

30 Day OTP Challenge: Love Is In The Details

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30 Day OTP Challenge: Love Is In The Details

by [OurImpavidHeroine](#)

Summary

The infamous 30 Day OTP Challenge! Sometimes a writer just needs to get her head back into the game. Thirty drabbles in thirty days that are being crossposted over at my [Tumblr](#) account. Whatever comes into my head, typed in. Let's see where this takes us.

I created a playlist for this series! Head on over and have a listen....

[Love Is In The Details](#) from [ourimpavidheroine](#) on [8tracks Radio](#).

Holding Hands

Wu politely skirted around a small spirit that looked like a cross between a rutabaga and some sort of jellyfish, sprawled in the middle of the sidewalk. He wasn't entirely clear on how one was supposed to handle this sort of thing - eyes to the horizon? A cheerful hello? Ba Sing Se didn't have nearly the spiritual presence that Republic City had, especially now that it sported a spirit portal in the middle of what used to be downtown. He wasn't sure of the protocol involved.

The spirit solved the ethical conundrum by opening its eyes and speaking. "Looking for someone?"

Wu automatically made a cordial bow. "I am, in fact. A policeman. Tall? Dark hair? Firebender? Wears a glove on his left hand?"

The spirit thought for a moment. "Oh sure, sure. That one. He comes here to eat." A tentacle-ish thing wavered up and pointed. "Go on down the path, take the first right, you can't miss him. Always sits on the same bench."

"Thank you very much."

"No problem, Your Highness."

Wu blinked a little at that. How on earth had it known who he was? Mysteries of the Spirit World, unsolved, he assumed. He made his way down the path. He'd only been back in Republic City for two weeks now. He supposed he probably shouldn't bother Mako at work, but he just wanted to see him. He couldn't get enough of seeing him. Not to mention, he was more than a little bored. The big house was too big; Mako was gone for most of the day and Wu rattled around it, desperately trying to find something to do. He needed something to keep him busy, something beyond learning to play the yangqin and playing with little Naoki. The firebender who had come up with her - Lozan was his name, although Naoki called him LoLo and he didn't seem to mind - had taken over the running of the house with almost terrifying efficiency. Wu was hoping he'd stay. He knew he'd have to hire some sort of housekeeper and cook anyhow - he certainly couldn't cook or run a house and didn't have much interest in learning how, quite frankly - but LoLo suited him. When people suited him, Wu liked to keep them.

The path split in front of him and he took the first right, walking another few meters. There he was, just as promised, sitting on a bench, chopsticks in one hand, a take-out container in the other. Wu smiled. Maybe someday he wouldn't get that little jolt of pleasure he always felt when he saw Mako - *mine, he's all mine, he loves me, he's mine* - but he couldn't help himself. Mako glanced up.

"What are you doing here?" Mako frowned. Wu had to laugh to himself. He was fairly certain that Mako had no idea at all how he put people off with his irascible faces; he usually looked like he wanted to set someone on fire. It had put him off for awhile too - he was more than a little afraid of Mako when Mako first started working for him, although if you didn't know

Wu very well you wouldn't know that his endless babble and insouciant attitude covered up his own nervousness. Mako had glowered; Wu had chattered. Round and round in circles they had gone.

"Nice to see you, too," he said, and Mako craned his head to peer behind him.

"Is something wrong? Is the baby sick or something? You didn't crash the car or anything, did you?" His voice sharpened.

"No, no and no. Nothing's wrong. I just missed you. I wanted to see you."

Mako's frown deepened into a scowl. "Wu, I'm working. You can't just come and visit me when I'm working."

Wu gestured around. "Looks to me like you're eating lunch, not hunting down dangerous criminals. What, you can't have a ten minute break to eat your lunch, talk to your boyfriend? Won't they call you on that radio thing if they need you?" Mako grunted and Wu took that as an invitation, sitting down on the bench next to him. "Don't worry, if any bad guys come I'll make a run for it. I'll even scream in terror if you think it will add to the crime fighting ambiance."

Mako snorted at this and held over his container. "You hungry?"

"No, you eat it. I'll get something later."

"You didn't drive over here, did you?"

"No, I did not, Mister Ask A Million Questions. I took a taxi, if you must know. I suppose I should see about getting a driver or something. I really don't like relying on taxis."

"So long as you aren't driving."

"Mako, it was one insignificant crash. I was learning!"

"Wu, you took out two dumpsters and half of a shop window! Not to mention you never look where you are going. You can't turn around to talk to people in the back seat when you are driving!"

"Well, if cars were designed properly you could!"

"Also, traffic signals are *not* suggestions."

"So many rules! I hate rules!"

Mako looked down at him and raised an eyebrow. "Royalty. Useless." Ah, there came a smile. Wu wanted to snuggle right up to him but he refrained. Mako was, after all, on duty. He might not like rules but he knew how seriously Mako took his work. He wouldn't get in the way of that. Mako wasn't his concubine. He was his equal partner.

"That's me, Prince Useless." He tried to give a carefree laugh but it came out a little flat.

"Not useless," murmured Mako, and he entwined the smooth fingers of his gloved left hand around Wu's fingers.

"I'm not so sure about that," muttered Wu, and Mako took his hand out of his. Wu was disappointed but Mako was only tugging off the glove before returning his hand into his, the roughness of the lightning scars scraping against his palm.

"I'm sure," said Mako in that tone that meant there was no arguing. Wu risked resting his head against Mako's shoulder and got a kiss dropped on his crown for his trouble. "You'll find your way. I know you. You'll find something to do." His thumb stroked little circles on Wu's hand.

"You really think so?" Wu increased the pressure of his own fingers around Mako's.

"I know so," Mako replied, and brought his hand up to kiss their entwined fingers.

Cuddling Somewhere

Wu shivered slightly as the thunder boomed. "One...two..." he counted softly before the lightning lit up the night sky outside their bedroom window.

"Getting closer," said Mako, pleased. Mako loved nothing more than a good thunderstorm.

"I was so terrified of storms when I was little," Wu said, and Mako snaked an arm around him. "The noise scared me so badly. There was never anyone to comfort me, either."

"Poor little Wu," said Mako into his ear. "I loved them. Well, I was never too thrilled with the whole rain part. But I loved the lightning, of course. Bo always hated them, though."

"Sensible man, your brother," Wu said, and the thunder burst again, nearly drowning out the pounding of the rain outside. "We're getting a good one tonight." The lightning flared again, near enough to the window to make him jump a little. "Oh, that was close!"

"Wonder if it will hit any of the trees across in the park," Mako said, and he swung himself out of bed, padding across the floor to peer out the window.

"I'd tell *you* to be sensible and come away from the window but I know better. Could you catch it?"

"What, the lightning? In theory I could redirect natural lightning, yeah. Have to tell you I wouldn't really want to test it, though. Getting zapped by that spirit vine was enough for me, thanks."

Their bedroom door opened up a bit and two small faces peeked inside. Mako turned from the window and smiled. "What is it? Did the storm scare you?"

"I was only scared a little bit but Meili was crying. She woke me up." Zhi cringed a little as the next roll of thunder shook the house a bit.

"Oh, Meili," Wu said, and held his arms out. "Papa should have checked in on you, I'm so sorry." Zhi led his sister over by the hand and Wu leaned down to lift her up onto the bed, Zhi scrambling in after her. Her lower lip trembled and he drew her in close. "Don't cry, darling, it's safe here. Daddy would never let the lightning hurt us, would you, Daddy?"

"Not even a little," said Mako as lightning forked behind his head. "Not a chance."

"Why is it so loud, though?" asked Zhi.

"It's the lightning that makes it that way," Wu replied. "The temperature of the air increases, as does the pressure. That's what makes the sound. If you like, we can go to the library tomorrow and find a book about it that would explain it better."

"Okay, Papa! It's not so scary if I know why. Daddy, if you make lightning does it make a thunder sound?" Zhi burrowed up close to Wu's chest.

"Well, usually the lightning I generate is pretty small compared to this, so it makes a smaller crackling noise. Not like these big booms."

"Could you show us tomorrow in the backyard?" Naoki grinned as she entered the bedroom.

"Never tell me you were scared of the storm," Wu said, looking over at her.

"No, you know I love them. It woke me up and I wanted to make sure Meili wasn't scared. But there she is, huh?" Naoki launched herself with a flying leap onto the bed and planted a big kiss on to her sister's cheek. "Don't you like the storm?" Meili shook her head. "Well, it's okay. I like it enough for both of us! Someday I'm going to generate lightning, too. And then I'll show you and you won't be scared."

"Some day in the *far* future, right?" Mako had moved away from the window and was staring down at his eldest. "And only with my supervision?"

"Yes, Daddy. I promise."

"Good." Mako nudged at her with his knee. "Move over, you're in my space." Naoki scooted over and Mako settled himself back into the bed. "Storm's moving away now. Everybody can go back to sleep."

"No," piped up Meili, a stubborn look on her face. "No baby bed."

Mako met Wu's eyes over the children's heads. "Okay. Fine. Everyone can sleep in Papa and Daddy's bed tonight. But just for tonight, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy," said Zhi, and he slid himself down in between his sisters. "Ow, Naoki, don't stab me with your toenails!"

"I'm not!"

"Hush now, you two. Daddy has work in the morning. Be quiet if you want to stay here."

"I'm quiet," whispered Meili, and Wu hugged her tightly.

"I know you are, precious," Wu said, and kissed her. "Now close your eyes and go to sleep. Never mind the storm, you're safe now."

"If Papa is cuddling Meili and Daddy is cuddling Naoki then who is cuddling me?" whispered Zhi, a little forlornly. "I don't have anyone to cuddle me."

"I'll cuddle you, you big old baby," whispered Naoki, and she squeezed him. "There. Better?"

"Uh huh."

"Shhh," said Mako. "Everybody go to sleep."

After a few squirms from Naoki and Zhi and some slight pillow adjustments everyone quieted down. Meili's breathing evened and slowed and Wu buried his nose into her curls,

smelling the last lingering wisps of her baby smell. She was getting so big now, so fast, and it hurt his heart to think about it. The thunder had receded to faint booms in the distance and the rain was falling steadily. He felt himself drawn back into sleep.

The silence was ripped asunder by a loud rumble of another sort. Naoki sat straight up. "EW! Zhi! Gross!" She smacked at her brother. "Right on me! Daddy! He did it right on me! I felt it! ON PURPOSE!"

The bed started to shake as Mako tried to stifle his laughter.

"Sorry! It just came out! I can't help it!" Zhi was apologetic.

"I hate you! My leg is going to fall right off! Turn black and fall right off!"

"Yaozhi Hou-Ting! Did you just...just...did you just *pass gas* in my bed?" Wu sat straight up, mouth dropping open.

"Did you actually just say the words *pass gas*?" Mako wasn't even trying to stifle his laughter any longer. "Oh come on, don't look so scandalized. Like you never farted in bed."

"I certainly have *not*!"

"Good to know. Kids, royalty doesn't fart in bed." Mako was wheezing with laughter.

"Daddy, that's not true. Everyone farts! I read about it!" Zhi sat up earnestly. "Even animals fart! It's true! But I don't know about spirits. Do spirits fart?" Mako only laughed harder.

Meili woke up and started to whimper. "There! Now you woke up your sister. There is no...*flatulence*...allowed in my bed." Wu reached over to slap at his husband's arm. "Stop laughing! What kind of a paternal influence are you anyhow?"

Mako sat up. "Come to think of it, I don't think I ever *have* heard you fart, Wu. How do you manage it? Was there some sort of training for that? Did you have an anti-fart tutor growing up or something? Is it in the Big Book of Royal Manners?"

"I am not having this conversation! Act your age! Look! You woke up the baby!"

"If you hold in your farts could you explode?" In the gloom of the bedroom Zhi looked half fascinated and half horrified at the thought.

"It would be in all the newspapers. Prince Wu dies of a huge fart explosion!" Naoki giggled, and Mako nearly fell off the bed with laughter.

"NAOKI! Mako! Stop laughing! You are only encouraging them! If you all don't stop it then Meili and I will go and sleep in her room!"

"Sorry, no, don't go. We'll all calm down now. Okay, everybody, calm down, come on. No more laughing. Time to go back to sleep." Mako reached over to rearrange his children.

"Come on Wu, lay back down. Everyone's just going to go back to sleep now."

"Hmph," said Wu. He kissed Meili and settled the both of them back down on the pillow.
"Honestly. We are a civilized family, I *do* hope."

"Well, some of us are, anyhow," said, Mako, and Wu could hear the smile in his voice. "Now everybody quiet down. We've offended His Royal Highness with our common ways enough for one night."

"Ha ha, aren't you just a shining beacon of wit."

"Papa! Daddy! Now who's talking? Not me and Naoki this time!"

"Right you are, Zhi. Everyone quiet now." Wu gave Meili another kiss.

It was quiet.

"But, Papa," came the whisper, "Do spirits fart? I want to-"

"SHHHHHH!"

Gaming/Watching A Movie

"You sure you want to move it there?"

Mako's hand hovered over the board. "I told you to stop saying that!" He glared.

"Just a simple question, of course." Wu was sitting back in his chair, legs crossed. He looked smug. "Please. Feel free to move it wherever you like."

Mako's hand hovered...and then moved the Pai Sho piece in another direction.

"Oh *dear*. Well, never mind."

"Wu! Damn it!"

"Mako, I'm really just being polite. No matter where you place it I've won the game." Wu was fully dressed except for his cravat; he'd taken that off in the beginning, calling it a freebie. Sweater vest, perfectly pressed shirt, pants and socks. His inside slippers were embroidered. Wu was not one to walk around in his socks; he was only barefoot in the bath or in bed.

Mako, on the other hand, was down to his pants and underwear. The rest of his clothing was strewn across the floor. "I knew this was a bad idea."

"On the contrary. Best idea I've had in ages. As far as I am concerned, the electricity can go out every night."

"Fucking power company," muttered Mako.

"Sulky! Look, I'll even the playing field. I'll take off my cufflinks. Call it another freebie." Wu carefully undid each cufflink and placed them neatly in the middle of the board. "May as well leave them there. It's not like you'll be taking the center any time soon."

"Damn it, Wu!"

"Tsk tsk tsk. More profanity. Shocking, really." One of the candles in the candelabra on Mako's dresser sputtered and flickered, dangerously low. "Do we have any more candles?"

"I don't think so. Unless there's a stash downstairs I don't know about."

Well, I guess you'd better hurry up and play your piece, then. The faster you play, the sooner those trousers come off."

Mako threw the piece at the table, knocking several other pieces askew. "Fuck it." He surged up from his chair and unbuttoned his pants.

"Temper, temper."

"Why did I even agree to this? I'm a terrible Pai Sho player." The pants slid down over his hips. His narrow hips.

"You are, really. Although I have to tell you, I don't mind a bit." Wu was grinning as the pants were kicked off, sailing halfway across the room to land on the floor. "And who is going to pick those up, I ask you? It won't be me, I can tell you that much. So. Next game?" He raised one eyebrow and leaned forward to collect the pieces on the board.

"I don't want to play this game anymore. I want to play a different game." Mako stood there in his shorts, fists on his hips, staring at Wu.

"Of course you do. Sore loser." Wu twiddled a piece in his hand. The White Lotus. "So what game did you have in mind?"

Mako's hands brushed through the air and all of the candles went out.

"Mako!"

Mako's voice came out of the darkness. "New game. If I catch you, I get to take your clothes."

"But...I can't see!" Wu heard a rustling sound and the curtains were drawn back. Towards the south was the spirit portal, the only light to be seen in the entire northern grid of the city.

"See by that. Better run. I'm coming."

Wu leapt up from his chair, knocking into the table, Pai Sho pieces flying. "Mako!" He froze and listened. He couldn't hear anything but the sound of his own breathing. Suddenly there were hands on him and he gasped as Mako felt around him until he had a good hold on his sweater vest. "What are you doing?" He was quickly turned around, the vest yanked up, entangling his arms until it was up and over his head and away.

"No more vest," whispered Mako into his ear, and then he was gone.

Wu's heart was pounding. He closed his eyes; he didn't know why it helped when he was already in the dark, but it did. He *listened*. The tiniest of scuffles to the right and he swung through one of his waterbender forms, down and under and away. He heard Mako's little grunt and found himself starting to get excited. He moved backwards, low to the ground, grimacing silently as he stepped on a Pai Sho piece. He could play this game, too.

Mako, for all his size, was a graceful man, light on his feet. Wu, on the other hand, was sinuous. He eased himself around Mako's nightstand, remembering to avoid Mako's undershirt that had landed that way. Mako stepped on a Pai Sho piece and cursed softly; Wu wanted to laugh, but kept silent. Years worth of sneaking around the palace in Ba Sing Se were paying off. He moved without a sound; when he heard Mako's feet slide something across the floor (Pai Sho piece?) he threw and then quickly moved to the side.

