk out of the bread.

A whistle sounded behind him, and turned his head to see a tall boy striding across the rooftop, a smaller one hurrying to keep up behind him. Noatak smiled. The pair had been his travelling companions for nearly a month, and he welcomed the distraction from his thoughts. The older one was Lao, only six months Noatak's elder, but nearly a head taller, and growing so quickly that his patchy pants ended halfway down his shins. His skin was as bronze as Noatak's, but only on exposed surfaces; beneath his shirt, he was milky white. He had brown hair and mischievous green eyes, and slow-growing stubble on his upper lip and chin. As he approached, his mouth spread into
a lop-sided grin, and Noatak felt himself flush.

The other was Lao's little brother, who Noatak only knew as Pebble. Pebble looked a lot like his brother, save for a heavy smattering of freckles. He seemed like a good kid, but his mannerisms and voice reminded Noatak too much of Tarrlok, so he couldn't stand to talk to him.

Lao settled beside Noatak and bumped him with his shoulder. The contact stirred up memories of the secretive kisses he had shared with the boy the night before, after Pebble was asleep, and his face burned. He never thought his first kisses would be with a boy - he always thought they would be with the pretty young Arnika, the fish-seller's merchant back home, who he had been sweet on since they were toddlers - but Lao's flirtations had caught him off guard. It felt good to be valued for something other than bending.

"How are you doing, Kanno?" greeted Lao, using the alias Noatak had adopted the instant he had separated from his family.

"Lousy. You? Any luck?" Noatak split the remainder of the bread in half and handed it to the pair.

Lao shook his head. "They only want benders, of course." He spat over the edge of the building. "Fucking benders. As if they haven't taken enough from us already. I hope they all die."

Noatak bristled. The boy's constant badmouthing of benders did nothing to stop his internal war, and he normally ignored it. This time, however, he found himself saying, "Benders aren't inherently bad. It's the bending that's the problem."

When a cocked brow was his only response, he pressed on: "Really. Bending corrupts good people, and they don't even realize it. It's this addictive power that consumes them. Makes them hurt each other, because they're chasing the rush that comes with it, like a drug addict."

His friend snorted. "Bending, bender, what difference does it make? Not like you can separate the bending from a bender."

"The Avatar can."

"Of course you'd bring up your precious Avatar." Lao spat again, and this time, Pebble joined him.

"He's the worst of them all!" said Pebble, and his voice was so like Tarrlok's that Noatak's heart twinged.

"Your obsession with him is getting really annoying," said Lao. "You in love with him or something?"

Noatak's eyes narrowed.

One goal had been weighing on his mind since he left home: to prove that himself better than his father. Yakone had often hinted that Noatak's skills with bloodbending far eclipsed his own, but it was impossible to know for sure. Or so he had thought, at first. One night, curled up and shivering in a poorly-constructed igloo, it struck him that there was a clear way to prove his superiority: he must try to defeat the Avatar. If he succeeded, then he was stronger than Yakone - and stronger than any bender in the world. If he failed, then the Avatar would take his bending, and he would be free. No matter which way the scenario went, it was win-win.

It had taken months to track down the Avatar's travel schedule, to pinpoint a location where the man would be vulnerable. And finally, here he was, less than an hour away from the route where the visiting Avatar and his wife would be open and exposed on the street. He didn't expect Lao and
Pebble to understand, so he had left his intentions vague. That was, however, until the moment Lao insulted him about it one too many times.

"If you must know," he said icily, "I intend to kill him."

Two pairs of wide green eyes stared at him for a moment, and then boisterous laughter filled the air. Noatak's blood boiled. *They do not understand the true power with which I am cursed.*

He stood. "Laugh all you want. I'll succeed. You'll see."

Doubt licked at the back of his mind like flames, and, as always, his conscience took on his mother's voice: *walk away from this. Embrace life as a non-bender. You should be fighting your destructive nature, not embracing it. You can be better than him.* He pushed back the thoughts, tried to snuff them.

Grabbing Lao's shoulder, he pointed down the street to bamboo construction scaffolding along the side of an old apartment building. "See that scaffolding? I'm going to kill him from the top of it."

His friend squinted. "What, are you planning to jump off it and crush him with your corpse?"

"Come with me, and you'll see."

"You're crazy." Lao stood, and Pebble stood as well, but Noatak shook his head. "Leave the kid here."

The younger boy's brows pinched, distraught at being left behind, and the familiar expression cut so deeply that Noatak had to look away. "It's for your own good, kid. Once they figure out what happened, they're going to hunt us. Your legs don't move as fast as your brother's."

"He's right, Pebble." Lao knelt down and clapped a hand to the boy's shoulder. "But don't worry. Nothing's going to happen because Kanno here is going to wet his pants and run away the second he sees his precious Avatar." Laughing, he walked toward the ladder and cocked his head at Noatak, signalling for him to follow.

Noatak's cheeks burned with wounded pride. As they climbed down the ladder, he growled, "I was planning to make out with you until he arrives, but now you can forget it."

"Oh, lighten up." Lao jumped to the back alley with a thud, and Noatak followed, landing silently.

"You underestimate how powerful I am."

"Powerful? Look at you." The boy encircled Noatak's emaciated forearm with his finger and thumb. "You're weak, just like us. And I've never even seen you throw a punch. What are you going to do, talk him to death?"

Noatak wrenched his arm free and jabbed a finger into his friend's chest. "Fine, then. Stay here, if you want. Just don't get in my way." With a huff, he began to storm away.

"Kanno, come on." There was a pause, then the pounding of bare feet on dirt. Lao settled into step beside him. "Look, if it makes it up to you, I'll let you suck my dick while we're waiting."

"Fuck you."

"Calm down. I was just kidding."

Ignoring him, Noatak jogged across the street. As he began to climb the scaffolding, he realized
how right Lao was: months on the street had weakened his strength significantly. The climb was slow and painful, and he stopped several times to rest, breathing hard. He was mostly acclimatized, but duress in the warmer climate was still too much for his body to take. A few faces among the crowd locked onto him, and he cursed his own lack of foresight. He was going to have dozens, if not hundreds, of witnesses.

The weak side of himself began to panic, but the powerful side glowed. Good. Let them watch. Let them fear me.

At the top, he pulled himself onto the platform overlooking the street. It was a perfect vantage point: he could flatten himself to the boards and be nearly invisible.

"Seriously, Kanno, tell me what you're going to do." There was a tremble in Lao's voice, and Noatak looked back to see that his friend had curled into a ball in the middle of the platform, looking nervously down at the street. It seemed that the brave, cocky Lao had a fear of heights.

"If you're too scared, you can go wait with your brother."

"I'm not scared." Lao drew himself upright, and the fear faded from his face. "How are you going to kill him?"

Moving to sit beside him, Noatak folded his legs under his body. He stared hard into the round green eyes and decided that he liked the boy enough that he wanted to be honest with him. But he couldn't admit to being a bender, not when Lao so stubbornly believed that there was no distinction between a bender and his bending. How could he explain it without revealing his abilities?

He thought of his mother's firm belief in the spirits, and was suddenly inspired.

"The spirits gave me a gift," he said.

Lao's eyelids drooped. "The spirits."

"They're unhappy with the way benders are abusing bending," Noatak said the words carefully, knowing they would appeal to Lao's hatred. "They said I had been chosen to send a message to benders by attacking the Avatar." His heart pounded in his chest as he said the words; how amazing it would be if they were true.

His friend's face was still unimpressed, but there was no hiding fear from a bloodbender: his racing heart betrayed him. "So what's this gift?"

Noatak leaned forward. "I can reach into a person's body with my mind and control them." He felt Lao's heartrate increase even higher, and his own matched it.

There was a pause long enough that Noatak wondered if Lao had put two and two together. Bloodbending, so far as he could tell, wasn't a widely known art, and psychic bloodbending was even more rare, but his paranoia told him that Lao was about to see right through him.

Instead, the boy just said, "That's impossible."

"I can demonstrate on you, if you like," said Noatak, trying to control his temper; the powerful side of himself did not like to be doubted. "But you will see for yourself when I attack the Avatar."

"You're crazy. You're fucking crazy."

"Watch it," he warned, his temper rising, but Lao was still talking:
"You're just a dumb kid! Why would the spirits talk to you?"

Noatak's eyelids flared.

His friend yelped as his body seized. Noatak could feel every heartbeat, every vein and artery in the boy's body. Control coated his mind, liquid and soothing; it felt like stepping into a hot spring.

*I missed this.*

The relief did not last; memories intruded on reality. Lao's face warped, the skin darkening, the brows widening. Suddenly, Tarrlok stared up at him, quaking with fear, lips murmuring silent pleas. *Brother.*

Noatak's breath caught, and the grip dropped.

Lao hunched over, panting to catch his breath. "What the fuck was that?"

"My curse. The spirits' gift," said Noatak, distracted. Images scrolled through his mind so quickly that they were dizzying: Tarrlok's tear-streaked face, his mother's gentle smile, his father's twisted pride. For the first time since he had left home, he felt his throat tightening and tears pricking at his eyes. What was he doing, bloodbending a friend, just to protect his pride? He had never felt more like a tool of his father's revenge. Just a dumb kid, indeed.

Flopping to a seat on the ground, he gathered his knees to his chest as nearly a year of repressed resentment finally burst free. "I never asked for any of this. I just wanted a normal childhood. Bending ruined my family, and now I have to carry this curse alone, and it's so heavy." His voice wobbled; humiliated, he pressed his forehead to his arms.

Just a dumb kid, indeed.

"If I can't defeat the Avatar, then maybe he can take this curse from me, the way he takes bending from benders."

After a long pause, he heard Lao clear his throat.

"Look, you're right. You're pretty powerful," said Lao, and Noatak felt an arm drape across his shoulders. "If you can stop him, then you should. Benders ruined my family, too. I wish I had some kind of power to stand up to them."

*Take mine. I don't want this curse.* Noatak leaned into the boy's embrace.

They sat there, unmoving, until the sound of drums announced the Avatar's arrival.

The two boys slowly stood. Noatak glanced at Lao and saw his own fear reflected in the other's eyes. *What do I do?* he wanted to ask, but he already knew. He had planned this for months; it was too late to back down.

Swallowing hard, he turned to face the street and walked along the boards, ready to face his destiny. He sank to one knee and peered down at the street below.

There, in the centre of the road, walked the Avatar, hand-in-hand with his wife. He looked more like an old man than an ethereal being, with a white beard that glowed in the sunshine. His robes billowed around him, yellow, orange and red, the colours so cheerful that Noatak felt as if they were mocking him.

The crowd began to yell and chant, and the Avatar broke into a grin; he summoned a ball of air and began to ride around on it, and the kids in his audience went wild with delight.
Noatak stood tall above the chaos, his bare toes curling over the edge of the wood. With great focus, he zeroed in on the Avatar's heartbeat, filtering out the noise of the crowd. It pulsed through his body, and he closed his eyes to savour it. The pulse of the most powerful being in the world. The pulse of the man who took down his father.

*I don't just want to kill him. I want him to kneel to me. I want him to fear me.*

His body began to tremble as his arm raised. The pulse of his self-appointed nemesis beat in his palm, waiting to be crushed.

Looking back, he would swear it was intervention from the spirits that stopped him. He stood there, frozen, as an unbidden flood of images drowned his confidence: Tarrlok's pleading cries, his father's greedy grin, the full moon, wolves, his mother's kind face. Each rasping breath stabbed into his chest like an icicle. His hand was too heavy to hold upright. Slowly, it sagged to his side, and he took a step back.

As his eyes lifted from the crowd, they locked on to the moon, clearly visible in the daytime sky. His mother's voice spoke clearly in his ear: "You have strayed from your path, Noatak, and Yue is showing you extra light in your time of darkness."

"Mother?" Whirling, his eyes darted around the platform, but only Lao stood behind him.

"Oh spirits," gasped Noatak, and he dropped to his hands and knees, sobs choking him. *I'm weak. I'm so weak. I'm sorry, Mother.*

Below them, the sound of drums began to distort and fade.

Bare feet stepped into Noatak's field of vision, visibly dirty and stained even through the veil of tears.

"I'm weak," he choked, too ashamed to lift his head. "I could have crushed him, and I was weak." *Stop talking. Stop crying. Stop showing how weak you are.*

Lao knelt in front of him. "You know why Pebble and I were coming to Ba Sing Se in the first place?"

Too paralyzed with shame to shake his head, Noatak's only response was another sob.

His friend sat cross-legged in front of him. "I told you a firebender killed my family, right? My dad told me to take Pebble and run. But we hid around a corner instead. I covered Pebble's eyes, but I watched everything."

Noatak's sobs slow, and he sniffs.

"When the bastard attacked my father, I was too scared, too paralyzed by fear, to stop him. But then he attacked my mother," continues Lao, "and I lost it. I grabbed a shovel and ran at him, screaming. He turned to me and looked me right in the eye, and he said, 'Go on and try it, you little brat. I'll burn your face right off your skull.'"

Slowly, Noatak lifted his head, and he saw a tear on Lao's face. Lao, the toughest person he knew, crying. Sitting upright, he wiped the last of his own tears away. "What happened?"

Lao shrugged, not meeting his gaze. "I panicked and ran away. I could have accepted my death, but instead I fled like a coward. I was weak." His eyes lifted. "We're supposed to be weak, Kanno. We're just kids."
"Yeah," said Noatak quietly. "I guess we are." He thought of the prospective employers turning him away. They saw what he couldn't: he was just a boy. He wasn't even ready to hold a steady job, let alone face the Avatar.

"Anyway," said Lao, "they say there's a recruiter here from the Kyoshi Warriors, who can teach non-benders to fight against benders. Chi-blocking. They do a couple years of classes here, then ship you off to train if they think you're good enough. Me and Pebble, we're here because we have to try." His green eyes held Noatak as he added, "Maybe you should come, too. Maybe it's too early for you to face the Avatar, you know? If you can fall back on this chi-blocking stuff, it might make you stronger, in case your spirit magic doesn't work on him. We're just kids now, but we'll be men one day. We will learn to be strong."

Noatak stood and walked to the edge of the platform. At the end of the road, he could see the Avatar, a faint orange smudge about to be swallowed by distance. His eyes narrowed.

"We will learn to be strong," he agreed.

One day, Avatar, we will meet again. And next time, I will not hold back.

*.*.*

As the memory fades, Noatak watches the sleeping Avatar. He realizes for the first time, just how much of his life has been dedicated to a grudge she didn't even know existed.

"None of what happened between us was your fault," he whispers. "It was a feud a generation removed, and I chose to carry on its legacy."

He can pretend all he wants that his revolution was for a noble cause, but at his roots, he was just a dumb kid with father issues and something to prove. He always has been.

Swallowing hard, he says, "I'm sorry." It's the first time in his life he has said the words and truly meant them, with no ulterior motives.

Even though she doesn't awaken, he feels a weight lift from his shoulders.
XXII: Lies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XXII

Lies

Korra's eyes open to reveal Noatak's face, and happiness surges through her. It's mind-boggling how quickly that face has changed from being her personal personification of fear. She can't even imagine herself fearing him any more, not after how tenderly they made love last night.

He's a liar and a manipulator, she tries to remind herself, but it's too late. Falling hard and fast has always been her way.

"Morning," she says, her voice gravelly. He blinks a few times as if coming back to himself, so she adds, "Lost in thought?"

"Recalling the first time we met face-to-face." His eyes search hers. "Retracing my steps from there to here, trying to figure out how this happened."

Her cheeks are warming; she yawns and flops onto her back to stretch her arms, trying to mask her shyness. The stretch amplifies her words: "Any regrets?"

He rolls onto one elbow to lean over her. "Over the years, too many to name. But from last night, just one." As he leans forward to kiss her, she can taste that he sneaked out to brush his teeth while she was sleeping, and that's cheating.

"And what regret is that?" she says, trying to direct her morning breath away from his nose.

"That I didn't bury my face here." His hand slides down her bare abdomen. When she realizes his destination, she catches his arm.

"Just a minute. I need to clean up before you go anywhere near there."

"There's no need."

A bit self consciously, she says, "I'm probably a bit...fragrant." Between the sex and the alcohol, she's pretty sure she must reek so strongly that the spirits are probably wrinkling their noses.

"I don't mind," he says.

She squints at him, remembering his fingers in his mouth last night. "You're kind of a dirty guy, aren't you?"

Amusement plays faintly on his lips. "Dirty?"

It takes her a moment to find a way to word it that doesn't sound like she's trying to insult him, because she's not. "I mean, you really like the messier aspects of sex."

"Sex is messy. We can only fully indulge in it if we embrace that."

"And you are a master of indulging in things," she says, because she's still a little sore about the
way he abused her celebrity last night, but her barb doesn't even faze him.

"Once upon a time, I had nothing. Give luxury to a man who has nothing, and you'll see him indulge in it with no concept of restraint. He has seen how something can become nothing in the blink of an eye, so why not enjoy the luxuries we have while the moment lasts?"

What he's saying almost makes too much sense to her, and she falls back on her teachings. "The air acolytes would say that a man who has nothing is one who has no earthly attachments, so he has everything."

He raises a brow. "Easy words to recite from within their monastery, where food and shelter are ensured."

His argument is a good one, but she juts her jaw. "Look, the point is that I'm going to shower. After that, we can indulge in the messiness of sex all you want. Maybe even a few times, she thinks to herself. Sex seems like the most fun way to keep her anxiety about the corruption at bay. She swings her legs over the side of the bed to leave.

"I look forward to your return." His fingertips flutter down her back, softly depressing a constellation of random points, and she decides she's not in a hurry to leave. She focuses on the softness of his touch, and her head lolls.

"Are you hitting chi points back there or something?" she murmurs; she feels as if she's melting.

"A few are chi points. Some are sensitive points I discovered last night." Hot breath slides against her neck. "Like this one here," he murmurs into the flesh, and she feels his words vibrate down her spine. The contact seems to be arousing him, as well; she can sense the blood coursing through his body, racing for his groin.

"How the hell are you so turned on?" she wonders aloud. "It's only been a few hours." And you came twice, she adds to herself, but she's still a bit shy about discussing his orgasms so bluntly.

"I have been told my drive is unusually high," he says into her ear. "I can tone it down if it's a problem."

"No, not a problem at all." She gasps as he bites her earlobe. Without thinking, she uses bloodbending to tug the blood flowing between his legs, just enough to make his breath catch.

There's a long pause, and she starts to feel guilty.

"Korra," he says, but he doesn't finish his sentence.

He knows I used bloodbending, but he's doubting himself. He doesn't want to call me out on it in case he's wrong.

Her pulse pounds in her ears; she pretends to misjudge what he was about to say. "Right. Shower." She hops to her feet and marches into the hall. Once she's in the bathroom, she closes the door and sinks against it.

"You are not a bloodbender," she mutters to herself. "Stop acting like one."

Quickly brushing her teeth, she starts the shower running. Once she has rinsed her mouth, she turns to step into the shower.

She doesn't hear Noatak enter the room, so she jumps when a strong hand clamps onto her
shoulder. He spins her around; his lips close over hers. Her cry of surprise fades into a moan as she leans into it.

Then she pulls away, her eyes trailing his bare body. "Couldn't wait?"

"I would be a fool to pass up the opportunity to watch you shower."

It feels so good to be wanted like this. It has been months since she has felt desired - no, she's not going to let herself think about Mako when Noatak is standing naked in front of her.

Noatak is standing naked in front of me. It still feels as if the past few days have been some bizarre dream. Standing on her tiptoes, she kisses him again. "If you join me, am I going to get a chance to wash myself?"

"It will certainly test my self-control." His palms run down her arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

"You'd better behave, or I'll have to find some way to restrain you," she teases.

He leans forward to growl in her ear, "Promise?"

The word makes her shiver. Her hand clamps around his wrist and she pulls him into the shower; he uses the momentum to press himself flush against her, and they kiss, hot water streaming down their bodies. Her hands travel down his slick back, and he feels so amazing that she's not sure she can behave herself long enough to wash.

The thought of him nuzzling between her legs is what gives her the strength to pull away. "I have to wash. Be good."

His eyebrows flash, and she's still trying to wrap her head around a playful Noatak. "There was some mention of restraint," he says.

"You know that involves the bending you despise, right?" Her finger runs down his chest, enjoying the sponginess of the damp hair against his skin. "Or is bending okay if it serves your own sordid purposes?"

He leans in for another kiss, gently scraping her bottom lip with his teeth as he withdraws. "I loathe bending, but I must admit, I've always been curious."

"Curious?"

"As to how it might be applied in an intimate setting. Especially wielded by the most powerful bender in the world."

Has he never been with a bender before? The thought shouldn't be a shock, in retrospect, but it still throws her off guard. "Come on, you're a waterbender. You've played with water whips before."

"Only alone, and not for decades."

The mental image of him pleasuring himself with waterbending disarms her. "Well then," she stammers, and realizing that words are going to fail her, she falls back on the physical instead.

Dropping into stance, she streams the pouring water into four water whips. The first two snatch his arms and jerk them behind his back, then pull him against the tile wall; he lets out a surprised yelp that makes a dark pride well in Korra's chest. The other two whips lash around his legs, holding
him in place. His chest rises and falls with harsh breaths as he lifts his chin to watch her.

She can't hide a smirk. "You look frightened."

"Terrified." He says the word with relish, and she realizes she's uncovering yet another facet of the confusing being that is Noatak. He isn't just attracted to power, it seems, but to power struggles as well. He's only fueling this recently-born part of her that craves domination, and she wonders if indulging in it is bad for her.

But then he strains against the water, and she strains back, and she decides that she might as well embrace this confidence. After years of feeling as if she has no control, she enjoys the opportunity to be intimidating. She drizzles water down his body, toying with him, and enjoys the way his pulse races in response.

"Do you realize that you are completely at my mercy right now?" she asks, the strength of her own words making her giddy.

He stares at her with hooded eyes, water dripping down his parted lips and chin.

"Do you like it?" she asks.

"Yes." His voice cracks.

Maintaining the waterbending is surprisingly easy without any movement, and she wonders if that's thanks to the psychic bending she accidentally absorbed. Yet another unexpected perk of her corruption. Can she do this with all four elements, or just water? She'll have to remember to test it later.

Since her hands are free, she lathers them and slowly begins to soap her body. He tracks her movements with narrow eyes, his lips parted, and she can feel the tension humming within him. The chemistry between them is unlike anything she has ever felt, and the rush of it almost makes her cave in and approach him.

But she's stubborn, and his desire for her is so flattering that she wants to tease him a bit more, to see how desperate she can make him. Her hips angle into what she hopes is an alluring pose, and she slows her movements, letting him see the slickness of her skin. Soon she's not so much washing herself as putting on a show for him. Based on the agony on his face and the tension in his body, he is enjoying every moment of it.

"Release me," he finally begs, his voice tight.

Enjoying her role, she stalks closer to him and runs a finger down his chest. "There are two ways I could interpret that. Which one did you mean?"

His eyes squeeze shut. "Either. Please."

"Begging for the Avatar's mercy? How far Amon has fallen." The power rush makes her lightheaded. She doesn't drop the water whips, but instead kneels in front of him and touches her tongue to him, and his gasp is so loud that her insides quake.

Then she presses deeper, and she can feel him trying to thrash, but the whips hold him in place. He's full-out panting now, and spirits, that sound: she is drunk on it.

It isn't long before his moans begin to escalate, and she pulls away at the last second. He gives a yell of anguish and thrusts desperately at the air, and she pauses to take in the sight, savouring the
fact that she has worked him into a frenzy.

"Korra," he pleads. It takes all her self-control to keep him restrained. More than anything, she wants to turn him loose and see where his frenzy takes him. The only thing stopping her is the lack of a condom - but that's easily fixed.

"Wait here," she says, and she steps out of the shower, ignoring his protests. Running to his room, she zeroes in on his bag and rifles through it to retrieve the bag of condoms.

She returns to him with one in hand. Noatak is slumped against the wall, still restrained. His suffering shows in his flushed cheeks and glazed eyes.

As she unrolls the condom, he gives a soft groan.

She presses her lips to his cheek, smoothing hair back from his damp forehead. "I'm turning you loose," she says when she pulls away. "Don't hold back." She lowers herself to all fours in front of him.

The waterbending drops.

He's on her so fast that she gasps; his hands curl painfully into her hips. The slams echo off the glass walls, and water spills into her open mouth. It hurts, and she needs it to hurt even more, she needs to feel how desperate she has made him. "Harder!"

He yells and gives a final thrust, and she feels his entire body spasm.

For several seconds, the only sound is the water streaming around them.

"Fuck," he whispers as he pulls away, and it's so bizarre to hear him swear that she grins.

She turns to see that he has sagged into a heap, his arms barely holding him upright. With two fingers, she lifts his chin, then presses her mouth to his.

Noatak reaches for the shower tap, and at first, she thinks he's using it to help himself stand, but he turns it off instead. Still kissing her, he rises to his feet, lifting her off the ground; her legs wrap around his waist.

As they leave the bathroom, she pulls the water off their bodies and throws it into the shower; he tugs off the condom and drops it in the garbage bin without even breaking the kiss.

He drops her on the bed and drags his tongue down the centre of her torso. When he presses his face between her legs, the sensations are so intense that her eyes have to close. She finds herself in a soft, warm darkness, where pleasure waves through her in pulses that match his rhythm. She can hear herself crying out and feel herself thrashing, but even though her body is violent, her mind is calm. Every finger, every toe, begins to glow. It isn't long before the glow encompasses her entire body.

She feels herself rising, then hears herself scream as her body falls away.

But she doesn't surface.

Instead, there is darkness, and a warm hum. She feels as if she's swimming underwater, yet she can't feel water against her skin. It's so comfortable that she wants to stay here.

"Korra," says Noatak's voice, almost too faint to hear, and at first she doesn't recognize the name as
her own. It repeats again and again, his tone more and more urgent. She strains to hear it, but the hum in her mind intensifies, drowning it out.

Then, with perfect clarity: "Korra!"

Her eyes snap open.

Noatak sits between her legs, but he's leaning away from her, his jaw tight. Her hand is clawed in the air, surrounded with swirling black energy. She stares at it, horrified.

Panic sharpens her senses and, fully in control again, she reels in the rogue Avatar State.

"What the hell?" Her voice is almost a shriek.

He is still staring at her, his eyes wary.

"I didn't hurt you, did I? I didn't bloodbend you?" As she leans forward, he flinches.

"No," he says. "You caught yourself in time."

"So what, I can't even orgasm now unless you chi-block me first?" Her jaw wobbles, and she swallows back a sob. "It's getting worse. It's getting so much worse, so quickly."

A hand closes over hers, and those blue eyes that she feared for so many years are warm and sympathetic. "No more putting it off, Korra. We have to try to reverse it."

Stubbornness rises in her throat, bitter and metallic. It's not that simple. His bending gives her the tools to defend herself and the Avatar way of life, to read and manipulate others in ways she normally cannot. She remembers psychically waterbending in the shower, as well as the way she could sense the crowd around her last night without sight, and finally the power she felt over the woman known as Qing. If she can learn to control this corruption, she'll have the tools to become the most powerful Avatar who ever lived.

But Noatak is looking at her with such concern that she nods and says, "Kneel," with no conviction.

He squeezes her shoulder, then kneels in front of her, but there's a hesitation to his movements. He's moving like a man condemned to die.

She stands before him, and as she looks down at him, she is transported back six years, to when she took his bending in the first place. Back then, she felt nothing but fear.

"Look at me," she whispers, and this time, when their eyes meet, she is filled with a glowing warmth that could almost be described as love. She wants to protect this man, to care for him. He holds her gaze and swallows hard. She can tell by the defeat on his face that he's not sure he wants his bending back, but he gives an almost imperceptible nod to encourage her anyway.

Korra makes her decision.

I don't want to give it up, and you don't want it back.

I can save both of us.

Her thumb presses to his forehead, her other hand to his chest. Black energy swims over her skin as she summons the Avatar State, and she fights with all her strength to keep it under control.
This is where she would unlock his chakras - she has done it so many times that it's second nature - but instead, she counts to three, then releases him untouched. The State falls away.

"It's not working," she lies.

He eyes her the same way he eyed her after her little bloodbending trick earlier tonight, and she's certain he sees right through her, but he only says, "I see."

They sit side-by-side on the bed.

There's a long silence. Korra reflects on how easy it was to lie to him, and how little remorse she has about it. It's her nature to follow her gut rather than question it, so she has made many rash decisions in her life, but she has never actively deceived anyone about those choices before.

Clearing his throat, Noatak reaches for her hand, gripping it so tightly that she winces. "I spoke with Kwan last night. On the rooftop. He unwittingly revealed that much of my old intelligence about the Equalists still holds true." His thumb strokes hers. "I have enough information to take them down. Our mission can end."

*Why didn't you say so earlier?* she almost asks, but when she thinks of what the end of the mission will mean for them, she's glad he didn't.

"It must end immediately," he says quietly. "You must return to the spiritual leaders in your life; they may be able to heal you before the corruption consumes you."

"But our mission isn't over," she blurts. "Our orders were to capture Kwan. He may have information that you don't. Key information." Her palms are sweating, and she tugs her hand free from his grip so she can wipe it on her pants.

He appears to be considering her words. "Then we must have a final showdown with Kwan. Today."

"Today?" She panics. "But we're still injured."

"Your corruption is worsening. If we delay it any longer..." He trails off, and when he speaks again, it's with hesitation, as if he's carefully choosing his words. "Against all odds, Korra, I have grown to care for you. I can't stand by while the corruption overtakes you, and it's becoming clear that I am not equipped to save you."

"Save me?" She stands, her hands balling into fists. "What happens to you when this mission ends, Noatak? Are you still planning to die, or are you going to rot in jail?"

He won't look at her, but his jaw clenches so hard that she can see his cheek muscles bulge. "You are the Avatar. The world will not care if I live or die-"

"I'll care," she says quietly.

His mouth freezes, half-open, the rest of his words forgotten.

"I've grown to care for you, too, Noatak. I don't want this mission to end. Not yet." She swallows hard. "Just one more day. Please."

He rises to his feet and looks down at her, and she sees conflict on his face. "I see the corruption laying its roots within you, Korra, more clearly than you think. The longer we wait, the harder it will be to help you, and I will not be complicit in your destruction. We attack Kwan today."
Without another word, he leaves the room. Korra stares after him, guilt scraping through her veins like shards of ice.

Chapter End Notes

I know that water whips have been used this way before in other fics, including my own, but I couldn't resist the chance to use them again, because unf. Sorry if it felt overused or anything. :(
XXIII: Introspection

XXIII

Introspection

The discussion with Korra distressed Noatak so much that he storms through the house. His battle instincts kick in once he reaches the front door. He opens it slowly, easing his head out to survey the street. Once he's convinced that Kwan and Qing aren't waiting to ambush him, he slips out from under the weight of the house and all it represents.

Though his eyes scan his surroundings as he walks and his body is alert, his mind paces circles around Korra. He's a good liar, good enough to know when someone else is lying. Her "it's not working" was far from convincing.

*Your fault.* The accusing thought repeats over and over in his mind.

He orders two meals from a stall, and the fragrant scent of Fire Nation spices steams from the grill. As he waits, he steps into the shade of a tree, carefully watching the street as his mind settles back into its loop.

The worst part about Korra's situation is: even though he can see that she is falling deeper under the corruption's influence, he would be a hypocrite to object. He knows the lure of power all too well, especially when coupled with the pressure and celebrity of being a leader. At least he had the luxury of a mask to hide behind, to project confidence during times of self-doubt; she displays every insecurity on her face. No wonder she doesn't want to give up the first taste of power she has had in years. She can't fake confidence the way he can. It has to be real.

When he returns to the house, meals in hand, Korra's bedroom door is closed. There's no answer when he knocks.

"Korra?"

Still no answer. She must be angry, though he's surprised that's taking the form of silence rather than rage. He would expect her to be more combative.

It's a shame to spend their last couple hours together separated by a closed door, but maybe she just needs a little time to cool off.

"I'll leave your food by the door," he says. As he bends down to set her food on the floor, a strong draught hits his fingers. It's coming from the crack beneath the door. He feels the air currents tugging at his fingertips, the directions constantly shifting. Straining his ears, he hears the whistle of wind from the other side of the door.

*Shit.* He knows what that means.

"Korra." He keeps his voice neutral, slowly standing. "Are you in there?"

When there's no response, he eases the door open.

Korra sits on the bed, cross-legged, her upturned palms on her knees. Her eyes are crimson. So much black energy streams off her body that it looks as if she's consumed by flames, but instead of giving off light, the flames are absorbing it.
Noatak freezes in the doorway, the wind swirling his hair and clothes. "Korra," he says softly.

"I can learn to control it," she replies in many voices at once. "I can learn..." Her voice trails off, and a tear streaks down her cheek, glowing red in the light from her eyes.

"If I try to help you, will you attack me?"

"No, I'm controlling it. I'm controlling it, I'm..." She drifts off, and her inability to finish a sentence isn't instilling him with confidence.

It takes all his bravery to start closing the distance between them. "Would you like me to chi-block you?"

"No!" The black flames flare in a whoosh, then settle back to their regular size. "No. Talk me down. I need to learn to control it."

Swallowing hard, he sits on the bed in front of her and folds his legs into lotus position. His hands rest on his knees. "What are you visualizing right now?" He keeps his voice low and soothing, as if he is back in his days as the leader of the Equalists, guiding his officers through group meditation.

"Visualizing?" she asks. "I'm just trying to push it down."

"I can lead you through a visualization exercise," he says. "It's one I used many times to control intense emotions or greed."

"Please," she says softly.

His eyes close as he guides her. "Visualize a sphere in front of yourself: this sphere is where you will contain the Avatar Spirit. Picture its size, its texture, its colour, until it is so real that you feel as if you can reach out and touch it."

"Okay," she says, and he hears doubt in her voice.

"The air all around you is your own essence: it is you. It is Korra. I want you to take deep breaths in through your nose. Feel your essence flowing into you as you inhale, flooding every corner of your body. As you breathe out, release the corrupted Avatar State with your breath. Visualize it leaving your body and flowing into the sphere, where it will be contained, safely separated from you. Feel it emptying from your body, and fill that empty space with the good air, your own essence."

The wind around her has calmed down enough that he can hear her deliberate breaths. When he opens one eye, he sees that her eyes are closed, and the black flames around her are dying. He wants to reach across and hold her hands for support, but he knows she needs to concentrate.

"Keep going," he murmurs. "Breathe yourself in, and the Avatar State out, until it is completely contained."

Soon, the wind dies and the darkness clears. He counts slowly to ten, then lets out a relieved breath.

"You can open your eyes," he says.

Her eyes open, and the irises are blue.

Now he does reach across to hold her hand, and at first, she smiles at him, but then her eyes narrow and she jerks her hand away.
"Wait a minute, I'm mad at you." She purses her lips in a stubborn pout.

"You're welcome," he says dryly, too shocked by her sudden outburst to censor his sarcasm.

Her gaze drops away from his. "I just thought..." She gives a small shrug. "I thought maybe you might want to spend a bit more time together. And when you didn't, I."

"Of course I do." His hand loops around the back of her neck and he gently pulls her in. Their foreheads rest against each other, and his eyes close. "We have to remember to stay objective. Our situation is complicated." Behind closed eyelids, he tries to picture how their lives would play out if things were different, but he falters. If he had never been Amon, if she wasn't the Avatar, if he wasn't twice her age, if, if, if... His eyes open. There are too many odds stacked against them; the only way they would work is if they were entirely different people.

He must sigh, because Korra asks, "Are you okay?"

Slowly, he shakes his head, his forehead still centred on hers. It should be easy, by now, losing people. He has lived through one loss after another.

"I should be used to it," he says aloud without meaning to. The words are like pulling a stopper, and everything begins to drain. "It's always my fault. I left my mother and Tarrlok behind. My first boyfriend and his brother died in an altercation that I started. My first girlfriend had the good sense to leave me, because I kept putting my hedonistic lifestyle above her. Then there was a chain of affairs. I always pushed them away the second I felt any sort of respect for them, because respect leads to love, and everything I love breaks." The decades of experience are fading from his confidence, and he's speaking too quickly, as if he has reverted back to a scared fourteen-year-old, on his own against the world. He looks at Korra for support, but she's staring at him as if shocked by his rambling.

"And then Kwan," he continues. "The one I thought was my soul mate. He suffered through my infatuations, carried me through addictions, and stood by my side as I let my power corrupt me. He sacrificed the better part of his life to me, and I tossed him away like a used rag."

He pulls away from her, swallowing hard. "For six years, I sat in jail and mulled over the ways life had personally offended me, and wondered why it was that everything I touch wilts. I was looking outside, but I should have been looking inside all along. The common thread in all my failed relationships is me. This revelation came too late. All the wounds I inflicted as Amon are still festering inside you, and Kwan, and Tarrlok. There is no undoing it.

"Of course I want to spend more time with you. I want to find out if our chemistry is just the drunken stupor of infatuation, or something bigger. I want to know more about you, to grow with you. But the reality is this: we set our paths in motion years ago, and that is not easily changed. My life is set - I will be in jail until I rot. You can still alter your path. And that, Korra, is why we have to end this mission as soon as possible. There are bigger things in this world than our feelings. Right now, the bigger things are that you are the Avatar, and you need help with your corruption."

"You're helping me with my corruption," she insists, and he can tell she's listening, but not really hearing. "Your guided meditation--"

"The corruption is getting stronger every day. Meditation won't be enough for long."

With a huff, she folds her arms over her chest.

"You know I'm right," he says quietly.
She doesn't unfurl her arms, but she doesn't protest, either. He decides not to press her.

"Here." He rises to retrieve her lunch, then sets it on the bed in front of her. "Eat, and then we'll meet downstairs to go over our attack plan."

He turns to leave, but she says, "Wait."

As he turns to face her, her hand darts out to grab his collar. She pulls him in, their lips meeting. For a moment, he lets himself sink into the kiss. *If only we could stay here. If only this could be my future, right here, with her.*

When she pulls away, her cheeks are dark. "Look, I'm still mad at you, okay? But I didn't thank you for your help, so I had to give you a kiss."

Noatak is a little thrown off by her abruptly changing moods; he wonders if it's just part of her passionate nature, or if it's a symptom of the corruption.

"Would you like me to eat with you?" he asks, and when she nods, he sits beside her and pulls his own meal out of the bag.

It seems like years since they first shared a meal in silence like this, not days. It's so comfortable now that he's not sure he can enjoy eating alone. But that's exactly what he'll have to do, once he gets back to prison, because Tarrlok will be released. His mouth suddenly goes so dry that he coughs.

"You okay?" asks Korra.

He wishes fervently for a glass of wine to wet his mouth. The words escape before he can stop them: "I can't go back."

She's watching him - he can see it in his periphery - but he can't bring himself to look at her. He wants to take back the words, but the more he gets to know her, the harder it is to censor himself.

"I forgot what the world was like," he says. "I had Tarrlok in prison, and I had Kwan before that, and when I go back now, I will have no one. I'll be alone, for the first time in nearly thirty years. That wasn't a problem when I didn't think I would return, but now..." He trails off as he forces himself to look at her. How can express what he's thinking? *You've reminded me of how beautiful life is. I can't die, not now.*

"Maybe your problem is the same as mine," she says. "Until Asami died, I was always surrounded by people, and measured my worth on what I did for them, and how they thought of me. I wasn't really getting to know myself through *myself*, but through the way other people perceived me. It worked okay until the day I ended up alone, and I had to start figuring out for myself who I was."

He considers. There's no denying that his entire life has revolved around how others perceived him - first his father, then lovers, then his followers, and finally Tarrlok. Maybe that is what scares him so much about being alone. There are things about himself he doesn't want to explore, and without Tarrlok to distract him, self-reflection is all he'll have to keep himself occupied.

"Sometimes you are surprisingly wise for your age." His hand reaches across to squeeze hers.

"And sometimes I'm surprisingly naive." She squeezes back, then returns to her food, staring into the bowl. "I mean, you're right about the corruption. I do need to get help for it, sooner rather than later. It's just, I'm surprised by how much I like being around you. I don't want this mission to end."
Her words are so flattering that his heart warms, but he knows it isn't the entire truth.

"That's not all, is it?" he asks. "You're starting to like it. The corruption. You're conflicted about giving it up." She looks at him with such strong shock that he watches carefully for the slightest red flicker in her eyes.

"You're talking about it like you understand," she says. "Is that how you felt about your bloodbending?"

He nods. "There were two sides of myself, constantly at war: the side that wanted to maximise my power, and the side that wanted to live life without it." His lips twist into a frown. "At first, I personified one as my father, one as my mother, and my wish to live as my mother would want kept me under control, but as I got older, the lust for power grew. I tried to sate it in other ways - drown it with intoxication, vent it in intimate settings, redirect it into my career. It didn't work: I lost myself, and it was all because I let the two sides of myself get confused."

"What do you mean?"

"I let myself think I was using bloodbending to fight for an era of peace. I was indulging the powerful side of myself under the pretence that it was my pacifist side, and so I barrelled headlong into it with no restraint. Denial was my downfall, Korra. Don't let it be yours. The moment you find yourself justifying your actions to yourself is the moment you have lost control."

His words seem to weigh on her; she hunkers deeper into the bed beside him, shoulders slumped.

They finish their meal in silence, and he's just gathering the empty containers when she says, "Noatak?"

He doesn't think he's ever going to adapt to her using his proper name; his pulse races every time. "Yes?"

"Let's compromise." She stands to face him. "We take them down and bring them to Chief Beifong today, but tell her we need the night to chase down a final thread and wrap up the mission. Tomorrow morning, we'll return, but tonight will be ours. Just a few more hours together."

One last night together would give them proper closure, and surely a few hours won't make much difference to her state. Besides, maybe he can use the night to convince her to return his bending - for real, this time.

He nods, and she smiles.

\*\*\*\*\*\*

Qing has been flipping a dagger for the past half-hour, the metal handle clanging every time it makes contact with the her rings. Kwan is normally able to tune out background noise, but not when he's contained in a tiny hotel room, surrounded by dozens of traps, waiting for the slightest indication that Amon is approaching. The walls are closing in on him, and the clangs are getting louder.

"Can you stop that?" he finally snaps.

Qing's eyes narrow, but she slips the knife back into her boot.

The silence is even worse; now all he can hear is the faint ringing of his ears, and the occasional motor car passing by outside the window. Every time his eyes dart to the clock, he swears the
second hand is ticking backwards.

"I hate this," he blurs. "We don't even know if they're coming." Hiding and stealth have never been his favoured strategies; he has always aggressively pursued his prey with the goal of beating the shit out of it.

"They might not come," his lieutenant concedes. She cocks a brow at him. "I could skulk around a bit, try to figure out where they're staying. Bring the fight to them."

He shakes his head. "Our best chance is to stage our fight here. We know the layout, and they don't." When she looks disappointed, he adds, "Or were you just looking for an excuse to get out of this room?"

"It's stifling."

"You used to do surveillance missions all the time."

"I was younger then. More tolerant." She stretches her legs, and her knees crack. "Less achy."

He knows that feeling; his hips hurt from sitting so long. He almost asks, *When did we get so old?*, but he already knows the answer. Spirits, what he wouldn't give to go back a couple decades and make some very different choices. At least, that's what his head tells him, so why does that thought hurt his heart?

"In your midnight chats with Amon," he says, and her eyes lock onto him. He reads there what he's already thinking: this is a dangerous area of discussion.

"Did he ever talk about me?" he finishes.

Her eyes soften, and she nods. "Constantly."

"Good things?"

"Mostly, yeah."

The question is going to reveal so many vulnerabilities that he almost doesn't ask it, and when he does, his voice cracks: "Do you think he actually loved me?"

"Yes. No question." She pauses. "Where is this going?"

He swallows hard. "I've been thinking a lot about forgiveness-

"No. Stop right there." Her eyes flash. "He almost killed you, Kwan, and then you almost killed him. What you two had is over."

The intensity of her reaction surprises him, and he pulls back. "I was just thinking-

"Don't." Her jaw trembles. "I went back to my husband, again and again, because I thought he would change. Do not make the same mistake. Focus on the last six years, and how miserable you were. Focus on how badly he hurt you. Please."

She looks so shaken that he regrets bringing it up. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Well, you did." She turns and marches for the door, deftly stepping around several traps.

"Where are you going?" he asks.
"Getting some food. I'll grab you something."

"No alcohol," he says sternly, because he knows she might go overboard with it if he upset her enough, and he needs her to be alert. She turns to roll her eyes at him before she ducks through the door.

He sighs. She read between the lines too well. It's as if seeing Amon falling backwards off that roof set waves in motion, which gradually eroded all the bad memories and leaving only the good. He misses what they had, even if it was all built on lies. Their bodies were in perfect harmony, both on the battlefield and off, and they connected on a deep, emotional level. While he was never very sentimental, and he didn't voice it often, he always thought of the man as his soul mate.

Deep down, he believes they could work if they started again. And that's the problem: so long as he believes that, his mind is going to betray him. As much as his brain warns him to listen to Qing, he has always been a man of instinct and heart rather than logic.

If Amon walked through the door this very second and held out his hand, Kwan would take it. He hates himself for it, but it's the truth.

.*.*.*.

Korra watches Noatak's finger trace lines on a piece of paper, which is serving as a makeshift representation of Kwan's hotel room. While they can only guess at the layout of Kwan's room, Noatak knows enough about Equalist strategies to walk her through several possible scenarios. The most unnerving section so far was the discussion about traps: electricity, blade, and gases. For the first time in her life, Korra plans on going into battle with a water canister by her side. During Tarrlok's raid of the Equalist base, she saw how useful waterbending could be to defend against gas canisters.

Next Noatak talks about Qing's fighting style, outlining strengths and weaknesses. Part way through, she interrupts him.

"Maybe I should focus down Kwan," she says. "I fought him enough times to know his style, and your history with him might make it difficult for you to take him down."

He looks a bit miffed. "I will not let emotion interfere with my tasks."

"I believe you. But you're still in love with the guy. Don't make yourself suffer through another fight with him if you don't have to." She remembers too clearly how it played out a few days ago, and even though she's certain Noatak is sufficiently enamoured with her to avoid the temptation of leaping into Kwan's arms again - especially after the men faced each other down on the rooftop - she can't imagine this showdown will be easy on his emotions.

He eyes her, and she wonders if he's weighing his feelings for Kwan, trying to determine how strong they still are, and how much of a distraction they might be. "Very well," he agrees finally. "You will focus on Kwan, and I will focus on Qing. But you should still know her weaknesses and strengths in case something goes awry."

If Korra were well, Qing wouldn't pose much of a threat, either, even as an unknown. The problem is that her connection to the elements feels weak. Aside from the weaker-than-usual water whips in the shower, she has tried a few subtle bending manoeuvres throughout the course of the day. She hasn't been able to bend so much as a puff of air or, more disturbingly, a flicker of flame. Fire always came easily to her.
Her teeth clench. She is at the cusp of greatness; she just has to figure this out. There has to be a way to keep the power of bloodbending while still keeping a strong connection with the other elements. If she just keeps working at taming the corruption, then her power-

The word "power" jolts her. She remembers Noatak's discussion about not justifying it to herself. *That's the moment when you're no longer in control.*

"Any questions?" he asks, and she realizes he has finished outlining their strategy.

Maybe she should ask about the mission, but she's starting to panic. "Can you tell me about the first time you realized you were losing control?" she blurts.

His eyes narrow, just a tiny bit. "Do I have to repeat any parts of the plan?"

"No, I was listening. I just..." She looks down. "It really helps me to hear about your struggles. Makes me feel like I'm not so weak, because I know you're strong."

"You aren't weak," he says, and he pulls out a wooden chair and sinks into it. "But I understand. Seeing the world's most powerful being echo some of my own struggles is giving me some solace as well. Though I would rather neither of us go through it."

She sits as well, and waits.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?" he asks.

"If you're willing to tell me."

He nods. "The first time I really lost control was when I was eighteen. I mentioned earlier that my first boyfriend died in an altercation that I started." His eyes lower. "His name was Lao, and his younger brother was Pebble. I had been travelling with them for nearly four years. We started in Ba Sing Se for the first few months, and then we were successfully recruited into the Order of the Tiger Crane, an offshoot of the Kyoshi Warriors."

"That's where you learned to chi-block," she blurts, because she always wondered.

"Yes. After two years of basic training, they brought us into the monastery, and we lived as monks, training with their elite. As we gained seniority, we began to do community service in the form of patrols, accompanied by our mentor.

"One patrol, we came across a gang of waterbenders tormenting a shopkeeper. Our mentor told us not to interfere, because she was going for backup. However, I knew I could defensively waterbend without being detected, and I was eager to prove myself. I rushed in, and my friends followed.

"I was in over my head; there were too many of them." His fingers slowly trace the border of the paper. "I couldn't protect everyone. Pebble went down first, and Lao went mad with rage. He charged right into the line of fire, and dropped a few seconds later.

"That's when I lost control. I bloodbent all of the attackers unconscious, but in the most brutal ways I could imagine, bursting arteries and strangling organs. When I turned around, my mentor was standing behind me; she had seen the whole thing. We rushed Pebble and Lao to the hospital, and at first, I thought she wasn't going to say anything about my bloodbending. It turns out she was just waiting, because she didn't have the heart to do it while my friends were dying." He pauses. "They didn't even make it a full day."

"I'm sorry." Her hand closes over his.
"It was many years ago," he says, but he falls silent, his face drawn.

"What happened with your mentor?" she asks, prompting him to continue.

"The morning after they passed, my mentor and the senior board met to discuss my bloodbending. I was discharged from the Order. Because of my reputation as an exceptional student, and because of the death of my friends, they opted not to go to the authorities, instead wiping my identity from their records. It was as if I had never existed. For the second time, I took a new name and started over." His head shakes. "Part of me wishes they had legally intervened. Avatar Aang could have taken my bending, and I might have lived a very different life."

"I don't think you were wrong for retaliating the way you did," she says.

He glances at her, and she sees a small smile of gratitude on his lips. "No, I suppose you wouldn't. I've seen how fiercely you protect the ones you love."

_Mako. She stares at Noatak, frozen. She suddenly hears Mako's voice in her head: He almost killed us, Korra! And you slept with him on the night we broke up? What are you thinking?_

This train of thought will lead nowhere good, so she says, "Thank you for sharing that." She's not sure what to say - _I feel much better now_ seems far too callous, even though she does. It really does help to hear about his own struggles with the temptation of bloodbending, even if their situations are a bit different.

"I haven't spoken about them for many years," says Noatak, still lost in thought. "I didn't handle it well. It was my first time losing a loved one, and it sent me into a crisis about mortality that I'm not sure I ever recovered from."

"Is that when you started drinking?" she asks curiously.

He nods. "A stronger man would have learned from his mistakes, used the opportunity to become a better person. I ran away. I always run away. It's easier to run away than to grow."

The more she learns about him, the more she realizes that beneath his persona, his brave façade, he's just as miserable and scared as she is. Is this what everyone is like, deep down? Impulsively, she leans forward to wrap her arms around him. His face buries into her neck.

"Let's get this mission started," she says gently. The sooner they get it over with, the sooner they can spend more time together.

He clears his throat and pulls away from the hug. "Excuse me for a moment." He walks to the kitchen, and she hears him running water into a glass. _Maybe it wasn't the best idea to send him back to a traumatic memory right before you go on a mission_, she scolds herself.

The more she considers her story, the more her heart breaks for him; it can't have been easy to watch his boyfriend die at the hands of benders. Between that and Yakone, his anger towards benders makes a lot of sense. For the first time, she feels as if she really understands his point of view, not just on a surface level. It doesn't excuse anything that he did, but it makes sense. She wonders if she would have done anything differently; had she been in his shoes, she likes to think she is too strong to run away, but that's exactly what she has been doing for the past year.

The water tap runs again, and he returns with a glass of water. "Do you think you can heal?"

"Should be able to," she says confidently, but when she tries, nothing happens. She sighs and lets her hands drop. _It's getting worse, so quickly. This is not good._
"Sorry," she mutters. "We'll have to use the salve."

"It will do." He hesitates. "Are you well, other than that?"

"Fine," she lies, but her heart races.

She tries not to notice the worry on his face.
XXIV: Bloodbender

XXIV

Bloodbender

Noatak and Korra stand side-by-side at the doorway. Korra takes in a deep breath and smells the menthol of the healing salve and a hint of cinnamon from Noatak's scent. She meant for the breath to steady her pulse, but now her heart beats even faster.

"Ready?" she asks, trying to keep the tremble from her voice. She has always loved a good fight, but this mission has grown far beyond a regular conflict. This is the closing chapter to a far-too-short era of her life. When she tries to imagine what her future looks like - even just the next few days - she sees a gaping black void.

Noatak reaches to his side and intertwines his fingers with hers. "I'm sorry for dragging you into this, Korra."

She looks up at him, surprised. Her instinct is to dismiss it - I don't regret anything - but she regrets a lot, like hurting Mako.

Overall, however, she's learning some important lessons about herself. She's learned that keeping herself occupied keeps her depression at bay, and she's regaining her confidence. Most of all, she definitely does not regret falling for Noatak, even though she's sure she's going to pay for it later.

Noatak. She studies his handsome features, the gentleness on his face, and her throat tightens. Something about the finality of the pending battle makes her realize just how hard she has fallen for him.

"Don't be sorry," she says. "I agreed to join the mission. Besides..." She blushes. "It hasn't all been bad."

He smiles, and she smiles back.

One last kiss, and then they step through the door.

They're silent as the walk to the hotel, but he doesn't drop her hand, and his thumb strokes hers. The gesture is reassuring. It's comfortable to stroll through the crowd hand-in-hand like this, and it makes her long for more time together. Maybe she can figure out a way to get him exonerated for his crimes. She's the Avatar, after all; she has a lot of pull. At the very least, maybe she can arrange for him to be transferred to a low-security prison or a halfway house, where she might be allowed to escort him on day passes.

Besides, she intends to demonstrate to the world that bloodbending isn't inherently evil. Right now, as backwards as it is, it seems as if the courts are more afraid of bloodbenders than of war criminals, and that might work in their favour if she can convince the Council that bloodbending is just like any other form of bending.

Noatak glances down at her. "You should probably keep your face hidden for anonymity," he says gently, and she realizes she has been staring at him, no doubt with a look of blushing adoration.

Mortified, she pulls her hood far over her face, keeping her eyes trained on the ground. Trying to focus, she runs through her role over and over again in her mind. She's so distracted that she doesn't
notice Noatak fall behind her as they reach Kwan's hotel.

"Korra, I'm going to chi-block you before we enter," he says, and the words completely negate all the pleasant thoughts she had about him a few minutes ago.

She whirs. "What the hell?"

Noatak's face is grim. "We can't take the chance that you might lose control." His hand clamps onto her shoulder to spin her around, but she knocks it away.

"I've been controlling it just fine!" Rage flares within her, burning the back of her throat. "What gives you the right to decide whether or not I can use it? I'm not your goddamned lieutenant or something. You can't just make a call and enforce it on me. We're supposed to be equal partners here."

"We are equals in all other things, but when it comes to the Avatar State, your judgement has been compromised."

"Compromised!" She has the sudden urge to blast a puff of flame at his face and march back to the house. Let him clean up his own damned mess!

"I'm sorry, Korra," he says, and he seems so genuine that her anger begins to subside. "I don't mean to treat you as though you can't make your own decisions, but I need to protect myself." He hesitates. "And, even though it isn't my place, I feel the urge to protect you. Think about how you would feel if you lost control."

She sighs. He isn't exactly wrong about her instability, but she's still feeling defensive. "Well, Lin expressly said that it didn't matter if he died-"

"You and I both know that Kwan is more valuable to police alive than dead." His face softens. "Besides, you aren't a killer, Korra. The lives you have taken in your lifetime still haunt you. I can see it in the way you spoke of it, when you told me about the circumstances of Miss Sato's passing."

"I can handle it." Her jaw trembles so badly that she can barely form the words. She thinks of Asami's panicked eyes and ashen skin. Then Mako's eyes rise in her mind, wide with betrayal. How can she pretend she's in control, when she did that to her own boyfriend? What if, in this battle, she loses control, and ends up hurting Noatak? Her heart twists, and she clutches at her forehead.

"Do it," she mutters before she changes her mind.

The jab makes her wince, but she does feel a little more secure after it's over. When she turns to face him again, he's wearing a look of hesitation, as if he feels badly about suggesting it in the first place. He's worried he offended me. It's bizarre that he feels badly when she is the out-of-control one, the one who needs constant baby-sitting.

"Let's just go," she mutters, and he nods.

They stride through the lobby with confidence, as if they belong. Korra's heart pounds as she watches the front desk clerks with her peripheral vision, expecting them to recognize her, or somehow sense that they're there to create conflict. The clerks don't even lift their heads.

They pass beyond the view of the clerks, and the hallway branches ahead of them.

"Which way?" asks Korra.
"Room 103. Check to the right," says Noatak, heading left. After a few steps, she sees the room numbers climbing, not dropping, so she turns to catch up to him.

Noatak stands in front of a door down the hall. He slowly crouches down, examining the cracks in the door for traps, and then peers into the keyhole.

Korra counts: it's three rooms from the end. She waits until Noatak looks up, then cocks her head toward the lobby. He nods: he's confident that he can pick the lock.

"Let's do this," she mutters to herself, bouncing on the balls of her feet with anticipation.

Holding eye contact with him, she sticks out one finger, then two, then three, establishing their rhythm; he mirrors the motions perfectly. Confident they're synchronized, she turns to stride back to the front entrance. In her mind, she continues counting the same rhythm: four, five, six...

As she circles the outside of the building, it becomes apparent that counting to fifty, as Noatak requested of her, is not going to leave her with a lot of time. The hotel is a lot bigger than she expected, and the back wall is set only a few feet away from a steep cliff overlooking the city. She hugs the back wall, carefully hurrying along it, as she counts the windows. Three from the end: there. The curtains are drawn, and a cursory glance suggests there are no traps lining the frame. She hopes she has the correct room.

Forty-three, forty-four...

Normally, she would use a concussive gust of airbending to smash the window in, but a quick test reveals she still can't bend even a puff of air. Gritting her teeth, she uses earthbending to tear a lump of earth from the ground. It's a strain to lift, and she groans. She's losing her earthbending, too?

Forty-nine, fifty.

Hoping she and Noatak are still relatively synchronized, she hurls the earth at the window. The glass shatters, the earth kicking up a cloud of dust. She barrels through, then lands on the bed in a crouch, just in time to see Noatak burst through the door, barely visible through the dust. He dodges a wire trap and a falling weight so deftly that he must have anticipated them.

The dust settles to reveal Kwan standing between them, backing toward the wall. His kali sticks are in hand, and he's awkwardly trying to pull a gas mask over his face. His eyes tick above Korra's head.

Shit!

Instinctively, she rolls to the side, twisting mid-air and uncapping her water flask. Her eyes lock onto a gas canister that had been carefully set above the window; it's already hissing.

As she lands in stance on the floor, she encases the canister in ice. It falls to the bed, disabled.

"Korra," barks Noatak. "Behind you."

She spins. Her heel is a hair's breadth from another wire trap, a second canister ready to fire. Breathing hard, she quickly freezes that one, too.

Her relief is short-lived as she hears Kwan's kali sticks buzz to life. She barrels toward him, but almost trips over another wire between them; she leaps over it just in time.

How many traps are there? she thinks as she closes the distance. Noatak flanks their target's other side. Kwan is keeping his back to the wall, and his furrowed brow and bared teeth show that he
knows he's cornered; his eyes tick between them. Korra falls into stance, waiting to see who will make the first move.

"You're outnumbered," says Noatak. "Stand down and surrender."

Kwan's sticks waver, but don't drop. For a moment, their hum is the only noise in the room.

"Where's Qing?" demands Noatak in the deep, threatening voice he used as Amon.

"I sent her home," says his ex-lieutenant, his voice growling as well. "I was wrong to involve her in this mess in the first place."

Korra buys his answer without even questioning it, but there's an advantage to having a partner who had a two-decade relationship with their quarry.

"You're lying," says Noatak.

Kwan's eyes narrow. "No. After your Avatar bloodbent her, I decided it was too risky for Qing to stay on the field."

The words seem to startle Noatak; his gaze locks onto Korra, and she realizes he was unconscious when she bloodbent Qing. He looks disappointed in her, almost sad, and her jaw clenches. You don't have the right to judge me, not after all the times you used bloodbending yourself.

Kwan must catch the gaze that passes between them, because he grins. "I see. You didn't know she was using her bloodbending on us. I guess your little plan of using the Avatar as your guard dog got away on you." He shakes his head. "So like you, Amon, to think you could control the world's most powerful being. So like you to underestimate everyone around you."

Without warning, a kali stick thrusts at Noatak's gut; he spins around it and drives two fingers toward Kwan's neck. Forearm meets forearm as they block each other's blows.

Rushing to her partner's aid, Korra drives her fist in Kwan's direction, intending to firebend a blast of flame. Nothing happens. She tries to lift a chunk of the earth from her earlier assault on the window, and it doesn't move.

With a howl of frustration, she falls back on the only bending that seems to be working: waterbending. She pulls a strand of water from the flask and attempts to wrap it around Kwan's wrist, but he moves through it without even noticing it.

Even my waterbending is weak! She begins to panic.

Noatak grunts with pain and staggers backwards as a blow lands on his ear. As Kwan moves in to follow up, Korra darts forward with a punch. If she has to resort to pure martial arts, she will.

Her distraction works; Kwan zeroes in on her, and Noatak takes advantage of it by knocking one of the sticks from his hands. Torn between two targets, with only one kali stick remaining, Kwan ricochets between them, but he's tiring fast. Noatak manages to knock the other stick away, and Korra kicks out the back of Kwan's knee, dropping him to his shins.

She clamps a hand on his shoulder, locking him in place. Noatak stands before him and clasps his arms behind his back.

"It's time to be reasonable," he says.
Kwan spits at his face, and Noatak just barely dodges to avoid it.

"That's hardly reasonable."

"Fuck you, Amon. If you think I'm going to be reasonable after all you did-" begins Kwan.

The door opens, and a blur flies at Korra. She dodges and steps back just in time to avoid a pair of bolas; they fly through the smashed window.

Her face snaps to a crouched figure in the doorway. Qing.

Already reacting, Noatak drives his fingers at Kwan's neck in an attempt to knock him unconscious, but Kwan rolls out of the way.

"Mask!" Kwan barks at Qing.

Mask? Korra barely has time to register the word when she sees Qing pulling a mask over her head, and Kwan dropping to the ground. His hand is reaching for another canister, one that hasn't been frozen.

"Korra!" yells Noatak, but it's too late for either of them to run. She sends a blast of water at the canister, but her flask is almost empty, and she can't encase it completely. The slow hiss of gas starts to fill the room.

Noatak begins to hack and cough, and she feels her eyes tingle.

If only I could airbend, I could clear the room and protect us! Instead, she dives forward and slides up to the canister, grabs it, then tosses it through the open window. There's enough residual gas in the room that her eyes and nose begin to stream. Coughs burst from her chest so violently that she doubles over, gagging. She touches her hand to her nose to check for blood – none there, but spirits, she can barely breathe.

Get it together! You're in battle, she scolds herself, but she can't quite clear the effects of the gas. She feels as if someone rubbed onion on every surface of her body, inside and out.

Every hair on her body stands on end as she hears Noatak's sharp, pained yell. She wipes her eyes, desperately trying to clear them, and sees him drop to his knees, clutching his arm. His teeth are bared, and he's still giving small coughs, even through his pain. Qing stands behind him, holding her stance. She must have chi-blocked him.

Protective instinct swells within Korra. She yells and charges at Qing and Kwan. Her watering eyes obscure her vision, but she doesn't need it: she can sense every drop of blood in their bodies with perfect clarity. Her hands twist in the air. Both attackers drop flat to the ground, twitching.

She can feel Noatak's disapproval in his racing pulse, can feel him wiping his eyes as he tries to stare at her. She doesn't let any shame show in her stance. Bloodbending is her only reliable weapon right now. He's smart enough to understand that.

To his credit, he doesn't speak out against her actions, maintaining their appearance of solidarity. With a few closed-mouth coughs, he drags himself to his feet. "Surrender," he says to their captives, his voice gravelled from the gas. He's still clutching his arm.

The air is clean enough now that the sting in Korra's eyes is finally fading. She wipes away sticky tears. Kwan and Qing come into view, both prone, and she's surprised to see their bodies vibrating, their eyes wide. The bloodbending feels so easy and effortless that she assumed she was barely
holding them in place, but she has completely overpowered them. Experimentally, she lowers her hands, and finds it's easy to psychically maintain the bloodbending, even at this strength. Her lips purse. *At least one type of bending is working in my favour.*

Noatak's gaze meets hers, and she cocks her brows at him to ask, *you all right?* He gives a barely perceptible nod, then clasps his hands behind his back and strides to stand between the restrained Equalists.

"Surrender," he says again.

"Yes. I surrender." Kwan's voice is distorted with strain. "Take me. Leave Qing."

"What?" rasps Qing. "No."

"I'll come peacefully. Let her go."

"Kwan, don't you-"

"Do it!" snaps Kwan.

Noatak stands tall, apparently fully recovered; it's almost as if the gas hasn't impacted him at all, and Korra admires his resilience. "Release them," he says to her.

She has no qualms with that request; Kwan's the one they want, and the sooner they end this, the sooner they can begin their last night together. She drops the bloodbending.

The two captives rise to their feet. The corner of Noatak's mouth lifts at her, and she returns the smile. It didn't go as smoothly as they had hoped, but it's finally over.

Qing spins so quickly that no one sees it coming.

The heel of her palm drives into Noatak's nose. He reacts in time to lean back, but the blow still connects, and the crunch reverberates through Korra's body.

Time slows.

Korra hears herself yell his name. She sees him drop, eyes clenched with pain. A shard of sympathy pain spikes through her face like steel, and makes her eyes burn even more strongly than the gas.

*This ends now.*

Her hand claws the air, and she launches bloodbending at Qing as if throwing a boulder. The woman slams to the ground, her body rippling with crunching spasms.

Kwan howls and rushes forward to her aid, and Korra pins him to the ground, leaving him restrained, but unharmed. Kwan, she needs alive, but the other one...the other one...

"Korra." The tone of Noatak's voice is wrong; he sounds horrified. She's protecting him. He should be grateful.

He stands, shaking so hard that it's visible even across the room. His skin is pale and blood trickles from his nose, and the sight of his blood makes her even angrier. She clenches her fist, and Qing's body falls limp. Kwan struggles against the bloodbending, yelling his lieutenant's name over and over, but Korra keeps him pinned.
"Let them go," growls Noatak.

He's still not grateful – why isn't he grateful? "She hurt you. You gave her the opportunity to walk, and she hurt you." The words come out in a sob, and she realizes that tears are streaming down her cheeks.

Noatak takes a step forward. "Korra, look at her."

Her eyes lock on to Qing's body: the skin is greying, the colour just like Asami's body, that night when Korra tried so hard to revive her... Panicking, she feels for a pulse and finds none.

_Oh spirits. She's dead...she's dead_!

This time, she doesn't even have the Avatar State to blame. This is _her_, completely conscious; she chose to kill.

_No! I won't kill anyone else. I won't._

She tugs at the blood deep in the woman's heart, trying to coax the organ into beating again. _Come on..._ A cry of frustration leaves her lips. There's a faint quiver of a pulse, but it fades away the instant she stops manipulating it. _Come on! Keep beating._

Noatak closes his eyes as if in great pain. Slowly, he walks up to Korra and puts a hand on her shoulder.

"Korra, release them."

"I can't," she sobs. He's interrupting her concentration; she needs to undo this. She massages Qing's heart, trying to force it into a steady rhythm. As she loosens her grip, it finally seems to be beating on its own, and she holds her breath. _Yes; keep beating, keep beating..._  

"I'm sorry," says Noatak flatly.

Too late, she realizes that he thinks she's still attacking Qing, not saving her. "Wait-"

His knuckles drive up her flank, and her bloodbending falls away.

"No!" she shrieks. She tries to sense Qing's body - she needs to make sure her heart kept beating - but it's futile: she's completely cut off from the element. She howls and whirls on Noatak.

"I was _saving_ her!"

He's already pushing past her, striding toward the window.

Korra turns back to see Kwan crawling across the floor to the fallen woman, crying her name - not a monster, just a man, mourning a dear friend. A dear friend Korra chose to kill. She's frozen in place by the sight. Should she apologize? Is that even appropriate? _Oh spirits, please let her live. Please let her live..._  

Kwan looks up at her, and his eyes burn with fury. "Get the fuck out of here!" he snarls.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she runs for the window.
XXV: Hospital

Chapter Notes

(whoops, totally forgot to upload the last chapter here when I put it up at ffnet, so I posted this one + previous at the same time! Sorry!)

XXV

Hospital

What have I done? Kwan cradles Qing to his chest and rises to his feet. This is all his fault - he should have sent her back to the base, where she would have been safe. He should have forgotten about Amon and disappeared.

Leaving through the lobby will attract too much attention; he's already going to have to do a lot of explaining about the state of their room. Running for the window, he gingerly climbs over the frame, careful not to hit any broken glass.

The Avatar is still in sight, running around the corner of the building ahead, but he doesn't care - the attackers are retreating, so he's in no danger, and Qing is his highest priority right now. She's barely breathing in his arms, and her skin is still grey. "Hang in there," he mutters, carefully avoiding the cliff.

Once he's on the street, he awkwardly tries to flag down a cab while still holding her against his chest, but no one wants to stop for him. He can't say he blames them; he wouldn't stop for a wild-eyed man holding a woman who looks dead, either.

The hospital is too far away to go on foot, and he doesn't trust an ambulance to arrive in time to save her. There's only one sure way to get a ride. Gritting his teeth, he steps into the path of an oncoming taxi. The brakes squeal, and Kwan closes his eyes, mostly hoping he won't be killed on the spot.

He hears a blaring horn, then feels the soft nudge of a bumper against his shin as the vehicle barely manages to stop in time. "What the fuck are you doing, you asshole?" hollers the taxi driver.

"Republic City Hospital," yells Kwan, and he hurries Qing into the back seat before the driver can leave them behind.

As they drive, the driver casts anxious glances in the rear view mirror. "She dead?"

"No." Kwan presses his cheek to Qing's forehead. The skin is cold and clammy.

"She's not going to die in my cab, is she?"

"Just drive," snaps Kwan.

At the hospital, he pulls out the biggest denomination of yuans he can find in Qing's wallet - he'll pay her back later. "Keep the change," he yells to the driver as he races Qing to the entrance.
Bright white lights blind him, and nurses and patients are scurrying around him like spider-rats. He stands in the centre of the chaos, stunned, until a nurse runs over to him. Then he's answering her questions by rote, none of them sinking in enough to make sense. Qing is whisked away to surgery, and he's alone, staring dumbly after the stretcher.

He finds himself in a cold room with hard wooden benches and four blank white walls. Three other people sit on the benches, two men and a woman; all three of them have drawn faces and sunken postures. A grandfather clock is in the corner, chipped and faded, no doubt a donation from someone's estate. Its tick is incessant, and it reminds Kwan of the tick of Qing's dagger against her rings only a hour or two earlier. He rakes his fingers into his hair and takes a shuddering breath.

He hears the door swing open, and then feels a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Mr. Kwan?"

She's dead. She's here to tell me that Qing is dead. He swallows hard, then sits up, and his fear must show on his face, because the nurse holds up a hand.

"No, no news yet. I'm just here to check up on you." She's young, with reddish-brown hair and wide brown eyes, and he wonders if she's old enough to be any good at her job.

As she sits beside him and begins to take his pulse, he jerks his arm away. "I'm fine."

"You said you were both in a fight. I need to make sure you're okay." She shines a light into his eyes, and he flinches and pushes her hand away.

"I said, I'm fine," he growls.

"Are you sure?" She glances down, and he notices his knees are bouncing. He tries to slow them, but then his hands start to fidget instead.

"My best friend is in surgery," he snaps. "What do you expect?"

Her eyes are so sympathetic that he sighs and buries his face in his hands. "She was only there because of me. If she dies..." He can't even finish the thought.

"Do you need something to help you relax?" asks the girl, opening her bag, and that's when he realizes she's not a nurse, but a doctor. How is she old enough to be a doctor? Or am I just getting so old that everyone under thirty looks like a kid?

"Do you have some hard liquor in that bag?" he mutters.

She smiles kindly and gives him a small white pill. "This will relax your muscles, which should make sure your aches from the fight aren't too bad tomorrow. It'll also relax you mentally, so don't be alarmed if you feel a bit sedated."

"Sedating me? Worried I'm going to start to a fight in here?"

"Yes," she says, and he can't hide a laugh at her bluntness.

"Thanks." He pops the pill into his mouth and swallows it dry. He could use a little medical courage. "Any news about my friend?"

"She's still in surgery. A nurse will come speak with you when she's out. Hang in there." She pats his shoulder, then moves on to the next patient.

By the time a nurse calls for him an hour later, his world is hazy and white and warm from the
drug. The nurse tells him that Qing is through surgery - though she doesn't outright say it, the speed of it suggests they were using waterbending. His disgust with bending doesn't pierce his medical haze. He's just glad she's alive.

"The first few hours will be critical," says the nurse. "You can sit with her, if you like. You won't be in our way."

"Yes," he says instantly.

They lead him to a small private room. Qing's skin isn't quite as sickly as before, and her breaths are even, if rattling a bit. He sits beside her and his hand finds hers.

"What are her chances?" he asks quietly as the nurse is about to leave. She only smiles sadly at him and departs, which does nothing to answer his question.

The haze of the drugs makes the lines of her face shimmer; she looks almost ethereal. Spirits, this is all his fault. He should have guessed that she wouldn't step aside and let him get captured. Loyalty is both her greatest strength and her greatest weakness.

He thinks of the Avatar, of her curled lips and flared eyelids as she dropped Qing. She wore a look of delight on her face.

No. This isn't my fault.

This all goes back to Amon. He's the one who insisted on working with the Avatar. He's the one who taught her to bloodbend. Qing was absolutely right: any thoughts of forgiveness were stupid. He has his priorities straight now.

If Amon walked through the door this very second and held out his hand, Kwan would spit in his face.

.*.*.*.

Noatak doesn't look behind him as he marches back to their house. Passersby stare at his bloody face, but he ignores them. Once he's a polite distance from the crowd, he spits blood onto the street.

"Noatak, wait." Korra's voice; he hears her running to catch up with him. His teeth clench and he picks up his pace.

Once he gets to the house, he marches upstairs, slams the bathroom door behind him, then slides down it to the floor. He wants to weep, but he's too proud. Besides, tears will just make his nose hurt more than it already does.

It's hypocritical to be this upset. Anything Korra has done with bloodbending, he has done worse. What haunts him is the look on her face when she did that first pulse. She enjoyed it. She enjoyed it, and she wasn't in the corrupted state. Korra, plain old Avatar Korra, enjoyed bloodbending.

The worst part is that his gut reaction was jealousy. He misses that control. That's how terrible a person he is: the woman he loves was bloodbending a woman who was once a dear friend, and he was jealous. It doesn't matter how much time passes: he is rotten to the core. No wonder everything he touches decays. Tarrlok had the right idea, and for the thousandth time, he curses himself for saving them from the explosion. No, more than that, he curses himself for not just laying down and dying in that blizzard when he was fourteen. Everyone he has ever met would be better off because of it.
But I still don't want to die. I'm still too selfish to remove myself from this world.

Shakily, he walks over to the mirror and splashes water on his face. Once his face is clean, he gently squeezes the bridge of his nose. It isn't flat-out broken, but maybe a bit cracked. Likely it will swell tomorrow, and leave him with a pair of black eyes.

Korra pounds the door. "Noatak, I need to talk to you."

What can he say to her? I saw the monster in you, and I can't call you out for it, because it was the monster that was in me. I see you sliding deeper and deeper into the life I once knew, and I'm torn between guilt, concern and envy.

"Amon, open the fucking door," she snaps, and that's when he notices what he was too self-absorbed to notice before: she's angry.

The door swings open.

"Only the first blow was out of rage," she blurs. "I was trying to restart her heart. I was trying to save her. I couldn't say it properly, because I was trying to focus."

His jaw clenches. She's already justifying it.

"You shouldn't have stopped me." Her brows drop. "I could have made sure her heart was working, and we could have taken Kwan and dropped Qing off at the hospital."

"It looked as though you lost control," he says, his voice a low growl. "I saw no alternative."

"You should have trusted me!"

"Trusted you? Trust requires honesty." He advances on her, and she takes a step back. "I had to hear through Kwan that you've been using bloodbending without the corrupted Avatar State, and you think I should trust you? I saw the look on your face when you used it. That was not the look of someone who is trying to move past it."

Korra's eyes are narrow. "You have no right to judge anything I do with bloodbending."

He's shaking; he hasn't been this livid in years. This is the type of childish yelling match he would get into in his drunken days, not the mature argument he should be having as a sober adult. He takes a deep breath and tries to control his temper.

"You're right," he says. "I don't. But it's difficult to see you following a path I once walked. I know where it leads."

"You and I are two very different people," she says.

He studies her. "Are we?"

She swallows hard and looks away.

For a moment, they're silent.

"What now?" she mutters. "We didn't finish our mission."

"The rest of our actions proceed as planned," he says. "Tomorrow morning, we will return to the police station. You will return to people who can help you, and I will return to jail."Alone. The word sits in his stomach like jagged stone.
It's all too much - Korra's changing attitude to bloodbending, the outcome of their mission, the inevitable return to prison, the throbbing pain in his nose. He has to get out.

Feigning a wince, he touches the swollen bridge of his nose. "We need more healing salve." He edges past her and strides down the hallway.

He hears her intake of breath, as if she's about to say something, but she must change her mind, because no words follow.

Good. He can't converse any more, not in this state.

Once he's out of sight of the house, he hails a taxi and directs it to the hospital. The nurse at the front desk glances at him.

"Let me guess. Broken nose?"

He shakes his head. "I'm looking for a woman named either Midori or Qing. She would have been admitted as an emergency patient."

The nurse runs a finger down a sheet of paper. "We have a Qing. She's in surgery."

_Still alive. _He feels his shoulders relax, but, perhaps out of guilt, he feels the need to verify it for himself. "May I see her?"

The nurse purses her lips at him. "I said, she's in surgery. You can visit her when she's out. Maybe I should put you down to see a doctor while you're waiting?"

He decides that might not be a bad idea, given that his swelling nose is starting to eat into the lower half of his vision. As he fills out his fake registration details, he says, "Does she have any other visitors?"

"She's in surgery," says the nurse again, and Noatak slowly lifts his chin to glare at her.

His ability to intimidate has not suffered over the years. The snide expression drains from her face.

"If she did, they probably would have been sent home," she says, and he wonders if Kwan would have obeyed such a command.

He settles into the waiting room. While waiting for his name is called, he spends the time flipping idly through outdated newspapers and magazines. One article makes him pause: a small piece on the Avatar, a couple years old. His knuckle slides along the border of her jaw. She looks a little weary in the photo, but still so much happier than she is now. His throat tightens.

_You would be with her right this second, if you weren't such a coward. Are you ever going to outgrow your desire to run away from your problems? _

"Mr. Kanno?" calls a nurse.

The doctor is a young woman, reasonably attractive, with dark auburn hair and brown eyes. Noatak can feel her eyeing him with some interest, but he has no desire to flirt, and she maintains a professional demeanour. After prodding his nose and asking a few questions, she says, "I could send you for some tests, but it seems like it's just a hairline fracture. A short round of healing should fix it right up."

A week ago, the idea of being healed by a waterbender would have seemed abhorrent. "Do what
you need to," he says.

She directs him to a healer down the hall, and he leaves a few minutes later with a healed nose. There's still a bit of residual swelling, and he might still have black eyes tomorrow, but at least the pain is gone. He finds himself nostalgic for the days when Korra healed him, which is ridiculous, firstly because she only did it a few times, and secondly because it was only a few days ago. Being imprisoned and then freed has completely distorted his sense of time.

He sighs. If he's already missing her this much after an hour away from her, how is he going to handle the rest of his life without her? It doesn't matter how he feels about her bloodbending, or what feelings of envy or despair spark within him: he has always insisted that a bender is separate from her bending, and so he will spend his last few hours of freedom focussing on Korra, not her actions. He'll regret it for the rest of his miserable life if they spend their last night together arguing.

He almost heads back to the house, but he needs to make sure Qing is all right first, or his conscience won't let him relax. A much more helpful nurse is that the desk this time; she directs Noatak to a room in Intensive Care.

He hovers outside the doorway, almost too afraid to step inside. *She's still alive,* he reminds himself. *That's the important thing.*

Clenching his fists, he pokes his head into the room. There's a chair by the bed, empty. Qing's skin is still too pale, but at least she's breathing on her own. He settles into place beside her, studying her face. Her unconscious expression is perfectly slack; he hasn't seen her look this peaceful in a couple decades, at least.

"You weren't meant to be a part of this," he says quietly, "and now you've borne the brunt of it. It isn't my place to apologize for what the Avatar did to you, so I won't. You had the opportunity to walk away, and you should have taken it. That being said, I do regret putting you in that position in the first place. I should have expected that you would never turn your back on Kwan." He rakes a hand through his hair. "I also imagine you've borne the brunt of everything I put him through, in the time since my true identity was revealed to the world. You probably volunteered to help him on this mission; you probably wanted to kill me, for all I've done. I don't blame you - you would be a hero to Equalist and bender alike."

He freezes as footsteps echo in the hallway. Slowly, he shifts to his feet and steps away from the chair.

Kwan moves into the doorway, and their eyes lock.

"You," growls Kwan, his lips curling, but there's a stumble in his movements. His pupils are dilated, and he's blinking too hard, as if trying to clear them of an imaginary fog.

"You're drugged," says Noatak.

"I'll still kill you!" The man tries to lunge at him, but he stumbles and falls to his hands and knees. "Fuck," he mutters.

His heart pounding, Noatak backs away. Kwan lifts his head, but now he looks as though he's about to weep.

"Temporary truce?" offers Noatak, settling against a wall.

Kwan's eyes narrow, but he nods and clumsily finds his footing. He staggers to the chair and drops
into it. "Fucking doctor thought I needed to be sedated. If I had known you would come here to gloat-
"
"I'm not gloating."

"So, what, you're apologizing?"

Noatak hesitates. He isn't sure what he's doing, exactly. "I needed to see that she survived."

"Barely."

"I gave her the option to walk."

"You should have known she wouldn't!" Kwan's eyes flash. "And you should have known that training your pet Avatar to bloodbend would backfire on you. You can't just give such a volatile person a toy like that and then be surprised when they start playing with it. You're smarter than that, Amon. This happened because of your wilful ignorance."

There doesn't seem to be any benefit to correcting him, so Noatak is silent. *Let him think I trained Korra. The last thing she needs is for the Equalists to be armed with information about her corruption.*

Kwan shakes his head. "You and your fucking Avatar," he mutters. "I don't know why it keeps surprising me every time you sink to a new low, but it does. I should have expected you to betray everything you ever claimed to stand for."

"I had no choice," says Noatak quietly. "The police made a compelling offer. My love for my brother was all I had left-"

"That's not what I mean." The steel grey eyes bore into him, and he has to fight against his reflexes so that he doesn't wither under the accusatory stare. There aren't many people in the world who can disarm him, but Kwan is one of them.

"Come on, you know what I'm talking about," growls Kwan. "Calling each other by first names, conversations with your eyes: you're in love with her. You're in love with the fucking Avatar."

Noatak wishes for his old mask, because he's not certain he's successfully hiding the shock from his face.

Shaking his head, Kwan gives a low, humourless laugh. "You're in love with the woman who was your own downfall, who hurt me and nearly killed Qing. It's so like you, Amon. So like you to be drawn to something so dangerous, something that's probably going to kill you. You motherfucking hypocrite."

He's so certain about his theory that Noatak sees no point in denying it. "You know how I am," he says, downplaying it.

"I do. You're a power-hungry, manipulative, lying sack of shit, who latches on to anyone who shows him the slightest bit of affection." Kwan closes his eyes. "I wish I could go back in time and tell my younger self all about you, so he would never have to suffer through any of your games."

"I wish that, too."

The man glances up at him. "Is that an apology, or a platitude to try to manipulate me?"
Noatak doesn't reply.

For several minutes, they watch Qing: Kwan from his seat by the bed, and Noatak from his position against the wall. Noatak's mind races. He can end this right now, if he chooses to; he can easily overpower the other's drugged body. But he's sick of cowardice, and he's sick of running. He's sick of seeing all the pain and suffering his actions, past and present, have brought to the people he is supposed to care about. It's time to put a stop to this, properly, the way he originally intended.

"Let's end this," he says.

Kwan looks up, brows pinched. "Now?"

"No. Tomorrow morning." Noatak stands. "Remember the cliff overlooking the docks, where you first suggested I don a mask?" Saying the words aloud is painful, and he sees a wince pass across Kwan's features. It's hard to fight off the memories as they rise up in his mind: staring across the water on a warm summer's night, sticky and flushed in each other's embrace, the broad face of the moon inspiring a conversation about the power of symbolism...

"Of course I remember," says Kwan gruffly.

"We'll meet there at ten o'clock. No Qing, no Avatar, no traps, no tricks. Just you and me, hand to hand." Noatak's tone drops. "A fight to the death."

Panic flits across Kwan's face, and he sees written there what he feels, as well: *I don't know if I can kill you.*

But Kwan, never one to admit his fears, stands and nods, holding out his hand. "To the death."

Their hands interlock to shake on it, and he sees written there what he feels, as well: *I don't know if I can kill you.*

With a last glance at Qing, he leaves the room.

***

Noatak barely has the presence of mind to remember more healing salve on his way back to the house. He also purchases a pen and some stationery; he'll need those later. By the time he returns, he's walking so briskly that he's almost running.

The house is quiet, and he wonders if Korra went out to get dinner. The door of her room is closed, and there's no sound from the other side. A bit worried, he lowers his fingers to the crack beneath the door, but there's no unusual wind or air currents. She hasn't utterly lost herself to the corrupted Avatar State, then, at least.

He stashes the stationery in the desk drawer of his room, then has a quick shower, eager to rid himself of the scent of the hospital. As he's styling his hair, he sees that his eye sockets are already bruised, but the swelling in his nose is barely noticeable. Good. As vain as it is, he has made it forty-six years without damaging his profile, and he doesn't intend to ruin it now.

Fully dressed, he steps into the hall. "Korra?" he calls. No answer. The door to her room is still closed, so he knocks on it, then pushes it open. The room is empty.

His heart sinks. *What if she went back to her old life already?* While it would be better for her, in
the long run, his heart breaks at the thought of never seeing her again. He was really hoping for this one last night together.

The front door creaks open, and he spins toward the sound. "Korra?"

"Noatak?"

He hurries down the stairs and sees her standing in the entrance, a paper shopping bag in her arms. She sets it on the ground.

"You went into public," he observes, hovering by the stairwell.

"Yeah, well." She glances at the food and shrugs. "We needed food, and I didn't want to sit and think for too long."

It's a sentiment he understands. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, it was actually fine, even though I got recognized a few times. The shopkeepers were a lot happier to see me than I expected. I guess people don't hate me as much as I thought."

"That's good, but not what I meant."

Her lip quivers, and she sprints at him, throwing her arms around his chest so violently that he almost staggers backwards. "I didn't know if you were coming back," she says, her voice wobbling. "I thought you were so disgusted with me that you left, and I hate how much that bothered me, because I'm supposed to be strong and independent, but this was supposed to be our last night together, and after all that happened I feel like I don't know which way is up, and all I want to do is be with you, and maybe that's wrong, but the time I've been with you is the only time in the last year I've felt good, and I'm just so tired of feeling awful."

He pulls back enough to lift her chin, and then lowers his mouth to hers. She meets him halfway, their lips parting, their tongues intertwining.

When the kiss breaks, he smooths one of the ponytails by her ear. "Qing is alive."

She doesn't question how he knows, but only says, "Oh, thank the spirits," and presses her face into his chest.

Noatak's eyes slip closed as he rests a hand on the back of her neck, pressing his lips into the top of her hair. He breathes in her scent and tries to memorize the shape of her body against his.

"We should eat something," says Korra, pulling away from him. She's trying to hide the fact that she's wiping her eyes. "And then maybe go upstairs for the rest of the night?" She glances at him, as if unsure he'll agree.

He nods, and reaches over to cup either side of her face, gently smoothing the last of her tears with his thumbs. His throat is so tight that he has to clear it before he speaks.

"Nothing that happened out there matters right now, Korra," he says. "We aren't going to discuss it, and we aren't going to dwell on it. Tonight, all that matters is us."

"Okay," she whispers, giving him a quivering smile, and he pulls her in for another kiss.
"You should go home," says the doctor to Kwan as she checks Qing's vital signs. "If you leave your number, we can call you when her condition changes."

Kwan glances down at the union of his hand with Qing's; his knuckles are white. The sedative is starting to wear off, and his anger at Amon is rising. He wonders if it's showing on his face, and the doctor is trying to get rid of him early so that he doesn't cause them any trouble.

"I want to stay," he says. "I don't think I'll be getting any sleep tonight, anyway."

"There isn't much you can do here." The doctor smiles kindly at him. "You should try your best to get some rest."

He reflects that he probably needs to sort out the state of his hotel room before he enters into his final battle with Amon. No point leaving loose ends. He feels badly for the kindly innkeeper, who gave him the room out of a favour to her niece. He'll have to compensate her well. Once again, he'll borrow money from Qing; her purse is on the bedside table.

That word: borrow. He's not sure he'll have the opportunity to pay her back.

"Can I have a minute to say goodnight?" he asks the doctor.

"If you promise you won't still be here when I check again in fifteen minutes, then yes," she says.

"Sure."

With a nod, the doctor leaves the room.

Kwan turns back to Qing, and takes a long, deep breath. Her skin is still grey; why isn't it regaining colour? He pauses for several minutes, trying to figure out what to say.

"There's a good chance this is goodbye, for good," he says finally. "I'm fighting Amon tomorrow morning, to the death, and I'm not sure I can kill him." He waits, expecting her to pop out of unconsciousness to berate him for his stupidity, but she doesn't move.

He sighs. "I'm not too good with words, and I'm not sure how to properly thank someone for thirty years of friendship and support. So I guess I'll just say, you kept me from being lonely when we were young, and you stood by me as the Equalists grew. When Amon turned on us and I lost my shit, you were the only one to stay on my side when I pushed everyone else away. So, thank you." He swallows hard and leans forward to kiss her forehead. "You're like my little sister, Qing. I love you. Promise me you won't die, okay? The Equalists need you."

For a moment, he studies her, hoping for any kind of response to show that she heard him: fluttering eyelashes, faintly moving lips, anything. Nothing happens.

His hand releases hers.

"Goodbye, Qing." He walks way, his eyes blurring.
Korra sits across the dinner table from Noatak, watching him. He has been pushing the food around his plate for several minutes, his face distant. Though he's clearly upset about something, she can't decide what - there are too many options to pick from. She hopes she isn't the root of his worries, but it seems likely, given that her bloodbending is the most recent major stressor in their lives. She knows she should feel guilty about that, but all she feels is a stubborn resistance. You had your turn with it. It's my turn now, and I'm going to put it to good use.

Her food done, she pushes away her plate. Maybe she can help alleviate one of his worries, at least. "I've been thinking."

Noatak looks up, blinking, as if clearing away a daydream.

"As the Avatar, I have a lot of pull," she says. "I might be able to convince the police to reduce your sentence."

He flinches. "Let's not discuss this."

"No, let's." She leans forward across the table. "The judge seemed more interested in your bloodbending and your connection to Yakone than your other crimes, and if I can prove that bloodbending isn't inherently evil, they might be willing to release you." He's staring at her, expressionless, so she presses on: "Especially if I convince them to release you into my care. Imagine how nice it would be to live together like this all the time."

He leans forward on the table as well, his face sombre. "It isn't that simple. I have war crimes to answer for."

"Most of them were reversible, and your occupation only lasted a few days. It was property damage, at most. Besides, Tarrlok kidnapped me and abused his powers to imprison non-benders, and they're willing to release him, so there's a precedent for forgiveness." She reaches across the tabletop to grip his hand. "I think we can make a strong case for you, especially if you have a lot of valuable information about the Equalists. We can make some sort of bargain."

While she wasn't sure what to expect as a reaction, it wasn't this: Noatak looks as though someone has punched him in the stomach.

"My actions have sealed my fate," he says quietly. "It is too late for me."

"But we can-"

"Let's not discuss this," he says again. "Please."

She flops back into her chair, arms folding over her chest. He has slipped back into absence, his eyes glazing over.

Well, they'll talk about it later. She intends to visit him regularly in prison, so there will be plenty of time to press forward with these plans. For now, they should just enjoy their last night together, while he's still free.

"I'm sorry," she says, swallowing her pride. "I shouldn't have brought it up now." She stands and circles the table to stand behind his chair. Her arms wrap around him to give him an awkward hug from behind. At first, he's tense, but then he sinks into her embrace.

"Let me make it up to you," she says. She buries her face in his neck, hugging him tightly. "Let me
distract you. Tonight's only about us."

He nods, his hand rising up to grip her arm.

For a moment, they hold their positions. She can sense his pulse slowing. Her eyes close and she revels in the contact.

Then her hand begins to slide down his abdomen, and she hears his breath catch. She hesitates, thinking she's pushing ahead too aggressively after upsetting him.

He must sense her hesitation, because he encourages her: "Keep going." The growl in his voice vibrates his chest, making her arms tingle.

Happy to oblige his request, she begins to kiss his neck. It's prickly with stubble, and she gently bites, rubbing her tongue against the rough texture. She hears his breath release, accompanied by just the faintest hint of a moan.

Her mouth works its way up to his ear. "I want to feel you between my legs," she breathes, hoping it's a sexy phrase to whisper - she's never been adept at dirty talk.

The phrase has a stronger effect than she expects. He whirls to his feet and catches her jaw, so quickly that a squeak escapes her. His kisses are deep; she's sure her teeth must be painfully scraping his tongue, but he doesn't slow. The strength of his drive will never cease to amaze her.

When he pulls away, they're both breathing hard.

"I want to lose myself in your arms, Korra," he whispers.

"Okay," she blurts, too stunned by his fervour to think of a more eloquent phrase.

"Turn around; I'll chi-block you."

Her heart sinks as she remembers how the morning's intimacy ended. Trying not to think about it too much, she turns her back to him.

Once the chi point has been blocked, however, he doesn't turn her around again. Instead, he presses himself against her back, his hands rising to grip her breasts. She sinks against him, her eyes slipping closed.

"What would you say to me taking you right here, over the table?" he says in her ear, and shivers run down her spine.

"Isn't that going to end things a little quickly?" she asks, trying to be coy.

"We have all night. This is just to take the edge off before we get started." His fingers tighten into her breasts, his circling thumbs somehow finding her nipples through both her shirt and her bra, and it's all the convincing she needs.

"Do it," she says.

He sweeps their food to the side, and she bends over the table, bracing herself against it with her palms. He jerks down her pants. She hears the rustle of a condom package behind her. Amusement temporarily dwarfs her arousal; has he had condoms in his pockets this whole time? She might have taken advantage of that earlier if she had known.

Then she feels him press into her, and she gasps. The table is cold and hard beneath her, a strong
contrast to the warmth and softness of the body behind her.

This is such a foreign sensation. She has several years of experience, but that was all by-the-numbers sex, the way they thought it was supposed to be: in a bed, dim light, three basic positions repeated over and over again. Not like this: fully-clothed, under bright lights, on the kitchen table. She feels wild. Liberated.

"Pull my hair," she demands, and he winds her ponytail around his hand, then gently jerks her head back. If she glances up, she can see their reflection in the kitchen window. His face is stern, almost severe, and he's looking down at her as if he wants to possess her.

*Let him think he's in control. I know who's really in charge.* She starts to shift her hips, and he unconsciously falls into her rhythm. Her heads spins. Is this what manipulation feels like - controlling the person who thinks he is in control?

She needs more.

Her body is pinned, so she falls back on the strongest weapon at her disposal: her voice. The words rise up to her mouth, bypassing her brain's censorship, and she hears herself narrate everything he's making her feel in the filthiest terms she can imagine. With each word, she feels him slipping a little closer to becoming that desperate, feral beast she saw in the shower this morning.

"Korra," he gasps, the tension on her hair increasing.

"Harder," she commands, and that's all it takes to tip him over the edge; he yells, and she feels his body shudder.

There's a long pause, and she stretches her fingers and toes, listening to him pant as he finds himself again.

Slowly, he releases her hair and withdraws. "Turn over," he says, still fighting for breath.

She rolls onto her back, careful to avoid their dinner plates, and he drops to his knees and presses his face between her legs. At first, she's not sure she's ready to let the power balance swing back in his favour, but tingles course through her body, and she quickly decides that she's okay with submitting. He's persistent, and it isn't long before she finds herself overwhelmed. This time, there's no rogue Avatar State to distract her. Pleasure rockets through her, making her limbs vibrate, and she dimly hears herself yelling.

As her awareness returns, Noatak leans over her, bracing himself on one elbow on the table. His hand smoothes damp hair off her forehead, and he's studying her with a tender expression that makes her glow.

"Here." He stands and holds out his hands. She catches them. Once she's on her feet, she pulls up her pants, and he does the same. He's giving her odd little glances when he thinks she isn't looking, a half-smile on his face.

"What?" she asks, embarrassed.

"That mouth of yours," he says, and her cheeks warm.

"I don't know what came over me."
"No, it's a good thing. One of your most attractive qualities is your fire. You are welcome to show it as often as you like."

Still blushing, she pretends to readjust the ties on her pelt, because she's suddenly too shy to look him in the eye.

That shyness lingers as he takes her hand. "You can select our next activity," he says with a wink, and if she stops to think about it too much, it's still a bit odd that Amon is winking at her, but not as odd as it was a few days ago. She's getting closer and closer to equating his two identities in her mind.

"Okay, then follow me." She guides him to the door so that she can retrieve her shopping bag from earlier. He cocks his head, quizzical, but she only smiles mischievously and leads him upstairs.

Once they're in his bedroom, she drops his hand and rustles through the bag. Inside are a dozen thick candles, a box of incense and an incense holder. She sets them up around the bedroom, and strikes a match to light them - she's not even going to attempt to firebend, because it's likely she will fail. Tonight is about forgetting their troubles, not dwelling on them.

The scent of incense fills the room, strong and sweet. She turns out the overhead light. Orange candlelight illuminates the room, soft and flickering. As Noatak steps toward her, his eyes sparkle with reflected flames.

"The candles are a nice touch," he says.

"I wanted to do something romantic." She's still feeling a bit shy.

"Romantic?" His brow cocks playfully. "I thought this was just sex."

"Oh, come on. It was never just sex."

His smile fades, and she searches his eyes, studying the perfect shape, the dark lashes, the pale irises that get darker toward the pupils and around the borders. Even the dark bruises around them, remnants from Qing's attack, just make his eyes more striking by contrast. Spirits, even injured, he's a beautiful man.

Emotion rises up within her, so strong that she stops to examine it.

I'm in love with him.

Her breath catches in her throat, and she stares dumbly at him. I love him. I love Noatak. Amon. Admitting to the thought makes everything real. The man in front of her is real; their upcoming separation is real; everything she has ever done to disappoint him, or herself, is real.

"Noatak," she whispers, because she is accustomed to speaking what's on her mind. "I-

He must anticipate what she's about to say. "Don't," he interrupts with a flinch.

She's hurt, at first, but when she sees the pain on his face, she understands. It's easier if it's unsaid. Saying it aloud makes it even more real, and that would be too painful right before separation. Her heart races. The only reason it would hurt him this much is if he were feeling it, too.

They can act on it, though. Their bodies can say what their words can't. They meet in a kiss, and this time, they take it slowly. It's several minutes before she pauses to pull his shirt over his head, and her palms gently slide across his skin to memorize the shape and tone of his muscles. Soon he
pulls her shirt off as well, and they embrace, enjoying the sensation of skin on skin. His mouth grazes her neck and shoulder, and her fingers claw into his shoulder blades.

His hands rove down her back, but he suddenly stops and pulls away.

"Noatak?" she asks, looking up at him.

His brows are pinched. "Turn around."

Concerned, she turns. His fingers rest against her lower back, and she hears him softly suck in air through his teeth.

"What is it?" she asks, alarmed.

There's a long pause, and then he says grimly, "There are markings on your back."

"What?" She whirls. "What kind of markings?"

"Dark lines. Forked." He seems to be at a loss for words, and his face is drawn.

Panicking, she sprints to the bathroom. She turns her back to the mirror and cranes her neck.

A black line, about the width of her wrist, lines her spine, smaller lines shooting off of it like tree branches. At first, she thinks it looks like black tattoo ink, but when she shifts her position, the light doesn't reflect properly. It's as if the markings are swallowing all light, as if they're an absence of matter.

Noatak stands in the bathroom doorway, his brows still pinched.

"What the hell is this?" she demands. "Was this here this morning?"

"No."

She reaches back to touch the lines. They feel too yielding. She can't quite pinpoint the sensation; there isn't enough *substance* there. It's almost as if the skin there only half-exists.

"Spirits," she whispers. "I'm fading away."

Noatak crosses the room and stands before her. "You have to try returning my bending, Korra."

The word bubbles up within her and erupts from her mouth, too loudly: "No!"

"Korra-" he says gently, but she cuts him off.

"You saw how I was in that fight, Noatak. I have nothing left. *Nothing*. Even my waterbending is leaving me." Tears well in her eyes. "If I give up my bloodbending, then I have nothing at all. I'm not a non-bender, I'm the *Avatar*. I need to be able to bend."

"If this works, it will allow you to bend again."

"But what if it doesn't?" A tear spills over. "What if I'm giving up the last bit of bending I have?"

"Maybe you don't need it. I've seen how well you fight without any bending at all. Besides, I took your bending once, and you still undid my entire revolution."

"Through a complete fluke that I still don't understand," she says. "Do you know what happened
after you escaped? I was going to kill myself. I was just too scared. If Aang hadn't reached me in time..." She trails off. "I need to be able to bend. It's all that I am."

Noatak falters; he sinks to a seat on the ledge of the bathtub, staring absently at the ground. She wonders if he's reliving the moment he took her bending, and realizing, for the first time, just how much it impacted her. Good. The word rises in her mind, ugly and bitter. I hope he's regretting every awful thing he ever did to me. I hope it hurts him as much as his actions hurt me.

She clutches her forehead, shocked by her own thoughts. In a sudden, dizzying moment of clarity, she sees that she's spiralling. Take him up on his offer, says a tiny voice of reason deep within her.

"I can't stand by and watch you die," says Noatak, still staring at the ground. "Your corruption is the result of events I set in motion long before you were born. I can't watch you suffer for my mistakes."

"You expect me to give back the bending that allowed you to set those events in motion in the first place?" The words escape before she can stop them.

"No," he says quietly. "I suppose not."

Her tears are spilling over. She turns on her heel and marches from the room. Once in the bedroom, she falls onto the bed and buries her face in the pillow, letting her tears flow.

Her thoughts are broken. When she analyzes Noatak's request logically, there's no denying that the corruption is picking up speed, and that she needs to fix it. There's also no denying that returning the bending she took while her spirit was bendable might be the quickest way to reverse the corruption, or at least halt its progression. When she approaches the idea in segments like this, it makes sense. When she puts it all together, however, her entire body protests so strongly that she feels the urge to vomit. He's just wrong. Even though, logically, every bit of it makes sense, he's still wrong.

Time passes - maybe fifteen minutes, maybe half an hour. A strong hand grips her shoulder. Sniffling, she rolls onto her back.

Noatak sits on the bed beside her and holds out a tissue. Grateful, she takes it and blows her nose, and he turns his head to give her privacy.

"If you genuinely don't think it will work," he says, "I'll stop pressuring you."

"I genuinely don't think it will work," she replies.

Lies, says the tiny voice of reason inside her.

He nods, but he still isn't looking at her. "I want you to know that I'm only trying to help."

"I know."

"My concern for you..." He hesitates. "After all this is over, I want to know that you'll be out there, living your life."

"I'm not going anywhere," she says. "I'll do everything I can to get well."

Lies, says the tiny voice.

"Promise me," he says, his voice cracking.
Her hand catches his jaw and she turns his head, forcing him to look at her. His eyes are bloodshot, and his nose is red. *Has he been crying?*

"You're acting like we're dying or something," she says, trying not to show just how much her heart breaks at the thought of him crying over her. "I told you, I'm going to try to get your sentence changed." Her hand smooths his stubbled jaw. "This doesn't all end now that the mission is over. I promise." She sits up and presses her mouth to his. He drinks her kiss as if he's parched for it.

They fall back to the bed, clinging to each other, both desperate to forget their sadness. She pulls his pants off his hips, and he kicks them away. He reaches for a condom from the bedside table, and while he puts it on, she finishes undressing.

Sweat beads on their skin from the heat of the candles as he lowers her to the bed. Their foreheads press together; she hooks a hand around his neck to hold him against her, and he mirrors the motion. They move in a slow rhythm, their eyes locked, their lips just barely grazing with each thrust. There's no sound save for their soft breaths and the occasional creak of a bedspring.

She feels so safe here, caught in this gentle motion, that Korra doesn't want it to end. But her body is betraying her: its arousal is starting to overpower her patience. She ignores it for as long as she can.

When she can't bear it any longer, she whispers, "My turn to be on top."

He kisses her, and then rolls onto his back. She straddles him. One hand interlocks with his, pinning it to the bed. Her other hand falls between her legs. He watches her with pinched brows, his mouth slightly agape.

When he looks at her like this, she feels more powerful than she ever has before. He's looking at her with awe, and she knows, for perhaps the first time in her life, that none of his awe is for the Avatar; it's all for *Korra*.

*Maybe I've been feeling so weak, these past few years, because I've been looking for power that stems from fear and intimidation, and those aren't my true strengths. Maybe true power comes from a place of love and respect instead.*

She stops moving, stunned by the realization. His brow creases and he reaches out a hand to smooth her hip.

"Korra?"

She swallows hard. "I'm a bit distracted. Thinking too much."

"It's fine," he says gently. "I can help you silence your mind, if you like."

"Okay," she says, curious.

"Close your eyes."

Her eyes slip closed, and she feels his thumb circle a sensitive point just inside her hip bone. Tiny streaks of electricity shoot toward her groin, and she gives a soft moan.

"Do you feel that?" asks Noatak.

"Yes."
"Trace each thread of electricity with your mind, over and over, as if you're meditating on them. Don't think about your hand, or me, or any other sensation; just hold your focus on those threads."

As she focuses on each specific thread, all the other sensations in her body suddenly increase in intensity. It's as if, by not paying attention to them, she's feeling them without restraint - like looking away from a star to make it seem brighter in the night sky. The longer she holds her focus off of them, the more overwhelming they become.

Then all the sensations begin to meld together, and they're going to pull her under, and she forgets to focus on the threads of electricity. She grinds faster and pants his name, and she hears him murmur hers in encouragement.

As she cries out, she feels him draw her down, his lips finding hers.

The last pulse fades. Instead of continuing, his arms wrap around her, and he holds her. She wonders why has stopped then when he hasn't climaxed yet, and that's when she notices the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she sobs, and she isn't sure what for, exactly - for ruining the moment by crying, maybe, or for her refusal to give up the bloodbending. Or maybe she's not even apologizing to him; maybe she's apologizing to herself, for everything she has done wrong. For every time she gave up on herself when she should have tried to become a better person.

At last, her sobs slow. Embarrassed, she pulls away to wipe her cheeks. This isn't the romantic lovemaking she had in mind when she bought the candles.

"If you want to stop there-" he whispers, but she interrupts.

"Keep going."

He rolls on top of her again, and as he begins to move, she can tell he's already right on the brink of release. Even though she is still recovering, she swears she can feel his rising pleasure resonating through her body. Her arms and legs wrap tightly around him, trying to meld their bodies into one. She hears him holding his breath, and his muscles begin to twitch.

Then he cries out, his face burying into her neck. Her hand rakes into the back of his hair as she carries him through it. In that moment, there is no bloodbending, no corruption, no jail, no mission. There's just pleasure, rippling through him and into her.

The cadence of his breath slows, and his body relaxes, his full weight pressing her into the bed. A tear trails down her cheek, and she isn't sure if it's his, or hers, or both.

Saying the words will only complicate things, so she mouths them instead, knowing he won't be able to see them:

_I love you, Noatak._
XXVII Parting Ways

It's nearing seven in the morning, and the sunrise's red light floods the room. For the last time, Noatak watches Korra sleep. Her face is flushed and shiny, and her hair is tangled. The night has been a haze of lovemaking and emotion, leaving his groin and his mind numb.

Soon, he knows, he will have to leave this woman behind. He truly wishes he would have been able to convince her to give him back his bending. How poetic it would be to take the burden from the woman he loves, and then bury it forever in his own death at the hands of his ex-lover. It would have been the closest thing to redemption he could ever hope to achieve.

He doesn't want to admit it, but their discussion at dinner has complicated his intentions. He had made up his mind to die against Kwan. Life in prison, alone, is a fate worse than death. Besides, he has long known that the world is better without him in it - he has just been too cowardly to admit it. The time seemed right to finally accept the punishment Tarrlok tried to levy on him six years ago.

But Korra, dear optimistic Korra, had to talk about the possibility of a reduced sentence. Now he can't stop thinking about another option: as slim as the possibility seems, what if she is successful? What if he can live out the rest of his life with her? True, he's getting on in age, but there are things he never thought possible that now seem within reach - home, spouse, family. He studies Korra's sleeping face and imagines waking up to it every morning. He imagines cooking breakfast with her, sneaking a quick lovemaking session before they head out to their daily work. He imagines her belly swelling with their child - true, he's never even asked her if she wants a child, but in his imagination, the idea delights her.

He even imagines the negatives, because, from his time with Kwan, and he knows the shared miseries of a relationship are just as important to its character as the shared joys. The first serious infatuation; no doubt it would be him, with his fickle, wandering heart. Not cheating - never cheating - but his misplaced affections would lead to an argument all the same. He stares at Korra's face and imagines it twisting with pain, pictures himself falling to his knees, swearing his love to her and begging for forgiveness. He pictures himself standing outside her window in the rain, telling her just how much she means to him.

And, at the end of it all, he pictures himself on his deathbed, his hand intertwined with hers. He imagines them sharing a smile, bittersweet: they will be separated, but their decades together have been worth it, in all their glorious pain and joy.

It's a happy ending, one he's never even considered as a possibility. He had a chance at it, once, but his crusade against bending always came first. Any time Kwan made offhanded comments about their life together after the war, or the possibility of adopting a child, Noatak - Amon - always brushed it aside.

That's what I do. I destroy happy endings. It's better that I don't hurt her the way I hurt Kwan.

He eases out of bed, careful not to wake her. As he walks away, he feels his stomach twist, but he
ignores it. He is a strategist above all else, and he has the self-control to keep his eye on the long term. *This is the happiest ending I can give her, Kwan, and Tarrlok. It must be done.*

Quietly, he pulls the stationery and pen out of the desk drawer, then creeps downstairs. Once he is seated at the kitchen table, he begins to write.

The first part of the letter is the easy part: information about the Equalists. He starts with the location of all major bases. As he writes, other ideas pop into his mind: weapons bunkers, key manufacturers, major players. One train of thought leads to another, and he writes for nearly a solid hour, his hand cramping by the end of it. There are pages and pages of information here, more than enough to help the police root out the Equalists.

He flips through the pages, rereading them with a pang of guilt. This movement was his child, and it feels wrong to sell it out to the police. But then he thinks of the small smile Tarrlok gave Korra, and sets his jaw. *This is for you, Brother.*

Besides, the Equalists have made no progress, even after so many years of activity. Non-benders don't even have a foothold in the Council yet, and all talk of non-bender empowerment seems to have died with the war. Flushing them out will force them to change their approach, which is necessary, because the old one clearly isn't working. He has seen for himself how important it is to evolve.

He has exactly one sheet of paper left for the final, and most important, part of his letter. He stares at it, not sure what to write. A page is not enough space, and too much at the same time.

*Dear Korra,* he begins, and he taps the end of the pen against the paper. How is it that he can write a rousing speech in ten minutes or less, but trying to write these few sentences is almost impossible?

*I have gone to finish business with Kwan. I do not know if I will return.*

*I'm sorry to do this behind your back. I realize that trust has always been tenuous between us, due to our history, and I'm certain this will not help. If the worst comes to pass, and I do not return, I only hope that you will forgive me this one final betrayal. This is the best possible ending for everyone involved.*

He doodles a small figure-eight in the corner, tracing it over and over again, as he considers how to continue.

*When I requested your partnership on this mission, I saw you as a weapon, a necessary evil. I did not expect our bond to grow so quickly, or so suddenly. I told you before that I tend to fall for people easily, but I neglected to mention just how strongly I have fallen for you.*

He hesitates. Writing about his love for her is not going to make their separation easier. So, instead, he moves on:

*There are many things in my life that I regret, Korra: too many to list here. I am not a good man, but when I am with you, I feel as if I have the potential to be one. Maybe that's just delusion on my part, but I feel you and I helped each other to see the potentials in ourselves by acknowledging our worst. I feel as though we have shattered through our denial about our flaws, and we learned to accept ourselves and each other all the same. Maybe, if we were given the opportunity to be together longer, we would start to nurture the potential and move away from the flaws. Maybe we would grow and blossom together.*
I wish we could find out. And that, Korra, is my biggest regret as I write this letter. Not the revolution, not my crimes, not even all my years of hypocrisy. My biggest regret is that you and I have only just seen the glimmer of something beautiful, and, due to all I set in motion years ago, we will never have the opportunity to polish it and make it shine.

I am sorry.

I love you.

He hesitates, then slowly scratches out the last three words, each line of the pen slicing his heart. He doesn't stop until they are illegible, and then he continues on to the next line.

I hope that time will not make you judge our union harshly. I hope that, as short as it was, and as non-ideal as its ending is, our affair's intensity will keep a glow in your heart forever.

I will treasure you until my very last breath.

Yours,

Noatak.

His hands tremble as he stacks the letter on top of the notes about the Equalists, then slides it all into the envelope.

Each step up the stairs gets more difficult, as if his body is getting heavier. He lays the envelope on the desk, then forces himself to walk over to the bed.

Her face is peaceful. His throattightens as he imagines it twisting with pain as she reads the letter. He bends down to give her a soft kiss on the cheek.

She stirs and her eyelids part, and he freezes. Of all the mornings for her to be a light sleeper.

"Noatak?" she murmurs, groggy.

"I'm just stepping out," he says. That, at least, isn't a lie.

She stretches. "Want me to come with you?"

More than anything. "No, you keep sleeping."

She nods and snuggles into the pillow. What he wouldn't give to spoon up behind her and hold her, then go into town for breakfast together. He bends down and gently brushes his lips against hers, and when he pulls away, she's smiling, her eyes closed.

His heart breaks as he turns and walks away.

As he leaves, he grabs his bag and slings it over his shoulder.

.*.*.*.

Noatak's heart is heavy as he approaches the cliff. He's early, so he sits at the edge of it, dangling his legs over the rock face. It's a long drop, about thirty metres, and jagged rocks line the shoreline below. To his left, the cliff is swallowed by thick forest; to his right is the city, the docks about a ten-minute walk down a steep slope. A few discarded wine bottles litter the area, as well as the remains of a campfire. It seems that their once-secret location has been discovered by local youths. I suppose it has been more than twenty years. Nothing stays a secret forever.
It's a cloudy day, and dark clouds on the horizon suggest it might rain in a few hours.

*By then, either Kwan or I will be dead.*

For a moment, he lets his thoughts drift away from Korra - he doesn't stop thinking about her, exactly, but just lets the thought of her recede into the background. Now, he's considering Kwan.

Unslinging his bag from his shoulder, he rifles through it and pulls out the broken mask. His fingers run over its markings. The mask was Kwan's idea, back in the early days, when their relationship was still open and their love was still new. They had already decided, together, that the back story he would present to their followers would be the one of a farm boy, his family brutally killed by firebenders. It was a relatable back story, one that would resonate with many. In Noatak's mind, it was also homage to Lao and Pebble and all they went through, though he never told Kwan about them. The wounds were still too raw.

He glances to the side and sees the boulder where they tossed their clothes, that night more than two decades ago. Kwan laid out a blanket, and they drank wine as they watched the horizon swallow the sun. He's certain they must have made love, given that they were naked together, but he can't remember it, specifically. He feels a bit guilty, as if he's betraying Kwan yet again by forgetting such an intimate memory.

What he does remember is lying on their stomachs, passing a cigar back and forth. Kwan's arm was draped lazily over him, and he remembers that his skin was damp and too warm, but the contact felt so nice that he didn't shoo the man away. The moon was high over the water, and as always on nights like this, Noatak was thinking about his family.

And so, he found himself recounting the tale of Yue, embellishing it with great details about the war with the Fire Nation, and the catastrophe that began to engulf the world when Tui was destroyed. Kwan listened with interest, even though he had heard the story many times before. Noatak always figured the unrelenting interest in the tale was because Kwan had a secret spiritual side, but he would later learn it was just because the man liked to listen to his voice as he spoke.

When he finished, Kwan said, "You know, something like that would really help our cause."

"Something like what?" asked Noatak, accepting the cigar from the other's outstretched hand.

"A rousing story about the spirits being on our side against a great evil."

Either the words or the cigar made Noatak's head spin. *This is my opportunity,* he thought. He had been holding off on explaining his bloodbending to Kwan, mostly because of everything that happened with Lao when he was younger. By that point, he was able to play it off as skill; the only time he used bloodbending any more, outside of the bedroom, was to subtly redirect his attacker's arms as they were bending, giving him extra control in a battlefield. Chi-blocking gave him a way to fight benders without resorting to bending.

He knew, however, that one day, bloodbending might play a more important role - especially against stronger attackers, like the Avatar. Now that Avatar Aang was dead, that wasn't a concern for a good sixteen years, when the new Avatar would be identified, but keeping such a big secret from the man he loved was getting more and more difficult.

"The spirits are on our side," he said without thinking, and he instantly regretted it.

Kwan turned to look at him, a brow raised. "What do you mean?"

"They told me to learn chi-blocking," he said. "They told me to empower non-benders to fight..."
back. They chose me as their warrior." *Shut up, shut up,* he told himself. This was starting down a road that was going to make his lies compound even more than they already had.

To his surprise, Kwan's response was, "I believe it."

"You do?"

"Of course." Plucking the cigar from his hand, Kwan took a draught, then blew smoke rings. "I've seen you take on more benders than humanly possible, and come out unscathed. You have a gift, Amon. I knew that from the moment I first saw you fight. And your obsession with the Avatar and the moon spirit - it's like you have one foot in the spirit world."

Noatak swelled with pride. *Of course I do.* "I've been considering making that a part of my back story."

"You should." Kwan glanced at him. "But you have to sell it."

"Sell it?"

"People look at you, and they see a man. You don't look like you've been touched by the spirits."

Insult must have shown on Noatak's face, because Kwan leaned in to kiss his cheek. "Not just a man," he corrected. "You're good-looking enough that people will follow you, no question, and your prowess on the battlefield won't go unnoticed. But if you are going to incorporate a spirit angle, you need to sell it with something that seems supernatural, like Yue's legendary white hair."

"Tattoos?" asked Noatak. "Scars?"

"Scars would help the firebender story, for sure." Kwan thought for a second, then said, "How about a mask?"

"A mask?"

"Yeah. Something really iconic and mystical looking."

Noatak considered. It would definitely protect his anonymity, something that could come in handy if the entire operation failed. Besides, it might help convince others that he had supernatural powers; a mask would narrow his peripheral vision, but his psychic bloodbending would allow him to sense all others around him with perfect clarity, anyway.

"I like that idea." He accepted the cigar again. "I could be more than a figurehead. I could be a symbol."

"Exactly. We'll build you into a god." Kwan nuzzled against his neck, and that's where the memory fades.

Blinking his eyes, Noatak looks around him, rediscovering the present day. The broken mask is in his lap. He picks it up.

Slowly, he pulls it over his face.

The mask is a symbol of all he was, and this fight is meant to be his redemption. It is fitting to wear the mask one last time.

Besides, it might just disarm Kwan. He still isn't sure if he wants to live or die, but he wants to give himself the best possible position to make that decision for himself.
Korra has difficulty sleeping after Noatak leaves. She snuggles into the pillow and squeezes her eyes shut, but it's no use. Eventually, she gives up and sits up.

The clock reads nine forty-five; it feels far too early, after their late night. She groans, cursing her body for refusing to sleep longer. The day was going to be difficult enough before her body decided to rob her of sleep on top of it.

Her stomach is growling, and she wonders if Noatak will return soon with breakfast. No doubt he's going to be gone for a little while - if she were facing a return to prison, she would go for a long stroll and take in every bit of freedom that she could. Maybe she'll wander down to the street and try to find him.

As she stands, her gaze scrolls past a white envelope on the desk. She almost dismisses it, but then she sees it has her name on it.

She knows instantly what it is. There's only one thing it can be, and as much as she hopes her fears are wrong, she can't think of any other explanation. He's not coming back.

She opens the envelope, and the letter inside is written on a stack of paper. As she reads his letter, she slowly sinks to a seat on the bed. Her jaw begins to shake. This is too much emotion, too much emotion, and she has to stay calm, but all sorts of negative feelings are swirling within her, and the current is starting to pull her away.

He left me. He's fighting Kwan. He intends to die. He's going to die. Chaos begins to engulf her. Noise swells in her ears, a din of groans and wind and Noatak's voice crying her name. She sees the disappointment on his face when she bloodbent his ex-allies, the pained expression of orgasm, the tender gaze he gave her right before he left her. Other memories begin to bleed in: Mako's face as she bloodbent him, Asami's wide eyes, her greying body. The images spin and swirl in her vision, and the cacophony gets so loud that she covers her ears and yelling.

Then, suddenly, the chaos narrows into razor-sharp focus. It's as if every sound in the universe has been perfectly tuned into a single hum, and all else is silent.

Her eyes open, and they glow red.

Memories two-decades old flood Kwan's mind as he reaches the old grassy field. He marches through it, trying not to dwell on the past, but slows as he approaches the cliff. Amon sits at the very edge, completely unaware of his surroundings.

Kwan grits his teeth. He could end this right now, if he chose. He could sneak up behind Amon and send him toppling over the edge with one quick shove. Without the man's bloodbending alerting him to his presence, it would be easy to sneak up on him.

But he is a better man than that. This isn't just about killing Amon any more; it's about facing his demons. It's about looking the man who hurt him in the eye as he decisively closes this chapter of his life, one way or another.

"Amon," he says.

The man stands and turns, and oh spirits, he's wearing his old mask. A flood of memories crash over Kwan, but he stands tall, resolute. This is just the first test. There will be more before this
ends. Be strong

"The time has come for us to end this," says Amon, his deep voice sending shivers down Kwan's spine.

With a nod, Kwan crouches in stance and pulls out his kali sticks. They hum to life.

It's time for Amon to pay for everything he's done.
XXVIII: Showdown

Showdown

Korra barrels down the street, her hair loose, black energy streaming behind her like water. The crowded streets part for her as people jump out of her way. Their mouths are split in shapes that suggest they're screaming, but all she can hear is a steady hum, a perfect oneness of sound.

With the path clearing for her, she makes it to Kwan's hotel in seconds. She loops around the back side of the hotel and sprints along the cliff, then jumps over the broken window ledge, into his room.

The scream is close enough that it attracts her attention even over the droning hum. An elderly housekeeper scurries backwards, a broom in one hand, a dustpan full of broken glass in the other.

Korra advances on her. "Where is Kwan?" Her voice reverberates with echoes.

The housekeeper backs against the wall. "Please, please, I don't-"

"Where?" There is no room for pity or remorse in Korra's mind, no room for reason. Her lips twist and she holds up a hand as a threat, but doesn't bloodbend yet.

The woman's knees give out; she slides down the wall and curls into a ball, the broom and dustpan clattering to the ground. "He said something about the docks, I don't know, I don't know..."

The docks. Korra's eyes close and she traces the route in her mind.

"Please, Avatar Korra, that's all I know," says the woman through her tears.

At the name, a spark of panic runs through Korra. For a moment, the hum in her mind splits back into different sounds, and one of them is her internal voice.

\-this isn't who you are, this is the corruption, she's crying, look at her-

Then everything snaps back into that singular note. It's so organized and soothing that she hopes the voice doesn't come back.

Turning, Korra vaults over the window ledge and begins to run along the cliff.

Noatak and Kwan stand in stance, sizing each other up. A breeze off the water ruffles their clothes.

The mask is a lot more stifling than Noatak remembers; he took for granted the extra senses the bloodbending used to give him. It does, however, seem to be having the desired effect on Kwan. The man stares at him as if seeing a ghost, his face drawn and pale.

Taking advantage of the shock, Noatak runs at him, but Kwan is more alert than he expected. The kali sticks buzz past his ear; Noatak ducks beneath them and spins to Kwan's back, trying to chi-block one of his arms. The other man must anticipate the move, because he rotates away, following up with a shoulder check. The blow sends Noatak tumbling. He skids to his feet only inches away from the cliff ledge, breathing hard.
"You're slower than you used to be," says Kwan.

Noatak rotates his shoulder, then pushes forward off the balls of his feet. This time, he doesn't have a clear shot on any chi points, so he drives his fist toward Kwan's gut. The kali sticks scissor toward him, one low, one high; he just barely pulls back in time to avoid them.

Now Kwan is on the offensive, and Noatak forgot how fast he is with those damned things - it's as if he's wielding four sticks instead of two. The past several days of combat and injury are catching up to him, and he's already winded. When dodging becomes too tiring, he rolls to the side and takes a few steps back, trying to leave himself space to recover his breath.

Kwan stands tall; he flips his sticks for show, then lowers them to his sides. "A lot slower." In spite of his bravado, he's panting, too, and sweat trails down his temples. "I got old when I wasn't looking." Noatak tries to keep the gasps from his voice, but it doesn't work.

"You sure that's it? Maybe all those times you and I fought hand-to-hand, you used bloodbending to cheat. Maybe you weren't half as good a fighter as I thought you were."

Noatak glares at him from under the mask.

Kwan shakes his head. "I spent twenty years treating you as if you were my superior, as if you were better than me in everything. But you know what, Amon? I was a better man than you ever were. I just wish I had figured that out sooner."

The words sting, but Noatak tries not to let them faze him. They only sting because you know they're true. This is who you are. Embrace it.

"If you're the better man, then we had better hope you win this showdown, for the world's sake," he says. "But I wonder if a man so flawless can strike down the man he loved in cold blood?"

"I didn't say I was flawless." With a yell, Kwan charges.

Noatak slips aside an instant before the sticks connect. His fist strikes Kwan's solar plexus just as a kali stick slams his ear.

They both drop.

The world is ringing. Noatak rolls and clutches his ear, trying to force his eyes to stay open, even as every muscle in his body screams at him to curl into a foetal position. His stomach heaves, and he tastes bile.

His blurring vision clears to show that Kwan isn't faring much better. The man is on all fours, dry heaving onto the grass. When he sees Noatak watching him, he gives a strangled yell and bolts at him.

They fall to the ground, Kwan pinning him down. A crackling baton drives at Noatak's face; he jerks his head to the side, and it plows into the earth beside his ear. Reflexively, his elbow snaps up, catching Kwan under the chin. The man falls back with a grunt of pain.

The wind off the water is starting to kick up, and hair whips into Noatak's face, obscuring his vision. He hastily tries to sweep it back off the mask, then launches himself at Kwan and lands on top of him. The man tries to fight back, but it's too awkward to use kali sticks at his proximity, and Noatak easily knocks them away. One hand presses Kwan's head into the ground. The other hand pulls back, two fingers extended. There's a deadly chi point just under the ear: one solid blow, and
it will all be over.

Kwan stares at him, eyes so wide that the whites show all the way around the grey irises. He doesn't fight back.

Noatak clenches his teeth. *One quick jab.* He stares into the eyes of the man he once loved.

"Do it," growls Kwan.

Noatak pulls back his arm, coiling to strike.

An enormous crack, far to the right, distracts him. As his head snaps toward the noise, Kwan pushes him off and crawls away.

Past the edge of the cliff, toward the docks, Noatak sees the tip of a tree tilting, then disappear. An inhuman howl sounds, accompanied by the shouts and yells.

As improbable as it is that she could have found him, his instincts tell him it's Korra. What other force could make that inhuman sound?

"Give me a moment." Instead of turning back to Kwan, Noatak sprints to the edge of the cliff, hoping his instincts are wrong.

Far below them, a figure barrels along the docks, obscured by a thick cloud of dark energy.

"Korra," he whispers, his heart sinking.

It's impossible for her to have heard him from this distance, but her head snaps up, and two red pinpricks of light lock onto him. She begins to race up the path along the side of the cliff, and the wind begins to gust.

He curses, and turns just in time to see a kali stick swinging for his head; he deflects with his forearm. He has to yell to be heard over the intensifying wind: "Stop."

"Like hell I'll stop!"

Noatak throws up his arms, defending himself from a barrage of blows. The electricity makes his forearm muscles seize, and the pain is so intense that the fringes of his vision go dark.

"Kwan, *listen,*" he manages, teeth clenched. "We'll finish this later. There's a bigger threat. We have about ten seconds until a feral Avatar descends on us."

Suddenly, Kwan's eyes widen, and he jerks backwards as if yanked. He falls to the ground in a heap.

Behind him stands Korra, her hand clawed in the air. She's almost unrecognizable. The corruption markings from the base of her spine have spread; now they trail down her arms, as forked and jagged as lightning. The skin between the markings has an unnatural sheen to it, like a grey oil slick. Black smoke rises from her, so thick that it distorts her image like heat waves.

Worst of all is her face. The red eyes are fearsome beneath her lowered brows, but the rest of her face hangs slack. Emotionless. It's so far removed from the woman he loves that it sickens Noatak's stomach to look at her.

"You brought the fucking Avatar?" yells Kwan, rising shakily to his feet.
"I have no idea how she found me," he replies. Taking a step forward, he swallows hard. There's no recognition on her face. "Korra, it's me."

Her eyes flash. "You left me," she growls, and there is barely a hint of her normal voice among the distorted echoes. "You left me to die."

"The best thing I could do for you was remove myself from the equation," he says, standing tall. "I've done enough harm already."

"You wanted me to die! You said you would destroy me, and you are, you are." "What the fuck is she talking about?" asks Kwan warily, moving to stand next to him.

Noatak watches Korra, ready to defend himself if she attacks, but instead, she hunches over, her face twisting with pain. His heart twists with it. "You should leave, Kwan. Hide if you have to. She has been corrupted."

"Corrupted? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that when she hurt Qing, she still had restraint and reason left. Now she has none."

Kwan swallows hard. "Say I do try to leave - is she going to let me?"

Noatak doesn't have an answer for him. He takes another step forward to address her. "Korra, let me help you."

Her head lifts and glowing red eyes lock onto him.

"We both know there's only one thing left to try," he says gently.

"No!" Wind blasts at him, and his arms cross in front of his face to defend himself. The blast isn't air; it's cold and slimy, and soaks through his sleeves. When he opens his eyes, the same colourless oil that slicks her skin is coating his forearms. His skin feels numb. He lowers his arms and sees oily streaks on the ground between them.

"Korra, what is this oil?" he asks, trying to keep his voice calm.

Instead of answering, her hands rake into her hair and she doubles over, howling.

His eyes locked on her, Noatak slowly lowers himself to one knee and presses a hand into the oil-slicked grass. The texture is familiar; it's like the markings on her back. It's as if the grass has lost substance, as if its presence has been somehow lessened. His fingers rise to his forearms, and he feels the same sensation in the fabric of his shirt.

His eyes widen with realization. *It's even worse than we thought.*

His heart thuds in his chest. Korra is still struggling with herself. Slowly, so as not to attract her attention, he rises to his feet and takes a step back.

"Kwan," he says quietly. "We are in grave danger."

"You don't have to tell me twice," says the man. "I'm getting the hell out of here."

"Wait." Noatak doesn't drop his gaze from Korra. He tries to keep his voice low, so she won't overhear. "Do you remember the tale of Tui and La, and the death of the moon spirit?"
"Off course," says Kwan gruffly. "You told it enough times."

"Do you remember how I spoke of the darkness that began to engulf the world when the moon spirit died?"

"Yes."

Noatak swallows hard. "The Avatar is the planet spirit incarnate. If she is corrupted, if she is destroyed, then what happens to this planet and everyone on it?"

By the other man's silence, Noatak knows he's considering the gravity of the situation. He presses on: "We have to work together, Kwan. You and me."

"To kill her," says Kwan solemnly. "So that the Avatar can be reborn, free of this corruption."

"What?" Noatak finally drops his gaze from Korra, staring at the other man. "No, we have to contain her. Help her find herself again."

To his surprise, the look on Kwan's face is sympathetic. "I know how painful it is to see someone you love become a monster," he says quietly. "And I know how hard it is to decide to stand up against them, for the sake of a greater good."

The guilt is so overwhelming that Noatak has to fight the urge to burst into tears like a child. When he tries to push down his despair, anger rises in its place. "We are not killing her," he snaps. "I can get through to her."

"Amon, look at her. Do you think you can reason with that?"

Looking back at Korra, Noatak sees that she is slumped, her shoulders cocks at an unnatural angle. Her mouth hangs slack. Worse yet, the forked corruption markings have begun to climb her neck. They glow red, cracks in cooling lava.

Oh spirits. His heart sinks.

"I have to try," he says, and his voice breaks, so he clears his throat. He can't break down, not until she's safe. "She's still in there. I can reach her, once we've physically subdued her. There's a chi point on her back that will block the Avatar State." If it still works.

Kwan eyes him warily. "Okay," he says finally. "But I'm doing this for the safety of the world, not for you. And if my life is in danger, I'm not going to hold back."

"Understood." He turns to approach her, but Kwan catches his shoulder again.

"This isn't going to help anything." He lifts the mask off Noatak's face, then casts it to the grass.

Noatak stares at it; he had forgotten he was wearing it. How easy it was to become Amon again.

He runs a hand through his hair and stands tall, then paces toward Korra. Her head twists as she studies him. He gets the horrifying sensation she is a predator deciding when to strike, and he is the prey.

"Korra," he says. "I can make this suffering end."

"I'm not giving up my bending," she roars, and he feels a pulse of bloodbending tighten around him like a net. The breath squeezes from his body, for just a moment before the bloodbending drops, and he has a sudden flash of despair. There's no way we'll be powerful enough to subdue her.
"The chi point," he says, struggling to reclaim his breath. "I can chi-block you."

Her eyes narrow. "You will not touch me."

"Let me help you."

"You've done enough!" She blasts another gust of the ethereal, oily wind at him, but he dodges and then charges at her, deliberately encouraging her to turn her back to Kwan. In his peripheral vision, he sees Kwan turn off his kali sticks for silence, then race along the edge of the cliff.

It hurts to attack the woman he loves, knowing she's going to see him as a threat again, the way things used to be between them.

_Not for long. I'm on your side, Korra. You'll see that when you're yourself again._

He deftly spins around a blast of corruption- he has no better word for the oil - but then her hand contracts, and he feels his body lift into the air. His eyes close. Bloodbending is just too powerful. Once she has the presence of mind to grab both her attackers at the same time, their paltry little counterattack will be finished.

_Fight this_, says a tiny voice inside himself, his very last reserve of optimism. _You've resisted bloodbending before. You can do it again. You have to keep fighting until she's safe or you're dead._ He struggles with every iota of energy at his command. Even if he can't break free, he's going to make it as difficult as possible for her to keep him captive. If she exhausts herself, they will be able to subdue her more easily.

There's a flash of green light behind her, and she cries out. Noatak falls to the ground. From her back, he hears Kwan yell, caught in the fervour of battle.

Korra half-turns, trying to address both her foes at once. The movement exposes her flank. It's not her back, but it's enough to work with. Noatak grits his teeth and closes the distance, trying to skirt toward her back without drawing too much attention to himself.

As he moves, he sees her lift Kwan in the air and fling him. Kwan skids and bounces toward the cliff, trying desperately to slow himself with his hands and feet. He comes to a stop a few feet shy of the precipice.

Before she can turn her attention back to him, Noatak lunges for her back. His finger is just about to connect to the chi-point between her shoulder blades when she whirls and grabs his arm. He tries to jerk away, but her grip is too strong, and she refused to drop him.

The light in her eyes flares as they fix on him. He doesn't want to drop his gaze - it's instinctive to constantly read his opponent's face - but a cold, creeping sensation in his wrist makes him look down.

Black, vine-like markings are crawling up his forearm.

Panic begins to rise in his throat, but panic is unproductive, so he swallows it back. He twists his arm and works to free himself. Her grip is inhumanly strong. The markings have reached his elbow now, and he has lost all feeling in his hand.

"Korra," he says, speaking as calmly as adrenaline will allow, "you're hurting me. Release me."

Her pupil-less red eyes bore into him. The markings are halfway up his bicep, and he can't feel his forearm.
"I don't understand why you're attacking me, Korra," he says, hoping the repeated use of her name will spark self-awareness within her.

Her brows pinch. "Neither do I," she says in the terrible voices that are not hers.

"We can talk about this, Korra." The markings have reached his shoulder, and his voice rises in pitch. "I can chi-block you. I can help you. Release me."

The glow in her eyes flickers, and his teeth clench. *Come on, Korra! Recognize what's happening.* He can feel the corruption creeping across his chest, and it's only inches from his heart.

Suddenly, she yells and drops his arm, whirling. Noatak falls to his knees, clutching at his injured arm.

Kwan steps into view, circling Korra from behind. He turns on the electricity of his kali sticks, and Noatak realizes what happened: recognizing that electricity would only seize her grip, Kwan attacked without the electricity first. On one hand, he's grateful, because he would probably be dead if the grip had lasted even a few seconds longer. Seized muscles would have ended him for sure. On the other, he was just about to get through to her, and now he has to start all over again.

"Kwan, fall back," he yells, but the two are locked in combat. He glances down at his arm. Although the markings are gone, they've done their damage: his arm is cold and numb. He can't even lift it.

Bile rises in his throat just as a wave of hopelessness rises in his mind, but he swallows both back. *This isn't over yet.*

"Enough," roars Korra, and he feels bloodbending tighten his muscles again. He floats into the air, Kwan beside him.

She stands before them, her teeth bared. Her entire body is shimmering, and the viscous corruption puddles on the grass around her like shadow. The wind around them is so thick with dark energy that it's difficult to see more than a few feet away.

Noatak can't tell if it is panic or bloodbending tightening his chest, but it's getting increasingly difficult to breathe. "Korra," he yells, and he repeats her name, over and over, desperate to get through to her.

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Korra is confused. She wants everything to stop hurting. She's angry. So angry.

She doesn't understand why she's so angry, exactly. There's the dim feeling that these two men have hurt her in the past, and she has to punish them for it. There's also a dim feeling that they're evil.

But what is she, if not evil? She's enjoying the terror on their faces.

That's what they get, for hurting Asami-

*You hurt Asami,* says the tiny voice of reason inside her.

Her head swims. No, she was defending herself, and it was the fault of these two men. Wasn't it?

Noatak. The name is familiar, and it makes her heart race. She stares at the man. He is injured; the rest of his body struggles against the bloodbending, but his right arm gives no resistance. Is that her fault? She feels as if it is, but she can't remember. His face is twisted with agony, and she can tell his pain isn't solely physical. His mouth makes the same shapes over and over, as if he's repeating the same word, but she can't hear him over the hum in her ears.

Look at him, the tiny voice says. Look what you're doing to the man you love.

"No!" she screams at the voice. This power is her birthright. It is her destiny. They're trying to take it away from her. She will be the greatest Avatar who ever lived. No one will dare doubt her again.

But when she looks at the injured one, warmth rises inside her. Fondness. Weakness. She cannot succumb to weakness.

With a howl, she flings their bodies away.

The one with the moustache flies wildly to the left; he slams into a tree, then falls to a heap on the ground.

The other, Noatak, skids toward the cliff edge.

Look at what you're doing! says the tiny voice inside her. He's going to die!

The weakness in her is growing. Memories flicker through her mind, almost too quickly to identify. Words exchanged in prison. Overheard gasps of pleasure. Accidental arousal. A shared kiss that meant nothing, but also meant everything. Cigars on a rooftop. Falling into each other's arms, and agonizing over it afterwards. Fighting side-by-side. A moonlit dinner, too much wine, then passionate lovemaking...

The hum in her mind dies just in time for her to hear his yell:

"Korra!"

He disappears over the cliff edge.

She stares at the empty space where he was, her stomach dropping.

"Noatak," she yells, running toward him. The corruption is pressing down on her, trying to reclaim her, but she fights to stay lucid.

"Korra!" His voice is almost a shriek.

She dives and slides to her stomach by the cliff edge. He's hanging on with one hand, panic on his face. The shoreline is far below, jagged rocks.

As she reaches out a hand, she sees him flinch. Her arm is thick with black smoke and glowing red lines, its surface slick and oily. She stares. Suddenly, it's Asami's green eyes staring up at her with terror, Asami refusing to take her hand. Oh spirits, not again. Don't do this to me, Noatak. Trust me. Please.

"Grab my hand." She cringes at the echo of voices.

He's still staring, too terrified of her to react, and oh spirits, she's not going to lose him the same way she lost Asami.
"I'm in control," she yells, even as the little voice inside her wonders, *for how much longer?* She can feel the corruption hazing her mind. "Please, Noatak, you have to trust me."

"I can't move my arm," he says, strained.

She has two options: grab him, or bloodbend him. Deciding bloodbending would be more traumatic, she reaches down to grab his wrist.

"Don't touch me," he growls, and she vaguely remembers what happened when she held his wrist before, as if from a half-forgotten nightmare.

"I'm going to bloodbend you," she warns, and before he can protest, she stands tall and raises a clawed hand in the air.

His grip gives out.

She catches him just as he begins to fall.

But fighting against gravity demands her full attention, and as the vice tightens around him, it tightens around her consciousness as well. The corruption, unopposed, smothers her mind like a blanket. Now all she can think about is the dizzying power: she's lifting a fully-grown man with her mind, literally saving him from the brink of death.

Once he's safely over solid ground, she can't bring herself to release him. Instead, she holds him fast, reveling in it.

"Korra," he says. "Let me go."

Her eyes lock with his, and she sees a tear trail down his cheek. She falters. "I can't fight it," she says. "I'm so tired."

"I know you are," he says. "But you are the Avatar. You are not expendable. If you are destroyed, then so is our planet. You have to end this."

Tears choke her throat. "I have nothing left except this power. Nothing."

"The power of bloodbending is a fallacy. Have you learned nothing from what happened to me?" He swallows hard. "This power you are feeling is destruction. I know its allure; I devoted my life to it, and six years ago, I thought I had finally proven myself to be the most powerful being in the world. I was wrong. It's weak, so weak. Your power to defeat me back then came from rage, but also from love, and compassion, and protective instinct. These qualities will always trump greed and revenge." Another tear joins the first. "We are alike in our destruction, Korra, but you are so much more. You are a balance: destruction and creation. You are a dangerously skilled bender, yet you saved my life with healing. You are a relentless opponent, yet your ability to nurture is so strong that you swayed our hatred to love. This balance is your true power, and the corruption will only strip one in favour of the other. Don't sacrifice what is already yours to chase after a madman's dream."

Her breath catches, and her body begins to shudder. Her mind feels like it is being pulled too far in two directions, like a rubber band about to snap. "I can't...I..."

"Kwan, stay back," growls Noatak. She can sense Kwan rising shakily to his feet behind her, his sticks drawn, but he listens to the man's command.

"You know what must be done," Noatak says to her.
Do it, says the voice of reason in her mind. She feels the corruption working its way into her skull, and she knows she has minutes before that voice of reason is silenced forever.

"Korra," says Noatak, "you are so much more than this." His eyes are glassy, and he's looking at her with such love and concern that she feels a sudden surge of determination.

With a yell, she drops him to his knees. Her hand presses to his chest, her other thumb to his forehead, before she can second-guess her decision.

At the skin-to-skin contact, the corruption begins to spread. Dark markings thread their way across his forehead. She stares, horrified, as they begin to circle his eyes.

"Hurry," he yells through clenched teeth.

Her eyes close.

She has never felt anything so painful. It's as if Noatak's bending has latched itself inside her, thousands of tiny hooks through flesh, and each one must be torn free.

It would be so much easier to succumb, she thinks, but she feels Noatak's forehead losing substance beneath her touch, hears him scream her name, feels the wind kick up around them...

And somewhere in the back of her mind, so faint that she wonders if it's just her imagination, is Aang's voice. "Korra."

"Aang," she yells - in her mind, or aloud, she can't tell.

"Korra, you're strong. You can end this."

"I'm a bad Avatar." She feels tears on her cheeks.

"You will learn from this," says Aang, his voice fading in and out, like a radio station with poor reception. "You are strong."

Another voice joins his, and she recognizes Roku. Then Kyoshi. Then Kuruk, and Yancheng, and their voices gain strength as she focuses on them. They begin to drown out the pain with their chorus: "You are strong." Her consciousness fills with warmth.

With a triumphant yell, she tears the bending free and channels it through her thumb.

Noatak groans and slumps to her feet.

Korra's eyes open.

She floats above the ground, her arms spread wide. Around her, the black flames dissipate into the breeze like smoke. The markings along her skin retract, leaving shiny scar tissue in their wake. The constant hum fades from her mind, and stillness takes its place. Her thoughts are her own again, and now she sees how distorted they were only a few seconds ago.

She looks down at Noatak, and she's relieved to see that the black markings have disappeared from his forehead. He's looking at her with his mouth open, awe and fear written on his features. In his wide eyes, she sees her own reflected: they glow white.

I am me again. It's over.

Exhausted, she lets the Avatar State leave her. As she sinks and her feet touch the ground, she
realizes she doesn't feel quite right yet. She feels hollow. It's as if the corruption ate away part of her soul, and now there's nothing to fill it.

At least I'm not going to be destroyed, she thinks, trying to calm her racing pulse, but she wonders if that will be enough.

Noatak rises to his feet in front of her. His right arm hangs limply at his side. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Kwan sit up and clutch his forehead.

"Are you okay?" asks Noatak, and she's surprised by how gentle his voice is.

Not sure what to say, she blurts, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what- That wasn't me." Tears spill over.

"I know," he whispers. His brows are pinched, and he looks like he's still sizing her up.

"I hurt you. I was going to hurt everyone. I'm so sorry." She's sobbing now.

After a moment's hesitation, he steps forward and wraps his good arm around her. She buries her face in his neck, and he strokes the back of her hair.

"I'm sorry, too, Korra," he murmurs into her ear, and even though the letter seems like a trivial thing to be upset about in the face of her near-destruction, she feels hurt all over again.

"You didn't even say goodbye to my face," she sobs.

"I know. I'm sorry, but we both know it has to be done."

Something about the words hits her wrong. She has just barely caught on to the fact that he used has in the present tense when she feels him press the chi point between her shoulder blades.

Her stomach drops. "Noatak? What-"

"When I put on my mask at the beginning of this duel, it surprised me how quickly I forgot it was there," he says into her ear. "How quickly I fell back into step as Amon, even after six years."

"What the hell are you saying?" She pulls away from his grasp. His expression is sad, almost sorrowful.

"You did your part to end this," he says, "and now I will do mine. Take care of Tarrlok. I hope both of you will forgive me, in time." He tries to kiss her cheek, but she ducks out of the way.

"No, you tell me what the fuck you're planning to do," she snaps.

His gaze drops, then he turns and walks over to Kwan. The man eyes him warily.

Noatak holds out his hand. "I'm leaving. Come with me."

"What? No!" Korra steps forward to intervene. Bloodbending tightens around her, holding her in place.

Realization slams into her. That's why he chi-blocked me - without the Avatar State, I won't be able to resist his bloodbending.

Betrayed, she struggles against the bending. Noatak stands with his back to her, and his shoulders are stiff, but he won't look at her. Rage wells in her throat.
"Look at me in the eye while you stab me, you coward," she yells.

He doesn't turn.

"Amon!" She launches the name at him like a curse.

His hand is still extended to his ex-lieutenant. "Kwan."

"You think after all that happened between us, I'm going to trust you?" says the man.

"No," says Noatak. "But if you stay behind, the Avatar will deliver you to the police. I do not recommend spending time in the Republic City jails."

There's a long pause between them. Korra curses, trying desperately to call on the Avatar State.

"I'm not taking your hand," says Kwan finally. "But I'll come with you."

Noatak nods, and the two men begin to walk in the direction of the docks without even a glance back at Korra. With a howl, she writhes against the bloodbending.

"Amon," she hollers. "Fucking look at me!"

As they're about to disappear down the path, he finally turns to meet her gaze. The expression on his face fills her veins with ice: fear. He looks like a man condemned to death.

That's when she finally understands what he's about to do.

"Noatak," she screams.

The bloodbending pulses, and darkness overcomes her.
XXIX: Noatak

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

XXIX

Noatak

As soon as the stolen boat hits the open water, Kwan sees all resolve fade from Amon. His former leader's shoulders sag, and he moves to the side of the boat, gazing across the water. Kwan recognizes that face all too well: Amon is standing at the edge of a roof, trying to gain the courage to jump.

Kwan moves to the cockpit, because someone has to navigate. The water is choppy, and the clouds ahead of them are so dark that they're almost black. He remembers the morning's red sunrise. A storm was coming. Didn't realize how true that would turn out to be.

Soon, the sky opens up, and between the spray and the rain, Kwan's clothes soak through to the skin. He shivers and glances back occasionally at Amon. Each time he looks, the man sits with his bad arm in his lap, staring absently across the water. This is not what he expected.

With a sigh, Kwan cuts the motor, letting them drift. He moves to sit near Amon. The man doesn't even look up at him.

"I'm no fool," says Kwan. "I know you didn't ask me to come along expecting the two of us to work it out, after all we've said and done to each other."

Amon's eyes lift to meet his, and he slowly shakes his head. "No."

"So you plan to kill us."

"No. I'm giving you the opportunity to win our duel." He looks across the water again, his face dull. "I thought you would have done it by now."

Now Kwan is confused. "Oh."

After a moment, Amon says, "You thought I was going to kill you, and you came willingly?"

Kwan shrugs. "I've been toying with the idea of offing myself for a long time. Thought I was past it, but I guess I haven't quite figured things out yet."

"I see," says Amon, and he looks regretful. Actual, genuine regret. It's so unexpected that Kwan stares at the expression, feeling the first hints of closure.

"So," he asks Amon. "Why do you want to die?"

Raking his fingers into his hair, the other says, "Among other reasons, the Avatar gave me back my bloodbending."

"You don't want it?"

"I do. That's the problem." Amon shakes his head. "Over the past few days, I've come face-to-face with who I am, deep down. I cannot be trusted with a power so destructive."
"No," agrees Kwan. "You can't."

There's a long silence, then Kwan rises. He makes his way toward the back of the boat, then takes a seat beside the gas tank.

"I figured you were going to blow us up, the way you tried to blow up Councilman Tarrlok," he says.

"That was my brother's doing, not mine."

"Oh." Kwan's trembling fingertips drum the gas cap. "I saw it happen, you know."

When the only response is silence, he presses on: "Qing found me, after you bloodbent me. I was half-dead, but I coerced her to help me chase you down. Figured it would be fitting if my dying breath was spent taking yours. We were on a speedboat, just barely starting to close the distance on the two of you. Then you went up in flames." He shakes his head. "By the time we arrived, you were both unconscious, burnt and bleeding. Bet you never stopped to wonder how the United Republic Forces found you so quickly. We radioed you in."

Amon's eyes narrow, and he turns to look across the water again. "You should have let me die."

"You're telling me. Would have saved us a lot of trouble. We didn't have any foresight/"

"You can undo that now. Go on. I won't stop you."

There's a long pause. Kwan idly unscrews the gas cap, testing himself. Six years of searching for fitting closure, and now he has the opportunity. He feels like he's up on that rooftop again, being pulled toward the ledge.

"Why do you think I should be the one to do it?" he asks.

"You're the one I wronged the most." Amon's face falls, and it's fascinating to see all these expression changes; Kwan has never seen this much expression on that face. "At least, that was the case, but the Avatar might hold some claim over that now."

Kwan shakes his head, still darkly amused by the man's hypocrisy. "You always did think with your dick too much for your own good. The Avatar? Of all the people you could fall for."

Amon's eyes close. "You built me into a god, Kwan, but I am human. I am fallible."

"It just keeps surprising me that after twenty years together, I never really knew you. The man I loved would never have betrayed his principles like that."

"The man you loved didn't exist."

"No, I suppose he didn't."

Kwan slips one of his kali sticks into the gas tank. One flick of the switch, and it will electrify, setting the whole boat up in flames.

Their eyes hold.

He considers Qing. There's still a chance she might pull through, and if she did, she'd probably single-handedly fight her way into the spirit world just to punch him in the face and tell him he was an idiot for killing himself. Sure, it's not like he had any real plans for the rest of his life, but he has a good thirty or forty years left, if he's lucky. Maybe not having plans, for once, is a good thing.
What ultimately stops him is the look of terror on Amon's face. In all their time together, he has never seen him look so frightened.

*I don't want to be responsible for this. I don't want anyone looking at me like I'm a monster, even him.*

"You know what, Amon?" he says. "I've spent twenty-six years obsessed with you - twenty in love, six in hate. I'm sick of it. I did everything I could to be a loyal friend and lover, and you repaid me by feeding me lies and manipulating me. You want to die? Kill yourself. I don't owe you shit, and I'm sure as hell not sacrificing any more years of my life to you."

Slowly, he withdraws his kali stick and re-caps the gas tank.

Amon lets out a long breath, his shoulders relaxing.

Kwan feels a weight lift off him. He always thought closure would involve one of them dying, or both, but he's finally ready to let go, after so many years of obsession. Returning to the cockpit of the boat, he starts the engine again and navigates east, looking for land. He's going to find a new community, start a new life. First thing will be to make sure Qing's okay - he'll find an inn, and offer to work odd jobs to pay for a room, board and, most importantly, the use of their phone. If she's well enough to travel, a team of Equalists can secret her back to the underground base, where a doctor can treat her in private. It will be his last action as the leader of the Equalists.

And after that, for the first time in decades, his life is his own.

The first glimpse of land appears on the horizon just as the stars start to show in the evening sky. He whistles to himself, feeling freer than he has in years. A chance to start fresh. Maybe he's a bit old for such things, but better late than never.

Amon moves to stand beside him, staring at the land. His face is sunken.

"This will be my stop," says Kwan. "Whatever you do after this is your own problem."

He navigates the boat toward the twinkling lights on the shoreline. It looks like a small village, and he wonders where they are. A small set of docks come into view.

"I never did know your real name," says Amon.

"No, you didn't."

There's a pause.

"You aren't going to tell me," says Amon, and Kwan smirks.

"Not a chance."

The docks are closer now. Kwan closes his eyes. He feels the wind beckoning him, like it did on that rooftop of the hotel. *Freedom, true freedom. I was looking for it in all the wrong ways. I thought I needed to end him, or end me, but in the end, I just had to let go.*

As they dock, he glances at the face of the man he loved, the man he hated, and he feels neither.

"Take the boat. I won't need it," he says, and he steps onto the wooden dock. He's not sure what to say. He's never been good at goodbyes, let alone ones as complicated as this one. A small part of him is sad at the thought of never seeing him again. Similar conflict is written on the other's face.
"Take care of yourself, Kwan," says Amon finally.

"Goodbye, Noatak." With the name, he dismisses the last link to their shared past. Amon is dead - no, not dead, because Amon was only a lie. Amon is disproven.

Turning, he walks up the dock, striding toward an unknown future.

..*.*.. As Noatak watches Kwan leave, he sinks to a seat.

**Now what?**

He truly hoped the man would kill him, because he's too dangerous to leave alive. Returning to Republic City isn't an option. Once they find out he has his bending again, with Avatar removal no longer an option, they'll keep him in some isolated chamber where he'll have no potential human targets to bloodbend. Or perhaps they'll use some sort of constant chi-blocking to keep him restrained. Neither option is particularly appealing.

But the thought of staying away from Republic City, away from Tarrlok and Korra, makes his heart ache.

He pulls away from the dock and begins to navigate the boat up the coast. For now, he'll find a room in the next town he comes across. Maybe a plan will come to him after a good night's sleep. The day's events are muddling his thoughts.

It quickly becomes a difficult task to find the next town. The storm is in full force, and the water is so choppy that he's sure he'll slam into rocks at any second. Maybe he'll find his death yet. The seasickness that accompanies it certainly makes him wish for it.

Against all odds, he finds himself navigating safely into a bay an hour or two later. A few lights twinkle along the shoreline; judging by the number of them, it's a small community, smaller than the one where he left Kwan. Glancing at the moon to gauge its height, he estimates it's around ten o'clock at night.

Instead of docking, he pulls into a shadowed region of the bay, obscuring himself from view of the town, then cuts the engine. He scours the boat for supplies, rummaging through all the storage areas with his good hand. He easily picks the lock on an emergency lockbox, and retrieves two flares, a lighter, a first aid kit and a small amount of cash. It's roughly enough yuans for either two drinks and a night's accommodation, or twelve drinks. He'll decide when he reaches the town.

Popping open the first aid kit, he pulls out a medical sling and tucks it into his pocket, then pulls out a long bandage that should have a reasonably slow burn rate. He may be too cowardly to actually kill himself, but the least he can do, to protect everyone he loves, is make it look like he did before he disappears. If he wasn't so numb, he might feel guilty for what he's about to do. Hopefully the boat's rightful owner has insurance.

First he uncaps the gas tank and feeds the end of the bandage in, then unrolls it. The gas begins to wick up the bandage, but it's long enough that there is still plenty of dry bandage to act as a fuse.

Once it's all set up, he starts the boat's engine, sets it into gear and navigates it toward the open ocean, then opens the throttle. The boat begins to speed forward. Hastily, he moves back to his fuse, lights it, then dives overboard.

The water is freezing, and his skin aches. Preservation instinct overcomes his desire to pretend he
is a non-bender, and he uses waterbending to propel himself to shore. Once there, he pulls the water off his body as he watches the boat. The fuse is just a pinprick of light now.

He waits several minutes, and then sees it, far on the horizon: the boat explodes.

He didn't expect the image to send him back six years, but now he can smell the flaming wreckage around him, he sees Tarrlok's body flying, he remembers frantically encasing them in water, and then darkness...

*I'm never going to see my brother again,* he thinks, and he has to swallow back a sob.

Twelve drinks it is.

As he makes his way into the town, he awkwardly loops the sling around his neck, resting his injured arm inside it. He wonders if he'll ever regain the use of it. Some feeling is starting to return, so he's optimistic.

The town has only one main street, with a few small shops, but one of them appears to be a tavern. It's surprisingly busy on the streets. Judging by the garb of the people around him, this must be a major hub for farmers in the area.

He pushes open the tavern's wooden door and steps inside. A few folks give him suspicious stares, but he ignores them and carries himself with dignity to the bar.

The bartender nods at him. "What can I get you?"

"Two shots of the strongest liquor you've got," says Noatak. He takes a seat on a stool.

The strongest liquor is stronger than he is accustomed to. The alcohol burns his throat. He takes both shots for good measure, then begins to nurse an ale. It isn't long before the warm glow of inebriation begins to take hold. He may have lost Tarrlok, Korra and Kwan, but at least he still has alcohol: the one friend who hurts him more than he hurts it.

About a half an hour later, the bartender sets a mixed drink in front of him. It's red, with a small assortment of fruit on top and a tiny parasol. "Compliments of the lady."

"The lady?" Noatak turns and sees a woman sitting at the other end of the bar. When she sees him looking at her, she gives him a smile.

*Looks like I'm returning to my old form in every sense tonight,* he thinks as he cocks his head for her to join him.

"Not common for a lady to buy a stranger a drink," he says as she approaches.

She shrugs. "Not common for a Water Tribe man to show up around here. Besides, I swear I know you from somewhere."

He studies her, but she doesn't look familiar. She's probably in her late thirties or early forties, with short black hair that looks far too stylish amid the sea of farm folks. She's lithe, with fashionable clothes, and a pretty face with light lipstick. Though he finds her quite attractive, he also finds himself missing Korra even more, simply because this woman is not her. Does he really expect he can fill the void left by her by flirting with random people?

"I hope you like the obnoxious drink." The woman pokes the parasol. "You looked glum, and these things always make me laugh."
He takes a sip of the drink, then coughs. It's almost sickeningly sweet, and his mouth burns. "Cinnamon?"

"You didn't expect a reasonable flavour out of something this ridiculous-looking, did you?" she asks. Holding out a hand, she says, "Riko."

He takes her hand and shakes it, and he's struck by how delicate it is. All he can think of is Korra's hands, smaller than his, but still strong and soft. "Kanno," he says, because he hasn't had time to think of a new pseudonym yet. When he does, it will be his fourth identity. How many people have to run from themselves three times?

"You aren't from around here," she says, and he shakes his head.

"Republic City. North Pole before that."

"Maybe that's where I know you from. I grew up in the City, but moved here a couple years ago." She squints at him, and he swallows hard. Her scrutiny reminds him of Korra, of the way she used to study him whenever he said something that surprised her.

*There you go, thinking about Korra again. You're going to have to stop that if you want to move on.*

Talking to the woman might provide him with a distraction. "Would you like to move to a table, Riko? If you don't mind me pestering you for conversation, that is. I'm curious how a city woman ends up in a small town like this."

"Mm. I'm curious about you myself." She smiles. There's a small gap between her front teeth, and Noatak finds it charming. "Just let me grab my drink."

They settle into a booth, and the conversation and the alcohol flow easily. Though thoughts of Korra keep threatening to distract Noatak, he clings to Riko's conversation. He's better than his emotions. He's better than staying attached to a woman he can never have, in a life he's trying to leave behind.

*You're afraid of love,* Korra's voice suddenly says in his mind. *You're so afraid of love that you cling to it whenever it's easily available, and push it away the second it looks like it might not be.*

He must grimace, because Riko suddenly stops talking. "I'm sorry, did I say something to offend you?"

"No."

Riko leans in close. "What's her name?" she asks gently.

"How-"

She motions to her neck, and he realizes he's still sporting several love bites. The worst thing is that even though most of them are Korra's, a couple of them are still Kwan's from that first night they saw each other again.

He curses under his breath and drains every glass in front of him, then waves at the bartender for more. It's too much, too much, losing everyone so close together like this. Spirits, he already misses her so much.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried." Riko stands, looking embarrassed. "I'll just-"
"No, it's all right. I apologize." He shifts. "I had to leave someone behind when I came here."

Her face softens, and she sits back down.

"She thinks I'm dead," he says, and he reflects that being so chatty might reveal too much information, but he can't seem to stop. "It was for her own good. I'm a dangerous man, and you would be wise not to associate with me."

"Because you're a bloodbender," says Riko softly.

His heart stops.

"It's okay." She leans forward, her voice low. "I figured out where I recognized you from. I won't tell a soul."

The room is spinning. Everything is about to unravel. "I don't know what you're talking about," he says, but he knows the shock on his face has already given him away.

"You're ex-Councilman Tarrlok," she whispers.

He stares at her for several seconds, his mouth open to respond, but no words come. The urge to laugh almost gets the better of him. "No, I'm not."

"It's okay, really. I would recognize you anywhere - you were all over the papers, back in the day." Her eyes sparkling with admiration, she adds, "I used to have a bit of a crush on you."

He hesitates. "Is that so?"

"Of course. A handsome man only a couple years older than me, representing his people on the Council? That kind of diplomatic skill is damned attractive." Her finger traces the rim of her glass.

The words leave Noatak torn. Her intentions are pretty clear. Once upon a time, he would have had no qualms lying about his identity to appeal to another person's attraction. But now, he's not sure he can do it without feeling guilt about it later. Besides, by all logic, it's far, far too early to even contemplate finding comfort in the arms of someone who isn't Korra. It wouldn't have stopped the old him, but he has evolved since then, hasn't he?

The liquor is making his head swim. He feels like he's drifting, like he doesn't know who he is anymore. Everything was so much easier when the mission began, when he knew he was an awful person, when he was single-mindedly ready to die.

The alcohol must be hitting Riko pretty hard, too, because she leans forward, her lids low. "I always wondered what bloodbending would be like in bed."

Swallowing hard, he says, "I'm not a bloodbender."