"What the..?" Mako said, voice loud in the silence. "Your shirt? Oh, that's how it is, is it? Okay, you're on!" Mako shuffled forward to where Wu had thrown the shirt, but Wu was

already across the room. His undershirt, slippers and socks followed; by the noise Mako made Wu guessed his trousers had hit him right upside the face. Not where he was aiming, but he wasn't the one who had doused the candles, was he? He took everything off until he was down to nothing at all; Mako's little growl when he'd gotten hit with Wu's shorts almost made him laugh aloud.

Carefully, slowly, silently, he eased himself up onto their bed. One of Mako's socks was there; he slid it over the side. And waited. Mako crashed around the room, stumbling over something unseen, breath sharpening as he lost his patience. Wu waited, the feel of the silk coverlet underneath him soft against his bare skin. He still had his eyes closed when a flare of red showed behind his eyelids. He opened his eyes to see Mako looming over him, a tiny blossom of flame in his hand. "Bending to see? That's cheating. I win." He smiled slowly up at him.

Mako stared down at him for a moment, and then his own smile started. "You win," he agreed softly.

"What do I win?"

Mako turned his head to blow at his upturned hand, the flame winking out. "Me," he said, and this time Wu let himself be caught.

On A Date

Wu had barely managed to take up a fritter in his chopsticks when the book was thrust into his face.

"Oh, wow! It is *totally* you! My friend said she wasn't sure, but I'd know that adorable face anywhere!" The girl simpered down at Wu, eyelashes fluttering flirtatiously. "Can you sign it for Nami? That's me." She leaned closer, her long strand of pearls swinging perilously close to Wu's head. "It's just so good to have you back in Republic City, Prince Wu. We've been missing you for way too long."

"Well, that's very kind of you," Wu said, putting down his fritter and reaching into his breast pocket for a pen. "Nami, you say?"

"Yes. *Nami*." The pearls were practically enveloping the top of Wu's head by now.

Wu took up the pen and scribbled quickly into the woman's autograph book, closing it and handing it over. "There you are, Miss Nami. Enjoy your dinner."

She drew back a little and tipped her head coyly. "Maybe I could give you an autograph, too. One with my phone number, maybe?" There went the eyelashes again.

"No," said Mako. The girl gave him an irritated look before turning back to Wu, big smile on her face.

"I don't think your bodyguard likes me this close." She leaned even closer to Wu, who leaned his head out of the way.

"He's my boyfriend," said Wu, mildly. "And I suppose he doesn't." He put the pen back into his pocket.

"You got your autograph," said Mako. "Why don't you go back to your own dinner and let us eat ours?"

The girl looked Mako up and down and sniffed before stalking with offended hauteur back to her own table, her well-heeled friends giggling behind their fans.

"That's the second one tonight," said Mako as Wu took up his chopsticks. "Your dinner is going to get cold. Can't these people see you are trying to eat, here? I thought Kwong's was a classier place than this."

Wu shrugged. "It goes with the territory, you know." He put a fritter into his mouth and closed his eyes happily as he chewed and swallowed. "Oh, I had forgotten how good these were. Nobody makes octopus fritters like Kwong's. *Nobody*."

"You'd better eat all of them. You're too thin. Not to mention you've still got circles under your eyes. Maybe we should have just stayed home. I'm no Kwong's but I could have thrown

us together something for dinner."

Wu smiled at him. "I wanted to come here with you. And don't fuss at me. I'm fine."

Mako disagreed. Wu still looked fragile with exhaustion. The past two years putting the abdication into place had been hard on him - too hard - and he hadn't regained his usual sparkle yet. He wasn't sleeping well either; Mako was waking up in the night to find Wu gone from their bed, wandering the house or sitting next to the koi pond in the back yard. He was worried about him. "What about a week or two out of town? Just go somewhere down the coast or something where you can rest."

Wu shook his head. "You can't take the time off from work and if I can't go with you I don't want to go at all. I missed you so much, you can't even fathom."

That got a sigh out of Mako. "I fathom it, believe me. Wu, if you-"

"Oh, Your Highness! Welcome back to Republic City! We have certainly been bereft of your company for some time now!" A handsome middle-aged gentleman bowed at Wu.

"Ah, it's Kenji, yes?"

"That's right, Your Highness. I own the Republic City Electrical Works, as you might recall? You remember my wife, Misaki?" The meticulously groomed and coiffed woman standing next to him inclined her head at Wu.

"Of course. Lovely to see you again." Wu's smile was blandly pleasant.

"I was wondering if perhaps Your Highness might sacrifice some of his important time to meet with a few of us?" the woman said, staring down at him.

"Us, being...?" Wu let the question hang in the air.

The woman tinkled what she probably thought was fascinating laughter. "Why, the Spring Festival committee, of course," she said. "It's only the most important festival in the city."

"Ah," said Wu. "Well, you are in luck, as it happens. The head of the committee has already invited me to attend. I'll be at the meeting next week."

The woman frowned, ever so slightly, before smoothing her face out. "I see. Jun-Yi already contacted you?"

"She did, yes. I have to say, I always enjoyed the Spring Festival when I was living here previously. I very much look forward to being a part of the planning process this year."

"I see you still have the same bodyguard," Misaki said, casting a glance Mako's way. "Is Your Highness really in so much danger here in Republic City, do you think?"

Wu's bland smile was unchanged. "Mako is no longer my bodyguard. I'm surprised you hadn't heard. I would have thought news like that would have been everywhere by this time."

Suddenly his smile widened. "In fact, unless I am very much mistaken, Mako used to work for you at the electrical works, Kenji. Before my time here in Republic City, of course."

Kenji looked at Mako for the first time. "Er. Yes. Of course."

"Well, I shouldn't want to keep the two of you from your own dinner," said Wu. "I've heard that a reservation at Kwong's can be quite difficult to get." His tone implied that it had not been difficult for *him*. With the barest of nods he turned his focus back to his own dinner, effectively dismissing them. Kenji and his wife bowed politely and made their way to their own table.

Mako stared at him. "I'm not one hundred percent sure what just happened there, but...was that you being rude?"

Wu affected an air of benign disinterest. "That, my dear Mako, was a first-class snub. A *royal* snub." He scoffed and picked up his chopsticks with one hand. "Crass. I don't expect anything different from someone young and silly like that Nami girl or the autograph seekers outside, but Kenji and his wife should know better than to interrupt me at dinner in order to impress upon me what they consider their all-encompassing social importance." He rolled his eyes. "May as well just wear a big sign around your neck proclaiming you to be *new money*." Going by his tone, Mako guessed that *new money* was quite an unforgivable thing to have.

"You're a big snob, you know that?" Mako shook his head.

"A big *royal* snob, thank you very much. Of course I am. And you love it."

Mako smiled. "I kind of do."

Wu's returned the smile in force. "I know you do." He put another fritter into his mouth.

"I knew it was you! Prince Wu!" A fashionably-dressed woman appeared out of nowhere at Wu's elbow, gasping and pressing her hands to her bosom. "Wait until I tell my-"

"Fuck off," said Mako, staring at her.

"I...I...w-what?" The woman's mouth was hanging open. She took a step backwards.

"Fuck off," he repeated, his vowels slurring and broadening into an accent that would have been right at home down at the docks. "We're havin' dinner. So fuck off before I fuck you up."

"Well, I *never*!" the woman gasped, and she retreated, hugely offended.

Wu stared at Mako, one eyebrow raised incredulously. Mako shrugged, all traces of the accent gone. "That's how street trash snub people." He motioned towards Wu's plate with his chopsticks. "Eat your fritters. They're getting cold."

"You never used to tell people to engage in vulgarities when they came to speak to me," said Wu, spearing another fritter. He was smiling.

"Consider it a perk of having sex with me instead of paying me," Mako replied, and he winked.

Kissing

"Oh, come now, there had to be at least one time. Just one little teeny-weeny tiny time. You can tell me." Wu smiled up at Mako, head ensconced in his lap. It was one of those late summer evenings where the air had cooled down just enough to be comfortable. They were taking advantage of it to share a bottle of wine in the pavilion in the backyard.

"I told you, I tried not to think about it back then!" Mako took a swallow of his wine. "Not to mention I'm the worst storyteller ever. You know I'm no good at it."

Wu made a pouty face at him.

"No, don't make that face! You know I can't take that face!"

Wu laughed and sat up, reaching for his own glass. "Come on, just one. Your storytelling is good enough for me."

Mako sighed. "Okay, okay. Fine. Let me think a minute." He looked down into his wineglass, lips pursing a bit. Wu kept quiet, letting him think, topping off his own glass of wine from the bottle. "Oh, I've got one. So this one time we went to Republic City Park and you started talking to one of the people that used to hang out there - well, live there, really, Bo and I used to crash there sometimes as well, back in the day - and the next thing I knew you had your shoes and socks off and you were wading into the lake there, you were trying to see if the guy was telling the truth when he told you that there were koi deeper in. So. Yeah. That was one time I wanted to kiss you."

Wu stared at him.

"What? Don't you remember that day? I can't remember the exact date but it's in my logbook if you want me to look it up."

"Of course I remember that day! Don't be daft, Mako! I slipped in the mud and went under and you jumped in and and fished me out. That was the end of that particular suit, too, let me tell you. It never recovered."

"Yeah, that was the day."

"And you wanted to kiss me...because....?" Wu looked at him expectantly.

Mako shrugged. "I don't know."

"Mako!"

"I told you I didn't want to do this! I knew I'd do it wrong!"

Wu laughed. "It's not wrong. I'm the one who made you do it, after all. I suppose I was just hoping for something a little more romantic. Passionate." He toasted Mako with his wine glass. "It's my fault, you know. I read far too many romances. They've given me grandiose

expectations. Thank you for telling me about that day in the park, though. It makes me happy to hear it."

"I'm sorry. I wish I was better at this kind of thing."

"Oh, Mako. You are so good at so many things. I think you can be forgiven for not being perfect, hmm?" Wu laughed again and swallowed some wine. "We both know I'm certainly not perfect!"

"Your turn." Mako finished off his wine and put the glass to the side.

"What, you mean to tell you a time I wanted to kiss you?" Wu cocked his head and gave Mako a look. "Try every hour of every day."

"Pick a single time, then."

Wu absently rolled the lip of his wineglass along his chin. "Hmmm. Well, I do remember one time in particular. It was the day I was kidnapped."

Mako grimaced. "I hate talking about that day, you know that."

"I know you do, but just bear with me for a moment. It was after Korra had gotten us off the train. We walked for awhile before we came across the farmer with the cart who gave us a ride back to Asami's place, remember?"

"Yeah."

"I wasn't feeling well - I don't know what it was that the Earth Empire soldier sprayed me with but as it was wearing off I felt so dreadfully sick."

Mako nodded. "You puked your way back to Republic City."

"I did indeed. Korra wasn't being very nice to me at the time - well, I suppose riding in an cart full of vegetables with someone who is vomiting isn't the best way to get to know someone and I had already made a very bad first impression on her at the restaurant, anyhow. Asami was just trying to avoid me - not that I blame her, mind. But you, you held me securely over the side of the cart while I vomited away and you jumped off at that little stream we passed and took off your undershirt and soaked it in the stream and brought it back to lay on the back of my neck. I was so miserable and so scared. Oh, I was trying to put on a big front but I was so terrified, you know."

"You were shaking and shaking. I remember."

"At one point I was laying with my face down in some cabbages and you moved me so that my head was against your chest and put your arms around me to steady me and told me you wouldn't let anything happen to me, that I was safe and to try and sleep for a little while. I did fall asleep, too, but before I did I realized it was the first time you'd ever held me. Of your own accord, I mean. The first time anyone had ever held me, really, and in my dreams I had imagined scenarios where you would finally hold me that were full of romance and intrigue and passion but of course it was full of the smell of vomit and overripe cabbages and one of

your buttons was digging very painfully into my cheek. I was scared and bruised and sick and it was still the most glorious moment of my life up until that point. You were holding me! Like you cared!" Wu dropped his gaze from Mako's and laughed a little self-consciously. "Well. I was a very silly boy, of course. I so wanted to kiss you but I was afraid I'd vomit right on you. I don't think I could have ever recovered from *that*, I must say."

Mako's fingers stretched out to cradle the side of Wu's face. "Shit. I was so scared. I thought I had lost you that day."

"You and me both, believe me."

Mako pulled him closer. "What would I have done if Kuvira had gotten her hands on you?"

"Lost your job, most likely." Wu smiled and pressed a kiss onto his cheek.

"I wouldn't have stopped until I had found you. I would have torn the world apart."

"Oh, Mako," Wu said, and his eyes filled up. Mako took his wineglass out of his hand and put it aside.

"Believe me. I would have. Nothing would have stopped me." He ran his thumb along Wu's bottom lip. "Do you know why I really wanted to kiss you that day in the park?"

Wu shook his head, Mako's thumb dragging along his lip.

"You saw one of the koi and you turned around, you were so excited, you were jumping up and down and yelling at me to come and see it. Remember? That was right before you slipped and fell in. At first I was like, oh that little fucker, he better not fall into that lake. But as soon as I had thought that it just suddenly hit me, all at once, that whenever you got excited or happy about something, you always tried to share it with me. Even when I was shooting you down. And I just...I realized that it was the one thing in my life right then that made me feel good. Made me feel right. You, sharing all your happy moments with me, even when I was being a prick. So. Yeah. There you were, shouting at me to come and look at the stupid damn fish, big goofy grin on your face and that was when I wanted to kiss you. It was the first time I had felt like that. That I wanted to kiss you, I mean. It kind of shocked me in the moment." Mako laughed very softly. "Then you fell in and I had to go and get you and I was pretty pissed about that."

Wu turned his face so he could trail several small kisses along Mako's jaw. "True. You were exceedingly irritated with me, as I recall."

"That happened a lot," Mako said, as he leaned his forehead against Wu's. "You were a real pain in the ass."

"I don't seem recall you quitting, however," Wu replied, closing his eyes. His only answer was Mako's mouth on his.

Wearing Each Others' Clothes

"I'm swimming in this thing. I fail to see how it would help me if I fell off."

"You aren't going to fall off," Mako replied, as he fiddled with something mysterious on the dash. "I won't let you."

"Then why do I have to wear it? I look like a child." Wu waved his hands at Mako, the excess leather of the sleeves flopping about.

"Because it makes me feel better if you wear it and if I feel better then everyone's happier."

Wu thought about this for a moment. "Well. I don't suppose I can argue with that. Can I at least roll up the sleeves? Because this is ridiculous."

"Yes, you can roll up the sleeves."

"Do it for me?" The sleeves were thrust out hopefully.

"Sometimes you're a real baby, you know that?" Mako carefully rolled up the leather sleeves of his jacket until they reached Wu's wrists.

"You love it. You know you do."

"I admit nothing. Now. Put on the helmet."

"It's going to ruin my hair!"

The only answer he got was a glare.

"Fine! Touchy!" Wu settled the helmet onto his head, making distressed noises as it squashed down his hair. "I'd like to see you try and rescue hair like mine from a helmet. I'll look like a flattened koala sheep! You wait and see!"

"Your hair always looks fine to me." Mako pulled back from his tinkering, satisfied that all was well.

"You're only saying that because you're hoping to get some tonight."

"Yep," Mako agreed, and then he reached under Wu's chin to adjust the helmet. "There. Turn around." After Wu had obediently turned around, he adjusted the buckles on the jacket.

"Well, it's still too big but it will do for now."

"I look ridiculous, I just know it," Wu muttered, and Mako turned him around again to kiss him on the nose.

"It looks better on you than it does on me."

Wu scoffed. "It does no such thing." He looked down at himself, drowning in Mako's jacket, and back up at Mako, eyebrows raised. "*Really*, Mako."

Mako grinned. "Well, if you like riding on the bike you can buy your own for next time, how's that? Okay, goggles down." He slipped his own goggles down over his helmet and motioned Wu to do the same. "And I am going to tell you now that you'd better keep your mouth shut. If you talk and swallow a bug then don't come crying to me."

"Well! I can keep my mouth shut! Honestly, Mako!"

Mako raised an eyebrow under the goggles. "Right." He swung his leg over the bike and settled himself down. "Okay, get up behind me." He turned and gave Wu an arm to steady himself with as Wu clambered up and sat behind him. "Put your feet here." Mako demonstrated with one foot. "Keep them there, too. I don't need you kicking me when I am trying to drive."

"Okay, okay, Mister Bossy! Sheesh!"

"Put your arms around me. Right, like that. Now, I'm going to start out slow, so what you need to do is hold on to me and lean where I lean, okay? Like this." Mako leaned to one side and Wu moved with him. "Good, do exactly like that."

"You won't let me fall?" Wu's arms tightened around his waist.

"Never let you fall yet, have I?" He reached down with his right hand to squeeze Wu's hands where they clutched at his abdomen. "I won't let you fall. I promise. Now don't get nervous, this bike makes a lot of noise, Asami gave it a bigger engine. Just...don't scream in my ear, okay?"

"Mako! I am not going to scream in your ear!"

The bike started up. Wu shrieked.

"What did I just say!"

"Sorry! Sorry! It surprised me, that's all. Is it supposed to be all rumbly like this?"

Mako looked back over his shoulder. "It's a motorcycle, not a baby carriage."

"Oh, you are just hilarious, aren't you?"

"Okay, now hold on tight. No! Not that tight! I have to breathe, you know!"

"Make up your mind!"

"Just...hold on, okay? Are your feet in the right place? I'm going to go slow, so don't panic."

"I am not panicking! I wish you'd give me a little more credit because - aaaaaaaaiiiiiieeeee!" Wu shrieked again and held on for dear life as Mako put the bike into gear and pulled away very slowly. "We're going really fast!"

"Wu, if I went any slower we'd tip over!"

"Oh. Then why aren't you going any faster than this?"

Mako grinned and took the speed up just a notch, moving smoothly down the road. He was still going fairly slow; it was Wu's first time on the bike. He didn't want to scare him or anything. He could feel Wu's head pressing along his neck and he leaned just slightly back into him. "Everything okay back there?" he shouted over the noise of the engine. Wu squeezed him in reply, and he accelerated just a bit. They spun around the outskirts of the park across the street from their home before Mako brought the bike to a stop, bracing his feet onto the pavement. "Well? You want to go for a drive through the city now?" He craned around to look at Wu, whose eyes were shining through the goggles. Wu did look a little like a child, lost in his jacket, but Mako knew better than to say anything. If there was one thing he'd learned over the years, sometimes it was best to keep his comments to himself. Even if the comment was with regards to someone's perceived adorableness.

"Can you make it go faster?" Wu bounced a little on the seat, and Mako's grin got even wider.

"I can make it go a *lot* faster. Can you handle it?"

"Please. I handled the dismantling of a thousand year old kingdom. I think I can handle a little motorcycle ride."

"Hang on tight then, Your Exaltedness."

Mako shifted gears and took off with a roar, Wu pressed up closely behind him. "Faster," Wu shouted into his ear, and Mako laughed before giving it some more gas.

Cosplaying

"I've had many regrets in my life, but cutting off my queue is not one of them," Wu said, looking at himself in the mirror. "It would have been fine if my hair had been properly straight like a Hou-Ting's, but since it curled it was just unruly and frizzy and always coming out of the braid in little wisps. Horrible. At least shaving the front part of it had gone out of fashion by the time I was born."

"I like your hair," Mako called from the other room. "How long did it take to braid it anyhow?"

Wu thought for a moment while tugging at his robes. "Well, before I cut it off it was nearly to my knees. They'd do it everyday. It took about a half-hour or so by the time they'd comb the whole thing out and then re-braid it. Never mind how long it took to wash it and let it dry. They being my staff of personal attendants, of course. I had four of them."

"Four? Seriously?" Mako came into the bathroom, shuffling his way through the door.

"That was nothing. My great-aunt had twelve personal attendants. One of them did nothing more than see to her fingernails." He shuddered. "Long pointy things. Terrible." Suddenly he pointed his finger at himself in the mirror and sneered, his voice dropping down into a slow drawl. "Boy! Boy! I see you skulking about there! Someone remove him from my sight! I loathe children, have I not made myself clear?" He shook his head, voice going back to normal. "I don't miss her, let me assure you."

Mako wrinkled up his nose. "Do me a favor, scratch my nose, would you?" Wu obligingly reached over and scratched. "Don't take this the wrong way, but your great-aunt was really a piece of work."

"Oh, I'm not taking it the wrong way. She was." Wu reached over and took the hat with the Earth Kingdom symbol on it up and fastened it to the wig with the long black queue, carefully securing it with a hat pin. He took up a pair of pince nez glasses and perched them on the end of his nose, adjusting them a bit until they sat straight. "Well. What do you think?" He turned and made a little bow. His robe was pear yellow and spring green, belted with the Earth Kingdom symbol and covered with a green capelet. His heavily embroidered slippers curled up at the toes.

"You forgot your pearls," Mako said.

"Pearls! Those are jade, I will have you know!" Wu reached over to the counter and drew the long jade necklace over his head. "I suppose the original ended up in a pawn shop in the Lower Ring somewhere. Which is a pity, really. I would have gladly paid to have them back. There now. Better?"

Mako looked him up and down. "Your coloring is all wrong but you kind of do resemble him otherwise."

Wu gave himself one last look in the mirror. "I suppose I do, at that. Everyone is always telling me how much I look like my mother, but I like to think I take after him at least a little bit. My grandfather looked quite a great deal like him, actually." A last tug, a patting down of the necklace, a quick adjustment to the hat and he was done. "Well, let's get you finished."

Mako shuffled back out of the bathroom door, making his way over to the bed, where the rest of his costume was laying. "You'll probably need to stand on the bed or something. Can you manage it in those clothes?"

"Please, all I wore were robes until I was sixteen. It's not a problem." To prove it, Wu quickly twitched at the skirt of his robe and nimbly stepped up onto the top of the bed. "At least I don't need to wear a corset."

"A what, now?"

Wu shrugged. "Oh, a corset." He put his hands up to his rib cage, spanning around it. "Lots of men wore them if they didn't have a smooth silhouette. Well, women, too, of course. Some of them had them laced so tight they'd creak when they walked." He grinned, suddenly. "When I was a child I was convinced some of the people at court were metal underneath all of that fabric, not unlike Kuvira's mecha, I suppose." He picked up the bear head and looked down at Mako. "You sure about this?"

Mako grinned. "If I'm dressed up like a bear no one will expect me to make small talk. The only disadvantage I can see to this is that I won't get to eat and I'm not sure what I'll do if I need to pee."

"Well, if you need to pee come and find me, I'll help you."

"Huh. I wonder if King Kuei helped Bosco pee."

Wu laughed. "He used to sleep in the same bed with that bear, Mako. I read his diaries, remember? Even after he was married. I can't imagine how my great-grandmother must have felt about it. Even though, according to what he wrote, Bosco got a bath every day. He had his own personal attendants, too."

"The bear had his own attendants." Mako's eyebrow shot up.

"Look, I've told you, there was something not quite right going on with that bear. I think that's why my great-aunt hated animals so much. We're a weird family, I don't know what to say. Okay, let me put this thing on. Tell me if I'm doing it wrong." Wu hoisted up the bear head and gently eased it over Mako's head. "Oh! Your ear! I'm sorry!"

"It's fine, don't worry about it." Mako raised his paws and attempted to move the head. "I think it's a little crooked."

"It is, hang on, let me adjust it. Is that better? Can you see out of it?"

"I can't see very well but I don't think I'm going run anyone over or anything. Kind of stuffy in here, though." Mako's voice echoed a bit inside the head.

"Well, at least it isn't summer." Wu hopped off the bed and went back a few steps, looking Mako over critically. "It seems straight enough from here. The hat should stick, too, I pinned it really tightly."

"I just hope nothing starts itching," Mako said. He took an experimental few steps.

"Now that you've said it, it will." Wu smiled. "You know, you look good as a bear."

"Thanks. I think."

"Well, we should get going, I suppose. We don't want to be late, do we?"

"We're already late!"

"Mako, my dearest man, breath of my breath, love of my life, there's *fashionably* late and then there's *inexcusably* late."

"I thought royalty got a free pass on that sort of thing?"

"Good point. I suppose it becomes inexcusably late after *I've* arrived at the party." That got a muffled laugh out of Mako. Wu walked next to him. "Here, take my arm. I'll guide you down the stairs."

"Thanks." Mako let out with a little yelp. "Hey! Did you just grab my ass through this thing?"

"Just trying to get into character, you know." Wu laughed. "Come along, Bosco. The party awaits us!"

Shopping

"Mako?" At the sound of Wu's voice Mako jumped and spun around.

"Uh! Hey!" Mako pasted on what he sincerely hoped was a winning smile. "Wu! So! You're here! Shopping!"

Wu stared at him, his hands full of bags. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Uh. Um. Well! I am at work. Investigation thingie. Can't talk about it."

"Oh. Of course. Sorry! Did I just blow your cover or something?" Wu quickly looked about the shop in some alarm.

"Er...yes! I'm uh...um...in a um...covert operation. Yeah! Covert operation! So, you know, act casual." Mako stood up straighter, tried to look official.

"But...you're in uniform." Wu looked bewildered. "How can it be covert if you are in uniform?"

"Um..." Mako desperately searched his brain. "Well, you know...it's um...*police business*."

"Okay...?" Wu didn't look very convinced.

"Thank you for waiting, sir," said the shop assistant, choosing that exact moment to make his reappearance. Mako whipped out his badge.

"Thank you for your cooperation," he said, brandishing it in front of him. "If you'll give me a moment I'll be right back. To uh...take your statement."

The man behind the counter was nonplussed. "Sir?"

"Your *statement*," said Mako, meeting the shop assistant's eyes and looking towards Wu with what he seriously hoped was a meaningful look.

"Sir?" said the shop assistant, looking at Wu. His eyes widened just slightly as he understood. "Of course! Naturally! I'll be right here, sir. Ready to give my statement."

"I'll be right back," said Mako, and he put his hand to the small of Wu's back and propelled him out of the store.

"Ooooh, was there a crime? Was it a big crime?" Wu stopped dead in the middle of the corridor, eyes wide. "Was it a *Triad*?"

"Wu! What part of covert operation don't you understand?" Mako scowled. Having to make up stories on the spot was not one of his strengths.

Wu looked around the mall. "There aren't any goons around, are there?" He dropped the bag in his right hand and put his hand to his mouth. "Was that man in there your stool pigeon?"

"My what? What the hell are you talking about?" Mako stared at him.

"Your stool pigeon? Snitch?" Wu rolled his eyes. "Mako, won't you even *try* to watch those crime movers your brother makes?"

"Wu, I've told you again and again that I just can't sit there and and watch my brother pretend to be a detective in a mover. Bolin would be the worst detective in the fucking world."

"Well, honestly, Mako. As if he made a better waterbender. Besides, he makes a very dashing detective. For one thing, I am fairly certain that Yoshitoki, private eye for hire, would not shout at his boyfriend in the middle of the Little Ba Sing Se Mall."

"Yoshitoki, private eye for hire, wouldn't know his ass from a hole in the wall."

Wu sniffed. "Says you."

"Yes, says me! Now come on, Wu! I'm working, I don't have time to stand around chit-chatting with you." Mako bent over and picked up the bag Wu had dropped. "Here, take your bag and...are there fruit tarts in that bag?" He sniffed at the bag suspiciously.

"There were. They might be a little squashed by now." Wu took the bag out of Mako's hand and peered inside. "Well, the box looks okay. Let's hope the tarts survived it."

"You bought me fruit tarts?"

"Yes, I bought you fruit tarts! They are for dessert tonight."

Mako smiled. A real smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Well. I had better let you get back to your statement taking."

"Yeah. It might take awhile. You know how it is." Mako crossed his arms over his chest, tried to look nonchalant.

"Not really, but I'll take your word on it." Wu looked up at him with a little smile. "Am I allowed to kiss you goodbye or will that ruin your cover?"

Mako pursed his lips. "It might actually help with my cover. You know. Throw people off the scent."

"Riiiiiiiiight," said Wu, fighting back a smile. "Well then, better make it a good one." Mako took him into his arms, bags and all, and kissed him soundly. "Goodness! Well, that *was* a good one!" Wu was laughing, pressing the hand still holding the bag with the fruit tarts to his chest.

"Okay, now scoot. I have to go and take a statement." Mako pointed towards the exit.

"Yes, yes, I'm going! See you tonight, random unknown citizen of Republic City!" Wu wagged his fingers and walked towards the exit. Mako stood, arms crossed, and watched him until he saw Wu disappear around the far corner of the mall. He walked back into the shop and waited patiently as the shop assistant finished helping someone else. As soon as he was done he smiled politely at Mako.

"So, let me guess. Was that the lucky gentleman himself?"

Mako nodded his head and threw his hands up. "What are the odds?"

"You might be surprised, sir. It's not the first time it's happened in here, believe it or not. Well, now, let me get the box." He bent down and retrieved a small box, covered in embroidered silk. He opened it, and Mako took in a breath when he saw the jade ring inside. "The jeweler did a beautiful job on it, I must say. If you would like to see for yourself?" He extended the box and Mako took the ring out, examining it from all sides. There was the badgermole he had wanted, intricately carved into the surface of the ring, surrounded by stylized bolts of lightning. Mako swallowed, hard.

"It's perfect." He handed it back with some reluctance. "He'll love it."

"It did turn out well, yes. Shall I wrap it for you?" At Mako's nod the shop assistant quickly placed the ring box into a slightly larger box, wrapping it in heavy parchment, tied off with a gold ribbon. "There now." He handed the box to Mako. "And may I be the first to wish you happy felicitations on your upcoming nuptials, sir."

"Thanks," said Mako, and he tucked the box into the pocket right over his heart.

Hanging Out With Friends

"What is he doing?" Wu asked. He was staring at Bolin in fascination. Bolin was flailing enthusiastically around the dance floor, arms whipping about. "He's going to take Opal's head off if he's not careful."

Opal apparently agreed because she stopped dancing and gave him a look that clearly had been inherited from her maternal side. Bolin looked abashed and put his arms down, switching into a mix of a wriggle and a shuffle. Opal didn't look any happier with that, either.

Korra thudded down into the chair next to Mako, grinning. "Here you are. I couldn't see you at first."

"Where's Asami?" Mako asked.

"Toilet. She wanted to check her...things. Hair and stuff." Korra's look indicated her confusion with this. "Don't ask me why. She looked beautiful to me."

Mako scanned the club, standing up and waving a bit before he got Asami's attention, standing near the front entrance. She waved back and made her way through the crowd to where their table was. Once she'd reached the table Wu stood up and pulled her chair back for her.

"Thanks," Asami said, taking the seat.

"Hey! How come nobody ever pulls out my chair for me?" Korra asked indignantly.

"Asami's a lady," was Wu's reply as he sat back down.

"I'm a lady!" said Korra. She waited a moment. No one answered her. "Hmph," she muttered. "Well anyhow, what are we drinking?"

"I'm having a Si Wong Sling," said Wu. "Mako has whiskey, as usual." Mako toasted her with his glass.

Korra waved down a server. "Yeah, I'll take a vodka neat. Asami?"

"Sake is fine for me," Asami said, and the server determined what kind she wanted before walking off. "Is everything okay with Bolin?" She was staring out at the dance floor.

"I think he's trying a less enthusiastic means of tearing up the dance floor," said Wu. "Oh! He just stepped on that man's foot." Said man was hopping on one foot, mouth grimacing in pain. Opal grabbed Bolin's arm and dragged him along behind her, making her way to the table.

"...you can't just step on people!" Opal said as they approached. "Hi Korra, Asami. Oh, Asami, I love your hair!"

Asami put her hand to her hair, pinned up in a low knot at her neck, a red flower tucked into the marcelled waves in the front. "Thanks!"

Wu stood up again and pulled Opal's chair back for her.

"Oh come *on*!" said Korra, gesticulating wildly at Opal's chair. Everyone ignored her. Opal sat down, Bolin pulling the only empty chair out from next to Mako and trying to squeeze in between Opal and Korra. He didn't fit. There was some adjustment as chairs screeched across the wooden floor and everyone moved so that Bolin could be next to Opal.

"So! Here we all are!" Bolin beamed happily. "Out for an evening out! Like we're grownups or something!"

"We *are* grownups, Bo," Mako answered, giving him a look.

"Right! Well. Sure. Drinking like grownups, too!"

"Well, you aren't drinking anything!" Opal leaned over towards Asami. "The last time we went out he had a single drink and fell asleep at our table. Lightweight. You'd never think it to look at him but it's true."

Bolin shrugged. "Can't help it," he said, rather sadly.

"I'm kind of surprised you agreed to come here, Mako," Korra said. "You usually don't like crowded places."

"Wu and I used to come here all the time," he replied. "The house band is really good."

Korra gave him a skeptical look. "Since when did you have an opinion about bands?"

"Since I did," replied Mako. He frowned. "I like music."

"That's true," Bolin said. "Mako used to listen to music on our radio all the time when we lived above the gym. Oh, who was that one singer you liked so much?"

"Little June," Wu said, and he smiled at Mako. Mako smiled back.

"Yeah! That was her. She had that one really good song...oh, what was it? About the flowers?"

"*Blossom Love*," murmured Wu, and Mako reached out across the table and curled his fingers around Wu's.

"Mako's a good dancer, too," said Bolin loyally. "He tried to teach me, but...yeah. I'm not all that good." He looked crestfallen. Opal immediately put her arms around him.

"Well, never mind," she said. "You're still my own little lavamaster." She nuzzled her nose up against his considerable bicep.

"And you're my little easy-breezy," Bolin said, and they both giggled and rubbed noses together. Everyone else at the table ignored them.

"Since when do you dance?" demanded Korra. "You never took me out dancing!"

Mako looked annoyed, lips thinning. "I don't know. I guess it just never came up."

"Mako and I went dancing a few times," said Asami. She smiled at him. "We always had fun." Mako returned her smile.