"Oh, that's right. Amon took your bending away, didn't he?" She shakes her head, brows dropping. "Fucking Amon. I'm glad he's dead."

"As am I," says Noatak, but now he's wondering what the general public thinks happened to the two of them. Was their capture and imprisonment such a minor even that it didn't even register with the public consciousness? Does everyone just assume they're dead?

He downs another shot, and barely feels it burn.

***
They leave the tavern well past midnight, and Noatak is so drunk that the world is rocking beneath him, making it difficult to stand. Riko is boisterous and childlike; she grabs his hand and tugs him into an alley, laughing.

Desperate to lose himself, he shoves her against the wall and engulfs her mouth with his.

It feels wrong, and it isn't her fault. She's a good kisser, and enthusiastic, but he feels nothing. His emotions are as dead as his injured arm. She moans, and her clawed fingers rake down his back; all he can feel is the scratches left there by Korra.

He jerks away, breathing hard. Riko smiles at him, oblivious to his conflict, and his heart sinks. Noatak, what the fuck are you doing?

Her arm loops through his, and she pulls him down a dirt road that branches off the main strip. He follows, but his thoughts stagger and spin around Korra. What is she doing right now? Did she, thinking me dead, try to work things out with her ex-boyfriend?

What would she say if she knew what I was about to do?

Riko leads him to a tiny house at the end of the dirt path, then unlocks the door. She presses her lips to his, and even though his heart isn't in it, he kisses her with energy, trying to create even the smallest spark of desire inside himself. Without breaking the kiss, she leads him to a bedroom, then falls back onto the bed and pulls him on top of her.

Even here, with a warm body beneath him, everything feels wrong. His body is refusing to respond. There's always bloodbending to help him perform, but the idea, once routine, now sickens him. He is no stranger to loveless sex, so why is it suddenly so difficult now? He would put it down to the drink if he weren't so emotionally flat.

He breaks the kiss and sits up, trying not to notice how her brows pinch with concern.

"Tarrlok, are you okay?" she asks.

Oh spirits, this is all so wrong.

The concern, the name and the alcohol combine to wash away the last of his defenses. All his pent-up emotions explode, and he buries his face in his hand, letting out a wail that would embarrass him if he had any pride left.

He tries to take a deep breath and steady himself, but the next exhale is accompanied by a wail as well, and soon his body shakes with sobs. He cries for the woman and brother he left behind. He cries for the man who left him behind - as much as he doesn't want to admit it, and as much as he deserves it, it hurt to watch Kwan walk away. He cries for his mother, for all the mistakes he has ever made, for his stubborn insistence on continuing to exist. It's too much to bear. The last time he felt pain like this was after he left home at fourteen, and even then, he didn't cry this hard.

The bed creaks, and he suddenly remembers that he's in Riko's bedroom. He lifts his head, tears running down his face, and sees her watching him, her eyes wide.

"I can't do this," he says, and he curses his voice for cracking.

"I, uh," says Riko, and she slides out of the bed. "Can I get you some water or something?"

He's making an ass of himself, and instead of kicking him out, she's trying to help him. He buries his face in his hand, and he's humiliated to hear another sob leave his mouth.
She's silent for several minutes, and he tries to rein himself in, but he's too drunk to have any self-control. Eventually, she says, "I'm just going to give you a bit of space, okay?" He hears her leave the room, closing the door behind her.

He curls up on his side at the base of the bed, blubbery like a child.

.*.*.*.

At some point, Noatak must pass out from exhaustion, because he awakens shortly after sunrise.

The first thing he does is turn his head to look for Korra. His stomach drops as he sees the unfamiliar bedroom. So it wasn't all a nightmare, then.

He massages the bridge of his nose. He doesn't want to show his face around Riko, but he drank a lot of liquid before he passed out, and he's not going to be able to hold it in much longer. Desperation wins out, and he steps into the hallway. He can hear an announcer on the radio from the main room. The path to the bathroom is empty, so he darts for it.

As he washes his hand, he sees his reflection in the mirror. Both eyes are still a bit bruised from his injuries, and the whites are bloodshot. His nose is red, the skin raw. His cheeks are sunken, and all the lines on his face are stronger. He looks as if he has aged ten years in a day.

His fingers trace the fading love bites on his neck, and he frowns. This will get easier, he reminds himself. *It'll take time to heal, and time always moves forward. You just have to wait it out.*

While he's thinking of time and healing, he tries to clench the hand of his injured arm. The fingers just barely move. It's a step in the right direction, at least.

He steals a dollop of toothpaste and uses his finger to do a poor approximation of a scrub of his teeth, then rinses out his mouth and smooths his hair into place.

There's nothing more to delay him; now he's going to have to face Riko. He tries to imagine how he would feel if he spent all night conversing with someone, brought him home, and the man burst into tears. Offended, no doubt. Or maybe just embarrassed for him. Pity, perhaps. None of the options is pleasant.

Best to just get it over with. Steeling himself, he steps into the main room.

Riko sits at the kitchen table, listening to the radio. She looks up. "Morning," she says tentatively.

"Morning." He clears his throat and clasps his hands behind his back. "I believe I drank too much last night."

"It's okay," she says, but she looks down. "I shouldn't have been so aggressive, not after you told me you were heartbroken."

"You were fine. Thank you for your kindness. Most people would have thrown me out instead of letting me sleep it off." He bows his head. "It's best if we both forget last night ever happened. Goodbye, Riko."

He's almost at the door, when she says, "Wait."

He turns. She stands and begins to rummage through a drawer.

"When my husband died," she says, her back to him, "there was an exercise that helped me." When
she turns around again, she has some stationery and a pen in her hands. She walks up to him and holds them out. "I wrote a letter to him, confessing all my deepest thoughts and feelings. Then I burnt them, to send them to the spirit world." She shrugs off the last phrase. "I mean, I don't really believe it went to the spirit world, but it was more of an emotional thing, you know? Cleansing. So maybe it would help you, too. Even if the girl is still alive."

The last thing he wants to do is write another letter to Korra after the way the last one turned out, but he recognizes that the gesture is important to Riko. He owes her this, after being so rude the night before. "Thank you." He accepts the gift.

She stands on her toes to kiss his cheek. "Good luck, Councilman."

Cringing, Noatak nods his goodbye, then leaves the house. He tucks the supplies into his satchel, glad the whole mess is behind him.

.*.*.*.

His first stop is the docks, to find a ship captain who will give him passage and board in exchange for labour.

"You're a bit old," says a captain looking to hire. He's a grizzled man, Water Tribe, with weather-worn skin.

"I'm as fit as a man half my age," says Noatak, "and clear-headed, good with maps, and decent with a wrench."

The captain snorts. "You've got one arm in a sling."

"The injury will heal, and there are plenty of tasks I can do one-armed."

The blue eyes narrow as the man studies him. "And you want passage to where, exactly?"

"Anywhere but Republic City."

The two men eye each other for several minutes.

"Might I suggest that you give me probationary employment until your next port of call?" says Noatak. "If I haven't proven myself useful by then, I'll leave without a fuss."

Still looking a bit reluctant, the captain nods. "What is your name?"

"Saomik," says Noatak without really thinking. It's a half-forgotten name from one of his mother's legends; he can't even remember the context.

"See you at two o'clock, Saomik," says the captain, and he turns his back without even introducing himself in return. The rudeness inspires confidence in Noatak. The sea is unforgiving, so he wants a captain who cares more about getting to the point than societal conventions. A good leader is decisive.

Heading back into town, Noatak counts the remainder of his yuans. He buys a newspaper and a stuffed pastry, then settles at a table in a nearby park. The local news is so thin that he finds himself with two hours to kill and nothing left to keep himself preoccupied. If he's not careful, he's going to trap himself in depressing thoughts and start blubbing again.

He eyes his satchel.
"Better than nothing," he mutters, and he pulls out Riko's writing supplies.

As soon as he touches the pen to paper, he understands why she said this exercise would be cleansing. He has never written like this, in bouts of stream-of-consciousness with no consideration for the end reader. Knowing Korra will never see the letter means he can be honest, and as his honesty begins to flow, it begins to surprise even himself. Between the bursts of writing, much of his time is spent staring into empty space, trying to strip away layers of pride and defensiveness to get at the truths he normally won't let himself consider.

When the letter comes to its natural close, he carefully folds it into the envelope and seals it. For authenticity, he addresses it: Avatar Korra, c/o Air Temple Island, Republic City.

He already feels as if he has purged some of his internal demons. Now there's just one final step remaining.

Rummaging through his bag, he pulls out his lighter. The flame sparks to life. The corner of the envelope is just starting to char, when he suddenly closes the lighter and blows out the flame.

He can't explain why, but this feels wrong, burning the letter here in this anonymous park. Maybe he needs to do it over the ocean, scattering its ashes to the sea. He and Korra share a common connection to the water, after all, as much as he has always tried to deny his own. It will be like a proper funeral.

He walks to the main street and is just marching toward the docks, when his eyes, always scanning his surroundings for threats, land on a sign.

The town post office.

His feet slow. The letter is suddenly heavy in his hand.

You can't, he tells himself. Korra and Tarrlok have to believe he is dead. Everyone does. Revealing himself to Korra is the worst thing he can do for either of them.

Isn't it?

On the other hand, their relationship, as short as it was, was built on honesty. She knew all his darkest secrets, and he knew all hers. He had never allowed himself to be so honest, so vulnerable, with any other lover in his life. Maybe he owes her that continued honesty. Maybe if she knows what was in his mind when he left her, she will move past him more quickly, even if she learns he is still alive at the same time.

His feet begin to carry him to the post office.

You can't, he tells himself again as he buys a stamp with the last of his coins.

Your sentiment will be your downfall, his inner voice yells as he affixes the stamp to the envelope. Everything is perfect now. Your disappearing act is complete. Don't jeopardize that because of sentiment. Think of Korra. Think of Tarrlok.

He dangles the envelope over the mail bag, his heart pounding in his throat.

The clock tower chimes two. He's going to miss his sailing if he doesn't make up his mind.

His eyes slip closed. I hope I don't regret this.
He opens his hand and lets the envelope fall.

Chapter End Notes

I have been nervous about posting this chapter since...well...for a long time now. I am pretty sure no one is going to be thrilled about Noatak kissing another woman only a few hours after he left Korra.

There are a few major concepts I'm trying to play with in this story. One is personal identity/knowledge of self (and the importance of names as they relate to identity, blah blah), and another is the idea of lowest point/greatest change.

Kwan hit his lowest point when he was standing on the hotel rooftop. Korra hit hers last chapter, when she almost succumbed entirely to the corruption. Noatak has been kind of slumming it in the low points for the past 6 years, but he still needed to hit rock bottom.

For Noatak, I feel rock bottom is reverting completely back to his old self (alcohol, self-serving lust, lies, a bloodbender, afraid of love, abandoning his brother, hurting/pushing away a loved one, etc.), after he has already been through a period of seeing greater potential in himself, thanks both to introspection in prison, as well as reflection with Korra. His lowest point is regression to his old self, except this time, it all feels wrong. He can't go back to being the man he was; he has evolved without realizing just how much, until he comes face to face with himself.

The story will continue in "Chapter XXX: Korra," which should go up pretty soon. Thanks for reading!
XXX: Korra

XXX

Korra

One last time, Korra looks through the house she shared with Noatak, making sure she has collected all their belongings. His mask sits at the bottom of a shopping bag. She hasn't had the courage to look at it since she shoved it in there.

Her memory of everything that happened on the cliff is still fuzzy. What she does remember, she wishes she could erase: his arm wilting under her touch, his look of distrust as she reached for his hand, the fear in his eyes as he left her...

Exhaustion must have hampered the Avatar State from rousing her from unconsciousness after Noatak knocked her out. By the time she awoke and made it down to the docks, there was no sign of Noatak and Kwan. According to a police officer, who had been called in when the fugitives had stolen a boat, they had already been gone a good twenty minutes. He tried to convince her that the police could do a better job of searching for them than she could, but that didn't stop her from borrowing a nearby row boat and waterbending her way into the bay.

Her waterbending, still weak from her corruption, took so much effort that she was out of breath by the time she reached the open ocean. Taking a minute to catch her breath, she studied her surroundings. An endless expanse of water stretched before her, its horizon blurred with dark clouds. That's when she realized how hopeless it was: Noatak could have gone anywhere.

As she fell to her knees and wept, the rain began to fall. She returned to the docks nearly an hour after she left, dripping wet and shivering, but too exhausted to pull the water out of her clothes.

The police officer offered to give her a ride back to town. "We have a search party out. We'll find the stolen craft."

"I just have to grab something from the cliff first," she replied, too numb to feel gratitude.

It wasn't until after she got back to the house that she realized the officer was more concerned with saving the missing boat than its passengers.

Now, she's left with an empty house, a hollow reminder of the fleeting connection she made with a man who is likely dead. As much as she wants to deny it, she knows what a boat ride means in Noatak's world.

The last sweep of the house brings her to the healing salve in the bathroom. Her hand hovers over it for a second, then moves to the water tap instead. She tries to bend the water around her hand, and it just barely responds, but it won't absorb into her skin to heal. A shame, as the corruption has left thick scars in its wake, and they might still be fresh enough to heal.

She sighs and turns off the tap.

The corruption is gone - she can feel that, within her - but she's not sure what to do about the gap it left within her. Questions about it are heavy on her mind. *Will I be able to bend the elements again, or is this permanent? And if it is, does the next Avatar regenerate without this gaping hole, or did I damage the entire line?*
Aang will probably have an answer for her, but she needs a few days to process everything that has happened before she adds more potential stress to herself. As it is, she's just barely holding herself together.

Pocketing the salve, she continues her sweep, then, with everything ready to go, she sinks to a seat on the bed one last time. Her fingertips run across Noatak's pillow, but then her brows drop, and she drives her fist into it.

"You fucking asshole," she snaps. "You stupid, selfish fucking asshole!" She knows it isn't fair to be angry with him. She understands his logic, and she understands why he felt he had to die. But spirits, it still hurts.

Her trembling hands close around the pillow, and she lifts it to her face and breathes in. For a second, she can smell his hair, the mixture of his shampoo and his natural scent. The scent fades from her consciousness as her brain adapts to it, and she closes her eyes, trying to hang onto it for a few moments longer, but it's already gone.

Her arms wrap around the pillow and she hugs it tightly. I knew you wanted to die, from the beginning, but I thought maybe I had convinced you life was worth living. No wonder you looked so distraught last night, when I was speaking about the possibility of a future together. You had already made up your mind to die in the morning.

As much as she wants to let herself fall apart, she forces herself to stand and set the pillow back on the bed, then she wipes her cheeks with her palm. Not yet. There are too many things to do today. She will use what she learned about herself on this mission: so long as she keeps herself busy, she will be able to keep pushing forward without breaking down. Tonight will be her time for mourning.

After she calls the landlord to cancel their rental, she drops the key in the rain barrel outside. With one last look back at the house, she bows her head with respect, and tears prick at her eyes.

"You can cry again later," she mutters to herself. "Just keep moving forward. One goal at a time."

She's so focussed on hailing a taxi that she forgets to pull her hood over her face. A few people point and call her name, and they sound excited to see her. Their enthusiasm feels out of place next to her grief.

At least being recognized doesn't give her the crippling anxiety she felt at the beginning of the mission. She knows her weaknesses now; she knows she isn't the hero they want her to be, and it doesn't crush her the way it used to. She's glad they think the best of her. As she works to become a better person and a better Avatar, it's going to be helpful to have people around her who believe in her, even absolute strangers.

The taxi pulls up to the police station about fifteen minutes later. As Korra approaches the building, she rustles through her bag of belongings and pulls out Noatak's letter. She removes the page addressed to her, folds it into quarters, then subtly tucks it down the front of her shirt, nestling it safely in her bra. As angry as she is that he left her, she knows she'll be rereading the letter over and over in the days to come.

At the front desk, she requests a one-on-one meeting with Chief Beifong. While she isn't going to give the police chief all the details, there are some that are going to be too private for the ears of random officers.

So she's shocked to arrive at Chief Beifong's office and see Mako sitting beside her.
"Mako," she blurts, just as he says, "Korra?"

Lin stands. "Welcome back, Korra. I thought Officer Mako could join us for the debrief. I'm grooming him for a promotion."

"Congratulations," says Korra, but her mouth is dry. She can't stop staring at him. You slept with another man hours after Mako broke up with you. Hours! What kind of person does that to someone they're supposed to love? She feels sick with guilt.

Turning to Lin, she says, "I, uh, was hoping to speak with you alone."

Lin looks surprised. She probably thought the two would want to be reunited as quickly as possible. "For the purposes of this meeting, Officer Mako has the same clearance levels as I do."

Mako stands, looking uncomfortable. "Actually, if it's okay, I would rather leave. Captain Saikhan was going to take me through the archives in a couple hours, and I want to catch up on some paperwork first."

After studying him for a moment, Lin says, "Next time, then."

Mako salutes. He glances at Korra and opens his mouth as if to speak, but then his eyes duck away and he marches from the room.

Korra realizes that her hands are curled into fists, and her palms are sweaty. She wipes them on her pants. "I'll be back in a minute," she blurts to Lin, and she runs after him.

He's already halfway down the hall when she steps out of the doorway.

"Mako, wait," she yells.

He stops, but doesn't turn.

"Come on, Mako, look at me." She jogs to stand behind him. When he turns, his face is drawn and pale.

"I'm so sorry, for everything," she says. "I hurt you, and-" She's going to start crying if she keeps talking, so instead, she lunges forward to hug him. There's a long pause, then he hugs her back.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice hoarse. "I was worried about you."

"I'm not corrupted anymore, and I'm not a bloodbender anymore, either. I'm so sorry." When she pulls away, she sees him looking at her with concern.

"I didn't tell anyone about it," he says quietly. "And I won't."

"Thank you." It's more than she deserves, and she is grateful.

"Korra..." He looks down. "I know when things ended between us, we talked about maybe looking at things again after we've had some time, but... I've been thinking, and I don't think I'll be able to look at you the same way again. Not after what happened between us."

"I know. I understand." She feels her face crumple, but she won't let herself cry. This is what she expected.

"Did he hurt you?" asks Mako.
"Noatak?" she asks, and she sees him hunch, as if she has just punched him in the stomach.

"I guess not," he mutters.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snaps, too defensively.

"You tell me. You're the one who was so hell-bent on calling him 'Amon.'"

Her stomach lurches. She's going to vomit if this conversation continues. Why did she chase after him like this? "I should get back to Beifong," she mutters.

She's just about to leave, when Mako blurts, "Did you sleep with him?"

"Excuse me?" Her pulse sounds in her ears.

"Did you- No, never mind. I don't want to know." He sighs. "And I guess it's none of my business, anyway."

He won't look at her, but she can tell his eyes are damp. Hers begin to fill with tears, too, and she fights to keep them from spilling over.

"Mako," she says, "you were right with everything you said when you confronted me. I had lost control. I learned a lot about myself this mission, even some stuff I didn't want to learn. But I'm better now, and I'm starting to find myself again. I'm always going to care about you, Mako, and I can't stand the idea of losing your friendship."

"Friends. Yeah. That would be good." He swabs at his cheek. "Your stuff is waiting for you at Air Temple Island. The girls set up your room, just the way it used to look."

"That's good."

There's a long pause.

"Good luck, Korra," he says softly. It's genuine, but also a farewell.

"Goodbye, Mako," she replies, then she turns and walks away.

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When she returns to the office, Chief Beifong gives her a stern look. "Close the door."

Korra obeys, then sits down.

"Where the hell is Noatak?" asks Lin. "I heard reports that you let him slip away."

*Don't start crying. Don't start crying.* "I did, but I'm pretty sure he's dead." Swallowing hard, Korra launches into the story about the mission, from the first encounter with Kwan right through to the moment when they left her to steal a boat. She doesn't recount all the details, of course: she leaves out everything to do with her corruption, and any romantic entanglement, though she does imply that she befriended Noatak. It would probably seem suspicious if they didn't befriend each other, given how closely they were working together.

She finishes up by handing Lin the letter. "I hope it's useful."

"Assuming it's true, there seems to be a lot of information here." Lin flips through the pages. "What
makes you think he's dead? Isn't it more likely that he and his ex-lover ran away together?"

The thought twists into Korra's heart like a knife. "I guess I didn't really consider that."

Lin's brow furrows. "Wouldn't that be your first inclination? You said they were intimate on the first night they saw each other again."

_She knows I'm leaving things out._ Squirming, Korra says, "Well, they seemed to be on less friendly terms once Kwan tried to stab him." How would she feel if the two men did run off and start a life together? She knows Noatak was, to some extent, still in love with Kwan, and they were together for so long that her dalliance with him is just a blink in comparison. At least he would be alive, and presumably happy. She tries to convince herself that it's the better of the two options.

"Look, I don't know," she says, frustrated. "I got to know him pretty well, and his face, when he left, clearly said that he was going to his death. My instinct tells me he was trying to finish what Tarrlok started six years ago."

After a long, scrutinizing gaze, Lin says, "We have a team looking for them. We'll find out for sure. I want a body or his re-capture."

The dissatisfaction in her voice worries Korra. "Are you still going to release Tarrlok?"

"If this information checks out, I will consider it, but I'm hesitant to do it if Noatak is still at large. What would stop Tarrlok from running to join him?"

"I could keep an eye on him."

Lin's lips purse. "The same way you kept an eye on his brother? And, I might add, on your mission budget?"

Korra sighs. She wondered when their expenses were going to come up.

"Although," adds Lin, as if to herself, "I suppose it won't exactly be easy for him to wander off the Island."

"The Island?"

With a nod, Lin says, "Tenzin has offered to take in Tarrlok."

This news is surprising. "I thought they hated each other."

Lin shrugs. "They were colleagues for many years, and Tenzin never could resist the opportunity to help fix someone who needs fixing."

Korra isn't sure how she feels about living with Tarrlok. At least it will be easy to keep an eye on him.

"There's a third in command," she says at length. "If it'll help secure Tarrlok's release. The one I mentioned, Kwan's partner. We hurt her pretty badly in the fight, so she should still be in the hospital." Her mouth goes dry as she realizes that if Qing pulls through, her secret about bloodbending may be revealed. She might be able to convince the police that Qing's tales of bloodbending are lies, but if other witnesses come forward...

"Good. We'll send out a team to arrest her. While I'm at it, I'll find out if there's any progress on tracking the two fugitives." Lin picks up the phone and asks for Captain Saikhan. After relaying
the commands, she adds, "And send an assistant in here to take food orders - we're overdue for lunch."

While they wait for their food to arrive, Korra fidgets, her eyes trailing around the room. The shelves are full of books, all neatly filed and arranged. The desk surface is covered with papers and stationery supplies, but it's all perfectly squared with the perimeter of the desk. Lin runs a tight ship.

Soon, she runs out of things to look at, and this is dangerous, because she needs to stay distracted so that she doesn't break down. She considers making conversation with Lin, but the woman is studying the letter again.

It's a relief when the assistant brings in their lunch. Lin still doesn't look up from the papers, so Korra eats her noodles a single noodle at a time, trying to make it last as long as possible.

An hour or so later, a knock sounds at the door. An officer enters.

"Ma'am," he says, bowing to Lin. "We searched the hospital, but the target had already been extracted. There is no record of her departure."

_The Equalists got to her_, thinks Korra, conflicted. Though she's greatly relieved that her bloodbending won't come to light any time soon, she wishes she had thought to alert the police earlier.

"Thank you," says Lin to dismiss him.

"There's more," says the officer. "We have reports of a shipwreck up the coast, near Red Bay."

Korra's throat tightens.

"What sort of shipwreck?" asks Lin.

"Speedboat. A fisherman says it exploded; he just radioed it in a few minutes ago. Part of the registration number was visible, and it matches the one the fugitives stole this morning. We're going to send a couple officers out in the morning to check it out, but so far, it seems like a probable match."

"Any sign of the fugitives?" asks Lin, and the officer shakes his head.

"No, but the fisherman rushed over as soon as he saw the explosion, and he didn't see any survivors, so they're either charred or drowned. We'll send a dive team out tomorrow."

Korra's entire body is shaking, and she feels a tear spill onto her cheek. The words have her imagining Noatak's body, charred and bloated, and she bites her lip and squeezes her eyes shut, fighting to keep herself from bawling.

Behind her, she hears the officer's boots on the floor, then the door closes.

"I'm sorry," says Lin, her voice gentle. "I understand how difficult it can be to lose someone you worked in close quarters with, even if there is a bad history between you."

"I'm fine." Korra wipes her cheek, then blinks a few times to encourage the tears to reabsorb.

Standing, Lin says, "I guess we'd better make sure Tarrlok is ready to leave. We've kept you here long enough, and we can escort both of you to Air Temple Island at the same time."
"You're letting him go?"

She nods. "But keep an eye on him. I mean it."

"Okay. Thank you." Korra closes her eyes again, trying to steady herself. "I just need a minute."

"I'll meet you at Tarrlok's cell." Lin drops her hand onto Korra's shoulder and squeezes, then leaves the room, closing the door behind her.

The second she's sure she's alone, Korra collapses against the desk, her body shaking with sobs. To her surprise, the emotion demanding the most attention is anger. *How dare he choose to die? How dare he connect with me and then leave me? I might have been able to grant him a pardon. We might have had a life together!*

It seems to unreal, that she will never see him again. Everything has changed so much, so quickly.

She takes a deep breath in, then lets it out slowly. *Keep busy. Break down later.* She repeats the words in her mind, over and over, as she dries her face, then steps into the hallway.

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As she approaches Tarrlok's cell, she sees Chief Beifong standing outside it, her arms folded over her chest. Seeing Korra approach, the woman cocks an eyebrow.

"How are your diplomatic skills these days, Avatar?"

"What's going on?" Korra peers into the cell. Tarrlok is curled into a ball in the corner of the bed, his hair hanging in his face. Two distraught police officers hover around him, one scratching his head.

"He's refusing to leave." Lin shakes her head. "First word he's said in six years, and it has to be 'no.' And now he won't stop. He's like a damned two-year-old."

"Let me try." Korra steps into the cell. Her gaze darts around the tiny space. This was Noatak's home, his world, for all those years. The beds are nothing more than metal slabs with blankets. There's a toilet and a small sink, and not much else. Her heart breaks for the man all over again. No wonder he didn't want to come back.

Tarrlok's eyes lift as she approaches, but he doesn't move. She stares at the man, torn between pity and contempt. Even though he apologized years ago for manipulating, bloodbending and kidnapping her, she still hasn't quite let go of her anger. Still, if she can forgive Amon, then she can certainly forgive Tarrlok. She just has to give him a chance.

"Hey pal," she says gently. "I hear you're going to come live at Air Temple Island with me."

Tarrlok stares at her, and she wonders how much he understood.

She holds out a hand. "Come on - you're going to be free."

"No," he snaps.

Korra glances at Lin, who throws her hands in the air in defeat and says, "We'll have to drag him out."

"No," says Tarrlok again, but this time, Korra notices something odd about his inflection. It feels almost de-emphasized, as if it's only part of a bigger whole. She holds up a hand to Lin.
"Wait a sec." Crouching in front of the man, she says quietly, "You aren't saying 'no' at all, are you? You're trying to say something else."

Tarrlok looks at her, and his gaze is so aware that she feels a little silly for talking to him like he was a child.

"No," he says.

"Noatak?" asks Korra softly.

He nods.

Turning back to Lin, she says, "He's not saying 'no,' he's saying 'Noatak.' He doesn't want to leave without seeing his brother." She lets her glare say what her words didn't: didn't you tell him his brother is dead?

Lin clears her throat.

Frowning, Korra says, "Give us some privacy."

"We thought it best if Tenzin-" begins Lin.

With her best impersonation of Noatak's leaden tone, Korra repeats herself: "Give us some privacy."

The two women exchange a long look, staring each other down. Finally, Lin nods and cocks her head for the officers to follow. Korra waits until their footsteps disappear down the corridor, then turns back to Tarrlok. His brows are pinched.

"No," he says, and he looks frustrated. She can't imagine how difficult it must be to be unable to talk, especially for the ex-councilman, whose words were his greatest weapon.

Biting her lip, she studies him, trying to figure out the best way to break the news to him. Deciding there's no way to lessen the blow, she chooses to be blunt.

"Tarrlok," she says, "your brother is missing, presumed dead."

She expected tears, or yelling, but instead, he just closes his eyes and bows his head. Somehow, that's even worse. If her heart weren't already broken, it would break for him.

"I'm sorry." A bit awkwardly, she says, "He told me to watch over you. I guess we'll be living together at Air Temple Island, so that should be pretty easy."

Though Tarrlok doesn't open his eyes, a tear trails down his cheek, and Korra cringes. She isn't sure how to handle his emotions, not when she's already struggling to control her own.

"We can share a taxi," she says awkwardly. "If you're ready to go."

He doesn't seem to hear her.

"Tarrlok? Are you coming?" she asks.

He stares blankly at her, his eyes shining with tears.

"There's nothing left for you here," she says. "Noatak did the mission with me so that you could be free, and so that you could be attended to by the best medical care in the city. He sold out the
Equalists and everything he ever believed in, all because he though your life was going to be better outside than inside." Tears are rimming her eyes, and she tries not to let them spill over. "That mission took his life. Don't let that be in vain."

Tarrlok stares at her for a moment longer, then nods.

"Come on," she says again, holding out a hand. He accepts it and rises to his feet.

.*.*.*.

Tenzin, Pema and the kids are waiting for them at the docks. Korra's throat tightens. She hasn't seen the kids in almost a year, and she can't believe how grown-up Ikki looks, or how tall Meelo is getting. Even Rohan is looking older, an impish grin on his face.

Behind the family sits Naga, and even though their boat is still docking, the polar bear dog's tail is already wagging. Korra's heart swells; she has missed Naga so much.

As Korra steps onto the dock, Naga barks and pushes past the humans, bounding over to her. Korra laughs and throws her arms around her companion, buckling beneath the slew of slobbery kisses. "I missed you, too, girl."

Tarrlok hovers awkwardly behind her. Realizing that she has a duty to attend to, Korra good-naturedly shoos Naga aside and turns to him. "Come on, let's say hi." When he still doesn't move, she loops her arm through his and drags him toward the smiling family.

"Korra," says Tenzin, and she gives him a big hug.

"Thank you for taking me in."

"You're always welcome in our home," says Pema, stepping forward to accept her hug.

Behind her, Korra hears Tenzin welcome Tarrlok and begin to lay out the ground rules of the Island. Leaving them to talk, she turns to the kids.

"Come here, you four." She gathers them in a big hug and squeezes tightly. "What have you been up to?"

"Jinora has a boyfriend!" blurts Ikki.

Korra sets them down and glances at the older sister, who is blushing. "He's just a friend."

"They were holding hands," says Meelo, and he starts making smooching noises.

"Okay, okay, cut it out," says Korra, bopping him good-naturedly on the head. "I'll let Jinora tell me all about it - and in private, so you goons don't make her uncomfortable."

The girl gives a relieved smile, and Korra winks at her. Spirits, she missed these kids.

"Well?" says Pema. "Anyone hungry? We have quite the feast waiting for you."

In spite of her rocky stomach, Korra is ravenous. She wolfs down everything set in front of her. Tarrlok seems equally delighted by the spread, though he eats with more dignity. Korra watches out of the corner of her eye, and she can't stop comparing his mannerisms to his brother. Now that she knows Noatak so well, it's easy to see the small movements and habits that are common to both. She gets the feeling that spending time around Tarrlok is going to constantly reopen her wounds.
After dinner, she treats herself to a hot bath, then settles into her old room. It's exactly the way she remembers it, as if the last six years never happened at all.

Well, not exactly the way she remembers it. She paces slowly around the room, noticing the few added items from her time living with Mako: the glass music box from their trip to the Earth Kingdom, the photograph from the time they visited Iroh, the quilted wall hanging her mother sent them when they moved in together.

Her feet come to a halt as she finds Asami's portrait, set up carefully on a shelf over the dresser. It looks naked without the candles, incense and fruit from the shrine, but the time for maintaining the shrine has ended. Her heart is heavy, and she's always going to miss Asami, but studying the portrait doesn't crush her the way it used to. She made a horrible mistake, but she learned from it the next time she was faced with the same situation. In a way, she feels redemption. Maybe she's being too gentle on herself, but maybe that's what she needs in order to get well. She needs to learn to forgive herself and let go of past wrongs.

When she circles back to the bed, she notices a stack of papers on the pillow, and a smile spreads across her face. The kids have drawn pictures for her and left them on her bed, even Jinora - the girl is turning out to be quite the artist. All of them are portraits of Korra, and Rohan has written on his, "my hero." She smiles. It feels good to be someone's hero again.

She carefully sets the pictures aside, then flops back onto the bed. Naga lies down beside the bed, resting her head on Korra's pillow. Normally she would instruct the polar bear dog to reposition herself - that enormous head takes up most of the pillow - but she missed her so much that she doesn't mind the intrusion, just for one night.

Her eyes close.

All she can see, inside her eyelids, is Noatak's expression of fear.

She tosses and turns. Her throat is tightening, and her eyes sting, and she realizes she's not going to be able to get any sleep without having a good cry first.

Sitting up, she retrieves Amon's mask from the shopping bag. Her fingertip runs along the bridge of the nose. Seeing him wear the mask, just a few days ago, was enough to send her flashing back to worse times, but now, it's one of the last connections she has to him.

She tries to imagine what it would be like if they had fallen in love while he was still Amon. Could they have overcome their differences? Could she have become a champion for the Equalists, and brought about the equality he sought in a peaceful way? Neither of them is the same person they were six years ago. It's probably impossible, the way they were then.

Tears are leaking from her eyes now, and she doesn't want to start sobbing in case she wakes up her neighbours. Maybe she'll give the mask a bit of a funeral to give her some closure.

She steps outside, signalling for Naga to follow. The temple is dark, but she still knows her way around from all those nights she sneaked out to be with Mako, many years ago. Once they're outside the temple, she climbs onto Naga's back, and they pad up the island, toward the cliff that has always been Korra's weeping spot. She remembers Noatak telling her about the breakdown he had there, right after she defeated him, and she's surprised that her heart aches for him. He deserved to feel wretched, under the circumstances, but she feels so much love for him now that it hurts to imagine him in pain.

At least he will never feel pain like that again. It's a small consolation, but she will take any
consolation she can get.

Once they reach the cliff, Korra dismounts and hugs the mask to her chest. It's so dark that she doesn't notice a figure among the shadows until she's almost on him. She jumps.

"Tarrlok?"

The man turns to look at her, his face unreadable. His eyes drop to the mask at her chest, and she quickly lowers it to her side. Too little, too late, she's sure; he had to have noticed how tenderly she was holding it.

"I can leave, if you want some privacy," she says, but he shakes his head. He is sitting with his knees drawn to his chest. It looks as if he has been staring across the bay; she's certain he must be thinking of Noatak.

Though she was hoping for some privacy herself, it's probably for the best that he's here for her makeshift funeral. She sits beside him, leaving a few feet of space between them, and folds her legs beneath her. Naga curls up behind her, and Korra leans back, drawing strength from her companion's solid warmth.

"You're probably wondering what I'm doing with the mask," she says, setting it on the ground in front of her. When he turns to study her, she says, "I was planning to burn it and sink it into the ocean. A funeral, of sorts, since there's no body yet."

His brow furrows with concentration, and she can hear the strain in his voice: "How?"

"How did he die?" she guesses.

He nods.

She takes a deep breath. She's still not sure she trusts him, but she really needs to talk about this with someone. Besides, it's not as if he's going to be able to tell anyone about it. The thought is tactless, but it gives her the courage to speak.

"What I'm going to tell you stays between you and me," she says.

When he nods, she tells him, in abbreviated terms, about the way she inherited Noatak's bloodbending, and how that led to her corruption.

"I understand now," she says quietly. "Bloodbending is a terrible burden; it's so incredibly powerful that it's difficult not to be corrupted by its influence. I see why you and your brother became what you became. Especially Noatak, who embraced it so thoroughly."

Tarrlok gives her a small smile, and she tries to return it, but can't quite bring herself to smile.

"So," she continues, "at Noatak's final showdown with Kwan, I gave him back his bending. I think, in his mind, the only logical next step was for that bending to be ended permanently. He bloodbent me so that I could not follow, and he and Kwan went down to the docks and stole a boat. There are reports that their boat exploded, and the police are going to search the wreckage tomorrow for..."

her voice trails off. She feels herself unravelling, and she's so thin that she's about to snap.

"That asshole!" she blurts. "I was planning to find a way to free him from prison once the mission
was over, but he had already made up his mind to die. That stupid, stubborn man, so desperate to play the martyr. So eager to push everything away." She doubles over the mask, hugging it closely to her chest. Behind her, Naga whines and presses closer, her nose nuzzling Korra's ear.

Tarrlok is quiet, and Korra still can't bring herself to look at him, but she can't dam up her rushing emotions, either.

"I fell in love with him," she sobs. "The two of us, we were so stupid: we let it get complicated. We made it so much harder than it needed to be. Right before he left, he tried to kiss my cheek, and I pulled away before he could." Korra rocks in place, tears streaming down her face. "I spat and swore at him. I called him Amon, like it was a curse, like he had regressed. And now he's gone, and he will never kiss my cheek again."

It takes several minutes for her grief to release its grip on her lungs, for her breaths to become hers again. Numbness slowly begins to blanket her anger and her sadness, and she welcomes it; it's like a healing balm, soothing her. When the pain is finally bearable, she lifts her head and dries her eyes.

Tarrlok stares across the water, his knees drawn to his chest. His face is blank, as if he has withdrawn again. She sniffles and cranes her neck, trying to make eye contact, but he is absent. She wonders when he blanked out.

"Tarrlok?" she says quietly, her voice still a bit shaky.

He blinks and turns to look at her.

Holding out the mask, she says, "Do you want to keep this?"

His brows drop, and he shakes his head.

"Do you want me to burn it?"

He nods.

Standing, she tries to firebend, but she can barely create a spark. Trying not to panic - tomorrow; I'll deal with that tomorrow - she rifles through her pockets and finds the matches she bought for the candles. No, don't think about the candles, don't think about all those times you tenderly made love. It takes two matches and some gentle breaths to coax it along, but the wooden mask finally catches. It burns slowly, letting off thick, fragrant smoke.

She carries it to the edge of the cliff. Tarrlok stands beside her.

"Do you want to say anything?" she asks without thinking, and she cringes. "Sorry. I mean, you can take a moment to reflect, if you need it."

He reaches out a hand. She passes him the burning mask - Noatak was his brother, after all, and so he deserves to be the one to put him to rest. He stares at it for a moment, then holds it over the cliff.

She takes in a long breath that shudders as she releases it.

Tarrlok's fingers open, and the mask falls, fire and ash trailing behind it. The flame snuffs when it hits the water, and the light that was Amon is no more.

"Goodbye, Noatak," whispers Korra, and she turns to bury her face in Naga's fur.
XXXI: Pathways

Chapter Notes

Oh my...I neglected to update here for a long time! The full story is up at ff.net -- I'll try to copy it over here as quickly as I can here, too!

XXXI

Pathways

Korra wakes up at nine o'clock to the sound of Pema calling the girls to breakfast, and her eyes refuse to stay closed. Apparently living with Noatak has shifted her sleep schedule.

She sits up. Her eyes and nose are raw, and her throat feels hoarse. A shower helps her feel a little more human, but she still feels as if she might break down crying at any minute.

For one of the first times in her life, it takes her a long time to figure out what to wear. Her closet is filled with her entire wardrobe, and someone has arranged her clothes by colour and length - no doubt it was Mako. Her disorganization always drove him nuts, but she secretly thinks his overly organizational tendencies aren't healthy, either. It can't be a pleasant existence to be constantly stressed by a little bit of chaos.

Yawning, she flips through the hangers, trying to decide on an appropriate outfit. As much as she wants to wear mourning clothes, she doesn't want the entire temple to know just how much she is mourning Noatak. In the end, she decides on a simple blue dress with a patterned leather belt - not too dressy, but still a little bit more formal than her usual wear.

It turns out that even this subtle gesture is much more obvious than she anticipated. When she steps into the dining room, six pairs of eyes lock onto her; Only Tarrlok continues to eat his breakfast, seemingly lost in his own world again.

"Wow, Korra, you look pretty!" yells Rohan.

Blushing, Korra settles to a seat next to Jinora. "I just felt like wearing something a little bit more formal than usual," she murmurs. "To celebrate coming back to live with you guys."

Tarrlok's eyes lift to meet hers, and he gives her a small smile of understanding. She gives him a tiny nod. He's mourning more blatantly than she is, with clothing in shades of white and grey. The clothes are too tight in the shoulders, but loose around his torso; they must be old, probably from his time mourning each of his parents.

One of the acolytes sets a bowl in front of her.

"Seaweed noodles and sea prunes?" She raises a suspicious eyebrow at Tenzin and notices he's fidgeting a little. "I doubt this is a welcoming party for Tarrlok, given how much you two used to be at each other's throats." Seeing Tarrlok glance at her, she adds, "No offense."

"Gran-gran's here!" says Meelo.
Korra's first instinct is a surge of happiness, but then she notices that Tenzin still looks uncomfortable. "Tenzin? What's going on?"

"We figured it might be a good idea for her to take a look at Tarrlok," he says. "Maybe she can help him where the prison doctor couldn't."

"How did she get here so quickly? We only got here last night."

Pema raises a brow at her husband, who gives a sigh.

"Korra," says Tenzin, "may I have a word in private?"

Korra follows him into the hallway and folds her arms over her chest. "What's really going on?"

"When I was helping Mako move your belongings, he confessed to me that you have been unwell." Her terror must show on her face, because he gently grips her shoulder. "He didn't disclose the nature of your illness, but it was clear that he was shaken by whatever is going on. I figured you might be more comfortable discussing it with my mother than with a doctor."

Korra sighs. "Dammit, Mako," she mutters, but a part of her feels relieved. It will be easier to talk to Katara about the corruption than Tenzin. She loves Tenzin dearly, but he can be a little overprotective, even more so than her real parents.

Her heart sinks. Her parents. They've always been so proud of her - how would they react if they found out how badly she lost control? They've been giving her some space since Asami's death, and she appreciates it, but suddenly she just wants them to be here to hug her.

"Maybe Mom and Dad can come visit, too?" she asks, and Tenzin gives a soft laugh.

"I had forgotten how you like to fill my home with guests, Korra," he says. "By all means, please invite them to visit."

"Thank you." She lunges to wrap her arms around him, and he gently pats her back. Her throat is tightening and she feels tears pricking at her eyes, and she's so sick of crying that she releases him and steps back. "When can I see Katara?"

"Let's leave her to rest until after lunch. It isn't an easy voyage for her."

"But she's going to miss her special Water Tribe breakfast," says Korra, but when Tenzin looks sheepish, she raises a brow. "Wait a minute. It was to placate me, wasn't it? In case I got offended that she was here to check up on me."

"You can be a bit changeable, Korra."

"It's going to take a hell of a lot of seaweed noodles," she says. "I hope you made enough."

She turns and marches back to the dining area, feeling optimistic for the first time in days. If anyone can fix the damage she has done to herself, it will be Katara.

"*.*.*."

"Korra!" Katara steps forward, and Korra meets her in a hug.

"Katara. It's so good to see you."

When their embrace breaks, Katara turns. "And you must be Tarrlok."
The man politely bobs his head. It's strange to see him so reserved. The Tarrlok of old would probably be puffing out his chest, lavishing praise on Katara while subtly bragging about his own accomplishments. Korra never thought she would miss that Tarrlok, but he seems to broken in comparison that she actually feels sorry for him.

Tenzin speaks up from behind them. "Mother, why don't you start by examining Tarrlok? Then you and Korra can spend some time getting caught up."

"A good idea. Come on in, Tarrlok." Katara opens the sliding door behind her to reveal the Temple's medical room. Korra is familiar with every inch of it, from its cupboards of medical supplies to the most creaky sections of the bed. She has a bad habit of pushing her body too hard during training, and paying for it with injury.

Katara and Tarrlok disappear into the room. Korra moves a little way down the hallway to give them some privacy, then slumps to a seat on the floor. Tenzin is watching her with concern, so she gives him a little smile to let him know she's okay, even though it's a lie. Her stomach is twisting again with thoughts of Noatak.

*Keep your mind occupied with something else.*

She rehearses, over and over, how she's going to tell Katara about the corruption. Deep down, she knows it's useless to rehearse, because it's in her nature to blurt out whatever is on her mind. At least it's better than thinking about her loss.

About a half an hour later, the door opens, and Tarrlok walks out, a pad of paper and a pen in his hand. He walks past them, only giving Korra a sidelong glance, then continues on toward the male quarters. She cranes her neck to stare after him, curious.

"Tenzin and Korra, you can come in now," calls Katara.

They enter, Tenzin closing the door behind them. Korra flops to a seat on the bed, hearing the familiar creak of the frame. Last time she was here was a couple of years ago, when she sprained an ankle. Her eyes drift around the room.

"Tarrlok has a reasonably common affliction, but an unusual manifestation of it," says Katara, settling to a seat at the desk. She closes a thick book, an encyclopedia of medicine. "His difficulty constructing more than a few words at a time, spoken and written, is something we call 'aphasia.' That, in itself, is not uncommon. What's unusual is his ability to read written words aloud. Usually that is hampered as well. Furthermore, his comprehension is quite sharp.

"Normally, I would suspect some form of stroke or brain damage, but this manifestation is odd enough that I'm not confident the damage is physical. As well, while waterbending doesn't give the clearest view of the brain, there are no major abnormalities that I can detect. So, while there is possibly a physical aspect to it, my guess would be that it's mainly psychological."

"So, what, he's making it up?" asks Korra.

"Don't confuse 'psychological' with 'imaginary,' Korra. It's very real to him, and it will require a lot of work to overcome. Maybe even more so than if it were only physical."

There is no hint of scolding in her tone, only patience, but Korra feels sheepish anyway. After the way her past year played out, she, of all people, should understand how difficult it can be to deal with psychological illness.

"So does that mean he can recover?" asks Tenzin.
"He can definitely improve," says Katara. "How much is difficult to say, but his ability to read aloud is going to be a big help. I asked him to practice writing down statements and reading them aloud as a way to communicate with everyone around him. Please be patient with him if the statements are short or sometimes difficult to understand at first. It's going to take him a long time to construct even a simple phrase, and his brain is trying to confuse him by constantly grabbing for the wrong words."

"I'll make sure the kids don't make him feel self-conscious," says Tenzin with a hint of anticipatory exasperation.

With a nod of thanks at her son, she says, "Your turn, Korra."

Once they are alone, Korra drums the bed frame with her heels. "It's good to see you, Katara."

"You, too, my dear." Katara pulls up a chair and sits across from her. "What can I help you with?"

"How much do you already know?"

"Only that you are ill, and that you may be sensitive about discussing it." The placid blue eyes crinkle kindly at the corners. "I promise you, Korra, whatever you have to say will stay between the two of us."

"I know, it's just..." She sighs. "I've lost parts of my bending." Her mouth opens and closes as she tries to figure out how to word the rest of it. Here she is, the reincarnation of Katara's longtime love, and she has to tell her that she may have permanently damaged the Avatar spirit due to her own poor decisions.

A hand closes gently over hers. "Losing parts of your bending is nothing to be ashamed of," says Katara. "Several times during our quest to bring peace to the world, Aang encountered blocks of his own. He even lost the Avatar State for a time."

"No, this isn't a block, it's..." A lump forms in Korra's throat, and she clears it. "You know how energybending requires strength of spirit? When I took Noatak's bending, I wasn't strong enough - I felt too weak, and I let him intimidate me. I absorbed his bending instead of removing it, and I became corrupted. I was almost destroyed." A tear spills over, and she swabs it away. She's so sick of crying, so utterly sick of it.

"What do you mean?" asks Katara.

Korra hasn't seen this much worry on the woman's face since she tried, and failed, to heal the damage Amon did during the war. "I became a bloodbender, and the Avatar State became corrupted. In the last year, it accelerated, and I got...I got caught up in it." She can't even look at those shocked eyes anymore; she stares at the ground. "It almost overcame me. In the end, I gave Noatak back his bending, and he..." Every muscle in her body is quivering, trying to force her to collapse and sob, but she won't let herself. She skips ahead; Katara must know by now that Noatak is dead, anyway. Everyone else does.

"It was too late. There's a gaping hole inside myself, and I'm so scared I've permanently damaged myself - or worse, the whole line."

There's a long pause. Korra feels the Avatar State pulling at the fringes of her consciousness, but it's the normal Avatar State now, not the violent corrupted version. Even so, she wishes Noatak could be at her side to chi-block her and talk her down. She doesn't trust herself to behave if she slips into the State, not with this maelstrom of emotions inside her.
Katara leans forward, not making eye contact, and closes her hands over Korra's. A glow forms as she draws in moisture from the air, engulfing their hands. Korra feels probing tendrils of energy inside her body.

When Katara pulls away, her face is grim.

"What is it?" asks Korra, almost frantic.

"Have you consulted Aang?" Katara's voice is quiet, almost a whisper.

"I'm afraid of what he'll say. Why? What did you see?"

"All of your body's chi pathways are damaged. Usually, chi is blocked, but yours feel..." There's a pause, as if she's searching for the correct word. "Corroded. As if there was too much energy rushing through them, and it ate them away."

"Can you fix them?" blurs Korra.

Katara shakes her head. "I can heal the damage, and I can flush out the areas that do feel blocked, but I do not know if I can heal the corroded areas."

"But it's just me, right? It's my body that's damaged, not my spirit?"

"Yes."

Korra's heart beats in her ears. "So the next Avatar will be okay."

There's a long pause, and when she speaks again, Katara's voice is small. "Please, Korra, don't let that give you any ideas."

It's too late - how could it not give her ideas? Her life is just a blink of an eye in the overall succession of Avatars, and she has already proven to be a terrible one. If the cycle changes over now, the world will only have to wait sixteen years for a new Avatar to be identified, at most. Who knows how long it will have to wait if she tries to fix her broken body? Her heart races.

"Korra," says Katara sharply, as if reading her mind. "Do not let this sway you."

"Sway me?" says Korra, panic making her voice rise. "Sway me towards what? Logic? I'm a failed Avatar-"

"You are twenty-three. You are barely an eighth of the way through your life; do not assume this is the end." Katara stands and throws her shoulders back. She suddenly seems tall in spite of her tiny stature, and Korra sees a glimmer of the impassioned young girl from the tales of the olden days. "I have seen the Avatar make impossible recoveries and overcome impossible odds."

"That was Aang. He was so strong." Tears spill onto Korra's cheeks. "I'm tired of everything being so hard."

Katara's hands grip her shoulders. "You are strong, stronger than you think. Promise me you'll try, for at least one year. Just a year. If you've made no progress, we'll have this conversation again then. Okay?"

"Okay." Korra sniffles.

"Promise me."
"I promise."

Katara stands, and first Korra thinks she's leaving, but she only moves to the desk and returns with a tissue.

After she has blown her nose and wiped her face, Korra says, "I guess I should start by contacting Aang. The other Avatars might have dealt with something like this in the past."

"That would be wise," says Katara, but as always when Korra talks about speaking with Aang, her face falls. Now that Korra has experienced the loss of a love herself, she feels a surge of understanding. While she's sure her own loss can't be of the same magnitude, given the comparative durations of their relationships, the pain she feels is still unbearable.

"Katara," she says softly, "how do you move past a loved one's death?"

The older woman studies her, then says, "Like many things in life, it takes time for the good days to outweigh the bad ones." She pauses. "Might I ask who you are talking about?"

This is what I get for opening my mouth without thinking again.

Korra stares blankly at her.

"Asami?" she says, the lie obvious even to her own ears. She still misses Asami - she always will - but she feels like she's finally coming to terms with her death.

There's a long pause, long enough for Korra to start fidgetting with the edge of the bed cover.

Katara's voice is gentle. "When you were speaking of your corruption, I found it interesting that a man would take back his bending from you, then immediately end his life. One would think that if he actually wanted it back, he would have accepted it and then escaped instead. Which leads me to wonder, if he didn't want it back, why would he accept it and sacrifice his life? Why not just leave you to deal with it yourself, unless he cared for you?"

"Don't tell anyone," says Korra. "Please. No one will understand." Emotions are swirling so violently inside her that she's shivering. Her arms wrap around herself, fingers clawing into the flesh.

"I'm not sure I understand, either." The tone is patient, not judgemental, and Korra decides she needs to have another ally, someone who is able to counsel her.

"We hated each other, at first." She busies herself with examining her fingernails, too shy to look into her mentor's eyes. "But then I found myself saving his life, and we kind of started to commiserate, I guess? With me being slowly corrupted, and Noatak having a history with power corrupting him, we had some common ground." Her vision blurs. "He listened to me, and he actually seemed to care. I had always thought of him as a monster, but he was just a man, with weaknesses and emotions, just like me."

She chances a look up at Katara. The woman's face is neutral, listening, so she continues.

"We kind of fell into each other's arms, and things got a bit uncomfortable after that." It's awkward to talk about intimacy with her mentor, but she has no one else to talk to about it, not any more. She had Asami, once upon a time.

"But then things erupted so quickly that... I know it was only a week or so, but it really felt like love. He begged me to give him back his bending; he planned to die, and he thought it was a fitting end. But I was already talking myself into keeping it." She feels shame choke her throat, making her voice hoarse. "In the end, I was almost consumed, and I... I nearly killed him. He talked me down, I gave him his bending, and he left to die and stopped me from following him."
Though Katara doesn't say a word, she sees skepticism in the woman's eyes. No doubt she's wondering if Noatak was just manipulating her.

Korra reaches down the front of her collar and pulls out the letter that he left for her yesterday morning, before his showdown with Kwan. If anything can convince anyone that Noatak truly loved her, it's the honesty of those words.

Katara's wisened hands unfold the letter. When she finishes, she re-folds it, hands it back to Korra, then closes a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she says.

The genuine sympathy is so unexpected that Korra breaks down. She falls forward, sobbing; Katara's arms wrap around her.

"Even though it hurts right now, my dear, and even though you should take time to mourn, it will pass. Time is the great healer. You will love again."

Korra closes her eyes, drawing strength from the woman's embrace.

*It will pass.*

.**.*.

After a long cry and a thorough healing session, numbness settles comfortably over Korra, a welcome change after being overwhelmed by emotion. Seeing as it's the closest thing to mental peace that she's likely to find for a while, she decides it's the best time to try to reach out to Aang.

She returns to the cliff where she and Tarrlok spoke last night. She has always found it easiest to contact Aang near water, perhaps due to her innate connection to the element. Settling near the edge, she pulls her body into lotus position.

It takes several minutes of meditation before she hears a voice behind her: "Hello, Korra." Turning, she sees him standing behind her, apparently in his twenties. When she first contacted him, he chose the appearance she would recognize from the visions of Yakone; lately, he seems to be matching her age. She appreciates it. While she knows, logically, that Aang is her, he feels more like a big brother.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Foolish." She hangs her head. "I keep retreading all the decisions I made over the past year, and every single one of them feels like I made the wrong one."

He settles to a seat beside her. "It isn't easy making the decision as an Avatar; we know that we must be impartial, but our hearts are human." He smiles kindly at her, and she sees Katara's expression in his eyes - the two really did mark each other over the years. "A decision that seems right at the time can come back to haunt us later. It is never easy, and even the right decision in the wrong context can be our downfall. My decision to take Firelord Ozai's bending and spare his life was the right one, but my decision to do the same with Yakone - well, maybe that was still the right decision, but it ended up rippling into your lifetime in ways I didn't anticipate."

"And then I fell in love with his son," murmurs Korra. "What kind of Avatar does that, after all he did to harm benders?"

"As I said, our hearts are human. Don't be too hard on yourself, Korra. Being able to make a
connection that strong with a former enemy isn't all bad. Your ability to befriend is one of your strengths.

She finds herself smiling as she remembers Noatak saying something similar, but then her smile fades. "I'm still suffering from my bad decisions, though. I've lost my connection to the elements. Katara says my chi pathways have been corroded."

"That is true," he says. "But there is hope."

She sits up straighter. "What do you mean?"

"When we practice to master an element, Korra, we wear the same pathways in our bodies, again and again, teaching the energy flow to be more efficient. In a way, our chi pathways are somewhat malleable: they shape beneath the pressure of our training."

Her breath catches. "Do you mean I can relearn the elements?"

He nods. "It will be difficult, and your bending will be very weak, at first. In time, with practice, you can rebuild much of what was lost."

"'Much,'" she repeats, her hope dissipating.

"It's impossible to say if you will ever be as strong as you were," he admits. "But you're strong-willed, and you have people around you who will help you succeed." Pointedly, he adds, "You just have to keep yourself open to them."

"I'm done closing myself off," she says quietly. "No matter how hard it is, I'm ready to open myself up to people again. Barricading myself away cost me Mako, and it made me spiral deeper into the corruption when I should have been seeking help for it."

"Good." He smiles. "You can do this, Korra. You are strong."

The words echo through her, resonating with her bones. "I'll do my best," she says. "I promised Katara I'd put in a good solid year of effort."

Aang nods, and he looks a little sad. "Please tell her I love her."

"Of course." She reaches over and hugs him; he feels so real that it's hard to believe he's just a tiny piece of her. "Thank you, Aang."

"Good luck, Korra," he says, returning her hug.
XXXII: Pact

Chapter Summary

(chapters 32-end were all posted within 24 hours of each other...sorry for the confusion!)

XXXII

Pact

Jumping to her feet, Korra begins to run back to the Temple. All hope isn't lost! She has mastered the elements before, and she will again. She's older now. Wiser. More patient. She will give it a solid year and see where it takes her.

Even though it's nearly time for dinner, the temple is empty, save for a few acolytes; she was really hoping to talk with Katara. It looks as if the whole family went out for a walk. She considers visiting Tarrlok, but she wants to give him time to focus on the writing and reading exercise that Katara has him working on.

At least she can give Naga a hug. She pokes her head into the open door of her room, looking for the polar bear dog.

Naga isn't there, but two pieces of mail sit on her bed.

Korra sighs. Mail, already? She hasn't even been back for a full day. The first is a postcard from her parents, post-marked more than a week earlier. They must have known about her return to the Air Temple before she did, just like everyone else. Was everyone conspiring behind her back? Her mood darkens, and she sets it aside.

Below it is an envelope, addressed to her with immaculate penmanship. The corner of the envelope is burnt so badly that it has crumbled in transit, and it leaves a black streak of ash on her palm.

Korra stares at the envelope. It's post-marked today, so it can't have come from too far away. "Who do I know from the Earth Kingdom?" she murmurs to herself. She has a few friends scattered around the world, but most of them would just call, not write.

Her heart starts to pound. *Wait - I recognize that writing.*

*It can't be.*

She tears open the envelope and falls to a seat on the bed, laying the letter flat on the blanket in front of her.

*My Dearest Korra,* says the first line, and a crushing pain squeezes around her chest. A panic attack. She closes her eyes and takes deep breaths, and slowly, the grip loosens enough for her to breathe again.

Her fingers knead into the blankets on either side of her, her palms damp, as she reads.
My Dearest Korra,

It is foolish for me to write this, a waste of effort that will never reach your eyes, but I have some time to kill, and it was suggested to me that it might be cleansing.

And cleansing is needed, not just from the guilt of leaving you behind, but also the guilt over the speed with which I tried to move on. For a brief moment tonight, I found myself in another's arms, desperate to submerge my grief over our separation in carnal pleasures, but I found myself weeping like a child instead. Your words haunt me: I am afraid of love. I cling to it when it's near, and push it away the second it looks as if it won't be. In my forty-six years, Korra, no one has ever hit on a truth closer to my heart.

Yet here is something you do not know. I have always found it easy to push away anyone who cares for me. My mother, my brother, even my father, in his own twisted way, all cared for me, and all were easy to leave behind, as were my various relationships. I may get attached easily, but I have always had a knack for instantly severing my affections - maybe not as cleanly as I would like, as we saw when Kwan and I first met again during our mission, but severed nonetheless.

So why, after only a week in your company, am I unable to push you aside? Why does your voice ring like a distant song in my ears? Why do I constantly turn my head, thinking I have seen you in my periphery?

I do view love as a weakness, Korra: you were absolutely correct. And I have never been so weak as I am when I think of you.

(The letter skips a line, the blank space marked with several dots, as if he tapped the pen while contemplating.)

I want to give you here, in this imaginary interaction, what I cannot give you in real life: an explanation.

I have long known that death is the only solution for the problem of bloodbending. My family's is a potent strain, too strong for any mortal to handle. Even you, in all your power, were quickly seduced by its potency. Simply removing it from me is not a solution - as we saw with my father, it can be passed down even after it is removed. Tarrlok understood this, six years ago. Ending us both was the only logical solution. The line must stop here.

But I am a coward.

My resolve to die faded early in the mission. When Kwan stabbed me, I was forced to face death for the third time in a decade, and I panicked. Any life, even a life filled with nothing but prison time, seemed too precious to waste. This was further amplified by my time spent with you: I forgot how beautiful life can be, Korra. I forgot about the thrill of new love, the safety of sleeping in another's arms. I forgot how it feels to connect with another with conversation, to share one's deepest thoughts without judgement - no, that it is not something I forgot; it is something I never knew. I have always protected myself with masks and lies. You and I, we exposed ourselves to each other, bleeding and raw. You made me feel stronger for being more vulnerable, as contradictory as that may seem.

Still, at the back of my mind, the only fitting end was for me to accept my bending from you, and then die. I squandered my life on feverish dreams of power, and so I thought I deserved no further chances. Perhaps I truly don't.
I didn't anticipate that Kwan would refuse to kill me. So I am doing the next best thing: a spiritual suicide. The world will think me dead - even you, even Tarrlok. It is the best thing I can do for each of you. How odd it is: I once fancied myself the saviour of humankind, and now the greatest gift I can offer the world is my death. How far I have fallen. Or maybe it isn't a fall at all. Maybe it is that I am finally grounded in reality, after a lifetime of delusions.

(There is another gap here, where he has doodled a braided pattern.)

If I could see you again, Korra, there are a few things I would tell you.

The first would be that you have a great opportunity in the coming months. With the information about the Equalists revealed, the old movement will come to an end, and non-benders will need a new voice. This is your chance to become their voice. If you can peacefully unite benders and non-benders and convince them to work toward common goals, you will succeed where the Equalists failed. I can think of no greater way to make your mark as the Avatar than to properly unite the two factions. If you can appeal to my humanity enough that I fell in love, Korra, then you have the power to sway even the most stalwart Equalist. Do not underestimate your ability to nurture.

The decision is yours, of course, but given that you are looking to find your own voice as the Avatar, I hope you will recognize and take advantage of this opportunity.

The second thing I would tell you would be that I'm sorry. I'm truly, deeply sorry. I know this fake death will hurt you, and should it ever come to light that it was fake, I do not expect you to forgive me. The guilt is heavy on my shoulders. I would want to be sure you understood that it is only because I saw no viable alternative. I cannot waste away in prison, yet I cannot risk you seeking leniency for me. It sounded, to me, as if you were planning to reveal your history with bloodbending to the Council in order to try to negotiate a reduction in my sentence. You are far too important to risk tarnishing your reputation on my behalf.

And so I must stay hidden, in places where I will never be tempted to become the man I used to be - I saw, standing on that cliff, how quickly I can revert to being Amon. I must stay hidden from you, and Tarrlok, so that both of you have the best possible chances of moving on. This mission has shown me, very clearly, just how far the ripples of my actions have reached. Your corruption, Tarrlok's inability to communicate, Kwan's pain: all because of the dreams I selfishly chased down years ago. I am a better man now than I was before my imprisonment, but it is not enough. I cannot be trusted to act in the best interest of anyone but myself.

I am running yet again, building a new identity. How broken a man must be to start so many lives in one lifetime.

All these lies should be second nature by now.

Tarrlok, especially, will be hurt if my lie is ever revealed, and I don't know if he has the fortitude to take it. He always was the more sensitive of the two of us, and I worry for him. I worry what my "death" will do to him. I hope you will be a good influence on him, Korra. I hope, now that you know the burden that is bloodbending, you will be in a better position to understand him. I hope you will be the sibling to him that I failed to be.

The third and final thing I would say to you is this. My wish for you is a love you deserve: someone who will treat you with respect and kindness. Someone who understands your destructive nature, as I do, but your constructive nature as well. Perhaps that will be Officer Mako, or perhaps you will find that love elsewhere. It pains me to think of such things, which is hypocritical, given that I was kissing another's lips the same night I left you (but we both know I am nothing if not a hypocrite). It is selfish for me to want to occupy your heart forever - and naive, after such a short
time with you. I hope your recovery will be swift, and that thoughts of me will not fill your mouth with a bitter taste. I am truly sorry it could not have been different.

(There is a smear of ink in the centre of the word "different"; it looks as if a drop of water fell on the page before the ink dried.)

Having said all three of these things to you, Korra, I would draw you in for a long kiss, if you would allow it. As we broke apart, I would run my knuckles down one of your ponytails and let my eyes say the three words that my mouth cannot. Even here, in this letter you will never see, I cannot bring myself to write them, because admitting to them will unravel me, and I have just barely woven myself together. But know I feel them.

Anything else I could say here would just rehash what I wrote in my real farewell letter, so I see no reason to repeat it - how can one purge what has already been purged? I will send this letter to its end, and hope that the flames will engulf this unbearable anguish as quickly as they engulf the paper.

This anguish.

I have never known pain like this, Korra. You have left me scarred, my mind even more useless than my wounded arm. Every day for the rest of my life is going to be a fight to keep myself from abandoning my resolve and rushing to your side.

But I know what must be done. For you, and for Tarrlok.

Yours,

Noatak.

.*.*.*.

Korra's eyes are so thick with tears that she can barely read the last lines. A howl erupts from her mouth and she reflexively tries to blast flame at the letter, but her connection to the element is too weak.

She shrieks, and her world goes white.

.*.*.*.

"Korra." Katara's voice, far away.

Her eyes open to see the woman gripping her arms, Tenzin hovering in the doorway. They both look worried, and there's a faint breeze in the room, as if from residual wind.

"Are you all right?" asks Tenzin. "We heard you cry out, and when we arrived, you were in the Avatar State."

Korra is still shaking. She thrusts out the letter, and Katara accepts it. Her eyes scan the first few lines.

"Tenzin," she says calmly without looking up. "Korra could probably use some tea. Would you mind boiling us a pot?"

There's a pause, and then he replies, "Yes, Mother," and closes the door.

Korra wraps her arms around her body, hugging herself. She's full-out quaking now, her teeth
chattering, and tears pour down her face.

When Katara finishes the letter, she folds it, sets it on the bed, and opens her arms. Korra falls against her.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" she asks between her sobs. "What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to be happy that he's alive? Angry that he let me think he was dead? Sad that he's out there and not here?"

"There is no right or wrong way to feel," says Katara.

"I'm so confused."

"It's okay. That's normal, even under normal circumstances." Katara's hand smooths her hair.

Korra sniffles; she has cried so often lately that she feels as if she's running out of tears, and her sobs are already slowing. Now she's remembering Lin's suggestion that Noatak and Kwan ran away together. It seemed ludicrous at the time, but the letter says very clearly that he moved on last night. The thought of his broad, soft lips on Kwan's - her stomach knots with a jealousy she believed she had outgrown. She tries to be happy for him; the two men have been in love since before she was born, and it's romantic, objectively speaking, that they went on the run together. Instead, she feels abandoned.

The door opens, and Katara casually slides the letter between them, where Tenzin will be unable to read it. He steps in with two mugs of tea.

"Thank you, Tenzin," says his mother, accepting them. He nods and, with a last concerned look at Korra, steps outside and closes the door behind him.

The tea tastes of honey and mint, and Korra feels it settle in her belly, warm and comforting. She wipes her eyes and perches on the edge of the bed, then pulls out the letter, skimming through it again. "Do I tell Tarrlok?" she whispers.

Katara hesitates. "You may want to choose your timing carefully. He's in a delicate state right now."

"I can't just hide this from him." Her head drops and she screws her face tightly, trying to stop herself from bursting into tears again. "This is too much to process, Katara. I can't deal with it."

"Would you like a tincture to help you sleep?" asks Katara gently. "Your body is exhausted from all it has been through, and sleep can only help."

"Please."

"I'll be right back." Katara gives her a pitying look, then leaves the room.

Korra scans the letter again, her fingers tracing that one water splotch in the ink - is it a tear? Did he weep as he wrote this? Her emotions are all over the place. She wishes she could see him just one more time. She wishes she could scream at him, cry in his arms, and ask him what he expected her reaction would be when he sent it - clearly, he didn't originally plan to mail it to her.

Maybe, in her dreams, she will see him one more time, and she can do all of it. Even if the conversation is fictional, it might help.
She falls asleep a short while later with the bitter taste of the tincture on her tongue, the letter folded carefully under her pillow.

A soft knock rouses Korra from a deep, dreamless sleep. Her open window reveals the moon, high in the sky. She stares at it, blinking, and tries to find the energy to move.

There's a second knock, and this time, she feels a delirious surge of hope: *It's Noatak. He came back for me.*

Though she knows the thought is ridiculous, it at least gives her the motivation to get out of bed. She rubs the sleep from her eyes and plods across the room to answer the door, flipping on the light.

Tarrlok stands in the hallway. His hair has been freshly groomed; it hangs over his shoulder, trailing in a long braid down his chest. She wonders if anyone helped him with it, or if he is becoming more independent already. Maybe Noatak was right: maybe being apart from him is the best possible arrangement for Tarrlok's recovery. The idea is as heartbreaking as it is encouraging.

Tarrlok nods his greeting to her, then his eyes drop to a piece of paper in his hand. "Avatar Korra," he reads, his words laboured, and Korra sucks in a surprised breath. Katara was right: though he's clearly struggling, he can read much better than he can speak spontaneously. He stops, and his eyes flick up to meet hers; he looks nervous.

She steps aside to let him in. "It's okay, Tarrlok. Katara explained that you might be putting together something to say, and that it might be hard for you. Take your time."

He steps into the room, his eyes fixed on the paper, his lips moving, as if he is rehearsing. She slides the door shut behind him.

"Avatar Korra," he says again, and his free hand repeatedly flexes into a fist, then relaxes. His brows are knit, and she can tell, by the slow pace and wavering pronunciation, that each syllable is taking his full concentration. "Writing this took my day." He looks up at her again, and the corner of his mouth curls into surprised smile, accompanied by a little laugh, as if he can't believe he just made it through the phrase.

*This is the first time he has communicated a thought to anyone in six years,* she realizes, and her heart begins to pound.

"Go on," she says gently.

He swallows hard and looks down at the paper, and his smile fades.

"Loss of words worse than lost bending," he reads slowly, and she hears his voice choke up. "Everything me is gone."

There's a long pause before he finishes his thought: "I wish Noatak took me with him."

She stares at him, her heart beating in her ears. He keeps his gaze fixed on the paper, refusing to look at her, and she sees tears welling in his eyes. *Is he saying he wishes he were dead?* Noatak's words rise in her mind: *He was always the more sensitive of the two of us.*

Now she's certain this isn't the right time to tell him his brother is still alive.
"Tarrlok," she says quietly, "I know what it means to lose everything you use to define yourself. Believe me, I know. But look at yourself. A few days ago, you hadn't said a word to anyone for years, and now you just communicated a full thought to me. Don't you see how big that is?"

A tear trails down his cheek, and he cringes and swabs it away.

"You and I have a lot of work to do," she says. "And we're both stubborn people, so you can bet we're going to get back to our former glory. You'll be schmoozing your way around the Republic City elite soon enough."

Though he still looks miserable, the corner of his lips lifts. Whether it's from her sentiment or her little jibe, she can't say, but she's glad to see that little smirk.

She hesitates, her mind still on Noatak's letter.

"Listen, Tarrlok, I know our history is kind of rocky. So thank you for trusting me with this. Noatak wanted me to be like a sister to you, and I can only do that if you trust me." She stabs a finger into his chest. "But you'd better not kill yourself. Okay? You feel the urge, you come talk to me."

"And," he says, pointing at her. She tilts her head, trying to decipher his meaning, and then it clicks.

"Same right back at me?"

He nods.

She swallows hard. It makes sense that a manipulative man like Tarrlok can read her so easily, and she should really be accustomed to it after spending so much time around Noatak, but it's still unnerving.

"Tell you what," she says. "Let's make a pact. We give ourselves one year. In that year, we promise to never give up, to never stop working hard to fix all the stuff that's making us miserable now. Deal?" She holds up a hand.

He hesitates.

"Come on. It's just one year," she says. "Think about how much progress you made in just a few days."

His eyes narrow with determination and he clasps her hand, his grip strong in a show of solidarity. She feels a surge of hope.

"You know what, Tarrlok?" she says. "We're going to be okay."

He grins.
Two Months Later

"Saomik," calls the captain, just as Noatak's booted foot hits solid earth for the first time in nearly a week. So much for slipping by him unnoticed. Noatak stops and turns.

"Sir?" he asks, knowing full well what they're about to discuss.

The captain jogs after him and claps a hand to his shoulder. "That was some fine navigating you did back there. Saved our asses, that's for damned certain."

Noatak glances uneasily around them. Their shipmates are filtering past them, eager for their first day of shore leave after the storm. All he wants right now is to the join them for a drink. He's not doing this job to stand out, he's doing it to blend in. "I didn't mean to overstep my bounds-"

But the captain is eagerly pressing ahead. "I've never seen a civilian command a crew like that before. Hell, you almost had me saluting you. You sure you aren't ex-military?"

"No, sir. Just doing what needed to be done."

"You're too modest, Saomik. I want to talk to you about our arrangement." The captain drapes an arm around his shoulder and begins to steer him down the road after the rest of the crew. "I'm thinking it's time to promote you."

"Promote me?" This is the last thing Noatak's logic wants, and the first thing his ego wants.

"It's been awhile since I had a proper first mate. You've got the skill and the strength, even with that gimped arm of yours."

The choice of phrasing makes him grit his teeth, but Noatak only says, "I'm not looking to be a permanent fixture aboard this ship."

"It would come with a significant pay increase."

"Meaning you would actually start to pay me."

"Ha!" The captain smacks him on the back. "Yes. Handsomely."

Noatak considers. It isn't as if he has any other plans. Living at sea, drifting from city to city, is reducing his chances of being recognized - they're never in the same place for more than a day, so there's no time for anyone to start to suspect him. Besides, out on the open water, there are no temptations to use his bloodbending: he only encounters his shipmates, a team predominately made up of non-benders who may get on his nerves from time to time, but never drive him into a rage. It's a good life, and exactly what he needs.

But not what I want. Korra's face rises unbidden in his mind, and he shoves it back. He'll save that
train of thought for a time when he has a drink in hand.

"How about this," says the captain, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Agree to your promotion, and I'll give you the week's pay in advance." He pulls out a fold of notes, using his back to shield it from the crowd's view, and begins to count. As the number of yuans increases, Noatak's brows raise. He was expecting a small stipend, not an actual liveable wage.

The fold of notes lands in Noatak's good hand. He stares at it.

"And," says the captain, "I'll let you in on a little secret: Friday night, I've reserved a hotel for the whole crew at Seashell Bay. The last haul was more lucrative than expected, and I figure it's good for morale to have a little party."

"This is all extremely generous," says Noatak, wondering how the grains they deliver port-to-port could possibly net such a windfall. He has enough experience operating in the shadows to guess when someone else is circumventing the law, and this burst of generosity only fuels his growing suspicions. Though he has no moral qualms with smuggling, smugglers draw police attention, and that's exactly what he's trying to avoid.

"Only the best for my crew." The captain smiles kindly at him. "Go have a drink, First Mate Saomik. Maybe find yourself a companion or two. You've earned it." He gives him a playful shove toward the town.

Noatak pockets the money. The first mate on a smuggling operation. Great choice of cover, Noatak. He's going to have to start looking for new alternatives, somewhere lower-profile. Maybe he'll get a couple months' worth of pay under his belt first; that should give him a decent amount of cash to allow him to start again somewhere new.

As he walks into town, he spots a few of his shipmates inside a nearby tavern, beers already in hand, but as he's approaching it, his eyes drift to the newsstand next door. The Republic City paper, displayed on the first rack, immediately draws his attention. It's reflex to hone in on that logo, after so many years scouring it for information about himself, the Avatar, and Tarrlok.

His blood freezes in his veins. Korra's picture is on the front page. She's addressing a crowd in a press conference. To the untrained eye, she looks comfortable, but there's the faintest furrow to her brow that makes his stomach tighten.

Avatar to speak to the world Friday! reads the headline.

Noatak moves in and picks up the paper, his bad hand trailing over that furrowed brow in an awkward approximation of a caress.

"You read it, you buy it," barks the shopkeeper.

He sets the paper back on the stand. As much as he would like to buy it and bring it with him, he can't let his shipmates see him mooning over the Avatar. Besides, reading details about her life isn't going to help him sever his connection to her. He's still determined to move on.

But the more he tries to stop thinking about her, the more he focuses on that furrow in her brow. He can tell she's anxious about what will be her first public speech since Miss Sato's death. His desire to support her is so strong that it drowns out his self-preservation instinct. His feet carry him down the street to a small stand that has an assortment of jewellery and clothing on display.

"Can I help you, sonny?" asks the merchant, her kindly smile wrinkling her weathered skin. He's taken aback by the nickname - he's been feeling so old lately that it's hard to imagine anyone seeing
him as young.

"I'm looking for a token or charm that will convey good luck," he says. "Nothing too extravagant."

"Well, you're in luck. I have some items that may be appropriate." She pulls out a small black case.  

A half-hour later, Noatak sits on a stool, a mug of steaming oolong tea and a half-written note on the bar in front of him. He idly flips the lid of a thin jewellery box open and closed with his thumb, considering how to end the letter.

"Saomik," greets a voice from the door.

I guess I'll end it there. He sets the case down and jots the last few characters to close off his thought. Not bothering to sign his name, he folds up the paper and slides it and the box into the envelope. She'll know who it's from. He seals the flap and slips the envelope into the pocket of his jacket. It has five days to arrive in time for her speech, so he'll have to stop at a post office before he joins his shipmates.

"Saomik! Hey, you ignoring me or something?" One of his shipmates, a man by the name of Hassun, slides onto a stool beside him and gives him a broad grin. He's a few inches shorter than Noatak, with a lean frame and narrow shoulders. His long face and sharp features are reminiscent of a young Kwan, but his face is clean-shaven, and his hair is red-brown instead of black.

"Lost in my thoughts," says Noatak, taking a sip of his tea. He's not sure yet how he feels about Hassun; the man seems to have taken a shining to him, and he can't decide if the constant attention is flattering or annoying. He has almost made up his mind to sleep with him, more out of pity than any true desire. Maybe it would end the constant flirting and desperation.

"You look tense," says Hassun. "I give a mean massage, if you want one. It might help you relax."

"No, thanks."

"Oh." Disappointment flickers across the man's face. "Can I at least get you a drink?"

Noatak holds up the tea in response.

"I meant something a little stronger," says Hassun.

"This is strong enough for me at the moment."

Hassun laughs and shakes his head. "You're a tough man to please, Saomik. I'll figure you out one of these days." He waves for the bartender and orders an ale. "All the others are at the tavern down the street. We should join them. If we're missing for too long, they'll start to talk."

Noatak studies him. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well," says Hassun. "You know."

"Enlighten me."

"Only two gay men on the ship, and both of us ridiculously hot, at that." He leans closer, and his hand trembles a little as it drifts along Noatak's forearm. "Especially you."

This is the first time flirtation has crossed the line into an advance, and all Noatak feels is a
crushing disappointment that Hassun is not Korra. He pulls away. "You should join the others. I need some time alone."

"Okay, I can respect that," says Hassun. "Maybe I gauged you wrong, anyway. You seemed pretty affected by that picture of the Avatar."

The hair on Noatak's neck rises, and he snaps his gaze to Hassun. The usual blank, friendly stare is on the man's face, but there's the slightest curve of a smirk to his lips. *How did I not notice I was being followed?* Even distracted as he was by Korra, his engrained battle instincts should have alerted him any tails.

"If you have something to say, Hassun, spit it out," he growls.

The man drums his fingers on his glass. "I was thinking about how odd your name is. Saomik. Kind of funny, isn't it?"

Noatak's eyes narrow. "If you're trying to make a crack about my heritage-"

"No, that's not it. I'm very familiar with Water Tribe culture - my sister married into it, so I spend a lot of time reading stories to my niece and nephew. The tale of Saomik was one of their favourites: the man of legend, slaying a sea serpent even though he only had one arm. Seems rather convenient that you're injured in a way that mimics him, doesn't it? Not like your parents could have known this would happen when they named you."

"Life is full of strange coincidences." Though he holds his expression neutral, Noatak inwardly curses his subconscious. Is that what the legend was? No wonder the name felt so fitting when he randomly selected it.

"Strange coincidences indeed," says Hassun, and he quietly nurses his ale.

Noatak's jaw aches from clenching his teeth. He drains the rest of his tea in one swallow, then stands.

"Leaving already?" asks Hassun. "I still want to buy you that drink. You intrigue me, Saomik, if that is your real name. I'm interested to learn more about you." His eyes trail lower. "All of you."

Noatak studies him. This growing obsession is becoming problematic, and if he's not careful, Hassun is going to poke too many holes in his cover. Ending the mystique is the quickest way to make him lose interest, and sex is the quickest way to end the mystique. Besides, it's been two months of poor libido and almost no self-care; he could use the release.

Still, as attractive as the man is, he has no interest in sleeping with him. The gift he bought for Korra is heavy in his pocket and on his mind. *You'd get over her a lot sooner if you didn't keep dwelling on her like this*, he chastises himself.

"Well?" says Hassun, his voice low. "We could sneak back to the ship now, while everyone is busy drinking."

Noatak shakes his head. "Maybe another time."

"I'll hold you to that." With a sly grin, the man returns to his ale.

Noatak watches him for a moment longer. *This isn't going away on its own*, he tells himself, *and sex isn't the only solution. You're going to have to put a stop to it, one way or another.*
Dark thoughts flood his mind, and he strides for the door, trying to outrun them.

Preparation for the press conference engulfs Korra's week. Half of her time is taken up by working with Tenzin on her speech, halfheartedly listening to his pointers on oration, or taking his notes into account. The other half is spent working with her mother to prepare her appearance.

Korra hates focusing on her appearance, she hates it, but Senna has been so anxious to help that Korra lets her take charge. She understands what's going on: her mother is upset that her little girl lost most of her bending and broke up with her long-term boyfriend. She needs to feel like she's a positive force in her daughter's life, like she's helping make a difficult time easier. Appearance is something tangible, something she can sink her teeth into. So, for her mother's sake, Korra grits her teeth through the manicure, the hairstyling experiments and the visits to the tailor. She points at fabric samples, and nods along when her mother gets excited. The crazy thing is, it seems to be working: in spite of herself, she finds her spirits lifting.

The constant planning has left her with very little time to feel anything, which is a welcome relief. She's still torn about how she feels about Noatak, and keeping busy has stopped her mind from spiralling headfirst into that confusion. Because of that, she feels more stable than she has in weeks.

Unfortunately, the constant preparation has also left her with almost no time to visit with her father. Dinner time is her favourite time of day now: she and Tonraq joke and laugh like they did when she was growing up, sometimes shocking Tenzin and Pema's family with their boisterous behaviour.

It's nice to have her parents around, and even though they're only here for the week, she secretly hopes they'll stay longer.

Another downside to the planning is that she has been too exhausted to visit with Tarrlok. The ex-Councilman has been making some solid progress with his oration - while he still frequently confuses his vocabulary, he can construct simple phrases of two or three words, and he is getting faster at writing and reading. A few times a week, he and Korra have been meeting on the cliff to talk. It's strange to feel a growing friendship with the man, after how much she once hated him. Noatak was correct about her ability to nurture, to connect with people with whom she shouldn't be able to connect.

Oddly enough, their conversations have revolved about anything but Noatak; neither of them seems eager to discuss him. She's glad, because she still can't bring herself to tell Tarrlok his brother is alive. No one but Katara knows, and Korra is content to keep it that way; the fewer people know, the safer Noatak will be.

By mid-week, they've been in heavy preparation for five days in a row, and Korra is exhausted. As her mother tries a new hairstyle for what feels like the hundredth time that day, Korra lets out a long, exasperated sigh.

"Can we please take a break?" she asks, trying to keep a whine out of her tone. "I've barely been able to say a word to Dad since you two got here, and besides, I really need to spend some time training." Progress on relearning the elements is painfully slow, and she can't shake the feeling that this week is just making her regress.

Senna looks a little disappointed, but she nods and pulls the pins out of Korra's hair. "Of course,
sweetie. Why don't we take the rest of the day off? I can get some more embroidery done on your dress."

"Thanks, Mom. You're the best." Korra gives her mother a peck on the cheek, then hurries to the corner of the room, where Naga is napping. "Come on, girl. Let's go to the training grounds." Her father had mentioned at breakfast that he was planning to spend the day working out.

It's a beautiful Autumn day, the air crisp and smelling of smoke, and she takes in a deep breath. On days like today, she feels as if she can smell snow. When they arrive at the grounds, she's surprised to see that Tonraq is not alone. Tarrlok stands beside him, the two of them moving through a basic training form. Her head tilts with confusion.

"Didn't realize you two were getting so chummy," she calls out as she and Naga approach them.

Tonraq stands tall, beaming at her. "Get sick of your mother's beauty camp?"

"More like beauty prison, but I got early parole." Korra leaps off Naga's back and lands in front of them. "And speaking of camp, you putting Tarrlok through boot camp or something?"

"Non-bending defensive," says Tarrlok, and she automatically reads between the lines of his speech.

"He's teaching you non-bending martial arts, is he?" She raises a brow at her father. "Here I thought I'd have to protect Tarrlok from you, after everything that happened during the war."

"Seems to me he's a different person now," says Tonraq. "Besides, he's a good student. Excellent control over his body: really shows that he used to be a waterbender. And he doesn't talk back."

Tarrlok flattens his lips, clearly unimpressed by the comment.

"Want to join us for a bit?" Tonraq asks her.

"I'd love to." It seems that any training she's doing these days is trying to relearn what she lost, and it's like beating her head against a wall. Falling back into basic patterns will be good for her confidence. She falls into formation on her father's other side.

The three of them work through several patterns, stopping occasionally for Tonraq to correct Tarrlok's stance or posture. Even though they're easy forms, the late summer sun is hot, and Korra finds herself working up a sweat. It feels good to feel competent.

She's so focused on her movements that when Tenzin calls her name, she jumps.

"You have a visitor," says Tenzin, approaching. Walking beside him is Bolin.

"Bo!" Korra's first instinct is delight, and she rushes toward him, grinning. Once she closes the distance, however, her feet slow, and the two of them eye each other awkwardly. Tenzin moves past them to talk with her father and Tarrlok, giving her some privacy.

"Heya, Korra." Bolin gives her a tentative smile. Pabu is perched on his shoulder; he, at least, doesn't judge Korra, chittering at her with excitement. She smiles and steps in to scratch the fire ferret's ears.

"What brings you to the Island?" she asks Bolin without looking at him.

He shrugs. "Got a box for tonight's match, and thought I would extend an invitation to Tenzin and
his family, since they took Mako and me in for so long. We've got tons of extra room, and it's going to be catered and everything." His gaze drifts after Tenzin and lands on Tonraq. "Hey, your dad's here! Think he'd want to watch a pro-bending match?"

"I'm sure he would."

"Great, because - whoa. Is that Tarrlok?"

"Oh. Yeah." She puts her hands on her hips, shrugging it off. "Tenzin offered to take him in. We're trying to help rehabilitate him. He has problems speaking and writing, but he's starting to get better."

Bolin looks uncomfortable; no doubt he's remembering the time Tarrlok threw them in jail. Or maybe the time he kidnapped her. She frowns, seeing her choice of friendships through his eyes. Between Tarrlok and Noatak, she really has been keeping some odd company lately.

It surprises her that Mako didn't tell Bolin that Tarrlok is staying with them, but maybe Mako himself doesn't know. Maybe Lin is keeping it on the down-low, to prevent any public retaliation against the ex-Councilman. Probably for the best, she decides.

"Do you, uh," says Bolin, snapping her out of her thoughts. "Do you think Tarrlok might like to watch, too? There's room for all of you, if you want to come, too. Except-" He looks sheepish.

"Except Mako's going to be there."

"That's okay. I've been meaning to call him, anyway." Their pact to be friends hasn't exactly been fruitful; this will be her first time seeing him since she returned from the mission. She could use the excuse that she has been too busy, but really, she has been feeling too guilty to speak with him.

"He, uh," says Bolin, tenting his fingertips together.

"He'll have a girl with him," she guesses.

"Yeah. Not a girlfriend, not...yet, but they're spending a lot of time together. If that's too uncomfortable for you, I understand."

Korra can't pinpoint her emotion. It's a strange sort of jealousy. It's not because another girl is with Mako, necessarily - there's a hint of that, but it's faint. It's more because the two of them have the option to be lovers, while she's stuck here, alone, her heart fixated on someone she can never have.

Noticing that Bolin is waiting for a response, she forces a smile. "It's fine. I don't mind."

"Okay, good. You think your dad would mind if I said hello?"

"He'd love to see you." Without thinking, she adds, "He and Mom won't stop talking about you and Mako. I think they're both pretty choked that I didn't end up marrying him." The words come out with more bitterness than she intended.

There's a long pause, and Bolin finally says, "How are you, Korra?"

"I'm fine." Her arms tighten around her chest.

"No, don't just say that." His hands land on her shoulders. "How are you?"

There may be a two-month chasm between them now, but there are six years of friendship
preceding it, so she decides to trust him. She swallows hard, her gaze dropping from his. "It's been tough. I don't know how much Mako told you-"

"Not much, just that you were sick."

"Yeah, I was sick. Really sick." She kicks a loose rock with her boot, sending it skittering across the training grounds. "It was my fault, though, and I've lost a lot of my bending because of it. Aang said I could relearn it, but it's slow going. It's pretty hard on a girl who defines herself by her bending, you know?"

Bolin's jaw clenches. "Did he take your bending again?"

"What? No!" She stops just short of saying, Noatak had nothing to do with it, because that would be a lie. Even though it was ultimately her fault, there's no way to disentangle to two in her mind. The loss of her bending, the loss of Noatak: both stem from the same cause. Every time she manages only the faintest puff of flame, or her healing fails her, or she fails yet again to airbend, it rips open that wound, just a little bit. He left you. He's with Kwan now, and you're alone.

If it was only pain and anger that she felt, she would be able to bounce back, but he marked her. He marked her so deeply. He swirls through her, fogging the fringes of her mind like the corruption once did. It's unfair that she's still haunted by him, while he has probably spent the last two months in Kwan's arms.

If only he had let her believe he was dead. At least then she wouldn't have this annoying flicker of hope burning in her chest, inextinguishable by logic and reason. Every night, when the slightest shadow passes by her window, or the floorboards creak as they settle, she sits bolt upright, hoping to see that he has come for her. The idea that he might intrude was once her greatest nightmare, and now it's her greatest hope.

"Anyway," she says, shoving Noatak into the recesses of her brain, "I'm making a little progress, but patience isn't exactly my strength."

"I'm sorry," is all Bolin says, and the worlds feel hollow in comparison to her grief, but she appreciates the sentiment.

"I'll be fine." Noticing his discomfort, she decides to release him from the conversation, even though she could really use a deep talk right about now. "Thanks for the invite, Bo. See you tonight. You'd better put on a good show."

"You can count on it." He grins, but he looks uneasy; she can tell he's worried about her.

As he turns and walks toward her father to greet him, Korra lets out a sigh, her shoulders sagging. She's getting tired of constantly wearing a brave face, but how can she possibly tell anyone what's troubling her?

She's about to sink into the depths of her thoughts again, when Tarrlok approaches. His head is tilted slightly, one of his newly-adopted poses to compensate for his lack of spoken words. What's wrong?

Waiting until he's in earshot, she says quietly, "I miss him, Tarrlok. How long is it going to take for that to go away?"

"I know," he says, and she nods. If anyone understands, it's him. She almost asks, Do you think he ever misses us?, but then she remembers that he doesn't know Noatak is alive. This would be an opportunity to tell him, but she thinks of the peace he must have, believing Noatak dead, and
decides this isn't the time to disturb it.

Changing the subject, she says, "I hope you enjoy pro-bending, because you're coming to the match tonight."

He raises an eyebrow, his mouth flattening.

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun." She glances at Bolin, who is in animated conversation with her father. "Mako's going to be there with his new squeeze."

"Ah," says Tarrlok, with a look that's sympathetic.

"Yeah. But I guess it's going to be nice to watch some pro-bending. I remember when that was the only thing that mattered to me." She sighs. "You know what? I miss those days, when you and the Equalist threat were my biggest problems. Things were a lot more black-and-white back then."

"Grey world," says Tarrlok.

"Grey world, indeed," she murmurs, wishing for a little more contrast.
XXXIV: Blossom

XXXIV

Blossom

Shivers run up Korra's spine as they approaching the pro-bending stadium later that evening, and not just from the cold breeze blowing in from the ocean. It's been a couple years since she was last here, and now she can't separate her memories of the stadium from memories of Noatak.

"You okay, hon?" asks her mother. "You're shaking." At the words, her father also looks at her with concern, and Korra grits her teeth. She doesn't want them to worry about her.

"I'm fine."

Though they don't look like they believe her, they don't press her, and she appreciates it. Instead, her mother quietly loops her arm through her daughter's in a silent show of support. Korra clings to it.

Bolin is waiting for them in the box, already in his Fire Ferrets gear; he's pacing. When Korra steps into the room, he runs over to her.

"Korra, I need your help," he blurts. "Azara just found out she's pregnant."

"Oh! That's great news, isn't it?"

"It is, but she retired on the spot. We don't have a firebender, and the match starts in less than an hour."

"Why don't you ask Mako?"

Bolin winces. "Well, I told you he was bringing a girl, and she doesn't know anyone else here, so I kind of wanted them to be able to hang out together..."

"You mean, you don't want to cockblock him," she says dryly. As soon as the words leave her mouth, she realizes that everyone - from her parents, to Tarrlok, to Tenzin's family - is watching them. Her cheeks flush. Turning her back to them, she lowers her voice. "Look, I'm sorry, Bo. I'd love to get back in the ring, more than anything, but my bending is a bit weaker than I let on."

His brows raise. "How much weaker?"

"I haven't bent more than a spark of flame in about two months."

His face falls. "Korra..."

"Look, I'm fine, and I'll be fine, but I can't help you. Ask Mako. You guys can read each other in the ring, anyway. It makes sense." Seeing he isn't convinced, she grits her teeth. "If it helps, I can entertain his friend."

"Really? Isn't that going to be a bit..." Bolin trails off.

"Awkward? Probably." She shrugs. "It's okay. I'm the Avatar. I'm supposed to be the great uniter and all that. I'll deal."
He throws his arms around her, and she hugs him back, hoping she doesn't regret her decision.

And so, when Mako arrives, Bolin pulls him aside. Korra eyes the girl hovering in the doorway. She's about Korra's height, with a pale complexion, dark eyes and straight, jet-black hair that just barely skims her shoulders. Her eyes are lined with dark makeup that swoops up at the outer corners, and her fashionable dress and shoes make Korra feel frumpy in comparison. She rubs her bare cheeks, thinking she should have accepted her mother's offer to do a trial run of hair and makeup before they left.

When the girl's wandering eyes land on Korra, they light up, and she quickly looks away. It isn't the reaction Korra expected, and now she's confused.

As Mako approaches Korra, she stares pointedly at the floor, suddenly shy.

"Hi," he says gruffly.

"Hi," she replies.

"Look, thanks for offering to keep Lian company. Really." He runs a hand through his hair. "I know it's probably a bit awkward."

"That does seem to be the word for it." She shrugs. "It's okay, really. Go play your game."

Instead, he asks, "How are you doing, Korra? It's been awhile."

Her throat suddenly tightens and tears flood her eyes, but she'll be damned if she's going to cry in front of Mako. He might think it's all for him, when he's really only a part of it. Instead, she shrugs. "Working to fix what's broken. Making some progress."

"Good." He hesitates. "I don't know if Chief Beifong ever contacted you about the shipwreck, but-"

"She didn't," she interrupts, trying to cut him off.

"We didn't find the bodies, but the currents are so strong that we couldn't risk a dive team staying down there for too long. There's no way anyone could have survived. Their files have been officially closed as deceased." He hesitates. "Look, whatever happened between you and Noatak-"

"I don't want to talk about it," she growls.

There's a long pause.

"Okay," he says finally. "Do you think your parents would mind if I said hello?"

"They'd probably love it." She finally chances a look up at him, and he looks so sad that her gaze drops again. "Good luck with the match. We'll all be cheering you on."

"Thanks. Won't be the same without you there." He reaches out to squeeze her arm, then moves past her to greet her parents.

Korra squeezes her eyes shut, trying to hold back her tears. *Dammit, I thought I was finally getting past all this crying.*

"Avatar Korra?" says a voice, sweet and almost musical. Korra lifts her head to see Mako's friend standing in front of her, her head tilted, hands clasped behind her back.
"Hello," replies Korra, and her voice is so hoarse that she clears her throat. "You must be Lian."

"I am." The girl is blushing now. "I apologize if I come across a bit nervous. I'm a little starstruck. You're pretty much my role model."

"Me?" asks Korra, stunned.

The girl nods. Her mannerisms make her seem so young that Korra blurts out, "How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

Korra's first instinct is that the girl is a bit young for Mako, but then she considers the age difference between her and Noatak, and she almost laughs. "Come on, Lian. I'll introduce you to the rest of the group."

As they go from person to person, the girl is so sweet and kind that Korra is finding it difficult to hate her. Once the introductions are done, they each help themselves to a glass of wine and a plate of appetizers from the table at the back of the box. Korra takes extra helpings of the meat dishes, and she notices Tarrlok and her parents do the same.

They settle into seats at the front of the box, by the glass, and now Korra realizes why these seats are so prestigious: there's a clear view of the ring, almost top-down. They'll get a perfect view of the entire match. She's looking forward to it.

"Mako told me a lot about you," blurts the girl.

"Oh? Nothing bad, I hope." Korra sinks her teeth into a rib, pulling the meat from the bone, and it's so juicy and tender in her mouth that her eyes flutter closed. Sweet, delicious meat. How I've missed you.

"Well, he's been pretty honest about what happened between you. I mean, he clearly thinks the world of you, but..." The girl clears her throat. "I've gotta be honest with you: I, uh, I kind of like him, and it's intimidating to follow in the Avatar's footsteps."

Korra glances at her, surprised by the honesty. Lian is staring at her plate, her cheeks red. If Korra is honest with herself, she can relate to this girl who speaks without thinking and trusts others on instinct. It's like looking at herself before experience made her jaded.

"If he told you everything about me, then you shouldn't be all that intimidated," says Korra. "I've kind of been backsliding for years, battling some internal problems. I think, during the last year, Mako and I were more like roommates than partners. He needs to feel useful, you know? Protective. And I don't like to be protected. So I wasn't a great partner; I closed myself off and told myself it was self-preservation, but really I was just making it harder on both of us by not letting anyone in." She sighs. "Besides, with the way I let all my stresses overwhelm me, I'm definitely not anyone to look up to."

"Are you kidding? The fact that you had to deal with mental stuff just makes you even more admirable," says Lian quietly. "I've had my own battles, and it was tough enough without being constantly in the spotlight. Hearing that you've been dealing with all that, and you're still here and holding it together - well, it's inspiring."

"Oh." Korra feels her cheeks glow. "Thank you. I don't often hear it phrased so kindly."

The ice broken, they begin to chat, and Korra finds they have a lot in common: love of animals, food and swimming, and their general approach to life. Lian's fascination with fashion and makeup
isn't something Korra is particularly interested in, but thanks to her friendship with Asami, she is able to hold a conversation about them, and she even pulls in her mother for a discussion about her outfit for Friday's speech. Conversation flows so easily that they almost miss the beginning of the Fire Ferrets' match.

As Korra watches the game, her mind drifts. She hasn't had a conversation that involved since her mission with Noatak. Despite her doubts coming into this arrangement, she feels like she and Lian are going to be good friends. She glances at the girl, and sees the admiration on her face as Mako successfully knocks a Wolfbat out of the ring.

"You really do like him," she says aloud.

Lian looks up, blushing. "What? Oh.. I'm sorry. I know you two were together for a long time, and-
"

"No, it's okay," interrupts Korra. "Really. My heart is kind of focussed on someone else right now, anyway."

She stares at the probending ring, and remembers the beginning of the Revolution. Explosions, downed police airships. You're in love with that man, she reminds herself. And after two months, it's time to face reality: he's not coming back for you. He has moved on. So should you.

Her throat tightens, and she feels the urge to storm from the room and find a quiet place to cry, but she tenses her jaw instead. No more crying; it's time for healing instead.

After a triumphant match, Mako and Bolin appear at the doorway, reeking of sweat, but all smiles. The kids rush forward, clambering for attention, while the adults begin to close in to congratulate them.

"Great match," says Korra to Mako and, making sure everyone else is too distracted to overhear, she adds quietly, "Lian is a sweetheart."

"I'm planning to ask her out," says Mako, his face suddenly solemn. "On a proper date, I mean. But if it's too soon-"

"You two will be happy," she says, and she means it. "But I want to hang out with you guys more often, okay? I miss you."

"I miss you, too," he says, and she smiles.

.*.*.*.

Her father, Tarrlok and Lian accompany the triumphant teammates to a nearby pub, where wine and conversation flow. It's been so long since she has been out with friends that she drinks a bit more than she should, but no one seems to mind, not even her father. Even Tarrlok is grinning, and the sight gives her hope. We're all going to be okay.

Mako and Lian disappear for little while, and Korra tries not to notice. When they return, their faces are flushed, and they're holding hands. Korra clears her throat, refusing to let it tighten, and leans close to Lian.

"I hope you didn't kiss him first," she whispers. "He hates that."

Lian's blush deepens.
"Korra?" says Mako's voice behind her. "Can I chat with you for a sec?"

"Yeah, sure." She swings her legs around and hops down from the chair, swaying a bit; he catches her elbow to steady her. She follows him to the back alley. It's so quiet outside after the noise of the pub that her ears ring. The moon is almost full. She catches herself wondering if Noatak is staring pensively at it, thinking of his childhood.

Mako leans against the wall beside her, his arms over his head. "So, I guess Lian and I are dating now." He glances down at her. "Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"The only thing I'm not okay with is everyone constantly asking me," she mutters.

"I just want to make sure you're okay."

"I won't be, if everyone keeps asking." She feels tears rising again, and she curses herself. "Look, Mako, I'm having a great night, so don't ruin it with your overprotectiveness."

"Okay, okay." He's looking up at the moon, too, his face sombre. "Our breakup was kind of messy, and I just want you to know, you're always going to have a place in my heart, you know? I still want you to be a part of my life."

Her mood softens. "Of course. I'm going to be the cool auntie to your kids."

"My kids?" He looks down at her, panic on his face. "I just barely kissed her - don't go planning our family just yet."

"I meant, any future kids you have, with anyone." She scuffs the ground with her boot. "I really fucked things up with you, Mako. I'm sorry."

"Well, I wasn't exactly the most patient person. I need to feel like I'm in control of everything around me, and when I realized I couldn't help you..." He shrugs. "Lian said you feel like you pushed me away, but I want you to know, it wasn't just you."

A bit annoyed, Korra says, "Is there anything you two don't talk about?"

"I didn't tell her about you and Noatak," he says quietly.

Her stomach drops. "Good, because it's best if everyone just lets that fade."

"I meant it when I said that whatever happened was none of my business. But I know you, Korra. I can read you." His arms lower to his sides and he stares at the ground. "Even if I don't quite understand it, I get it, you know? I get how these things happen. I want you to know that. I don't want that to be something that hangs between us and stops us from ever being friends again."

Her vision blurs with tears, and the moon doubles. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I know. But if you ever do, you have me. Or Lian. She really likes you, you know."

Korra's throat is too tight to reply, so she only nods.

"Enough of this heavy talk." Mako stands tall and stretches. "I think it's time for me to buy everyone a round of shots. I want everyone to be dancing on the table before the night ends."

"Even my Dad?" she says, wiping her cheeks.

"I think he'll be the first one, the way he's going." Mako shakes his head. "Tarrlok is going to be a
bigger challenge." He glances at her. "Tarrlok," he says, in disbelief. "Korra, you have the weirdest choice of friends."

She laughs. "I was thinking the same thing earlier today." Sniffling, she steps forward and wraps her arms around him. "Everything's going to be okay, right, Mako?"

He hugs her back. "Everything's going to be okay."

His hug feels like the closure she didn't realize she needed.

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The rest of the night becomes a blur of boisterous laughter and colourful drinks.

Korra leans heavily on Tonraq's arm as they walk down to the ferries, and he seems to be in a great mood, too. He tells her a story she had never heard before, about the time his father caught Tonraq and his friends red-handed with liquor stolen from his cabinet, and she can't stop laughing as her father mimics her grandfather's reaction. As they ride the ferry, they sing an old drinking song together, each surprised that the other one knows the words. Tarrlok surprises them both by pitching in a few words for the chorus. It's the most fun she has had in years, and her heart is light when she returns to her bedroom.

She slides open the door.

A single envelope sits on her bed.

All at once, every drop of progress she has made tonight drains from her, leaving her chilled.

"Goodnight, Princess," says her father, oblivious, as he leans in for a hug. "It's good to see you back to your old self."

"Thanks for hanging out with us, Dad," she replies, trying to hide all signs of her sudden regression. "Love you."

"Love you, too," he says, ruffling her hair, and then he slides the door closed.

Her heart pounds, and she smooths her hair back into place, pacing toward the bed. Maybe if she drops the envelope in the garbage bin, it will be like it never existed, and she can continue healing.

Slowly, she sinks to a seat on the bed beside it. There's no mistaking the writing. So much for her image of a Noatak who has blissfully moved on, never giving a second thought to her again.

Swallowing hard, she picks it up. There's something heavy inside it.

She rips open the end of the envelope and tilts it. A small box falls onto the bed. Inside is a pendant. She picks it up, letting it rest in her palm. It's about half the size of a yuan, and made of glass, rimmed with silver. Encased inside the glass is a tiny blossom; it's pale blue, but the five petals are so thin that they almost look silver. It's so beautiful and delicate that her breath catches.

Peering into the envelope for an explanation, she fishes out a letter and unfolds it with trembling hands.

My dearest Korra,

I intended to send you a symbol of good luck, a charm that will signify my vote of confidence in your abilities to woo the world with your speech - but while those qualities are true of this
particular charm, I must confess they aren't the reason I ended up selecting it. Allow me to explain:

The silkblade is a tree that grows exclusively in the harsh forests of the northern Earth Kingdom. The tree has a tenuous existence; it is renowned for its rare and beautiful blossoms, which appear for a single week every five years. This pendant is the artist's attempt to preserve the beauty of a fleeting week, encasing it so that it may be remembered for all eternity.

As much as I want to, Korra, I cannot crack open the glass to allow your memory to wilt. All others were encased in glass; you are encased in diamond. Please forgive me this one last indulgence in our blossoming.

Korra blinks back tears as she rereads the words several times. Once she is certain she has absorbed as much meaning as she can from them, she pads across the room and opens her underwear drawer. Hidden in the back corner are two letters: the one he left her before his showdown with Kwan, and the one he sent her after he fled. She carefully folds this one and lays it on top of the others.

Her eyes narrow as she looks down at her growing stash of letters. How is she supposed to heal if he keeps reopening the wounds? She slams the drawer shut.

The pendant is still in her palm. She holds it up to the light. The flower's thin petals refract the light into a faint rainbow of colours. As much as she hates to admit it, his thoughtfulness touches her. She can think of no better symbol for their relationship. The thought of him, out there, paying attention to the events of her life, then painstakingly selecting this charm and writing out his thoughts - she has never felt more flattered, or more lonely.

In a shoebox under her bed, she finds a package of dark leather strings she intended to use as replacement boot laces one day. She threads one through the pendant and ties it around her neck. The glass rests on her chest just below her collarbones, so cold that she shivers.

Just until Friday, she thinks. Just for good luck.

She curls up on her side on the bed and clutches the pendant until it warms, trying not to admit to herself just how much she wishes Noatak were lying beside her.
Noatak opens the door to his hotel room and steps inside.

"This will do?" asks the captain with a grin, leaning against the doorway.

"Indeed. Thank you." In truth, it's one of the nicest rooms Noatak has ever set foot inside. The bed is wide enough that he could probably stretch out in any direction and still be perfectly comfortable, and there's a sunken tub in the corner of the room. If only he and Korra had been trapped in a room like this for their mission. It's a room that begs to have more than one occupant.

The captain tosses a key, which Noatak gracefully catches with his good hand.

"Go ahead and get settled, Saomik. Don't forget to come down to the bar at seven. The Avatar's giving a speech, so the first round of drinks is gonna be on the house. Second round is on me."

"I wouldn't miss it."

The door closes behind him, and Noatak stares absently at the wall. Even though the room is a good five times as large as his sleeping quarters on the ship, he feels the walls closing in on him.

He's familiar enough with speeches to know what Korra is likely doing right at this moment: pacing and flipping through cue cards, testing out different intonations, doing breathing exercises to keep anxiety and anticipation at bay. He wonders if she has a Kwan figure in her life, barking out orders to the behind-the-scenes participants, shielding her so that she can make any last-minute polish to her speech. Is she dressed in fancy garb and makeup, or in her usual ponytails and Water Tribe casual style? Does she have his pendant in her pocket, or did she toss it out the instant it arrived?

He tries to stop his thoughts there, but they wander ahead of him anyway: *I wonder, even with everything on her mind, if she is thinking of me?*

*.**.*

Korra sits in a chair, one hand holding cue cards, the other anxiously fiddling with the pendant around her neck.

"People of the world," she mutters. "People of the- Ow! Mom, be careful."

Her mother has hair pins pinched between her lips, so her voice is muffled: "Sorry, hon. Just need to make sure it holds."

Tarrlok is standing at the front of the stage, peering through the crack between the curtains. On the other side, Korra can hear the murmur of a crowd, and it sounds enormous.

"Are there are a lot of people, Tarrlok?" she asks.

He turns and nods. "Thousands."

"Thousands?" She closes her eyes. Stage fright is not natural for her - adrenaline usually fuels her
confidence rather than saps it - so she has no idea how to cope. Spots dance in front of her eyelids, and she realizes she has forgotten to breathe. That seems like a good place to start. She breathes in through her nose, out through her mouth.

Tenzin returns from speaking with one of the photographers. "There, they'll hold off the flash bulbs until the question and answer portion of the speech." He stops short when his eyes lock onto her, and his voice softens. "How are you doing, Korra?"

"I feel like I'm going to throw up."

"You'll be fine. People will be very forgiving of you." He clears his throat. "Though I do still strongly recommend that you take out that section about your loss of bending."

"I can't just pretend I'm at full strength," she says. "I can't lie."

"No, but if you admit to weakness, you're opening yourself up to criticism or, worse, to an attack while you're still vulnerable. Don't forget that there are still Equalist sympathizers out there."

"He's right, Korra," says her mother quietly. "Part of the reason for giving this speech is to gain the political confidence of the people of the world. A good leader knows the difference between honesty and full disclosure."

She sighs and glances at Tarrlok for support.


"Of course you wouldn't have any problems hiding information from the public," she mutters, folding her arms over her chest. "Fine. But if this comes back to bite me in the ass, I'm blaming all of you."

"I know you're nervous, but don't get snippy with the people who are trying to help you," Senna scolds gently. She does a final adjustment to Korra's hair, then says, "There. Done."

Korra hops down from the chair and hurries to the mirror, and her mouth hangs open. Her forehead is exposed; her bangs thread into a braid that encircles the crown of her head, which is held in place with tiny, silver, flower-shaped pins. Four thin braids branch off of it in loops, hanging almost to her shoulders. Her throat tightens. "I look like a princess."

"That's because you're my princess," says Senna, bending forward to give her a peck on the cheek, and Korra flushes.

"Mom, come on," she complains, trying not to show how touched she is, but her mother must read right through her, because she beams.

Standing tall, Korra examines herself. Her dress is a deep mahogany, with a stylish straight collar and a slightly flared cut that ends just below her knees. A swooping pattern of flowers and vines has been painstakingly embroidered along her left side in silver thread. Her sandals are flat, thankfully - there is no way she would have been able to balance in heels and focus on the speech at the same time. They reveal toes that have been painted with mahogany varnish. She feels unusually feminine and mature. Womanly.

Her fingers rise to the pendant at her throat, straightening it into place. It matches her outfit so perfectly that it's hard to believe Noatak wasn't secretly watching her preparations. Maybe he was, she thinks, even though she knows it's impossible. Maybe he'll be at the speech tonight, watching from the crowd.
"Two minutes until show time," says one of the City Hall assistants.

"Thanks." She turns to her mother and gives her a big hug. "Thanks for everything, Mom. Even if I flub my speech, at least you made sure I'll look beautiful doing it."

"You're always beautiful." Her mom squeezes her tightly, then steps back, beaming proudly. "I'm going to go find your father. We'll be cheering for you." She glances behind her. "Tarrlok, would you care to join us?"

He nods his thanks, then holds out a hand to Korra. "Good luck."

She clasps it. "Thanks."

Then it's just Korra and Tenzin.

"Want me to stay backstage with the cue cards?" asks Tenzin. "I'm sure you won't need it, but sometimes it's nice to know there's someone there to prompt you if you get stuck."

Her instinct is to refuse; her pride tells her that she should be able to handle this alone. If she's honest with herself, however, it really will be helpful to have him there for security. She's supposed to be learning to open herself up to the help of others, after all. "If you don't mind, I would really appreciate it. You can stand on stage beside me, if you like."

"I don't want to steal your spotlight."

"You won't. It's a radio broadcast, and I don't mind having you there in the newspaper photos. Your father was the founder of the legacy that I'm trying to uphold tonight, anyway."

He smiles, and she smiles back.

"One minute, Avatar Korra," says the assistant. "We'll bring you onstage thirty seconds before the broadcast goes live. Give the crowd time to cheer and then settle down."

"Thank you," says Korra, her stomach flipping.

Tenzin's hands clamp onto her shoulders. "You'll be fine, Korra. Just think of all the people who are cheering for you to succeed. Focus on the good energy they're sending you."

She feels it, and she feels that same energy radiating from the pendant around her neck.

*I can do this. Everyone believes in me.*

"Thirty seconds," says the assistant. "Come on out." He holds open the curtain for her.

With a deep breath in, then out, she steps onto the stage.

...*

Noatak finds his shipmates already drinking at the bar, ten of them occupying two tables. He settles into an empty chair and holds up his ale to greet them, then takes a sip. It's been a long time since he had any alcohol, and he lets the foam trail along his tongue, savouring the bitter taste.

The bartender has set the radio on the bar, and it's cranked up. A lively, modern melody plays, filling the airtime until the speech begins. Noatak closes his eyes and envisions himself backstage with Korra, encouraging her before her speech the way Kwan used to encourage him: little jokes, fussing over her hair, encouraging words. Maybe he would even grab her hands in an impromptu
dance to break her tension. He sees her spinning away from him, her laughter so boisterous that it
drowns out the music, then spinning back in. He playfully taps her nose, but gets distracted, his
fingertip trailing down to her soft lips. Her face is suddenly solemn, and she pulls him in for a
kiss...

He feels a hand trails across his upper back, from one shoulder to the other.

"Saomik," greets Hassun, just arriving. With a final shoulder squeeze, he takes an empty seat
beside him.

Noatak's teeth clench. The man's advances have been getting more blatant, and he still hasn't
decided how to defuse the situation, or if he even wants to. He's certain the combination of privacy
and alcohol provided by this little hotel getaway is only going to encourage Hassun to escalate.

Sure enough, he feels a hand drop onto his knee, under the table, where none of their shipmates will
be able to see it. Noatak tenses, but doesn't pull away. It does feel nice to have some actual human
contact. He didn't realize how dependent on contact he was until he was suddenly deprived of it.
Mostly recently, of course, there was Korra, but before that, there was Tarrlok, the two of them
huddling together against the chilly air in the prison. Spirits, how he misses both of them.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Hassun watching him, no doubt trying to gauge his reaction.
He gives no response, keeping his face neutral.

The song on the radio ends, and a female announcer's voice cuts in, "I am down at City Hall,
where, minutes from now, the Avatar will be making her first speech in more than a year..."

"Wonder what she has to say?" asks the captain.

"Probably some boring shit about a spiritual journey," says Bariq, a burly man who is one of
Noatak's bunkmates.

"Come now," says Hassun. "I'm sure our esteemed Avatar is breaking her silence for something
much more important than that. Wouldn't you say, Saomik?" His hand inches from knee to thigh.
Noatak flounders for a composed response that will defend Korra without making him seem too
familiar with her, but that hand has shattered his concentration.

He's saved by Solis, a woman whose fiery personality reminds him of Qing. "Who cares? I'm more
interested in the fact that we're getting the signal this far away. Technology has come so far in the
days since-

"Technology! There you go again," interrupts Bariq. "You and your technology."

"It's more interesting than whatever spiritual crap she's been chasing down, isn't it?"

While other shipmates begin to chime in, Hassun's hand slips further to the inside, tracing along the
inseam. The conversation fades from Noatak's attention as the warmth of arousal floods his veins,
and he isn't sure he's comfortable with it. He glances sharply at Hassun, but the man only grins and
leans closer.

"Do you like that, Saomik?"

Keeping his voice too low to be overheard, Noatak says, "There is a time and a place, and this is
neither."

"It could be both. I could get you off right here." His breath is hot in Noatak's ear. "I can be very
subtle. No one else would notice." His hand drifts higher to cup him.

Power struggles and risks are normally two major turn-ons for Noatak, but only in the context of respect, and it's clear by his pushiness that Hassun has none. His good hand darts out to grip Hassun's wrist, then tosses it aside. For good measure, he follows up with his most dangerous glare. The man wilts in his seat.

"Lovers' spat?" asks Solis, and that's when he notices that all eyes are on them. So much for subtlety.

"Lovers? Ha!" says Hassun bitterly. He wraps his arms around his chest and slumps. "This one's too in love with the Avatar to even give me a second glance."

"In love with the Avatar?" she repeats.

The entire table falls into a puzzled silence. Noatak wonders, with a hint of amusement, what aspect of the statement is puzzling them the most: the idea that an old, unremarkable man like him could be in love with such a vivacious young celebrity, or the fact that he might not be gay. He has been intentionally evasive about his personal life, allowing them to draw their own conclusions, and it's clear that whatever conclusions each individual has drawn, the idea of him being in love with the Avatar doesn't make sense.

Well, they aren't wrong about that.

He takes a sip of his ale, then calmly says, "You've had too much to drink, Hassun."

"Don't deny it." The man's eyes narrow, and his voice is getting too loud. "I saw you eyeballing that picture of the Avatar in the paper. Stroking her cheek. And you're sending her trinkets and letters. What sort of creep are you, obsessing over a celebrity half your age? You're practically stalking her."

"Shut your whine hole, Hassun," snaps the captain. "Go back to your room and rub one out if you're that sore about not feeling up my first mate. The speech is about to start." He rolls his eyes, clearly exasperated, and Noatak wonders if Hassun is going to find himself kicked off the ship. Maybe this little problem is going to sort itself out after all.

Wild applause sounds on the radio, and everyone in the room falls silent.

"The Avatar has arrived," the announcer says. "She looks majestic in a long burgundy gown, her hair done in intricate braids."

The urge to hold his breath is so strong that Noatak focuses on his breathing, keeping it slow, in and out. He watches out of the corner of his eye as Hassun stands and then staggers over to the bar. Let him sulk. He needs to learn his place.

The applause on the radio dies, and Noatak strains his ears until they ring, anticipating the sound of her voice for the first time in two months.

"People of the world, this is Avatar Korra."

Even though he thought he was prepared for it, the sound of her voice roots him to the chair. He stares at the radio, feeling past and present collide. This was his first introduction to her, six years ago. Back then, too, her voice made butterflies dance in his stomach, but only because she was both his end goal and his excuse to launch his attack. Her voice marked the execution of a plan years in the making.
This time, he's affected not because she's the Avatar, but because she's Korra. He feels like a child with a first crush, his emotions running away on him in ways that he can't comprehend. A full two months after their separation, he's even more in love with her than before. It makes no sense.

A cold sweat breaks out on his forehead. He lifts his glass to his lips and drains it.

"People of the world, this is Avatar Korra."

The audience goes wild with cheers, and Korra's eyes travel across the sea of people. The entire arena is packed; it's as full as one of Amon's Equalist rallies. Maybe even more so. The spotlights make it impossible to distinguish any faces in the crowd, but she knows her parents and her friends are out in the crowd cheering for her.

She clears her throat and begins to speak.

"I want to thank you for your patience during my long absence from the public eye. I feel I owe you an explanation. As you know, my dear friend Miss Asami Sato passed away last year. While I am your Avatar, I am also human, and the loss of a friend isn't easy for anyone to overcome. It has taken me some time to recover from the shock, the guilt and the grief over her passing.

"I am here today to tell you that I have taken the time I needed. I'm back, and I'm committed to bringing the world the peace and balance it desperately needs."

The crowd roars, and her confidence swells.

As Korra speaks, Noatak hangs on to every word, but more than understanding their meaning, he's analysing the lilt of her voice. She sounds poised and confident. There is the occasional inopportune intake of breath that suggests she's nervous, but overall, her oratory skills are riveting. Every single mouth in the tavern is closed, every pair of eyes focused on the radio.

Well, every pair of eyes but one. Hassun returns with two drinks in hand, and sets one in front of Noatak. "I never did buy you that drink," he mutters, not looking up. "And I figure I owe you. I got carried away."

Though Noatak is still annoyed, the gesture is kind enough that he nods and holds up the glass in thanks. He doesn't speak; he doesn't want to interrupt the steady stream of Korra's voice.

"Over the past several weeks, much of the Equalist machine has been dismantled," says Korra. "Credit for that goes to Chief Beifong and the Republic City Police. They have been working tirelessly to follow up on intel offered to them by...by a former member of the Equalists." Her voice cracks, and her pause after the sentence is too long, as if she's composing herself. Noatak's hand tightens around the glass until his knuckles turn white.

"I am here to tell you that while the brutal approach of the Equalists had to be stopped, non-bender inequality is still very real," she says, confidence returning to her voice, and his heart skips a beat. Is she following the advice he suggested in the letter, becoming a voice for non-benders? A part of him figured she might just cast his letters and the pendant aside, already moving on with her life. That she might have taken his words to heart...

He takes a long swallow of the drink from Hassun. There's an odd floral tang to the ale that is vaguely familiar, but he can't quite place it.
"When Avatar Aang built this city," continues Korra, "he intended it to be a place where benders and non-benders alike could live in harmony. This ideal has fallen out of balance. Bending gangs harass non-benders day after day, and there is still no non-bender representation on the Council. Many of our jobs and our celebrated forms of entertainment revolve around bending. Non-benders face prejudices and insurmountable obstacles at every turn.

"This imbalance cannot continue. Non-bender empowerment must take a new form. That's why I will be personally leading an inquest into the status of non-benders in Republic City, to identify both problems and solutions. It's a small start to what will become a worldwide movement to promote harmony and peace.

"As your Avatar, I represent all people, bender and non-bender alike. While benders will continue to have a voice in our society, non-benders, too, must be given voices. Our coexistence must be a balanced dialogue, where all voices are loud enough to be heard."

Noatak's head buzzes with pride. As a former public speaker himself, he admires her charisma. He feels a pull toward her words, thanks to her energy and enthusiasm. What's more, she has avoided using the words he appropriated for his propaganda - a clever way to distance herself from the Equalist movement while still pushing a similar agenda. He drains the rest of the drink, and feels a smile spread across his face.

Hassun is watching him intently.

Noatak glances at the man, but as his head moves, his world shifts. He's far too aware of the parallax of the objects in the room, and a white haze is forming in the fringes of his vision. I probably shouldn't have tossed back those drinks so quickly.

With the main body of the speech complete, Korra begins answering press questions. Most are inquiries about the specifics of her inquest, although a few are about her reaction to Miss Sato's death. Noatak's fingers curl into his palms as he hears her voice quiver.

"That's it?" says Bariq.

"It isn't over yet," says Noatak, still trying to listen.

"It isn't going to be any important information," says another of his shipmates, a broad man by the name of Lei. "She's just answering questions."

"It's interesting anyway." His mouth feels as if he's trying to speak around cotton balls. How strong were those drinks?

Solis gives a teasing grin. "Spirits, Hassun was right: Saomik really is in love with her. Look at him, hanging on to every word she says."

"Can't say I blame him." Bariq leers. "Any red-blooded male would want to get her into bed."

Noatak's gaze locks onto the man. "She is your Avatar. I suggest you watch your tone."

Instead of being intimidated, Bariq begins to laugh, and several of their shipmates join in.

"Knock it off," says the captain. "Like none of you assholes has ever had a little crush on a celebrity." Though the words are meant to help, their pedantic tone makes Noatak's blood boil even more.

"Oh, no sir, I was agreeing with him," says Bariq. He narrows his eyes at Noatak, as if challenging...
The words send Noatak spiralling into his memories. He remembers the weight of her breasts in his hands, the left just slightly heavier than the right. The way the areolas contract into ovals in the cold, the faint smattering of hair around them standing on end. He remembers the two freckles on the top of the right breast, the fading scratch near the bottom of her left, the indents left on her skin by her bra. In his mind, he is still tracing those indents, feeling them slide across the pads of his fingers. And her cleavage, that perfect amalgamation of bone, flesh and muscle, that mind-numbing scent...

They are beautiful breasts, and they are hers, and this boorish man has no right to reduce their complexity to *tits*.

He stands. The floor tilts beneath him, but he adjusts his balance and throws his shoulders back. "Bariq-" he begins, but then he hears a snippet of a reporter's question from the radio:

"-necklace. Are you engaged?"

"Well? Bariq, what?" says Bariq, his voice drowning out Korra's response. "I dare you to finish that sentence. You going to order me around again, First Mate Saomik?" He cracks his knuckles. "You know, I've been on this ship a lot longer than you, so I really resent you acting so big and mighty."

"I said, knock it off," says the captain, but he doesn't appear to be interested in standing up to intervene, returning to his beer instead.

Ignoring him, Bariq stands and circles the table, planting himself a foot away from Noatak. "You may be the first mate, but I'm the better man. I can drop you in seconds, old-timer."

"You don't want to fight me," growls Noatak.

Bariq grins, then throws a punch.

Easily dodging in spite of his body's growing sluggishness, Noatak spins to his back and drives his fist at the man's shoulder blade, one knuckle subtly extended to trigger a chi point. As the fist connects, Bariq howls in pain.

"You don't want to fight me," repeats Noatak through clenched teeth, but he's struggling to compose himself. Coloured patterns are appearing in the corners of his vision, and a high-pitched whine sounds in his ears.

"Both of you will cease this immediately," barks the captain, standing.

Ignoring him, Bariq yells and charges, arm extended in a clothesline. Noatak ducks beneath it and drives his fingertips into a chi point on the lower back as the man stumbles past.

A table of wide eyes stare at Noatak, and he breaks into a cold sweat. *Showing too much skill. Can't draw attention.* The thoughts are confused, crashing to the forefront of his mind and then receding like waves.

Turning to face Bariq, he braces himself, preparing to take a punch. He purposefully makes his next dodge sloppy. A fist connects with his abdomen with more force than he expected, and he
doubles over, stars sparking in front of his eyes. An elbow between his shoulder blades drops him.

"Shit, Bariq, go easier on him," says Solis' voice in the background.

Too dizzy to stand, and still winded, Noatak lays on the ground, blinking furiously to try to clear his fogging vision. Leather boots step into his line of sight, and in his confusion, he wonders, Korra?

"Lay off him, Bariq," barks Hassun. There's some shouting and scuffling, then a hand extends into Noatak's view.

"Thanks." Noatak accepts it and stands, wobbling.

"You okay?" says Hassun, his brows pinched with concern. "You don't look so good."

"I think...I..." His knee gives out on him, and he almost falls, but Hassun catches his arm. Blinking, Noatak looks around for Korra. He saw her boots, he's sure of it, and her voice, he heard her voice...

"Maybe you should go lie down," says Hassun. "Need me to help you?"

Noatak's lips feel too numb to respond; he clumsily shoves Hassun away and begins to stagger toward his room.

There are yells behind him, and echoes, but he can't tell which are real and which are only in his mind. His good hand trails the wall to help him stay upright. His vision is doubled, and his pulse feels too quick; blood is pooling in his groin.

He's vaguely aware that this isn't right, that this isn't typical drunkenness, but the thought keeps skirting just shy of his consciousness. Whenever he manages to focus on the thought, it slips free before he can parse it into words.

He staggers into the room and slams the door behind him, then falls face-first onto the bed. Korra's voice echoes through his mind, and he can't stop picturing her on stage, so competently addressing her people.

Oh spirits, he wishes he were there. He wishes he could hold out a hand to her to help her down the stairs and catch her in a kiss at the bottom of them. They could celebrate with a bottle of wine. He imagines drizzling the wine down her naked abdomen, lapping it with his tongue, and a low groan sounds in his throat.

He rolls onto his back and forces his hand beneath his waistband. Another groan escapes his lips, and he slams his bad hand into a pillow, clumsily gripping it and shoving it into his face. The pillowcase is so soft against his nose and his cheeks, so soft, and suddenly it's not a pillow at all, it's Korra, she's sitting on top of him, he kisses her, running his tongue along the softness...

He yells into the pillow, writhing, as a surge of hormones pulls him under.

Lifting the pillow off his face, he gasps for air, his body relaxing into the bed. When he opens his eyes, the room is spinning.

Again, he thinks, and he rolls onto his front, centring himself on top of the pillow. His mind is an array of flashing images of Korra, saturated and colourful. He goes under again, and this time his entire body shudders. The bed still seems to be vibrating when he's done.
He tries to walk to the bathroom, repeating the phrase over and over in his mind: *clean up and go for help, clean up and go for help, help up and clean for Korra...* He sinks to his knees. The floor is shuddering violently, as if there’s a giant motor underneath it. *Come on, Noatak, pull it together, Noatak, Noatak.* Is that his name? It doesn’t feel right. Noatak, Kanno, Amon, Saomik... none of them are right, none of them are *him.*

Somehow, he makes it to the sink. He shakily pulls himself to his feet and washes his hands. His reflection is doubled and hazy, and at first he thinks the mirror is dirty, but then he looks down at his hands and sees the same effect. And spirits, his body is still so aroused. It hurts.

He doesn’t realize he has fallen until he feels the cold tile floor on his side. Running water is beginning to overflow the sink, but he can’t control himself well enough to stand and reach the tap. Instead, he lies flat on his back, his hand drifting between his legs, instinct driving him to release the building pressure.

"Didn’t your mother ever tell you that would make you go blind?" says a voice, echoing through the tiny room. Noatak lifts his head and sees Hassun standing at his feet, arms folded over his chest. The lines of his body are jittering, and a bright palette of colours slides across his skin.

Noatak tries to ask for help, but it comes out as a pained gasp.

"I do apologize, Saomik." Hassun squats, looking down at him with pity. "I was expecting such a high dose to take you down more cleanly, but it seems you’ve got some sort of lingering tolerance. This isn’t your first time on spiritbrush, is it?"

"Spiritbrush?" It’s difficult to follow the words, and that one is familiar, but Noatak is too stupefied to place it. He struggles to sit up; the man catches his arm and helps him to a seat.

"I knew you were an alcoholic, Saomik, but a druggie as well? And a pretty heavy user, I would guess, if you’re still tolerant after so many years. Tsk."

None of this is making sense. Noatak pinches the bridge of his nose and tries to force his brain into sobriety. "No, that’s not... You drugged me?"

"Make no mistake, Saomik. I won’t do anything unsavoury. You’re hot as hell, sure, and it’s a shame I never got the chance to fuck you before it came to this, but I’m not an animal." Hassun hauls him to his feet with one hand and turns off the water tap with his other. "I just needed to make you easier to transport."

"Transport?"

Hassun smirks. "You poor idiot. Thinking you were so clever, that no one would catch on." His lips tickle Noatak’s ear as he rumbles, "Amon."

Every muscle in Noatak’s body tenses. He’s in no condition to bluff, so he slurs, "What do you want?" Darkness is closing in on him, and he fights to stay in control.

"We’re going to take a little drive."

"Where?"

"I don’t want to spoil the surprise."
"Won't...leave..."

"Of course you will. I'll be patient." Hassun steers him toward the bed and forces him to a seat. "Once the drug kicks in, you'll be perfectly compliant."

Noatak closes his eyes, trying to centre himself, even as fractals dance on his eyelids. *Focus. Fight this. Fight this...*

It's his last thought before the drug takes hold.
XXXVI: Pendant

Chapter Notes

Chapter XXXI to end was posted within 24 hours of each other. Sorry for the inconvenience!

XXXVI

Pendant

Korra runs backstage and hugs Tenzin, who squeezes her tightly in return.

"You did very well, Korra," he says proudly. "You delivered your speech perfectly, and you handled the press questions with the grace and finesse of a seasoned speaker."

Though his praise makes her glow, she pulls away and shakes her head. "I'm glad it came across like that, because I still feel like I'm going to throw up." She's grateful the reporters were delicate with her, aside from that one question about her marital status. At least it was an opportunity to inform the public about her amicable breakup.

Her hand subconsciously reaches for her pendant, the movement already engrained as a nervous tic. Even though she knows the thought is irrational, even childish, her eyes dart around for Noatak. Deep down, she knows there's no way he would risk his safety - or hers, or Tarrlok's - by showing up at an event crawling with police and press.

Tonraq appears at the end of the stage, and he grins and runs for her. She shrieks as he catches her and spins her around, as if she's two years old again. He plants a big kiss on her cheek, then sets her down. "Way to charm the crowd, kiddo."

"You were amazing," adds Senna, reaching in for a hug as well. Next in line are Pema and the kids, then Tarrlok, Bolin, Mako, and Lian. Still giddy from the applause and brimming with nervous energy, Korra bounces on the balls of her feet between hugs. She hesitates when she reaches Tarrlok. Though they're getting closer emotionally, she has been keeping him at a distance physically, partly out of lingering resentment for the time he kidnapped her, and partly out of some misplaced resentment toward his brother. He's much more slender than she expected; his build feels delicate in comparison to Noatak. His smile is awkward when she pulls away, and she wonders if they're ever going to be as close as true siblings.

When she reaches Mako, she says quietly to him, "Sorry to make our breakup so public."

"Better they know," he replies, giving her a hug. "But that question they asked about your necklace-"

She cuts him off. "It matched my outfit."

"You keep touching it."

"Oh, leave her alone," says Bolin, reaching in for his hug. "A Water Tribe girl can't wear a necklace without it meaning anything? That's stereotyping, Mako."
"Thank you," says Korra with a huff, but her stomach flips.

Tonraq has reserved a banquet room in a nearby noodle restaurant, where the entire group can feast and drink without interruption from the press. Though Korra is enjoying the company of her friends and family, her heart isn't in it. It feels, to her, as if everyone is celebrating too soon. There is still so much work in front of her, both in terms of non-bender rights and in terms of training to recover her lost bending. She remembers an argument with Tenzin last week, when he tried to convince her that pushing for non-bender equality right now would be taking on too much at once. Perhaps he's right, but keeping busy will keep her getting out of bed each day. She has to keep moving forward.

Moving forward is going to be difficult if she keeps expecting Noatak to appear from the shadows. As they walk down the street back to the ferries, her eyes scan the crowd. Even though she returns to her room alone, she throws open the door, filled with a childish hope that she might see him standing in the corner.

It's no surprise that he isn't there, so why is she so disappointed?

Naga lifts her head and gives a little whine, and Korra smiles at her. "Just give me a minute to change, girl."

The dress is comfortable enough, and she enjoys the way the fabric swishes when she moves, but she doesn't want to ruin it by traipsing around the island. It's a warm night, and she still feels a bit fancy, so she pulls on a loose blue sundress. The fabric is cool and soft against her skin. Her hair took so much effort that she decides to enjoy it for a few days, but she pulls out a couple pins just to make it more comfortable.

Naga whines again.

"I said, just a minute." She kicks off her fancy shoes and wiggles her bare toes. "There. Let's go."

The polar bear dog leaps to her feet, tail wagging.

It seems too hot for Naga's saddle, so Korra rides bareback. They pad toward their usual cliff, and Korra is annoyed to find herself hopefully scanning the shadows. She leans down, hugging the animal's furry neck. "It isn't fair, Naga. I know he isn't coming back, but I can't stop hoping. I shouldn't be so preoccupied with him anymore. It was only a week."

Naga gives a sigh that Korra interprets as sympathy, and it makes her feel a little better. She wishes her companion could speak.

Once they reach the cliff, Korra dismounts. Her legs dangle over the edge, heels kicking the rock as she stares at the moon. Tomorrow night is a full moon. She can already feel it in her blood, augmenting her waterbending. She plans to try healing tomorrow night, when her waterbending will be at its strongest.

She finds herself thinking of Noatak's connection to the full moon. Did he stop feeling it when his bending was removed? Is he remembering it now? Is it fuelling his power-hungry nature, or is he able to control that part of himself? She hopes, for both of their sakes, that he is avoiding bloodbending. Her choice to give bloodbending back to a man convicted of treason, if it were discovered, would not sit well with the people of the world, no matter what the circumstances.

"Korra," says Tarrlok's voice. She turns and sees him approaching, still wearing his formal clothes from the speech.
"Hey Tarrlok." She moves over to give him room to join her. "Can't sleep either?"

He sits beside her, but folds his legs instead of dangling them over the cliff. "Memories."

"Yeah, same. Hard to see a group of people that large without thinking about the days of Amon, isn't it?"

He looks startled at first, and she wonders if it's because she has mentioned the unmentionable topic of Noatak. After a moment, he nods.

With the ice broken about the topic, she decides to finally tell him Noatak is alive. He is seeming a little less fragile these days, a little more stable, and she thinks he can handle it.

Before she can muster her courage, however, Tarrlok gestures to his throat. "Not Mako."

Confused, Korra mimics the motion, and feels the pendant.

"Oh, the pendant? Yeah, you're right, it isn't from Mako. Our break-up was pretty permanent."

Clearing her throat, she adds, "It was a gift, though. I want to tell you who gave it to me, but I'm worried about how you'll take it."

His usual composure drains from his face, and he looks at her with an expression that's part hope, part fear. It's the hope that convinces her to continue.

"It's from Noatak," she says quietly.

His swallow is audible. "Old?"

"I just got it a few days ago," she says. "He faked his death. I think he's in the Earth Kingdom somewhere, but I can't trace the letters back to their source, so I'm not sure where..." She trails off as Tarrlok's brows lower.

"When?" he snaps, and she doesn't even need to ask him to clarify.

"The first letter I got from him was a few days after we moved here. I'm sorry. I wasn't sure how you would take it, and you had so much to deal with already..."

He slams his palms into the earth and shoves himself to his feet, then paces. She twists around to watch him, worried he's going to take a running leap at the cliff.

"Again abandoned," he growls, and her stomach twists.

"No, it's not like that. I promise you, he was torn up about leaving you behind."

Shaking his head, Tarrlok continues to pace. She can tell he's trying not to cry, and her heart breaks for him.

"He thought you would do better without him around," she says. "He thinks he's some sort of corruptive influence on everyone around him. I was going to try to get his sentence shortened, but he's got some sort of martyr complex." She feels anger rising within her. "He thinks the world will be better off if he's dead, but he claims to be too cowardly to kill himself, so he removed himself by running away instead. But running off with Kwan to live happily ever after is kind of the exact fucking opposite of being a martyr, isn't it?"

Tarrlok has stopped pacing, and now he looks confused. "Kwan?"
"His ex-lieutenant." She lobs a pebble off the cliff. "They were still in love, and they ran off together. Isn't hard to figure out what happened after that."

"In love?" repeats Tarrlok.

"Yeah, they were lovers for a couple decades."

His eyes slowly widen, and he returns to sit beside her. "He's gay?"

She taps the pendant. "Bisexual."

"Didn't know," he says, hugging his knees to his chest. "He's my brother."

"Hey, if you don't know big things about him, that's his fault, not yours." Her anger is only getting stronger, and it swells so violently that she has to jump to her feet. "You know what, Tarrlok? Fuck Noatak. He connected with us and then left us. He hides behind excuses, but really, he's afraid to get close to people. So we're left behind, heartbroken, while he screws off and enjoys the rest of his life. And every time I think I'm finally coming to terms with it, he just keeps reopening the wounds with a letter or a gift. So fuck that selfish asshole!" The pendant around her neck is suddenly too heavy. Her fist closes over it, and she yanks. The cord snaps. "I hope he's out there right now, thinking of us, and his heart is aching. I hope it hurts so much that he feels like he's dying!"

She throws the pendant as hard as she can off the edge of the cliff, but she regrets it the instant it leaves her fingers. My last connection to him. It glints in the moonlight as it reaches the height of its arc, and when it begins to drop, her heart drops with it.

"No, stop!" She wants it back, she wants it back.

The pendant jerks to a stop, hovering mid-air.

Korra stares. Beside her, Tarrlok rises to his feet.

A tiny whirlwind has formed around the pendant, holding it aloft.

"Airbending?" he asks softly.

"But I didn't airbend." She looks down at her hands, and slowly, it dawns on her. "I willed it to happen, and it happened. I think... I think I just used psychic airbending."

His gaze snaps to her.

Her heart pounds in her throat. She senses a lingering connection to the whirlwind. Normally, her connection to the elements feels as if she is cooperating with it - she would liken it to the sensation of sculling water, where she pushes against the water, and the water pushes against her, and together they move her in the direction she wants to go. This connection to the whirlwind feels more like the psychic bending she used while she was corrupted - she feels as if she can speak to the element, as if it is obeying her desires.

She mentally commands the wind to move closer, and it bends to her will, drifting toward her. The pendant drops safely between her feet, and then the whirlwind dissipates. She stares at it. "Did that really just happen?" she whispers.

Tarrlok bends over to retrieve the pendant, studying it. "How?"

She accepts the pendant from him, relieved to have it back. Her finger traces its borders. "Katara
said the corruption corroded my chi pathways. I was using Noatak's psychic bending a lot while I was corrupted, so I wonder if that created new pathways inside me? Sort of carved them into me with corrosion?"

Tarrlok raises a brow at her. "Psychic Avatar?"

"Wouldn't it be amazing if that whole mess left me more powerful than before?" When she tries to call forth a puff of air, however, nothing happens – it's as if she can't make that initial connection with the element unless it's by reflex. She frowns. "I guess, like regular bending, it's going to take training for me to make psychic bending happen consistently."

There's a long silence. A breeze washes over them from the water, and Korra leans back against Naga's warm body, her mind racing with possibilities.

Tarrlok's voice is quiet: "Find him?"

Her gaze snaps to him. "What?"

"Us. Find Noatak." He swallows hard.

Yes, yells a voice in her mind, but she knows it's futile. "I don't even know where to start looking. I'm pretty sure he's in the Earth Kingdom, but that's a huge area to search, especially without alerting the authorities. Besides, he doesn't want to be found. We both know how good he is at disappearing."

At the words, a muscle in his jaw tightens, and he looks away. She wishes she could take them back. As much as Noatak's absence hurts her, this is only the first time he has abandoned her. Tarrlok has already been through this once before. She can't imagine how much it must hurt to be left behind a second time.

"He thinks he's protecting you," she says quietly. "Don't forget that, okay? He thinks he had no other choice. It was an act of love, not abandonment."

The words are as much for her benefit as for his.

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A swirling mist hangs over Republic City, sparkling with reds, greens, yellows and blues.

Korra stands on the hotel rooftop, handling her cigar with delicate fingers, her lips wrapping around the end. She slowly breathes in. Noatak can feel the suction across every inch of his skin, and when she releases the puff, he feels the breeze of it across his body.

A groan sounds in his throat. "That is a beautiful sight," he says, and she smiles. She leans in for a kiss, and he bends forward to meet her, but his lips only find air.

He pulls away, his brows furrowed, and sees only a cloud of cigar smoke in her place, shaped like her face and body.

He sighs. "This is just a dream."

"It could have been reality." The smoke is beginning to dissipate. "We could have had this. Always, the two of us, together. I could have run away with you."

"Impossible. You're the Avatar."
"We could have made it work. We're smart enough to figure out a way. You're just too eager to push me away." Her voice is fading, and only the faint scent of the cigar remains. "Find me."

"Wait," he says, but the last of her wafts away on the breeze.

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*I have to find her,* thinks Noatak.

His eyelids part.

The first thing he notices is that he's lying across the back seat of a car. The constant bumps and rattles indicate that the car is far from civilization, and coniferous trees pass by the windows, barely visible in the moonlight.

The second thing he notices is that he has been speaking for quite some time, and he has no memory of what he has been saying.

His mouth snaps shut.

*Spiritbrush.* Now that his thoughts are his own again, he remembers. It's an herb that gives twilight unconsciousness, a hypnosis state. He and Kwan tested its effects thoroughly when they were in the planning stages of the Revolution, thinking it an easy way to dismantle the system from the inside out: compliant police officers and politicians would make for easy intelligence gathering.

After much experimentation and learning more about the herb, they ultimately discarded the idea. The main drawback was a quick, permanent tolerance build that made it nearly impossible to gauge the correct dose, especially for repeat recipients. Another drawback was that, contrary to their initial expectations, the herb didn't act as a truth serum. Any secrets the recipients wanted to keep hidden would stay hidden. It was useless for intelligence gathering.

Even though they discarded their professional plans for the herb, the two researches had amassed such a substantial stash of it that they opted to continue to work their way through it until they used it all up. This was ostensibly due to the strong aphrodisiac side effects of the drug, though in hindsight, Noatak suspects Kwan also hoped the relatively harmless herb would replace his partner's much more debilitating alcohol addiction.

Regardless, that lingering tolerance may have made Hassun's attempted attack more difficult, but it didn't do much to save Noatak in the end. *What did I say while I was out?* Spiritbrush might not act as a truth serum, but alcohol can, and the two drugs amplify each other's effects.

"Awfully quiet back there," calls Hassun's voice from the front seat. "I take it you're back?"

He's silent.

"You can try to ignore me, but we've got a couple hours left, so that would get pretty awkward."

Refusing to answer, Noatak tries to sit up, and discovers he is bound at the ankles and wrists. His wrists are bound behind his back, but the binding is down low enough that with a bit of mild contortion, he should be able to bring his hands around to his front. A smart captor would have bound his elbows as well. If Hassun made that oversight, it's likely he made others. Staying alert and paying attention might just get Noatak out of this.

His captor whistles and adjusts the rear view mirror, and now Noatak can see a grinning reflection.
"You know, Amon, you sure do sing when you're drugged. I feel like I know you better as a person now that I know your whole life story."

Though the statement feels like a bluff, Noatak decides to let his brow furrow with feigned worry, letting Hassun feel as if he holds all the power. "Where are you taking me?"

"Ba Sing Se. I can drop you off and make it back to the hotel before anyone even knows I was gone. Given how I was acting last night, everyone's going to assume I was too drunk to do much of anything, let alone drive." He gives a smug smile, and Noatak begins to deconstruct it. A smile means he's pleased his plan worked. He wasn't confident it would work. He lacks experience.

"Why Ba Sing Se?" he asks.

"Because they have a better police force than the ragtag bunch you find out here in the sticks. You, Amon, are going to make my career."

Studying the reflection in the mirror, Noatak takes his analysis further. Hassun wants to make sure his accomplishment is recognized by a credible police force, so he's either a bounty hunter, or an undercover cop. The former seems unlikely, since there would be no bounty on the head of a legally dead man.

"You didn't know who I was at first," he says, still fishing for information. "You would have turned me in sooner."

Hassun chuckles and shrugs. "Yeah, I was on a shit job, trying to bust small-time smugglers. You fell right into my lap, and thank the spirits for it."

Noatak studies him. It's going to be hard to convince him to let me go, when I'm such an important prize.

As far as he can see it, he has three options, none of them pleasant.

The first is to bloodbend his way out. He hasn't used any bloodbending since he left Korra's side - he doesn't trust himself to stop once he starts using it again. Still, it would be the cleanest way to get free.

The second is to seduce his captor, and attack - without bloodbending - once Hassun's guard is down. While he doesn't relish the idea of sleeping with a man who has drugged and kidnapped him, he has had loveless sex before, and he knows he would be able to fake his way through it.

The third is to allow himself to be captured. Living a life of anonymity is proving to be harder than he thought, and he is a bit tired of reinventing his identity. It's probably what he deserves.

Delaying a decision, he tries to understand where he went wrong with his Saomik identity. "How did you figure out who I was?"

Hassun bounces an unimpressed look at him through the mirror. "By opening my eyes and ears. Your voice and your face were dead giveaways."

It's an angle Noatak has considered so many times that he knows Hassun is lying. "No. Only a few people ever knew my face, and you were not one of them. My voice may be recognizable, but only when I am orating. I frequented many places in Republic City without detection even when the Revolution was in full swing."

His captor squirms in his seat. He's hiding something.
"Hassun," growls Noatak.

"Okay, okay." A blush is creeping across the man's face. "Truth is, you sleep talk. Kept crying out for your brother and your ex-lieutenant. Wasn't hard to piece it together after that. There aren't many people who would be on a first name basis with both."

"I sleep talk," repeats Noatak, and his eyes narrow. "We're in separate cabins."

Hassun doesn't reply. The hair on the back of Noatak's neck stands on end. He knew his admirer was getting more and more enamoured, but coming into his bunk to watch him sleep is a dangerous level of obsession. While the idea of sleeping his way out of captivity just got a lot more plausible, Noatak's skin crawls at the idea.

Hassun's eyes are fixed on the road. "Thing is, there was a third name that came up a lot, too. Couldn't figure out how she fit into it, at first."

The conversation is headed in a dangerous direction, and Noatak's bound hands curl into fists.

"I'm talking, of course, about Avatar Korra." Glancing in the mirror, his captor says, "At first, I figured you were fighting her in your dreams, but it was odd that you referred to her by her first name. Then I saw you moping over her picture at the news stand, and I put the pieces together. You had an affair with her."

Noatak's heart pounds, but he coolly holds the man's gaze. "You've jumped to the wrong conclusion."

"You have another explanation?"

His mind blanks. Quick wit is one of his strongest assets, but the drug has left him sluggish.

"Didn't think so. Amon and the Avatar. How fucked up is that? How does that even happen?" Hassun's voice is growing too loud, too bitter, but he swallows hard, then appears to compose himself. With another smile in the mirror, he says, "I think that information is going to be most useful to the police, don't you?"

Noatak's voice drops to its deepest register. "Leave her out of this."

"Do you think they'll bring her in, start an investigation into her role in your escape? I'm sure it will call her integrity into question. That letter and pendant you sent her will certainly be confiscated as evidence."

Sweat trails down his temple. For all his strategy, for all his planning, he never stopped to consider that his letters and gift might be used against Korra. *How could I have been so stupid? So selfish?* "Hassun," he growls. "My capture is enough to make your career."

"What, are you going to try to bargain for her safety? Save your breath." Hassun's face takes on a dreamy expression. "Imagine it: I will be the man who not only took down Amon, but also exposed the Avatar's darkest secret."

Red haze clouds Noatak's vision. Every muscle fibre twitches with the desire to make the man's heart explode, but he takes a long breath to steady himself. There is one key piece of information he needs before Hassun dies.

"Did you radio ahead to let the police know you were bringing me in?" he asks in his most
menacing tone.

His captor's eyes flick to the mirror. "What?"

"If I kill you, will anyone come looking for you?" He begins to sense Hassun's body with bloodbending, familiarizing himself with the veins and arteries.

Unaware of the noose about to tighten around his body, Hassun starts laughing. "Kill me? What are you going to do, spit on me until I drown?"

"Answer the question."

With a shrug, Hassun says, "No, I didn't tell anyone."

"Good," says Noatak.

The bloodbending seizes control.

Hassun shrieks as his arms crank the steering wheel far to the left. The car lurches violently off the road, and both men slam against the window. Noatak fights to maintain a psychic hold on the man's arms, but the car flips, his head slams into the ceiling, and his vision dims.

When it finally clears, Noatak groans and struggles to sit up. Warm liquid trails down his upper lip, and he tastes iron, but other than that and a few bruises, he feels unharmed. The driver's seat is empty, the door open, and the hood of the car is open; it looks bent. He can hear Hassun cursing from somewhere outside the vehicle, and the clang of metal on metal.

This is his opportunity to bring his bound wrists around to the front of his body. Quietly pulling into a ball, he pushes his hips back between his arms. Though the back seat is a bit cramped, he successfully manoeuvres his legs through his bound wrists, one at a time. He can't examine the knot in the dark; he holds his wrists close to the window to catch the moonlight. It looks like a standard overhand knot. He can't loosen it with his teeth, but he should be able to bloodbend Hassun through the motions before he silences him permanently.

He closes his eyes against a rush of delight, followed almost immediately by a rush of horror. No choice. Finish what you started. He thinks of the scandal that awaits Korra if Hassun is allowed to go free, and his jaw tightens.

With his bound hands, he slowly turns the door handle. As he pushes it open, he listens for any indication that Hassun has heard him, but the man is still busy cursing.

The ankle binding is loose enough that Noatak can inch his way forward. He controls the distribution of his weight with each step, careful not to snap any twigs or step on any dry leaves. His footsteps bring him around to Hassun's back. The front end of the car has slammed into a tree trunk, and the man is trying to separate the metal from the bark with a crowbar. He's not having much success.

Standing tall, Noatak watches him, his pulse races with anticipation.

After a moment, Hassun stops cursing and slowly turns. His eyes widen, but with surprise, not terror. He hasn't figured out that I bloodbent him.

"Hit something, bounced into the ditch," says Hassun, rubbing the back of his neck. "Thought you were out cold. You're a tough fucker, I'll give you that." He stops short as his eyes drop to Noatak's bound hands. "How-"
Noatak's eyes flare.

With a scream, Hassun jerks into the air. Noatak puppets him closer, until the twitching, shuddering body floats a few feet in front of him.

"You got in over your head, Hassun," he growls. "You let pride and greed rule over common sense." He holds out his bound wrists. "I have given you control over your hands. Untie the knot."

Hassun's pulse is racing, and sweat rolls down his face and neck in thick drops. "But the Avatar took your bending!"

The terror in his voice resonates through Noatak, his body singing in harmony. "Do you think bending as powerful as mine can be extinguished so easily?" He tightens his hold, both disturbed and satisfied by the resulting shriek. "Untie the knot."

Though Hassun tries, he's shaking so badly that his movements are clumsy. Noatak steadies him with bloodbending, and a minute later, his hands are free. Still maintaining the bloodbending hold on his would-be captor, Noatak bends down to untie his ankles. The knot is so sloppy that it's easy to untie even with one good hand.

Hassun is blubbering now, tears streaming down his face. Noatak studies him. He has to protect himself, and he has to protect Korra, but he hasn't killed in more than a decade. He wants to. Oh spirits, does he want to. In the six years since the identity of Amon was stripped from him, he has never felt this much power.

But what of the woman he's trying to protect? What would she say if she were standing beside him, watching him choose whether or not to extinguish a life with all the compassion of a man staring down an insect?

*It's not as if she will ever find out.*

His eyes close as he weighs his logic, his desires, and his conscience.

"Please," sobs Hassun.

What stops Noatak from killing him isn't the plea itself, but the way he delights in it. *Someone who delights so much in the suffering of others is not impartial enough to decide whether a man should live or die.*

He steps forward, shoves a hand into the man's pocket, and retrieves a wallet. Pulling out an ID card, he studies it. "Had you radioed ahead, I would have been less likely to attack you. As it is, you alone carry the secret that I'm alive." He lets his gaze bore through Hassun. "One voice is easy to silence." When the only response is a whimper and a snuffle, he shakes his head. He removes a fold of yuans, then tosses the wallet at the man's feet. "Furthermore, threatening the Avatar was a move that was only bound to anger me. Do not threaten someone's romantic interest unless you can handle them at their most dangerous." He holds up the ID card. "I'm going to use all my networks to get every drop of information about you that I can. Friends, families, coworkers, former instructors, landlords; anyone who has ever exchanged even a few words with you will be impacted. If I hear that you have breathed a word about my existence, or anything about my involvement with the Avatar - if even the faintest rumour reaches my ears - I will not hesitate to hunt down and destroy everyone and everything you have ever cared for. Do I make myself clear?"

Hassun is sobbing again, tears and mucous running down his face. He gives a frantic nod.

The effort of holding him in the air is exhausting. Using the ropes that formerly bound him, Noatak
secures the man to a tree, then releases the bloodbending hold and steps back.

"You can't just leave me here," whimpers Hassun. "I'll die."

"I'm giving you the possibility of survival. It's far kinder than what my instincts are telling me to do." Noatak's eyes narrow. "Do not test me."

Pacing toward the front of the car, he examines the damage. There's no way the hood will close in its crumpled state, so he uses the crowbar to pry it off entirely. Wedging the crowbar between the grill and the tree, he leans his weight into it. A tiny gap shows between them. Hassun's work must have successfully pried the car free.

Noatak slides into the front seat of the car, starts it and shifts it into reverse. Instead of pulling away, he drums his fingers on the steering wheel, eyes locked on Hassun. Doubts are rising in his mind.

*It's cleaner if you kill him. He's the only loose end. One quick squeeze will ensure your safety - and Korra's - forever.*

Slowly, he swings his legs over the side of the car and paces toward Hassun.

"What are you doing?" yells Hassun, panicking. "You said you were letting me live."

Noatak plants his stance in front of him and holds up a hand. "You are already obsessed with me, and that obsession will fester until it outweighs your fear. I cannot risk that ten, twenty years from now, you will seek your revenge on me. I can't risk that you will hurt the Avatar."

Hassun's voice rises in pitch. "I won't. I swear to you, Amon. I swear..."

Holding up a hand, Noatak begins to grip the man's heart. Hassun lets out a strangled cry, then, as the bloodbending tightens, falls unconscious. His heart begins to struggle.

But before it gives up entirely, the bloodbending falls away.

As much as he wants to, as much as he needs to, Noatak can't bring himself to kill.

.*.*.*.

Noatak makes it about halfway back to town when the road in front of him begins to blur. His body is exhausted, and doubts swarm his mind. He grits his teeth and presses forward, determined to make it back to town by the time his ship leaves. The sky is already beginning to lighten; he guesses it's about six o'clock, and the ship is due to leave at nine.

The road is difficult, but he's a seasoned driver, and even exhausted, he is able to navigate the bumps and sharp curves. A bigger worry is the gasoline. The tank is almost empty, and he isn't sure how far away he is from his destination – the unending forest around him yields no clues.

The car dies before he escapes the forest. With several low curses, he searches the entire vehicle, hoping for an extra canister of gasoline. He finds none.

His usual reaction would be anger or frustration, but instead, he slumps against the car and stares blankly at the sky until the stars blur. By the time he finds the motivation to move, he's shivering and cold.

Between exhaustion and hangover from the spiritbrush, he isn't sure his legs will carry him the
entire way back to the hotel, but somehow, he makes it. His stomach is growling, his mouth is parched, and every joint in his body aches. The sun is high in the sky, so it's no surprise that the ship already left the docks. A long sigh leaves his parched lips. He had been considering moving on anyway, but he wanted to do it on his own terms. He's accustomed to pushing others away, not being abandoned.

At least the money from Hassun's wallet will buy him another night of accommodation until he figures out his next move.

When Noatak reaches the hotel lobby, he notices a stack of daily papers sitting on a side table. *Republic City Times: Special Edition - The Avatar Speaks!* He eyes it as he adds another night to his room rental. He needs rest, and food, and water, but his need to see that paper is drowning out everything else.

"May I take a paper?" he asks, holding out of a few yuans.

"By all means." The clerk hands him a copy. He folds it under his arm and returns to his room. Once there, he sits and sets down the paper, perfectly square with the edge of the desk.

His fingers hover over the page, but he doesn't open it. All he can think about is the question he heard on the radio, about her necklace. How will he react if she's wearing an engagement necklace? It's more of a Northern tradition than a Southern, so it's unlikely, but still possible. Will he be happy that she has moved on, or jealous?

His hands tremble as he opens to the first page. Ignoring the recap, he locks on to the photo. Korra is stunning. Her expression is confident, and her hairstyle and makeup highlight her natural beauty. His head is spinning so wildly that it takes a moment to remember what he's looking for.

Around her neck, hanging on a leather thread, is the pendant he sent her.

He gives a soft laugh. *She's wearing it. It meant enough to her that she's wearing it.* It's ridiculous, how overjoyed he is by the sight of a little good luck charm. In spite of his fatigue, he is suddenly filled with nervous energy; he wants to run, or punch the air, or dance. His eyes are damp, and his heart is racing.

"Get a hold of yourself. You're a grown man," he mutters to himself, but he can't seem to rein in his grin.

Slowly, however, guilt begins to eat away at his joy. His idea to send this pendant is what tipped off Hassun about his feelings for her. Not only is he prolonging their attraction by continually reaching out to her, he's also putting her at risk. That pendant around her neck is evidence of their affair, as are the letters. The scandal that could come of it would shatter her. He can't hurt her again, not when she's just barely recovering from the way his Equalist media shredded her in the years after the war.

What's more, he saw today that his old desire to dominate is still alive. He's a dangerous man, constantly a few short steps away from being one of the bending monsters he has always hated. It's the biggest reason that he has to stay away from Korra and Tarrlok. They deserve stability and integrity in their lives.

He traces the photograph one last time, his fingers pausing on the pendant. He can't keep trying to inject himself into her life; it's only going to hurt her.

*I have been selfish. That was my last contact with you, Korra. I promise.*
He folds the paper in half and deposits it in the garbage bin.
XXXVII: Hope

XXXVII

Hope

5 months later

Qing launches herself at Kwan with so much enthusiasm that he staggers backwards. Her grip is surprisingly tight, given that she had indicated she was still weak. He laughs and wraps his arms around her.

"You made it," he says.

"Yeah, but I'm a bit sore. The ship wasn't exactly a cruise liner." She pulls away to look at him, grinning, and claps a hand to his cheek. "It's so good to actually see you, not just hear your voice on the phone."

"You too."

A crew member drops off a suitcase beside her; she thanks him. Kwan takes a moment to examine her. Her muscles have atrophied a bit, and she's leaning on the cane pretty heavily, but she's alive and she's standing, and that's all that matters. It wasn't long ago that the doctors thought she'd be in a wheelchair for life.

Another crew member drops off a trunk beside the suitcase, and Kwan raises an eyebrow. "That's a lot of stuff for a week."

Qing clears her throat. "I'm not sure I'm going back."

His other brow raises to join the first. "Oh?"

"The police have pretty much neutralized us, so I'm out of a job for now. Some of the other officers were suggesting I try to get involved with the Avatar's inquest, fight for non-bender rights from the side of the law, but..." She trails off.

"You're getting tired of it all," he guesses.

"That and the fact that I'd probably punch her in the face if I ever saw her again."

He can't say he blames her. "How is your recovery coming along? Looks like you're doing a bit better than you were." He waves for the driver of the rented car, who hurries forward to help with the luggage.

"They say I'll be back to my old self in half a year or so. Not much more the doctors can do at this point - just have to try to keep pushing a little harder each day until I'm back to full strength."

"I'm glad to hear it," he says, the words not strong enough to convey his relief.

His employer was kind enough to provide Qing with a free room, and as they step inside, he sees it's better than his own: a double bed, an in-suite kitchenette, and a shiny new radio. "I should have taken this room and given you mine," he grumbles.
"Don't be a grump," says Qing. "You can dump all my luggage in the corner. I don't know about you, but I could use a drink."

"Drinks and food are on me tonight." He sets the chest in the corner and lays her suitcase on top of it. "Come on, I'll show you the bar."

He gives her a quick tour of the bar and restaurant - more of a verbal tour than an actual tour, since she isn't very mobile yet. They settle into a corner table, and the server brings a roasted turtleduck and a bottle of wine. Kwan talks about his job doing maintenance and odd jobs around the hotel, and Qing listens with interest, but he can tell she has something else on her mind. He sighs; they can't dance around the subject forever.

"You want to know what happened with Amon and the Avatar," he guesses.

"Only if you're comfortable with it," she says.

He takes a sip of wine. "I don't really know the details, but something happened to corrupt the Avatar. My final showdown with Amon ended up with the two of us teaming up to take her down."