"Nice!" said Korra, lower lip stuck out in a pout. "So what am I, three day old mochi?"

Mako was saved from answering by the server arriving with the drinks. She distributed them; Opal ordered fresh aloe waters for both her and Bolin and Wu took another Si Wong Sling. Asami deftly changed the subject to talk about pro-bending and that engaged all of them. (All of them but Wu, who excused himself to the gentlemen's room.) By the time Wu returned the discussion had moved on to Korra's latest trip to the Spirit World, where she was trying to negotiate with a group of spirits who had apparently taken over a small village in the Northern Water Tribe and refused to let any of the human inhabitants back in.

"I think they'd come around, too, if it weren't for this one asshole," Korra said. She made a face and took her voice up an octave. "Humans are extraneous! We spirits have the right to settle where we please!" Her voice went back to normal. "As if they didn't have an entire Spirit World to themselves! Ugh! Can't someone else deal with this for awhile?"

"Well, you are the Avatar, after all," pointed out Mako.

"Huh. Really? Think, no one told me!" Korra glared at him irritably. Mako threw his hands up into the air.

"Okay, then," said Asami, shooting the both of them a repressive look. "Time to change the subject again!"

"Actually, that just reminded me," said Wu, jumping in before Mako said something that he'd later regret. "Asami, I wanted to speak to you about your PR firm. Not now, of course, but maybe we could have lunch or something next week? You like them, right?"

"I do," she replied. "What are you looking for, exactly?"

"Well, for one thing, I can't keep up with all of the invitations to various events. I've been away from Republic City too long, I'm not sure off of the top of my head anymore whose invites I need to accept and whose I can safely turn down."

Asami nodded with understanding. "Oh, I need to get you in touch with them, then. I have a meeting with them next week. Why don't you join us? I can introduce you." She leaned forward to speak to Wu about it.

"Maybe I could take some dance lessons. At a school or something," said Bolin, staring out at the dance floor. "With a teacher who won't yell at me when I use the wrong foot." He looked at Mako out of the corner of his eye.

"Hey, I never claimed to be a good teacher," said Mako. "You should do it, though. Take Opal with you."

"Oh sweetie, that might be kind of fun," Opal said, her eyes shining. "I think I would like that!"

"You might want to wear a pair of metal boots," said Mako.

"That hurt," said Bolin. "Deeply. In the very depths of my heart. To my core. I might never recover." He threw out a dramatic hand for emphasis.

"Look, I like Opal. I'm only thinking of her well-being." Mako turned to Opal. "Talk about hurt. He stomped so hard on my foot when I was trying to teach him to waltz that I limped for a week."

"I can't keep track of the steps," said Bolin. "All of that one-two-three-four-three-whatever whatever stuff! It gets me all confused. I'm more of a freestyle kind of guy."

"Yeah, like you freestyled into that poor guy out there," said Korra.

"He said I broke his toe," said Bolin anxiously. "But I think he was just kidding. He was kidding, right?" He looked around the table for confirmation.

"You weigh as much as komodo rhino," said Korra. "I bet you just *demolished* his foot."

"Metal boots," said Mako to Opal. "Trust me."

"Ladies and gentleman," said the emcee over the microphone in front of the band, the club quieting down a bit in order to hear. "Time to liven up the evening a bit! Here's a hot little number, straight to Republic City from the Fire Nation! Let's all get out on the floor and put a little spice into it!"

Mako turned to Wu, one eyebrow raised. Wu stood up and held his arm out. "Shall we show them how it's done?" Mako stood up and let Wu lead him to the dance floor. They took a position, and as the music started, Mako swung Wu around in a circle, pulling him close to his chest before moving his hips in time with the music. "Have you had enough to drink to make this good and sexy?" Wu asked, and Mako smiled slowly down at him.

"You know, I think maybe I have," he said, and promptly hooked his leg into Wu's leg, lowering him nearly to the floor in a very showy dip.

In Competition

"Okay," said Meelo, puffing up a little with importance. "Rules are simple. First rule: you have to carry your partner at all times. Doesn't matter how you carry them, so long as they don't touch the ground. Second rule: no bending whatsoever allowed. Any bending at all means instant disqualification. We've got non-benders here. Fair's fair."

"Thank you very kindly," said Wu. He and Asami gave each other a little nod of commiseration.

"Race starts here and ends at the finish line we've set up across the island. You all know the path. Mom and Dad're at the finish line, and Uncle Bumi and Ikki and Rohan and I will be watching to make sure no one cheats."

"Ye of little faith," intoned Korra.

"Whatever," said Meelo. "Take your positions, people."

Jinora hopped up piggyback style on Kai's back, and Kai tickled at her knee, causing her to giggle and squirm a bit. "Quit that!" she said, and he grinned.

Opal scaled up Bolin to sit atop his shoulders. "You comfy?" he asked her, and she bent over to kiss his head.

Korra squatted down and maneuvered Asami until Asami's legs were wrapped around her neck, her stomach pressed against Korra's back and her head level with Korra's backside. "I need to say one more time that I really think there's a better way to do this," said Asami, voice slightly muffled.

"I'm telling you, this is the easiest way to do it! You're taller than I am!" Korra patted Asami's legs and stood up, which got a little screech out of Asami. She wrapped her arms around Korra's waist.

"Oh Korra, I really think -"

"I've got it covered!" said Korra, and she took a few experimental steps before glancing over at Mako. "You're going to carry him like that the whole way?"

Mako had Wu in his arms, princess-style, Wu's arms wrapped around his neck. "Yep."

"Korra, can't we just do it like Bolin and Opal are doing it?" Asami's voice was plaintive.

"Do you want to win or don't you?"

Mako smiled at Wu. "You ready to hang on?"

"Always. But won't you need your arms to run?"

Mako shook his head. "We're good."

"Okay, everyone take your places," said Meelo, holding a whistle. Everyone moved up to the starting line. Little Rohan waved from his place down the path, perched on top of a tree. "On your mark...get set..." the whistle blasted loudly.

Mako started running at a good solid pace, Wu holding on. Bolin carried Opal with greater ease than anyone else; however, he wasn't a very fast runner. Everyone else quickly outpaced him. Kai was a fast runner, but was clearly having some trouble keeping up with Jinora on his back. Which left the race between Mako and Korra.

"Hooray!" Rohan clapped his hands together as they passed him by, swinging down onto one of the lower branches of his tree. "Run faster!"

Wu laughed into Mako's chest; Mako squeezed him just slightly in response. His gait was smooth and even. Wu was getting jostled, true; however nothing compared to poor Asami, who was clearly not very happy slung over Korra's back like a bag of rice.

They made their way down the path until they saw Bumi, sitting atop a rock. "Lookin' good there, Mako," he shouted as they passed, and in response Korra sped up. Mako just kept his even pace, despite the fact that Korra had pulled ahead. At that point Bolin had fallen far enough behind to no longer be visible; Kai was still gamely trying to keep up but was several meters behind and getting slower.

"Need to shift you a bit," gritted out Mako. "Hang on." He settled Wu a little more to the left. "Better. You okay?"

"Peachy-keen," said Wu, and that got him a little grin. Mako kept up his steady rhythm. Korra had slowed down a little after her burst of speed and he'd caught up to her again.

"That the best you can do?" she taunted breathlessly. "Asami's twice his weight!"

"HEY!" shouted Asami from behind Korra.

That got a grin out of Mako, but he kept running. Running past Ikki, who whooped loudly and flew down the path with them for a few meters, laughing, before swooping back to find her sister. Running past Meelo, who had bent himself across the island to cover the last leg of the race.

Wu could feel Mako's breath coming faster now; he was slowing just slightly. They turned a corner of the path and there was the finish line ahead in the distance, Pema waving enthusiastically while Tenzin shaded his eyes in order to see them better. Rohan, Bumi and Ikki had already made their way there; Wu assumed that Meelo was still keeping an eye on Kai and Bolin. There was a collection of resident airbenders and air acolytes there as well, cheering them all on.

"You need your arms," said Wu, and Mako grunted. "Okay, give me a second," Wu said, and he swung one leg out of Mako's arms, wrapping it around his torso. "Let go," he shouted. Mako risked a quick glance down at him and Wu nodded. "Trust me! Let go!" He tightened

his grip around Mako's neck - not enough to choke him! - and then, as Mako let him go, wrapped his other leg around Mako's waist. "Okay, I've got you! Go!" he shouted, and Mako's arms, now free, started to pump. He surged ahead of Korra and sprinted all the way to the finish line.

Wu banged up and down, painfully biting his tongue. He didn't care. Mako crossed the finish line first, slowing to a stop, kissing the top of Wu's head. "I need to walk it off," he gasped. "Let loose of me for a sec." Wu untangled his arms and legs and slid down Mako to the ground before getting a pair of arms around his waist.

"Wow! That was amazing!" Rohan was jumping up and down in excitement and Wu hugged him back with one arm, eyes on Mako, who was getting pounded on the back by Bumi. Korra and Asami were sprawled on the grass, Asami laughing and kissing Korra, who was shaking her fist at Mako with a grin.

"You've killed me," Korra shouted, and Mako dropped to his knees next to her, laughing as well. At that moment Kai and Jinora crossed the finish line, Kai groaning.

"Next time we pick partners I'm going for Wu," he gasped, and Jinora just laughed.

"I'm not that light," protested Wu, and Korra dove over, grabbed him by the legs and bench-pressed him above her head. "Korra!"

"Don't drop him," warned Mako, but he was smiling.

"Where are Bolin and Opal?" asked Jinora, standing up and peering into the distance. Ikki threw together an air scooter and zipped down the path, turning to wave. "Here they come," she called, and sure enough, Bolin came charging down the path, Opal sitting up on his shoulders like a queen, Meelo following along behind.

"Last but not least," laughed Opal, as they crossed the finish line and she floated off of Bolin's shoulders. "Excellent running, sweetie!"

"Th-huh-an-uh-ks," wheezed Bolin. He flopped to the ground, flat on his back.

"Well, it appears the grand prize winners are Mako and Prince Wu," said Tenzin. "Rohan, if you would?"

Rohan shot forward and put two necklaces made of colored rice, shells and acorns over both Mako and Wu's heads. "I made them," he said proudly.

Mako looked down at his, holding it out from his body so he could get a closer look at it. "Did you? This is great, Rohan! Nicest necklace I ever had."

Rohan squirmed with happiness. "Do you like yours?" He looked at Wu a little anxiously.

"Rohan, this is exquisite. In fact, I have just the perfect suit to wear with it. You don't mind if I wear it to a party I am going to next week, do you?"

Rohan shook his head, eyes wide.

"Come on, all of you," said Pema, smiling. "Dinner's back at the house. Good run, everyone!"

Mako pulled himself up, giving a hand to his brother. "Come on, Bo. We're getting fed."

"Food. I need to eat. All the food." Bolin staggered down the path, Bumi clapping him on the back.

"I wasn't too heavy, was I?" Wu appeared at Mako's elbow. Mako stared down at him for a moment, saying nothing; then he grabbed him and swung him back into the princess carry, walking down the path.

"Not even a little," Mako said, and Wu wrapped his arms around his neck again.

Hospital

Chapter Notes

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

The waterhealer looked down at the chart in her hands. "So you were treated for the broken bones in the emergency room already, I see. Well, none of those are life-threatening, although you'll be off work for a couple of weeks, at the very least. Says here you were a pro-bender? I'm guessing you probably got fairly banged up doing that, too." She looked him over. "What about the left hand and arm?"

"Electrical burn." Mako didn't elaborate. The waterhealer looked at his hand and arm critically.

"Well, it seems to have healed quite well. Your bending okay in that hand?"

"Yeah."

"Well, in any case, that's not what you're here for. I'm concerned about the concussion. I know you told the emergency room healer, but briefly tell me again what happened?"

"Was with Chiyo. My partner. Arresting a Terra Triad member." Mako closed his eyes a moment, the better to concentrate through the pain that was pounding through his skull. "Uh...I...I don't know. Don't really remember. Got hit with something, I guess?"

"Losing your memory around an injury like this is to be expected. Says here that your partner reported that you were hit on your left side with a chunk of pavement and that you were out cold for a good ten minutes. So what happened when you finally came to? Headache? Vomiting?"

"Both, yeah."

"Scale of one to ten, what's the pain in your head like now?"

"Uh, maybe four?"

"You're a cop, so I'm going to double that and take it as an eight. Okay, tough guy. There's no doubt at all you've got a concussion, and from what I can see, a pretty nasty one at that. There's no way at all I'm releasing you today, so don't even ask. You'll stay here at least tonight, and we'll see how I am feeling about your chances to go home tomorrow. Be a good boy and we'll see. What I'll do tonight is get you started on a regimen of water healing on the head. We've got a bone specialist who will come in tomorrow and give you another go on those broken bones, but I think they'll be fine. So long as you keep quiet. Before I start in on your head, though, there's someone to see you." The waterhealer walked to the door, opened it and nodded, waving someone in.

Wu walked in, uncharacteristically silent. He glanced at Mako's face and then away.

"You're the fiancé?"

Wu nodded.

"Okay. Well, they probably already told you he's pretty banged up. He's got a broken scapula - that's his shoulder bone - several broken ribs, and three of the fingers on his left hand are broken as well. He's also black and blue pretty much everywhere from getting slammed to the ground. None of those are complicated breaks, so he should be just fine in a few weeks, so long as he keeps his appointments with the bone specialist and keeps quiet. I'll be pulling him off duty, of course. My concern now is the concussion he's got. I know you won't like to hear this, but I'm keeping him here overnight at the very least, possibly longer."

"Of course," Wu said, quietly. "Whatever's best."

"Okay, I'll give you a few minutes alone here, and then I'll be back. If he starts to vomit or passes out or does anything else alarming, I want you to immediately call for a healer."

"I will do that."

"I'll leave you to it, then. See you in a few minutes." She walked out, closing the door gently behind her.

Wu sat down in the chair near Mako's bed.

"I'm fine," Mako said, trying to move his head. He gasped a little as his vision swung and he was hit with a sharp bolt of pain.

"Keep your head still," said Wu.

"No big deal," said Mako. "Heard the doctor. I'll be fine."

"I heard her, yes."

"Nothing to worry about." Mako closed his eyes again. He supposed that his broken bones were hurting, but he couldn't get past the pain in his skull to feel anything else.

"As you say."

"What's wrong?" Mako forced his eyes back open.

Wu took in a deep breath. "I'm sitting in a hospital room, and you're in a hospital bed. Have you seen your face?"

"Uh...no?"

"The right side is one enormous bruise. It's a little upsetting. Forgive me if I'm not in the mood to make jokes about it."

"Nothing broken on my face, never fear, my good looks will come down." Mako tried a little laugh, which didn't work at all. It came out more like a creaky sort of groan. He was having a

hard time finding words that made sense.

"That's not what I am talking about and you well know it." Wu's voice was sharp and tight. Mako tried to move his head again to look at him but immediately stopped. It hurt too much.

"I...I'll be fine. Heard the healer."

"I talked to Chiyo and Lin in the lobby. The head injury is what I'm worried about."

"Beifong's here?"

"Of course she's here, Mako! Where did you think she would be?"

"I...I don't know. Sorry, I'm...can't think right now."

Wu was silent for a moment; then his hand clasped Mako's uninjured right hand. "I'm sorry. Please just rest. The healer will be back soon."

"Did Chiyo make arrest? Is he in custody?"

"*Fuck* the arrest!"

Even through the oppressive pain in his head Mako was startled. Wu never cursed; he could count the times he'd ever heard him curse on one hand, probably.

"Wu...I..."

"Fuck the arrest and fuck your job and fuck the triads and fuck this damn city that seems to think you owe it your life!" Wu's voice was furious.

"Wu!" Mako tried to move his head again and hissed out in pain.

"Stop that! Lay still. You do exactly what that healer tells you to do, do you hear me!"

"Can't move my head. Can't see you. Please. See you."

Wu sat still for a moment and then got up from the chair and moved to the foot of Mako's bed, arms crossed. He'd been crying; Mako recognized the swollen eyes and the red nose.

"No. Don't cry. Please no. Be okay. Be good, okay? No." He stopped for a moment to find the words he wanted. "*I'll* be good. Please. Don't cry."

Wu's eyes overflowed. "It's not just your face. You can't even speak, you can't even focus on me, your eyes are all..." He took a deep breath and struggled to control himself. "I'm sorry, I promised myself I wouldn't do this. The important thing is that you do what the healer says so that you can come home as soon as possible." He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped at his eyes. "I wanted to stay here tonight but Lin won't let me. She says I have to go home, that she'll stay here and call me if there are any changes. So don't worry, okay? Lin will be here all night if you need her."

"Beifong is...Beifong is staying here?"

Wu flapped the damp handkerchief at him. "You should have heard her laying into one of the healers who told her she couldn't get information about you because she wasn't a close family member. I thought she was going to bring the entire building down on him."

"Oh."