"Team up," repeats Qing, her face twisting with disgust. The expression convinces him to leave out the part where Amon got his bending back - the possibility that Amon might be out there right now, fully in possession of his bloodbending, would upset her, and she's been through enough already. Personally, he has already come to terms with it. Amon was once a monster, true, but that broken, wretched man he saw in the boat, the one who hoped for death, was no monster. He's no threat to anyone.

He continues, "We worked together to neutralize her, and he managed to fix her corruption," he says. "Then he asked me to run away with him. Turns out he was hoping I would kill him, but I'm no killer."

"So he's still alive?"

With a shrug, he says, "Maybe, but I don't think we'll ever hear from him again. I got the closure I needed, and that's all I care about."

She gives him a smile. "I'm glad to hear it."

He takes another long sip of his wine, but now her gaze is fixed over his shoulder. He follows it to a handsome man sitting at the bar. Though Kwan has seen him around town, he has never really taken the time to study the man in detail. His skin is a rich golden-brown, as is his hair, and his eyes are dark brown. His shirt is a bit too tight, showing broad, shapely shoulders and arms. The weathering on his face suggests he's in his mid-forties. No wonder Qing is staring.

Kwan grins and turns back to her. "Good-looking fellow. I've seen him in the bar a few times. Doesn't seem to be married - you should go chat with him."

She shakes her head. "This one's yours."

"Mine?"

"He was watching your ass when you walked in. Go chat."

Kwan feels his cheeks warm. "Look, I'm not really interested in hitting on random strangers at the bar, and you just got here, so I should spend time with you," he says, but his eyes drift back to the man. This is the first time in seven months that the sight of someone has made his heart beat a little
faster.

"My track record isn't great, anyway," murmurs Qing. "Knowing me, I'd set you up, and he'd turn out to be some domineering psychopath." She drains her glass.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," he says. "You're my good luck charm. I got twenty years out of that last match-up, so it can't have been all bad, right?" He catches himself staring. "Maybe I should prove to you that you bring me good luck."

She claps his shoulder. "Go on. I can be alone for a few minutes."

"I'll send you another drink," he says in thanks. Swallowing hard, he stands and marches toward the bar. He leans against it, subtly flexing his muscles. "Hey Yan," he says to the bartender. "Can you send another glass of red to my friend's table?"

"Sure thing, Kwan," says the bartender. "Another ale for you?"

"Please." Kwan turns to the handsome man at the end of the bar. "What about you? Can I get you a drink?"

The man's eyes snap up to meet his. "Oh, there's no need to do that," he says, visibly flustered.

"You sure? The winter ale is on tap today, and it's nice. Kind of spicy."

"Well, maybe just a glass," says the man. "Thank you."

Once he has the drinks in hand, Kwan approaches him. "Mind if I take a seat?"

"Not at all." The man gestures to the bar stool beside him.

Kwan sets the ale in front of him and watches as he takes a sip, waiting for his reaction.

"It's good."

"Yeah, we just got it in last week. Leaves a nice glow in your stomach. Good now that it's getting cold out." Kwan starts to panic as his sentence reaches its end. Now what should he say? He's been out of the game for twenty-seven years. There were several one-night stands after Amon, but they were all Equalists, and his prestigious position had been enough to attract them. He's completely out of touch of all the rules and games of dating.

I'm too old for this shit.

"Look," heblurts. "I'm trying to figure out the best line to use on you, but I'm old and rusty, and I'm sick of games. So I'm going to try honesty."

The man raises a brow, looking intrigued. "Okay."

"I've seen you around town a few times," says Kwan, "and you're a good-looking man. My friend over there says you were checking out my ass. If you liked what you saw, I'd like to take you out for dinner sometime."

The man gives a hearty chuckle. "You get right to the point. I did like what I saw, and if we're being honest, that's not the first time I've stared at your ass." He clears his throat. "And I may, at one point, have tipped over a beer just because you were on a working shift, and wearing a tank top, and I wanted to watch your arms flex as you mopped it up."
Kwan laughs, feeling his cheeks flush. "Then I guess it's a good thing I just bought you that beer, since I provoked you into wasting one."

Bowing his head, the man says, "I know your name, but you don't know mine: I'm Jae. Nice to formally meet you, Kwan."

"You as well." The name Kwan is common enough that he never bothered to use a new pseudonym. He doubts the Republic City police even have any interest in him anymore, anyway. They've got the information they wanted about the Equalists, and according to Qing, everyone thinks he's dead.

"So, dinner." Jae clasps his hands together and leans forward. "How's your Saturday?"

Kwan hesitates, and the man's face falls.

"Oh no. What's the problem?"

_Honesty_, thinks Kwan, and he says, "Second-guessing myself. I'm kind of damaged goods. Pretty badly damaged."

"I guarantee you, I've seen worse." Jae gives him a kind smile. "I'm a psychiatrist by day. I am patient, and I won't judge, no matter what's going on. But..." He looks nervous. "I kind of need patience in return. I got out of a bad relationship not too long ago, and I'm a bit skittish about dating again."

"Me too," says Kwan with relief. The tension drains from his body.

"I'd say I'm just looking to have a little fun," says Jae, "but the truth is I tend to fall hard and fast. I'm a heart-on-my-sleeve kind of guy, and I usually suffer for it." He looks away, shifting in his seat. "There we go, my total honesty. I'm a bit of a mess. You sure you want that dinner?"

Kwan considers. He's in the same boat himself, and this man seems trustworthy and open. More than that, he feels a spark between them, something he hasn't felt since the early days with Amon. Maybe this is what he needs: someone who knows what he's going through. Someone who will be patient with him, and who will require patience in return.

"Let's give it a try," he says. "Just one date, and we'll see how it goes."

"Okay," says Jae, his cheeks darken. "Thank you."

"I've got to get back to my table, but I'll see you Saturday. Meet here, say nine-ish?"

The man beams, his cheeks dimpling. "Sounds good. Thanks, Kwan."

Kwan hesitates. The honesty thing seems to be working well for them so far, and keeping secrets is what made things go so wrong with Amon. This time, he wants to create a solid foundation of honesty.

He stands. "You know the whole 'Kwan' thing? Forget it. My real name is Lee."

"Lee." Jae looks confused. "I bet there's a whole story about why you use a pseudonym, isn't there?"

"We'll talk about it next time." Kwan smiles at him. "See you Saturday."

"Wouldn't miss it."
He can't keep the smile off his face as he marches triumphantly back to the table.

"Lee?" says Qing. "I always thought Kwan was your real name."

Kwan settles into his seat. "I was named after my asshole father. Ditched his name when I left home. But I've been thinking: every asshole I ever met got me here today. My father, Amon, every gang member, everything. Trying to hide from it all only ever made me miserable." He grins. "From here on out, it's all honesty, all the time. I'm going to be myself. And you know what? I feel free."

Her eyes well with tears. "Little Kwan is all grown up."

"Don't be pedantic," he says gruffly, but he can tell she's teasing him to cover up her pride. He's pretty proud of himself, too - and of her, for working hard and defying medical expectations. Their futures are bright.

He holds up his glass. "We're going to be okay, Midori."

At her real name, she smiles and holds up her glass to mirror him. "To new beginnings, Lee."

For the first time in years, he feels genuine optimism.

"So?" asks Lian, dragging out the word, as she walks two milkshakes back to the table.

"So?" repeats Korra, stalling.

Her friend sets the chocolate milkshake in front of herself, and then slides the vanilla across the table. "What did you think about Tien?"

With a shrug, Korra digs into her milkshake with a spoon. "He was nice enough. We had a fun time."

"But," prods Lian.

"But, I don't know. I'm just not interested in dating right now." She doesn't realize she's playing with her pendant until she notices Lian staring at it. Quickly, she drops her hand, but it's too late.

"All right, time to come clean." The younger girl leans forward, her dark eyelids drooping. "Is it Tarrlok?"

"What?"

"The man you've been moping over."

Korra stares at her friend for a moment, then starts laughing. "Tarrlok?"

"You two spend an awful lot of time together."

"Tarrlok?"

"Well, someone is on your mind, and someone gave you that necklace. Every time you go on a date, it's always the same thing: 'he was great, but...' as you idly toy with it. You're clearly madly in love with the mysterious necklace-giver." The girl studies her, tapping her chin with mock seriousness.
"Maybe it was a drunken one-night stand, and I don't remember his name," says Korra, and Lian laughs.

"I don't believe that for a second."

They fall into a comfortable silence as they begin to drink their milkshakes. Korra closes her eyes, enjoying both the creamy chill on her tongue, and the reprieve from Lian's questions.

It's not that she doesn't want to date. She likes the freedom of being single, but she misses small things - having someone to cuddle with while she's reading, for one, or having someone to snuggle with while she sleeps. And sex. She misses sex.

Before any of that can happen, she needs to form a connection with someone. She has gotten pretty good at not thinking about Noatak, but no one else attracts her interest. She doesn't want to look back anymore, but she's not ready to move on yet, so she's floating in limbo.

Her eyelids part to reveal Lian staring dismally into her milkshake. The shift in tone is so unexpected that Korra blinks a few times, trying to confirm what she's seeing.

"You okay?"

"I don't want to offend you," says the girl, "but the man you're still in love with - it's not Mako, is it?"

It's the first time he has come up as a potential issue during their entire course of their friendship, and Korra wonders why he's coming up now. "Of course it's not Mako. Is everything okay?"

"Things aren't going so well." Lian stirs the whipped cream into her milkshake. "I feel like we're days away from a breakup."

"Oh, Lian. I'm sorry. Are you okay? Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not sure there's much to talk about. It's not like we're fighting or anything. Things are just getting...detached, I guess." The girl looks as if she's about to cry. "Once the initial rush died down, we're too different, you know? We're kind of at different places in our lives."

That could be you and Noatak, if your relationship had continued. You're moping over a man you never really knew outside of the rush of early love. The thought makes bile rise in Korra's throat, and she swallows it back. "I'm sorry. You guys seemed so good together."

Lian is still stirring her milkshake, even though it's already a uniform creamy texture. "If he and I break up, will you and I stay friends?"

"Of course," says Korra, and she means it. It's so nice to have a female friend again. Mako, Bolin and Tarrlok are great, but she needs balance.

"Good," says Lian absently, and her smile fades too quickly. Her stirring hand loses focus, and she stares absently at the centre of the table. She looks so lost that Korra feels the need to demonstrate that their friendship, at least, is solid.

Leaning forward, she says, "Lian, I can trust you, right?"

One eyebrow perks up. "Definitely."

Korra's voice drops to a whisper, and she looks around them, making sure no one else is within
earshot. "This is a huge secret, and if it gets out, it could ruin several lives."

Now the girl looks excited. "I won't tell a soul. Not even Mako, I swear."

"The man I've been moping over is Amon."

Lian's mouth drops, and with it, Korra's stomach plunges. Please don't get too upset. Hoping to push past the initial shock, she presses on:

"We were on a mission together, just before you and I met, and we kind of bonded, I guess. It turns out we had a lot in common, more than either of us guessed, and one thing led to another..." She trails off. The girl is still staring. "Please say something."

"Sorry," says Lian. "I just...that's unexpected."

"You're telling me."

"Did he give you the necklace?"

"Yeah," says Korra.

"Before he died, I guess, right?"

Hesitating, Korra toys with the pendant, and Lian's eyes widen.

"He isn't dead?" she whispers.

Korra clears her throat. "Aside from him and me, there are only two other people in the world who know, and now you're the third," she says quietly. "I am counting on you to keep this a secret."

"I promise, it'll stay between us."

The girl shakes her head, still looking stunned. "Amon. That's amazing. Why aren't you with him right now? You clearly miss him a lot."

"It's complicated. He feels like his fake death was the best way to protect me, and Tarrlok."

Korra sighs. "He wrote a couple of times, and sent me this pendant, but I haven't heard from him since the summer."

"You should find him. Meet in secret." Lian's eyes light up. "Think of how romantic that would be: Amon and the Avatar, meeting in secret to indulge in their forbidden romance." She gives a dreamy sigh, and Korra squints at her, confused by the reaction. She expected to be judged, not admired.

"You're taking this a lot better than I thought you would."

"Well..." The girl shrugs and fiddles with her straw. "If we're revealing dangerous secrets, I was an Equalist."

There's a long pause.

"Oh," says Korra, not sure how to respond. Once upon a time, the news would have horrified her, but now that she's in love with the leader of the Equalists, she can't really judge any of his former followers.

"I was just a kid." Lian keeps her voice at a whisper, but the cadence is harsh and defensive. "I barely even learned any chi-blocking before the whole thing ended. My parents were members, and they raised me according to their views. Took me awhile to see the error of their thinking. I don't actually believe benders need to have their bending taken, you know?" A bit bitterly, she adds,
"Mako doesn't see it that way, though. He's acting like I personally betrayed him, even though it happened years before we met."

"Mako holds a grudge for a long time if someone or something threatens someone he loves," says Korra quietly. "We had many unpleasant dealings with the Equalists during the war. Bolin almost lost his bending, and my whole showdown with Amon..." She trails off, wondering if she should tell Lian how her relationship with Mako ended and the relationship with Noatak began. While Mako has more than enough cause to hate the Equalists already, that whole situation is probably tainting his opinion even more. She settles on saying, "Besides, Mako's not too happy that I developed feelings for Amon, though he doesn't know the extent of it."

"Were you together long?" asks Lian. "You and Amon."

"A little over a week, I guess. It's hard to know how to count it."

"That short, and you're still so smitten? It must have been unforgettable - fiery and passionate."

Korra feels her cheeks warm. "Yeah, I guess it was."

"It's all so romantic." The girl slowly shakes her head, her face glowing. "By being with you, he betrayed everything he ever preached. You must have made quite the impression on him."

"And the same in reverse." Korra takes a long sip of her milkshake. His impression on her refuses to fade. There are nights when she can't sleep, when her mind is caught in the haze between sleep and wakefulness, and her unconscious mind paints vivid images of her thoughts on her eyelids. On those nights, she sees him with perfect clarity, and he feels so real and so close that her heart aches.

For the most part, she has gotten better at putting him out of her mind. The inquest and her bending training are keeping her busy. She is close to re-mastering waterbending, both psychic and traditional, and she can heal again. Her earthbending and firebending seem to be strictly traditional, and they're still weak, but getting stronger. Oddly enough, it's airbending that is getting closest to mastery of her non-native elements, probably due to Tenzin and Jinora patiently re-training her. Tenzin's theory is that she spent so much time training it the first time around that it's easier to relearn the second time.

So, overall, her life is good. She's making progress, her reputation is constantly increasing, and most importantly, she's happy. Her social life has rebounded, and while she still gets the odd panic attack or has an occasional bad day, her lifestyle is doing a good job of combatting her mood issues.

She has proven to herself that she can be perfectly happy without him, but she can't stop wondering if she could be happier with him.

Lian clears her throat. "You're daydreaming."

"A bit." Korra's eyes dart around the cafe, making sure they're still safe from potential eavesdroppers.

Her friend leans forward. "I have to know, just between us. What's he like? I mean, I know the figurehead, inside out, but what's he like as a person? I'm guessing he's pretty intense."

"That's a good word for it." Korra takes a biscuit from the stack at the centre of the table and bites into it, thinking as she chews. "He's more driven by his senses than you would expect. He likes cigars, fine wine, good food. There's a level of polish and sophistication to him that I didn't expect."

She takes another bite, considering his battles with alcohol, and the way he fell back into Kwan's arms when the mission first began. "But he also has weaknesses - he seems to latch on to things that are familiar and... manageable. Like me, I guess."

"You're still smitten."

"I'm not so sure about that," Korra replies, shaking her head. "I'm just not sure what I want now."

"But there's something about him," Lian presses on. "Something that you can't quite shake."

Korra shakes her head. "I don't know."

"Could be your heart," Lian suggests.

"I don't know."

"Maybe you're just not ready," Lian concludes.

Korra nods. "Maybe."
that give him pleasure and fixate on them. For the most part, he is detached and strategic, but when his weaknesses are involved, he seems more impulsive."

"You're one of his weaknesses, I take it?"

"I suppose I am." She wonders if he's still fixated on her, so many months later; she hasn't heard from him since she received the pendant. Maybe Kwan put his foot down, gave him an ultimatum: *if we're going to be together again, you have to forget the Avatar.* Her heart sinks.

"Is he handsome without the mask?" asks Lian. "I only ever saw the fake scars."

"Yeah, he's pretty damned beautiful. His face is shaped a lot like his old mask, just less severe. He looks a good ten years younger than his actual age, and he has these pale blue eyes with dark rings around the irises. They seem to look through you, not at you."

Thinking she's rambling, she pauses, but Lian still looks interested, so she decides to keep going. Her eyes close as she focuses on her memories. "He's got sideburns, and his hair is greying at the temples; he keeps it slicked back, but it looks best when it's a bit messy. Good physique - broad shoulders and hips, a bit barrel-chested. You can tell he's strong and fit just by looking at him. There's some scarring on his back and the back of his head from the explosion, but it kind of suits him."

"Is he good in bed?"

Korra's eyes fly open. "Lian!" Her cheeks burn.

"Oh, come on. Just between us." Lian's eyes sparkle. "I mean, he's older, so he's gotta be experienced, right?"

"He definitely knows what he's doing; he's very considerate, and..." She wonders if she's about to offer too much information, then decides she wants to revel in the details. Katara and Tarrlok are the only other people who know about her affair, and she can't talk with either of them about her sex life. "He just genuinely seems to revel in the human body. Being with him feels like he's in awe of you, like he's celebrating you." It's been awhile since she let herself think of sex with him. She remembers the awkwardness of their first encounter, then the slow, lengthy exploration of their second. Her heart races as she remembers the time she teased him in the shower, when he became frantic, almost feral... Her body begins to glow, but that just makes her feel even less in control.

"I feel so weak," she murmurs. "I'm supposed to be strong and independent, and I can't stop thinking about him."

"You are independent."

"No, I'm not. I'm fucking pathetic and mopey." Korra prods her milkshake with her straw; it has melted into a soupy mess, and she wrinkles her nose.

"It's okay to be in love, Korra," insists Lian. "It's okay to miss someone, and pine after them. It doesn't make you any less independent unless it's impacting your life. Look at all you've accomplished in the time that you've been separated from him - it's not like you're sitting in a corner moping. You've got the non-bender rights thing, and relearning your bending, and all sorts of Avatar duties. And you're a good friend to many people. Yeah, maybe your romantic life is suffering a bit, but that doesn't mean you've lost your independence."

"I'm not good at being in love," blurs Korra. "When I was with Mako, things were great when I was happy, but when I was upset, I kept pushing him away. I didn't want to burden him with my
weakness. That's why Amon and I bonded - I felt comfortable showing him my worst side, because his worst side was as bad or worse, so I felt like he couldn't judge me. I made myself completely and utterly vulnerable to him in a way I never had with anyone else before. I gave him the power to hurt me. And he knew that, but he still abandoned me." She closes her eyes just in time to catch the tears that are welling in her eyes. \textit{Come on, reabsorb. You've shed enough tears over this already.}

"You said he left to protect you and Tarrlok."

"He did, and I know that, but I still feel hurt and abandoned, because my emotions are stupid and I can't reason with them. I feel like his actions were selfish, and he has deluded himself into thinking they were for our own good. But maybe I'm just being selfish for feeling that way, I don't know. I've been overthinking it all so much that I've lost perspective."

"Have you told him how you feel?"

"How am I supposed to do that?" Korra laughs bitterly. "He can reach out to me any time he wants, but I have no way of reaching him."

"You should go find him," says Lian quietly. "Hunt him down. Tell him how you're feeling. Maybe it'll be good just to get it all out, you know? Maybe he can convince you that he didn't abandon you. Even if nothing romantic comes of it, you can get closure."

The suggestion spurs Korra to open her eyes, even though the motion allows her tears to spill onto her cheeks. "I don't know where to look."

Lian fishes through her purse and pulls out a paper tissue.

"Sorry," mutters Korra, dabbing her tears. "See what I mean? I shouldn't be this invested after so long."

"It's okay to be in love," says Lian quietly. "It's okay to be heartbroken. Those don't make you any weaker of a person. You're strong, Korra."

Korra sniffs. "Thanks. But can we talk about something else?"

"Sure." With a smile, her friend begins to talk about the latest pro-bending match, and Korra hangs on to every word.

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Noatak is still on Korra's mind when she returns to the Island. Crying seems to have successfully vented her misery, at least temporarily, but now she can't stop thinking about the more intimate memories she accidentally dredged up. It's been a long time since she let herself recall them, and her knees feel weak. It's the first time in a long time that her libido has been this active. She may have conflicted feelings about the relationship itself, but there's no denying that the sex was phenomenal.

Maybe a little stress release will help her mood. She has a half hour of free time before dinner, so she slips into her bedroom, closes the door, and then hurries to her desk. A stack of files sits neatly on the corner of it; she has been doing research on the ex-Equalist leaders for her project. She pulls out Noatak's file and opens it.

There are dozens of photos inside, most of them taken stealthily at Equalist rallies, but there are two in particular she's looking for: the two mugshots from the day he was arrested. She particularly likes the front-facing one. He's staring at the camera lens with intensity, almost hatred. Maybe it's a
bit screwed up that the expression turns her on so much, but it's very similar to the expression he makes when he's getting close to orgasm.

Guilt floods her body: this is police property, and it's so wrong to use it this way. Her body is speaking louder than her mind, however, so she shoves the guilt aside. She pulls off her pants and crawls under the covers, propping the photo on top of the blanket. Her hands slide between her legs.

Oh spirits, that expression. She pictures him looming overtop of her, the eyebrows just a bit more pinched, the eyes a bit less focussed, sweat beading on his temples. She hears him hold his breath, then gasp, over and over; she feels his muscles contract until they shake as he begins to lose control. His eyes close and his head tilts back, showcasing the thick cords of his neck muscles. He pants her name, over and over, his body so rigid that it hurts.

A wail escapes her, and she quickly rolls over, trapping it against the pillow. Her whole body shudders, and then she's left gasping for air, her hands and feet tingling.

As the afterglow fades, it leaves loneliness in its wake. All the misery she has been carefully keeping at bay comes crashing down on her again. She glares at the photo.

"I hate you," she mutters. For good measure, she adds, "Asshole."

Now his expression just looks angry. She hurriedly stashes it back in the folder and buries it beneath the others.

The continual rollercoaster of the day's emotions are wearing on her, and she's in a foul mood when she arrives at the dinner table. The room is empty, save for Tarrlok; he nods to greet her.

"You okay?" he asks.

"None of your business." She flops to a seat on the cushion next to him.

He arches a brow, and she sighs.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap, I'm just... Want to grab some drinks tonight?"

He looks surprised. "What about your friends?"

"I had milkshakes with Lian already, and I need something stronger." She flops dramatically forward, laying her chin on her arms atop the table. "The boys are busy tonight, Naga isn't allowed in the bar, and I have no other friends."

"I'm your last choice?"

"Well, yeah."

He grimaces. "I'll pass."

"Fine. I'll drink alone."

"Enjoy," he says dryly.

Her eyes, travelling across the table, lock on to a piece of paper on his plate. It isn't unusual for him to prepare lengthy statements to read - he can handle complete sentences on his own now, sometimes a few in a row, but longer thoughts and conversations are still difficult, particularly when he gets upset. What's unusual about this one is the length of it; it's several pages long. She
leans over and snatches it off the plate.

"Hey," says Tarrlok, and he reaches out for it, but she leans out of his way, reading. Her eyebrows raise.

"You're going to your hometown?"

"To visit my mother's grave," he says quietly. "Anniversary."

She flips the pages, skimming. The proposal itself is only a paragraph long; the rest of the pages are filled with Tenzin's potential responses, and Tarrlok's counterpoints to those responses. "This is adorable. You've actually scripted out little arguments. What will you do if Tenzin messes up his lines?"

"Give me that," he growls, lunging for it, and this time she lets him take it.

"Why do you have to ask permission, anyway?" she asks. "It's not like you're under house arrest."

He shuffles the pages and taps them against the table to align them. "Tenzin is my legal ward."

"Your legal ward? But you're a grown man."

"Brain damage," he mutters, clearly unimpressed with the label.

"You've got to be kidding me," she says. "You have problems talking - it's not like you can't take care of yourself."

Tarrlok shrugs it off, but he still looks displeased.

After a pause, she says quietly, "Do you think Noatak will show up at your mother's grave, too?"

She sees his jaw muscles tense. "No. He never did before."

"But things were different then. Now-"

"Good evening, Korra and Tarrlok," says Tenzin from the doorway, and his family begins to filter into the room behind him.

"A word before dinner, Tenzin?" asks Tarrlok, and the two step into the hall.

Ikki, Meelo and Rohan are all trying to get Korra's attention, but she cranes her neck to watch Tenzin and Tarrlok. She can't hear them from this distance. They appear to talk for a moment, then Tenzin raises his hand as if to halt the conversation, and Tarrlok looks upset.

"Excuse me," says Korra to the family as she rises from her seat. As she approaches the doorway, both men stop talking and stare at her.

"You can't keep him under house arrest," she blurts without even assessing the situation.

"Korra," says Tenzin, "this is not up for discussion."

She moves to stand beside Tarrlok. "He's a grown man, and he's perfectly capable of reason and self-care, and he can communicate almost normally-"

"Tarrlok's autonomy isn't the issue." Tenzin sighs. "There are political complications."
"Like what?" she challenges.

"I'm curious as well," says Tarrlok icily.

Tenzin's head is bowed; he won't look either of them in the eye. "There were some high-ranking officials who disagree with Chief Beifong's decision to release Tarrlok. Some believe he's too dangerous to be unsupervised. To help alleviate their anxiety, I agreed to take him in: Air Temple Island is the most isolated place in the City, and also the safest. If I let him go to another continent alone so soon, before everyone has agreed that he's properly reintegrated with society, the whole fuss is going to start up again."

"Then I'll go with him," says Korra.

Both men turn to her with matching looks of surprise, and she juts her jaw.

"Republic City officials trust me, don't they?" she says.

Tenzin gives another sigh. "You aren't yet at full power-"

"They don't know that. To them, I'm a fully-realized Avatar. The perfect babysitter." Her stomach is dancing. Please say yes. Please say yes...

 stroking his beard, Tenzin says, "That might work. But how do you feel about Korra coming along, Tarrlok?"

She punches Tarrlok's arm. "Come on, it'll be fun. We'll make a little vacation of it, take in the winter solstice festival; throw some snowballs, drink some ice wine. It'll be good to get away from the pressure of the City for a while."

The corner of his lips lifts in what looks to be a grateful smile, and he gives her a small nod.

"I'll make some phone calls after dinner," says Tenzin.

"Thank you, Tenzin," says Tarrlok. The airbender smiles, and steps back into the dining room.

As she's about to follow him, Tarrlok says quietly, "Korra."

She stops and turns. "What?"

"He won't be there. Noatak."

Her face flushes. "That's not the only reason I'm going."

"Don't get your hopes up," he says. "Don't get hurt."

She glances inside the dining room to make sure they won't be overheard, then steps closer to Tarrlok. "He cared about you and your mother more than you might think. He visited her several times before she passed away. I bet you wondered why she left a bowl and a card addressed to him, didn't you?"

He stares at her, mouth cracked open, and tears rim his eyes. He clears his throat and lifts his chin. "Could have visited me."

"No, he couldn't. You know that. Besides, did you ever stop to consider why he found you so quickly, that time he took your bending? I bet if you ask him, he'll tell you that he constantly kept tabs on you. Wouldn't surprise me if he intentionally passed you on the street or went to a
restaurant where he knew you'd be, watching you from behind some disguise."

Tarrlok looks so sad that she grips his shoulder.

"I don't know how well you remember your jail time," she says, "but the day I came to collect Noatak for our mission, he was singing a lullaby to you, and he kissed your forehead. That wasn't an isolated event." She holds out her pendant. "I know you think of that hardened, cynical fourteen-year-old when you think of him, or of the cold revolutionary that was Amon, but he's more complicated than that. Don't underestimate how sentimental he can be."

Tarrlok's face twists, and he pushes past her, striding into the dining room.

Korra leans against the doorframe. She understood that expression perfectly: like her, Tarrlok has mixed feelings about the possibility of seeing Noatak again.

Her stomach flips. It was only hours ago that she never thought she would be able to find him, but now she's certain he's going to visit his mother's grave. She intends to be there when he shows up. If she has to, she'll camp there all day.

In spite of Tarrlok's warning, her hopes are already sky-high.
"There it is," says Tarrlok, leaning on the ship's railing.

Korra studies the town along the shore. It's definitely smaller than Republic City, but she's surprised to see modern highrises, some around ten stories tall. "The way you described it, I always thought you were from a tiny little village in the middle of nowhere."

"I was," he says. "Progress."

The town looks quaint in the falling snow, its streetlights yellow and glowing. On the outskirts, she sees the more traditional dome-shaped huts that she expected. They look rundown and uninhabited, but nowhere near as menacing as the homes she pictured as the backdrop of Yakone's abuse.

"Which one of those huts are we staying in?" she asks.

Tarrlok gives her a confused look. "In a hotel."

"Oh. I just assumed we would be staying in your family's old home."

He looks so horrified by the suggestion that she asks, "What?"

"My mother died inside the home," he says, as if that should explain everything.

"Is this another of those weird Northern things I don't understand?" She was raised exclusively on a diet of Southern customs and traditions.

"Last breath inside the house," says Tarrlok. "Taints the home."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

Korra balks. "So, what, the dying should have the decency to go outside and die in the cold?" The North has always been a bit less compassionate, a bit more traditional than the South, but this seems excessive to her.

"Don't judge," he says, lifting his chin to look down his nose at her. "You are a guest."

"Sorry. It's just, you could have told me this sooner. It's the solstice festival. Did you phone ahead and reserve a room?"

"There will be room," he says confidently.

"I hope you're right." Given how busy the ship is, she's certain she'll be delivering a resounding I told you so soon enough.

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Noatak pushes his eyeglasses further up his nose as he waits patiently for his client to sign the
"There we are," says Akna, sliding it across the table. As Noatak checks it over, his brows raise.

"You overpaid."

"Consider it a bonus. I can't believe how much money you saved me, and your discretion is greatly appreciated." She smiles. "I'll be recommending you to everyone I know."

"Thank you." He folds the cheque and pockets it. The sum will cover his final payment on the house - he didn't expect to have it paid off so soon. For a small town, there are a lot of businesses in need of his services.

He stands. "I'll be closed for the solstice celebrations, but open again next week. Feel free to leave any work in my drop box in the meantime, and I can get started immediately after the holiday."

"Thank you, Saomik." She stands, too, and they exchange bows.

The wind is howling when he steps outside, and his glasses fog up. He would take them off, but they, like his beard, are his new mask. After what happened with Hassun, he's paranoid beyond reason about being recognized.

Thankfully, his job allows him to avoid most contact with the public. He only sees his clients twice: during the initial consultation, and again when he's collecting payment. The rest of the work is done at home. Accounting and business strategy aren't exactly his lifelong dream, but they are steady work for a non-bender, and there was a market for it that needed to be filled.

Still, even when he fights to maintain his privacy, there are routine interactions with the public he didn't expect: buying groceries, bumping into people on the street, riding in taxis. As afraid as he is of the idea, he is starting to become a part of the community.

Though, if anonymity was his true desire, he should have chosen another community as his new home. Deep down, it seems, all he really wanted was to come back home.

He shoves his gloved hands into his pockets and pushes against the wind as he walks down the main street, the snow crunching under his boots. He's still not fully re-acclimatized to the cold, and now that they're entering the coldest stretch of the year, he's wondering why he didn't settle in a nice little hut in the Fire Nation instead.

In the town square, he sees volunteers struggling against the wind to set up lanterns and banners for the festival. They're laughing, somehow celebrating even though they should be cold and miserable. He shakes his head. I remember a time when mundane things excited me, too.

Several taxis are driving down the street, pulling up along the hotels. He heard a ship's whistle on his way out to his appointment with Akna, and it looks as if tourists are visiting for the festival. It surprises him, the number of people who come and go. His little hometown has really grown up since he was a child. What was once his tiny village is now a rundown suburb of the main town. All of the families from his day - even the ones his mother mentioned by name, in her later years - seem to have moved on. Maybe that's why he feels comfortable here: it's familiar, but changed. Like him.

He steps into the general store next to the hotel, knocking his boots against each other over the entrance grate to clear the treads of snow.

"'Afternoon, Saomik," says the owner. "Can I interest you in some ice wine? It's 10% off, in honour
of the festival."

The bottles are stacked neatly by the till. Noatak reaches for one and inspects the label. "High-quality."

"Only the best for my customers."

Though he has been dry for several months, the solstice is a special occasion, so Noatak picks up a bottle. He grabs a bottle of brandy, as well. When he was a child, his mother would give him warm brandy when he was sick, and given the date tomorrow, he feels the right to bask in nostalgia.

While he's indulging, he also purchases a container of fresh pemmican, a block of imported chocolate, a loaf of frybread and a few strips of high-quality igunaq. He's getting bored with frozen fish and seaweed noodles, and what he's really craving is any range of foods from Republic City's culinary diversity, but the celebratory foods of his childhood will make for a nice treat. He pulls out his wallet and sets it on the counter. "I'll take your finest cigar as well." After seeing the brand, he says, "Make it two." If he's going to indulge, he might as well go all-out.

The last bit of sunlight has faded when he leaves the store. His village isn't quite at the north pole, so he does see little glimpses of daylight even on the darkest days, a short dusk in the middle of the afternoon. He has nostalgia for the long winter nights, but it all involves huddling with family and friends. It isn't the same when he's alone. That's what it boils down to: he's lonely, and his loneliness is all self-imposed.

His house is set one street back from the main road, built in a similar style to houses in Republic City. He originally thought he might want a dome-style hut similar to the one he grew up in, but he has grown accustomed to having different rooms for different purposes. The roof is steep to prevent the buildup of snow, so the top floor functions as a storage area. The bottom floor is his kitchen, dining room and living room. The middle floor currently houses three bedrooms. He's planning to turn one into an office for his work, and the other into a hobby and training room, but hasn't gotten around to it yet, so his belongings are still boxed up. It's a small house, but comfortable, and the furniture that came with it is worn and cozy.

He's just putting his purchases in the icebox when he realizes he forgot his wallet at the store. He gives a long, low sigh. All he wants to do is sit down, put his feet up, and enjoy his private feast. Instead, he pulls on his gloves and steps into the cold.

As he rounds the corner to the main street, however, his mood begins to improve. The streetlights cast a soft orange glow, and snow is falling, thick and fluffy. The scene is idyllic. Down the road, the young adults who were preparing for the solstice have broken into a snowball fight spanning both sides of the street. A smile stretches across his face.

Carefully skirting the fight, he sticks to the sidewalk. A few stray snowballs fly in his direction. He dodges them with ease, and now he longs to run into the thick of the fight and practice his manoeuvres. He trains religiously every morning, but without any opponents, he can't tell if his skills are improving or deteriorating. More than that, he knows his skills would earn him the admiration of the onlookers, and he's starving to be the centre of attention. But just because something is an innate need doesn't mean he has to indulge in it. Attracting attention will feed his ego, and he's at his most dangerous and impulsive when his ego is out of control. His life must be a life of restraint and humility.

Ducking his head against a sudden gust of wind, he ignores temptation and presses on.

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"Okay," says Korra. "You wait here with the suitcases, and I'll..." She trails off as she notices that Tarrlok is staring fixedly down the street. Her hear pounds in her chest as she follows his gaze, but instead of leading to Noatak, it leads to a snowball fight. "Tarrlok?"

His gaze snaps to her, and he gives his head a little shake, as if clearing his thoughts. "Though I saw him. Eyes playing tricks. What were you saying?"

"You wait out here with the suitcases, and I'll check if they have a room."

"Wait here? Outside?" His eyes narrow. "Punishing me?"

"Of course not. It just makes sense to avoid hauling these things into the hotel if they don't even have any rooms." She would offer to watch them while he went in, but she doesn't want to put pressure on him in case his speech gives him difficulties.

He tugs his scarf over his mouth and nose, his eyes wandering back to the street.

"I won't be long," she promises as she walks through the hotel entrance.

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When Noatak steps into the store, the owner smiles and holds out a wallet. Sheepishly, he accepts it. "Thanks."

"Anytime, Saomik. Have a good one."

With a nod, Noatak steps back onto the street, quickly checks the wallet's contents to make sure it's intact, then shoves it into his pocket.

He's almost across the street when he hears running footsteps behind him.

He spins in time to see a man barrelling at him, wearing a scarf over his face and a hood. As the distance closes, the man's fist snaps out.

Instinctively, Noatak weaves out the of the way. The man throws two more punches and a kick; the punches are easy to dodge, but the kick clips Noatak's shoulder. His mind ticks through the people who could possibly want to attack him. Hassun? Kwan? Or did I accidentally invoke the wrath of one of my clients?

His attacker yells and drives his fist at Noatak's face. Noatak steps aside, catches the extended wrists, and tugs, using the man's own momentum to send him staggering forward. The man falls to his hands and knees, back heaving.

Noatak looms behind him. "What do you want?"

The man's head turns to look at him. The scarf has fallen away, revealing his face, and Noatak's knees weaken.

"Impossible." He takes a step forward, thinking he must be seeing things, but there's no mistaking that face, even though it's missing the placidity he studied so many times in jail, the smug confidence he used to study in newspapers and safely crowded rooms. Tears run down the glaring face, its lips twisted.

"Tarrlok," whispers Noatak, falling to his knees beside him. "Brother, it's really you. You found me."
"You left me again," says Tarrlok, his voice cracking.

"You can speak. Oh spirits, you can speak." Noatak's eyes flood with tears. He reaches out a shaking hand to grab his brother's coat, then forcefully pulls him in for a hug.

"You left me," says Tarrlok again, but he buries his face in his brother's neck. Noatak holds him close, his fingers clawing into the thick jacket.

"I missed you so much," he says gruffly, rocking him. "I knew you'd make more progress if I wasn't around, I knew it, but I missed you every single day. Oh spirits, I can't believe you're here. I can't believe you're talking."

Tarrlok sobs loudly, and even though Noatak knows they're making a scene, that all his months of caution are going to unravel if he isn't careful, he doesn't care. All that matters now is his brother.

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"Can't you just cram us into a broom closet or something?" asks Korra, panicking. "We can't sleep outside in this weather."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I can't do that." The desk attendant smiles sympathetically. "The town sees a great boom in tourism for the winter solstice festival. Our sister hotel down the street is fully booked as well. You should ask around at the bar. It's a kindly town. I'm sure someone will be able to offer you and your husband some lodging."

"He's not my- Oh, never mind. Thanks anyway." Korra sighs and storms away from the desk. At this rate, we're going to be breaking Tarrlok's superstitions tonight and sleeping in that tarnished death hut.

Muttering to herself, she pushes open the door.

She's shocked to see the suitcases sitting unattended on the front steps of the hotel. She runs to the sidewalk, looking frantically up and down the street. The snow is falling so hard that it's hard to see, at first, but then she sees Tarrlok's coat. He's huddled in the centre of the street.

"Shit!" If he got mugged or hurt, she'll never forgive herself for leaving him alone. She pushes closer through the falling snow.

She freezes. Tarrlok isn't alone.

The two men are half-kneeling, half sitting, their arms wrapped around each other. Tarrlok's face is buried in the other man's neck, and the man appears to be kissing the top of Tarrlok's head.

Her throat tightens as she takes a step closer. The man's eyes are closed, and his glasses and neatly-trimmed beard mask his face, but she still recognizes him. How could she not? This is the man she has dreamed about for eight months, both awake and in sleep.

The array of emotions she feels is too broad to define, and her head spins. The first emotion to emerge from the chaos is panic.

Korra turns and runs, then steps into the first alleyway. She falls against a wall, gripping her pendant. Sobs erupt from her body so violently that she shakes and gags.

I shouldn't have come.
Tarrlok is the first to break the embrace; he pulls away, wiping his face. "Embarrassing."

"It's fine." Noatak tucks a stray hair back into place under his brother's hood. "I'm just glad to see you." He stands and holds out a hand to help his brother to his feet. The two of them brush snow from their clothes and straighten their jackets.

"Why are you here?" asks Tarrlok.

Noatak can't help staring with a dumb smile on his face. It's so surreal to hear his brother speak again. The speech is clipped, the tone more monotone than it once was, but he's actually aware and communicating. It's more than Noatak ever hoped for. His throat tightens, and he clears it. "It's a long story, but I live here now. I assume you're here for our mother's anniversary? I have an extra room, if you would allow me to host you."

There's a pause, and then Tarrlok glances at the hotel. "Have to find Korra."

The ground drops out from under Noatak, and he has to take a step back to keep his balance.

"Korra," he repeats, certain he heard wrong.

"Yes." Tarrlok begins walking toward the hotel, and Noatak follows.

Words don't make sense. He feels as if his brain is suddenly thick and syrupy.

"Avatar Korra?" he asks. "She's with you?"

Tarrlok turns to raise a brow at him. "Yes." He pushes open the door to the hotel, then frowns when he sees no patrons in the lobby. "She was here."

Noatak turns to stare at the street. One set of footprints catches his attention in the falling snow; they're boot prints, about her size. The steps, close together, suggest she slowly approached the brothers while they were embracing. They turn and move toward the alley, further apart; she was running.

He tenses. "She saw me and ran off."

"Ah." When Tarrlok looks at him again, the intensity in his eyes is surprising. "Go after her."

Noatak's feet refuse to move. How can he face her, after all he has done? He abandoned her, he tried to sleep with someone the night he left, he led her on with letters and a gift that could have caused a scandal, he almost killed a man with bloodbending...

"Tell me, Tarrlok," he says quietly, "when I see her again, what will her reaction be?"

"I don't know," says Tarrlok. "She doesn't know, either."

Noatak's jaw tightens, and he stares at the alleyway, still unable to find the strength to go after her.

His brother grips his shoulder. "Stop running away."

The words strike like a bell, reverberating through his body, echoing again and again in his ears. They're the last words he wanted to hear, because they speak to his true nature; they're words only a brother or lover could get away with saying.

"I'll be right back," he says, and he strides along the footprints.
When he rounds the corner into the alley, he finally, after so many months, has his first glimpse of Korra. She's leaning against a wall, her back to him. Her shoulders are shaking, and he can hear her sobs. His heart breaks, and he feels his own tears, still fresh from the reunion with Tarrlok, spill over. He spent many nights dreaming of their impossible, theoretical reunion, but none of them played out like this.

He circles around to face her. Her hand is balled around the end of a necklace, and she's staring at the ground, her hood obscuring her face.

"Korra," he says softly.

She doesn't look up, but her sobs stop.

His hand reaches out for hers and gently coaxes her gloved fingers open. When he sees the pendant, he lets out a sharp breath that's somewhere between delight and disbelief. He reaches out to pull her in for a hug, but she ducks out of the way and takes a step back, her face still hidden.

His heart breaks. "Korra, please."

"I don't know how to feel." Her voice shakes. "I've spent the last eight months hating you, and missing you, and loving you, and mourning you, and I don't know how to feel. I'm just so angry."

His first reaction is defensiveness. "I did what I had to do."

"What you had to do?" she snaps, and she finally lifts her head. Her face is blotchy and tear-stained, and her eyes are narrow and cold. "You can play the martyr all you like, but it's not going to undo everything bad you've done in your life. You can't deny what you are."

"I know what I am," he says quietly. "That's why I left."

Her face collapses, and she flops to a seat, leaning back against the wall. He hesitates, then sits beside her.

"Please know that it was never my intention to hurt you or Tarrlok with any of my actions," he says.

"Well, you did."

"And for that, I am truly, deeply sorry."

There's a long silence. He watches her, but she refuses to look at him.

"I've invited Tarrlok to stay with me," he says. "You are also welcome. I have spare bedrooms for each of you."

She sniffs. "Will Kwan be okay with that?"

The question confuses him so much that he leans back to try to see her face, hoping it will help him decipher her meaning. "Kwan?"

She squints a little, as if trying to piece things together, and he's certain his expression must look the same.

"You aren't with Kwan?" she says finally.

"You thought I was?"
"You still loved him, and then you ran off together, and then your letter talked about trying to move on. What was I supposed to think?"

His stomach drops. "I'm sorry." Already, the word is losing weight, and there's still so much more to apologize for, so much that she doesn't know yet. He wishes he could tear himself open and show her just how deeply his sorrow and regret run.

Korra's hands are bound so tightly into fists that her knuckles are white. He wants to run his fingers across them to soothe her, but he predicts the gesture would only make her more uncomfortable. Instead, he stands.

"I hope you'll consider staying with me. There's a lot to discuss."

"The hotels are all full," she mutters. "I don't really have a choice."

"I'll make sure both of you are as comfortable as you would have been at a hotel." His voice softens: "I missed you, Korra."

At the words, she looks up at him, and for the first time, he sees a flicker of longing on her face. It almost hurts more than her anger; the anger, at least, he knows he deserves.

"Take whatever time you need," he says. "I'll be waiting with Tarrlok." He walks back to the main street.

His brother is waiting for him by the suitcases, looking so much like a ghost amid the fog and falling snow that Noatak blinks to make sure he's still real.

"Is Korra okay?" asks Tarrlok.

"I don't know." Noatak's jaw clenches. "Why is it that even when I try to do the right thing, when I try to be a better person, I still end up hurting everyone? Am I just rotten to the core?"

"Don't stop trying," says Tarrlok quietly. "We can be more than what we were."

"You certainly can, Tarrlok, but I'm not so sure about me." Noatak picks up one of the suitcases.

The crunch of snowboots turns their heads. Korra approaches, her head still hanging low. Tarrlok walks briskly toward her, and the two have a soft, murmuring conversation. Noatak watches them, and he's surprised to feel jealousy rising in his blood. He feels left out. This is what you wanted, you asshole. You wanted them to be close, and you're the one who left them both.

At last, Korra lifts her head. "We'll stay with you," she says. "Thank you for the offer."

She still hasn't said his name, and he wonders which one she would use - Amon or Noatak? Still, at least she'll be staying with him. Once they have some time to talk, this ice between them will thaw, and, one way or another, their wounds can begin to heal at last.

He leads them to his home, and once they arrive, Korra stares at the sign above the drop box. "Saomik?"

"My new name," he says.

"You're an accountant?"

"And business consultant." He unlocks the front door. "I only see my clients two or three times during each contract. They appreciate my discretion, and I appreciate theirs. It's working well." He
opens the door and turns on the light. "Welcome to my home. I have two spare bedrooms upstairs." As he sees the two step into the room in perfect unison, he knows he has to bring up the question he's afraid to ask: "Or do you just need one?"

"Two," they say in unison.

Trying not to let his relief show on his face, Noatak turns and begins to walk up the stairs. He puts Korra's suitcase in the furthest bedroom, the one that will be his hobby room. Tarrlok will be in the bedroom between them, the future office. As they're getting settled, he returns to the kitchen and scours his fridge and cupboards. The personal feast he purchased won't feed three mouths, and he doesn't have anything else to prepare. He usually buys his ingredients fresh, day-by-day.

Well, he doesn't mind splurging a little on some fancy take-out. There's a restaurant at the end of the block that has high-quality food, and the fish and seaweed noodles he's growing tired of will be a nostalgic treat for his guests. When he checks with them, they seem okay with it.

"I'll come with you," says Tarrlok.

Korra flops onto her bed. "I'll wait here."

"You must be tired from your journey," says Noatak, even though they both know that's not the real reason she's staying behind. He tries not to let her evasiveness bother him. She needs time to process everything. Be patient.

.*.*.*.

Once the men leave, Korra sits up. What she really needs right now is the opportunity to take a shower. The ship wasn't equipped with modern amenities, and after living for so long in Republic City, she just isn't accustomed to roughing it anymore. The tension between her and Noatak is so strange that she doesn't feel comfortable showering when he's in the same house, not yet. Her memories involving him and showers are too vivid.

As she's walking past Tarrlok's room, a stack of newspapers catches her eye. It's sitting on a desk, and appears to be the Republic City news. She peers over the railing down the stairs, making sure the men are really gone, then sneaks into the room.

"I'm just looking at what's already here," she says aloud to herself. "It's not snooping."

When she flips through the top one, she notices an article about a recent press conference she gave, updating with a report about the status of non-benders. She begins to flip through the other papers. Every single paper there contains an article about her, some of them dog-eared to mark the page. The papers span the last six months. She had assumed Noatak forgot about her after the pendant, and that's why his mail stopped coming, but these clippings prove otherwise. He has been following her public appearances religiously.

Now I'm crossing the line into snooping, she thinks as she pulls open the desk drawers. In one of the bottom ones is a piece of paper, the beginning of a letter:

*My Dearest Korra,*

*This will be my last correspondence with you. Each time I reach out to you, I not only prolong our recovery, but put you at risk.*

There it is, in three sentences: he was aware of the ramifications of his actions, and that's why he stopped contacting her.
She still doesn't know how to feel. Hurt and anger are still the strongest emotions, but underneath it all, she still loves him.

Her hands shaking, she pushes the drawer closed. Maybe a shower will wash away her confusion.
Korra is mostly silent during dinner, partly because the food is so flavourful, and partly because she isn't sure what to say. Thankfully, Tarrlok spends most of the meal speaking, struggling occasionally, about the difficulties he has been working to overcome. She steps in now and then to help him with words - it's something she's accustomed to doing for him back home, and she hasn't realized how often she does it until she sees Noatak staring at her. His expression, difficult to read to begin with, is further obscured by the glasses and the beard. Is he jealous? Does he think she's patronizing Tarrlok? Her jaw juts. He can judge as much as he wants - she and Tarrlok have a system, and it works.

Noatak talks a bit about his life as well, saying that he found some work on a cargo ship, then moved out here when that fell through. She can tell, by his hesitation, that there's more to the story, but he doesn't offer it, and no one asks.

Then the conversation slows, and the brothers turn to her, but she doesn't feel like talking just yet. Instead, she stretches her arms and yawns.

"I'm exhausted after all that travelling. I think I might head to bed early."

Noatak looks disappointed. "I was about to open a bottle of ice wine."

"You two go ahead and catch up. Thanks again for your hospitality." She gives a small, formal bow, which Noatak returns. She can feel his eyes on her as she leaves.

Though she is exhausted, she finds it impossible to sleep. Her emotions are still running wild on her, and the constant sound of Noatak's voice, floating up through the heating ducts, doesn't help. Her confused body is aroused and tense and nauseated all at once.

She's finally drifting off, when the mention of her name jars her awake again.

"Is Korra okay?" asks Noatak.

"Your departure hurt," says Tarrlok's voice. They don't seem to realize how well sound carries - they're speaking conversationally, and it's as clear as if they're in the next room over.

Korra strains her ears to listen.

"I tried to explain myself in my letters to her," says Noatak with a sigh. "I don't know if I was able to make her understand why I left."

"She understood," replies Tarrlok. "Still hurt."

"I suppose they aren't mutually exclusive, are they?"

After a beat, Tarrlok says, "I have to know. Love or manipulation?"

"What do you mean?" says Noatak, a definite growl in his voice.

"You and Korra. Was it real?"
"Of course!" There's a pause, and then he adds, softer: "I wish I had been manipulating her, that it was all just an act I could cast aside. I can't stop, no matter how much it hurts. I wish I could."

Korra's throat tightens and tears well in her eyes. She wants to storm out - she needs to get out, to clear her head - but they're both between her and the entrance. Once they go to bed, she'll go for a walk. It won't be the same without Naga by her side, but at least it will get her out of this constrictive, confining house.

She doesn't have to wait much longer; Tarrlok is also exhausted from their journey, and the two brothers decide to retire. There's a long stretch of running water and opening and closing doors as they prepare for bed. The hall light is the last to go out.

Hurriedly, Korra pulls on her jacket and mittens. The moon outside is so bright that it illuminates her room, so she doesn't need to risk detection by turning on the light. She creeps down the hallway. One of the stairs creaks, and she freezes, waiting for a reaction from either of the brothers. When there's none, she keeps moving.

The entranceway is dark, and it takes her several minutes to find her boots. The front door creaks, and she winces, but hurries through it.

Stepping into the night is immediately calming. Fresh snow blankets the ground, untouched, and the world seems unnaturally quiet and muffled. She has missed this perfect stillness. There's still a light flurry, but the winds have died down, and it's warmer now than it was during the evening. The moon, though waning, is still nearly full, illuminating everything in blue light. The polar lights dance around it, green and glowing.

"'Evening, Yue," she whispers to the moon. "Looks like it's just you and me tonight."

*.**.*.

Noatak drags the razor across his skin, feeling a great sense of relief. He has heard that beards stop itching once they grow long enough, but he couldn't stand having it too long, and constantly trimming it meant it never got to the comfortable stage. As his sideburns take shape, it's as if he is revealing himself to the world again.

He has Tarrlok to thank, partly for making his decision for him by making a few jibes about the beard over wine, but mainly for that phrase: *Stop running away*. There's no need for the beard for safety reasons; this town is far enough from Republic City that he doubts many people have even heard of Amon, let alone know what his face looks like. If he is honest with himself, the main reason for the beard was so that he didn't have to see his own reflection in the mirror.

He pats his face dry and faces himself in the mirror. One ear is just slightly higher than the other and he's never sure whether to cut the sideburns to be even according to his nose or his ears. Pulling out the razor, he makes a few last adjustments, evening them out the best he can.

With nothing left to scrutinize in his reflection - not unless he starts digging into his personality and psyche, that is - he turns out the lights, turning in for the night.

Once he lies down, however, his eyes fly open, and he is unable to convince them to close. He rolls onto one side, then the other. His mind is whirling. The reality that he has been numb to all evening is all too vivid now: *Korra is only two doors away.*

He slides out of bed and paces down the hall. The door to Korra's room is open, so he steps into the doorway.
"Korra?" he whispers, hoping she's awake. A conversation with her is sure to resolve some of the whirling thoughts.

There's no response. The room is too quiet. He reluctantly acknowledges his bloodbending, feeling for a heartbeat in the room. It's empty.

Flicking on the hall light, he pads downstairs and studies the shoes on the rack. Her boots are gone.

He gives a long, low sigh, then walks to the kitchen. If he's going to follow her, he'll bring a peace offering with him.

.*.*.*.

Korra heads away from the town, looking, as always, for an isolated perch. She finds a little cliff just outside the town, and she settles on it, hugging her knees to her chest. She'll stay here, watch the dancing lights and breathe for a while.

After barely fifteen minutes of solitude, however, she hears crunching footsteps behind her. She turns to see Noatak approaching. He stops about ten feet away.

"If you want me to leave, I will," he says, his words rising into the air in clouds of condensation.

"I don't really know what I want," she admits. She finds herself wondering what everyone who knows about their affair would say to her - Lian, Tarrlok, Katara. All of them, she's sure, would tell her to talk to him. *You've wanted this opportunity for so long.*

She moves over to give him room. "Have a seat."

"I brought brandy to warm you up." He settles beside her, a respectable distance away, and holds out a flask. "Truth be told, I expected it to be colder out here than it is."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised to see you with alcohol," she mutters, and he looks offended.

"Until tonight, I hadn't touched a drop in five months. This is purely for ceremonial purposes."

"Oh. Sorry." Her stomach plummets. "I swear I didn't come all the way here just to pick fights with you all the time."

"I think we got along better back when we were sworn enemies," he mutters, uncapping the flask and taking a swig.

"Pass it over." She drinks some as well; it's nice and smooth, and leaves a glow in her stomach. "That's good."

"Imported. You can find this brand everywhere in Republic City, but it's hard to get out here." After a pause, he says, "So why did you come here?"

"Because I hoped you would be here," she says. "I guess I was so busy wondering whether or not you would be that I forgot to think about how I would react if you were." She glances at him again. "Wait a minute, didn't you have a beard a couple of hours ago?"

He rubs his smooth chin. "Tarrlok made a few snide comments about it. Or tried to."

"He still struggles with words, sometimes. It's pretty easy to understand him once you get used to reading between the lines."
"I'm just happy he's speaking again." He turns to her, his face warm. "It's done him a lot of good to be in your company, I can tell. Thank you."

"He needs you in his life, too," she says quietly. "Your death crushed him, and then finding out you were alive after it hurt him even more."

Noatak's face twists, and he takes another swig from the flask. "Well, he certainly made sure to let me know it." He rubs his shoulder. "You taught him to fight, didn't you?"

"My father had a hand in it, but yeah, I helped." Her brows pinch. "He hit you?" It has been many years since she saw Tarrlok in a blind rage, and she doesn't envy anyone on the receiving end of it.

"Came flying at me out of nowhere. I avoided most of it, but it's hard to defend with only one good arm."

"What?" She looks down at his arms, and notices the right one is slung a bit more heavily in his lap than the left. "What happened?"

He winces and looks away.

"No, tell me what happened," she says. "I might be able to heal you."

After a long pause, he says, "I damaged my right arm. It gets a little better, month by month, but it's still clumsy and weak."

She moves to sit cross-legged in front of him. "Hold it out."

Their eyes lock, and she takes a long look at his face for the first time since they were reunited. The grey patches at his temples have started to spread, and most of his hair is peppered. His eyes haven't lost any intensity, and in spite of his age, there are still only a few lines in their creases. She forgot how long and thick his eyelashes were. He's even more handsome than she remembers, and the familiar scent of his aftershave is intoxicating. Her heart thuds in her chest, and she wonders if he's able to sense it with his bloodbending.

"Very well," he says finally. He holds out his arm, and she pulls off her glove to grip the exposed wrist above his sleeve. It's their first contact, skin-to-skin, since their separation. She can feel the warmth of flesh, the softness of arm hair, the strength of bone. Before she accidentally loses herself in the sensations she focuses on her task, using her other hand to tug down his sleeve. In the moonlight, she can see strange, scrawling lines marking his skin, and she gasps and drops his arm.

"The corruption," she says. Her eyes lock onto him. "This is what I did to you when I was corrupted, isn't it?" Memories scroll through her mind, images forgotten until now. "I grabbed you and tried to destroy you." Shame chokes her. She has spent so many months focussed on how much he hurt her that she never stopped to wonder if she hurt him.

"You weren't yourself," he says quietly.

"Being myself is what led me to that state in the first place." She pulls water from the snow and makes it glow, holding it against his arm. The wounds are old and scar tissue is thick throughout the arm, but she feels it begin to give way to her bending.

"You're able to heal again," he says, sounding relieved.

"I got most of my waterbending back, and I'm working on re-learning the other three elements." She tugs his glove off and begins to heal his hand, trying not to focus on the intimacy of her fingers
sliding against his. "The interesting thing is that I'm able to do some psychic bending as well."

His brows rise, but he doesn't speak. He's watching their hands, and she wonders if he's hyper-aware of the intimacy of the gesture as well.

"The corruption corroded my chi pathways, which made me weaker in some ways, stronger in others," she says. The healing glow dies, but she lingers for a few more seconds, pretending to examine the scar tissue. More than anything, she wants to lace her fingers through his, but there are a few things they need to discuss before she's ready for anything like that.

As she tries to work up the courage to ask a question she has been holding onto, one that has been on her mind for eight months, he clears his throat.

"Bloodbending allows me to read chi pathways and, to some extent, reshape them," he says. "From my chi-blocking experience, I have an excellent understanding of how chi points work."

She looks up at him. "What are you saying?"

"If you are comfortable with it, I can take a look at your chi pathways. If there's corrosion, I may be able to fix it by reshaping it."

"Let me think about that for a bit first," she says. She realizes she's still gripping his wrist, and her cheeks flush as she drops it. "Try moving your hand."

He flexes and curls his fingers. "That's a little bit better. Thank you." She can taste the clouds of his breath, thick and cool with mint.

"I can do that a few more times before we leave. It might not reverse the damage entirely, but it should help." Moving to sit safely beside him again, she fixes her gaze on the moon. "How were you able to write to me with your arm so badly damaged?"

"I'm left-handed."

"Oh. I had no idea."

"We skipped over some of the smaller details of getting acquainted," he says quietly.

It's true, when she considers it. They started out with deep, soul-searching confessions. There was no time for the little details of dating, no place for it. It took her and Mako six months to move from shy kisses to anything resembling a proper adult relationship; she and Noatak jumped in headfirst.

And drowned because of it, she thinks.

"You have an interesting choice of venue," says Noatak, interrupting her thoughts. "This ledge was my favourite thinking spot when I was young."

"Really?" She looks around them and sees a few small dome huts nearby. "Did you live in one of those huts?"

"That one there." He points. "The old way of life has ended here, and all those families have moved on."

Her impression is the same as her original impression from the ship: the hut seems far too quaint and innocuous for all that went on there. "Did you ever sit here and plot ways to destroy Avatar
"Aang?" she asks, a bit amused by the idea.

"Sometimes, yes. More often, I was plotting to destroy my father, but besting the Avatar was a lifetime obsession." He glances at her. "A part of me wishes I could tell that kid what would become of him and see how he would react."

She gives a weak smile, but her mind is still hung up on that one question she's afraid to ask. She grabs the flask from him and takes a swig for courage.

"In your letter," she blurts, and she hesitates.

Noatak shifts and sits a little straighter. "Ask," he says, as if he is already expecting it.

"You said you tried to move on the night you left me. If you didn't mean Kwan, then who did you mean?"

All expression fades from his face, which is a bad sign, because it means he's trying to shield himself. "After Kwan refused to kill me, he left me with the boat. I went to the nearest town I could find and set up the boat to explode, then decided to drown myself in alcohol. A woman named Riko bought me a drink, and we ended up chatting for a while."

"How far did it go?" interrupts Korra. She knows she has no right to judge - she slept with Noatak the night she broke up with Mako, after all - but it still hurts.

"Not far."

Tears prick her eyes. "Be specific."

"We kissed-"

"Who initiated it?"

He sighs. "Korra-"

"Who initiated it?" she repeats. She needs to know these details. She needs to feel every bit of pain and misery she can.

"I did. I was desperate to bury my heartache. She brought me back to her place, we kissed a bit more on the bed, and then..." He grimaces, and she expects the worst, so she's caught off guard when he says, "I started sobbing and made a complete ass out of myself."

"What?" The words are so different from what she expected that she has a hard time wrapping her head around them.

He folds his arms tightly against his chest, leaning forward, as if he's suddenly cold. "I was utterly drunk and heartbroken. To her credit, she left me to cry and sleep it off instead of tossing me out the door. It was her idea to write you that first letter, one I never intended to send."

Korra swallows hard. She was all set to hear that he had slept with someone else, and instead, he cried over her. Between this, the results of her snooping, and the realization that he isn't with Kwan, her anger toward him is starting to feel misplaced. "So why did you send the letter?"

"All that happened between us was based on honesty. I felt it only fair to continue that." He draws his knees in to his chest. "I didn't consider, at the time, that it probably would have been easier on both you and Tarrlok to believe I was dead. For that, I am truly sorry."

With the apology, Korra feels the last of her anger subside. In the past several months, her pain has warped her perspective: she had painted him as a selfish man, chasing after happiness and occasionally leading her on without a single regard for her feelings. The reality is proving to be different. It's clear their separation hurt him as much as it hurt her - maybe even more.

More than that, she had forgotten what it's like to be around him. He speaks to her as if she's his equal, and his tone shows respect and affection. She's beginning to remember why she fell in love with him.

"I snooped through your desk," she confesses.

His gaze snaps to her.

"When you and Tarrlok went out." She rocks a little in place. "I found the letter you wrote and never sent. Before that, I was angry at you for not realizing how much your communication hurt me, and then I was angry when you stopped communicating at all, as if you forgot about me. I thought you were naive to both of those things, but when I read what you wrote, I realized you already knew both of those things." She hesitates. "I'm sorry. I'm glad I saw what I did, but I should have respected your privacy."

"Yes, you should have," he says, sounding a little cross, but when she looks up at him, his face softens. "Are you still angry?"

"A little," she admits. "I should have just gotten it out all at once, like Tarrlok did."

He smiles. "I'd be lucky to escape with just a bruised shoulder. Last time we sparred, you defeated me, and I had full command of both arms."

"You have your bloodbending now," she says. "I don't think there would be much contest unless I went into the Avatar State."

His face flattens and he looks away. She instantly feels terrible for bringing up his bending, but speaking about it reminds her of his offer to help her corroded chi pathways.

"If you do this thing where you look at my chi pathways," she says, "is there a chance you could make them worse?"

"No," he says with so much confidence that she decides to trust him. He is certainly the most qualified person in the world to do this type of examination.

"Then I'd like you to try," she says. "Please."

He nods. "It will work best if you kneel," he says apologetically. "It might be reminiscent of the time I took your bending."

She rises to her knees. "I still have a hard time thinking of that person as you."

"So do I," he says quietly.

It's surreal, kneeling here on the cliff where he once dreamed of defeating her, allowing him to stand behind her and place his hand on the back of her neck. When she sees his hand reaching for her forehead, she gets a spark of panic, but then she sees his face. His expression is placid and gentle.

There's a glow of contact, then she can feel his bloodbending inside of her. The sensation is so
uncomfortable, so disturbingly familiar, that she gives a sharp cry.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She blinks back her tears. "Keep going."

As he probes her, she focuses on the feeling. It's the same tingling feeling of a limb that has fallen asleep, but inside her body, coursing through her in ribbons that must be her chi pathways. She feels as if something is shifting inside her, and it's somehow wrong, like a misplaced tendon snapping over bone. When he finally pulls away, she shudders.

"I was able to reshape a few pathways, but I can't repair all of them." He sounds as if he's out of breath. "It might help a bit."

She stands and holds out her hand, summoning a burst of flame. It explodes from her hand, several feet high, and she gives a laugh of delight.

"Now that's more like it!" She pulls a wave of water out of the snow and explodes it into flakes, then blows them off the cliff with a gust of wind. With a stomp, she pulls a block of earth out of the cliff below them, then slams it back into place.

Noatak stands. "How is it?"

She throws her arms around him, and he takes a step backwards under the unexpected weight. "It's a huge step in the right direction. Thank you."

His arms curl around her, and he buries his face in her hair. She closes her eyes as she presses herself flat against him. He's warm and strong. Even through the thick coat, he feels harder, more muscular than she remembers. Her mind starts to wander to inappropriate places, and she quickly breaks the embrace and pulls away. He's looking down at her, his expression so intense that she feels heat rise to her cheeks.

"I was going to offer to take your bending," she says, "but it seems you have it under control."

His eyes widen. "You can do that? What about corruption?"

She stands a little taller, puffing out her chest. "I'm much more confident now, and I'm not afraid of you anymore. I can take your bending properly this time. But there's no need, since you-"

"Take it," he says. "Please." He drops to his knees in front of her, and looks up, waiting.

Her brows pinch. She sinks to her knees in front of him. "Are you sure?"

"I don't trust myself with it."

She studies him, sensing there's more to the story. "What did you do?" she asks quietly.

He looks down. "One of my former ship-mates had a bit of a fixation with me, and by following me around, he figured out both my identity, and that you and I were once lovers. It turns out he was a rookie undercover police officer, looking to make his first big break. He drugged and captured me, but I came to earlier than he expected. At first, I tried to reason with him, but then he threatened to drag your name through the mud." He pauses. "I snapped. I used bloodbending, after trying for so long to keep it repressed. I almost killed him; I came so close. More than anything, I wanted to crush his heart." His eyes flick up to meet hers. "I am dangerous, Korra. I can't trust myself to show restraint if I get into a similar situation in the future. I barely did that time."
"But you did," she says. "I'm not sure I would have."

He looks genuinely surprised. "You would have killed him?"

"I might have. I almost killed your brother, once upon a time. I almost killed you, almost killed Mako." She frowns, realizing, yet again, that she is no better than the man she once looked down on as a villain. "I am dangerous, too."

"Your bending has other purposes," he says. "You have two sides: destruction and nurture. I have only destruction."

"You have nurture, too. You've just never taken the time to explore it. What do you call what you just did to my chi pathways?"

His face softens. "Maybe you're right, but I'm tired of being on guard. All my life, all I ever wanted was to be a non-bender."

Her heart breaks for him. "It won't undo your past."

"No, but it can improve my future."

As bizarre as it seems, the thought of taking away his bending saddens her. "Are you certain?"

"It won't hurt you?" he says.

"No." She knows what to look for, this time around, and she knows how to stop it if it starts again; corruption is never going to take hold of her again.

"Then I'm certain," he says, bowing his head.

She stands and presses a hand to his heart, the other to his forehead, and he smiles, shaking his head.

"I always went for the neck instead of the heart," he says, as if to himself. "What could be a more perfect metaphor for everything that was wrong with my approach to bringing balance to the world?"

The insight is what convinces Korra that removing his bloodbending is the right step to take. He's showing genuine self-awareness, and so he knows what's best for himself. With confidence, she calls on the Avatar State and reaches into him, sensing his energy flow. Immediately, she notices a difference. Last time, she felt herself roll over his energy, unwittingly gathering it into herself. This time, she feels their energies colliding. She feels herself rerouting and changing it. Even in the cold air, sweat sprouts on her temples and upper lip.

Then it's over. She pulls away.

Noatak's lips move as if he's trying to speak, then his eyes roll back into his head and he collapses.

She remembers that sickening feeling of weakness, and she, as the Avatar, had the strength of spirit to resist the worst of it, so it must be even worse for him. Kneeling beside him, she pulls his fallen form into her lap, wrapping her arms around his chest. Her face nuzzles against his cheek, and his freshly trimmed sideburns scratch her skin.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

He's completely unconscious, and after a few minutes, it's becoming clear he won't be coming
around any time soon. Korra cradles him against her chest and stands. He's heavy with muscle, but she's strong, and she slogs through the snow with only a little difficulty.

They're just turning the corner onto his street when his eyelids start to flutter.

"Corrupted?"

"No, it went well," she says quietly. "You need to rest. You're going to feel awful for a little while."

"I did this," he rasps. "To others. So many times."

"It's okay."

"To you."

Her grip on his body tightens. "You're a different person now."

His head falls against her collarbone. "No."

"Yes you are," she insists. "You've grown. You've evolved."

His voice is fading: "How can you be sure?"

"Because I could never have fallen in love with Amon," she says quietly. "And he could never have fallen in love with me. We've both changed since those days."

He's silent, but when she looks down, there's a small smile on his lips.

Negotiating the stairs is a bit difficult with the added weight - they're steep and narrow, and she has to sidestep to climb them - but at last they arrive at Noatak's bedside. She lays him on the bed and turns on the lamp, squinting against the sudden intrusion of light. His face is slack, and he appears to be unconscious again. After she pulls off his boots, gloves and coat, she positions his cheek over his pillow and pulls the covers over him. She smooths the hair off his forehead, then steps forward to leave.

A hand catches her wrist. She turns to see that Noatak is watching her, his eyes just barely open. His thumb slides against her skin, and then his hand falls away.

Her throat tightens as she realizes how badly she needs his touch.

"It's cold in my room," she says as an excuse.

"It's warmer here," he whispers.

She pulls off her coat, gloves and boots and crawls into the other side of the bed. Reaching over him, she turns off the lamp, then spoons behind him. Her arm drapes over his ribcage. His shirt is soft and warm, and it smells like him. She buries her face between his shoulder blades and breathes in.

She's still confused, and she still needs time to sort out her emotions, but here in this moment, she feels warm, safe and sleepy. Her hand presses against his chest, and even though he's exhausted, she feels his heart racing.

"I missed you, Noatak," she whispers drowsily.

His hand reaches up to meet hers and their fingers intertwine.
Noatak awakens the next morning to find himself curled up behind Korra, his arm around her. His memories after she took his bending are a bit hazy and fractured, as if he were drunk. He drank a fair amount last night, but not enough to start blacking out, so it must be a side effect of proper bending removal. He's grateful for the fractured memories, because what he does remember is discomfort unlike anything he has ever experienced. Having his bending removed properly feels unnatural. 

*I did that to hundreds of people.*

He takes a long, deep breath of Korra's hair, then pulls away from her and slides quietly out of bed. As much as he wants to stay beside her, he's reacting to her body heat, and, given how complicated everything is between them, he doesn't want her to wake up to find him obviously aroused.

He grabs clean clothes, then closes the bedroom door on his way to the bathroom. There, he locks the door and falls into his normal routine: toilet; jerk off in the shower (silence is difficult, given the memory of Korra's body heat, and his body's explosive reaction); wash body; dry hair with towel; trim beard (he reaches for his scissors out of habit, even though this step is no longer necessary); slick back hair; apply deodorant cream; brush teeth; scrutinize.

His eyebrows are in good shape, and all potentially offensive body hair is neatly trimmed or plucked, but even with all this grooming, he frowns at his reflection. His hair is turning more and more grey each day, and the wrinkles by his eyes are starting to become more visible. *An old man like you has no business with a woman in her mid-twenties.* After their time apart, he wonders if she's shocked by how old he looks.

When he finally opens the door, Tarrlok is striding down the hallway, fully clothed and already smelling of a subtle, sweet cologne. He must have gotten up early.

"Morning," says Noatak.

"Morning." Tarrlok moves past him into the bathroom and seems to catch his reflection out of the corner of his eye. He stops and leans close to the mirror, frowning as he touches his eyebrow. "Still uneven. Do you have any tweezers?"

"Korra once said we were alike, and I found the idea surprising," mutters Noatak as he opens a drawer and retrieves a set of tweezers for his brother.

"Others judge by appearance," says Tarrlok. "Best foot forward." He plucks a couple stray hairs from his brow line, then raises and lowers his brows a few times. "Better." Turning to Noatak, he says, "I want to show you something. Outside."

They stop in the kitchen, where Noatak pulls apart a chunk of fry bread for each of them. He pockets the cigars, too, in case his brother smokes. Tarrlok, meanwhile, leaves a quick note for Korra.

They each grab a lantern and step outside. The snowfall has stopped, for now, and the fresh blanket makes the city look soft and smooth. A few children are having snowball fights in the street; it
appears they have teamed up, waterbenders versus non-benders. Even in children, the segregation makes Noatak bristle.

Tarrlok begins to walk toward the old part of town, and Noatak falls into step beside him.

Raising a brow, Tarrlok says. "Korra slept in your room."

"Nothing happened," says Noatak, wondering if the intimacy of their cuddling qualifies as 'nothing', given their history.

"Why not? Kiss her."

"She's confused. Somehow, I don't think shoving my tongue down her throat is going to help defrost things between us." After a moment, he says, "She took my bending again. Properly, this time."

Tarrlok stops in his tracks and stares. "You gave it up?"

"I asked her to take it." Noatak stops walking as well, perplexed by the other's reaction. "Wouldn't you?"

"Never. Bending was who I was." Tarrlok does not drop his gaze; it's cold and accusatory.

Guilt twists Noatak's stomach. "But bending only ever brought us pain."

"Bending wasn't the problem. Our father was."

For the first time since their reunion, Noatak feels as if they are facing off as Councilman Tarrlok and Amon. Their six years in prison together did nothing to advance their relationship, because Tarrlok was barely responsive. They never worked past their enmity; before yesterday's reunion, their last two-sided interaction ended with Tarrlok trying to kill them.

Noatak stands tall and folds his arms behind his back, and his voice drops in pitch. "You haven't forgiven me for taking your bending."

"No."

"Are you taking me somewhere to kill me?"

Tarrlok's eyes widen. "What? No! Why-" He loses his words, but his hands continue to articulate his baffled anger.

But paranoia is already gripping Noatak. "I should warn you that I'm difficult to catch by surprise. I knew you were reaching for that gas tank."

"You didn't stop me."

"No. I didn't."

They eye each other. Tarrlok's mouth flattens and he keeps moving forward. The paranoia drains from Noatak; he watches for a moment, then follows. Instead of apologizing for taking his bending, you asked if he wanted to kill you. You sure have a way with people. It has been a long time since he felt this ashamed of himself, and he wonders if the rift he forced between them can be repaired. It has only been widening for the past thirty-three years.

They push past the old huts, and Noatak glances at their old home. The black ink across the door is
a reminder that it's tainted by his mother's last breath. Perhaps the best thing would be to tear it down so the town can continue to expand, paving over the old memories. Tarrlok technically owns the hut now, so it's his call to make.

Secretly, however, Noatak is glad it's still standing. The bad memories may outweigh the good, but he doesn't want to sever all ties with the good ones. He thought he did, once upon a time, but that was short-sighted.

Tarrlok leads him up a hill and down the other side. There's a small rock cave here, about five feet high and deep. He crouches and ventures into it, but Noatak waits by the entrance and peers warily in. Inside is a pile of stones carefully balanced in the shape of a human, a few feet tall: an inunnguaq. Between its feet is an incense holder made of a metal that might be silver, but it's too tarnished to identify. Tarrlok sets down his lantern and sits cross-legged in front of the inunnguaq. He pulls a stick of incense from his pocket, carefully setting it in the holder and lighting it.

"I came here every week, at first," says Tarrlok. "Eventually, every month."

Noatak ducks under the low ceiling and takes a seat on the damp rock floor, listening.

His brother won't look at him. "You had no memorial. Father wouldn't accept your death. So I made one. You were lost; I thought it might guide your spirit."

The words choke Noatak, and for a moment, he struggles to breathe. When he finally inhales, it's accompanied by the heady scent of incense, and his head spins.

Tarrlok's shoulders slump. "Your death changed everything. Shaped everything. Every success was ours, not mine. I felt you with me, always." His brows lower. "All lies! Amon and war and left behind again." A howl bursts from his lips as his fist drives into the inunnguaq. The stones were so precariously balanced that they topple, clattering against the cave floor. Tarrlok stares at it for a moment, breathing hard, then his head drops and his shoulders begin to quake.

Noatak watches, his heart pounding. Destruction of an inunnguaq is said to curse its destroyer, and even though he's sure it's superstition, he whispers a quick prayer of protection to the spirits anyway. He has already been responsible for enough suffering for Tarrlok, and he doesn't care to add a curse to the list.

Though his instinct is to flee, he forces himself to take a step closer.

"You shaped me, too, Tarrlok," he says quietly. "Every night after I left, my last words to you echoed in my mind, taunting me. They were cruel words to leave you with. You weren't a weakling - you were stronger than me. You had the strength to endure that household, solely for the sake of sticking by our mother. I failed her, and I failed you." His head bows. "I almost turned back, so many times, but I was fuelled by an infantile rage that I can't explain, even now. For the first two years, I couldn't even speak to any women who reminded me of our mother, or any boys who reminded me of you."

He waits to see if Tarrlok has anything to say, but the man is silent.

Noatak continues, "I came to Republic City because I found out, by accident, that you were selected to attend the university on scholarship. I cut out the newspaper article and carried it in my pocket until it eventually disintegrated. I was so proud. I took a job with Hiroshi Sato, partly because I saw potential in him, yes, but also because he was involved as an assistant with the university engineering program at the time. After my shift ended, I would walk through the political science wing, hoping to see you."
His voice cracks. "And one time, I found you. You were in the hallway, trying to convince your professor to improve your grade on an assignment. I wrapped my scarf across my face and watched, taking you in. I couldn't believe how much you had grown. You would have been eighteen at the time, and I was so amazed by your voice, and your height, and how defined your face was becoming. I went home and wept, because until that moment, I was able to pretend that my old life had ended when I ran away. The reality that your life continued on without me was too painful to bear. You had a whole life, a whole world that didn't include me. It was the first time I realized what I had truly sacrificed, and it no longer seemed worth it."

"You should have spoken to me," says Tarrlok quietly. "I might have saved you. We might have saved each other."

Noatak lifts his head. His brother is still hunched over the destroyed monument, but his shoulders have stopped shaking. A gust of wind howls across the cave entrance, its mournful sound a perfect reflection of Noatak's emotional state.

"I can stop there," he says quietly.

Tarrlok shakes his head, still not looking back. "I want to know everything. I want to know how you could attack your own brother."

It's the longest, most fluid sentence Noatak has heard him say since their reunion, and he has to take a moment to compose himself before he continues.

"I saw you a few more times," he says. "Cocktail parties, public gatherings. I considered recruiting you to my cause, but then I saw you performing in a waterbending demonstration with such artfulness and delight that I knew you would never agree that bending was evil.

"It wasn't long before Kwan and I began plans for the Revolution, and we had to go underground. It became harder to find the occasion to run into you. The places I frequented were far seedier than your tastes, and it wasn't safe to be seen elsewhere. So, I watched from the shadows with increasing anxiety as you began your political ascent. I kept waiting for you to stumble, but you played every hand perfectly, and soon it became apparent you were going to be one of my greatest opponents.

"I tried to dissuade you, with written threats and, later, by paying off those in charge of elections. I even tried to bribe Chief Unalaq, pretending to be operating on behalf of another of the potential representatives, claiming you were too young and inexperienced. None of it worked. You were too talented, too determined. I admired you for it, and yet it was infuriating at the same time."

He watches Tarrlok, waiting for a reaction. The man still has his back to him, running his fingers over the fallen stones.

"We watched you with increasing scrutiny," continues Noatak. "I labelled you and Councilman Tenzin as our biggest threats after the Avatar, and insisted on having all information about you filtered through me. When you began your task force, the Equalist officers were pushing for your capture, but I delayed them. I pointed to our increasing recruitment numbers, as your actions were driving non-benders to our cause in droves.

"When you captured Korra, however, I knew I couldn't delay it any longer. If the benders of the world thought we had her, they would escalate our war before we were ready."

His voice softens: "Right until the moment I confronted you, the plan was to take your bending and leave you behind. Then you bloodbent me, and it was as if the twenty-six years between us hadn't passed at all." His voice fades. "My excuses for taking you were flimsy, and I believe some, Kwan
included, thought I had developed a fixation on you. We argued, that night, worse than we had in years—He stops, realizing Tarrlok might not know about his relationship with his ex-lieutenant. The memory continues in his mind: he had no way to defend himself without revealing his true identity, and with so much on his mind, he eventually decided to let Kwan believe it was an infatuation. It was easier than coming up with a convincing lie. That was the beginning of the disintegration of their relationship in private, though Kwan's loyalty, in public, was unfaltering until the bitter end. *I let him hurt because it was convenient. I have wronged so many people.*

"I thought I was saving you," he murmurs. "I thought our bending was a curse."

"You can't make that decision." Tarrlok finally turns to look at him, and his eyes are so sunken and cold that Noatak takes a step back.

"I know that now. I got caught up in my power. I've changed."

"No you haven't. You decided for me again by leaving."

Noatak's eyes narrow. "I was certain you would do better without me around, and I was right. I was only going to hold you back."

"You didn't have to leave," snarls Tarrlok, baring his teeth. "There or not, my recovery would be the same. My world doesn't revolve around you. *You aren't that important.*"

Noatak stares dumbly for a moment, then pushes himself to his feet and strides from the cave. Once he's outside it, he falls against the rock wall and pulls out a cigar. His hands are quaking so badly that he struggles to light it.

Every time he thinks he's finally achieved self-awareness, he discovers a new layer to his selfishness. *It's like an onion,* he thinks bitterly. *So many layers, and each one makes me want to weep.*

Spirits, he needs a drink. His body is still shaking. He takes another drag on the cigar, its tip glowing orange in the darkness.

He hears a clatter from inside the cave, and he freezes, straining his ears. When he hears nothing, he calls, "Tarrlok?" The only response is more clattering. For a moment, he's afraid that the whole thing is caving in on itself, and he darts around the corner. Instead, he sees Tarrlok struggling to rebuild the inunnguaq.

Noatak's heart twists. Even though the words are honest, they're still difficult to say: "I'm sorry, Tarrlok. For everything."

The rocks fall to the cave floor, and Tarrlok's shoulders slump. "Can't rebuild. Too shaky."

"Maybe if we work together." Gripping the cigar between his teeth, Noatak kneels beside his brother. He props up the stones that were functioning as legs and looks expectantly at Tarrlok.

Tarrlok bites into his lower lip, his nostrils flaring. He looks as if he, like the inunnguaq, will collapse at any moment.

"Come on," says Noatak around the cigar. "Two broken men are as good as one whole one."

Hesitantly, Tarrlok reaches out for a stone and balances it on top of the legs.

Together, they continue to rebuild the monument, taking turns holding it and finding balancing
The head topples a few times once they reach the top, but eventually, it stays standing. Noatak leans back to examine their work and realizes that a large portion of his cigar is now ash. He tactfully reaches outside the cave and knocks it clean, then takes another draught.

Wrinkling his nose, Tarrlok says, "Smells."

After a moment to consider, Noatak snuffs the cigar on the cave floor and tucks it into his pocket.

"You're right, Tarrlok," he says quietly. "I'm not the centre of your world, and I have to stop thinking I am. I want you to understand that I'm deeply, genuinely sorry for every bad decision I have ever made on your behalf. You're my brother, and I love you."

Tarrlok's jaw clenches, but he gives a little nod.

"You should ask Korra to return your bending," says Noatak. "You always did have better self-control with it than I did."

"Maybe I will."

Together, they stand, studying the inunnguaq. If only our relationship was this easy to rebuild, thinks Noatak.

There's a long pause, then Tarrlok says, "I didn't mean what I said. You were important. You were always important."

Noatak drapes his arm around his brother's shoulders and pulls him in close.

Korra wanders downstairs, yawning. "Hello?" The kitchen light is on, and she sees a note on the table. It's in Tarrlok's writing: Went for a walk.

"Helpful," she says dryly. She opens the icebox, and though she's tempted by the igunaq, she pulls out some of their leftovers from the night before.

She slurps down her noodles, then heads back upstairs to change. When she's finished, the brothers still haven't returned, so she sighs. "Might as well go for a walk myself," she says, too accustomed to speaking aloud for Naga's benefit. The lack of response only highlights how alone she is, and she frowns.

It's dark outside. That shouldn't surprise her, given how close she is to the north pole, but it makes her take notice anyway. Republic City has even days and nights, year round, with almost no variation, and she has forgotten the beauty and loneliness of the unending nights.

She sparks a flame in her palm and follows Noatak and Tarrlok's footprints into the old area of town. Instead of leading her to their old hut, as she expects, they veer toward a small set of hills. She smiles to herself, deciding they must be idly walking and talking together. How cute.

They'll be back eventually, so she'll stay in the area. Tarrlok said their mother's memorial was near the house. In the meantime, her wandering feet bring her to the cliff where she and Noatak sat the night before. Their indentations are still noticeable in the snow, though the fresh coat of snow smoothed them over.

She sits in lotus position and closes her eyes, taking great care to control her breaths. Her mind
stills as she searches for a moment of peace, a break from all of the emotion of the previous day.

"Korra," says a familiar voice.

"Aang?" She opens her eyes and sees him sitting beside her, mirroring her posture. He smiles.

"It's good to see you taking a break from your training," he says. "You've been working hard."

"Thanks. Between all the training and the little adjustment Noatak did last night, I feel like my bending is getting stronger each day."

"It really is," he says. "How about your spiritual connection? Can you feel the energy of the solstice? The wall between the material world and the spiritual world weaken four times a year, during solstices and equinoxes."

She scrunches her nose with concentration, trying to feel the change in energy. In spite of all her training, her connection to her spiritual side, though better than it used to be, is still weaker than the physical.

Then, she feels a slight hum of energy, familiar and warm. "I feel it. It's nice."

"If you wanted to speak with any spirits, Korra, today is a good day to do so."

She smiles. "It has been awhile since I spoke with Yue."

"I think there is another who might like to speak with you." Aang cocks his head, directing her to look behind them.

Korra turns, and as she does so, she feels herself detach from her body. Shocked, she looks down at herself, and sees that her spirit is floating. Her body is still in lotus position, its eyes wide and glowing white. "I'm in the spirit world? How did that happen so quickly?" Usually, it takes her a great deal of focus.

Aang smiles. "As I said, the wall is weak today."

She remembers that she's supposed to be looking behind her, and she turns. A figure stands by the hut where Noatak and Tarrlok grew up, watching.

Korra sucks in a breath of air and takes a step closer, squinting to study the figure. She's a woman, elderly, with white braids that hang in a loop around each ear. Swallowing hard, Korra turns to Aang.

"Is that...?"

He nods.

"But how is a human spirit able to materialize here?"

"She is gifted with a strong spiritual connection, and the barrier is weak. She is able to break through and come here every year at this time, hoping to catch a glimpse of her sons."

"I don't know what to say," says Korra, staring at the woman.

"You will be fine, Korra. Your greatest strength is your ability to befriend." Aang's eyes twinkle, and then he dissipates.
Slowly, Korra's spirit moves closer, leaving her body behind. The woman flickers, half-translucent, and a violet glow fringes her form. She has Tarrlok's eye shape and brows, and her nose and mouth are a more feminine version of Noatak's. As Korra approaches, the mouth pulls into a kindly smile, and the woman gives a deep bow.

"Avatar Korra. This is a surprise." Her voice is husky and warm. "I was hoping for company, but I didn't realize I would be graced with your presence."

Korra bows back, taking in their surroundings. They're behind the hut, and a small stone monument rests beneath the woman's feet. It must be her memorial.

"I don't know your name," says Korra apologetically.

"I'm Okanna."

"You're Noatak and Tarrlok's mother."

The violet eyes widen. "You know my sons?"

Korra nods.

"Are they safe? It's been six years since I last saw them, but I haven't found their spirits among the others in the spirit world, so they must be alive."

"They're safe. I expected them to be here, actually, so they'll probably come by pretty soon." Korra shifts from one foot to the other with nervous energy. She's not normally shy, but it's surreal to be standing here next to a woman she has only heard stories about.

"All my life, I have dreamed of meeting the Avatar." Okanna smiles. "And now here you are, telling me that my sons are safe. What a glorious day. Please tell me, how do you know them? And why haven't they been here to see me?"

Korra hesitates. "I'll let them answer that last part; I think you should hear it from them. As for how I know them..." She hesitates again. "Tarrlok and I worked together on a task force, and we have recently become friends. And Noatak..." This is so much harder than she expected, especially with those wide eyes looking at her with such hope. "We recently worked on a mission together, and we, uh..." She clears her throat. "We kind of fell for each other."

The woman's eyes light up, and she reaches forward to clasp Korra's hands. "What wonderful news! The Avatar and my son! It's more than I ever dreamed possible."

"Well, it's complicated," says Korra.

"Love always is." Okanna leans closer, and the intensity of her expression is so like her eldest son. "I have a selfish favour to ask, Avatar Korra, and you are more than welcome to say no."

"What is it?"

"You are the bridge between the material and the spirit world. Would you consider staying here while my sons visit, to allow me to communicate with them?"

Korra isn't not sure she wants to be in the middle of what might be a tearful reunion, but the hope in Okanna’s eyes is heartbreaking.

"Yes," she says.
"Thank you." The woman looks as if she's about to weep. "Thank you so much."

"It's my pleasure," says Korra, but now she's wondering what she's getting herself into.

It isn't long until she finds out. Noatak and Tarrlok appear around the corner of the hut, moving toward the memorial. Korra steps forward to meet them, but Noatak's eyes suddenly lock onto something in the distance.

"Korra," he whispers, and he runs through her. She remembers that her body is still in the Avatar State, sitting on the edge of the cliff.

"I'll be right back," she says to Okanna, but the woman doesn't seem to hear; she is glancing between her sons, her jaw trembling.

Korra hurries back to her body and jumps into it. When her vision clears, Noatak is crouching in front of her, gripping her shoulders.

"Korra?"

"I'm okay," she says, slightly out of breath. "I was just in the spirit world." She stands, stretching out her legs, which fell asleep while she was out of her body. "Your mother is here. She wants me to help you and Tarrlok speak with her."

His face hardens, and she knows him well enough to know when he's overcompensating.

"Come on," she says gently. "I don't know how long she'll be able to stay in this world." She begins to walk toward the memorial. At first, there's silence behind her, but then she hears the crunching of Noatak's footsteps.

"What's going on?" asks Tarrlok. When she relays the news, he looks as if he doesn't know whether to laugh or weep. "She can see me? Right now?"

"She can hear you, too. She comes here every year at this time."

He rubs his face with one hand, and Korra can tell he's trying to steady himself. "What do I do?"

"Just take a seat and start a conversation. I'll repeat everything she says."

Noatak arrives, his face expressionless. He sits in the snow, back straight, shoulders square. Tarrlok eagerly settles beside him.

"Mom, can you hear this?" says Tarrlok. "I've missed you."

Korra folds her legs and listens for the familiar hum of spirit energy. She finds it quickly now that she knows what she's looking for, and she straddles the two worlds. Okanna materializes beside her, her hands cupped over her mouth as she stares at her boys.

"Go ahead," says Korra gently.

"Tarrlok," says Okanna. "Noatak. I'm so glad to see you. I love you both."

Korra repeats the words. Tarrlok sucks in an amazed breath of air, but Noatak's eyes narrow.

"Where is she?" asks Tarrlok.

Korra points at the woman, and his gaze focusses on what, to him, must be empty air. "Too many
years since I was here," he says. "I owe you an explanation."

"We owe her nothing," growls Noatak.

There's a long, shocked silence.

Noatak's face is twisted and bitter; he looks more like an angry fourteen-year-old than a greying ex-revolutionary. "She owes us an explanation, not the other way around." His eyes snap to Korra; he hasn't looked at her with this much contempt since he was Amon. "Tell us she knew about our father. She had to have known, and she did nothing to stop him."

"Noatak, stop it," snaps Tarrlok.

"Did you know?" asks Noatak, his voice dangerously quiet.

When Korra turns to Okanna, tears are trailing down the elderly woman's cheeks. "Yes, I knew he was Yakone." Okanna dabs her eyes with her fingertips. "Not at first. I figured it out when you boys were seven and ten, and he confessed when I confronted him. But I thought he had changed - he was always taking you on hunting trips, and he was so excited about your waterbending. I thought he was a good father, just a strict one. I had no idea he was teaching you to bloodbend, not until years later. If I had known, I would have put a stop to it."

Korra's voice shakes as she relays the words. Noatak's eyelids flare, and he leans closer.

"You claim ignorance, but you had to have seen what it was doing to us. It broke us. I thought about killing him or killing myself, every single day."

"Back off," growls Tarrlok.

"It's okay, Tarrlok." Okanna moves closer, trying to put a hand on Noatak's shoulder, but it passes through him instead. "Of course I noticed. We had many hushed, worried conversations about your mental state after you boys were in bed. I genuinely don't think he realized his lessons were the source. He never forgave himself after you ran off. Never. His heart issues started the day you left, and they continued until he passed away from them. Your father loved you."

Korra inches back as she repeats the words, intimidated by the anger on Noatak's face. Once she finishes, his teeth clench.

"That was 'love'? He made us bloodbend each other. He wanted us to destroy the Avatar so he could have his revenge."

"And we almost did," says Tarrlok quietly. "We both know the blame doesn't lie solely with him."

There's a long pause. Okanna looks at Korra, tears in her eyes. "What does he mean?"

"Tarrlok," says Korra quietly, "it's time to tell your mother why you haven't been here for so many years."

The younger brother nods. He lifts his chin, and his face takes on the quiet confidence she saw so many times when he was a politician. She never realized until now that it was a carefully projected mask.

"My career in politics went well," he says. "In time, I became the representative for the Northern Water Tribe on the Republic City Council, a rare appointment for my age. But it wasn't enough." He lifts his chin higher, but Korra sees his throat bob. "I long ago embraced my gift for convincing
people to my side. Sometimes it was in legitimate ways, but sometimes..." He trails off.

"So like your father," whispers Okanna, and Korra doesn't relay that one; she's too transfixed by Tarrlok's fluency. His tone is a bit stilted, but he's speaking with very little delay and no mixed-up words.

"I had a lust for power." Tarrlok's head dips a little. "When Amon started terrorizing Republic City." He hesitates. "I don't know if you heard about the war."

"Yes," says Okanna. "There are some here who have spoken of it."

Korra relays the words, and her eyes drift to Noatak. He's staring stonily through her, as if lost deep in thought.

"When Amon's war began," says Tarrlok, "I saw it as an opportunity to be the City's saviour. I started a task force and allied with Avatar Korra, but Amon kept eluding us. I pushed harder, seizing control of the police force, and imposing conditions on non-benders. I got so caught up in my goal that I forgot about the people behind it." His gaze locks onto Korra, then drops. "The Avatar tried to remind me that I was losing my grip on my humanity, so I snapped. I bloodbent her and locked her away. I was doing just what Yakone wanted."

Korra turns to Okanna to gauge her reaction. The woman is staring, her gaze almost as empty as Noatak's.

"Amon found me," says Tarrlok glancing sideways at his brother. "He released the Avatar, took my bending and secreted me away. Then he brought me with him as he fled the city, so I tried to kill us both, but we were saved, and sent to prison for the last six years. I was left in a near-catatonic state from the trauma, and I was unable to speak until-" He suddenly looks up at Korra, his eyes wide.

"Seems like your fluency just took another jump forward," she says, and he gives a surprised laugh, his eyes flooding with tears.

"I'm speaking. I'm speaking properly." Okanna's spirit kneels in front of Tarrlok and drapes her arms around him.

"She's giving you a hug," says Korra softly, and Tarrlok's eyes close.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he says. "You taught us to be gentle and kind. I turned my back on everything. I got caught up in my power."

"But you realize that now," replies his mother, and Korra repeats the words. "You're friends with the Avatar, and you're aware of your mistakes. Personal growth is a lifelong journey." There's still a hint of disappointment in her tone, but when she pulls away, she smiles at her son, her eyes full of tears.

She disapproves of what he did, thinks Korra, but she still loves him. The words encourage her to look at Noatak. He's still staring at nothing.

"I think it's your turn now," she says softly.

His gaze comes into focus, and this time, he can't quite force his neutral expression. She sees anger, fear and shame in his eyes.

"Tell him it's okay," says Okanna quietly.
"It's okay," says Korra. "Go ahead."

Noatak lifts his chin. "Very well," he says. "After I left home, I tried to live as a non-bender, but my desire to overpower the Avatar was too strong. I got accepted into a chi-blocking academy, where I excelled, and then I moved to Republic City. There, I became Amon."

Okanna is very still and very quiet. A tear rolls down her cheek. *She already knew,* thinks Korra.

"I started a war," says Noatak. "I destroyed the lives of thousands of benders. I hurt my brother, and my lover, and the Avatar, and anyone who ever followed me. When all that ended, I fled, because that's how I deal with any hardship: I flee, without any regard for the people I'm leaving behind. When Tarrlok tried to kill us, I let it happen, and I was disappointed when I reflexively saved our lives. Then the Avatar took my bending, and it corrupted and, later, almost destroyed her. She suffered for my sins."

He's getting more and more visibly upset as he speaks, his voice rising. "After six years in prison, I accepted a mission with the Avatar in exchange for Tarrlok's freedom. I betrayed the movement I spent twenty years building, just for the selfish cause of freeing my brother. And after all that, after corrupting everything and everyone I ever touched, I didn't even have the strength to die and leave everyone in peace. I keep fleeing, and I keep hurting everyone, because *that's all I know.*" He abruptly stands and paces away from them, then stops, raking his hands into his hair.

Korra starts forward to follow him, but Tarrlok catches her shoulder and shakes his head.

Okanna, however, drifts closer to him.

"Noatak," she says quietly. "Do not think death would have solved anything. The wall between our worlds is thinner than you think, and it doesn't keep out your problems. They follow you, and here, there's nothing you can do to resolve them. You must resolve them while you are still alive."

Korra relays the words, and Noatak growls, "I don't know how to resolve them."

"Sometimes it's as simple as looking ahead instead of behind, living for the future instead of the past."

At the words, his stance softens.

The hum of energy changes in pitch for a moment, a little bump in frequency, and Korra flinches. Though Okanna has spiritual strength - Korra can feel it curling off of her in waves - it's taking her a great deal of energy to stay bound to the material world for so long.

"The link is fading," Korra tells her.

The woman nods, strain showing on her face. "Then I will deliver my final words." She moves close to the younger brother. "Tarrlok," she says, and Korra repeats, "your heart is good, but your mind is your father's: crafty and conniving. Stop listening only to your head, and start consulting your heart as well, and you will live a good life."

Tears stream down Tarrlok's face. "Thank you. I will."

The spirit approaches her older son. "Noatak, your heart is good as well, but like your father, you have encased it in ice so thick that it can barely beat. I know you feel the world has hurt you, and I know your instinct is to push it away, but don't. Let the world in. Be the humble bowl merchant who came to visit me so many times, so full of care and love."
As Korra relays the words, Noatak's knees seem to buckle beneath him. He slowly sinks to the snow and gathers his knees to his chest.

"I love you both," says Okanna. "No matter what your pasts, you are my sons, and I love you. Never forget that."

"Don't go," says Noatak, his voice small.

Tarrlok is more composed: "I love you too, Mom. I'll be back next year."

The link fades, and Korra blinks as she comes fully back to herself.

"Don't go," says Noatak, his voice rising. "Don't go. I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"She's gone," says Korra quietly.

His head bows, and he's silent.

Rising to her feet, Korra turns to Tarrlok and holds out a hand to help him up. Once he's standing, she reaches in for a hug. He clings to her.

"Thank you," he says. "That was closure I didn't know I needed."

"It must have been hard."

"A bit," says Tarrlok, the words clearly an understatement. "I need a few minutes." He pulls away and his gaze fixes on his brother. "I think he does, too." His expression is a mixture of anger and concern, and she understands the feeling. Noatak's reaction was not at all what she expected.

"You go ahead," she says. "I'll be right behind you."

With a nod, Tarrlok begins to walk back toward the town.

Slowly, Korra paces up to Noatak.

He stops rocking. "Leave me," he says without looking up.

After their mission together, she knows better than to push him when he's overly emotional, but she feels the need to help him work through it. The words helped her once, so maybe they'll help him, too: "When we hit our lowest point, Noatak, we are open to the greatest change."

"Every time I think I've reached my lowest point, I find a lower one," Noatak says bitterly. He lifts his head and looks at her with sad, sunken eyes. "A chance to talk to my dead mother, and all I did is yell at her. My mother! I love her, Korra. Why did I..." His eyes close and he takes a shuddering breath.

She removes her coat and drapes it around his shoulders. "Stay warm and take the time you need, okay?" she says gently. "Tarrlok and I will be there for you when you're ready."

As she's walking back to the house, she chances a look back, and her heart breaks.

Noatak is doubled over, hugging her coat to his chest, and his body is shaking with sobs.
When Noatak hasn't returned an hour later, Korra starts to get worried.

"Give him some space," advises Tarrlok as he warms their leftovers on the stovetop. "Lots to process."

She spins on a kitchen stool, using airbending to assist her rotations. "I didn't expect him to react like that."

"Before that, I showed him his memorial. It was...difficult."

"Oh." She is torn between feeling pity for the man, and feeling as if he deserves everything coming to him. "I'm going to go talk to him."

"He seemed angry."

"I can handle it." She hops down and begins to rifle through the cupboards. "Know where he keeps his liquor?"

A few minutes later, she trudges through the snow, carrying the bottle of brandy under her arm. The day's first light is tinting the sky orange, and the top layer of snow is hard and crispy, slippery powder underneath it. The chilly air cuts through her shirt, and she hopes that even if Noatak is too upset to talk, he'll at least relinquish her coat.

She finds him sitting cross-legged in front of his mother's memorial. Her coat is around his shoulders, and he's hugging the sleeves. He's speaking, but she can't make out the words.

She doesn't want to interrupt him, but she's curious about what he's saying. The crunchy top layer of snow will alert him to her presence, so shesummons an air scooter. Her bending, though stronger than it was, is still a bit clumsy, but she manages to hover above the snow and quietly approach.

"I sang your lullaby, every time he needed soothing," Noatak is saying. "I didn't do it justice, but it calmed him without fail." He pauses. "It calmed me, too, if I'm honest. It was as if you were watching over us."

The flow of words seems to be therapeutic for him, even though his mother's spirit is long gone. Not wanting to interrupt, Korra tries to retreat, but the movement is so complex that her bending gives way. She yelps and falls into the snow.

Noatak jumps. He doesn't turn to face her, only curls more tightly into himself. "I asked you to leave," he says, but his voice is gentle in spite of the words.

"You didn't say for how long, and it's been an hour, so I figured your request expired," she says. "I brought brandy. I can leave it with you, if you need more time alone."

He turns to her, not quite looking her in the eye. His nose is dark and his eyes are bloodshot, but dry. "Why did you do it?"
"Bring brandy?"

"Allow me to talk to my mother."

"You always spoke so fondly of her. I expected a happy reunion." She settles beside him and holds out the bottle. "Trade you for my coat."

He accepts the bottle and passes her the coat. She brings it subtly to her nose before she puts it on; it smells like him.

Noatak chugs the brandy for so long that she's worried he's going to forget to come up for air, but he finally stops to take a breath. "I needed that. Thank you."

"I shouldn't be enabling your drinking," she mutters, snuggling into her warm coat. It's not warming her up quickly enough, so she sparks a small flame in her palm, trying to keep warm.

"Just for today," he says, passing back the bottle, and for the first time since she sat down, he looks directly at her. "You're cold."

"A little." Her teeth are chattering. "I'm acclimatized to the City now."

"Your lips are blue. Here." He drapes an arm around her shoulders. She's about to protest the intimate contact, but he's warm and his arm is heavy.

"Is that okay?" he asks.

"Yeah. Thank you."

What follows is a comfortable silence as her shivers begin to subside. Her skin glows as she leans into him; his cheek rests on the top of her head, and she can feel his breath in her hair. There's something about body contact with him that cuts through all the awkwardness and shyness. She feels secure. If she had just hugged him when they first saw each other, maybe she could have even avoided all the anxiety of their reunion. She shifts subtly closer to his heart and listens for its beat, taking comfort in its rhythm. Its racing pace contradicts his calm expression. She never realized how much she depended on bloodbending to sense his mood.

"Better?" he asks.

"Still a little chilly," she replies, knowing he'll pull away once she admits to being warm.

"The poles aren't built for lonely people," he says. "Shared body heat is a necessity, especially in the winter."

"Lonely?" she asks.

"Did I say lonely? I meant solitary."

"You said lonely."

He lets out a low sigh. "I am lonely, and it's all self-imposed." Catching himself, he adds, "I don't mean that in a 'martyr complex' way, just factual. You can't spend your whole life pushing everyone away and then complain when you're left alone." He smooths the back of her hair with his free hand. "I'm sorry you had to see all this, Korra. Home brings out strange sides of people. Makes them regress to the maturity they were when they left it." His hand freezes, then drops away, as if he's second-guessing the intimacy of touching her head. She instantly misses it.
"You're allowed to get upset," she says. "I know you're used to being passive and unemotional, at least on the outside, but it's okay to feel things. When you bottle emotions up, that's when they explode." She closes her eyes and focuses on his heartbeat. "You felt what the corrosion did to my chi pathways, right? Emotions corrupt you like that, too. They twist and mutate and erode your psyche, unless you learn how to vent them properly."

It takes him a few moments to reply: "That's an astute observation."

"It's Tenzin's," she admits. "We've spent a lot of time over the past eight months discussing my mental state."

"And how are you?"

"A lot better. He helped me realize that I had gotten into a pattern of expressing some emotions in unhealthy ways, and keeping others too bottled up, something that's not a natural state for me. So I'm getting better at acknowledging what I'm really feeling, not what I think I should be feeling, if that makes any sense? I mean, I still have days where I want to hide away from the world, but it's no longer a daily thing like it once was. I feel things again." Quietly, she adds, "You helped with that."

"I did?" Beneath her ear, his heart rate increases.

"I was bottling up a lot of my negative emotions - pride, fear, lust for power, even just lust in general. You helped me realize that people are complicated, that some bad character traits doesn't make me a bad person. Everyone is made up of good and bad, even the Avatar. Once I realized that about myself, it became easier to accept the parts of myself I had been trying to deny."

She feels him shake his head. "A lesson I still need to learn. I've spent my whole life running away from myself. That conversation with my mother... I was always pretending to be someone else when I visited her, so we ignored the past. Any discussion of it was permanently suspended when she passed. I thought it was better that way, but then I think about how much stronger our relationship could have been if I had been open from the start."

"Sometimes honesty is hard," she says, "but it's often easier in the long run."

His voice fades. "If we're being honest, then tell me, Korra: why did you fall for me?"

She pulls back a little so that she can see his face. "What?"

"Why did you fall for me, during our mission?" His brows are pinched and twitching a little, as if he's barely holding himself together. "After all I've done, after everyone I've hurt, after all my selfishness."

Korra gives a little shrug. "My heart latched onto you, and I followed it."

"It's really that simple for you, isn't it?" He pulls the brandy bottle out of the snow and lifts it to his lips.

"I hadn't been hurt all that much in my life," she admits. "Love didn't scare me. I liked you, and you seemed to like me, so I jumped feet-first into an affair."

The arm around her tenses. "'Affair' is an interesting term."

She shifts; for all her talk about honesty, there are some things she's still shy about discussing. "What word would you use?"
"I don't know. Not 'affair.' It's too transient." There's a softness to his expression she's never seen before. He looks vulnerable.

"Transient," she repeats.

"Fleeting."

"I know what it means," she says, even though she didn't. "Doesn't a week qualify as transient?"

He studies her for a moment, then nestles the bottle into the snow. His free hand reaches for her neck and traces the chain of her necklace, his fingertip just barely grazing her skin in the process. She holds her breath.

"You're still wearing it," he says. "Are you just celebrating a transient memory?" He asks it as if he already knows the answer.

Heat flashes throughout her body, and she stands, accidentally knocking away his arms. She can't bring herself to discuss these feelings. Not yet.

He rises to his feet beside her. "Korra-"

"I'm fine," she says, but her hands are shaking. She balls them into fists. "Tarrlok and I were planning to head to the festivities to check them out, and we'd love for you to join us."

Still looking a bit stunned by her reaction, he says, "I'm surprised Tarrlok wants to be anywhere near me."

"You're his brother," she says. "He loves you, even with everything that happened."

He doesn't say a word, just watches her, and she fills in the blanks herself: And what about you, Korra?

With a sudden burst of bravery, she blurts, "It wasn't just an affair."

His brows perk up, so microscopically that she wouldn't have noticed if she weren't hanging on to every tiny movement. Her words keep pouring out: "I keep your letters in my underwear drawer, and sometimes I pull them out and analyse your writing, or stare at the smudges and wonder if they were tears. I imagine your state of mind as you wrote them, and in those moments, I understand why you left. But then I put the letters away and a few minutes pass and I get angry and hurt all over again."

His eyes drop to her neck, and she realizes she is unconsciously gripping the pendant again. She curses aloud, and her hand falls away.

"And it's stupid," she says, "because I'm upset that you hurt my feelings, but I tried to kill you. I tried to kill you! Noatak. It doesn't matter! I tried to kill you, Noatak." She takes a shuddering breath and tries to steady herself. "It's all so difficult. Love is supposed to be easy. It's supposed to complement your life, not make it harder."

She can tell by the slight narrowing of his eyes that she has insulted him. "Do I make your life
"Of course you do." The words have barely left her lips when she starts to second-guess herself. "But then when we had those few days during the mission where it was just the two of us, everything felt so easy and natural. Even before we started sleeping together, just talking and being together was so easy."

"Every relationship has its hard and easy times," says Noatak. "Due to our circumstances, ours had to start at a difficult point in our lives."

"But that's the thing," she says. "There are no easy times for us. You're a fugitive who needs to stay out of the spotlight, and I'm the most famous person in the world. There's no way we can work."

"That's why I left."

"You made that decision for me," she says. "You didn't give me any say."

"Believe me, Tarrlok made it clear that I don't have the right to decide what's best for people, and I won't be making that mistake again." He reaches out to her, and his fingers trail down one of the ponytails framing her face. "I'm giving you your say now, Korra. What do you want?"

"I don't know," she admits, her gaze ducking from his. "I want to forgive you. I want to be able to look at you without feeling hurt or angry, but it's going to take time, and I'm only here for a couple more days."

"Time is something I have in abundance these days, Avatar." He says the title softly, with fondness.

"I can't ask you to wait while I sort out my feelings."

"You aren't asking. I'm offering."

"You're building a life here as Saomik the accountant," she says, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "You could marry a local woman or man and live out the rest of your days here. You have always had the ability to move on and fall hard - you should take advantage of that."

"I don't want to." His fingers slide down to the tip of her ponytail, then he gently presses his fingertips beneath her chin, encouraging her to look at him. "I can't move on. This is the longest I've been alone since I was a teenager. It seems my fixation on you is life-long, even if its nature has changed."

He's looking at her so tenderly that tears well in her eyes, and she blinks them back.

His hand slowly returns to his side. "But I know what I am, Korra, and I know that wanting someone doesn't mean we deserve them. You need time, and I am willing to give it. The anniversary of my departure is four months away, and I think it's safe to say that if you're still unable to forgive me after a year, forgiveness will never happen. So I propose we meet again in four months to decide what we are."

The deadline coincides with the year-long pact she made with Tarrlok, and for a moment, she's paralysed, realizing how far all three of them have come since that night on the cliff when Tarrlok confessed he wanted to die. Tarrlok has regained much of his speech, and he is honing his martial arts skills. Most importantly, he seems happy. Noatak has made a new life for himself, and his self-awareness is greater than she ever thought possible. And Korra is regaining her bending, her public image, and her social life. If so much happened in just eight months, then a lot can happen in
Another four.

"Does this mean you're going to be courting me for four months?" she asks. The only time she has really been courted was when Tarrlok was trying to woo her to his task force, and she's no idea if that's what it's always like, but it seems exhausting.

"Not unless you want me to, but I imagine it would only be unnecessary pressure."

She takes a moment to consider, then says softly, "Okay."

He steps in, and she can tell he's leaning down for a hug, but then he hesitates. *He's worried about offending me. Have I really been that jumpy?*

"It's been a tough day," she says, "so if you need a hug-

She doesn't even get to finish the sentence. He pulls her in for an embrace, so violently that it momentarily knocks the breath from her lungs. This is the contact she has been wanting since the moment he first left her side, and she closes her eyes and claws her hands into his back.

*I still love you,* she thinks. *Even with all the self-pity and regret and misplaced rage.*

Maybe she isn't as confused as she thought.

.*.*.*.

Noatak presses his nose to Korra's hair and breathes in. He can't get enough of her natural scent - he had forgotten it during their absence, but now it's bringing back vivid imagery in little flashes. He sees her hand reaching out after the memory of Asami as she recounted the story of her death, sharing a painful part of her past that no one else knew. The narrowed, challenging eyes as she held him with water whips in the shower. The playful yet painful way she elbowed his ribs when they were both drunk on wine. The jarring blow of bone-on-bone contact during their sparring match, where she displayed such strength and competence.

He's furious with himself for the way he has acted today. All this time, he has tried to convince himself and everyone else that he has been evolving and growing, and the way he spoke to his mother only proved that he's still the same selfish child he always was. Korra is being nice about it now, but time will allow her to reconsider the event, over and over, and soon she'll see him for what he is. This may be his last chance to hold her like this.

As much as he wants time to slow, it paces relentlessly forward, and he's becoming conscious that the hug is lasting far too long. He can't resist planting a soft kiss in her hair before he pulls away.

She clears her throat and adjusts her ponytails, not looking at him. He awkwardly rakes his fingers through his hair, then scowls as most of it falls into his face. His hair, when untamed, is naturally fluffy, and all the melodramatic rage of the day has returned it to its natural state.

Korra must notice, too, because a smirk appears on her lips. *Here, bend down.*

He complies, and she uses waterbending to dampen the gel, her fingers combing his hair into place.

"There," she says, and he lifts his head.

"Better?" he asks, noticing the way her eyes widen a little.
"You look-" Her voice comes out as a squeak, and she clears her throat. "You look good. Where are your glasses? Don't you need them?"

"Most likely, but the ones I wear are plain glass. My new mask."

"Significantly less intimidating than the previous one." She gives him a wobbly smile.

"That's the idea. Trying to look intelligent and harmless."

"Guys like you are never harmless," she says, and then she blushes. He raises a brow, intrigued.

"Guys like me?"

"You know." She shrugs it off. "Devastatingly handsome guys." She turns and begins to walk back to his home; he falls into step beside her.

"Devastatingly handsome?" Is she flirting with him?

"Yeah. Using their handsomeness to get what they want out of life."

"I made a name for myself by hiding my face."

"And you never once, in fifty years, took advantage of your looks?"

"Fifty!" His lips flatten. "I'm forty-seven."

She gives him a playful wink, and he's surprised by the obvious flirtation. It seems out of place given the solemn history of their relationship, but he wants to see more of it. His tongue is just touching the back of his teeth to begin enunciating some teasing of his own, but then her face sags.

"I missed your birthday, didn't I?" she says. "You were forty-six last time we saw each other."

"I didn't celebrate it, either."

"When was it?"

"A couple months back," He glances at her. "And I missed yours. I considered sending you a gift, but I decided it would just reopen old wounds."

She gives him a sad smile. "Part of me is glad to hear you realized that, but part of me wishes you had sent something anyway."

He returns her smile.

It's warm enough that the upper layer of snow has iced over, and the bottom layer is soft, gradually clogging Noatak's treads until his feet have no traction. They round the top of a hill, and his balance is good enough that he can check himself when his feet start to skid. Korra, however, steps into an unexpected sinkhole and yells, clamping onto his arm to hold herself upright. His balance gives out under their combined weight and they tumble down the hill.

Noatak spits out snow and claws it out of his eye sockets. He's lying on his back, Korra splayed across his stomach.

"Sorry," she mutters, clearing snow from her face. "I've forgotten how to walk in this kind of snow."
"Are you hurt?" He instinctively covers her hand with his. It shouldn't feel intimate - he's wearing thick leather gloves, and she's wearing mittens - but it makes him suddenly aware of her body weight on top of his. His mind blanks, and he stares at her. She looks dumbfounded, too, her mouth hanging open.

Kiss her, his body screams, but his mind is reminding him that he promised four months of no pressure. Images begin to flood his brain anyway: he'll grab her jaw and pull her in, then kiss her, lick her lips and teeth, kiss her deeply, and then roll her over and lay his weight on top of her. His kisses will trail down her neck; her back will arch and she'll roll her hips against his, moans escaping her lips in little bursts-

"We should probably get back to the house," he says, his voice tight. She must notice his awakening body, but she doesn't say a word, just rolls off of him and begins to brush herself off. He subtly adjusts himself as he stands.

Korra takes the lead, using waterbending to lay down a path of sticky snow that makes a squeaking crunch as they walk. Noatak feels a pang of sympathy for the hunters and wanderers who don't have waterbending to aid them in adverse snow conditions. I suppose I am among them now.

Once they reach the street, she drops back to walk beside him, and the conversation that flowed so easily before has evaporated. How small the difference, he thinks. We can cuddle and huddle of our own accord, but one accidental contact has left us speechless. Are we guarding ourselves so carefully around each other that we can't bear to lose control for even a moment?

"Korra-" he starts, just as she says, "I think-"

They glance at each other, each waiting for the other to finish their thought, until Noatak gives up and looks down the street instead. I forgot how much she disarms me. I'm like a kid with a first crush.

As they step into his house, she says, "Can I use your phone? I can pay you back for the long distance."

He nods. "You can use the one in Tarrlok's room. It'll be more private."

"Thanks." She peels off her outerwear, tosses it on her boots, then takes the stairs two at a time. Noatak hangs up his own coat, then picks up hers and hangs it next to his, carefully smoothing it. When he's done, he sees Tarrlok watching him from the kitchen. Their eyes hold, the second hand of the clock ticking in the background. Noatak is at a loss for words. What can he possibly say, after how horribly he acted before?

Korra's voice begins to filter downstairs. He never realized how poor the soundproofing was on his house, and he feels compelled to speak to give her an extra layer of privacy.

"I'm sorry, Brother," he says. "I've been acting like a child all day."

"None of this is easy." Tarrlok brings a pot to the table and sets it on a folded cloth. "I was angry, too, once. I screamed at Mom the day our father died, said awful words. We worked past it."

"I never had that opportunity." Realizing it's a self-deluding lie, Noatak corrects himself: "I never allowed that opportunity to happen. If I had been braver, it could have. I wish I had salvaged a real relationship with our mother, one based on honesty instead of lies and denial." He shifts his gaze back to Tarrlok. "I'm glad you and I, at least, have that chance, if you can ever forgive me for all I've done."
His brother stares at him, then he barrels forward, and Noatak tenses, expecting another punch - he doesn't intend to resist this time.

Instead, Tarrlok's arms wrap around him, and he buries his face in Noatak's neck as if he's a child again. Noatak hugs him back, closing his eyes, and the words finally come easily: "I'm sorry."

"As am I," says Tarrlok.

"For what?"

Tarrlok pulls back, brows pinched. "For the boat." Before Noatak has a chance to react, he presses on: "Listen to what Mom said. Her words were true."

"I know." Noatak sighs. "That's why they hurt so much."

But here, with his brother in his arms, he feels like he can be so much more than what he was.

* * *

The phone rings, and then Lian says, "Hello?"

Korra doesn't even need to ask what happened; she can tell by the cracking voice. "Oh, Lian," she says sympathetically.

"Korra?" There's a sniffle. "Yeah, I was right about Mako. We broke up today."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could be there to stuff you full of dessert until you feel better."

"I need something a little stronger than dessert. Nalena is going to take me out to a jazz club."

"Good." The pauses between their sentences are awkwardly paced due to lag on the line, and Korra wishes she could have this conversation in person. She sits on the bed and twists the phone cord around her fingers. "I'll be there in spirit."

"We'll go again when you get back. And dessert. No reason I can't do both." Lian sniffs again, but then her voice brightens: "Are you still up north? How's it going?"

"Oh, Lian, I can't talk about it when you're so sad," she says, even though she desperately wants her friend's advice.

"No, no. I need distraction. Is you-know-who there?"

"Yes." Korra's voice drops to a whisper, and she glances at the closed door, remembering how well sound carries through the house. "We're staying at his house. I slept in his bed, so there was a little cuddling, nothing more than that. So things were going pretty well until I channelled the spirit of his dead mother. He got into a fight with her and completely broke down."

"Shit, did he actually cry in front of you?"

"This whole visit has kind of been non-stop crying for everyone." Korra sighs.

"Have you told him how you feel about him?"

"Yeah, I mean, I told him I've been really confused. But..." She drops her voice to a whisper again. "I don't know, I'm even more confused now. Everything's so tense and awkward and emotional. We were conversing pretty well today, and then I stupidly stumbled and fell and landed on top of
him, and..." She feels her cheeks darken.

"And what? I think the line cut out."

She tries to pad her words with nonchalance, but they come out singsong instead: "No, I just trailed off there."

"What's with that tone? Something happened, didn't it?" There's a short pause. "You landed on him, he got a boner, you noticed, he noticed you noticed, and things got weird."

"Lian!"

"I'm right, aren't I? What else could have happened, with the two of you piled together like that?"

Korra sighs. "Have you already gotten started on those drinks or something?"

"Maybe a sip or two," says Lian. "Look, you're over thinking this. Just touch his dick."

Korra gives a shocked giggle. "You're drunk."

"No, seriously, touch his dick. Then there's no way he'll mistake your intentions."

Now Korra's imagining her hand reaching down the front of Noatak's pants, his eyes sliding closed, his neck arching, his lips parting with a low groan... "Fuck, Lian! I called you for advice, not to make things worse."

"Okay, seriously: you aren't there for very long, and you're obviously going to sleep with him eventually, and when that happens, you're going to be all, 'why didn't I do this sooner?' So do it sooner. Save Future Korra some grief, and let me live vicariously through you. For the sake of this newly-single woman, I implore you: touch his dick."

"Spirits, I hope this is a private line." Korra lets the cord loose, and it springs back into its coiled shape. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Thanks for calling, Korra. You might want to check in on Mako when you get back, too. He's pretty shaken up."

"Should I give him a call?"

"Nah, Bolin was going to take him out on the town. You go have fun." They say their goodbyes, then Korra hangs up. She stays seated on the bed, staring at the doorway.

Obviously, Lian was playfully exaggerating, but there's a hint of truth to her words: time is short, and there is still a crackle of chemistry between her and Noatak. Unless she's imagining it. Her jaw clenches. *Why does this have to be so complicated? Why didn't I just fall in love with a nice boy my age with no long, complex history?*

She returns to her room. As she's rummaging through her bag for a warmer shirt, her hand brushes her makeup bag, and, distracted, she opens it up. She brought it on a whim, along with her best winter dress. Maybe dolling herself up will give her a little confidence.

She tries to pretend it's for her sake, not Noatak's, but already she's wondering how he'll react when he sees her.

***
Lunch is just coming off the stovetop, and Noatak is just setting the table, when Korra's footsteps sound on the stairs. Noatak's look starts as a glance and ends as a stare as her appearance utterly distracts him from his task.

She's wearing a winter dress. The thick blue fabric falls down her body in a fashionable straight line, revealing a cheeky hint of her curves beneath it; it ends in pleats at her knees. The long sleeves are fitted, and beneath the skirt, she's wearing dark blue fitted pants. Fur lines the collar and sleeves, and a white pattern plays across the waist and bottom hem. Her hair is half down, half of it pulled off her face with a blue headband, and she's wearing dark eyeliner. Her red lipstick makes her teeth gleam white in contrast as she smiles.

He tries to find the words to tell her how beautiful she looks, but his mind is too slow.

"Do I look okay?" she asks shyly. "I know I'm not likely to be recognized out here, but I thought I should disguise myself a bit just in case."

"You look stunning," says Tarrlok behind him, and Noatak feels a hot wave of frustration that his brother got the first word.

Korra smiles at him, but then her eyes tick to Noatak, and she watches anxiously, as if waiting for his reaction.

"If you didn't want to draw attention, you went about it the wrong way," he says, standing tall. "You're going to be the talk of the town." Trying not to show how much her beauty has affected him, he continues his task of setting the table, but accidentally knocks over the empty wine bottle; he fumbles and catches it before it hits the floor. He winces and doesn't look up, knowing the other two are probably smirking at him with amusement.

"Have a seat," says Tarrlok, pulling out a chair for her.

Noatak slips into his chair, too. Korra is still watching him, a shy smile on her face. When his brother joins them, he is smiling, as well. The two most important people in his life, at the same table, smiling - Noatak feels his throat tighten.

He abruptly stands and paces to the ice box, where he pulls out his igunaq and chocolate. Returning to the table, he sections each into three.

"A few days ago," he says, "my idea of celebration was sitting alone in my house eating delicacies." He sets sections on the plates of his dining companions. "It will taste a thousand times better if it's shared with the people I care about."

The honesty surprises him - it leaves his lips as easily as any lie he ever told in his years as Amon. His companions look surprised as well, staring at him with twin stunned looks.

Tarrlok is the first to break the silence. He holds up his igunaq, carefully pinched between his chopsticks. "To the future," he says.

Korra does the same. "To honesty."

Noatak holds up his as well. "To looking forward, not back."

Deep within his chest, the wall of ice around his heart begins to crack.
As they approach the town square, Korra's steps get bouncier until she's almost skipping. She pulls ahead of the brothers and spins to face them, stomping the snow with excited mock frustration. "Come on, slowpokes!"

Noatak adjusts his glasses as he increases his pace to catch up to her. Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes are alight, and she's so adorable that he wants to squeeze her to his chest like a stuffed toy. He doesn't realize he's grinning until he catches Tarrlok smirking at him.

"Come on!" Korra grabs Noatak's arm and pulls him forward. As they approach the town square, he takes in his surroundings. Lit paper lanterns of various colours and sizes zigzag above the square, held aloft by wires. The nearest side of the square is occupied by merchant booths. The scent of frying bread makes his stomach growl, even though they just ate.

The centre of the square has been shaped into a skating ring, and couples and children are zipping around it, some on proper skates, some using waterbending. Beyond it are more booths that seem to be the craft and artisan exhibition booths. He's curious to see how his project is being received, but he's a bit shy about Tarrlok and Korra seeing it. It might be a good segue to the other project he has tucked safely in his pocket, the birthday gift or Korra that he never sent.

Beyond the square is the city park, and a drum circle is getting set up. Once upon a time, when the town was just a small village, he and Tarrlok were among them.

"Here we are," he says to his guests. "It's probably a bit small, compared to what you're accustomed to."

Korra is still bouncy. "Let's start by looking at the booths! And I want to see the crafts, and then watch the drum circle." He has never seen her so excited; it's energizing him as well.

"Tarrlok?" he asks, seeking his brother's input.

"We'd better let her do what she wants," he says. "She might explode."

Korra darts toward a food booth. As the brothers arrive behind hers, she's already ordering each of them a candy stick. Noatak accepts his warily; it's wintergreen mint, a flavour he's never been particularly fond of, but she's so excited that he takes a lick of it anyway and thanks her.

Armed with their sugary treats, they wander around the booths. Korra purchases a few gifts - a woven headband, some wrist cuffs, and a couple belts. Tarrlok mostly rifles through merchandise and wrinkles his nose. Noatak subtly slips his candy stick into a garbage bin when no one is looking.

They stop for a few minutes at a steamed bun stand to purchase some small treats, and the residual steam fogs up Noatak's glasses. Korra laughs and pulls the moisture off the lenses.

"No point in me being all dressed up like this if you can't see me," she says with a cheeky grin.

"Even when I can't see you, you're polished so brightly that with my eyes closed, your afterimage is
burnt into my vision," he says.

Korra giggles, but Tarrlok rolls his eyes, grumbles "Spirits," and moves to the next stall.

By the time they finish touring the stalls, the drum circle is nearly set up. "Let's see the craft section while we're waiting," says Korra, bolting ahead. The brothers follow behind her. The crowd is starting to get thicker around them, and her bobbing ponytail disappears into a sea of people.

"You're terrible at flirting," says Tarrlok.

"I'm more accustomed to being the one flirted with, not the other way around." Noatak pats the gift in his pocket to reassure himself that it's still there. "I could face her head-on with a cool head when we were enemies, but I'm not quite so collected around her now. I feel like the closer I am to her, the slacker my mind becomes. In the events of the past day, I've lost all my confidence, all my poise."

"Love does that. You're fine. She doesn't seem to mind." Tarrlok pauses, then nods at the craft tables ahead of them. "You look nervous. I saw carving tools in my room."

It seems his brother's reasoning skills are still sharp; Noatak's lips flatten as they near the craft section. "I'm a poor artisan, but it breaks up the monotony between training and work. If I look nervous, it's because it's intimidating for the muse to see the work she doesn't know she inspired."

"Ah. You any good?"

"You tell me." Noatak grabs Tarrlok's arm and pulls him to the side of the pathway, where they won't be in the way. With a quick glance around to make sure Korra isn't in sight, he pulls the gift out of his pocket. "I was going to send this for her birthday, but I decided it was best not to contact her and re-open old wounds."

Tarrlok delicately unfolds the cloth to reveal a soapstone figurine.

"Maybe too lumpy," says Noatak.

"No." Carefully, Tarrlok re-bundles the carving and hands it back to him. "She'll love it."

Self-doubt is an unfamiliar emotion for Noatak, and it makes his palms sweat. "I suppose I should wait to see how she reacts to the one I entered in the competition."

"She'll love it," says Tarrlok again. "Take her somewhere private. Give this to her and kiss her."

"I promised not to pressure her."

Tarrlok's hands clamp onto either shoulder as he forces Noatak to look at him. "You flirt poorly, and she laughs. She loves you. Kiss her."

There's no way he's going to make the first move after essentially promising Korra that it was hers to make, but Noatak knows the advice comes from a good place, so he only says, "Thanks." He slides the gift back into his pocket. At least he feels more confident about giving the carving to her now.

When the brothers arrive at the craft stalls, Korra is looking at a display of fine embroidery. She waves a greeting. "Sorry, I couldn't wait."

"I wouldn't have expected you to get excited about crafts," says Noatak.
"Are you kidding? I love this kind of thing." Her fingers trail down an embroidered banner of a winter scene. "It was my break from training when I was a kid - I'd visit home, and Mom and I would make things together. I was never very good, and I got frustrated easily, but I always liked watching her. She's always been very skilled with her hands – she even helped me make Naga's saddle. Sometimes Katara would join us, too, but she was even less patient with it than I was." She chuckles. "I still remember one time she accidentally knocked a tray of beads onto the floor, and they scattered everywhere. It was the first time I heard the word 'shit,' and she was so embarrassed and apologetic afterwards. Mom laughed so hard that she started crying."

The thought of the legendary Katara swearing over scattered beads makes Noatak smile, but it fades as Korra takes a few steps toward the soapstone section.

"Which one is yours?" asks Tarrlok, quietly enough that she won't overhear.

"Far left." There's no prize ribbon on his sculpture - that honour went to three of the skilled elders, and he's not surprised. He fixates on Korra, waiting to see if she'll like his work.

At first, her eyes skim over it, but then they lock on. She takes a step closer, her lips parting and her brows pinched.

Swallowing hard, Noatak moves to stand beside her. The sculpture is about a foot high, and shows her shoulders, neck and head in the exaggeratedly smooth, elongated style of traditional soapstone sculpture. The eyes are intentionally blank, the brows low with focus. Her hair is what took the longest - it fans her head in stylized curls, an aura of waves. The placard in front of it reads, *Her Terrible Beauty, by Saomik.*

He sees tears well in Korra's eyes.

"Her Terrible Beauty," she says, and her lips quiver. "That's so needlessly pretentious."

He isn't sure how to interpret the words, but then he feels movement along the side of his hand. Looking down, he sees her mitten brushing against his glove.

Suddenly, he's a child with his first crush; the slight contact, even through leather and fur, sends sparks through his body and into his brain. He's dizzy, disoriented, giddy. His hand closes over hers with a surge of bravery.

"I didn't expect you to see this," he says, and he's impressed with himself for keeping his voice from cracking. "The face is a bit lopsided, and-

"Stop." She sniffles. "It's perfect."

"If a bit pretentious?"

"No, it's perfect. I saw enough of your propaganda posters to know your style." She smiles up at him, her eyes glistening. "I can't believe Amon made pro-Avatar propaganda."

He stares at her, frozen by the realization. In the early stages of their relationship, she very clearly made the distinction between 'Amon and the Avatar' and 'Noatak and Korra'. Not only has she just openly acknowledged that his two identities are the same, but his statue represents the same for her. He carved Korra in the Avatar State without even a second thought. In their time apart, they've removed those carefully placed dividers between their personas, acknowledged each others' entireties.

He runs his thumb along her knuckles - or his best approximation, through the mitten - and this
time when she looks up at him, her smile and eyes are soft.

*I love you because you're Korra,* he thinks, *and I love you because you're the Avatar.*

In the background, the drums begin to beat.

Korra blinks, as if waking from a dream, and looks around. "The drum circle is starting up. Where's your brother?"

They find Tarrlok across the park, examining beaded hair ties in the vendor stalls.

"Are you thinking of doing your hair the way you used to?" asks Korra.

"Four tails this time," he says, not looking up from his prospective purchases. "New tail for each life-shaping event."

"What were the others?" she asks.


"I would have thought your appointment to the Council would have been the third," says Noatak gruffly.

Looking him directly in the eyes, Tarrlok says, "Relative intensity. It was an achievement, but didn't change my life."

*I should have been there for him,* thinks Noatak, his heart sinking. In all those years of surveillance, it never occurred to him that his brother was still hurting from their separation. Tarrlok always seemed so calm and practical; he had evidently severed himself from the emotions he always wore on his sleeve when he was a kid. *How alike we are. He didn't sever himself from the emotions: he buried them.*

Tarrlok's eyes flick down to stare at Korra and Noatak's joined hands, and a tiny smile forms on his lips. "How times have changed."

"Oh," says Korra, hastily withdrawing her hand with a blush.

"No need to let go," says Tarrlok. "It's a strange sight, but welcome."

Noatak looks between the two people he loves more than anything in the world, and for the first time in his life, he feels absolutely no desire to escape. He doesn't want to be apart from them ever again. He wonders how they would react if he pulled them both in for a hug.

His adoring look must be awkward enough, because Korra says, "Okay, enough sappiness. Hurry up and pick your hair ties, Tarrlok. The drum circle's starting up, and I want to watch."

Tarrlok holds up two nearly identical bags of blue bands, chewing his lip.

"The one on the left," says Noatak, since there's no discernible difference.

"Definitely," says Korra.

Tarrlok nods and hands his cash to the merchant. He's barely received his change when Korra grabs his arm and begins to drag both brothers through the crowd.

As they approach, the drum's reverberations get stronger, vibrating Noatak's bones. A crowd has
formed around the circle, and they quickly find a gap in the crowd where Korra will be able to see. There are four drummers so far, two of them men, two boys. The boys look as if they might be brothers, and Noatak watches them with tears in his eyes. They hold the drums by their handles, rotating them back and forth as they dance and striking the rims with the mallets. The sound is so deep and booming that Noatak feels his breaths begin to match the rhythm.

"Do you still remember how to drum?" asks Tarrlok quietly.

"Of course."

"If I get us some drums..." He trails off, and Noatak nods.

"I'll drum with you, brother."

Tarrlok smiles and pushes his way to a small drum stall outside of the circle. Noatak recognizes the drum-maker as the father of the family who owns the general store. The man has never introduced himself by name, but he often sits in the corner of the store, fashioning his drums. "Humidity's perfect in this spot," he always says. Sometimes, when he's shopping, Noatak pauses to watch with a great sense of conflict, remembering the way he used to watch his father shape drums as a child. He's built his father into such a villain in his mind that it's difficult to reconcile the bad memories with the good.

They watch from a distance as Tarrlok holds up a drum and gives it an experimental beat. Korra steps in closer.

"You know," she says, "I drum, too."

"You do?" Noatak looks down at her, surprised. "But you're-" Realizing what he's about to say, he cuts himself off, but her arms fold over her chest anyway.

"-a woman?" she finishes.

He clears his throat. "In Northern Tribe tradition-"

"Not really a champion of equality after all, are you?" she says, and he can't tell if she's joking or genuinely annoyed.

"Women typically throat sing instead."

Korra snorts. "Throat singing. Sounds like two dogs growling at each other."

Noatak sets his jaw. "My mother was a throat singer."

"Well, my mother played the drum. But I'll respect your sexist traditions if it's just going to draw unwanted attention to me." She elbows him playfully, letting him know she's not upset, but her words about equality are already swimming in his mind. He left home when he was young enough that most of his ideas of fairness were society's, not his own. When he stops to deconstruct his culture, it really does have some sexist aspects. He sets his jaw.

"It would draw attention in this circle," he says, "so we'll start our own." Before she can respond, he strides over to Tarrlok's side.

"Get three," he says.

Tarrlok turns to him, brows raised. "Three?"
"Sao Mik, is that you?" The drum maker grins, his face wrinkling. "Didn't recognize you at first."

Noatak subconsciously adjusts his glasses. "Yes, it's me. Shaved off the beard."

"Trying to clean up for your niece's visit, I take it?" The man strains his neck to look at Korra.

"She isn't my niece."

"Daughter?"

"We aren't related," says Noatak, trying to ignore Tarrlok's amused smirk.

"Oh." The man looks surprised, but then his face stretches into a friendly grin again. "Well. In that case, you'll be wanting to impress her, won't you?"

Noatak opens his wallet and counts out a few notes, then passes them to the drum maker. "Three of your finest."

"Then you won't want this piece of junk." He plucks the drum from Tarrlok's hands and rummages around for three new ones. They're finely painted with three designs: crashing waves on one, the moon on another, and a stylized Tui and La on the third. "Finest drums I have. They'll sing so clearly that your heart will ache."

"Thank you," says Noatak, not sure he needs his heart to ache anymore than it already does.

Korra is waiting for them at the back of the crowd. She hurries over. The drummers are taking a break between songs, and Noatak feels their absence, a little hollow in his body that appears in time with the beats.

"Here." Noatak hands Korra the drum with Tui and La on it. "The Avatar is balance."

She examines the design with a smile, then gives a few experimental taps on the rim with her mallet. It's a deep, clear base, much higher quality than any drum Noatak has ever heard in person.

He turns to Tarrlok and hands him the one with waves on it. "I know you don't like when I decide things for you, but I believe this one is fitting. Waves have the power to shape things around them, even seemingly unyielding rock. It's a good metaphor for your political career." He may not agree with his brother's decisions, but he certainly admires his skill.

"The moon for you, then," says Tarrlok. "Sometimes seems to disappear, but always watching, even from shadow." Before the sentiment of the statement can sink in, his face takes on an arrogant, challenging expression. "Remember how to play?"

"Of course." Noatak hopes he isn't inadvertently lying. He glances at Korra, who's still inspecting her drum. He knows enough about human psychology to understand his impulse to impress her - an ancient inborn instinct to try to appear to be the most ideal mate - but acknowledging it doesn't make it any less powerful. He has already unconsciously widened his stance and puffed out his chest.

"I'm not sure I remember," says Korra. "Come on, let's go deeper into the park in case we're terrible."

They leave the path and find a patch of untouched snow deep in the park, within a crescent of fir trees that must have been transplanted from the northern Earth Kingdom. Though the lit path is still within eyesight, they're far enough away that most of the light comes from the moon herself.
"Here we go," says Korra, striking her drum.

All three of them are clumsy, at first. It's difficult to find the rhythm of the drum while still maintaining its momentum, especially in unison. Noatak finds his clumsy hand is just making matters worse. He tries to drive the momentum and rhythm with his dancing feet, the way his father taught him, but the mallet still strikes at uneven intervals.

"Left-swing-right-swing," says Tarrlok.

"That's what I'm doing." Noatak feels his cheeks flush with frustration.

Korra stops. "We need a song to drum along to. That will keep us in unison. I can sing, if it will help."

"I thought you didn't throat sing," says Noatak.

"I don't, but I know some story ballads. Here." Clearing her throat, she begins to dance, hopping from one foot to the other. Her drum spins on its handle, and the drumbeat is loud and clear.

Then she begins to sing, and Noatak stares, enchanted. Her voice is a bit rough, a bit off key, but it's so strong and melodic that he's drawn in. Every second line, true to tradition, is a chant of "ayayaya." I used to call these 'ayaya songs,' thinks Noatak, his mind straining to remember the forgotten detail of his childhood. The elders used to sing epic tales of hunting with their families, and I couldn't wait until I was old enough to go hunting with my father. Tears well in his eyes.

Korra's song is about her chancing upon a wounded polar bear cub as a little girl, and trying to coax it back to her home. As she talks about the cub, she bends low to the ground, her dance shifting so that she looks more animal than human.

Beside him, Tarrlok's drum begins to join in. His dance is restrained, at first, and he looks a little uncomfortable, so Noatak joins in to support him.

"And her fur was soft and warm, ayayayayaya..." she sings, and this time, Noatak joins in the chanting. Korra beams at him.

The next chanting line, Tarrlok joins in as well, their three voices ringing in a strange, pleasing dissonance, alto, tenor and bass.

Noatak had forgotten the power of the drum circle. With each beat of the drums, he can feel the energy of his brother and the Avatar flowing through him in bursts; he's part of a perfect, infinite circuit. There's an intimacy, camaraderie, in making music together like this. It's the first time in years that he has felt he truly belonged.

Korra begins to move to her left, and soon the three of them are dancing and spinning in a circle. She gives a laugh that's almost a shriek, and Noatak feels a hearty laugh rise from his stomach. Tarrlok's eyes are nearly closed, as if he's feeling their pattern more than following it.

The verses end, but Korra isn't ready to end the song yet; she continues the chanted lines, letting the drums replace the words between them. Her eyes twinkle at Noatak, and he's just trying to figure out what it means when a flame starburst explodes at the centre of their circle. The flames weave between them in time with the music, and streams of glowing water begin to weave a counter-pattern, and he realizes that Korra is psychically bending the elements to add another layer of beauty to their dance.

Tarrlok gives a wild holler, and Noatak echoes it, euphoric. Conscious thought has left his mind;
this is like meditation, but perfect wildness instead of perfect stillness. This is primal, fire and ice, his blood pumping in time to the drum beats. This is the voice of their ancestors, thousands of years old. Sweat trails down his back under the thick layers of clothing, and his lungs are sore from breathing in cold air, but he never wants to stop.

And at the helm of it all is Korra, her loose hair dancing around her face in perfect mimicry of his carved portrait of her. Her movements are fluid and unpredictable, her face flashing orange and blue with the elements, and he's never been more in awe of another being. He wants to knock the drum from her hand and force his fingers into her hair, wants to feel that dancing body writhe against his. He wants to pull her down to the snow, wrestle with her until one of them claims dominance; he wants her to singe his skin with the dancing flames, burn it with the ice.

Korra's movements slow, her dance becoming toe taps instead. Their chants fade, and then there's just the perfect clarity of the drums for a few more beats. Finally, she lowers her drum, and the brothers follow, and the air around them is unnaturally still, cold and silent.

Then Korra laughs. "That was amazing!" She rushes forward to gather both brothers into a tight hug. Noatak's nose presses into her hair. She smells faintly of sweat, sweet and musky, and the pheromones flood his mind.

"That was beautiful," says a woman's voice behind them.

The three break apart and turn.

"Akna," says Noatak, recognizing the client he had dealings with yesterday. Her hair is up in an elaborate mound of looping braids and beads, and she's wearing softer makeup than usual. Like Korra, she's wearing a winter dress, thick and fur-lined. It's so different from the modern business clothes she usually wears that it looks out-of-place. Most unexpected of all is the smile on her face.

Slowly, the rest of the world comes back into focus: he begins to hear the faint sound of drums from the official circle, a vague chattering of a distant crowd. A few passersby wander off, having stopped to watch their performance. Noatak's joy fades as he realizes that they just drew far more attention to themselves than they should have.

"You three put on quite a show," says Akna, her voice genuine. She turns to Korra and dips in a small bow. "Avatar Korra, it is truly an honour to have witnessed your skills first-hand."

"Oh," says Korra, her face still flushed from the dance. "Thank you. I shouldn't have started bending - I was hoping to keep my visit here low-profile."

"I can understand," says Akna kindly, and her eyes drift to Noatak. "The media would be all over you both if they discovered you had started a relationship."

"We haven't-" he begins, but then his eyes lock onto Korra, and he falls silent. Even if they can't define whatever it is between them, it's still there. "Good to see you, Akna," he says instead.

"Saomik," she greets. "Almost didn't recognize you without the beard. Sideburns are a good look for you."

Her eyes drift to Tarrlok, and she stands taller, as if waiting for an introduction.

Noatak wipes the sweat off his forehead with the back of his glove. "My apologies; I should have introduced you right away." He clasps a hand onto her shoulder. "This is Akna, the local food industry queen. She is responsible for bringing in eighty per cent of the town's food imports. I have the honour of helping her with her budget."
"The honour is mine," she says smoothly, her eyes still locked on Tarrlok. Tarrlok doesn't seem to notice; he's inspecting the sinew stitching on his drum with exaggerated focus. *Is he shy?*

"I suppose Avatar Korra needs no introduction," continues Noatak. "And we thank you in advance for respecting her privacy. The man beside her is my brother, Isitoq."

"Nice to meet you," says Akna, holding out a hand. "But I think I know you by a different name." Glancing back at Noatak with a raised brow, she says, "I didn't know Councilman Tarrlok had another brother aside from Amon."

Three pairs of stunned eyes lock onto her.

"Half-brother," says Korra, the first to recover, and Noatak is impressed by how smoothly the lie rolls off her tongue.

"So far as we're concerned, I'm his only brother," adds Noatak, letting disapproval show in his voice. "We don't talk about the dead one." He raises a brow. "I'm surprised you recognized Tarrlok. The people of this town seem to be rather ignorant about anything that happens outside of it."

"I spent several years living in Republic City, and saw him speak several times." She smiles at the ex-Councilman. "You were a captivating speaker."

Now all eyes lock onto Tarrlok. "Not good with words anymore," he blurts, and then he cringes, as if regretting his own inelegance.

Noatak steps in: "My brother has been battling injury-induced speech difficulties for a long time. He has made great progress, but sometimes words still elude him."

"He's living with me at the Air Temple in Republic City," says Korra. "I'm his babysitter on this trip."

Tarrlok frowns at her.

"I see," says Akna, looking unfazed by all the new information. "Tarrlok, would you be interested in a bit of a tour around the festival grounds? We can give these two lovebirds a chance to be alone." She winks at Noatak, who grimaces. *When I promised a pressure-free four months for Korra, I didn't realize how much pressure would come from external sources."

"Yes," says Tarrlok, too quickly. He still looks flustered, and Noatak understands why. Akna is an attractive woman, and her confidence is charismatic. She would be a good match for Tarrlok: strong enough to hold her own against him, warm enough to engage his sensitive side.

"Is that okay with your babysitter?" asks Akna playfully.

Korra smiles. "That would be fine with me. Thank you. Be good, Tarrlok."

His eyes narrow at her pedantic tone, but then Akna's arm loops through his, and his expression reverts to nervousness.

"Come on," says the woman. "I'll show you around."

Once the two are out of earshot, Korra says, "She isn't the type to start rumours, is she?"

"Not at all," says Noatak.

"Good, because we just accidentally gave her enough rumours to fill an entire gossip column." She
raises a brow at him. "You think they'll get along?"

"Akna's a good woman. I can easily see them becoming friends, maybe more." He bends to pick up Tarrlok's drum and mallet. "Has he dated at all since his release from prison?"

"I don't think he's dated much at all, to be honest. He has mentioned a few ex-girlfriends before, but it sounds like work always ended up getting in the way." She smiles after the departing pair. "Wouldn't it be cute if they ended up falling in love? He deserves a little happiness."

"We all do," says Noatak quietly.

Her hand finds his again, and she smiles up at him. "Shall we go sit on the bench for awhile and chat? I'm a bit tired after all that drumming, and it would be nice to watch the sky for a bit. It's really dancing tonight."

"I would enjoy that," he says.

Gathering up the drums, they head toward the bench.
XLIII: Anticipation

XLIII

Anticipation

Noatak stacks the drums under the bench, then settles next to Korra. The bench is set back against the trees, their branches heavy with snow. Above them, the celestial lights are green and violet, and the stars form a thick band across the sky. The moon is hiding behind a cloud, giving the cloud a glowing white fringe. It truly is a beautiful evening.

Noatak watches Korra. Her chin is upturned, her lips parted as she takes in the sky. Her eyes reflect the dancing lights, and soft breaths puff from her mouth in clouds. He feels as if he's floating, as if they're both drifting in those celestial lights, lying on their backs, hands clasped and hearts racing. He feels as lightheaded and breathless as he was when they were dancing.

Then she looks at him, a soft, wondering smile still on her face, and he isn't sure if it's a lingering expression from her awe of the sky, or if it's for him. He's sure he must be looking at her the same way.

"The constellations are all wrong," she says, her voice a bit timid. "I've always found it so strange to be up north and not see any familiar ones."

"You don't know the names of any of the northern constellations?"

She shakes her head. "I recognize a couple near the horizon from Republic City, but I'm not sure what they are."

"Maybe I can help." He leans close to her and points just above the horizon. "That one with three stars in a triangle is Turtle Seal."

"Where?" she asks, squinting.

"Here." He pulls her in close and presses his cheek against hers, lining her up so that they can view his pointing hand together. "There. See the triangle? That planet at the edge of it almost looks like it could be its tail, doesn't it?"

"How can you tell that's a planet?" Her words puff into his vision, and he can taste the sweetness of her breath.

"It doesn't twinkle. The stars do. Look, you can follow the planets in an arc across the sky." He points to a bright one near the horizon, then traces the line to the others.

"How do you know so much about astrology?"

"Astronomy. I've always had a fascination with the night sky, and I spent a lot of my youth researching." He points above them. "See those two bright stars there, close together?"

"Yeah." She breathes the word, as if they will be frightened away if she's overheard.

"Those are the eyes of the Avatar."
"What?"

"The two stars that form the eyes are the brightest stars in the sky, like the eyes of the Avatar State. The cross-shaped stars below it form the body."

She pulls away, staring at him. "Really? I have my own constellation up here?"

"I thought your father was from the North," he says. "Didn't he ever tell you?"

"Dad never talked much about the North, and he was never really interested in things like stars. Maybe he doesn't even know." Korra pulls her knees to her chest, smiling, her eyes fixed on the stars. "My very own constellation. That's two beautiful portraits of me you've shown me today."

He wants to tell her that her eyes burn even more brightly than the stars themselves, that until now, he has been unable to even look at the constellation since he arrived up north, because it reminds him of her.

But the reference to his portrait reminds him that he has something for her. His arm still rests on her shoulders, and he tightens it in a half-hug. His other hand reaches into his pocket for her birthday gift.

*:.*.*.

Korra closes her eyes, the stars of her constellation still burnt into her vision. Noatak's arm is warm around her, and she regrets pulling her face away from his. How easy it would have been to roll her cheek along his until their lips touched.

She hears him rummaging through his coat pocket, so she opens her eyes. "You okay?"

"Earlier I said that I wanted to send you a birthday present, but never did." He holds out a closed hand, a plain white cloth barely peeking out from underneath it. "Happy Birthday."

Curious, she accepts the gift and unfolds the cloth. It's another soapstone carving, this one about the size of her fist, and she sucks in a delighted breath. A polar bear dog. The edges are rounded, stylized in a swooping Northern fashion, so that it looks elegant and strong.

"This is beautiful," she whispers, the word inadequate to describe how much she likes it.

"I know Naga is important to you," he says, his tone humble. "It was going to be bigger, but my hand was clumsy and I made a few mistakes, so I had to pare it down to fix it."

"I love it." She beams at him. "Thank you, Noatak. No one has ever given me a gift like this before."

He gives her a one-sided smile, and he looks so boyish and pleasant that she feels a swell of longing.

Touch his dick! screams Lian's voice unhelpfully in her mind, and her face flushes. Dammit, Lian, I am going to dump ice water on your head when I see you again.

Trying to maintain her composure, she carefully tucks the carving into her pocket and focuses on the platonic. "Speaking of your hand, I haven't healed you yet today."

"It can wait," he says.

"No, I insist." She tugs off her mitten and turns to face him, sliding off his glove. She pulls water
from the snow around them and coats his hand in the glow, but his hand feels so nice beneath hers that she gets distracted. Her palm presses against his, slowly rubbing. It's warm, the skin thick and masculine.

"Korra?" he asks gently.

"I... I think..." She doesn't realize at first that she's speaking, and when she does realize it, she can't figure out how to end the sentence. This hand, though wounded, helped the other one carve a gift for her, and a stunning portrait as well. She imagines him labouring for hours, his thoughts with her the whole time. The decision to withhold the gift, after spending so much effort lovingly creating it, must have broken his heart. Her fingers weave between his, and their hands clasp.

*I don't need to wait four months,* she realizes, feeling a wave of euphoria. *I still love him. I still love him...* Their eyes lock, and her eyes drift down to his lips. So broad, so nicely shaped.

She leans forward and kisses him.

Noatak's eyes fly open. His mouth is tight and unmoving, and she begins to panic. *He's not kissing me back. I completely misread his intentions.* Mortified, she breaks the kiss and starts to pull away.

His hand catches the back of her neck and he lunges for her. This time, his lips are soft, his eyes closed. She feels a wave of relief, quickly followed by a fresh wave of longing. Her mouth parts, and his tongue slides along hers. A moan rises in his throat, and she hears herself echo it.

The kiss breaks, and her forehead rests against his. He strokes the back of her neck, his breath hot, damp and minty.

"I'm sorry," she pants, "I didn't mean to assume-"

"It's okay. It's okay. I was just surprised." He gives her a soft peck, and her eyes close.

"I still love you, Noatak," she says. "I still love you so much."

He gives a soft, relieved chuckle, then clamps onto either side of her head, pulling her in again, his kiss so demanding that she feels it flood her body, settling in a glow between her legs. Nothing matters but this kiss, not the sound of the drums or the crowd, not the cold air around them. Even the sky, with its Avatar constellation and line of planets, seems dull and uninteresting in comparison. Her hand curls into the collar of his jacket, and she feels his fingers claw into her skull as his tongue presses deeper.

The kiss becomes a dance. First he leads, then she does; their heads tilt one way, then another, shallower, then deeper. The shape of his teeth and tongue and the roof of his mouth are familiar, and she forgot how good he smells. She cracks open her mouth and breathes his taste across the small gap between her lips, and she feels him do the same.

When the kiss finally breaks, it leaves them both softly panting for air. His parted lips along her jaw, laying warm puffs of breath along her skin. She whimpers with anticipation as he reaches her ear.

"How far is this going to go, Korra?" he breathes, the air so hot in her ear that her body erupts into shivers.

"As far as you want to take it." She's drunk on his kisses; her inhibitions fled the instant his tongue
first grazed hers. If he asked her to spread her legs for him right here, on this bench in a very public place, she would without hesitation.

He pauses to kiss her earlobe. "There are so many things I want to do to you, Korra. So many things I want you to do to me." She can tell by the strain in his voice that he's drunk off her as well. "But the anticipation has been building for so long that I hope you'll forgive me for milking it a little. It would be a shame to let all that build-up go to waste."

She's about to protest that if the anticipation builds any more, she's going to tear off her pants and splay herself in the snow in front of him, but then his tongue traces the border of her ear and all words slip from her grasp. Her eyes squeeze shut.

He moves slowly at first, pausing to nibble and kiss her ear, and then his teeth and tongue get rougher. It shouldn't feel this good - it's just her ear, just a few square inches of flesh - but every movement ricochets through her and leaves her shuddering. She vaguely hears whimpers leaving her mouth, feels herself sliding off the bench. He catches her arm and holds her upright, his grip firm.

Even though it's just those two points of contact, her arm and her ear, her entire body is sensitized. The pressure of her underwear against her skin is torturous, and she shifts, feeling the cloth move against her.

She gasps, "Please."

He stops to nuzzle her ear. "Please what?" he breathes, and her ear is so damp that his breath burns her skin. She moves her lips to reply, but can't form any words.

He shifts his position so that he's facing her, tucking one knee close to his chest to accommodate the back of the bench. Her eyes, just barely open, lock onto the strained fabric between his legs, and she vaguely remembers that Lian gave her some advice that might be relevant, but she's not sure she can move.

Noatak wraps a hand in her hair once, twice, and gently tugs her head back. He kisses below her ear this time, moving downwards. Her head rolls as he finds the sensitive line along her neck, and he pulls her hair taught, gently but firmly trapping her in place.

They're just kisses, just kisses, but oh spirits, she can't take this. Her body is on edge, aching so badly that it would only take a couple light touches to release her.

"I-" she says, and she can't find any other words, so she repeats it, hoping the desperation in her voice will get her meaning across.

"Too much?" His voice is low; he pulls back to look at her, and she can tell by his narrow eyes and ragged breaths that he's feeling the same way.

She gasps for air. "Please, I can't take it. I need you."

His chest rises, then falls, and he releases her hair. As his hand retreats along her jaw, she turns her face into his palm and gently bites the skin. His eyes flutter closed.

"Please, Noatak," she whispers, not sure what she's asking for, exactly; all she knows is that her body is humming and she needs it to stop.

He glances around them, and she does the same, her vision blurred. There are people around, but none of them seem real through her haze of hormones, so she doesn't care what they see. Besides,
here, surrounded by trees, they're practically invisible.

Noatak must be thinking more clearly, because he stands and holds out a hand. "Come with me." His face is placid, but his grip is tight as he pulls her along.

"The drums," she protests, foggy; they left them in a pile under the bench.

"They'll be there when we get back."

His pace is quick, and she has to half-jog to keep up with him. He leads her to a small packed snow building that must be the park's maintenance shed. Around the back corner, they're obscured from view by snow banks and shadow.

They've barely stopped walking when he pushes her against the wall and covers her mouth with his. She reaches around him to grab his ass with both hands, pulling his body flat against hers. Following her lead, he leans into her so tightly that her breath escapes in a moan.

She needs to feel pressure between her legs, and she shifts her position, centring herself over his thigh. He presses his leg into her, and she can't stop herself from grinding. She's still so sensitized that her knees buckle, and she would probably collapse into a heap in the snow, but he grabs her shoulders to pin her in place. His hands are strong, and his chest is flat against hers, and his tongue is deep in her mouth, and she frantically bears down on his thigh until she sees sparks.

He breaks the kiss and angles his hips so that her leg is rubbing him as well, and the knowledge that she's pleasuring him at the same time makes her own pleasure almost unbearable. She vents the rising pressure with a moan.

"Come on, Korra," he says, strained. "Faster."

His words send her hurtling toward the edge, and she hovers there. Her breath is leaving her in sobs and she can barely keep her eyes open.

"Korra," he says through clenched teeth, and the rest of his words are lost beneath her wail as she tips over the edge.

He kisses her through it, possessive and protective; her entire body shakes, and she feels it in waves all the way from her forehead to her shins. It leaves her limp and disoriented. She breaks the kiss to pant for air, desperate to get oxygen to her tingling limbs.

When she comes back to herself, Noatak is watching her. He's wondering if I'm having second thoughts now that I've climaxed, thinks Korra, and while she's a little uncertain about what this means for them, she doesn't want to think about that yet. For eight months, she has dreamed of this, and she doesn't intend to interrupt it.

Now it's her to take control. He's still pinning her against the packed snow wall, so she pushes him away and spins his body, slamming him against the wall instead. His breath escapes with an oof, and she presses a hand into his abdomen to hold him in place. As she drops to her knees, understanding flickers across his face.

The air is cold, and she takes great care to keep him warm with her mouth and hands. She still feels a bit clumsy at this, so she looks up, trying to determine if she's doing well. His eyes lock with hers, and he looks so helpless, awed and grateful that she feels a rush of confidence.

Then his eyes slide closed and his head tilts back. She hears the occasional soft gasp, as if he's so absorbed that he has forgotten to breathe.
"Korra, I'm going to... Oh fuck..." Gloved fingers claw into the packed snow behind him. She intended to draw this out, to torture him near the brink, but she finds herself too eager to release him. Picking up speed, she moans into him.

He slams his fists into the wall and doubles over, letting out a gruff cry. She tilts her head to look up at him and takes in his expression: twisted face, pinched brows, flared lips. Spirits, it's even more beautiful than she remembers.

Then he lets out a slow breath of air, his face relaxing. Gently, she pulls away and fumbles to do up his pants. Once they're buckled, he drops to his knees and pulls her in for a deep kiss.

"It was okay?" she asks, pulling on her mittens.

"Okay? That was..." He falls back against the wall and slides to a seat. "Fuck," he whispers again, and she chuckles at his uncharacteristic lack of eloquence. She flops to a seat beside him, reaching up to trace the finger and fist marks he left in the snow.

"I think you ruined the wall," she says cheekily.

His head rolls to face her, looking amused. "You sound proud."

"I am proud." A bit shyly, she says, "I always feel a bit self-conscious, because I know you've been with men - very experienced men - and I'm sure they knew their way around your body better than I ever could."

He raises a brow. "I wondered if this was going to come up."

"This?"

"With everything else we have to worry about, I want to put it to rest." He reaches out to grip her mittened hand with his gloved one and looks her squarely in the eye. "I fall in love regardless of gender, not because of it. I want you to understand that."

She didn't ever expect to discuss this, but it's something that has been eating away at her for awhile now, and she swallows hard. "But people who have the same parts have got to be better at doing things to them, right? And there are things you can't get from me. I mean, they can be approximated - I was reading this article about a little trick with earthbending that makes it so that I could use a stone to-"

"Korra." He brings her hand to his face and kisses the back of her mitten. "You made me damage public property, and I'm still too weak to stand. Do not doubt your ability to bring me pleasure."

"Okay," she says uncertainly. "But aren't there things you'd miss if you committed to a woman?"

As she says the words, she realizes she's getting ahead of herself, and her cheeks flush.

Noatak doesn't seem fazed. "Listen to me, Korra: a person is more than their collection of body parts. Whether you're male or female doesn't matter to me, and I wouldn't miss one just because you're the other. Don't make the mistake of assuming I need both in order to be happy."

"Okay." A little ashamed, she says, "Sorry. I know it's a bit rude of me to question you."

"It's fine. Things between us grew on a foundation of honesty, even when we were revealing sides of ourselves we weren't proud of." He wraps an arm around her and draws her in. "I don't ever want you to censor yourself."
She leans her cheek on his shoulder.

They sit like that until she starts to shiver. Noatak sits up.

"We should go somewhere warm." He stands and holds out a hand to help her up. Instead of releasing her, he pulls her in and gives her a soft kiss. "I'll buy you a steamed chocolate and we'll see if Tarrlok needs rescuing."

"Rescuing?"

"Akna can be pretty single-minded when she wants something. I have a feeling they're getting along fine, but it was probably a bit selfish of me to leave him without an escape for so long."

"I'll take the blame for that one," says Korra. "I distracted you." She looks down at their joined hands and smiles; she sees Noatak doing the same.

"Come on, I want that chocolate," she says, tugging him along the path they used to enter their little hiding spot.