Wu blew his nose noisily. "The next time someone bends half the street at you, you duck, do you hear me? Don't you ever do this to me again."

"Promise," Mako said. His eyes closed of their own volition. His head hurt so much, and he was so tired. He felt Wu's lips on his forehead, a slight pressure that barely registered.

"Here comes the healer. You be good. I'll see you first thing tomorrow morning, okay? I love you so much. Just rest now."

"Okay," Mako murmured. He heard the healer talking to Wu; something about the healing she was going to do. Wu answered, but Mako couldn't keep track of what he was saying. All he wanted to do was sleep. "Love you," he thought he said; he tried to say it, at least, but no one answered him.

"Okay, tough guy, my turn. Hang in there," said the healer, and Mako felt the coolness of the water sweeping over his brow. With a little sigh, he slipped into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Some years back, while walking my kids to kindergarten, I slipped on a patch of ice and slammed my head into the sidewalk.

Apparently I did eventually sit up and ask for my glasses (which had flown off my face and were, to my later deep dismay, busted) and I even managed to get up and finish walking the kids to school (it was only a half block away). I have no memory of this whatsoever. It was their teacher who took one look at me and immediately called an ambulance when I sort of drifted down until I was laying in the middle of the hallway in front of their classroom. I don't remember any of that, either, although I apparently gave my name and address and ID number to the EMTs in my non-native tongue, so go me!

The first thing I remember was laying on a gurney in the ER, waiting to get a cat scan. My head hurt like nothing I'd ever felt before, and that includes childbirth with twins. I wasn't conscious for very long, but my late wife - who had nerves of steel and nothing but nothing ever ruffled her calm - was sitting there next to me and I remember thinking, "Oh, she's here. Everything is going to be okay." And I went right back out again.

Concussions are weird things, I tell you.

Making Out

"Mmmmm...open bar, of course, but the question is whether or not I want to do those little crispy fried shrimp or have the shrimp dumplings. Well. I suppose I could use other flavors for the dumplings and leave the shrimp out, otherwise the appetizers might be a little too heavy on the shrimp, I fear." Wu tapped his pen on his lower lip, staring at the papers spread over a lap desk that was resting across his thighs. "I could balance it out by doing octopus fritters instead and leaving the shrimp to the dumplings, perhaps." He turned to Mako. "What do you think?"

"Huh?" Mako started up a bit guiltily. "Uh. Whatever you want. Everything's fine."

"Mako, you haven't been listening to a word I've been saying!" said Wu, frowning at him. "I told you I wanted your opinion!"

Mako shrugged. "I don't know! The food is always good at your parties! I eat it, don't I?"

"Well now, there's a ringing endorsement. Come to a Hou-Ting party! The food is Mako-approved!"

"Hey, I have some taste, you know. I mean Bolin, he'll eat anything that isn't moving." Wu just glared. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I'll listen, I promise. You were going on about shrimp or something?"

"Oh never mind. I'll just talk to the caterers about it tomorrow."

"Look, I've told you before. Beds are for sex and sleeping. Maybe reading a little bit before sleeping. I can't concentrate on other things while I'm lying in bed, not like you can."

"Hou-Ting XXXVII pretty much never left his bed. He conducted all of his business and everything else in his pajamas. He said that the mind can only truly blossom when it is in a state of reclined relaxation."

"Get the fuck out."

"True story. Look it up in any history book you like. He had attendants do everything for him - sponge baths, feed him in bed, so on and so forth."

"Wait...*everything*?" Mako made a face.

"Yes. *Everything*."

"Your family is truly fucked up. How did his wife take all of this?"

Wu shrugged. "Oh, he never married. He also said that sex was unnecessary and an impediment to the thinking mind."

"Well, I'd have to agree about the whole impediment to thinking part. Can't say I agree with the whole unnecessary part, though. What did he do for heirs, then?"

"Adopted several of his most promising nieces and nephews. When he died, however, he hadn't declared an actual heir and so they all battled it out until only his one niece was left standing. You know, the second Earth Kingdom civil war? The one that went on for forty some-odd years and pretty much demolished an entire generation and a good portion of the next one?"

"Huh. That's what caused it?"

"It was indeed."

"Think of what could have been avoided if your however many times great-grandfather had just gotten out of bed and had sex every once in awhile!"

"True." Wu tapped his pen on his papers. "I guess I should just go with the octopus fritters." He scribbled something in the margins.

"You know," Mako said, smoothly sliding across the bed until he was pressing up against Wu, under the covers. "I'm a very peaceful guy."

Wu's raised eyebrow was his only comment.

"It's true! For example, I am actively against war."

"Something to aspire to, I'm sure." Wu shuffled a bit until he found the piece of paper he was looking for.

Mako pressed himself into Wu's hip a little more firmly, just so he'd get the point. "In fact, I would hate to even think of being involved in a war."

"Would you, now?" Wu crossed something off of one of his lists.

Mako plucked the pen out of Wu's hand and tossed it off the side of the bed. "Terrible thing, war. Should be avoided at all costs."

"I don't suppose anyone would argue with that." Wu shuffled his papers again.

"Nope." Mako gave the lap desk a shove and it teetered on the edge of the bed. "Make love not war, I always say." The lap desk was given an extra nudge and it toppled to the floor, papers flying. Mako swung a leg over Wu, trapping him in his embrace.

"I'm going to remember that the next time you start shouting at me that I'm making you late for something," said Wu, smiling.

"You do that," Mako said, and focused his attention on Wu's throat, kissing up along it until he reached Wu's jaw. His hand slid up under Wu's pajama top.

"Then there is the question of dipping sauce. It's not a sit down party, so I think I'll need to forgo it." Wu tapped a long finger along his thigh.

"Hmmm, you're still thinking," said Mako along Wu's jaw before he took a long, slow lick on Wu's earlobe. Wu shivered. "You need to stop that. I'm trying to prevent a war, here." The earlobe was nibbled on.

"I've mostly planned on savories but it's always good to accommodate those with a sweet tooth." Wu's back arched up as Mako's fingers hooked inside the waistband of his pajama bottoms.

"I have a sweet tooth," Mako murmured into his ear before sucking his earlobe into his mouth. Wu shuddered this time.

"Egg custard tarts are standard, of course, but I thought..." he lost his train of thought for a moment as Mako's hand curled around his hip and slid right on by, going lower. "I thought we could do Dragon's Beard candy as well."

Mako pulled back for a second. "With extra coconut?" His tone was very hopeful.

"Seduction derailed for coconut. I win!" Wu was laughing.

"I haven't conceded yet," Mako said, and with a wicked grin, he went in for the kill.

Eating Ice Cream

"Okay, we'll take one green tea, two moon peach, one coconut and one lychee. But I'll need one of the moon peaches in a cup. She'll drop it, otherwise."

"So like just in a cup or a cone in a cup?" The woman manning the ice cream kiosk looked slightly confused.

"Cone in a cup, please." Mako fished in his pocket for his wallet.

"Wait, Daddy, I changed my mind, I want mango instead."

"Okay, sorry. Scratch the lychee and replace it with mango." Mako turned to his son. "Next time decide what you want *before* I order, Zhi."

"Well, Daddy, I decided but then I undecided. And decided again."

"Well, mango is the final decision, because that's what you are getting."

"Okay, but Daddy, maybe I want lychee, too." Zhi bit his lip, frowning. "Maybe I can't decide."

"One or the other, Zhi."

"Change mine to mango and then Zhi and I can share back and forth." Naoki spoke up, poking Zhi in the side. Zhi beamed.

"Hey! Yeah! Okay! That's a good idea!" Zhi wrapped his arms around his sister's waist.

"Er..." the woman manning the kiosk looked even more confused. Mako sighed.

"One green tea, one moon peach - a cone in a cup, please - one coconut, one mango and one lychee." He turned to glare down at his two eldest. "And no more changes!"

"Righty-o, Daddy." Naoki grinned.

"Okay, Naoki, you stay with me. The rest of you go grab us a table."

"Don't forget the extra napkins," Wu said, shifting Meili on his hip. "Come along, Zhi. There's a table free over there, by the tree. You see it? Run and reserve it for us!" Zhi immediately took off.

Wu had just gotten Meili settled onto one of the benches when Mako and Naoki came their way, hands full of ice cream. "Sit next to your brother so you can share, darling," he said to Naoki. "That was a very nice thing to do, by the way. Thank you."

"Move it or lose it, Zhi," Naoki said, and sat down next to him as he scooted over. "You take the lychee and I'll keep the mango. Then you can lick off of mine and I can lick off of yours."

"Here you go," said Mako, placing the cup with the cone sticking out of it in front of Meili. "Daddy has the spoon. You want me to help you?"

"No," said Meili, holding her hand out for the spoon. Mako gave it to her. "Tell me if you need help, okay?"

"No." With a scowl of concentration Meili dug the spoon into the ice cream.

Mako handed Wu the green tea cone before sitting down on the other side of Zhi.

"Yer Highness! Hey! Yer Highness!" Two scruffy teenage boys came running up to the table. Wu smiled.

"Hello, boys. Were you hoping for some ice cream?"

The older boy shook his head. "Nuh huh. We wanted to talk to you about Seiho and his little sister."

Wu exchanged a glance with Mako. "Do I know Seiho?"

"Nope. Him and his sister, they been on the streets since his Da died 'bout three months ago. He won't come out to meet you, says he don't trust that you won't make him go to the orphanage."

"We told him that you never would, but he don't listen." The younger boy was eyeballing the ice cream hungrily. With a small sigh, Mako handed his cone over. "Thanks, Mister Mako!"

"Him and his sister, they're over there behind the trees." The older boy tilted his head just slightly. "His little sister, she's doin' somethin' real weird, so I told him, you come with me and we ask His Highness about it, he'll help you. We been takin' care of them best we can, Yer Highness, but now we need some help."

"You'll help, wontcha?" The younger boy asked around a mouth full of coconut ice cream.

"I'll help if I can, boys. Do you think you can get him to come over here so I can talk to him?"

Naoki handed Zhi her ice cream cone before sliding off the bench and striding over to where the trees were. "Hey you! Boy and your sister! You come on out right now and talk to my Papa! He won't make you go anywhere you don't want to go!"

"The other one's a cop," said a boy's voice from the trees.

"Well, I guess I know that! He's my other father! And he does whatever Papa tells him to do, so there!"

"Out of the mouths of babes," muttered Mako.

A thin boy of about ten or so stepped out from around the trees. He was holding tightly to the hand of a small girl, about five. "Nobody is going to make us go to the orphanage?"

Everybody says it's a bad place."

"No, darling. Not in the least. Please come and talk to me, perhaps Mako and I can help you?" Wu gestured at him with a smile. The boy came forward, standing near the table. Mako dug out his wallet and handed the other boys some yuan.

"Go get yourselves some ice cream," he said, and the other two boys ran for the kiosk.

"So it's Seiho, is it? What's your sister's name?" Wu continued smiling.

"Varvara."

Meili was staring at the other little girl and held out her spoon full of ice cream to her. Varvara reached for it but looked over at her brother. Naoki smiled at her. "It's okay. You can have some. Meili doesn't have any germs or anything."

"Well, that's not true, we have lots of bacteria in our mouths and-ow! Naoki! What did you kick me for?" Zhi looked outraged.

The little girl took the proffered spoon. Meili bestowed her with her very best princess smile.

"Now Seiho, can you tell me what's going on? Something with Varvara? Is she ill? Does she need help from a healer?" Wu asked, smoothing back Meili's hair unconsciously.

The boy shook his head. "It's just...well, about a week ago, she did something. And it keeps happening, and I keep telling her to stop, but she says she can't." He frowned. "I don't know what to do."

Mako and Wu exchanged another glance. "What exactly is it that she's doing?" Mako asked.

The boy hesitated, looking at his sister.

"Hey! Varvara! My name's Naoki. Can you show me what it is you're doing?" Naoki grinned at her. "I bet it's really good! Do you want to see what I can do?" She threw herself into a back flip, spraying flame out of her hands before landing back on her feet. "Pretty neat, huh? I'm a firebender. Can you do something like that?"

Varvara put the spoon down on the table, stepped back, and with a concentrated look, held her hands out. The napkins flew across the table, skittering through the air until they landed on the ground a ways away. She looked over at Naoki anxiously.

"Hey! Wow! You're an airbender! We know some airbenders! My Auntie Opal's an airbender!" Zhi bounced up and down in his seat.

"Harmonic Convergence strikes again," said Mako to Wu. "Still randomly popping up, even after all of these years."

Naoki smiled and crouched down next to the girl. "It's okay. I promise. Like my brother says, our aunt is an airbender, and we go over to Air Temple Island all the time. Everyone over

there is really nice. They really are. They'll help you learn all about being an airbender. You don't need to be scared. Cross my heart." Naoki solemnly crossed her fingers over her heart.

"How about you?" Mako asked Seiho. The boy shook his head.

"I can't. But...she can't go to that Island!"

"Well, she's an airbender. It's where she needs to be, darling," said Wu.

Mako put his hand gently on the boy's shoulder. "You're worried they'll take her and not you, aren't you?"

The boy's eyes filled up. "She's my sister! I promised Dad that I'd always take care of her! How can I take care of her if I'm not there?"

Mako took in a deep breath. "Look. Tenzin - he's the leader of the Air Nomads - he's a personal friend of mine. I know him. He would never try to separate you and your sister. In fact, his wife, Pema? She's not a bender either. There are people living over there on the Island who aren't benders. It will work out. I give you my word. No one will separate the two of you. I promise."

"I have an idea," Wu said. "A splendid one. Why don't I get Varvara and Seiho some ice cream cones while Mako here runs back to our home to make a phone call and fetch the car?" He shot a glance at Mako, who nodded. "Then we can all take a ride over on the ferry and go and visit Air Temple Island. I can introduce you both to Tenzin and his daughter, Jinora. Oh, you'll like Jinora, she's very nice indeed."

"Nice," asserted Meili. She dug her spoon back into her ice cream.

"Oh, the ferry is the *best*," said Naoki.

"You kids have anything you need to take?" Mako asked.

"It's behind the trees," said Seiho. "Just a bag. But, you promise? You promise they won't take her away from me?"

Mako went down on one knee in front of him. "I promise you. I know how important it is to you. Believe me. I know." He put both hands on the boy's shoulders. "No one is going to take her away from you. Not ever." He pulled the boy into an embrace and whispered into his ear. The boy started to cry, and nodded. Mako whispered again, and hugged him tighter.

"What is Daddy saying?" asked Zhi.

"None of your business, Mister Nosy. If he wanted you to hear he'd say it out loud. Hey! Varvara! What kind of ice cream do you like?" Naoki held out her hand.

"Moon peach," whispered the girl shyly. She put her hand into Naoki's. Naoki put her other hand out to Seiho, and he took it, stepping back from Mako.

"Come on, Papa will pay the lady," Naoki said. "What kind do you like, Seiho?" She dragged the two of them towards the ice cream kiosk. Zhi jumped up and followed, both hands full of dripping cones.

"I'll call Tenzin and bring the car around," said Mako. "Give me a few minutes."

"You didn't even get any of your ice cream," said Wu, with a smile.

"Day in the life," Mako said with a bit of a rueful smile back. "Well, with any luck we'll get dinner out of Pema. Don't let him forget their bag of things, okay? I'll be back soon."

Petnames/Nicknames

"Opal calls Bolin *sweetie*." Wu tossed a bit of an old dumpling and one of the turtle ducks snapped it up with a quack, shoving a smaller turtle duck out of the way. "Oh, greedy! Let someone else get a chance!"

"She gets that from her mother. Su calls everybody sweetie. She even called me sweetie once." Mako absently broke the old dumplings into smaller pieces before handing them over to Wu.

"Did she? What did you do?"

"Pretended I hadn't heard it, what did you think I'd do?"

"Could have been worse. It could have been Lin calling you sweetie."

Mako made a face. "I don't think Beifong's ever called anyone sweetie in her life. I think her tongue might shrivel up and turn black if she did."

"No wonder that turtle duck is twice the size of the others! Pushy old thing!" Wu deliberately threw the next piece far to the other side. "Asami said she calls Korra her koalaotter."

"Bullshit! When did she say that!"

Wu raised his eyebrow. "Last time we went for a mani-pedi. Give that woman a half of bottle of sake, she'll tell you anything you want to know. *Shockingly* indiscreet."

Mako thought for a minute. "Koalaotter?"

"Straight from Asami's lips."

"Huh." Mako tossed a dumpling piece in a high arc towards the middle of the pond. Several smaller turtleducks went for it at a rapid pace. "If I tried to call Korra my koalaotter she'd kick my ass into next week and then pull it back for another go."

"Well now *there's* an image."

"Tell me about it." Another dumpling piece went sailing. "Well, I do call Bolin *Bo* sometimes. Or bro."

"Bo's just a shorter version of his name. And *bro*...well." Wu slouched down on the park bench and spread his legs out. "BRO."

Mako snorted and rolled his eyes. "Doesn't work for you."

"Are you trying to say I don't possess any street cred?"