They walk hand-in-hand through the park, both silent. It isn't an awkward silence, necessarily, but it makes Korra's mind start to wander. She's still a bit hurt by all that transpired between them, and, if she's honest, she's wondering if they're just setting themselves up for more pain by letting themselves get close again. But she also knows that eight months apart hasn't weakened her feelings for him, or his for her. There has to be a way to make it work.

She grips his hand tightly as they walk through the festival, only letting go when he passes her a cup of steaming hot chocolate.

It turns out that Tarrlok doesn't need rescuing - he and Akna are sitting on one of the snow banks lining the skating rink. She's talking animatedly, and he's watching, intrigue on his face.

"Well," says Korra. "What do you think - is romance in the air?"

"A budding friendship, at the very least. I'm glad they're getting along." Noatak is smiling with something akin to pride. "Tarrlok doesn't have many friends, does he?"

"Just me. Maybe Tenzin, but that's a stretch." She takes a sip. "I think he was too focussed on politics to have time for people."

"Then maybe a place like this is exactly what he needs," he says, as if to himself.

"Maybe it is." She wonders if the police would ever allow it, or if Tarrlok is even interested in moving back to a small town. "Tonight is the first time I've seen him happy since he was released from prison."

Noatak says quietly, "You should give him back his bending. Keeping his bending away wasn't a part of his sentence, just mine."

The statement shocks her; it's something she hasn't considered. She's always had it in her mind that those who break the law in horrible ways have lost their bending privileges. "Does he want it back?"

"Yes," he says, and she wonders why he's so insistent on undoing something he once believed was necessary, but then she sees his throat bob, hears him swallow even over the crowd, and she realizes he isn't entirely comfortable with it. He's insistent because it's what Tarrlok wants. He's
putting his brother's priorities above his own. She smiles and steps closer to him, leaning her head against his arm.

"I'll talk to him about it tomorrow. Maybe we can come to some sort of agreement." She nuzzles his arm. "You're a good brother."

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You're a good brother.

The words make Noatak's jaw quiver as he remembers all the suffering his little brother has endured, all because of him. That third tail in his hair, the inunnguaq in the cave, they're proof that Noatak utterly and irrevocably changed his brother's life, and not for the better. "I'm not a good brother, Korra."

"You are. You weren't, but you are. Don't forget what your mother said - sometimes you have to look forward, not back. You have the power to be the man you want to be." She looks up at him. "Who do you want to be, Noatak?"

He closes his eyes and tries to look forward with no consideration for the past. He envisions a humble career as an accountant, a blossoming hobby as a soapstone carver, a growing friendship with his brother. He sees himself continuing to train well into old age, keeping his body as sharp as his mind. Maybe he can even contribute more to the community than he does now - as time passes, and he grows more confident that his true identity won't be revealed, he would like to surround himself with people. No god-worship this time around, just a community. Friends. Acquaintances.

His eyelids part, and he smiles at her.

In every image, in every scenario, he sees Korra by his side.

"I know who I want to be." He turns to look at Tarrlok, still smiling. "And I know who I want beside me."

His grip tightens on her hand, and she squeezes back.
XLIV: Love

XLIV

Love

As the three of them walk home together later that night, Tarrlok has a slight bounce to his step, his lips curved into a smile. Noatak is just about to comment when Korra beats him to it, gently poking Tarrlok with her elbow.

"Looks like you and Akna got along pretty well," she says.

"She's intriguing," says Tarrlok absently. "An intelligent woman with charming wit. I'd like to speak with her again."

"We can ask her to come for dinner with us tomorrow night," says Noatak. "I was thinking of taking you two out to a fine seafood restaurant near the water. You can go over to her place tomorrow with the invitation, if you'd like."

His brother smiles at him. "Okay."

Noatak unlocks the front door and is just about to open it, when Tarrlok says, "Where are the drums?"

Noatak and Korra exchange a glance.

"I guess we were so engaged in conversation that we forgot them," he says, and Korra's face flushes.

"Conversation," says Tarrlok dryly, glancing between them. He shakes his head.

"I'll go back and get them," says Noatak, pushing open the door. He was hoping for an excuse to stop by the general store, anyway. The condoms he has are the ones they inherited from Kwan, and they're so old that they probably need replacing. He doesn't want to assume he'll need them, but given how things went tonight - well, he is assuming.

"I'll join you." Tarrlok steps out of the doorway so Korra can enter.

"You don't have to. I'll just be a minute." As much as he'd like the company, the last thing Noatak needs is for his brother to see him buying condoms.

"Can I use your phone?" asks Korra. "I'll pay you back again."

"Of course." Before Tarrlok can insist on coming along, Noatak turns on his heel and marches back down the street.

The park is nearly empty, save for a few couples drunkenly making out on benches. The bench he and Korra were using is occupied by a couple enthusiastically groping each other, but fortunately, there's no need to interrupt them: even from the pathway, he can see that the drums are gone. He sighs. Almost half of his last contract went into those drums; they weren't cheap. At least they got some good memories out of them.

Defeated, he turns and trudges down the main strip. Even though it's late, the shops are still open,
as is customary during the festival. He pushes open the door of the general store.

The shop keeper is swaying behind the counter; he beams and waves. "Saomik! Happy solstice." His words slur.

"Did you like the drums?" booms a voice from the corner, and Noatak sees the drum maker sitting in his corner, stretching a membrane over a frame. He seems a bit clumsy; he's probably been drinking, too.

"Their quality was astounding," says Noatak with a pang of guilt.

"You know," says the man, "it's not good to leave them in the snow for too long." He nods to his left, and Noatak sees all three drums, neatly stacked on the floor.

"Ah. Thank you for retrieving them."

"Hmph," says the man. "Leaving my drums in the snow. Must've been distracted." He looks up, a brow cocked. "Guessing you impressed that pretty girl after all. There was quite the frantic scuffle of footprints around that bench." His eyes twinkle.

"What?" yells the shop keeper, smacking the top of the counter. "Saomik has a lady? Didn't think you were the type. Good on you, old boy!"

Noatak sighs and rubs his forehead. He's still accustomed to being revered and respected, not treated like 'one of the boys,' and he's not sure he'll ever grow accustomed to it. "I just have to get a few things," he says stiffly, and he begins to fill a basket with some groceries. He searches the personal section for condoms, then spies them in a jar behind the counter. Somehow, he gets the feeling the teasing is only going to intensify when he asks for them.

"What's Saomik's girl like, Dad?" the shop keeper asks.

"Young. Real young." The drum maker gives the membrane a few experimental taps, then frowns and begins to adjust the binding. "Never seen her before - must be from out of town. Big blue eyes, pretty, smiles a lot. Walks like she's powerful. I bet she's feisty."

"Oh-ho!" The shop keeper grins at Noatak, who is bringing his purchases to the cash register. "You going to need some healing salve, Saomik? In case you get bitten a few times."

Noatak winces at the heavy alcohol on the man's breath. "No, but I need some condoms."

The two men start laughing and making ribald gestures, and now Noatak is quite certain they're drunk out of their minds. He closes his eyes to steady his rising impatience.

"If you don't mind, I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"I bet you are, but just hold on a sec," says the shop keeper. "She a special lady, or just an easy lay?"

"I don't see how those are mutually exclusive," says Noatak pointedly, "but she is dear to me, yes. As such, I'd appreciate if the two of you would stop talking about her so crassly." He's proud of himself for not knocking their drunken heads together.

"I ask, because I have some...special merchandise." The man bends down and pulls out a box from under the counter. Noatak peers into it and sees an assortment of straps, paddles and phallic objects. He raises a brow. He hasn't seen an assortment of toys this large since he was with Kwan.
Idly, he sorts through them, pleasing mental images rising in his mind. He wonders how Korra would react if he showed up with any of these. On one hand, she seems genuinely curious and eager to experiment - the bashful comment about earthbending earlier tonight seemed to imply something of this nature anyway. On the other, she's still quite young and inexperienced in the racier aspects of sex, and he doesn't want to pressure her or frighten her away.

"Our relationship is still new," he says. "Maybe in the future, we'll purchase something together."

"Ah. A real gentleman, giving the lady her say," says the drum maker. "Good for you! You know, you could learn a thing or two from Saomik here, son."

The shop keeper grumbles and pulls the condom container down from the shelf. "How many?"

After a moment to calculate, Noatak says, "Ten," and the shop keeper whistles.

"Is it always this difficult to buy condoms from you?" asks Noatak, annoyed.

"Ah, sorry, too much? I've had a bit to drink." The shop keeper looks guilty.

"He's been a good sport," says the drum maker. "Throw in a couple for free. Make it an even dozen."

"Sounds good." The shop keeper adds two more to the pile. "Sorry, Saomik. No hard feelings?"

"You're lucky I'm in a good mood." Noatak scoops the condoms into his pocket.

"Don't forget your drums," says the drum maker, pointing to them. "Have yourself a good night." He winks.

Carefully balancing the drums in his arms, his grocery bag slung over his wrist, Noatak leaves the store. He hears raucous discussion start up behind him, but intentionally ignores it.

"So much for not drawing attention," he mutters to himself. Next time, he'll ask Korra to bring condoms with her from the City.

If there is a next time.

His heart pounds.

.*.*.*.

"Lian?" blurts Korra as soon as she hears someone pick up the phone on the other end.

"Korra! Hi."

"How are you doing?" Sitting on the edge of the bed, Korra leans forward, bouncing her crossed legs with nervous energy.

"Oh, I'm fine. I, uh, I'm sorry about that advice I gave you earlier. I was a bit more drunk than I let on." Lian giggles.

"You're not drunk now?"

"A bit. Danced most of it off. Forget about me - how did it go with you-know-who?"

Korra grins, and says, singsong, "A lady never kisses and tells."
Lian shrieks so loudly that it leaves Korra's ear ringing. "I knew it! I want details."

"Well, okay. Just a few." Secretly, she wants to share every single detail; she wants to brag about it from the rooftops, as ill-advised as that would be. "So we were at the festival, and we went to the craft section, and he had entered a sculpture - a soapstone carving of me. It was beautifully stylized, and he called it 'Her Terrible Beauty.'"

"What?" yells Lian, and Korra wonders if she's going to have to hold the phone a few inches away from her ear for the rest of the conversation.

"Oh spirits, I almost started crying. I grabbed his hand, and we held hands for awhile." Her cheeks warm as she speaks, and she can't seem to slow down her words. "Then the three of us played the drums in our own little drum circle, and it was - I don't know if I can explain it. It was so unifying. Playing drums is kind of like making a heartbeat, creating a life, and the three of us were working in harmony to keep it alive."


"It was. And then Tarrlok went off to chat with a lady - I'll tell you more about that when we get back; we might see her again tomorrow, and I think they like each other. Anyway, Noatak and I found a little bench in the park, and he showed me constellations. I have an actual constellation up here!"

"No way," says Lian. "He was just saying that to get in your pants."

"No, he wasn't," says Korra defensively. "I'm the Avatar, Lian. I'm important."

"And modest. So, he's showing you constellations. Then what?"

"I healed his hand a bit, and his skin felt so nice that I..." She blushes harder. "I kissed him."

There's another shriek, but this time Korra is ready for it; she holds the phone several inches away from her ear.

"Korra! How did he react?"

"He didn't kiss me back, at first. I guess I caught him by surprise. I started to pull away, and he clamped onto me and dragged me in, and gave me a proper kiss, you know? The kind you can feel between your legs even though it's on your mouth. Oh spirits, Lian." She falls back to the bed and gives a happy sigh, draping one arm across her forehead. "Oh spirits, the man can kiss."

This time, her friend's response is a squeal. "Korra!"

"I know!" Grinning, Korra says, "So we made out for awhile-

"On a park bench? That sounds so...youthful."

"I know," says Korra again, her eyes closing. "It was like we were teenagers, stealing kisses in secret places. The energy between us is just so indescribably intense. I've never felt like this, Lian." She sighs. "Listen to me. I'm disgusting."

"No, no, it's cute, not disgusting. So then what?"

Korra's eyes fly open. "That's it."

"Yeah right. Making out with indescribably intense energy, and it just ends there? Come on,
woman, tell me all of it."

Her cheeks burning, Korra mutters, "And then I humped his leg behind a storage shed."

There's a pause, then a delighted cackle on the line. "You humped his leg? Oh Korra, you must have been so desperate."

"It was more romantic than I made it sound," says Korra defensively, but she can't help laughing. "Okay, yeah, maybe 'desperate' is the right word for it - we were pretty worked up by that point."

"I'll say! You poor girl, you must be so chafed."

"I'm all right." Now that she has shared the most embarrassing part, Korra feels the need to save face. "But then I gave him a blow job so good that he lost control and damaged public property."

"Attagirl." Lian makes a sigh that sounds as if she's trying to compose herself. "I figured Amon would be all polish and sophistication, an experienced and intense romantic who would teach you the ways of lovemaking. And here you are going at each other in a park like wild animals."

"It's usually more romantic than that, but..." Self-consciousness suddenly begins to tighten around Korra, and she sits up, gasping for air. "Wait, was it stupid of me to give into lust like that? Did I screw up? Is he going to look back on this and realize I'm just some immature kid who—"

"Korra, calm down. I'm just teasing. I think it's cute that you were so frantic, and I bet he does, too. Hell, he was right there with you." Lian gives a happy sigh. "And now that you vented that energy, the two of you can have sophisticated, passionate love. Spirits, you are so lucky to have an experienced older man to teach you the ways of lovemaking."

"That's the second time you've said that," says Korra. "It's a bit creepy."

"Sorry. Maybe I'm still more drunk than I thought."

"Besides," says Korra, "Tarrlok's here, and the walls are paper thin. Wouldn't it be rude to have sex?" She cringes at the idea of him overhearing.

"It isn't rude if he doesn't know you're doing it."

Korra's silent, considering the possibility. She has always had a bit of an exhibitionist streak - some of her favourite encounters with Mako were secret, sneaky encounters when Bolin or her parents were sleeping next door. A shiver of anticipation runs down her spine.

"Oh, the doorbell just rang," says Lian. "I think Jalah forgot her purse. I have to go. You have fun tonight, okay, Korra? Don't worry about checking up on me. I promise you, I'm okay."

They exchange their goodnights, then Korra hangs up the phone. She hears conversation coming from downstairs, and her heart leaps at Noatak's voice. Now she's nervous and excited all over again.

It's a different kind of nervousness than it used to be, however. When they were on their mission together, everything was steeped in uncertainty. She wasn't sure if he was in love with her, or if she was in love with him; she wasn't even sure who she was. Now, she feels significantly more in control of her own life. There's a quiet confidence in her feelings for him, as well. The bond between them has survived a crisis and eight months apart, and it feels even stronger than it did before.
Whatever hurt comes of this, it was worth it to see him again, if only for her to become certain about their feelings for each other. Now she may need to make some tough decisions, but at least she's armed with all the information this time.

The brothers laugh, and the sound makes Korra's heart sing. She hurries to the bathroom to examine her reflection, and frowns. Her makeup is smeared, her hair tousled. Quickly brushing out her hair, she leaves it down. She scrubs her face and when she looks up again, her eyes are still a bit darkened around the eyelashes, but otherwise, she looks like her usual self again. She brushes her teeth, nods at herself with confidence, and heads downstairs.

Noatak and Tarrlok are chatting on the sofa, wine glasses filled with an amber liquid. Tarrlok's telling a story about a failed task force mission, and, not wanting to interrupt, Korra stops on the stairwell and rests her arms on the railing, watching. Noatak lets his eyes sparkle at her to greet her, then turns his attention back to his brother. Tarrlok is having trouble with words again, but Noatak helpfully pitches in, and the rest of the conversation flows smoothly.

As they burst into laughter, Korra makes her appearance.

"Korra," says Noatak. He holds out his glass. "Would you like some?"

"Ice wine?" she asks.

Tarrlok twists his head to regard her. "Apple cider. Non-alcoholic."

"Sounds good." She spies a pot of it on the stovetop, and helps herself to a small mug.

Tarrlok drains his glass and stands, stretching. "I should get to bed. It's late."

"Are you sure?" asks Noatak, looking disappointed. "I was hoping to share some of my clumsier career moments with you. I think you'd get a kick out of them."

"We can chat some more tomorrow. Maybe do some training. Goodnight, Noatak. Korra." He bobs his head at them with a kind smile, then walks up the stairs.

"You two seem to be getting along well," says Korra as she settles on the couch beside Noatak, blowing on her cider to cool it.

"We are so alike." He drains his glass and sets it on the glass coffee table in front of them. "I missed having him in my life. My mother was right: he has a good heart."

"So do you."

"Maybe. When I acknowledge it. I've spent so many years training myself to hide it that it will take time to expose it." He studies her. "Though some people easily get under my defenses. Tarrlok is one. You are another."

She blushes and looks into her glass, swirling the sediment at the bottom of it.

"How are you, Korra?" he asks softly.

"I'm okay." She takes a long sip, then says, "Just had an interesting phone conversation."

"Oh?" He looks genuinely interested, so she continues,

"My friend Lian was dating Mako, and they broke up, so I was trying to cheer Lian up, but she was more interested in knowing what was going on between the two of us. She's become my confidante
these past few months. I tell her everything."

"Everything?" he asks, brows rising.

"Almost everything, yeah. Don't worry, she's trustworthy. She and Katara are the only people outside of this house who know you exist."

"And Hassun," he says quietly. When she shoots him a confused look, he says, "The obsessed man who tried to turn me in, but I believe I scared him enough that he won't be a threat." His brows pinch. "I'm curious; I once knew a girl named Lian."

"An Equalist?" she asks. "Joined because of her parents?"

"Yes." Now he looks troubled. "I've known her since she was knee-high. She would have been about twelve when the Revolution unravelled."

"That's her."

"That little girl is your friend? And she knows everything?"

"She's a bit younger than me," says Korra.

"Sometimes I forget how young you truly are."

She panics. "It's not a big deal, though, is it? I mean, I don't think it is. We seem to relate to each other well, and I see us as peers..." She trails off. He's watching her with a sad expression, and she lifts her cup to her lips with shaking hands, draining the rest of it. "If you pass me your mug, I'll take it back to the kitchen for you," she blurts, pushing for normalcy.

His upper body shifts so that he's facing her, and he delicately plucks the mug from her grip and sets it on the table beside them. He reaches over and takes her hands in his.

"It's time to talk through this, Korra."

Her stomach drops.

"What happened earlier tonight was- " His eyes close for a second, as if momentarily caught up in the memory. "—wonderful, and amazing, but we can't just pretend it's never going to end. Not this time. There are many odds stacked against us, and we have to make a choice about how much we're willing to endure to be together."

"I thought you were giving me four months."

"I'm not strong enough to wait," he blurts.

She stares at the man who led a revolution, who severed himself from his own family to pursue injustice, and sees a quiver in his jaw.

"I'm not strong enough," he says, calmer this time, but his hands tighten around hers. "Not after what passed between us this evening. I am an addict by nature, Korra. I always have been. I can't have a taste of wine without drinking the whole bottle."

"I'm not wine," she snaps. "I'm not some addictive poison you have to ration."

"I'm not saying-" He interrupts himself with a slow breath, apparently centring himself, and when he finally speaks again, his tone is soft. "It was a poor analogy, and I'm sorry for offending you.
But that doesn't matter - I'm being unreasonable, aren't I? I promised not to pressure you, and here I am doing just that. Please forget I said anything." His hands release hers, and he begins to stand.

"No, wait." She catches his arm. "Sit."

He pauses, watching her. His mouth is perfectly flat, but his brows are pinched.

"Please sit," she insists, tugging him toward the couch until he obeys.

"I think I know what you were trying to say," she says. "If we keep fooling around every time we see each other, but put off this discussion every time, we're just going to keep going through that same cycle of happiness and then pain that we endured for the past eight months. You don't want to go through that again. I get it. I don't want to go through it, either."

He nods and sits tall.

"So let's talk," she says quietly. "Right now. Forget the four months. Let's talk about our plans for the future, and see how they line up. That's a good place to start, right?" It's something Mako tried to make her do when she started pulling away from him, and now she sees the value in it. She and Noatak are individuals, with individual goals; the more their goals align, the easier it will be to make a relationship work.

He still looks tense, and she feels they talk more easily when they have physical contact, so she says, "You can lay your head in my lap if you want. Maybe it'll make it easier to talk. More like we're a team instead of opponents."

"A good suggestion. Thank you." He gives her a little smile, then stretches across the couch, placing his head in her lap. She sometimes forgets how big he is - his broad shoulders are the width of the cushions, and he has to bend his legs at the knee to fit them on the couch.

He's wearing a plain black undershirt and dark blue pants that are tight around his calves, and she can see the shape of his muscles under his clothes. A warm, fuzzy feeling settles over her body. This isn't just lust - though there's some of that, as well - but admiration. He's so solid and muscular. She wants to rub his chest, knowing his shirt is so thin that she'll be able to feel the shape of wiry hair through the fabric, and little ridges where his pectoral muscles meet his breastbone.

Instead, she runs a hand through his hair, which seems more platonic, more soothing. Noatak looks up at her, his face gentle.

"Your lap is comfortable."

"Yeah? This is okay?" she asks.

"It is. I don't think we've ever sat like this before."

"We haven't. It's nice." It feels intimate without being sexual, something unusual for them, given how sexually charged their relationship usually is. She stares into his irises, fascinated by the way the light catches them; they're pale blue, almost grey, with so many layers that it's like staring into the bay and seeing seaweed at the bottom. The borders are dark, almost black, and there's a little gold burst around each of his pupils. She reaches down to smooth his eyebrow with her thumb. His eyes flutter closed, the movement highlighting his long, curled lashes.

"Don't fall asleep on me," she says, and he smiles, his eyelids parting again.

"So tell me, Korra," he says. "What does your future hold?"
She takes a deep breath. "Part of it will depend on the needs of the world, unfortunately. I'm not really in control of my destiny. I have responsibilities." She traces a sideburn with her knuckle. "I do plan to travel - I'm not doing the world much good if I always stay in Republic City. I like the idea of setting up a base somewhere and spending periods of time living abroad."

His eyes search hers. "Do you see yourself settling down? Marriage, children?"

Panic flares so abruptly that her hand curls away from his face. "I feel like it's too early to think about all that. I'm not ready for it, not even close. Marriage, sure, maybe in a few years. Kids, I don't know. I'm definitely not interested in them right now. A benefit of being an Avatar is that my lifespan is extended - some of the past Avatars didn't bear children until they were in their eighties - so I have time to figure out if I want them or not." She's almost afraid to ask: "What about you?"

"I'm almost fifty. I think I'm too late for both." His head shifts, snuggling deeper into her lap. "I could see myself getting married, but I wouldn't be a good father. I can't have biological children, anyway, not with the curse that runs in my family."

"You could adopt," she says. "I think you'd be a good father. You're a good leader, and patient, and you genuinely care about people."

"I'm too manipulative and self-absorbed," he says dismissively. "And as for settling down, I've never felt particularly attached to any one place. I'm open to moving around, though Republic City is probably off limits for me, at least for awhile."

Her fingers comb his hair back from his forehead. "Do you see yourself ever seeking a pardon for your crimes?"

He shakes his head. "There's no way I would be granted one, particularly now that I've faked my death and spent time on the run. It's safer for me to stay dead."

With a sigh, she says, "Which brings us back to the problem of my very public life."

"Our relationship would have to be kept out of the spotlight. I'm comfortable with keeping secrets, Korra, but are you?"

"No," she says quietly. "I can't stand secrets, or sneaking around. I need honesty. I hate the thought of being in love and having to stay quiet about it. I'd want to show you off."

Silence settles over them, the ticking of the clock in the background the only noise in the room. Noatak smile is gone; his eyes are sad. He reaches up for her hand, weaving his fingers through hers.

"As much as we might not like to think about it, the age difference is a barrier as well." His thumb runs across her knuckles.

"It doesn't bother me," she says firmly.

"Not now, but what about in ten, twenty years? I'll be geriatric, and you'll still be in your prime - especially since you're the Avatar. Would you be comfortable still being in your fifties when your partner reaches his eighties?"

She feels her throat tightening. "You're so fit that you'll still be spry."

"But what if I'm not? Men in my family tend to live until their late seventies or early eighties. Are you comfortable losing me when-"
"Stop." She closes her eyes. "I don't want to talk about it."

"It isn't going to go away."

"I know, I know." She wills her tears to recede, refusing to blink in case she accidentally makes them fall. "I guess that's the bottom line, isn't it? Our lives are just incompatible." Her head lolls back to rest on the couch.

"It seems that way," he says. There's a long pause, and then he says, "And yet..."

Her eyes open and she tilts her head to look down at him. His eyes bore through her, and his eyebrows are low, but twitching. She can't tell if he's determined or frightened.

"And yet what?" she asks.

His voice is clear and strong: "When I'm with you, none of that matters."

Her heart races.

Slowly, he sits up to face her. His hands find hers again, and he clings to them until his knuckles turn white.

"You were right," he says, "You and my mother. I have always followed my head instead of my heart. Even when I was with Kwan, even though I loved him, I was mainly with him because it made sense. It was safe. I thought if I followed my head, I would never get hurt. I was wrong.

"I can pretend to be the type of man who doesn't care, who can move on easily, who can sleep with people without emotional attachment, but that's not who I am. I fall in love, Korra, and I fall hard, and I can't ignore that just for the sake of following my head. Not anymore." His voice fades. "Not with you."

He's using his intense gaze, the one he used so many times from behind the mask, but this time, she recognizes it for what it is: passion. This is the intensity of a man who firmly believes in every word leaving his mouth, and wants to make sure his audience knows it.

"What do you mean?" she whispers.

"I left you because I thought it was the intelligent thing to do," he says. "I left you because it made sense, but all I learned is that I'm happier with you in my life. Yes, I could make a life for myself and live out the rest of my days here. I could be content alone, certainly, but when I picture you by my side, Korra, I feel better than content. I feel euphoric. My head keeps telling me it can't work, but in my heart, it feels right."

Her throat is tightening. "Noatak," she says, but she doesn't have any words to follow it.

"I don't care if we have to keep it secret," he says, his eyes searching hers. "I don't care if we only see each other a few times a year, if we spend most of our relationship exchanging letters and phone calls, if you have to court other men to keep up appearances. I'm willing to make compromises. I just want you in my life, in any way possible."

A tear spills down her cheek. "I want that, too. More than anything."

Noatak pauses to look down at their joined hands, and when he looks up, he takes a shaky breath, steadying himself. He looks more vulnerable than she has ever seen before.
"I love you, Korra," he says.

They're just words, just four little words, but adrenaline floods her body. She feels like she's tilting backwards, like her head is spinning, like rays of energy are exploding from her limbs. She gives a sharp, surprised laugh, and lunges forward, anchoring herself against him.

"I love you, too," she says. "I love you so much."

He holds her tightly against him, and she clings to him. Neither of them speaks; she closes her eyes and savours the rush.

When she finally pulls away, their hands clasp together again, and she feels that his hands are clammy and shaking - or maybe hers are.

"We'll make it work," she says. "Somehow. We'll make it work. Oh fuck, I'm going to cry."

"It's okay." His eyes are glistening, and he bends in to give her a kiss. This isn't the voracious kiss they shared in the park; it's gentle, soft and chaste.

They pull apart, still close enough that she can still taste the cider on his breath. He wipes her tears with his thumb, but then a tear spills onto his cheek. She uses her sleeve to wipe it away, and they exchange soft laughs.

"Do you think we'll ever get to the point where we aren't crying all the time?" she asks, sniffling.

"I hope so. This is pitiful." He wipes his eye again. "Come here." He gently grips her chin and pulls her in for another kiss. They exchange a series of soft, quick kisses, and when he pulls away, Korra's head is spinning.

Noatak stretches his back, and it cracks; she realizes that sitting side-by-side and twisting to face each other is probably a little hard on his joints, especially in the cold. She turns so that her back is to him, stretching out her legs. His arms wrap around her as he gets comfortable behind her.

"You're nice and warm," she says, leaning back against him. It feels so nice to snuggle.

"It is a bit cold in here." He kisses the back of her head.

"I'm glowing." She smiles. "I'm glad we actually said it. I've been in love with you for a long time."

"A long time?" He nuzzles into her hair. "When did you know?"

"That last night we spent together, at the end of our mission. When you came back from the hospital, I looked at you and it hit me, hard." Blushing, she debates whether or not to say the next part, then decides to be honest. "I was attracted to you almost right away, though. That first night we shared a bed together, the night Kwan attacked us, I woke up really early the next morning. I had spooned up behind you in my sleep, and you were holding my hand against your chest. With my bloodbending I could sense that...well...you're a guy, and you were asleep, so blood was...doing what it sometimes does when guys sleep."

"Ah." The word vibrates his chest, and she's almost too shy to continue the rest of the story, so she hurries it out in a whisper:

"And it turned me on so much that I locked myself in the bathroom and got off."

His body tenses. "You what?"
She pulls away a little, twisting to look at him. His eyes are wide.

"I tried so hard to think only of Mako, at first," she says, "but as I got closer and closer to orgasm, you were all I could think about. It was kind of messed up. I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have shared that."

He looks flustered, his cheeks dark. "I don't know what to say."

"In a good way or bad?"

"Good. Very good." He pulls her back against him again, hugging her from behind. "That mental image is going to keep me warm for many cold nights to come."

She's blushing furiously. Clearing her throat, she says, "So how about you? When did you first know you were in love?"

His words rumble in her ear: "When Kwan was chasing me on the rooftop, and you used earthbending to break my fall. You were so capable and strong, and there was an unspoken camaraderie between us."

She laughs. "Capable? Are you kidding? I let you fall to the ground, and it knocked you out."

"Maybe I just swooned."

She chuckles and tilts her head back to look at him, reaching back to tap his nose. "So, what, no secretly jerking off to me before then?"

He winces. "My drive is unrelenting, Korra, and I had just spent six years in an environment where privacy was nearly impossible to find. You don't want to know how often during the mission I was pawing at myself."

"Really?" She smiles, enamoured with the mental image. "Thinking of me?"

"Perhaps. I was rather haunted by the way your lips looked on that cigar."

She remembers the way he kept looking at her mouth during the rooftop discussion, and it's flattering to think he found her attractive so early in the mission. Her eyes slip closed as she entertains the mental image. "I'd like to watch you sometime," she says quietly. "If you don't mind."

He swears under his breath. "I'm going to have to stop thinking of you as innocent," he murmurs into her hair. "You're dirtier than I give you credit for."

She tries to grin mischievously at him, but then her mouth splits into a yawn.

He looks at the clock. "It's getting late."

"It is," she says, a little disappointed that time passed so quickly. She could stay up all night talking with him. Her legs swing over the edge of the couch, and she stands, holding out a hand to help him up.

Once he's on his feet, he pulls her in close. "All this talk of pleasure," he rumbles into her ear, and as he presses flat against her, she gasps. Unrelenting drive, indeed.

"Stay with me tonight, Korra," he whispers, an edge to his voice.
"The walls are thin. We'll have to be quiet." She rocks against him, trying to tease him. "Do you think you can manage that?"

He gives a low chuckle and shakes his head. "It will take all my self-control. I'll meet you in my bedroom - just give me a moment to get cleaned up first." His hands clamp onto her hips, and he bends forward to give her a soft kiss, this one hungrier than the last.

When he pulls away, she decides she's not quite done kissing him yet; she catches his collar and pulls him in, twisting her head. Her tongue probes into his mouth. He gives a surprised hum, but then meets her enthusiasm with his own, sliding his tongue against hers. When they finally break apart, her knees are weak.

"Okay, now you can go." She taps his nose. He gives her a dazed smile before he turns and walks away.

*I love this man, and he loves me,* thinks Korra, because it still seems surreal.

She turns off the pot of cider, then hurries upstairs. There are a few things in her suitcase she wants to use.

.*.*.*.

Noatak braces his hands on the sink and stares at his reflection. He looks drunk: his face is flushed, and he's grinning for no reason.

*Come on, pull yourself together.* He splashes cold water on his face. His mind is racing. Now he can't stop thinking about the way Korra looked on her knees in front of him earlier tonight. The pose was submissive, but her face was challenging him, and the act, the act, oh spirits, he was completely at her mercy. And now, finally, he's going to see her beautiful bare body again, smell it, taste it. He doesn't know how he's going to be able to keep himself quiet, and he wonders if he should have purchased one of the ball gags he saw in the toy box at the store.

He finishes cleaning himself up, then does a last-minute check to make sure he looks presentable. Drawing himself upright, he leaves the room and opens the door to his bedroom.

Korra has set up three candles on the bedside table; they smell faintly of sandalwood. She's lying on her side on the bed, wearing a black lace bra and panties, and thigh-high stockings.

His mouth goes dry. He closes the door behind him, staring. Searching for words, he only comes up with a whispered, "Stockings."

She holds a finger to her lips, then pats the bed beside her. He holds up a finger: one minute. He wants to take a moment to study her, commit this beautiful image to memory. Maybe he'll even try to carve it later, though he doubts he can do it justice. The flickering candlelight makes her skin impossibly soft, and casts shadows around the muscles of her abdomen, in her cleavage, between her legs. She's even more fit than he remembers, her muscles so defined and smooth that they look to be carved out of soapstone themselves. When he looks at her face again, she's giving him a smile that's part bashful, part cocky. He's glad to see confidence there. This body is a result of a lifetime of dedication and devotion to her art, and she has every right to be proud of it.

He takes off his shirt and tosses it on the floor, too distracted to fold it. Stretching out on the bed beside her, he runs his hand along her waist and hips, enjoying the dips and curves. Did she bring this outfit from home? Was she expecting to sleep with him, or is this just part of a normal outfit? He has so many questions, but the walls are too thin to ask them. As his fingers run over her
shapely hip-bone, he feels a moan rise in his throat, and he forces himself to swallow it. *Stay quiet.*

He leans forward to give her small kisses, taking great care that the smooching sound isn't too loud whenever they break apart. The stillness around them is gently suffocating, like a threatening hand sliding across his throat. He's surprised by how much the danger turns him on, even though the stakes aren't all that high. He can tell by the twinkle in her eye that Korra feels the same way.

Without her usual moans to guide him, his ears strain to listen for changes in her breaths. This feels more intimate than their usual lovemaking; he's hyper-aware of her movements. He combs his fingers down the back of her neck to try to show her how much he's enjoying himself. He wishes he could tell her how amazing her outfit looks, how he can't decide if he wants her to leave it on or take it off.

Her hand rubs his chest, her fingers tangling into his chest hair, and it feels so good, but he can't groan, so he kisses her harder instead. Now he understands why this feels so intimate: without their voices, they're forced to play up their movements to communicate with each other. It reminds him of reading each other's rhythm in the drum circle, resonating with each other on an instinctive, primal level.

Korra suddenly takes control, pushing him onto his back. She straddles his body, her torso hovering so closely above him that he can feel the heat of her skin radiating against his. She gently bites his chin, then her tongue trails down his throat. When her teeth barely close around his trachea, he releases a harsh breath. With a grin, she grips his neck and delicately bites his collarbone, then returns to his mouth to kiss him again. Her body lowers on top of his, squirming. She feels so good, so good...

His kiss is aggressive, and he rolls them over, pinning her against the bed with his body weight. He grinds, and her back arches; he drives an arm beneath it, holding her in position while he kisses down her neck to her cleavage. It smells and tastes even sweeter than he remembers, and he feels his eyes roll back into his head. He wants to kiss her breasts, but he doesn't want her to take off the bra just yet. Instead, he drags his tongue down the centre line of her stomach.

As he reaches the line of her underwear he looks up at her to make sure the next move won't be unwelcome. Her hand claws into his hair and she gives a slow, gentle push - not demanding, but giving him permission.

Releasing her waist, he carefully drags her underwear off her hips, revealing her body to him an inch at a time. He revels in the moment as he lowers his face toward his target, inhaling so deeply that his head spins. As he makes contact, a low groan sounds in his throat, and he freezes, listening for any sign that Tarrlok overheard.

There's no sound from next door, save for soft snoring.

His heart pounding from the close call, Noatak begins to move his tongue. He works with great care not to make any sounds, moving slowly even when he aches to move faster. With the pace so slow and the bedroom so quiet, Noatak feels like he's learning little details about her body's reactions that he missed before, tiny pulses, clenches and changes of breath that were always lost in the chaos. Her thighs are radiating heat in spite of the cold air, and soon he hears her breaths becoming harsh and uneven.

Korra's hand falls away from his head. She grabs her breasts, her mouth open, lips flared. Her head rolls from side-to-side; no doubt she's restraining herself from thrashing. Oh spirits, he would give anything to hear her cry out. The deprivation just makes him more desperate, more frantic, and it seems to have a similar effect on Korra. It isn't long before she begins to bear down, her muscles
tight. He looks up and recognizes the pained look on her face. Before she can tip over the edge, he gives her a parting kiss, then pulls away.

She looks up at him, eyes barely open, mouth damp and parted. She mouths a single word: Please.

He smiles and shakes his head: Not yet. Standing, he suckles at the slick palm and fingers of one hand, pulling open his drawer with the other. He pulls out a condom.

Korra snatches it from him and sits up, a bit clumsy. She unbuttons his pants and grabs his waistband, pulling down his pants and underwear in one move. He raises a brow at her, and she seductively bites her lower lip. Her fingers flutter over him, teasing, and he begins to doubt his ability to stay on his feet. Clumsy, he works the rest of his way out of his clothes, standing naked in front of her.

Then Korra reaches behind her back and unclasps her bra, taking it off and tossing it to the side. She presses her breasts together and leans forward, and suddenly he feels her on either side of him, her mouth at the top, and he has to bite into his cheek, hard, to keep from crying out. She pulls away, and it's suddenly too cold, and then the condom rolls into place.

He's quickly losing self-control, and it takes all his restraint to slowly climb into position. The first thrust makes the bedsprings creak, and he grits his teeth, because this means they're going to have to be even more restrained than he expected. Slowly, so slowly, they begin to rock, and the frustration melts with anticipation and begins to roar inside him, a fire that can't quite burn hot enough to burn itself out. Her fingernails curl into his back - he's sure they're drawing blood. Knowing she's just as frustrated as he is, knowing she wants him as badly as he wants her, only compounds the tension. His body vibrates with restraint as he grinds in slow circles. She moves counter to him, their movements slowing again whenever one of them gets too excited and accidentally makes the bed creak. The build up is so slow, so slow, and Noatak can feel every tiny movement as she begins to crest.

"Noa-," she breathes in his ear, but she can't finish the word, and her arms and legs clamp around him. He feels her spasm and fights to hold down her writhing limbs so the bed won't creak, but oh spirits, she's in so much ecstasy, she's so beautiful, he's going to follow her, he can't hold back...

His teeth clench and he fights to stay silent, but his ears ring and his breath shudders, and he loses all conscious thought.

He comes back to himself with Korra raking hair off his damp forehead. The room is so silent that his breaths seem too loud by comparison. He swallows hard, trying to regain control: in, then out. His ears strain for any sign that they woke Tarrlok, but he only hears his brother's snoring, deep and even. He gives a soft, relieved sigh.

He kisses Korra's forehead, then carefully pulls away. She rolls onto her side, watching him, her eyes shining.

I love you, she mouths.

He leans in to kiss her, his heart light.
Korra awakens twice during the night.

The first is because she's cold. She snuggles close to Noatak, spooning up behind him; he gives a small moan, half-asleep, and grabs her hand. She isn't sure if he leads, or if she does, but suddenly her hand is between his legs. Her body is tingling and she wants to continue, but not if he's unconscious.

"Are you awake?" she breathes.

He must have been wondering the same thing about her, because he rolls over and kisses her hard, his hand sliding down her abdomen. They grope each other in the dark, and it's a struggle to keep both her mouth and her hand silent. She's mostly successful: a tiny moan slips from her lips as she peaks, but a grunt slips from Noatak's clenched teeth when his turn comes, so she feels her blunder was acceptable. After taking a moment to clean up, she huddles close. He's radiating heat. Her palm rests in the hollow between his chest muscles, her fingers stroking the hair there until she falls asleep.

The second time she awakens, it's because she's too warm. She decides to use the bathroom and splash cold water on her face, but she can't find her clothes in the darkness, only the sexy underwear she was wearing underneath it. That won't do if she bumps into Tarrlok in the hallway. Noatak's shirt is on the floor, so she pulls it over her head. It's almost long enough to be a dress, and the sleeves hang far over her hands. She lifts the chest of it to her nose and breathes in, then smiles. He only wears a faint amount of cologne - not the heavy dose that Tarrlok wears - and it mingles with his natural scent in a way that makes her head spin. **If we agree to stay together long-distance, I'll have to ask him for the name of this cologne so I can have some on hand at home.**

She tip-toes to the bathroom. When she returns, Noatak is sitting bolt upright in bed, staring at the window.

"Noatak?" she whispers.

His head snaps to her. "Avatar," he growls in his Amon voice, and she freezes in place.

"Noatak, it's me." In the darkness, she can't see his gaze so much as feel it, but Amon's glare and tone don't have the power to frighten her anymore. She pulls off the shirt she borrowed and discards it. "Are you okay?"

"...dead..." he mutters, saying the word like it's the middle of a sentence and the beginning and end drifted away from it.

Shivers run down her spine. "I think you're still sleeping." She sits beside him and grips his shoulder. His muscles are tense. She sparks a small flame in her palm.

The light seems to wake him up. He presses his forehead into the heel of his hand. "Sorry, I..."

"Nightmare?"
He doesn't answer. He's trembling. She's surprised he's so shaken - how would she have felt, years ago, to learn that Amon himself had nightmares? She wonders if she ever featured in them. How strange it must have been, each of them living in fear of the other.

"It's okay," she whispers, rubbing his back. Now that the crisis has passed, she's a little miffed that he unconsciously reacts like she's a threat, but she reminds herself that he hated and feared her for forty-six years of his life. It's going to take more than a week or two of frantic sex to undo that reaction.

Tarrlok is snoring next door, so at least their interaction didn't wake him up. Maybe he's a heavier sleeper than they thought. One thought leads to another, and now she's remembering their lovemaking the night before. Her body begins to glow.

Noatak squeezes her knee. "I'm okay now."

"You sure?" She leans in to kiss his ear. "You don't need a distraction?"

There's a pause. "What did you have in mind?" he whispers.

Her hand skates down his spine to tickle the top of his tailbone, one of his sensitive spots, and he sucks in a sharp breath.

He turns to kiss her, and she bites his bottom lip; he fumbles behind him for the drawer. She breaks the kiss and lights a candle snuffing the flame in her hand. As he pulls out a condom, she begins to crawl back onto the bed, but he catches her arm. Pulling her in close, he breathes in her ear: "Floor."

"Floor?"

"Quieter. No bedsprings." He nuzzles her ear with his nose before he continues. "I want to take you hard."

At the words, every surface of her skin tingles with goosebumps, and she's on all fours on the floor before he even has the condom on.

Even though she was too warm a few minutes ago, the air is so cold and the floor so draughty that she begins to shiver. She feels Noatak's hands on her hips, his palms blistering hot. They still have to restrain themselves, but not as badly as when they were on the creaking bed; Korra pushes back, delighting in the bruising force. By the end of it, she's sore and satisfied, the back of her neck stinging from bites that are certain to leave a mark, her muscles quaking with shivers.

They hurry back into the bed, and he cocoons her safely in his arms, where their shivers slowly subside as body heat glows between them.

This time, neither of them awakens until morning, when a knock sounds at the door.

Noatak lurches to a seat beside her. Korra, not quite as on edge, groggily pushes herself up on one elbow.

"Noatak?" says Tarrlok's voice from the hallway.

"One moment." Noatak swings his legs over the side of the bed and begins to pull on his pants.

"No need to get up. Going for a walk. Back in an hour. Need anything?"
"I'm fine, thank you."

"And Korra?"

Noatak turns to face Korra, his brows raised. She sighs and flops back to the pillow, folding her arms over her chest.

"She's fine, thanks," says Noatak.

"Okay. Back later."

They hear footsteps on the stairs, and a few minutes later, the door closes.

Korra groans. "I had this idea that we were going to keep our relationship a secret."

"We are, from everyone else. Tarrlok's family." Noatak kicks off his pants and slips back under the covers. "All I care about is that he didn't overhear us last night."

As memories start to flood her mind, she feels warmth flood her body. "You know, right now, we can be as loud as we want."

"Hmm..." Noatak slides his arms around her and begins to kiss her ear. "I haven't tired you out yet?"

"Of course not," she manages, squirming. How is it possible for his mouth to still feel so good a fourth time in only a few hours? His hand slips between her thighs, and she is feeling a bit bruised, but he's gentle.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Good," he says, "because I'm aching to see you on top of me."

"Aching? Well then, you'd better put on a condom," she says, and she reaches down to help, leaning forward to kiss him at the same time. Once he's ready, she rolls onto her stomach and climbs on top of him, centring herself over his hips. Immediately, she can tell her knees are bruised from their earlier adventure on the floor, and she's a bit, for lack of a better phrase, saddle sore. She must wince without realizing it, because he cups a hand to her cheek.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"A bit tender."

He pulls her down for a kiss. "Maybe we should rest."

"And waste a condom? Not a chance." She smirks and sits upright again. The more she moves, the less she notices her pain. Noatak's soft grunts and moans fuel her, and she picks up speed. Soon she's twisting and grinding, feeling as free as she did dancing with the drum the night before. His moans turn to yells, and she feels her voice rise with him.

They come together, crying out in unison.

She realizes her head is tossed back; she drops it to look at him, and tousled hair falls into her face. Noatak watches her, his eyes barely open.
"Oh fuck, Korra," he whispers. "Oh fuck, you're beautiful." His hand hooks around the back of her neck and he draws her in, his mouth finding hers.

It's difficult, but she tears herself away. "Come on, we'd better get out of the bedroom, or we're never going to leave."

"Not such a bad prospect, really, but I did want to spend a bit of time training with Tarrlok." He sits up and kisses her forehead.

"Plus we have to get him and Akna together," she says.

He gives her a sharp look. "No meddling."

"I'm not really the meddling type. I'm just cheering them on." She finds her clothes in a corner and pulls them on; there's no point in showering yet, if she's going to train later on. Her hair is matted, however, and she should really sort it out. "I'll meet you downstairs. Have to comb this nest."

Once her hair is finally in neat ponytails, she plods down the stairs and finds Noatak in the kitchen. He smiles as she approaches, and she smiles back, feeling her cheeks warm.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to walk for a day." She eases herself onto a stool. He turns away, but not before she sees the proud smirk on his lips.

"Get that smirk off your face," she says, playfully miffed.

"I was just thinking I did quite well for a man in his late forties with no bloodbending to assist him." He opens the cupboard. "Seaweed noodles and fish for brunch?"

"Yes, that sounds good. And don't act like you did all the work. There were two of us in that bed. And on that floor." She spins the stool top one full rotation, then abruptly stops it. "Wait. For a man in his late forties? Without bloodbending? Are you implying you used to have sex even more times in a row?"

He sets a pot of water on the stovetop to boil. "I've slowed down a bit over the years."


Noatak turns to her, face twisted in an expression that is half amusement, half offense.

"Your poor ass?" she guesses, and then she winces, embarrassed by her own lack of tact.

He shakes his head and turns back to the stovetop.

She wrestles with her curiosity for a moment, then gives in. "How does that work, anyway, when there are two of you?"

"The usual way."

"I mean, how did you decide who gave and who took?"

He raises a brow at her. "How do you and I decide which position to use at any given time?"

She considers. "It just sort of...happens. I guess we kind of read each other's cues. Maybe ask for a position if we're really craving it. I just answered my own question, didn't I?"

"You did." He strides to the icebox and pulls out the jug of cider. "Would you care for some cider?
I was thinking of heating some up."

"Yes, please." She stops spinning the stool and watches him, delighting in the way he moves. Even preparing food, he's all grace and fluid motions. There's something about watching a man cook that has always appealed to her. She used to love watching Mako putting about the kitchen on nights when it was his turn to cook.

Noatak opens a jar and pulls out a cinnamon stick, then sets it in the pot with the cider, following it with a pinch of nutmeg.

"Did Amon's followers know he was this domestic?" she wonders aloud.

He chuckles. "Domestic? I usually eat my fish raw because I'm too lazy to cook."

"I just saw you put spices in cider."

"Ah, well I'm good with things that one would normally add alcohol to. And I boil noodles well. That's about it." He drops the noodles into the boiling water.

"You look pretty comfortable in the kitchen to me." She hops down from the stool and approaches his back. Her arms wrap around him and she presses her cheek to his spine, smiling. "I can't believe I spent all those months thinking you were living this domestic life with Kwan, and here I am enjoying it with you instead."

He's quiet for a moment, then his hand closes over hers. "I'm sorry I left you with that impression, Korra."

"You couldn't have known. I made an assumption." She closes her eyes, breathing in his scent. "I tried to be happy for you. It was better than you being dead."

"I'm sorry for that, too," he says quietly.

"It's okay. I forget about it a little more each day we're together." The words have barely left her mouth when she realizes they may soon be separated again. He falls silent.

Somber, she releases him and returns to her stool. Noatak stirs the noodles, not looking at her. She wonders if he's remembering Kwan. When they last parted ways, he was still in love with the man, and she can't help but wonder if he still is. Is she still in love with Mako? She doesn't think so, thought she'll always care for him on a slightly different level than her normal friends.

"Do you mind if I ask what happened with Kwan when you left together?" she asks quietly. She knows Kwan refused to kill him, but that's it.

"I don't mind." He turns down the flames on the stove, pours two mugs of cider, and sits on a stool next to her, sliding her a mug.

Thanking him, she lifts it to her mouth and breaths on the surface of the liquid to cool it.

"I expected him to kill me." Noatak sits with his back straight, staring at the opposite wall. "I could tell he was considering it. Put his kali stick in the gas tank, one flip of a switch away from killing us both. It was just like the time Tarrlok..." He trails off. "Kwan told me he saw the boat explode last time, saved my life, even after everything I did to him. And then he dismissed me, like I meant nothing."

"That bothers you, doesn't it?"
"The fact that it bothers me speaks volumes about my character, doesn't it? I'm used to discarding, not being discarded." He pauses for a sip of his drink, then says, "I do wish I had handled it differently, that I had sincerely apologized. He clearly got the closure he needed, but I'm not sure I did. I've considered going back to find him, try to set things right, if only for the sake of closure."

"Sometimes you have to walk away without closure, because seeking it just upsets the people you try to apologize to," says Korra quietly. Her throat tightens. "After Asami passed away, I felt like I needed closure, so I went to see her father in prison."

Noatak looks at her, his eyes wide, and she remembers that the two men were close friends at one point. It's so strange, to be on such intimate terms with a man who was close with Sato. They've barely even talked about him; truth be told, she doesn't want to think of Sato as anything but a monster. It's easier that way.

"I thought it might give me some closure," she says, continuing her story. "And I felt apologizing to him was the right thing to do." She swallows hard. "He started screaming 'I had no daughter' and got so worked up that the guards had to escort me out, and he was still screaming when I left. Sometimes you have to weigh your own need for closure against how the other person is going to react. I think I only made things worse."

Noatak grips her shoulder as he stands. "I'm sorry you went through that, but thanks. That helps."

"Does it?"

"Yes. Thank you." He returns to stir the noodles. There's a long silence, and he says, "It's interesting that we each expected the other to return to our past lovers. I expected you to reunite with Officer Mako."

"Really? You saw our falling out. There was no way to repair that."

He half-turns to her. "No?"

"I attacked him," she says flatly. "You don't attack people you care about. It's wrong..." She trails off as her gaze ticks to Noatak's injured arm. He looks down at it, too, then looks at her with soft eyes.

"We've both hurt people we care about," he says. "Those days are behind us. We're better people now."

Korra isn't so sure. She's always heavily favoured violence in any sort of conflict, and she seems to keep circling back to it, again and again, even when she gets hard life lessons about how wrong it is. Maybe this time, it will finally stick.

The front door opens, and Tarrlok steps inside. "I'm home."

"Welcome back," says Noatak.

"Your brother's cooking. Want some cider?" Korra pats the stool beside her.

Tarrlok hangs up his coat, then comes to join them in the kitchen. "Up before noon? I expect the two of you to stay in bed all day."

Her cheeks burn.

Noatak steps between them and sets a mug of cider in front of his brother. "I suppose we don't have
"to tell you we worked things out."

"I figured." Taking a sip of the cider, Tarrlok pulls out a stool for himself and settles to a seat.

"Are you okay with that?" asks Korra tentatively. She never really stopped to wonder how he might feel about the two of them together.

"Of course," he says. "A little strange, with the age difference, history. But you love each other. Be happy." He gives her a little smile, and she returns it.

Noatak grips his brother's shoulder in a symbol of gratitude, then returns to the stove. "Let's eat lunch, then maybe do some training together before we make our dinner plans."

"It's been years," says Tarrlok.

"It has. This time, it'll be on our terms, not our father's."

As much as Korra wants to watch the two of them train together - partly for sentimental reasons, partly to ogle Noatak - she decides she'll give them some privacy. With all this snow around, it's the perfect time to focus on her waterbending training. She's so hungry that she scarfs down her meal, the first one to finish. Excusing herself, she changes into a lighter shirt and arm warmers, knowing she'll heat up pretty quickly once she's moving around.

Before she leaves, she pops into the kitchen and gives Noatak a farewell peck on the cheek. He looks a little stunned by the gesture, and she smirks.

"Too cutesy?"

"No, this is just very new," he replies. Is he blushing?

Tarrlok tilts his head, eyes twinkling. "Where's mine?"

"Maybe Akna will give you one later," she replies cheekily. "I'm going to train. You boys have fun. I'll be back in a few hours."

"Here." Noatak opens a drawer and pulls out a key. "In case we're still out when you return."

Now it's Korra's turn to blush. "You're giving me a key to your place?"

"Lending it. Don't read too much into it," he replies.

"Well then, I'll be sure to take good care of it." She glances behind them to make sure Tarrlok has his back to her, then pulls down the collar of her shirt and coyly slips the key into a bra cup.

Noatak's cheeks are definitely dark now. She gives him a wink, then, suddenly shy about all this flirtation, hurries to the door.

"This is all so weird," she mutters to herself as she takes bouncy steps along the snow-covered sidewalk. Tarrlok being playful. Noatak being domestic. Her own flirtation and happiness is bizarre, too; she hasn't felt this way since the first couple months with Mako. Her heart is soaring - she's never really understood that expression until now, and now she sees why it's so common: she literally feels like she's gliding through time, lightheaded and dancing. When she remembers Noatak's rumbling baritone I love you, she wants to race, giggling, to the centre of an open field and spin, punch the air, do back flips.

She arrives in the outskirts of town, near Noatak and Tarrlok's childhood home, and her feet slow.
The black mark on the door is supposed to be a warning, but she finds it's only piquing her curiosity. Now that she's openly admitting her love for him, she wants to know everything about him. She still pictures their childhood in a dark, underground dungeon, walls cold and rocky.

Looking around to make sure no one will see, she opens the door and steps into the abandoned home. She sparks a small flame and looks around.

Far from the sinister dungeon she imagined, it's small and cozy, the walls thick with painted hangings and furs. She finds the ledge Noatak talked about, where his mother left a bowl and a note for him before she died - the bowl he smashed in rage. There are still a few tiny shards on the floor, and she bends to pick one up, swallowing hard. She can imagine his pain, knowing that his mother knew his true identity all along, knowing they could have rekindled their bond but never did.

"And all that rage was buried deep beneath the surface, until you dredged it up by reuniting the two of them," she mutters, setting the shard back where she found it.

She wonders how many painful memories Noatak has buried, how much rage is still carefully hidden beneath the surface. While she feels like she knows him inside and out, the truth is that they haven't known each other very long. A man who has had four aliases likely has more hidden pain than she knows. The thought makes her sad, even though she knows he caused a lot of his own pain through the choices he made.

Most of the furniture is covered with sheets, nothing of interest beneath them. Her wandering feet bring her to a worn chair by the wall. A coffee table stands beside it, uncovered; on its top are several framed pictures, all of them face down. Now Korra imagines Tarrlok tilting them down as he said his final farewell to his childhood home, too heartbroken to leave the memories exposed.

One at a time, she tilts them up. The first is an old photo of Yakone and Okanna on what appears to be their wedding day; even though it's old and faded, she can see they're gazing at each other with adoration in their eyes. The lovestruck look on Yakone's face is far removed from the cocky rage that she saw in Aang's visions, and she's startled to see an uncanny resemblance to the expression Noatak wears when he looks at her.

I think of Yakone as a monster, but to Okanna, he was a man who was deeply in love and wanted to start a new life. Is that how Noatak and I are now? Her heart pounds as she wonders if, like Yakone, Noatak will slip back into being the man he was, but she quickly discards the idea. Noatak is becoming so self-aware that he won't let that happen. Besides, neither will she: unlike Okanna, she knows all about her partner's dark past. She knows Amon, and she won't stay quiet if he starts to resurface, just as Noatak won't stay quiet if her darker side starts to resurface. They've seen each other's worst, and they're both moving past it.

Still, she's a little shaken as she moves on to the next photo.

This one is a family portrait; the boys look to be about eight and five. Noatak is wearing a hairstyle like her own, and though the proportions of his face are different, he still smiles the same way, top set of teeth showing, slight dimples. Tarrlok's face is so round that she wouldn't have recognized him if she hadn't known who she was looking at. There's so much innocence on their round faces that her heart sinks.

The next must have been taken in the years shortly before Noatak left, because he is already hitting puberty; his shoulders are broad, and his face is starting to lengthen. She recognizes his expression here, too: in spite of the forced smile, his face is hard and his eyes are piercing. This is his Amon gaze, the one she saw in his mugshot, the one he still wears during intense moments. Tarrlok, on
the other hand, looks frightened, his eyes slightly too wide with trauma. Her eyes drift to Okanna, who is smiling, but the lines on her face are deep.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs. "That wasn't fair to any of you, and it wasn't your fault. It was all him." She can't even bring herself to look Yakone in the eye.

Setting the photo face down, she looks through the rest. Tarrlok graduating from university, a couple more photos of Tarrlok and his mother, and that's it. Korra wonders how many times Okanna looked at these later photos and felt the hole that was Noatak's absence.

Sighing, she moves to set down the last frame, but fumbles. The frame pitches toward the floor. Yelping, she lunges and manages to catch it just in time. With a sigh of relief, she sets the frame on the table. While she doubts either of the brothers would come in here - they seem to respect their tribe's superstitions - she doesn't want to have to explain herself if they do. This is probably her hint that it's time to get out of here. She quickly leaves and closes the door behind her.

Moving to the blank snowfield, she falls into stance and winces as her legs ache; all the night's activity has taken its toll on her. She decides to practice her psychic waterbending and give her body a break. There's still plenty of practice yet to do. While she's gotten stronger at psychic bending, she still needs to build her endurance; even the tiny amount she did while dancing with the drums last night was exhausting, and it's only going to be practical to use it in combat if she builds up her stamina.

She spends about an hour practicing, then decides her lack of sleep is catching up to her. A shower and an afternoon snack will be a good after-workout recovery. She hops on an air scooter to ride back to Noatak's house. The lights are out and no one answers her knock, so she reaches into her bra to find the key.

It's not there.

Panicking, she grabs the bottom of her bra and shakes it out. Nothing. She shakes out her shirt and pants.

Shit. He gave me a key - the first sign of a trusting, long-term relationship - and I fucking lost it the second I got it. Shit, shit, shit!

It must have fallen out while she was training. She summons an air scooter and zooms back to the open lot where she was practicing, then retraces her steps through the crunching snow. Nothing. She drops into stance and lifts the snow out of the way, scouring the ground with a ball of flame, looking for a metallic glint. Still nothing.

"Fuck!" she yells out loud. If only she had taken the time to learn to metalbend, she could just sense the damned thing. She follows her footsteps back to the hut from Noatak's childhood, and pauses at the door.

Maybe it fell out while I was looking around, or when I fumbled that photo frame.

She bursts through the door. The floor is lined with rugs and furs, and it's all rippled and uneven, kicked out of place, and she groans, realizing it's going to take forever to search through it. She lights up the room with a ball of flame, careful not to catch it on the wall. That's the last thing she needs: to accidentally burn his childhood home to the ground in the process.

Dropping to her knees, she begins to scour the rugs, growing more and more frantic. She's so intent on her search that she doesn't hear the door open a short while later.
"Korra?" says Noatak's voice.

She jumps and whirls. The brothers are standing in the door, brows raised in twin expressions of confusion.

"Oh," she says, standing up. "I...uh..."

"We saw a light and thought it might be squatters," says Noatak, stepping into the house.

"Wait," says Tarrlok. "Bad luck to-

"It's okay, I don't really believe the old traditions. You can wait outside," Noatak stands tall and folds his arms over his chest. "Korra, what are you doing?"

She looks down. "I was snooping," she admits. "And then I lost your key." Her jaw wobbles.

"So I entrust you with my key, and you promptly lose it while in the process of disturbing my mother's sacred, forbidden place of death?" There's a hint of amusement in his voice, and that humiliates her even more than the anger she expected.

"I'm not too good with...things," she mutters.

"I'll help you look. Where were you standing?"

"Over by the photos."

Noatak eyes the frames for a moment, then strides across the room and tilts one up. It's the one from when he was a teenager. The amusement fades from his face, and he stares. Korra tries to read his face, but it's that perfectly blank expression he does so well.

Without a word, he sets down the frame and begins to search the carpets. Korra does the same, while Tarrlok hovers uneasily in the doorway.

At last, Noatak stands up. "I don't think it's here, Korra."

Tears of frustration prick the corner of her eyes. "I'm sorry." She feels as if this was the first big step of their relationship, and she let him down.

"It's okay," he says gently. "Let's go back home."

When they step outside, however, he turns to Tarrlok instead. "This place should no longer exist, Tarrlok," he says. "Mom's spirit is no longer there; the only ghosts that remain are bad memories. It stands as a monument to our childhood years, and that's not something that should be preserved."

Tarrlok holds his gaze.

"We should destroy it," says Noatak.

"Wait, what?" Korra steps between them. "There are good memories there, too, aren't there?" She thinks of the photo of the two as young children, their faces happy and innocent.

Tarrlok swallows hard, then looks at her. "He's right. Burn it."

"What?"

"Burn it. To the ground." He glances back at Noatak again, who gives him a small smile.
Korra's first instinct is to protest, but then she remembers Noatak's rage at his mother, the emotions in both brothers' eyes in the older photo, the heartbreak in Tarrlok's eyes when he first told her about his childhood. As an outsider looking in, it seems ridiculous to discard the good memories in favour of erasing the bad, but she wasn't there. She can't possibly understand what this home symbolizes to them.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Yes," they say in unison.

Turning back to the house, she falls into a firebending stance, then glances back at the brothers. Noatak steps in close to Tarrlok and drops an arm across his shoulders; their heads touch. They're standing like little kids supporting each other, not fully-grown men. Her throat tightens and she turns away.

Flame blasts from her outstretched hand and licks along the wooden frame. She pulls the fire down the dome in lines, trying to turn it to ash quickly, before the local fire department catches on and comes to put it out. It burns in minutes, collapsing in on itself. When all that's left is a smouldering mass of wreckage, she finally releases control over the flames and falls back to stand by the brothers. Noatak's hand rests on her shoulder.

"It's over," he says gruffly.

"Closure at last," says Tarrlok.

Korra looks up at the two of them and sees twin expressions of relief.

*Put an end to this sad story,* says Tarrlok's voice in her mind, a memory almost seven years old. At the time, she could never have imagined that this was how she would do it.

She leans against Noatak's ribcage and closes her eyes, listening to his heart pound.

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When they return to Noatak's house, Korra tugs off her boot, and a metal object clangs to the tile floor.

"Really?" She bends down to pick it up, furious. "It was in my fucking boot the whole time?"

"Maybe it happened for a reason," murmurs Noatak, pulling off his coat. She catches a whiff of his post-workout scent, musky and spiced, mingling with the scent of snow and smoke, and her knees weaken. Tarrlok attempts to move past her, and she wobbles out of his way to let him pass. When Noatak begins to follow, she stops him.

"Here." She holds out the key. "Take it back before I accidentally drop it down a drain or something."

Noatak studies her for a moment, then his hand rises to meet hers. He presses the key into her palm and closes her fingers over it. "Keep it."

"As in, until the end of this visit?"

"Longer than that." His gaze is so intense that she feels rooted in place. "My life is better with you in it, Korra, and I'm constantly surprised by the ways you make it better. I want you to be able to come into my life whenever you wish. That key is yours for as long as you want it."
"Better be careful," she says, flushing and lightheaded. "I might never give it back."

He watches her for a moment, then surprises her with a hug so tight that her breath escapes in a squeak.
"Are you almost done? I need to have a shower," says Korra.

Tarrlok frowns at the mirror and smoothes his hair. "Dry air makes my hair frizzy."

"How's the air dry? It's snowing every single day." She drums her fingers against the doorframe.

"It's dry. I can't go out like this." He pushes down a few stray strands that Korra can barely see.

"So ask your brother if you can borrow some of his hair gel." She grabs his arm and tugs him out of the bathroom. "Out."

Once he's through the door, she locks it and strips, then steps into the shower. Noatak suggested to her that they share a shower while Tarrlok delivers the dinner invitation to Akna, but she graciously turned him down. It would be pleasant to be soaping his body right now, but she knows herself, and she knows what that would lead to. She needs recovery time, or else she'll end up so bruised that they won't be able to touch each other for the rest of her visit.

After her shower, she dries her hair and decides to leave it down. She'll dress up and do her makeup later. For now, she pulls on a comfortable pair of pants, a pelt and a blue top.

"Your turn to use the shower," she calls down to Noatak as she begins to descend the stairs.

"Thanks," she hears Noatak reply from the ground floor, and then, to Tarrlok: "You sure you know how to get there?"

"Yes." Tarrlok sounds annoyed. "This town was my home longer than yours."

Korra jumps over the last two steps and lands in the foyer. Tarrlok is by the door, wearing his jacket, a folded piece of paper in his hand. Noatak turns to her and smiles as she approaches. She smiles back, then notices Tarrlok; his face is impassive, but she can his nervousness it in the way his gaze darts around the room.

"Want some company, Tarrlok?" she asks.

He nods, looking relieved. "Please. In case I lose my words."

"You'll be fine, but I'm happy to walk you there anyway." She slides past Noatak, subtly trailing her hand across his leg, then begins to pull on her coat and boots. "We'll be back soon."

"Good luck," says Noatak with a smile.

The temperature outside has dropped, and the snow on the ground is hard and crunchy. Korra finds herself looking for untouched spots of snow between footprints, delighting in the crunch as she stomps on them. Tarrlok's walk is more dignified. His hands are in his pockets. She glances at him and notices him staring at the ground as he walks, one brow furrowed.

"You okay?" she asks, poking his arm with her elbow.
“Fine,” he says absently.

She spins to walk backwards in front of him, trying to read his face. He slows to a stop and lifts his head to glare at her.

“Stop that.”

“Seriously, Tarrlok,” she says. “You don’t have to be so nervous.”

He lets out a long, weary sigh.

“Come on. A charming guy like you? I bet you’re smooth with the ladies.”

“You’d lose that bet.”

“I doubt it.” A thought crosses her mind. “Wait, you’ve dated before, right?”

“Of course, but things were different.” His slump in posture is almost imperceptible, but spending time around the brothers is making Korra good at reading tiny changes in composure. She wonders if he’s referring to his lost bending or speech, or both, and while she’s debating what to ask next, the pause is long enough that he says quietly,

“I have scarring. Lots of it.”

“You do?” She thinks of the scars on the back of Noatak’s head and between his shoulder blades. It makes sense that Tarrlok would have some as well, given that he was the one who set off the blast, but she never stopped to wonder. Now that she thinks about it, Tarrlok has never worn anything but long-sleeved shirts, even when training on a hot day.

“My torso and my arms. Disfiguring.” He looks down at his hands. “Noatak saved my hands and face.”

“When he shielded you with water.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “His shield kept me alive, but my hand was in the blast, almost severed. My face, badly burnt. He pulled me out of the water and started healing me. Drained him. Passed out before he could finish.”

“But...” She feels her world spin. “Noatak isn't a healer.”

“He's powerful enough to do anything.”

“This changes everything.” Korra begins to get excited; this is how she can convince him to keep his bending. The way he used his bloodbending to mend her chi pathways was a compelling argument in itself, but if he’s a healer on top of it, he has the potential to do tremendous good.

“He doesn’t remember he did it,” says Tarrlok. “He was in shock. Let him forget.” His voice fades. “I wish I could.”

“But he if he knows he can heal, he might-”

Tarrlok’s face twists. "This conversation wasn't about Noatak," he snaps.

Her stomach flips. Here he is baring his soul about his scarring, and she's redirecting the conversation to his brother. Does she do this often? She vows to make a better effort to respect their friendship.
"I'm sorry, Tarrlok," she says quietly.

He still looks cross, but he nods, accepting the apology.

"Look," she says, "Akna seems like a mature woman, and she had no problem with your past or your speech difficulties. If she likes you, she won't mind the scars. I know I don't mind Noatak's scars." She bites the inside of her cheek, realizing she's turning the conversation back to Noatak yet again. *I really have to stop doing that.*

Tarrlok's expression is a little less dismal. She hates seeing so little confidence on the face that was once so smug and cocky. Well, she doesn't want to see him as cocky as he used to be, either, because that was the expression she always wanted to punch in the face. Somewhere in the middle would be good.

"Okay, don't look so sad," she says. "I'll let you in on a secret that will cheer you up: I'm thinking of trying to give your bending back."

His eyes widen.

"You've changed so much that I don't see you being a threat to the safety of the world," she says. "You would just have to be careful with it, since there's a good chance you'll be under the police's watchful eye, and I haven't discussed this with the Council. Think about it for a bit and we'll talk about it when we get home, okay?"

"Home," says Tarrlok quietly, and she's not sure if he has lost his words and is repeating hers to show his understanding, or if there's something on his mind.

"You okay?"

He nods. "Let's continue."

Akna's house reminds Korra of Asami's old mansion, and her heart twists a little. It doesn't matter how much time passes - she's never going to stop missing her friend. She stops at the entranceway, staring at the boxy, two-story building. The pagoda-style roof is steep to prevent snow buildup, and the house itself features pillars and brickwork that seem more Earth Kingdom style than she would have expected up here. Tarrlok doesn't seem fazed by the opulence; he marches up to the front door with only a brief glance up. She remembers the extravagant gifts he bought her back when he was trying to woo her to his task force and wonders if he used to live in a mansion, too, before he lost everything.

She hurries up the path, falling into place beside him as he rings the doorbell.

Akna opens the door, and her face lights up. "Tarrlok. Avatar Korra. It's good to see you."

Tarrlok gives a stiff bow. "And you. I come bearing an invitation."

Korra glances at him. His voice is smooth, closer to the diplomatic charm she remembers from the pre-war days, but his cheeks are dark and there's a slight tremble in his fingers. She sees him take a breath and hold it as he stands, then let it out slowly.

"An invitation?" Akna leans against the door frame and folds her arms over her chest, relaxed. "By all means, go ahead."

"Saomik, Avatar Korra and I request your presence for dinner this evening at the Moondance Restaurant. If it suits you, we could come by to pick you up at eight o'clock."
She arches a brow. "The Moondance? You have good taste. I'd be delighted to join you."

"I look forward to it."

"As do I. See you then." She nods at each of them in turn. "Tarrlok. Avatar Korra."

As they return to the sidewalk, Tarrlok lets out a long breath.

"I haven't heard you talk that fluently since before the incident," says Korra softly. "Being out here is really good for you, isn't it?"

He appears to be contemplating her words; they walk back to the house in silence.

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As eight o'clock nears, Korra is just putting the last touches on her makeup. The eyeliner on one eye looks perfect, and she can't get the other eye to match it. She growls to herself, her knuckles turning white as she grips the pencil. If only Asami were here to help her.

That's twice today that she's missing Asami. Her eyes begin to tear up, and she curses aloud. Crying will only ruin the good eye.

"Everything alright?" asks Noatak from the open doorway.

"I didn't want you to see me until I was done," she snaps, but she catches herself and sighs. "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you, just this stupid eyeliner." She glances up at him, then stares. He's wearing a modern suit; it's tailored to his body, its lines accentuating his athletic shape. His hair, sideburns and brows are neatly groomed, and the glasses make him look sharp and sophisticated. As bruised as her body is, it begins to awaken. Realizing her mouth is hanging open, she closes it and swallows.

"Hello," she says, an accidental growl in her voice.

"Want some help?" He strides into the room and stands confidently beside her.

"I guess you had a lot of practice with makeup," she mutters, turning back to the mirror. "I can't get the eyes even."

"Here." He presses a finger underneath her chin and turns her face, bending in for a closer look. With nowhere to look but his face, she focuses on his lips; they're wide and broad, with a subtle snub to the upper one. Subconsciously, she wets her lips.

"Hold still," he says softly. Accepting the eyeliner from her, his brow furrows with concentration. A couple quick lines on her eyelid, and he says, "Something like that?"

She turns to the mirror and blinks a few times. "Perfect! Thank you."

"Let me look at you," he says, and she steps back, doing a spin. She's wearing a maroon evening dress with a plunging neckline and capped sleeves; Asami picked it out for her the last time they went shopping together.

"Do you approve?" she asks with a sly grin.

Noatak's eyes travel up and down her body, then meet her gaze. "I would convey my approval with a kiss, but it would be so deep that it would leave your lipstick smudged and your hair mussed."
"Her chest flutters. "Well, save that one for later."

"Maybe I'll leave you with a small taste of what you can expect." He grips her hand and presses a soft kiss into her palm. She expects him to leave it there, but he slowly takes her index finger into his mouth, dragging his tongue and teeth along its length, his eyes locked with hers. Her breath catches for so long that she feels lightheaded when she finally remembers to breathe.

Flustered, she blurts, "I don't know what body part that was supposed to represent."

He leans close to her ear to whisper, "All of it. By the time we finally drift to sleep tonight, my approving kisses will have covered every inch of your body." He pulls away and holds out his bent arm, offering her is elbow. "Shall we?"

"Spirits, I..." She accepts his arm to keep herself upright. "You're intense."

"Is it too much?"

"It's perfect. Just be careful you don't turn me on too much tonight." She tugs him down to her level and whispers in his ear: "I'm not wearing any underwear."

He clears his throat. "You're planting dangerous ideas in my head."

"Good." A shiver runs down her spine, and it's so ridiculous that even innuendo has this much of a physical impact on her.

When they reach the bottom of the stairs, Tarrlok is pacing back and forth across the alcove by the front door, already wearing his coat and boots. Korra's eyes trace him back and forth as he moves.

"You okay?"

"Fine. We're going to be late." He doesn't stop pacing.

"You've forgotten how small-town schedules work, brother," says Noatak. "We're still early." He pulls Korra's coat out of the closet and helps her put it on; not accustomed to the gesture, she awkwardly struggles to feed her arms into the sleeves. Mako offered a similar gesture once, early in the relationship, and she chastised him for being patronizing. You were so immature back then, she thinks. So insistent on being self-reliant. He was only being polite.

As they leave the house, the creases on Tarrlok's face deepen. Korra scoops up his elbow with her spare arm, and he looks down at her as if surprised she's there.

"It's going to be okay," she says.

"I'm fine," he says, but he doesn't drop her arm.

Noatak leads them along the back streets; they can hear the cheers, chatter and shouts from the festival, and jazz music from the park. Korra doesn't envy any musicians who have to play their instruments in this cold. She huddles closer to Noatak; he bends down to kiss the top of her head, somehow managing to do so without even breaking his stride.

"Cute," mutters Tarrlok, as if the word is bitter on his tongue. She glances up at him, and his cheeks darken.

"Sorry, it's just... The two of you." He shakes his head. "Hard to believe my eyes sometimes. We teamed up against you, Noatak. I tried to protect her from you." His voice is rising in pitch; he
sounds panicked, and it's unlikely about their relationship.

"Tarrlok." Noatak halts them and detaches himself from Korra; he grabs both of his brother's hands. "Listen to me, brother: it's going to be okay."

Her eyes drift to the joined hands. *Those hands once healed those ones.* The knowledge that Noatak has latent healing abilities is itching at her brain. She needs to tell him; he might be more comfortable with his bending if she does.

Why are you so desperate for that? she asks herself. Are you really interested in giving him his bending back? Are you hoping accepting his own bending will make him more comfortable with yours? He doesn't seem to be bothered by your bending anymore, so it can't be that.

Her eyes trace his features, the moving lips that are giving his brother a pep talk, and the realization washes over her like ice water.

I want him to accept his own bending because I hope to have his children one day.

"Spirits," she mutters to herself, taking a few steps away from the brothers to try to outpace the realization, but it catches up with her. *No. No, no, no. Stop thinking about this, you idiot. You aren't ready for kids yet, and he doesn't want to have biological kids, anyway.* But now she's seeing how tenderly he's coaching his brother, picturing him as a father, picturing their own children having that special sibling bond she never experienced...

The pep talk must be over, because the brothers turn to her. "Korra?" asks Noatak, brow furrowing.

"Just wanted to give you some privacy," she lies. Her heart is pounding, and this time, when she grabs his hand, it's not just the hand of her partner, but the hand of her life partner. The hand of her soulmate. How times have changed.

He looks down at her with a puzzled expression, but she only smiles at him, not ready to dump all her heavy thoughts on him just yet.

"Let's go," she says.

When Akna answers her door, she looks even more polished than she did the night before, if possible. She greets them with a broad smile that gets even broader when she looks at Tarrlok. All the tension seems to drain from his body, and he smiles at her, looking more relaxed than Korra has ever seen him. The four of them walk in silence to the end of the road, to a small brick building with stained glass windows, blue light shining through them. *The Moondance* is written in gold lettering on a marble plaque over its entrance.

The restaurant is aptly named; a large blue-hued light, detailed to look like the moon, hangs in the centre of a domed ceiling, and directly below it is a dance floor featuring a live band of mellow strings. Tables line the perimeter of the dance floor, lit by candles, and the patrons are dressed in formal wear.

Noatak pulls out her chair for her, then sits beside her. His foot slides sideways to press against hers under the table, and her cheeks warm as she remembers the time her feet found his under the covers, back during their mission.

They order their food - Korra balks at the prices, at first, but decides to splurge a little - and a bottle of wine arrives at the table. Conversation flows easily between the four of them, or, more accurately, between everyone but Korra. They're discussing politics, and she has no interest in it. Instead, she watches Noatak speak, fascinated by his mannerisms.
Her mind wanders, and now she's counting down the hours they have left together. This is their second-to-last night before the return sailing to Republic City. She finds herself pre-emptively beginning to miss him.

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Noatak has been conscious that Korra isn't part of the conversation, and he glances at her every once in awhile, trying to make sure she isn't feeling left out. As her polite smile begins to fade, and her mouth begins to droop, he reaches under the table to squeeze her leg. Her hand grips his so hard that he winces. Something must be bothering her.

Waiting for the line of discussion to come to its natural close, he turns to her and smiles. "But all this talk of politics must be boring for our esteemed Avatar to hear."

"I don't mind," she says politely.

"You look restless. Would you like a dance before our meal arrives?" He glances at the other couple. "If you two don't mind."

"Not at all," says Tarrlok, looking grateful; Noatak figured he wouldn't mind a little extra conversation time alone with Akna.

"I'm not much of a dancer," says Korra, her cheeks dark.

"I've seen you dance." His cheeks warm at the memory. He stands and holds out a hand. She hesitantly accepts it. Bobbing his head at the others, he leads her toward the dance floor.

"Sorry to pressure you," he says quietly. "We don't have to dance. You looked troubled, so I wanted an excuse to talk to you alone."

"I don't mind," she says, glossing over the part where she looked troubled; he decides not to push her.

As he moves into position, she falls into place so naturally that he knows she's more of a dancer than she let on. When they begin moving, however, her steps are clunky. He can tell she's over-thinking it.

"It's just like sparring, or dancing while drumming," he says. "Let your body react instinctively to mine."

"I'm trying." Her brows furrow.

Maybe conversation will occupy her mind and free her body. "I've missed dancing. We used to hold bi-weekly dances, back when I was with the Equalists."

"What?" She laughs, and, as he suspected, her steps begin to loosen up and flow better. "You're kidding me, right?"

"No. Dance teaches people to read each others' movements, and builds camaraderie and morale. It was an essential part of chi-blocker training, without anyone overtly understanding that it was training. Besides, I've always enjoyed dancing, so I took advantage of every opportunity."

"I suppose a dancing masked leader is such a romantic concept that you were never without a partner," she says, a teasing note in her voice.
"It's true that my dance card was always full." He begins to complicate their steps, and she easily follows along. Now that she's a bit more relaxed, he feels better about pushing her to open up. "Are you all right, Korra? You looked upset earlier."

"Oh, that." She shrugs. "I was just thinking about how much I was going to miss you when I leave."

"Don't spend our last couple days together worrying about being apart," he says gently.

"It's hard not to think about it."

He feels it, too; the gloom lurking in the shadows of his mind, ready to rush forward and overwhelm his mood the second he gives it the opportunity. His steps slow. "We'll figure something out. We've already overcome insurmountable odds. What's a little distance?"

She smiles up at him, but her eyes are glossy. His throat tightens. The song is coming to a close, its last few notes soft and bittersweet. He dips her and leans over her, his face inches from hers.

Her eyes are wide, and soft, and bright at the same time, and he feels warmth swell in his heart, a crescendo and decrescendo echoing the strings' final note. His mouth meets hers, and he feels her lipstick and the wine on her tongue, and he doesn't want it to end, but there's only so long they can kiss in a fancy restaurant before it becomes improper.

Then he lifts her upright again, and they're watching each other, and she reaches up to wipe her lips with her thumb.

"Lipstick," she says bashfully, and he smiles and pulls out his handkerchief. It's stained pink when he's finished dabbing his mouth.

No other words pass between them as they return to their table, but Noatak feels they're communicating on another level, as if they're both basking in the same bittersweet glow that no one else can feel. They slide into their seats - he's so foggy-headed that he forgets to pull out her chair for her. Akna gives them the soft smile of an onlooker who appreciates romance.

"You two put on quite the show," she says. "So much passion."

Korra's left hand finds his right under the table, and for the rest of the meal, neither of them lets go.

After a few hours of dining and dancing, Noatak takes care of the bill (after some polite argument with the other three), then invites everyone back to his house for some drinks and cigars. He has been abstaining from alcohol tonight, save for a small glass to sip during the meal, but everyone else is a little tipsy, and the conversation is getting silly. Korra tells a story about destroying a priceless airbender heirloom in a fit of rage during her training with Tenzin, and the hours of gruelling restoration work she undertook as penance, and the room fills with laughter. Akna confesses that in her teen years, she worked for her uncle's exporting company and accidentally smashed a priceless vase, then spent hours desperately re-gluing it to try to cover her mistake. She mimics her uncle's face and voice when he discovered her secret, and she has natural comedic delivery that makes the rest of them laugh until they're crying.

A comfortable silence settles over the room. Noatak has his arm around Korra, and she snuggles against his shoulder. Tarrlok and Akna are on the other couch, and they have been inching closer together over the course of the night; he's certain they're doing it subconsciously. Their thighs are touching now, and he wonders if he and Korra should leave them alone to let things progress.
Faking a yawn, he says, "It has been a lovely evening, but I'm wondering if Korra and I should retire."

To his disappointment, Akna says, "I'm getting a little sleepy as well. This has been a lovely evening indeed."

Tarrlok's face falls. "May I walk you home?"

"I've had a bit much to drink; I think I'd be better off taking a taxi, but if you like, you could wait with me on the front stoop."

"Of course." Tarrlok falls silent, and he looks so anxious that Noatak decides to come to his rescue. Korra beats him to it. "I've really enjoyed chatting with you, Akna. Tarrlok and I are only in town for one more night - would you be interested in visiting with us again tomorrow?"

Akna gives a little sigh. "Unfortunately, I have a prior engagement."

"I see," says Tarrlok, crestfallen.

"That being said..." Akna's cheeks darken. "This may not be the right time for this proposal, Tarrlok, but I want you to think about it: I have room in my company for someone with good marketing skills, someone who can think strategically about what people want. You have all the qualities I've been looking for in a partner- A business partner, I mean. Business." She looks flustered for a moment, then continues, "I know you have some legal issues that may need sorting, and you're a city boy now, and moving here might not appeal to you..."

Tarrlok stares at her, shocked.

"I have room for you here," says Noatak. "I don't need three bedrooms. You could have one." He feels suddenly alert, vibrating with energy. Tarrlok could stay with him. The two of them, together again, for real this time. He didn't realize until this moment how badly he misses his brother, how much he has missed him, all his life. The idea of going back to an empty house seems impossible now.

Tarrlok's face is a mix of hope and concern. "I'd like that," he says, his speech suddenly laboured. "The Council won't."

"I could make an arrangement with the Council to come visit you," says Korra. "At regular intervals. You've been behaving so well, and I think the improvement of your health is evidence that this climate is good for you. I wouldn't mind at all - it would be an excuse for me to visit you and Saomik."

This is it, thinks Noatak. The excuse for us to see each other. Everything is falling into place: he can be with Tarrlok and Korra, and Tarrlok can be with Akna. This is even better than the happy ending he deliriously hoped for when he fled with Tarrlok years ago.

"Take some time to think about it," says Akna. "You have my card; give me a call if you want to discuss the role in more detail. There would be a lot of room for growth, and I'd be happy to tailor it to meet your needs."

"Thank you," says Tarrlok, stammering a little. "Everyone. It's more than I deserve."

"You deserve more than you give yourself credit for," says Noatak quietly.
After a round of farewell greetings and a call to a taxi service, Tarrlok and Akna step onto the front stoop, closing the door behind them. Korra tiptoes over to the door and watches them through the peephole as Noatak cleans up the glasses and empty bottle.

"Give them some privacy," he says.

"They're just talking," she whispers. "He's a lot less pushy than I would have expected."

"He probably knows he's being watched." He wants to admire her jutting backside (and think about her rumoured lack of underwear beneath her dress) as she strains to get a better view, but instead he sets the dishes in the sink. The sooner he cleans up, the sooner he can take her to bed. In fact, he decides he'll leave the dishes for the morning. He strides across the front room and grips her hips, pulling her back against his body. "Maybe we should go upstairs."

"Just a sec."

A beam of light shines through the window; the taxi has arrived. "He's going to step back inside and see you spying on him."

"Wait - they're saying goodnight. Ah!" She gives a little shriek, her voice getting louder. "He's kissing her! They're kissing! They're- Oh. They can hear me. Tarrlok's glaring at the door."

Noatak grabs her hand, tugging her into the foyer. "Now they will forever remember you ruining their first kiss."

"I'm glad I can be part of the memory," she says, but she blushes. "Besides, it's not like our first kiss was so great, and things turned out well for us." She hesitates. "Eventually."

The word makes him consider all that happened between then and now, and he suddenly crushes her against him, remembering how horrible it felt to bloodbend her in place as he left her behind, how much guilt and loneliness have plagued him over the past several months.

"Oof, too tight!" She pushes back against his chest, but she's smiling, and she stands up to kiss him. "Do you think he'll take up Akna's offer?"

"I hope so, but only he can make that decision." He tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Are you sure you would be comfortable coming up here on a regular basis to check on him?"

"Anything to keep the Republic City bureaucracy happy," she says dryly. Looking a bit shy, she says, "Are you okay with it?"

"Yes. Absolutely. My door is always open to you, Korra."

"Even if it's not, I have a key." Her eyes sparkle, and then she rests her cheek on his chest. "I was thinking I could get a private phone line in my room so we can talk often. Tell Tenzin I met a boy up here and keep it vague."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

"No, but I can't keep a secret that big. I can keep your identity a secret, but not the fact that I'm in love." She strangles the word 'love' halfway through, then blushes. "I'm not used to being able to say it," she mumbles.

He understands. This is all still so new. He has always disliked the early stages of a relationship, with its strange rules and etiquette and uncertainty. He's looking forward to a time when the
constant butterflies in his stomach are replaced by a slow, warming glow. Already, with Korra, he feels a degree of comfort he rarely feels this early in a relationship, so he's certain these little bits of awkwardness won't last too long.

The door opens, and Tarrlok steps through, a grin on his face. The couple steps apart so they can face him.

"Sorry, Tarrlok," says Korra. "I didn't mean to spy." She hesitates. "Well, I meant to, but I shouldn't have."

"Hmm?" Tarrlok absently pulls off his boots, still smiling. "Fine. It's all fine."

"I'm a bit surprised you didn't go home with her," says Noatak, "seeing as it's your last night together until your next visit."

His brother cocks his head, confused. "I've barely met her. What kind of man would go home with a woman so soon?"

Noatak glances at Korra, who clears her throat and looks down.

Tarrlok drifts past them and begins to climb the stairs. "I need to go lie down. Light-headed. Must be the wine."

They wish him a goodnight, then watch as he disappears from view. Korra leans over to Noatak.

"What kind of man, indeed," she whispers.

"He doesn't know the finer details of our relationship's beginnings, does he?"

"Two confused former enemies fucking in an explosive fit of emotion, then instantly regretting it? Now I'm wondering how he would react." Her nose wrinkles. "It sounds so animalistic when I say it like that."

"It wasn't all animalistic. I was already falling for you," he says quietly. "I just couldn't admit it yet."

She smiles at him. "Me, too," she says, and her fingers interlock with his. They stare at each other, and he feels heat rise to his face. Her beauty is disarming; how was he impervious to it all those years ago?

"Noatak," she says quietly. "Tarrlok and I were talking earlier, and..." She trails off and looks down.

He squeezes her hand. "What is it?"

She shakes her head. "This isn't the time to discuss it. Shall we go upstairs?"

Though he's curious about what's on her mind, he can be patient. "Please, let's. I've been wondering all night if you're really not wearing any underwear, or if you were just saying that to tease."

She tugs his hand, leading him toward the stairway, giving him a coy smirk. "I guess you'll just have to find out."
XLVII: A New Beginning

Chapter Notes

Note: chapters XXXI to end were all published here within 24 hours -- sorry for the big posting!

XLVII

A New Beginning

"I have to run to the general store," says Noatak as he, Tarrlok and Korra are just finishing up their lunch the next day. "Anyone need anything?" Aside from a desire to cook one really good last dinner for his guests, he and Korra are down to five condoms - he doesn't think they'll go through those by tomorrow evening, but one of them tore as he was putting it on last night. Probably just a one-off defect, but he'd hate to be in a position where the were in the mood but had no usable condoms due to others breaking.

Korra looks up from her bowl, eyes bright. "Can I come? I wanted to pick up some souvenirs for everyone back home."

"I don't see why not," he says. "We could even go back to the craft merchants at the festival, if you like. What about you, Tarrlok?"

His brother shakes his head. "Feeling unwell. I'll rest while you're out."

"Are you okay?" asks Korra. "Do you need healing?"

"No, thank you." Tarrlok pushes his bowl away and stands. "Thank you for lunch. Please excuse me."

Noatak watches him leave, brow furrowed. Perhaps Tarrlok doesn't believe he'll be granted permission to move here. His heart aches for his brother.

Korra seems less shaken; perhaps the this moodiness is a semi-regular thing back home. "He'll be okay," she says. "We'll pick him up some vanilla taffy at the store. He won't admit it, but it always cheers him up."

"Vanilla taffy," repeats Noatak, surprised to discover one detail about Tarrlok that hasn't changed since he was eleven years old.

Lifting her bowl to her lips, Korra drains the rest of her broth, then sets it down and jumps to her feet. "Ready to go when you are."

They bundle up and set out. The wind outside is harsh, the tiny snowflakes rasping against Noatak's skin like sandpaper. He lifts his scarf over his nose, squinting.

"That's one disadvantage to being a non-bender, isn't it?" says Korra, and without so much as lifting her hands, she creates an air bubble around them that shields them from the snow.
"One of many." He glances at her. "You've really taken to that psychic bending."

"It's incredibly useful. Maybe everything that happened between us, from the very beginning, was a rite of passage I was always meant to undertake. Maybe not. Either way, I'm better off because of it." She swings her arms back and forth across her body as if stretching her shoulders. "So, what are we getting at the store?"

"Groceries." He breaks eye contact. "Condoms."

"Condoms? I thought there were still a bunch left. Are you planning to send me back to Republic City limping and bruised?"

"What if we open them and they're all defective? I don't want to be caught without any. There are other goods we might want to look at as well." He clears his throat as he prepares to bring up what could be an embarrassing topic for her. "Given that we might be separated for awhile, Korra, I wonder if you might want me to buy you something to keep you company."

She squints at him as if trying to make sense of his words. "A pet?"

"I was thinking a toy of some sort. There's an assortment available at the store, and you could pick out something you like."

She squints at him for a moment longer, then her eyes fly open. "Oh! Oh. I...uh..."

"If the thought makes you uncomfortable, then don't worry about it. It was a fleeting thought," he says gently.

"No, I like the idea, I just...I've never owned anything like that before. It wouldn't make you jealous to know I was using something?"

"Jealous? Not at all. I quite like the idea." He likes it a little too much; he tries to focus on the building fronts along the road, directing his thoughts toward the dull lines of their signboards.

"Well, maybe I'll take a look at what they have." Her mitten finds his. He pulls her in closer and hugs her shoulders with his arm as they walk.

When they enter, the shopkeeper looks at Noatak with a sheepish grin. "Sorry about being so hard on you last time we met, Saomik," he says. "I was a bit out of my head." His eyes flick to Korra, and they widen. "This must be your lovely lady-friend."

"Um. Hello," says Korra, unaware, as always, of how intimidating her apparent beauty, strength and confidence are to others. Even those who don't know she's the Avatar seem awestruck by her, and the shopkeeper is no exception.

"Welcome to my store," he says, stammering a bit. "Call me Peka."

Noatak mentally stores the name for later reference. "We were hoping to take a look at that box you showed me the other night."

"Oh! Well, then, you'll want a bit of privacy." Peka hoists the box off the ground. "Follow me." He leads them behind a curtain against one wall to reveal a small room lined with racks of erotic artwork. "Don't mind the other merchandise. Take your time to pick out what you'd like." As he walks past Noatak on his way out, he mutters, "Lucky bastard."

"Indeed I am. Thank you, Peka."
Korra pulls a book of erotic artwork off the shelf and thumbs through it, eyes wide. "Well, now I feel a little inferior. Look at the size of her boobs." She flips the page, and her eyes widen. "Does he have a weasel-snake stuffed in that codpiece?"

"That type of artwork is always wildly unrealistic," says Noatak as he subtly leans closer to appreciate the drawings.

"Yeah, I don't think this position is physically possible."

"We're both strong and flexible - we could always give it a try, if you're interested." He gets a little shiver at the back of his neck whenever he refers to their future together; it's still a novel concept that they even have a future together.

He squats in front of the box - he doubts the floor is clean enough to sit - and opens the top flaps. Korra shelves her book and mirrors his posture on the other side.

"I don't even know what half this stuff is." She holds up a zippered leather mask. "How do you breathe in this?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Oh, come on, with all the experience you've had?"

"Only in realms that held my interest. I covered my face enough in my day-to-day life that I had no desire to do so in the bedroom." He begins to rummage through the box.

"Well, do you know what this thing is?" She holds up a long, convoluted toy.

"That part of it is for you," he says, tracing it with his finger, "and that part is for me. I imagine there is a harness for it somewhere."

"Oh," she says faintly, and she looks a little queasy as she sets it down.

His hand closes over hers. "If you feel uncomfortable-"

"No, just intimidated. I've always been secretly interested in a lot of stuff like this, but I always thought it made me perverted." She gives him a shy smile. "But I feel like you won't judge me, or pressure me. I just need some time to get used to some of this."

A corner of his mouth lifts, and she squeezes his hand.

They look through the rest of the box's contents, commenting on things that interest or, in Korra's case especially, confuse them. Once they've laid out a few choices, she says, "I'd like to buy something for you, too. Then we can have...special phone calls..." She trails off, looking embarrassed again.

Now he's thinking of late-night phone calls, her panting voice on the other end of the line whispering commands to him, and he feels lightheaded.

She must misread his hesitation as reluctance. "If that's too weird-"

"I'd like that. Thank you."

They spend some time looking through the box and discussing, and eventually they each choose a toy. Korra holds them up.
"We have similar taste," she says. She's blushing furiously, and he feels his cheeks warm in sympathy.

"That's enough testing the boundaries of our comfort zones for one day. Let's shop for a few mundane items now." He stands, his knees creaking. After they gather a few groceries and souvenirs, she excuses herself to wait outside the shop while he pays. No quite so intimidated, he strides up to the counter and casually begins to unpack his basket. As he lays out the toys, he hears Peka inhale breath to say something, but Noatak looks up at him, channelling his sternest Amon gaze.

Peka quietly tells him the total, then hands him his change, and Noatak departs the store without incident.

"Oh spirits," says Korra, clinging to his arm as he steps through the door. "Don't stand close to the roof - I think my face is hot enough to start melting the snow off the rooftops."

She seems so young right now, so naive, and Noatak, who values skill and capability above all else, is surprised to feel fondness instead of annoyance. He kisses the top of her head, a gesture that, in spite of its cuteness, feels natural.

While they normally walk with determined strides and a goal in mind, this time they stroll side by side, paying more heed to the shared body heat between them than to their destination.

"So are we trying our new toys tonight?" she asks. "Or are we saving them?"

"Saving them might give us something to look forward to." He's trying to savour every moment with her without looking ahead to their separation, but tomorrow is already starting to loom in his mind. He feels an icy cold seed inside him, loneliness preparing to sprout.

"Korra," he says softly, "I don't want to give the impression that sex is the only thing I'm going to miss about you. I know our time together has had a heavy emphasis on the physical, but I enjoy your company outside the bedroom as well."

"I know," she says, and she leans her head against his arm as they meander along the snowy sidewalk. "I'll try to come here as often as I can. Or we can meet up in other cities. We'll still be able to talk, at least. Maybe it'll be a chance to get to know each other better without all this non-stop chemistry getting in the way."

He smiles. "I suppose there is still a lot left to learn about each other."

After a pause, she says, "Let's start now. Tell me something I don't already know about you."

His mind blanks.

"Come on." She playfully elbows him. "Favourite type of animal."

"Polar bear dog," he says automatically, and she sighs.

"I'm just trying to make conversation, Noatak. Don't just humour me."

"I know, and I apologize for not having much to say about myself. There's something you have to understand about me: I spent thirty-five years of my life systematically denying everything that I was so that I could stay focused on a single goal. My body is forty-seven years old, but I've only been Noatak for twenty-one of them, and almost all of those were spent obeying the will of my captors - my father and my jailers. How can I tell you about myself when I've never had the
opportunity to know who I am?" He realizes the words are true as he's speaking them aloud. "The only thing I know about myself is that I'm addicted to my work, whether that's security work, or leading a revolution, or working on a ship, or accounting, because if I spend every day working, then I'm packing every day full of small goals and tasks to focus on. If there isn't enough work to go around, I keep myself busy with hobbies. That way, I never have to worry about the man who is underneath that busy work, and any success or failure comes from what I do, not who I am. It makes me feel as if my life is under control, as if I'm under control."

They've stopped walking. Korra is watching him, her expression sympathetic. "You don't think you're under control?"

"Tentatively. You've seen first-hand what I'm like when I lose control. You've seen the monster I can become, the one I try to smother with work, with sex and wine." His heart is pounding, but when he studies her face, he feels calmer. A stray strand is loose from her bangs, and he tucks it back into place. "It's different, around you, Korra. I don't need distractions. I feel like I'm finally leaving the monster behind and rising to the surface."

She stands on her toes and give him a soft kiss that leaves his lips tingling when she pulls away. "So there's something you didn't know about me," he finishes awkwardly, unable to tear his gaze from hers.

She smiles. "And here I was thinking I'd learn something shallow, like the number of people you had slept with."

As if on an unspoken cue, they begin to walk again, and Noatak's steps are light. "Probably fewer than you think."

"Is it a three digit number?" she asks, and he chuckles.

"Much, much less than that."

"Fifty?"

"Sixteen."

"Really?" She shakes her head. "I thought you were way more experienced than that."

"Are you disappointed?" He lets his eyes twinkle at her, enjoying the playful banter. "I'm not very interested in one-night stands. Sex gets substantially better as partners learn each other's bodies; the first encounter is always the worst."

"Was our first encounter our worst?" she asks.

He hesitates. "In the moment, it was passionate and intense, and I'd hardly call it bad. The sinking feeling that came right after, however..."

"Yeah, all that drama was pretty miserable, wasn't it?" Her smile fades, and she hesitates a little as she says, "Four."

"Four?"

"I... Four men."

Now he's puzzled, because he distinctly remembers that there was only one man before him. "I'm not sure I understand what you're saying."
"Please don't tells anyone," she blurs. "I had a one-night stand, a long time ago now. Mako and I were off an on again a bit early in our relationship, and during one of our offs, Asami and I went to the bar and I got drunk and there were these three handsome guys. We went back to Asami's place, and well, one of them was really into her, and the other two..." Her sentence ends.

Noatak glances at the woman he has always presumed to be sexually innocent. Her eyes dart away from him. Her shame about the topic worries him, but he doesn't want to make any drastic assumptions or pry too deeply. He settles on saying, "As long as you enjoyed yourself and felt safe the whole time, there's nothing wrong with testing your boundaries."

"I know," she says. "It's just... I'm the Avatar. I'm not supposed to be having a drunken threesome with two men I met at a bar." She shrugs and a bounce sneaks into her step as she mutters, "But then again, I'm not supposed to be in love with you, either."

"There's no 'supposed to' about it, Korra. The people you choose to love - physically or emotionally - have no bearing on your ability to act as the Avatar."

"I suppose you're right." She gives him a shy grin. "I have to admit, it was kind of fun to throw expectations to the wind for that one night, even if the actual threesome itself didn't really live up to my fantasies about it."

He hugs her shoulders and presses a kiss to the top of her head between steps. "If there are ever any boundaries you still want to test, you are welcome to suggest them."

"I'll keep that in mind. Same to you. I think those discussions will make for some interesting phone conversations while we're apart."

They fall silent, the only sound their crunching footsteps in the snow, then the hollow thud of boots on wooden steps. As they're about to enter the house, Korra suddenly stops and hooks the back of Noatak's neck, pulling him down for a deep kiss. He's so surprised that he doesn't have a chance to take a breath first, and he gasps for air when she finally releases him.

"I like our talks," she says, and he smiles.

"So do I."

At least the distance won't take the conversations from them. His smile fades as he opens the door.

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The brothers and Korra stay up so late talking that Noatak's yawns begin to bring tears to his eyes. He tries to push past his fatigue, but he sees glossy eyes on the other two and realizes they're feeling it, too. Reluctantly, he suggests they retire for the night, and the others agree.

Once they're in the upstairs hallway, Noatak kisses Korra's hand to put on a show of bidding her goodnight, but Tarrlok only rolls his eyes. "You aren't fooling anyone," he says, his tone good-natured. "Don't bother pretending you're going to sleep separately."

So they don't. Noatak pulls Korra into his room and shuts the door behind her.

As they kiss, a lump builds in his throat, and his eyes are still tearing even though he has stopped yawning. When he pulls away, her cheeks are damp, too.

"It's not fair." Her whisper shakes. "This is our second big goodbye, and we've barely even been together."
He wants to speak of hope, of future promise, but he knows the lump in his throat is going to make his voice catch and undermine the confidence of his words. Instead, he kisses her again.

They leave the light on as they make love, slowly and quietly, palms sliding against skin. Last time they were saying goodbye, there were more tears than this; there was only fear then, but now there's hope as well. They hold eye contact until her eyes screw shut and she arches away, and he lets himself release with her, fighting to keep his gasps quiet.

For a few minutes, she lays on top of him, her ear on his chest, and he strokes her hair.

"I can hear your heart beating," she whispers, her voice faint. "Do you think if you held the phone to your chest, I would hear it on the other end?"

Sleep is trying to pull him under, and his brain is too foggy to create a proper reply. His eyes close.

He feels her shift. "Are you awake?" she whispers.

"Sorry," he mumbles without opening his eyes, "I think I'm..."

He trails off, but her gentle kiss rescues him from having to find the end of his sentence.

"Goodnight, Noatak." He hears a smile in her voice and then a click of the lamp switch as he's driftin to sleep.

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Noatak awakens intertwined with Korra, and there's a moment of pleased warmth until he recognizes where he is and what day it is.

All three of them are quiet over breakfast, and sombre as Tarrlok and Korra finish packing. She gives Noatak several long gazes, and he doesn't shy away, but he can't figure out what to say, either. There's some small conversation as they ride a taxi to the docks, but no one mentions the upcoming separation.

The ship's whistle blows, and passengers begin to board, but Noatak, Tarrlok and Korra stand at the end of the dock, delaying their departure for as long as possible.

Noatak's arms are tight around his brother. "We won't be apart for long," he says, and Tarrlok nods, but he looks as if he's about to weep. Noatak knows that face well; he saw it so many times in their childhood. Old instinct taking over, he ruffles Tarrlok's hair, and smiles at the scowl he receives in return. "Take care of yourself, brother."

Then he turns to Korra and opens his arms, and she throws herself against him, hugging him so tightly that he grunts.

"Sorry." She pulls back to look at him, cupping her hand to his jaw, and he covers her hand with his own.

"I'm going to miss you," he murmurs, and her smile wavers. "It's okay, Korra. This isn't like last time." His free hand taps the pendant he gave her, the flower encased in glass that once seemed like such a final parting gift. "That was an indefinite hiatus, but this is merely a pause."

"Republic City, last call," calls the dock hand, and Korra gives a panicked glance in the ship's direction, then looks back to Noatak.
"I love you," he says.

"I love you, too," she replies, her voice hoarse.

He leans down to kiss her, and she meets him halfway; they break apart too soon, and the ocean breeze is cold on his lips, on his damp cheeks. Their gaze holds for a moment longer, then she turns and, together with Tarrlok, departs.

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Korra is so exhausted that she sleeps for most of the voyage, her dreams filled with a blur of Amon and Noatak and sex and memories. She awakens to an empty cabin.

She finds Tarrlok leaning on the railing outside their cabin. Republic City is already on the horizon. Pacing up to him, she says, "Either we made good time, or I really needed my sleep. Or both."

He stares at her as if not comprehending, his eyes glazed.

"You okay?" she asks, standing beside him.

"Memories," he says flatly. "Crushing me."

Her eyes wander across the bay: the yellow glow of the pro-bending arena, the proud stance of Aang's statue, the spire of Air Temple Island. She feels a pang of pity; she has many bad memories based in Republic City as well, but none so bad that it brings her dread instead of a cozy warmth. Her arm loops around him.

"It's okay," she says. "We'll get you out of here as soon as we can."

He says nothing, but leans against her.

They pull up to the docks to find a group waiting to greet them: Tenzin, Pema and the kids, along with Mako, Bolin and Lian. Korra hurries between them to give them hugs; they were only away a few days, but so much has happened that it feels like years. Maybe it's her imagination, but Mako squeezes her extra tightly. When she pulls away to give him a puzzled look, he says quietly, "I need to talk to you, when you have a sec."

"Okay." She cocks her head at him, but then Lian grabs her in a big bear hug from behind. "Oof, Lian!"

"I want details," Lian hisses in her ear.

"You'll get them, you'll get them, just let me breathe!" Korra shoves her friend's arms away, then spins to embrace her.

Tenzin claps a hand on each of their shoulders. "What would all of you say to dinner on the town, on me?"

"At a vegetarian restaurant?" asks Korra, doing her best to hold back from wrinkling her nose.

"No, I was thinking Madame Chao's, so we can all find dishes we enjoy. Your friends are welcome, of course. The Acolytes would be happy to fly your belongings back to the Temple."

"That sounds great! I'll buy a round of drinks." She saved up for her trip and then barely spent any money due to Noatak's generosity, so she figures she'll pay it forward.
"I'll have a beer!" yells Meelo.

"Juice for the kids," she replies, swatting at him.

They walk toward the restaurant, and as Bolin and Lian excitedly discuss the latest pro-bending standings, Korra's eyes drift to Tarrlok. Pema is trying to engage him in conversation, but his answers are curt. She frowns and excuses herself from her friends, hurrying over to Tenzin.

"Can I talk to you?" she asks quietly.

He nods and falls back, furrowing his bushy brows. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. It's Tarrlok." She nods her nose in the man's direction. "When we were away, he gradually came out of his shell and started talking again, but now he's struggling. Republic City has too many memories for him."

Tenzin studies her. "You want permission for him to leave the City."

"It's bad for his health to stay here. We met some people up North, good people. One of them offered him a job if he ever returns." She sees his brows raising, so she pushes ahead before he can reject her idea. "I'd be willing to go out there every month or so to check up on him. He's trustworthy. He's really changed, Tenzin."

"I know he has. We all see it." He clears his throat. "But we would have to get the Council's approval, then get Lin, the judge and the President to sign off on it."

Her temper flares. "They guaranteed his freedom in exchange for Noatak's cooperation! They can't take that back. The Equalists are quiet now, aren't they?"

"I'm on your side, Korra," he says gently. "We'll work together with Tarrlok to build a strong proposal. I am optimistic that we can convince them."

A smile spreads across her face. "Thank you, Tenzin."

"Of course." He cocks his head at her. "What's his name?"

"Tarrlok?"

"The man you met up North. It isn't my place to pry, of course, but you did say 'we met some people' with a special twinkle in your eye."

"Oh." Her cheeks burn, and she looks down at her feet. "Saomik. He's an accountant. We hit it off pretty well."

"An accountant?" He sounds surprised, and she doesn't blame him; he's no doubt wondering what traits of interest to her could be possessed by a number-oriented businessman.

"He runs his own business, but that's just his day job. He's a master martial artist, and patient and kind, and..." She trails off, realizing she should be saying these things to her friends, not to her mentor. "I, um, was wondering if I could get my own phone line in my room. I'd pay for it."

"Of course. We can discuss the details later," says Tenzin as they arrive at the restaurant.

For the next hour, Korra is distracted by food, drink and laughter, but it all feels hollow. Beneath it all, she misses Noatak, and it's sapping the joy out of her mood. When she glances at Tarrlok, she sees his distant stare and wonders if he feels the same way.
Amidst the many conversations, she excuses herself and stands. A small deck along the side of the restaurant overlooks the city; she steps onto it and closes the glass door behind her. The chatter from the restaurant is mute, but the sounds of the city fill her ears instead: honking horns, random yells, sputtering Satomobiles. Above her, the stars are barely visible thanks to the light pollution. She wonders for a moment if Noatak is looking at the same stars right now, then realizes his sky looks completely different from hers. A sigh slides from her lips.

Behind her, she hears the door open, the restaurant chatter, then the door slide shut.

"Hey," says Mako.

She turns, surprised. "Mako?" He's the last person she would have expected to approach her.

"Is this an okay time to talk?" he asks.

"Yeah, I guess so." She turns back to the stars.

He walks up and leans against the railing beside her. For a moment, they're silent, looking up at the stars together.

"It's always an adjustment when I've been up North or South," she says. "The City feels suffocating until I readjust."

"I can't imagine," he says. "This is my home." His head bows. "Korra, I'm not happy about how things ended between us."

Her gaze darts to him, but he won't look at her. "Look," she snaps, "I've apologized and that's all I can do. I would change it if I could, but-"

"That's not what I meant. I meant how I reacted. You weren't yourself, and I should have helped you. Instead, I ran away and blamed you." He lifts his head, and she's surprised to see glistening eyes. "I wasn't there for you, Korra, not when Asami died, not-"

"It's okay," she interrupts. "I attacked you. That's unforgivable."

"But I've forgiven you." He swallows hard. "I broke up with Lian because I couldn't get over you."

She panics and takes two steps back. "Mako, don't-"

"Our relationship took so many wrong turns, and I see them now, so clearly. We could avoid them this time, together. We-" He stops and his eyes search hers, then he falls silent. A tear falls as he turns his head, and she knows he has read on her face what she's too tongue-tied to say.

"I'm sorry," she says quietly.

"No, I'm sorry, Korra. I thought maybe..." He trails off. His knuckles are white as he grips the railing.

Awkwardly, she says, "You're going to hear it eventually, so I want you to hear it from me. I met someone." She reaches out to cover his hand with hers, trying to soothe his tension. "You will, too, when you're ready."

He turns and pulls her into a hug. When they part, he wipes his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Technically, I met someone first, you know," he says with feigned light-heartedness.
Are you sure about that? She tries not to feel guilty about how quickly she moved on. "You're right, our relationship did take a lot of wrong turns. Use what you've learned to make your future Mrs. Mako very happy." She pauses. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Now he looks embarrassed. "This whole conversation shouldn't have happened."

"Maybe it's closure we needed so we can go back to being friends," she says. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

When Korra returns to her seat, Lian leans over. "You okay?" she whispers.

With an honest smile, Korra replies, "Of course. You?"

"Yeah." Her friend hugs her arm. "I've missed you. I can't wait to hear how things went."

"Let's meet tomorrow," says Korra, and with a wink, she adds, "I have a lot to tell you." She subtly glances in Tarrlok's direction, concerned about his well-being, and sees Jinora prattling away at him. He seems interested, at least, even if he isn't contributing to the conversation.

"And Tarrlok? Is he okay?" asks Lian.

"He wants to go back." Korra juts her jaw with determination. "And Tenzin and I are going to make that happen."

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When Korra returns to her room, she's mortified to discover that the Acolytes unpacked her luggage - all of it, including the toy Noatak bought for her. After a frantic search, she finds it tucked into her underwear drawer, and she blushes furiously on behalf of the Acolyte.

She pulls out a slip of paper with Noatak's phone number and address, and pads to the kitchen. During dinner, Tenzin gave her permission to make long distance calls until she gets her own line. It's late enough that no one else will be on the line. Phones make her nervous; she has to dial twice, because her trembling hands muddle the number the first time around.

"Hello?" says Noatak, his voice groggy.

"It's Korra. Did I wake you up?"

"Hearing your voice is better than sleep. How was the trip?"

"Okay," she says. "I slept through most of it. Tarrlok has stopped talking again, but Tenzin thinks the three of us will be able to make a good case to allow him to move."

She hears a low sigh, and realizes he is relieved.

"We'll do our best to get it set up as quickly as possible. I'm getting a private phone line soon, too." She hesitates, then decides that honesty has served them well until now, so that should continue. "Mako pulled me aside. He wanted me to consider rekindling our relationship."

There's a pause, then Noatak says, "Didn't he just break up with your friend Lian?"

"He has a bit of a problem with serial monogamy." As she hears her own words, she realizes she no longer has the right to judge him. "I turned him down."

"I should hope so," he says, and his deadpan voice is so deep that she flashes back to her early days
in Republic City.

"This is surreal." She lowers her voice. "Do you know how afraid of your voice I was when you used to hijack the radio stations? And here's your disembodied voice, all deep and rumbling, and my heart is pounding for an entirely different reason."

"At some point, Korra, you're going to have to stop pointing out the surreal nature of our relationship."

"I'm also going to have to train myself to call you Saomik. Do you know how hard it was to finally wrap my head around that first name change? Now I have a whole other one to learn."

The teasing tone fades from his voice: "Say it to yourself ten times each night while you're picturing my face. Within two weeks, your brain will accept the change. That's what I did every time I took on a new moniker."

"Are you sure this isn't a ploy to make sure I'm thinking about you every day? Because ploys aren't necessary." Her smile fades from her face. "I can't stop thinking about you."

"And I can't stop thinking about you."

She tangles the phone cord around her fingers and swallows hard against the lump growing in her throat. "Is this healthy? Being on each other's minds like this?"

"We've both proven that we can move on with our lives and be productive even if we're pining for each other. I think it would be more alarming if we didn't miss each other, or if we missed each other to the extent that we were figuratively paralysed." Quieter, he adds, "Though I'm not exactly a paragon of healthy relationships."

"Yeah, me neither." Remembering what she told Mako, she says, "We made all our mistakes before, so now we can identify problems earlier and build a really strong one together."

There's a long silence, and it begins to make her nervous.

"Are you having any second thoughts?" she asks.

"No." His voice is confident. "Are you?"

"Not at all. We'll make this work."

"We will."

There's another long silence, and she slides down the wall to make herself comfortable on the floor. "If we're this awkward about saying what we're feeling over the phone, then just imagine how awkward our first phone sex is going to be."

He chuckles. "I look forward to it."

"Me, too. Let's wait until I have a line in my bedroom, at least." She winds and unwinds the cord around her fingers, alternating them to make a pattern. "Maybe we should both get some sleep. I'll get better at this phone conversation stuff as we go. I promise."

"We'll learn together." His tone suggests he's still smiling. "Korra, I was going to give you a letter to read once you got home."

"It's always letters with you, isn't it?"
"That's the main reason I didn't do it. I imagine you loathe the sight of my writing by now, with everything that happened. So instead, I'll just read it to you a sentence at a time, each night we speak."

"Okay," she says. "So what's the first bit?"

"Short but sincere: I love you."

The words seep through her body, warm and cozy, and she smiles. "I love you, too."
Chapter XLVIII: Loose Ends

Chapter Notes

chapters XXXI to end were all published here within 24 hours -- sorry for the big posting!

Chapter XLVIII

Loose Ends

2 Years Later

"Maybe we should just spatter your skin with the brush," says Akna. "Give you freckles."

"Freckles, brought out by our strong polar winter sun?" Noatak shies away from the dye-soaked brush in her hand.

"Raska's youngest has freckles," she says.

"Fair point. Counterpoint: replicating a specific freckle pattern is going to be tricky if I ever meet her friends again in the future."

"Counter-counterpoint: hair dye, glasses and a beard is not going to be enough to hide your identity." Akna whirls to face Tarrlok, who is hiding behind a newspaper on the couch. "Talk some sense into your brother."

"I agree with Akna," says Tarrlok without looking up.

"You're not even listening." Noatak throws his hands in the air. "Fine. Give me freckles, but be quick. I have a ship to catch."

"Close your eyes." She flicks the brush at him, and he feels dye spatter across his face. "Oh, dammit. That didn't work at all."

He sighs as dye drips down the tip of his nose. Marching to the bathroom sink, he washes the dye away with soap, thankfully getting it all off his skin before it stains. He lifts his head to examine himself in the mirror and scratches at his beard. The black hair dye really did cover all the grey; he'll be able to pass for mid-thirties just fine. He pulls on a stiff black suit jacket. The final touch is a bowler hat to cover his distinctive hairline. Stepping back into the living room, he does a slow spin, holding out his arms. "Transformation complete: every bit of style and good taste has been sapped from my appearance."

Tarrlok looks up and wrinkles his nose. "I'm ashamed to be related to you."

"I figured you decided that a good nine years ago."

"At least when you were Amon, you knew how to groom yourself." He stands. "I'll walk you to the docks."
"That's not necessary." Noatak wraps a scarf around his neck. He doesn't bother to bring his coat; Republic City is having an unseasonably warm winter, and it would just take up valuable luggage space.

"I insist. It's snowing. You'll need a waterbender - that fabric looks so cheap that it will probably dissolve if any water touches it." Tarrlok kisses Akna's cheek. "I'll be back soon."

"I'll get some soup started." She hugs Noatak. "Don't get arrested."

"I won't. Thanks for your help." In spite of his complaining, he really is grateful that she put so much effort into his disguise. The dye was her idea, and it's going to help immensely.

The two brothers set off, suitcases in tow, Tarrlok bending the snowflakes out of their way. Once they're a half-block away from the house, Tarrlok glances at him.

"I know why you're going to the City. Aside from visiting, I mean."

Noatak's lips flatten, and he doesn't respond.

"Don't be angry. I wasn't eavesdropping or anything like that - I accidentally overheard part of a phone call I shouldn't have when I was walking past your room." His brother's face pinches. "Surgery?"

*Here we go again.* "Just a procedure. I'll be out of the hospital within a day."

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" asks his brother. "Is Korra?"

"Yes, I'm okay with it, and why should Korra get a say?" The words come out more tersely than he intended, and he bites his lip. He's been trying to talk about this procedure for weeks now, and the closer they have gotten to the date, the more unwilling she has been to discuss it.

"What if she wants kids?" asks Tarrlok.

"Then she can adopt. This is not up for discussion." Resentment settles on Noatak's shoulders, weighing him down. Discovering this new procedure had him delighted, at first: a simple way to become permanently sterile without any major side effects. Only the most advanced doctors in the world were performing it, all of them in Republic City. He thought the difficult part would be getting into and out of the city safely, not convincing the people around him that it was a good idea to go through with it.

For a minute, the only sound is their boots crunching in the snow.

"It's safe?" says Tarrlok. "The surgery."

"Procedure. It's safe, and I'm going through with it, and that's the end of it." He eyes his brother. "We both know the bloodline has to end here, and it's not fair for Korra to bear that responsibility on her shoulders."

They're silent as they approach the docks, then Tarrlok pulls him in for a hug so tight that Noatak accidentally drops his suitcases.

"Don't let anyone recognize you," says Tarrlok. "Especially the police."

"I'll be fine. I'd like to see the police try to lay a hand on me." Bravado is easier than acknowledging his nervousness. He pulls away and cups his brother's cheek in a fond farewell. No
matter how old they get, Tarrlok will always be his little brother, and he can no longer bear to leave him behind without acknowledging that bond. "Be good while I'm gone, kid."

Tarrlok knocks his hand away. "I'm forty-six years old, you ass."

Noatak grins. Hoisting his luggage onto his back, he turns to board the ship.

Soon, he'll be in Republic City, but he has one important stop to make first.

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The basement door flies open, and Qing bursts through it, an overnight bag slung over her shoulder. She closes the door and locks it behind her. "I'm off." She spins to look at Lee and Jae, who are washing dishes in the kitchen. "Why's it so quiet? Where are the girls?"

"Out in the yard. It sounded like they were going to put together a going away banner for you, so take a look on your way out." Lee moves in to give her a soft peck on the cheek. "Safe travels, Qing."

"I'll be back soon enough. Don't burn the place down." She turns to Jae. "You too, Jae. This month's rent is on the counter."

"Thanks! Have a good trip. Take in a hot spring or two on my behalf."

"Why did you tell him about the rent money and not me?" asks Lee, feigning insult. "Think I'll lose it?"

"Clearly he's the brains and you're the muscle. See you next week." She winks and then hurries out the door, her heels clacking.

"I think she just insulted both of us," mutters Lee.

"So long as her rent pays our food bills, she can insult us as often as she likes." Jae grins as he pockets the cash.

They fall into a comfortable silence as they continue washing the dishes. Silence has become a precious commodity, and it seems to waste it on chores; it's been a long time since they connected as proper adults during daylight hours. Throwing the towel aside, Lee leans against the counter, his fingers crawling playfully toward his partner's hand. "Looks like we finally have a few minutes to ourselves."

"Looks like it." Jae grins. "Maybe we should take advantage of that."

"Maybe we should."

Jae's embrace pins him against the cupboards, and his mouth is just touching Lee's neck when they hear the back door slam. They guiltily burst apart from each other.

"Uncles!" greets Hui as she skids to a stop on the tile floor. Lee instinctively claps a hand over the corner of the counter so she doesn't bang her head; there was a mishap last week, and her bump hasn't quite healed yet.

The girl doesn't seem to notice the gesture. She beams at the men. "Auntie Midori liked our goodbye sign so much that she took it with her."

Jae smiles at Hui and says proudly, "That was very kind of you two, making a sign for her like
The younger sister, Hao, hasn't quite warmed up to them yet; she hides behind Hui, clinging to her dress, and peers out with wide grey eyes. Lee sighs to himself. It's been a couple months already. How long will it take for Hao to accept them as her caregivers? He crouches down to her level.

"Did you help your sister, Hao?"

The young girl nods shyly.

"She did the sparkles," says Hui.

"Well, since both of you worked so hard, what do you say we go to the park to relax?"

Jae gives him a confused glance. "Don't you work today?"

With a shrug, Lee says, "It's the low season; they won't mind. We'll stop in on the way and let them know I'm taking the day off." Work is just a wage; family is more important. He has seen for himself how quickly loved ones can be lost. He smiles at the sisters and rises to his feet, his knees creaking.

"Sounds good to me," says Jae. "Grab your jackets, girls! Let's stop for ice pops on the way. My treat."

The girls cheer, and the four of them venture toward the park.

After a stop for ice pops and a quick exchange with Lee's boss at the bar, the family heads to the park. They manage to find a quiet corner near the back, by the tree line. Hui and Hao sit on the grass and begin to make kites out of the supplies in Hui's backpack. Lee settles onto a bench, and Jae sits beside him. Their fingers interlock and their heads lilt until they're touching.

"Are we doing okay?" asks Jae softly, and Lee squeezes his hand.

"They're smiling. It's a start. How about you, love? Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah." The man snuggles closer, resting his head on Lee's shoulder. "I think I'm ready to go back to work."

"You sure? There's no rush." Money is a bit tight, but his partner's well-being is more important than money.

"Being out of work is driving me crazy," murmurs Jae. "I'm ruminating on the same thoughts, over and over. It'll be better if I'm distracted."

Lee turns to plant a soft kiss on the other's forehead. "Maybe start out part-time and see how you feel. Go slowly if you need to."

Footsteps sound on the cobblestone pathway behind them, and the bench shifts as someone sits on Jae's other side. It's a busy park, so sharing benches with strangers is common, but Lee is a bit annoyed that anyone would intrude on their quaint family gathering. He ignores the new arrival and watches the girls decorate their kites instead.

"They even look like the two of you," says a man's voice quietly, as if to himself.

Lee has never had the patience for idle chit-chat with strangers, but Jae, always gregarious, turns to greet the newcomer. "Yeah, we think so, too. My sister and I have similar tastes in men, I
suppose." There's a pause. "Had."

"I'm sorry," says the man, his voice still quiet. "I didn't mean to-"

"No, it's okay. Thank you for your observation. Maybe it'll help the girls feel like they belong, you know? Like we're flesh and blood."

"Uncle Jae, Uncle Lee," calls Hui. "Look at my dragon!" She holds up a red kite with uneven edges and an orange smear by its mouth. There's no way it will ever fly, but Lee feels a surge of pride anyway. Ignorance of the laws of the world - physics, social codes, probability - always seems to give the girls a kind of freedom that he lost long ago. Their creativity isn't bound by any constraints yet. It's almost inspiring.

"That's beautiful, Hui," he replies.

Jae shifts, making the bench's wooden slats creak. "I haven't seen you around here before," he says to the stranger.

"Just passing through." The voice is stronger now, and the back of Lee's neck begins to prickle.

"Not many folks passing through here," says Jae.

"No, I imagine not. I was hoping to bump into an old friend while I was here." There's no mistaking that voice now.

Lee's teeth clench, and he stands, whirling to face the stranger.

Amon - no, Noatak - sits at the end of the bench, heavily disguised, but no disguise could ever fool his ex-lieutenant.

"How did you find me?" growls Lee.

Icy blue eyes lock onto him, and every muscle in his body tightens in response.

Sensing the danger in his partner's voice and stance, Jae rises to his feet. "Maybe I'll take the girls for a bit of a walk. It's windier on the bay side, so their kites will fly better there." His tone is conversational, but when he looks at Lee, his face reads, do you need help?

Lee gives his head an abrupt shake: I'll be fine. He circles around the bench to loom over Noatak, who looks up at him, face blank. You won't fool me with that blank look. I know you too well. The blanker the face, the stronger the emotions behind it.

"How did you find me?" he barks again.

"You made no effort to hide yourself. This is the same town where we parted ways." Noatak watches Jae lead the girls away. "I see you've integrated yourself quite well here."

"Leave. We had our closure."

"You had your closure, Kwan, but I have not." A brow cocks. "No, not Kwan. Which is it, Jae or Lee?"

"To you? Neither. Why are you here?"

"Please sit," says Noatak. "I'd prefer to keep this conversation private, and you're making a scene."
Lee grits his teeth, but obeys. As much as he doesn't want to admit to being afraid, he's been on the receiving end of bloodbending too many times for his liking. The thought of this monster hurting him in front of Jae and the girls is terrifying.

Noatak must pick up on his fear, because he leans closer. "There's no need to be afraid. I'm here as a gesture of good will. I never repaid you for your initial investment into the Equalists."

"I don't need your money."

"Are you sure? It sounds like you've just inherited two young girls. That has to be an unexpected financial strain."

The tone almost sounds like sympathy, and Lee is so exhausted that his defenses drop. The two extra mouths don't eat much, but it does add up, and they're still paying off funeral expenses and legal fees. He stares at his family across the park. Jae is dragging the kites along the ground with a buffoonish running style, and the girls are rolling on the grass in fits of laughter. Jae drops the act for a moment and glances Lee's way with a worried expression, but Lee nods to let him know everything is okay. Watching the three of them at play is helping him stay calm.

"They were good people," he says aloud. "The girls' parents. Treated me like family right from the start. This wasn't how I wanted to raise kids of my own. Not at that price."

After a long moment passes, Noatak pulls out a wad of notes bundled with an elastic, then sets it on the bench between them.

Lee eyes it. His pride is telling him to ignore it, but there's a lot they could do with some extra money: investments, house upgrades, extra activities for the girls. He picks up the bundle and shoves it in his pocket. "There. You got your closure."

The other leans forward, his elbows on his knees, and warmth begins to seep into his voice: "It wasn't just the money, Kwan. I wanted to see how you were doing. I'm glad you were finally able to have a family of your own, even if through unfortunate circumstances. I wasted your time for far too long."

This is a completely different Noatak than the one Lee has in his memories, and he doesn't know how to reply. After a long pause, he says, "Paying me back and talking like that - you're tying off loose ends. You're either about to kill yourself for real, or settle down. Given the awful beard and the glasses, I'd guess it's the second one, and you're marrying someone whose friends might recognize you."

"Not quite marriage yet, but you have the right idea."

"So what, you came here looking for my blessing?"

"No. I would never ask that of you." The man hesitates and lifts his hat to run a hand through his dyed hair. "I had a lot of guilt about how things played out between us. I needed to make sure you were okay."

"Your partner was all right with you coming to find me?" asks Lee with a raised brow.

"She warned that I might dredge up unpleasant memories for us both, but my guilt won out in the end. Besides, when we last parted, I was still running. I'm done running. I face my mistakes now."

The honesty of the words makes Lee's face twist, and he mutters, "I miss you."
Noatak's gaze snaps to him. "Pardon?"

"You heard me. Not romantically; I love Jae more deeply than I've ever loved anyone before, and we're still in the early years yet - it will only get stronger from here. But I miss things about you. Our late-night talks and plans. Sneaking into town for a bit of debauchery. How well we read each other in combat, how the two of us together were unstoppable. Before things got crazy, we were good together." He gives a low sigh. "We weren't just lovers. We were colleagues. Best friends. For twenty years, we blended two lives into one. I miss your friendship."

"We did make a good team," says Noatak quietly.

"We did. And we've both grown since then. Amon would never have come to check up on me, or give me funds, or apologize; Amon would have run away without looking back. You aren't the same man you were. Neither am I." Lee thinks of the girls' parents. "Life is too short to hold grudges. I'm not saying we're friends. I'm not even saying I like you. But I'm fine, fine enough that I can miss you a bit even after everything that happened. You didn't scar me or ruin my life beyond repair. That's what you wanted to check, isn't it?"

Noatak seems taken aback; he sits upright. After a pause, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a business card, holding it out with two hands. "If you ever need accounting services."

Lee casts a wary eye at the card, but doesn't reach for it. "Saomik?" he reads.

"Chose it on a whim, and it stuck. Name like that doesn't draw much notice up north, and neither do I."

"Up north. So if you stopped here, you're heading south." Lee eyes him. "Down to Republic City to see the Avatar, I'm guessing?"

"I'm not the same man I was." Noatak sets the business card on a slat and stands. "Good luck with your new family, Kwan. Take care." He turns and walks away. This time, his footsteps are nearly silent. A ghost.

Lee doesn't bother to watch him leave; his gaze is fixed on the business card. He should probably tear it in half and throw it out, but it couldn't hurt to have access to an accountant if they ever need one.

Once he's certain Noatak is out of view, he opens his wallet and slots the card carefully inside. There's a silver clip inside the wallet with a reflective surface, and he's surprised to catch himself smiling.

He claps the wallet closed and, without looking back, hurries across the grass to join his family.

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Noatak's heart is still thumping as he boards the ship. He does feel closure now, and he's genuinely glad Kwan is doing well.

There's an uncomfortable undercurrent to his emotions, however: humility. The older he gets, the more he realizes he grossly overestimated his power to ruin lives. Korra bounced back, Kwan bounced back, even Tarrlok bounced back. He imagines he'll find the same thing in Republic City itself: everything in order, as if the Revolution never happened. A tiny part of him is miffed that he is so much less powerful than he used to think - *I never once had the ability to shape the world the way I thought* - but he swallows it back. He knows this ugly, power-hungry aspect of his personality exists, but he refuses to let it engulf him the way it once did.
All that is behind him now. It's time to look forward.

Though, as anxious as he is to be reunited with Korra, looking forward isn't exactly a relief. He isn't certain what he'll see on her face when he arrives.

Reaching into his backpack, he pulls out a small box and opens it. Inside is a stone pendant he carved especially for her, a more permanent version of the glass one she wears now, both in terms of durability and meaning. His thumb traces the petals. It's probably his best piece - he's pleased with the smoothness of the linework and the intricacy of the details - but he hasn't found the right opportunity to present it to her during their last several visits. As much as he values their visits, their phone calls, and their letters, he's been having a hard time envisioning all those things transferring to a permanent relationship. The recent tension over his upcoming vasectomy is no help.

*Wall after wall after wall.* He closes the box and buries it in his bag. His hand brushes against her most recent letter, and he pulls it out and reads it again, even though he already knows it by heart. She speaks of love and anticipation, but either he's becoming paranoid, or there's false hope in her words.

*You're paranoid,* Tarrlok said when he brought up his fears a few days ago. *She's crazy about you. Don't do your thing where you get scared and run away just because people are getting too close to you.*

He takes in a deep breath; it shudders when he releases it. Emotional confrontation is his least favourite type of confrontation, and this trip is already full of it.

*. * * *

Korra paces along the dock as the ship approaches. She can feel Lian, Bolin and Mako following her with their eyes, hear them whispering between themselves.

"I'm sure we'll like him just fine, Korra," calls Lian. "You can calm down."

"Yeah, stop pacing. You're making Naga nervous," says Bolin.

Korra turns and sees Naga stretched out across a pile of rope, her face relaxed. "Oh, yeah, poor girl is shaking."

"Okay, so you're making me nervous." He stretches his arms over his head. "You're worrying about the wrong thing, anyway. What if he doesn't like us?"

"I'm not nervous about anyone liking anyone. You're all wonderful people." Both her parents got along with 'Saomik' just fine during a trip to the South over the summer, and Katara, even knowing his true identity, seemed fond of him, so she sees no reason why her friends won't be the same. The social aspects of this visit will be fine.

In truth, she's nervous about how things will go once she and Noatak are alone. The last few weeks have been filled with increasing tension, and there is sure to be at least one heavy conversation between them. She wipes sweaty palms on her skirt. *What if he's angry with me for being unsupportive about his surgery? What if he won't even look me in the eye? What if I seem so unappealing now that he fell for Kwan again?* Thoughts flood her mind beyond her control, each more ridiculous than the last.

Passengers begin to file down the stairs, and she doesn't realize she's holding her breath until she notices stars swimming before her eyes.
He steps onto the top of the stairs, and her heart skips. "Wait here!" she cries out to her friends, moving forward to greet him.

He doesn't see her until he's at the bottom of the stairs, and his face instantly lights up when he sees her running toward him. With no hesitation, he steps out of the flow of passengers, dropping his bags. Korra jumps at him and he catches her in a hug, his lips closing over hers. Her anxiety melts away and she opens her mouth for him.

"I missed you," she murmurs between kisses, and he gives a soft grunt of agreement and kisses her even harder.

Maybe all their tension will be easier to overcome than she thought.

She would love to make out with him until her jaw is sore, but there are too many people around for it to be polite. Besides, she's a recognizable face here, and she doesn't want to draw too much attention to her relationship. Pulling back, she examines him.

"Your hair is so dark!" Her fingers rake his temple. "Did you dye your beard, too?"

"And the skin beneath it, I'm sure. I hope I don't have to shave anytime soon, or I'll have a dyed shadow." His eyes search hers, and their smiles fade.

"Did you find Kwan?" she whispers.

He nods, then bends to pick up his luggage. "He's moved on, and he's happy. I found my closure."

She smiles, feeling a bit of stress leave her body. "Here, let me help you with that." Relieving a bag from his grip, she slips her free hand into its place.

"I had a hat, too," he says, looking around the wooden surface of the dock.

"Oh, here." She bends down to pick it up and places it on his head. "Sorry, I must have knocked it off while we were kissing."

"Don't apologize." He straightens the brim and leans in to peck her cheek. "I'm glad you greeted me with so much exuberance. I wasn't sure how our reunion was going to play out."

"Let's talk about that later. I'm just glad to see you." She gives him a shy smile, and he returns it.

Remembering herself, she says, "Ready to formally meet my friends?"

"Is Officer Mako among them?"

"Yeah." She tried to manufacture an excuse to leave him out of this meeting, but she couldn't think of any. The risk of recognition is great, but so is his disguise, so she's optimistic that they'll be fine.

Hand in hand, they walk toward Korra's friends, who are still waiting patiently at the end of the dock. Lian is bouncing in place, and Bolin looks excited. Mako is more reserved, his hands on his hips.

"Everyone," says Korra as they arrive, "this is Saomik."

Lian jumps forward and gives an enthusiastic bow. "I've been so excited to meet you, Saomik! Korra has told me all about you."

Noatak studies her, eyes sparkling, and that's when Korra remembers that the two knew each other
It must be strange for him to see his colleagues' little girl all grown up, as if he's seeing a long-lost niece.

"You must be Lian. It's an honour to meet you." His voice is light, even higher pitched than his usual conversational tone, a part of his disguise. "And this must be Mako and Bolin."

"It's an honour to meet you, sir," says Bolin cheerfully.

Mako, however, folds his arms over his chest and glares at the man. "Hey."

Korra's heart begins to pound. *Is he just being an ass, or does he know something's up?* Trying to keep calm, she turns to her partner and says, "If you're okay with it, Saomik, I thought we might all share some drinks and dinner in the hotel bar before you and I retire for the night."

"Hotel?" Noatak raises his brows at her. "I thought we were staying at Air Temple Island."

"We will soon, but I thought we should do something a little special tonight. " Part of her reasoning is that their relationship needs special attention right now, but also, the hotel is right by the hospital, which will make the whole recovery phase easier for both of them.

"Fair enough. I'll contribute to the cost, of course." He smiles. "Shall we?"

As they begin to walk, Korra recounts the latest news from Republic City, taking extra care to explain locations as if Noatak is new to the city. Bolin interrupts to play host, pointing out interesting landmarks and architecture. They arrive at their hotel and stand in line at the check-in desk.

Mako clears his throat. "Korra, can I talk to you for a second?"

She winces, already guessing what's on his mind. "Can it wait?"

"Now."

"Okay, just a minute." She turns to Noatak. "I'll be right back."

Noatak must sense the anxiety in her voice, because he pulls her in and kisses her forehead. "Don't be long, honey." It's not like him to be so openly affectionate, and the only nickname he has ever called her is *Avatar*, so she wonders if he's hamming up his sweetness to assuage any suspicions.

Frowning, Mako leads her around a corner, out of earshot of hotel guests and staff. His brows are heavy, but his voice is quiet enough that only she will hear him: "I know he's Noatak."

Her heart catches in her throat. "Mako, what the hell?"

"You think a beard and some glasses are going to fool me? I saw him all the time when he was a prisoner: I know who he is. If I recognize him, then so will Beifong and any cops who ever spent time in that part of the prison."

"Noatak is dead," she growls, tears springing to her eyes, "and yes, Saomik happens to resemble him, but that's just coincidence."

"Do you think I'm stupid?" His voice begins to crescendo.

"Shh, Mako, please." She grabs his shoulders, looking earnestly into his eyes. "Please, Mako. He lives a very quiet life now; he's no threat to anyone. He has a lot of regrets about how everything played out, and he's completely self-aware of all his shortcomings."
"Korra-

She won't let him speak; she has had this speech in mind since she knew Noatak was coming to visit. "I know you have your principles. I know you value honesty, and justice. But you also believe the justice system is there to help people reform, right? That all bad people can become good? I mean, look at you and Bolin - you started from a life of crime. Look at Tarrlok. We know criminals can reform. We know they can be forgiven." Her voice softens. "And look at me. Remember how I was a bloodbender, how I hurt you, how I was on a path that could have ultimately made me a threat to the entire world. You've kept quiet about me because you know I had good in me. Everyone has good they can tap into if they want to. Everyone. Even him. The system worked."

Mako is quiet for so long that Korra feels her panic rising.

When he finally speaks, he says, "He's treating you well?"

"So well. We're good for each other." She swallows back a rising lump in her throat. "I love him."

He sighs and rubs his forehead. "Okay, fine, I won't tell anyone-"

Korra jumps and wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him down for a tight hug. "Mako, thank you!"

"You didn't let me finish," he says, but he doesn't pull away. "The second I sense he's any kind of threat, I'm going straight to Beifong. And you'd better be careful. There are people here who will recognize him - not many, but a few."

"We'll be careful. Thanks, Mako. You're doing the right thing."

He sighs and breaks the hug, shaking his head. "I hope so."

To Noatak's surprise, he enjoys socializing with Korra's friends. Their youth and cosmopolitan attitudes make for some unexpected conversation topics: celebrities, pro-bending, city politics. Lian subtly turns the conversation to the status of non-benders, sharing all the advances the city has made in recent years, and he feels a surge of pride that one of his followers, at least, took his teachings to heart. Bolin is chatty, as well; he has interesting tales about film and athletics. Mako, however, only watches him. The yellow eyes, heavy brows and sharp nose remind him of a bird of prey.

When the time finally comes to retire upstairs with Korra, he says quietly to her, "Mako saw right through my disguise?"

She sighs. "Yeah."

"Is he a threat?"

"I swore him to secrecy. Convinced him you had changed." She shrugs. "I think it's okay. He still hasn't told anyone about my bloodbending, so he's trustworthy. And he has a few dirty secrets of his own I can hold against him if I need to. It'll be fine."

She won't look him in the eye, and he guesses it has nothing to do with Mako. He stops her outside the door of the hotel room and lifts her chin until she looks at him.
"Korra?"

"I just wish you would reconsider," she says softly, and he sees they're already moving into the difficult part of the evening.

His jaw hardens, and he turns to jam his key in the lock. "And I wish you would understand how important this is to me. There's no impact to you, other than lifting the burden of unwanted pregnancy off your shoulders. It's not going to affect my performance once the incision heals."

"I know, I know." She follows him into the room and shuts the door behind her.

"Then why are you so opposed?" When she looks away, he grabs her hand and leads her to the bed, sitting her down and kneeling in front of her. "Korra, stop being so evasive about this. I can't address your unhappiness until I understand the root of it."

She gives a sigh of defeat. "You're making this decision without all the facts."

"What do you mean?"

"Tarrlok didn't want me to tell you. And maybe I shouldn't, but I want to make sure that you have considered everything when you make a decision this permanent."

They've been hiding something from me? Trying to protect me? Isn't Tarrlok always insisting that it's wrong for me to hide information to protect him? His skin crawls as he waits.

She swallows hard, then finally makes eye contact. "Did you ever stop to wonder why Tarrlok's face and hand weren't destroyed by the explosion? He was in the centre of the blast, after all."

He feels a spike of heat, deep inside his head: a dream he can't quite remember.

"You healed him," she says quietly. "His face was destroyed and his hand was nearly blown off, and you healed him. You drew together bone and muscle that had been nearly vapourized. That's stronger healing than mine, possibly even stronger than Katara's."

There's a flash of Tarrlok's face, blistered and twisted, a nearly-severed hand so burnt that he can barely recognize it, and he cringes, pushing the memory under. "I'm not a healer."

"You are. You healed Tarrlok, with no training. And by using your bloodbending to clear my chi pathways, you healed me, too, remember?" She reaches over to grip his jaw, looking intently into his eyes. "Your bloodline has the potential for great evil, it's true, but it also has potential for great good. Imagine where you would be today if Yakone had nurtured your healing abilities instead of fuelling your destructive side. Imagine how powerful you would be if you had embraced both waterbending and bloodbending as healing arts instead of destruction. Think of the powerful healers who could come from your bloodline."

He feels a deep, claustrophobic panic, like the one that gripped him when he was about to drown after their final showdown so long ago. He abruptly stands and begins to pace.

"It's your decision, in the end," she says quietly. "You have all the facts now, and only you can decide if the possible healing is worth the possible violence. I promise to respect whatever choice you make. I just felt you had the right to know exactly what abilities were in your blood."

He sinks to a seat beside her and closes his eyes, trying to stop his body from caving in under the weight of this information.
"Are you okay?" she asks quietly, but then she seems to think better of it: "I guess that was a dumb question."

"I'm just disoriented." He opens his eyes and takes a deep breath in through his nose, out through his mouth. **Does the potential for good outweigh the potential for evil? How can I trust myself to make this decision, with all the times I've weighed the two in the past and made the wrong choice?**

Defensive, he turns the attention back to her. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to have all the information to-"

He cuts her off. "That's not the only reason, though, is it?"

She looks away. For a moment, she's so quiet that he doesn't think she's going to reply, but finally she says, "You're right. I'm selfish, Noatak. The reason I don't want you to go through with this is..." She hesitates. "I want to have your children one day."

The whirling in his head stops. Time freezes.

_The Avatar wants my children._

His eyes flutter closed. **Who would have better access to proper training than the Avatar's descendents? Who would have more balance, more respect for people of all walks of life?** He sees children, their children, healing the sick and the dying. He sees people travelling from around the world the way they do with Katara, seeking cures that modern medicine can't give them.

_Could even I, with such access to proper trainers, have become a great man? Could I have saved lives instead of destroying them?_

His eyes open.

Beside him, Korra is holding her face in her hands.

"Korra?"

"I'm sorry." Her voice wavers; she doesn't lift her head. "I'm so selfish. I shouldn't have dumped all this on you the night before your surgery. I wasn't going to say anything."

His face falls. "It's okay, Korra. We swore to be honest with each other, always, even if our honest feelings were less than admirable. Thank you for your honesty." Even though his head is still spinning, he gathers her in his arms and pulls her in close. She nuzzles his neck.

"I wanted to say all this earlier," she says, "but it's so hard to have a serious conversation over the phone. It's hard to do anything over the phone."

"It is," he agrees, pressing his nose into the top of her head. He breathes in. They spend so much time missing each other that whenever they're together, the little things like the scent of her hair make his heart ache in anticipation. It's as if their visits only remind him of their upcoming separation.

"It's so much more difficult than I thought it would be," he says quietly. "I miss you even when we're together now."

"I know." She sniffs. "It keeps getting harder."

He tilts her chin and presses a kiss to a tear on her cheek. When he pulls away, she leans forward to
follow him, stealing a kiss.

"Make love to me," she whispers into his lips. "I need to feel close to you."

He hesitates. Their discussion didn't come to any kind of conclusion, and he's not sure he can drop the line of thought so quickly.

Still, maybe relieving one kind of tension between them will help the other. He reaches out a hand and, when she takes it, leads her along the top of the bed. They stretch out together and begin to kiss. At first, it's slow and tender, but then his mind begins to wander. *How do I feel about my bending now? How do I feel about having children with Korra?* He mechanically helps her pull off her clothes, and she helps him do the same. *Do I still want to go through with the procedure? Maybe I should postpone and give it some more thought - but I swore my legacy had to end here.*

"Are you okay?" whispers Korra, and he blinks, coming back to himself. She's half-lying on top of him, her hand on his chest, and he realizes he hasn't been moving his mouth in reaction to her kisses.

He feels a twinge of guilt. Sitting up, he says gently, "Lie on your back."

Korra looks concerned. "Are you sure? If you're upset, we don't have to-"

"I'm okay." He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "Lie on your back."

It was his intention to occupy himself with an elaborate task so that he wouldn't have a chance to get lost in his thoughts - and he knows that Korra will enjoy this approach as well - but as he kneels between her legs, he is overcome by a wave of fondness. His hands softly stroke between her legs. *This has the power to bring our child into the world, if we choose, if we're lucky.*

His caresses are so gentle that he doesn't expect her to respond, but she surprises him with a soft, pleased sigh. That little sigh is enough to spark his body alight, and his mind finally quietens. He presses his nose against her, mouth open, and breathes in.

Over the past two years, their reunions have always been frantic and hurried, their bodies racing to release all the tension they built during their absence, but this time, he touches her gently, as if handling glass, feeling its contours. It's just breath and fingertips coaxing moans from her, at first, until she arches into him and pleads for his mouth. Even then, he moves slowly, feeling her skin with his tongue, pausing to savour the taste. She writhes and moans and her hand finds his wrist, locking onto it with a grip tight enough to bruise. He only gives in to her pleas at the very end, increasing his speed, and she loses control; her thighs squeeze his head so tightly that he can barely hear her cries. He stays a few beats longer than necessary, until she twitches and touches the top of his head as a request that he stop.

He's so hard that he aches, but he moves up her body to kiss her neck, giving her time to recover. Her hand lazily combs his hair, and when he pulls back to look at her, she gives him a drowsy smile.

"Now you lie on your back," she whispers.

His groin twinges at the suggestion, and he eagerly obeys. She trades positions with him, still a bit clumsy, settling between his legs. She surprises him by jumping right into her work, hands and mouth working in unison, and he wants to watch her, but his eyes are screwing shut. Then he's vaguely aware that he's thrashing and crying out, but it feels too good for him to care. He's just beginning to doubt his ability to hang on, when she pulls away.
"I want to ride you," she says, and the words are so beautiful that he can barely manage a nod.

She helps him put on protection, then climbs on top of him, facing away. This isn't the position he expected, but the view is so tantalizing that he grips flesh and his neck arches, and he can't find the words to warn her.

*Hold on, just a little longer,* he tells himself, because he never wants this to end. *Hold on, hold on...*

"Come on," she pants, and her permission overwhelms his restraint. He yells and feels it through his entire body, to the tips of his limbs, lifting off the mattress and collapsing in shudders.

When he finally opens his eyes, his world is still bathed in white fog. His jaw is frozen open, and sweat drips from his hairline.

Korra detaches herself and rotates to face him, lying stomach-down on top of him. Her arms fold over his chest as she studies him, a smirk on her lips.

He closes his eyes and smiles. "Don't look so smug," he says, still panting.

"Good thing we aren't at the Temple - you yelled pretty loudly there," she says, tapping his nose.

"Stop it." Sweat is still trickling down his cheek, and he wipes it and looks at his fingertips. The liquid is black.

"Shit," he mutters.

"Don't worry, it's still covering the grey. Just a little dye run-off."

"I'll ruin the pillows."

She shrugs. "We'll pay the damages. We've done worse to hotel rooms before."

"I suppose we have." He reaches out to touch her lips, still too drained to control a proper caress. "I think... I think we needed that."

"I think we did." She hesitates, then says quietly, "We should get some sleep. You have a big day tomorrow."

His mind suddenly sharpens. *She's assuming I'm getting the vasectomy.*

*Am I?*

"Are you sure you want to sleep now?" he asks. "After tomorrow, I won't be able to have sex until our next visit." *If I go through with it."

"It's okay. I'm pretty tired, and you must be exhausted from your travels."

She's correct; he's already fighting to keep his eyes open. "Maybe we'll wake up in the night and do this again."

"I suppose we'll see." Tapping the tip of his nose again, she says, "Don't worry; whatever sex we don't have this visit, we'll have double next time."

"I won't argue with that."

They share a slow kiss, and then crawl under the covers. He spoons behind her; her fingers
interlock with his, and she kisses his knuckles, then reaches over to turn out the lamp.

As his eyes close, he reaches the stage between wake and sleep, where thoughts take colourful form beneath closed eyelids in a waking dream. He sees an infant in Korra's arms, and as his imagination paints the colours and shapes of the scene, he feels heat in his heart, hotter than any love he has ever known.

"I love you." He doesn't know if he imagines the words or says them, but they make the infant smile, and his body glows.

*.**.*.

When Korra awakens to the alarm the next morning, she's alone in bed. She finds Noatak in the kitchenette, a bag of takeout noodles on the table, and she's instantly reminded of the early days of their relationship. He's wearing nothing but pyjama bottoms, and his hair is damp and slicked back from his face. Her eyes trail down his torso, taking him in, and she falls against the doorframe, watching him set out bowls.

"Morning," she says.

He looks up, then smiles. "Morning." She loves that smile, almost as white as the bath towel. It's strange to think that it was once a rare sight; it comes so easily now.

*Especially this morning.* As she studies him, she recognizes his emotion: relief. *This is what the procedure means to him: relief. It's the end of years of anxiety*, she tells herself, trying to honestly examine how it makes her feel. Her emotions surprise her. She's sad, of course; a part of her is still wishing she could have his biological children. Mostly, however, she feels happy for him: truly, genuinely happy. *This is the day he finds true freedom from his past.*

"Ready for your big day?" she asks as she sits down.

"Are you?" he asks, sliding into the other chair, and she hears concern in his voice.

"I am." She looks him in the eye as she speaks, showing her honest support. "I'll drop you off, and I'll be there when you wake up. I was thinking of booking the room again tonight so you can recover close to the hospital."

He gives a thankful one-sided smile, then serves the noodles.

"Thank you for getting breakfast," she says. "Brings back memories."

"Indeed." He cocks a brow at her. "Memories almost three years old."

*Three years.*

She looks down at her noodles. Three years, and even though they've grown together, the status of their relationship hasn't changed one bit: they're still facing an uncertain future, visiting in secret. Her smile fades, and she quickly stuffs her mouth full of noodles to disguise her mood change.

As they eat, her mind is racing. They've been struggling to keep this relationship together for so long. She doesn't care anymore if they can have kids together or not: she just needs the two of them to be together. She needs this domestic partnership, silently eating noodles in the kitchen, in their pyjamas. This comfort, this shared space is what she misses when they're apart, even more than the sex.
She's been toying with an idea for awhile now, but it has only recently begun to solidify. With all the difficulties they've been having lately, she was afraid of suggesting more change, but now she realizes just how much their current situation is hurting them.

"It's too hard," she blurts out loud.

His eyes lock onto her, his face neutral. There's no emotion in his voice.

"This," she says. "It's too hard. Being so far apart all the time. I can't be happy like this, not long-term, and I know you can't, either. That's the real problem here, not vasectomies or children or meeting friends."

His chopsticks are frozen halfway to his mouth, and a slight quiver in them is the only indication that he's upset. Feeling guilty, she reaches over and covers her hand with his.

"I should have phrased that better," she says. "I didn't mean to scare you. I have an idea about our future, how we can make things easier. But it should probably wait until after your procedure."

"I have some time." His voice is still emotionless.

She takes a deep breath. "Okay, so this is still in the planning stages, but I think it might work. I'm the Avatar for the entire world, but I've only ever lived at the South Pole and in Republic City. I want to spend a few years in each of the lands I never lived in before, to learn more about the cultures and the people of each of the lands." She squeezes his hand. "I want to start with the North."

He blinks. "The North?"

"I don't have to live in your village right away," she says in a rush. "Maybe somewhere nearby, so we can spend weekends together at first and see where it goes. Or I could get an apartment in your village. And maybe if things worked out, you could accompany me on the rest of my world trip, if you wanted. We'd be far enough away from people who would recognize you that we could even be open about our relationship - well, Korra and Saomik - to the public. I'd make sure to keep the media quiet as much as possible. Hell, I'll bribe them for privacy if I have to." His face still isn't showing any expression, and she starts to panic. "I'm pushing too much too soon; he's going to pull away. "There's no pressure, of course - I'm getting ahead of myself. We'll start slowly and we could see where it goes. I'm not assuming anything."

He's quiet for a moment, then he sits upright, still studying her.

"Say something," she murmurs.

"I have no ties to any location," he says. "My only loyalties are to you and to Tarrlok, and he and Akna take good care of each other, so I suspect he would be comfortable with me travelling, so long as we visited often." His voice is calm, but his hand is trembling beneath hers - or maybe her hand is trembling atop his. "You already have a key to my home, Korra, and I was serious when I said you were welcome to come and go as you please. I would be honoured to host you during your stay in my village, if you like."

Her heart thuds. "Are you asking me to move in with you?"

"Yes."

Tears well in her eyes, and she launches herself at him so hard that she almost knocks his chair backwards; her arms tighten around him. "We can live together. We can have this, every morning."
She sniffles, trying not to cry. "Yes, I'll move in with you."

His smile is cautious. "Are the Council and the president going to allow you to leave?"

"They can go fuck themselves if not," she says passionately. "I'm the Avatar!" She pulls back to smile at him. His eyes are red and glassy, but placid. Leaning forward, she kisses his nose.

"I'll start making the arrangements today, while you're in the hospital," she says, eager to get started.

He clears his throat. "I'm going to ask them to delay the procedure."

"What?"

"For six months. Now that I have all the facts, I'd like to take more time to think this through." He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "You planted some ideas in my mind last night, and I want to give them adequate consideration."

She stares at him. *He must mean having kids together. What else could he mean?* Her jaw quivers.

"In fact..." Noatak stands and holds out a hand. "Come with me."

"What?"

"It's urgent." He has an odd expression on his face, as if he's struggling to contain something, something that, so far as she knows, has never been a problem for him before.

Confused, she grabs his hand, and follows him to the window.

"What are you-" she says.

He throws open the window, revealing the fire escape, and steps onto it.

"Noatak," she says, but he's already climbing up the ladder. She hurries to keep up. "We're still in our pyjamas!"

They climb onto the roof, and the view of the city around them is so familiar that she feels herself smile, remembering the days when her feelings for him were unsettling and new. The memories are so strong that she can almost smell cigar smoke.

The wind is strong today. Noatak's hair, without its usual gel, dances around his face, giving his gaze extra intensity.

"I woke up this morning and made dinner plans," he says to her.

She wipes strands of her ponytail out of her mouth, and they whip right back into her mouth again. "What are you talking about?" she asks, battling the wind.

"I spoke last night of how difficult the distance was, but I came to an epiphany about my feelings for you." He moves up to her and grabs her hands. "I don't care how hard we have to fight to be together, Korra: I need you. We've made it work against all odds, and we'll keep finding ways to make it work." He smiles. "And by planning your trip around the world, you just proved me right without even realizing it."

Though she's still confused, she has a suspicion about where this is going. Her pulse begins to race.
"I'm not accustomed to playing it by ear, Korra," he continues. "I'm a man of strategy. I take calculated risks. You are the first person - the first anything - in a very long time to make me want to leave everything up to chance if it meant we could be together. That was my epiphany, and right after I had it, I phoned to reserve the rooftop at a restaurant where we once dined under the stars, where the city was ours. I meant to say all this to you there."

He sinks to both knees. "But I'm not a patient man, Korra, not when it comes to you. This is me getting carried away. This is me allowing my heart to lead my head. There is no calculation here, only chance."

Her world is tilting, she's going to fall backwards, her mind is soaring.

"Korra," he says, his voice strong and clear even over the wind, "will you marry me?"

"Yes," she blurts, and she drops to her knees to look him in the eye. "Yes."

He pulls a box out of his pocket and opens it. The pendant is almost the same size as the glass one she wears now, the stone so intricately carved that the leaves of the flowers have veins. Her jaw quivers.

"You're so talented," she rasps.

He lifts the pendant and fastens it around her neck, and it settles atop the glass one with a soft clink. "A more permanent promise." He cups her cheek. "You are worth all the risks I have taken, Korra, and every one I will ever take."

If she tries to speak, she'll start to sob, so instead she grips his chin and pulls him in for a kiss.
Epilogue: Source (Reprise)

Chapter Notes

chapters XXXI to end were all published here within 24 hours -- sorry for the big posting!

Epilogue

Source (Reprise)

Korra and Noatak move onto the stage together and stand before the Elder, positioning themselves on either side of the pedestal. Korra's eyes travel across the small group gathered in the ice hall: her parents. Her friends. Tarrlok and Akna. Tenzin and his family. Naga and Pabu, curled in the corner. Beside them, on a small table, are photos of Asami and Noatak's mother, flanked by candles and incense.

Swallowing hard, she anxiously smooths her silk dress. Noatak's hand tightens around hers; when she looks at him, he gives her a kind smile, but it wobbles, as if he's just as emotional as she is. There's no beard this time, no hair dye, just Noatak. Of those gathered, only Mako would ever recognize him without the beard, and he already knows the truth.


Noatak, thinks Korra, legitimizing the vows in her mind. *Saomik is the lie. Noatak is the truth. It has always been the truth.*

"Marriage is a vow for life," says the Elder. "A promise to bring your best to each other, and bring out the best in each other." She sets a chalice on a pedestal before them and crumbles dried herbs into it, then fills it with a steaming tea mixture that Korra has been assured tastes like berries.

"Saomik, you will be the first to present the chalice."

Noatak kneels, his head bowed. The scar on the back of his head is barely visible now that he wears his hair longer and ties it back. Sometimes, Korra sees him rub it as if it's sore, but he won't let her soothe it with healing.

She stands before him, and as she looks down at him, her heart floods with too many emotions to name. She's glad he has to give her the drink first, because she won't be able to speak without wetting her tongue.

He's breathing hard, but he won't lift his head. Is he nervous? Having second thoughts?

"Look at me," she whispers.

She sees his back rise, then fall, and then he lifts his head. Their eyes lock, and she sees tears forming in his eyes. Her jaw starts to quiver, and she bites her cheek. *Don't you dare start me crying.*

He clears his throat and accepts the chalice. "Avatar Korra-" His voice cracks, and he clears his
throat again. "Korra, I offer you my companionship, my protection and my faithfulness, in body and in spirit, for as long as we journey through this world."

She lifts her chin in a vain attempt to escape her tears; one trails down her cheek anyway. Her hands close over his and she lifts the cup out of his hands, then takes a sip. It burns her mouth and floods her body with warmth. She hands it back to the Sage.

Now it's her turn to kneel before him, and for a fleeting moment, they stare at each other eye-to-eye, then he stands.

And now it has arrived: the moment where she will commit herself to this man for life, with all their messy history, their enormous age gap, their forced secrets. She looks inside herself for any hesitation, for the slightest bit of resistance, but finds none.

"Saomik," she says clearly, "I offer you my companionship, my protection and my faithfulness, in body and in spirit, for as long as we journey through this world." The words are rote, a formal signature on a contract, but in her mind, she adds a different vow: Noatak, I'm proud of how far you and I have come together, and I'm excited about how far we'll go.

A corner of his lips lifts, as if he heard her thoughts. As if he is grateful.

She passes him the chalice, and he drinks from it, then helps her stand, drawing her seamlessly into a kiss while the onlookers cheer.

He's about to pull away, but she leans in, extending it. She wants to savour this moment, symbolic of all the changes they have undergone together. The first time they met head-on after his arrest, she was the one to retreat. The second time, when she was corrupted, it was his turn.

This time, they are two equals colliding head on and never pulling away. This, she realizes, is how their battle was always meant to end, why every ending before now felt incomplete.

Noatak finally breaks the kiss and gives her a gentle smile, holding out his hand. She returns the smile, and her fingers intertwine with his.

"Beloved guests, I present to you your newlyweds, Saomik and Avatar Korra," says the Elder.

In unison, they take their first steps as husband and wife, their chins high with pride, their chests glowing with hope.

~The End~

A/N: Life has a way of coming full circle, and each time we cross the same threshold, we know ourselves better, so we can see the things we once feared in a whole new light.

When I started writing Love & Corruption, I was using it as a way to vent an extremely difficult time in my life. The themes of the characters struggling to define themselves at a time when their body and/or mind was betraying them was a direct reflection of my own struggles: Korra's corruption was a reflection of my physical illness, Kwan's depression was a reflection of my mental illness, and Amon's skewed sense of self was a reflection of my own. I set out to write a tragic tale ending in death and heartbreak, where the character's struggles would be their downfalls, but they surprised me: they found hope. And so did I.

I know this fic has uneven pacing, polish issues and other problems, but it's possibly the most personal story I have ever written, and so I say this from the bottom of my heart: thank you for reading. Your reviews and comments kept me writing when I wanted to quit, and the cathartic
experience of it was a big part of my ongoing recovery. Thank you for your help.

For those of you struggling, I hope you will find your hope, maybe even in the unlikeliest places. May our darkest times help all of us to learn, grow and end up in a better place because of it. xo

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