"I can't even believe the words street cred came out of your over-educated mouth."

"That's over-educated *royal* mouth to you." Wu sat back up, recrossed his legs, and tossed another dumpling bit. "Oh, you bully! Mako, look at that turtle duck! He's a brute!" The extra large turtle duck chased all of the smaller turtle ducks out of the way.

"Survival of the fittest."

"Well, I like that! Good things come in little packages, you know."

Mako smiled down at him. "I've heard that, yeah."

"Your Highness doesn't count as a nickname. It's a title, not something you call someone out of friendship or affection."

"It's pretty hard to shorten Wu, though. I mean, Bolin goes right into Bo. Like Suyin into Su, I guess. No one's ever shortened Mako."

"Well, to what, Ma? Although you are rather mater-"

"Don't go there with me."

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Wu, but he was laughing.

"Oh! I almost forgot, Eska called my brother her feeble little turtle duck when they were going out."

"There are many things I could imagine calling your brother, but feeble isn't one of them. He's more like that big turtle duck there." Wu tossed a dumpling bit which bounced off of its head, causing it to quack in complaint. "Well, that's what you get!" He tossed another bit to the side. "My great-aunt called me Boy, but that wasn't out of affection, I assure you. The only time she referred to me by name was when she was speaking of me to someone else, and then it was always His Royal Highness Prince Wu. Very upper class, you understand. If she saw me - and I tried very hard to be in her line of sight as little as possible, I promise - it was always Boy! Boy! Boy!"

"My father used to call my mother *Cookie*."

Wu laughed. "Did he really? That's lovely."

Mako nodded. "Yeah, I remember." He grinned and his voice changed subtly. "Hey, Cookie! There's my best girl!" He threw a piece of dumpling. "They were very affectionate with each other, my parents. Even as a kid I could tell they loved each other. I don't remember my mother ever calling him anything but San - my mother was a lot more formal, in her way, than my father was. My Dad was very easy-going, more like Bolin is now. My mother was the one that was a stickler for manners."

Wu smiled at him and Mako gave him a little smile back.

"Grandma told me that when Dad left Ba Sing Se he was illiterate, so at some point he must have learned how to read and write. He used to read the paper every morning, I remember that, and I remember him sitting at our table writing letters or something. Maybe my mother

helped him? I don't know. But my mother, I'm pretty sure she was born to a higher class than he was. I knew she immigrated from the Fire Nation but she never talked about her family or anything that I remember. I've often wondered if she had any family left or if there was some sort of bad break there. I just don't know. I do remember her telling me more than once that people judged others on how they spoke and presented themselves. She'd really lay into Bo and me if we came home using any kind of street dialect or sketchy grammar or anything like that." He sat back on the bench, thinking for a moment.

"You know, I never really thought about it before but I guess that's why I was always after Bo not to pick up the street dialect. I know it's why I forced him to learn to read and write. He hated me for that. Well. Not hated me, I don't think Bo has it in him to hate anyone. But he sure as hell never wanted to learn to read or write, I had to bully him into it. But I remember my Dad saying that illiteracy was something that kept people down, held them back from their potential. So I taught Bo as best I could, used to make him practice on the old newspapers we found, that kind of thing. Sometimes I ran errands for this old woman we knew on the streets and she helped him as well. She'd been a teacher when she was younger but at some point her drinking became a problem and she lost her job. She was nice, though. She made sure Bolin could read and write, and even helped me out a little when I had time to sit in on their lessons. So."

Wu reached over and squeezed his hand. "Well, you did him a favor, even if he didn't appreciate it then." Mako squeezed back.

"My Dad used to call Bolin *Squirt*." Mako changed his voice again. "Hey Squirt! Come here and give your Daddy a big old kiss!" He laughed a little. "He used to use his bending to shake the bed underneath us, he'd yell that there was an earthquake and we'd bounce all over the room. He was a funny guy, my Dad."

Wu smiled. "Cookie and Squirt, huh? So what did he call you, then?" To Wu's surprise and delight, Mako's face started to shade into a deep pink. "Mako! Are you blushing?"

"NO!"

Wu slid closer and wrapped his hand around Mako's arm. "You are the most adorable thing in the world when you do that," he said.

"I'll show you adorable," muttered Mako, futilely brushing at his cheeks as if it would somehow return them to normal faster.

"Come on, spill it. Tell me. Come on, you know you want to," Wu teased, laughing.

"Right, so you can tell Asami when you're half a bottle of sake down!"

Wu pulled back and stared at him seriously. "Mako, I am never indiscreet about myself or my loved ones. That's not how it works in the Upper Ring of Ba Sing Se. You might gossip about others, but never about yourself. I've never told anybody any of the things you tell me, and I never would. Not even several bottles of sake would drag it out of me. That's how I was raised. Court manners, you know."

"Hmph," grunted Mako, and he quickly pressed his lips to Wu's temple as an apology. "Well. He used to call me Sparks."

"Sparks?" Wu's mouth curved up slowly. "Oh my. He did know you well, didn't he? That's just marvelous."

Mako smiled, despite himself, and his voice changed again. "Would you look at that, Cookie! He already finished all of those math problems! I sure am proud of you, Sparks!" Suddenly his eyes welled up with tears and he hitched in a deep breath, wiping at them with the back of his ungloved hand. "Sorry."

Wu handed over his handkerchief. "Don't be sorry. I wish I had one person in my past that was worth crying about."

"I hope he'd still be proud of me." Mako scrubbed at his eyes with the hankie.

"Oh, Mako. Of course he would be proud. Look at you! You raised Bolin all by yourself, kept him safe. You work for the police, you're a husband and a father with a very delightful family, if I do say so myself. You've fought with the Avatar and were a pro-bender and even if you won't talk about it you and I both know you're considered one of the best firebenders in the world. Mako! He would be so very proud of you, I know. You're a good man."

Mako looked down at him. "You think so?"

"Oh, I know so. I know so. Your mother would be as well, I am sure."

They sat for a time in silence, Mako occasionally tossing bits of dumpling into the pond. "I miss them," he said quietly.

"I know," Wu replied, and he laid his head against Mako's shoulder. They watched the sun go down over the horizon.

In A Different Clothing Style

"It's just so weird to see you with bare feet," Mako said, staring down at Wu's feet.

"Why? Are they funny-looking or something?" Wu stared down at his own feet in dismay.

"No, they're very nice feet. I'm just not used to seeing them."

"Well honestly, Mako. Do you really think people walked around the palace in their bare feet? I should say *not*. I can't help it, it's how I was raised." Wu kept staring down at them.

"Well, at least I don't have hairy toes. For which I am profoundly grateful, let me assure you."

"Okay, enough chat. Am I teaching you to swim or not?" Mako pointed over towards Asami's indoor swimming pool.

"Right. I am going to learn to swim. It is a useful skill that will only benefit me. I do not need to be afraid of the water."

"You were swimming in the ocean just a few weeks back!"

"I would like to point out that it was our honeymoon and that I was slightly inebriated at the time."

Mako grinned. "*Slightly*, was it?"

"As if you are one to talk."

"Well, the pool is a lot shallower than the ocean, so quit worrying. I'm not going to let you drown."

Wu looked down at himself. "I look like an ass. Swimming costumes are the most ridiculous things in the world. Where's the dignity, I ask you?"

"I'm wearing a swimming costume and you don't hear me complaining!"

"Oh, please. You could wear a burlap sack and make it look attractive, Mako." Wu pursed his lips and looked irritable. "I just look silly."

"Look, there's no one here to see you, Korra's still up north for a couple of weeks and Asami's staying at her flat above her offices, you know she hates being out here all alone when Korra's out of town. It's just us and the household staff, and they aren't going to bother us. Now quit stalling, and get into that pool." Mako dove into the deep end, surfacing and looking at Wu expectantly. "Well?"

"I'm going, I'm going. Is the water cold? Because I don't know if I can learn how to swim if the water is cold."

"WU!"

"Oh, stop shouting at me! My goodness! I'm coming!" Wu walked to the edge of the pool and stuck his toe in. "This is going to ruin my hair, you know this, right?"

Mako just pointed into the water next to him.

"We could do this another time, you know. I am not opposed to that, on the contrary, I am-aaaaaaiiiiiieeeee!" Wu let out with a shriek that reverberated around the tiled walls as Mako grabbed him by the ankle and yanked him into the pool. Wu came up sputtering, flailing at the water with his arms. "Mako! Mako! Help me!"

Mako crossed his arms. "The water only comes up to your chest, Wu. Stand up."

Wu stood up. "Oh. Well how was I supposed to know?" He put his hand up to his head which was an odd combination of flat, frizzy and drenched. "Oh, my hair!"

Mako ignored him. "So you need to float. So. Yeah. Try some floating."

Wu stared at him incredulously. "Try some floating? What does that even *mean*?"

Mako waved his hands about. "You know, float! Float!" He pitched himself backwards into the water, floating on his back. "Like this. Float!"

Wu gingerly squatted down until the water reached his chin. "If I do that I'll sink."

"No you won't. Just try it. You'll see."

Wu threw himself backwards. He promptly sunk under the water, his eyes and mouth screwed shut.

"Oh for the love of-" Mako thrust his hand out and grabbed the front of Wu's green swimming singlet, yanking him up above the water. Wu gasped in air.

"Did I do it? Did I float?"

"No! You sank!"

"You told me I wouldn't!" Wu frowned. "I knew this was stupid of me. Never mind." He started to half hop, half wade his way over to the ladder that would take him out of the pool.

"No, don't go. Come on, I'm sorry. I'm a shitty teacher, it's my fault. Here, come here, I'll show you." Mako held both hands out to Wu. Wu stood there for a moment, and then made his way back to him. Mako took his hands in his. "Okay, look. To float, you have to relax, but at the same time hold your body above the water."

"Mako, that makes no sense at all!"

"I know, I know. So look, I'm going to show you." Mako let go of his hands and let himself gently onto his back. "I'm not good at describing it. So feel me."

"Feel you?"

"Yeah. Go on, put your hands on me. I'm holding myself up with my stomach muscles, and letting the rest of me relax in the water. I'm not fighting it."

Wu reached out with his hands, resting them on Mako's abdomen. "Like I can feel anything through this thing." He plucked at the sodden wool of Mako's singlet.

Mako stood up and pulled his singlet up and over his head, tossing it to the side of the pool with a loud splat. He went back into a float. "There. Now put your hands there. Okay, so if I just let the muscles go, what happens?" He relaxed, and he started to sink down, Wu's hands still pressed to him. "But if tighten them back up again, I float." His body bobbed back up to the surface again. "You feel what I mean? The same goes when you are swimming, it's just that...Wu, what are you doing?"

Wu had climbed on top of him, his body's full length resting on Mako's. "Just trying to get the whole body experience. Keep talking, I'm listening."

"Uh. Yeah. Well, okay, so in order to actually learn how to swim, you should be able to float on your back, first, and then practice floating on your stomach, face in the water. Wu, stop moving around like that. I'm trying to teach you something here."

"I'm listening! Floating on your back first, then stomach with your face in the water. Then what?"

"Then you have to learn how to breathe in the water. Well. Not breathing in the *water*, but breathing *in* the water. Because if you breathe in the *water*, you'll drown."

"It's official. You are the worst teacher *ever*. I can't understand a thing you are trying to say to me. I'll hire somebody to teach me how to swim. Someone who won't make fun of my feet or pull me in before I am ready."

"I didn't make fun of your feet! And I only...would you stop squirming like that! You're distracting me!"

"Whatever happened to those fabled powers of concentration firebenders are supposed to have? A little squirming shouldn't throw you off your game." Wu sat up, swinging his legs around to dangle over Mako's side as he perched on his stomach. "You know, you are an *excellent* flotation device. I could just paddle you wherever I wanted to go." To prove his point, Wu dropped his hands into the water and started to flap them around. "There, you see? Who needs to swim anyhow?"

Mako stared up at him. "I'm laying here half-naked in the water, letting my husband paddle me around like a water float when I was supposed to be teaching him how to swim. How do you do this to me?"

"It's my vast amount of charm, I suppose," Wu said, and posed winsomely with his hands clasped to his chest, batting his eyelashes. Mako just continued to stare up at him. "What? Oh Mako, I'm only teasing you. I'll get off of you. I do think it's a better idea for me to hire a swimming instructor, though, because otherwise you'll just get frustrated and start shouting and I'll just keep trying to defuse the situation by being silly. It's what we've always done, you

know. Maybe it's just best for us to admit that we've never operated very well as a student and teacher and just stick to being husbands."

Mako nodded his head in the water, sending gentle ripples across the pool. "You're right. You're absolutely right. Call an instructor, I'll back off. You will learn, though, won't you? It doesn't matter if you're a great swimmer, so long as I know you have the basics. Just in case."

"I promise. I will call around tomorrow. It shouldn't be a problem. I can even call that one big gymnasium in town."

"Goa's Gym?"

"The very one. They have a pool there. I'm sure there would be someone there who could teach me."

"Okay. Thank you. I know I'm being pushy but it worries me that you don't know how to swim. So thank you for taking it seriously." Mako started to gently propel himself backwards in the water. "You know what?"

"What?" Wu smiled down at him.

"You actually have very cute feet. All soft and nice."

"I keep telling you, those little nibbly fish pedicures!"

Mako laughed. "It's still a no."

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I married you, didn't I?"

"Oh, ha ha ha, very amusing."

"Submarine attack!" Mako shouted, and he grabbed Wu by the waist and took him under the water to kiss him.

During Their Morning Ritual

"This smells kind of weird."

Wu snatched the pot of pomade out of Mako's hand. "It doesn't smell weird! It smells just fine! Besides, it's mine, not yours."

Mako took it back and sniffed it again. "Well, I like the other one you had better."

"I'm trying a new type. Now give it back to me before my hair starts to curl on me." Wu stuck his hand out and Mako gave over the pot.

"What was wrong with the old one?" Mako took up the eyebrow comb and leaned closer to the mirror, tilting his head to get a better look.

"Nothing was *wrong* with it, per se. I just thought I would broaden my horizons. Try something new. Experiment a little. You know, all those things you don't like to do."

Mako shot him a look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Wu just raised an eyebrow at him in the mirror and started to part his hair.

"I try new things!"

"Name one."

"Well...I...do. I do. I...hey! I tried the elephant koi steaks at Kwong's last month! That was new!"

"Please. That was only because they were out of komodo chicken and you sulked all night about it. You asked the poor waiter to go back to the kitchen and check to make sure they were really out of it. You asked him *twice*. I had to leave him a very large tip."

Mako scowled at the mirror. "Man goes to a nice restaurant, is it too much to ask to have his favorite meal?"

"My point."

"Just because I don't like to try every single new thing that comes my way like certain other people in this bathroom doesn't mean I can't try new things."

"See, I think it does. Hmmmm. Well, I do like the look of this pomade, but let's see if it lasts the whole day. If I turn into a koala sheep before the end of the day I will immediately return to the old pomade. Happy?"

"I liked how the other one smelled," muttered Mako, and he took up a pair of nail scissors to carefully trim an overlong eyebrow hair.

"I am also reminding you, once again, that we are having dinner at Jun-Yi's home tonight. Do *not* try to get out of it by lying to me about work."

"I don't lie to you about work!"

"Oh really? So that story you dreamed up the last time we were supposed to go to someone's house for dinner was true? The one about the car crash caused by the frenetically growing spirit vine in conjunction with all four triads as well as a deranged cadre of terrorist dragonfly bunny spirits? Mako. Mako, Mako, Mako. For one thing, if that had actually happened, it would have been in the newspapers the next morning, which it wasn't, of course. However, I don't need a newspaper to know when you are lying. You are a terrible liar. Quite possibly the worst liar I have ever seen." Wu finished patting his hair into place and looked at it critically. "It's not as shiny as the old pomade, which I do like."

"I am not a terrible liar!" Mako waved his shaving brush in an outraged manner.

"Yes, you are," said Wu, calmly. "There are three year olds who are better liars than you are. I know every single time you are lying to me. I usually let it go for the sake of marital harmony." He reached over and took the brush out of Mako's hand to start lathering up the shaving soap. "You know I don't ask you to come to most of my dinners and I always make excuses for you so that no one realizes it is just because you are terribly anti-social. However, this one is important to me, so please make an effort to come. I wouldn't ask otherwise, you know. I know you'd rather eat here and then put your feet up on my coffee table after dinner."

Mako grunted. "That woman always tries to grab my ass. She's more than old enough to be my mother!"

Wu motioned at him to come closer and started to lather up his face. "I know, but can you blame her? I want to fondle you in my every waking moment." To prove his point, he gave Mako an outrageous eyebrow waggle.

"Well, I don't mind if *you* do it," Mako grumbled.

"Don't *mind*, is it?" Wu laughed at him as he finished with the shaving brush. Mako grinned suddenly and whipped down to kiss him on the nose, leaving a smear of shaving soap. "Hey! I've already moisturized!"

Mako chuckled and took up the straight razor and started to shave. Wu wiped off the smear of shaving lather, poured some tooth powder on his toothbrush and began to brush his teeth.

"I forgot to ask you, did you have it out with the landscaper yesterday?" Mako deftly maneuvered the razor around his upper lip.

"Shesh, mah bol im ee eeded oo mum oo ee rees agin."

"When's he coming, then?"

"Oomaoow."

"How did he take it?" The razor made its way around his chin.

Wu shrugged. "Eee ahznt appee ut-" he leaned over and spit into the sink, "-for the money I pay him he'd better do it right. I can always hire someone else." He took up his tooth glass and rinsed his mouth out. "Missed a spot," he said, and pointed to a small patch of whiskers on Mako's jaw.

"Oh, thanks." Mako swiped at it and then rinsed his face off. He stared at Wu's hair in the mirror. "I guess it is less shiny than the old pomade," he said grudgingly.

Wu smiled in delight and stood on his toes to kiss him on the mouth. Before he could break away, Mako had wrapped his arms around him and held him in for a longer kiss before looking down at him. "Fine," Mako said, with an exaggerated sigh. "If I come to your stupid dinner will you make it worth my while?" His hand traveled down Wu's back for a lingering squeeze.

"Oh, that's how it is, is it?" Wu tsked at him. "Now I have to resort to sexual favors in order to get my husband to go to a dinner with me?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Mako grinned, and the squeeze turned into what was unmistakably a fondle.

"Well, it can wait, Mister, because if you engage in any of your nonsense now, you'll be late to work." Wu stepped out of Mako's embrace. "Think of it as an exercise in restraint. A delightful little shiver of anticipation throughout your day." He smiled wickedly. "Think of the things I will do to you under the cover of Jun-Yi's perfectly set and very expensive table linens."

"Wu!"

"Remember what I did when we were at that fundraising dinner two months ago?"

Mako's cheeks flushed a deep pink color. "Wu! How am I supposed to be at work all day thinking about that!"

Wu tapped his finger on Mako's mouth. "Well, you know I do always like to one-up myself. But if you don't show up for the dinner, you'll never know." He took his finger away and strolled out of the bathroom. "I'll just lay out your dark brown suit for you, shall I?" he said over his shoulder, and then he was out the door.

"Little shit," yelled Mako after him, but he was smiling.

Spooning

Wu sat up muzzily, noticing that the other side of the bed was empty. "Mako?" he called quietly.

"Shhh, I'm over here. I had to pee." Mako moved away from their bedroom window and crawled back into the bed. "It's snowing," he said as he gathered Wu close, his back resting against his chest.

"Children'll be happy," Wu murmured, and yawned. "What time is it?"

"About 4:30," said Mako, wrapping his arms around Wu. "Go back to sleep."

"Mmmmm," was Wu's response, and his breathing slowed back down as he drifted off again.

Technically, Mako supposed, he should prefer Wu naked in bed. But Wu was often cold, and unless they were up to something, always wore pajamas to bed. Silk pajamas. In the winter, like now, he'd wear socks as well, his feet like little icebergs. Mako was used to the sinuous slide of Wu's pajamas against his skin. In fact - and he'd never tell Wu, not in a million years - but thanks to Wu's pajamas he'd get instantly aroused whenever he felt any kind of silk against his skin nowadays. He himself wore nothing but a pair of undershorts. He'd prefer to wear nothing at all - he had a tendency to get overheated when he slept - but you never knew when a child was going to appear in your bed.

Their bed was a beautiful thing, dark wood that had been carved all over with various spirit creatures. The woman who had made the bed had wanted to add bed curtains, but Mako had put his foot down. He didn't like closed-in spaces. Wu had agreed without a fuss, even though Mako suspected he liked the bed curtains. Which was just like him. Mako had spent years assuming that Wu was rich and selfish and spoiled. He was rich, to be sure; but he hadn't really been spoiled as a child (ignored, more like it) and he was generous to a fault. Wu threw money at everything without any idea whatsoever as to whether it was appropriate or not. Not dissimilar to Asami, really. Mako smiled to himself, thinking of Asami buying him an entire new suit and shoes for their first date. She'd had no clue at all what that had meant to him; he had been torn between genuinely lusting for the suit itself and struggling with humiliation at the idea of being bought by the richest girl in town. He'd gotten good use out of that suit, though; he'd worn it for years, to special occasions and a wedding and even Wu's second coronation.

He'd worn a different suit to Wu's abdication, though. Wu had made sure of that.

Wu shifted and mumbled something in his sleep, and Mako pulled him even closer, resting his cheek on his head. Wu always smelled just slightly of jasmine, mixed in with a bit of sandalwood and something that was just his own personal smell. Mako had never thought much about how things smelled; for years he'd smelled the streets, a mix of dirty pavement, grease, smoke and humanity. Living with Wu at the Four Elements Hotel had smelled fresh and clean due to their daily maid service. It wasn't until they had moved into the Sato Estate that he'd smelled Wu's lingering scent, really. When Wu had moved to Ba Sing Se he'd

missed his smell so much that he'd ached with it. Wu had left a few things behind when he'd gone; a pot of mostly used hair pomade; a sliver of finely-milled soap in the shower; one of his yellow scarves, accidentally kicked under his bed. Mako had gathered them all together very carefully and had put them in a box and had kept them close, much like a lovesick maiden from one of the romances Wu loved to read. He'd cried more than once into the yellow silk, spotting it forever with saltwater stains. He'd gotten rid of the pomade and soap when Wu had moved back to Republic City, but the yellow silk scarf was still tucked away in the same box, along with the blanket Naoki had been wrapped in when he found her next to her dead mother, the first milk tooth that Zhi had lost, and a lock of Meili's baby curls. He had the first thing Bolin had ever written, too - his name - scrawled on an old piece of blank newsprint Mako had salvaged from a dumpster and had kept, all those years, wrapped carefully in oilskin and tucked into his pocket.

Mako liked his memories tactile.

He liked everything tactile, really, which is why he loved to hold his husband like this. Wu had never shared a bed with anyone before Mako; he enjoyed cuddling for a few minutes but would roll off to himself when he was ready to go to sleep. Once he was asleep, though, Mako could hold him all night long and it made no difference, Wu just slept through it. Mako had slept for so long next to Bolin that he had a hard time sleeping alone. He hated it with a passion. Wu rarely went out of town without him, but the few times he'd visited Zaofu with the children or gone to Ba Sing Se alone Mako had been miserable all night, tossing and turning and finally ending up downstairs on one of the sofas, lonely and unable to sleep. He couldn't stand to be in their bed if Wu wasn't there.

Wu shifted again, one of his arms flinging forward on to his pillow.

Mako wasn't obtuse. He knew what people said about him. Not everyone, of course; but he'd overheard the term gold digger more than a few times. And sure, he'd be the first to admit that once upon a time he'd gotten a thrill from the thought that the rest of the street rats would know that *he* was dating the beautiful Asami Sato, wealthy heiress. Same thrill that Asami got from dating handsome Mako, street trash. Oh, her father had been beyond furious that Asami went out with him; Asami knew it at the time. It wasn't just because Mako was a bender. Sato had been a snob, probably because of his own less than stellar beginnings. Mako and Asami, though, they could laugh about it now, all these years later.

Wu was wealthy. Beyond wealthy. Far beyond what Asami had. Mako was the one meeting with the various accountants and financial advisers; Wu had handed it all over to him. Wu hadn't even known how to buy things properly when Mako had first come to work for him; he'd always just put everything on account or had one of his other bodyguards pay for him. Mako changed that; he made sure Wu had cash on him and showed him how to look at the price of things, how to pay, how to make sure he got the right amount of change. It was all a game to teenage Wu, of course; he could have bought the entire city, most likely, and still had money to burn. They had agreed, when the children had come, that Mako would make sure they all understood money. How to save it, spend it, invest it. Wu was still hopeless with that sort of thing - and most likely always would be - but he was the one taking the children with him to distribute food to the people living in the park or teaching the street kids how to read

and write. *"It's not my fault I was raised the way I was,"* Wu had told him once. *"But it's my fault if I raise them the same way."*

No. He hadn't fallen in love with Wu because of his money.

His arm was going a little numb where Wu's head was laying on it. He didn't want to move him, however; didn't want to sleep without him close. He shifted him just slightly; Wu twitched a little but settled right back down. Mako buried his face down into his neck. "I love you," he whispered. "I love you so much."

The snow kept falling as he fell back asleep.

Doing Something Together

Chapter Notes

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

"That one was pretty, what's it called?" Mako opened his eyes from his spot sprawled across the sofa and glanced over at Wu, sitting in front of the yangqin, bamboo hammers in hand.

"*Spring Comes to the Cherry Trees*," Wu answered. "Chun sent me the music. She told me it was a favorite of my mother's. The composer was from Omashu, so I'm not surprised my mother knew it."

"I just want to know how you get your wrists to move that fast," Mako said. "They're blurring they move so fast."

"Lots and lots of practice," said Wu, rolling his eyes. "Believe me, if you heard a professional play, you'd see their wrists moving a lot faster than mine. I'm not near good enough for that."

"Still better than your singing," said Mako, and Wu stuck his tongue out at him.

"Ten out of ten badgermoles agree that my singing is the best."

"What do badgermoles know?" Mako grinned and Wu snorted.

"Why don't you try and ride one and see?"

"Thanks, I'll pass. Play me another one."

"Bossy bossy bossy," murmured Wu as he shuffled through his music. "Oh, here's one you haven't heard. It's from the Fire Nation. Huan was kind enough to send me some music with his last letter. I'm warning you, though, I haven't practiced this one that much, so no complaining if the tempo's a bit slow and I make mistakes."

"Like I'd know the difference. You could play terribly and it'd probably sound the same to me."

Wu turned slowly to stare at him. "Really?" he said, an eyebrow raised.

"What?" Mako stared back. Wu continued to stare and Mako threw up his hands. "Now what did I say?"

Wu sighed and shook his head. "It's to your benefit that you are so good looking because you'd certainly never be able to use *words* in order to seduce someone, would you?"

"Hey!"

Wu turned back to his yangqin and gave the music one last glance before picking up his hammers again. He launched into the song, wrists sending the hammers quickly across the

strings, tripping along the high notes before swooping to vibrate along the low notes.

"I know this song," said Mako, and something in his voice caused Wu to turn and look at him, hammers trailing off. Mako was sitting up on the sofa, hands clenched into fists, brow furrowed. "No! Don't stop playing it! I know this song from somewhere!"

Wu nodded and started again from where he left off. He had some trouble with a difficult glissando but got through it; he nearly dropped the hammers when he realized Mako was humming along. He managed to keep going, however. Kept going, that is, until Mako started to softly sing.

"Hushabye, hushabye, you're a good little boy, close your eyes now

My little boy is a good baby, sleep baby, sleep."

Wu's fingers stilled the hammers on the strings. "Why, Mako. I had no idea you could sing like that." He was staring at Mako. "Did your mother sing that song?"

Mako nodded, looking a bit stunned. "To me, and to Bo, too. She used to sing all the time, my mother. When she was cooking, or doing things around the house. My father used to pretend to look around the house, trying to find the songbird. I don't...I think there was more to the song, but I don't remember all of it, just that little bit."

Wu stood up from his chair and carried the music over to the sofa, sitting next to Mako. He showed him. "Here are all of the lyrics. It must be a folk variant of some kind; these lyrics say *sleep tight* instead of *hushabye*. Well, that's very common for these old songs. I'm not sure where Huan picked it up. You know him, he finds things that tickle his fancy and sends them. But I'm sure we could find out more, if you wanted to."

Mako ran his fingers along the paper. "I don't know how to read this."

Wu pointed them out. "Well, getting past the notes, you can still read the lyrics, yes?" At Mako's nod, he said, "Well here, look. This is what you were singing, right there." He moved his finger along. "You see? Here, let me show you." He stood up and went back to the yangqin, sitting himself back down, putting the music up where he could read it. He motioned to Mako to come over. "So here is the first line, with the *sleep tight*s that you were singing as *hushabyes*." Wu slowly tapped it out with one hammer, using the other hammer to move along the paper as he played. "The notes follow the words. Do you see?" Mako nodded. "Do think you could follow along?"

"I can try."

"Let's go slowly, then. Just sing the lyrics you remember, don't worry about what these ones say." Wu tapped out the melody while Mako sang the first line. "Yes! There, you see, you've got it!" He turned and looked at Mako again. "Mako, you have a very nice singing voice. Why don't you ever sing?"

Mako shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't know. Singing seems so...frivolous." He frowned. "No, that's not the word I mean. I don't mean I think it's silly or anything, I just never had

time for it, I guess?" He thought for a moment. "I always thought of singing as something my mother did when she was happy. I wasn't very happy for a long time. I guess that's it." He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again.

"What?" Wu cocked his head.

"Well, I...never mind. It's kind of stupid."

"Mako! That's not like you to say that! What is it?"

"Do you...could you teach me? How to read that, I mean?" Mako was staring at the sheet of music.

"To read music, you mean?" Wu smiled at him. "Of course I could. If you want an accompaniment to singing, though, I should probably get myself another pipa. It's been quite a few years, but I should be able to pick it up again." He shook his head ruefully. "Or at least I hope so."

"You play the pipa?" Mako gave him such a look that Wu laughed.

"Of course. The pipa and the ruan as well. Although I always did prefer the pipa. I also play the flute and the erhu, although really, I am not at all accomplished on the erhu. In fact, my poor erhu tutor used to tear her hair out over me, I'm sure. It's my own fault, of course. I never practiced, it always sounded like some sort of wounded animal in its death throes. Oh Mako, don't look so surprised. This is the sort of thing that princes do. You already know I can dance just about any dance ever danced in the Earth Kingdom going back a thousand years."

"But...you've been playing the yangqin!"

"Well, yes, when I found out my mother used to play I wanted to learn. But it's not the best for accompanying voice. The pipa is better. I had a beautiful one, I loved it. Gone, of course, like everything else in the palace. Still though. I could easily get another here."

Mako threw his arms up. "How is it that I didn't know you could play all those instruments?"

"How did I not know that you could sing?" Wu waved one of his hammers at him. "You've been holding out on me, mister." He smiled. "If you would like to learn, I would be willing to teach you. It's rare that I can teach you anything of use, you know. Most of my skills don't really apply to a normal life, I'm afraid. This piece of music is far too complicated to start a beginner on, however. We'll need to get you something easier. We can go to the music store in town. They have pipas there as well, I've seen them when I've shopped."

"Can we go today?" Mako was still holding the music in his hands.

"Of course we can," said Wu. He put his hammers down onto the yangqin.

"Let me get my keys," said Mako.

Chapter End Notes

When my children were babies I had a CD of international lullabies that I used to play and sing for them. One of them was *Edo Komoriuta*, from Japan. It was one of my favorites; hauntingly beautiful. Sometimes I still find myself humming or singing it. Naturally I gave it to Mako's mother to sing as well.

In Formal Wear

Chapter Notes

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

"My underwear is crawling up my butt," Korra said, squirming a bit. "I knew this tight dress was a big mistake."

"Stop that," Asami said out of the corner of her mouth. "People are taking pictures." Asami smiled brilliantly and tossed a flirtatious look over the back of her shoulder, posing for the cameras. She was in her customary red, her hair marcelled in the front and braided into an intricate knot in the back, showing off her long neck.

"They can take a picture of the Avatar dealing with her wedgie, then," said Korra. She flashed a big cheesy grin and a thumbs up at a man who kept shouting at her to look at his camera.

"Well, take them off," murmured Wu at her, hand tucked into Mako's arm. "Who's to know?"

Korra perked up at this idea.

"Don't you even *think* about it," said Asami through a clenched smile. "Don't you *dare*."

"I didn't mean out here on the red carpet," Wu said. He beamed at a group of shrieking fangirls and waved. "Hello, there!" He leaned a little closer to Korra. "Do it in the ladies' room inside."

"Absolutely not," said Asami, the smile never leaving her face. "Mako, tell him to stop encouraging her."

Mako had opted for the long suffering and put upon look for his red carpet appearance. "Can't we go inside yet?" He turned his glare onto a woman who was leaning too forward over one of the red velvet ropes, reaching for Wu's sleeve. "NO!" he barked, and she skittered backwards in alarm, slamming into the people behind her.

"We're waiting for your brother and Opal," smiled Wu, making sure the photographers got his best side. "Mako, if you aren't going to smile then at least try to look brooding and dangerous or something. Go for tall, dark and sexy."

"What?" Mako scowled. "I'm not doing that." A woman from the crowd took one look at him and fainted dead away.

"Yes, just like that," said Wu. "That's perfect."

"Ladies and gentlemen!" boomed out Shiro Shinobi's voice from the live mic on the small temporary stage that was set up to the side of the brand new mover theater. "Here he comes! Yoshitoki! Private eye for hire!"

Bolin stepped forward in a very tight and very flashy suit, tipping an equally flashy fedora over his eye, winking at the bank of cameras that swiveled towards him. Women (and a not insignificant number of men) shrieked in excitement. Shinobi started to ask him questions; Bolin answered into the mic as his co-star, Ginger, walked up to stand on the other side of him.

"If he bends over he's going to rip the seam right out of those pants. I can't believe he even got the zipper up," said Opal, coming up the nearly abandoned red carpet on Mako's other side. She looked breathtaking in a gown of dark orange. She was also shaped like an orange, seeing as she was eight and a half months pregnant. Mako immediately gave her his arm.

"You sure you can manage tonight?" Mako asked her. "Are you feeling okay? You don't look okay."

Opal shot him a glare.

"Such tact," said Wu. He came around Opal's other side. "Darling, you do look like you might need to sit down, though. Let Mako take you inside, at least. I can fetch you something cool to drink."

"I'm fine," Opal said. She grimaced and hunched over a bit, pressing her hand to her belly.

Korra moved closer as well. "You sure about that?" She gave Opal a fairly critical look.

"Stop fussing at me, all of you!" snapped Opal. "Stop hovering! It's just a false contraction, I've been having them for two days now."

Mako looked at Korra, frowning. "Can you check her?" Mako asked.

Korra shook her head. "I'd need some water. I guess I could go and find some inside. I'm no midwife, though. She needs a midwife."

Opal grabbed at Mako, pressing her hand to her belly even harder. "Oh, I don't think this was such a good idea."

"That's what I thought," said Mako, mouth grim. Opal was leaning on him heavily. "Opal, we need to take you to a hospital."

"Opal, please. I know you want to support Bo, but..." Asami trailed off as Opal started to sway. "Is she...*Mako!*"

Mako already had her, though. Opal sagged down and Mako swung her up into his arms. "Korra, make me a path." Suddenly he looked down at himself. "Uh..."

"My water broke," said Opal faintly. "Oh. Oh, Mako, please take me inside. Not here in front of all of these people."

"I'll call for a healer," said Asami, and she moved as fast as her long dress would let her towards the front doors. Mako carried Opal in his arms as Korra walked in front of them,

giving anyone left standing in front of them a little gust of wind to move them out of the way. Wu followed along behind.

"I don't think the healer is going to make it in time," gasped Opal, and her body arched up as she shook with a contraction. "Oh, Mako! Mako!"

"It's okay, I've got you," Mako said, and they were inside. "Wu, lock those damn doors so we don't have half the city paparazzi in here taking pictures." Wu immediately turned to lock both sets of double doors. "You!" He barked at one of the catering staff, staring at them with his mouth wide open. "Go and bring me clean towels and some hot water."

"Uh," said the man, and then he fled.

"I'll do it," said Korra. "I need water if I'm going to be able to do anything. I'll find towels, too." She tried to run; with an exasperated sound she tore a slit right up the side of her dress to her thigh before hauling the whole thing up over her knees to dash into where the caterers had set up.

"This is going too fast," Opal said, clutching at Mako. Another contraction hit, and she cried out with it.

Mako laid Opal down on one of the ornate red velvet couches that decorated the lobby. "Wu, help me get her shoes and underwear off." Opal arched up with another contraction and he grabbed her hands.

"Don't leave me," panted Opal. "Oh, Bolin, I want Bolin."

Wu and Mako exchanged a look. "If I go to get him everyone else will come in too," Wu said, and Mako nodded.

"I know. Get her shoes off."

Wu quickly unbuckled her shoes, sliding them off. "Forgive the indelicacy, darling," he said, and hiked up her dress to remove her stockings and underwear. "Oh. Oh my. Mako, I am not an expert on females or anything, but I am pretty sure I am seeing a head there." Wu gestured wildly.

"Switch places with me," said Mako, and Wu sat down on the couch, smoothing back Opal's hair and taking her into his arms.

"Don't worry, darling. We're here." He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Mako will take care of everything, you know he always does."

Opal looked up at him, tears in her eyes, before her body arched up again. She screamed.

"Opal, I see the baby's head. I think it's time for you to push." Mako's voice was calm. Asami came running, before skidding to a stop, hand to her mouth.

"Right now? I called the healer but it will be a few minutes."

"We don't have a few minutes," said Mako. "Can you please go and make sure the healer gets to us?" He never took his eyes off of Opal. Asami turned and ran. "Wu, get her up, let gravity help her out, she needs to sit up." Between the two of them they got her up on her knees, and she screamed again, shaking in Wu's arms. "Okay, Opal, the baby's halfway out! I've got my hands on it. One more good push, come on. I know you can do it!"

Opal screamed again, and Mako caught the baby as it came barreling into the world. "Gotcha," he whispered, and Opal started to sob.

"Opal, she's fine. You were right, she's a girl!" Mako looked at her, smiling, tears in his eyes. At that moment the baby let out with a scream of such magnitude that the walls of the lobby practically shook. Opal fell backwards onto Wu and the couch, and held her arms out. "Give me half a sec," said Mako, and he looked around for a moment. "Nothing for it," he said, and shot a very thin and precise line of flame from his fist, searing the umbilical cord in two. "Here she is. Here's your Mommy, baby girl." He handed the baby into Opal's arms before shrugging out of his suit jacket and wrapping it around Opal and the baby. "Korra will be back soon with towels so we can clean the both of you up a little. And the healer is on the way."

"Thank you," sobbed Opal. "Oh, she's so beautiful. So beautiful."

"She most certainly is," said Wu, wrapping his arms around Opal. "Oh, well done, Opal. She's perfect." He kissed her again on the cheek. She rested against him.

Mako smoothed Opal's dress down a bit and made sure she was settled on the couch before leaning over to peer at the baby. "Hi there, baby," he said, giving her the gentlest of kisses. "We'll clean you up in just a moment, I promise. I don't think they're going to want to keep this sofa, though."

"Pearl, I would like you to meet your uncles," said Opal through her tears, smiling. "This one here is your Uncle Wu. He will call you darling and spoil you. This other one is your Uncle Mako. He took care of your Daddy when he was a little boy and he'll take care of you, too."

"Always," said Mako. "Pearl, is it?"

"Bolin and I had already decided to name her that if she was a girl."

"Pearl is just perfect," said Wu. He smiled as Pearl opened her eyes and made a little squeaky noise. "Welcome to the world, darling. We've all been longing to meet you. Apparently you were quite impatient to meet us as well!"

"Typical Beifong woman, always has to be in charge," said Mako, and Opal laughed.

"Yes," she said, and together they watched the baby and waited for everyone else to arrive.

True story: my great-aunt was pregnant with her seventh child (my father's cousin). By the seventh baby she was pretty nonchalant about the whole going into labor and giving birth thing. So when her contractions started, she just went along with her business, figuring she had plenty of time. Her water broke while she was washing dishes; she had her oldest daughter run next door to ask the neighbor to come and keep an eye on the younger children for her and sent one of her boys to go and fetch the doctor. By the time the neighbor had taken off her apron and washed her hands and walked next door my great-aunt was on the floor of the kitchen and the baby was already halfway out. Apparently the neighbor hit the floor and delivered the baby right then and there. By the time the doctor got there the neighbor had already put my great-aunt to bed, cleaned and wrapped the baby in blankets and was having the oldest girl make a pot of tea!

Dancing

Chapter Notes

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

"Wu? You up there?" Mako called up the stairs to the third floor. The library was up there, as well as Wu's small study. Wu took his correspondence seriously; Mako knew Wu spent at least an hour a day and sometimes far more on it. Friends got letters, certainly; so did people Wu was hoping to involve in his charities. He also dealt with matters of state that still cropped up despite his abdication years before. Everything got a personal response in Wu's beautiful and distinctive calligraphy. Mako took the stairs up two at a time. "Are you there?"

"In my study," Wu called, and Mako walked across the landing and poked his head in the door. It was open, which meant people were welcome to disturb him. When it was closed, it meant Wu wasn't to be disturbed for anything less than blood or fire (not that fire hadn't happened more than a few times; the consequence of having a young firebender in the house). Wu smiled at him from behind his desk.

"Am I bugging you?" Mako asked. Wu shook his head.

"No, just looking through some things. How was work?" Wu gestured for him to come in. Mako came in and shut the door behind him.

"Fine, nothing special." Mako sat down on the overstuffed leather sofa, putting a bag on the cushion next to him. "Kind of boring, actually. Two robberies and a missing persons which I am about ninety-five percent sure is not a missing persons at all but a husband taking off with another woman and the wife not willing to accept it. I'll follow up on it, of course, but unless the wife offed them both I don't think it's a coincidence that the girlfriend is missing as well, especially as she told her flatmate as well as some friends she was running off with him." Mako shrugged. "Anyhow! That's not why I came up here." He grinned. "I have something for you. Aren't you going to ask me what's in the bag?"

"And ruin your fun of dangling it in front of me? Never." Wu laughed.

"It's a preeeeeeeeeeesent," said Mako, picking up the bag and waving it enticingly. "Okay, be a good boy and close your eyes. No peeking!"

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Wu, closing his eyes and putting his hands in front of them for good measure. He could hear the bag rustling and Mako moving; the unmistakable sound of a record being put onto the Victrola. "I know what you're doing!" he said, and Mako's tone was amused.

"Cheater."

"I'm not," Wu protested. "I can still hear, you know." He smiled. The crackle and hiss of the needle hitting the vinyl came before the first twangy sounds of the recording started. "Oh, Mako," Wu said, and Mako put his hands over Wu's hands.

"Nice, hmm?" Mako gently moved both of their hands away. Sitting on Wu's desk was the record cover.

"Little June! Mako, where did you get this?" Wu picked it up to examine it. Little June's voice swirled into the study, rough and sultry. She was Mako's favorite. Wu tended to like his jazz bright and sparkling, but Mako liked the slower and sadder songs.

"One of the robberies was across the street from the music shop. You know, the one over on Peony Avenue."

"Shun Gao's," said Wu with a nod.

"Right, that's the one. I poked my head in to see if anyone there had seen anything last night. The manager was there. She hadn't seen anything, but we got to chatting for a minute and anyhow, long story short, she just got copies of this today, it's brand new. She hadn't even put them out yet. I just got lucky, you know Little June sells right out."

"Oh, it's good," said Wu, closing his eyes and leaning back in his chair to listen to the chorus. He opened his eyes to see Mako sitting on the edge of his desk, smiling down at him. Mako put his hand out and pulled Wu up from his chair, leading him around the desk to the rug in the middle of the room. He kept hold of his hand, wrapping his other arm low around Wu's waist. Mako started to sway with the music, pulling Wu along with him. "Why, Officer," Wu murmured. "Are you supposed to be doing this on duty?"

"Can't help it," Mako answered. "Blame it on the music." He leaned down to kiss Wu, hand sliding out of Wu's hand to cup around the back of Wu's head. He pulled Wu in even tighter as he kissed him, his hips continuing to move. He kept kissing him, even when the needle bumped along at the end of the record, music fading into tinny skips and scratches.

"Song's over," Wu said finally, breaking away for air. His eyes were closed, his head tilted back.

"Don't care," Mako said, and he picked Wu up and pushed him against the wall. "Don't care at all."

Chapter End Notes

Little June was inspired by American jazz/blues vocalist Ma Rainey. The song Mako brought home for Wu is based on [this recording](#).

Cooking/Baking

"So which is better, the one behind the Four Elements or the one behind Kwong's?" Wu was sitting on a rock, legs crossed, leaning forward. He had one eye on his two year old daughter, and the other on the gaggle of children sitting in front of him.

"Kwong's, they got better food, but they get mad if you go into the dumpster," answered one of the girls. Ine was her name.

"Yeah, they chase you off." This from a boy in his early teens, mouth full of food. Naoki took his spoon from his hand and stared at it.

"I see." Wu waved at his daughter. "Naoki, darling, give that back, please, that is Jin-Jin's spoon, not yours."

"Long as we don't make no trouble they don't mind so much at the Four Elements," said the aforementioned Jin-Jin. "But they don't got a separate dumpster for the regular trash so you gotta dig deeper to find some dinner."

"This food is real good, mister," said one of the younger boys.

"Well, excellent! I will be sure and pass along your compliments to the chef. He used to cook in the Navy, you know, and there is always too much food left over. So I thought you might enjoy it. What's your name, darling?"

"I call myself Cork, 'cause I can swim real good," said the boy. "I bounce up and down inna water like a cork."

"I see! Well, Cork, I will be sure to tell LoLo you liked his komodo chicken. Now tell me, children, do you come to this park often?"

"Sometimes," said one of the girls, who had earlier given her name as Spring. "When the cops don't chase us off. These are rich houses here, them people don't like us nearby."

"Well, I live just over there," Wu pointed to the rather impressive facade of his three-story home, "and I don't mind a bit."

Jin-Jin squinted. "But that's the house where the king lives. That's what I heard. Qi said so."

"Ah, you know Qi?" Wu smiled. "Well, technically I am a former king. I abdicated. That means I gave it all up. I'm just a prince now."

The children stared at him. "Is it really true?" asked Spring suspiciously.

"It is, indeed," said Wu. "You may ask Qi, if you don't believe me."

Cork pointed at Naoki, who was sitting on the ground, digging with a stick she'd found after giving up the spoon. "And that's yer daughter?"

"She is," said Wu.

"So she's a *princess*?"

"She is, yes. A princess who is getting mud all over her shirt, I am afraid." Wu smiled down at her.

"Mister, can we have some more?" The youngest child, a girl of about nine or ten, was looking longingly at the pot of food Wu had brought with him.

"Certainly you may, Natsiq. That's why I brought it with me. That goes for all of you, mind. So please eat." Natsiq immediately dug in.

"So what do people call you? If you're a prince?" This from Jin-Jin again.

"Well. Generally speaking, they call me Your Highness."

"So we can call you Yer Highness? Ain't never met a real live prince before."

Wu smiled. "If you like. Although Wu is fine as well."

"Uh oh, mist- I mean, Yer Highness, we gotta go. There's a cop comin'!" Ine looked alarmed.

Wu glanced over to see Mako walking across the park, hands in his pockets, his long legs making short work of the distance. "Ah, that's my fiancé. I suspect he's just gotten off work and is coming to see what Naoki and I are up to. I don't believe he will make you leave, darlings."

"Yer boyfriend is a cop?" Cork's eyes went wide.

"He is indeed. And I will let you in on a little secret, too. He once lived on the streets, with his younger brother. Just like you all do."

The children glanced at each other. "A cop did?" This from Spring.

"Well, he wasn't a police officer then, of course. But yes, he did. Ah, Mako! Let me introduce you. This is Spring and her brother Jin-Jin, Cork, Natsiq, Ine and...oh dear, I haven't gotten your name, darling. I am sorry."

"Oh, that's Zip. He don't talk much," said Cork. "They call him Zip 'cause he keeps his mouth zipped, you follow?"

"I follow, indeed. Children, this is my fiancé, Mako. Mako, please tell the children you are not here to chase them off."

"Hey, kids," said Mako, dropping down into a squat. "No worries. I'm not here to run you off."

"Daddy!" said Naoki, and she dropped her stick to jump up and barrel into him. "A dinner! A dinner in a park!"

Mako put his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "I can see that." He sniffed at the pot. "Is this where my dinner went?"

Wu laughed. "No, there's some left for you at the house."

"It's good," said Natsiq. Mako took up one of the spoons Wu had brought with him and sat cross-legged on the ground, digging into the dinner. He looked around at the kids. "It's getting cold at night. Where you kids sleeping?"

The children looked at each other, remaining silent.

"The underpass over on Willow Street? The abandoned sewage pipes? Please tell me you aren't squatting downtown. Those buildings are dangerous. You do know the rest of City Hall came down last week, right?"

Jin-Jin shrugged. "Don't matter."

Mako pointed his spoon at him. "It matters."

Jin-Jin scoffed. "So lemme guess. Yer gonna tell us to go to an orphanage."

Mako shook his head. "My brother and I only lasted two months at the orphanage before we ran away." Mako put some more food into the silent Zip's bowl. "Go on. Eat that."

"How come, Mister?" Ine leaned forward.

"My brother's an earthbender, and they found a farming family in the country that wanted to adopt him. They didn't want me, though, so they were going to separate us. So we ran away."

Spring nodded knowingly. "Yeah, they do that. That's why me and Jin-Jin, we stick together out here." She nodded at him and he nodded back.

"I didn't know that, Mako," said Wu.

Mako shrugged. "Bolin doesn't know it, either. I never told him."

"You a bender, too?" asked Natsiq. "Me, I'm a waterbender."

"Firebender," said Mako.

"Fire!" chirped Naoki happily, and she thrust her hands out, shooting out flames towards Cork, who scrambled out of the way.

"Naoki, we don't bend fire at people!" said Mako, and he put his hands over hers, extinguishing her. "*Never* at people." He glanced over at Cork. "Sorry, she's just figured out how to produce flame on her own. She's kind of a menace right now."

"Naw, that's okay, mister. She's still just a baby," said Cork, but he sat back down out of the line of fire.

"Listen, if you kids are with Natsiq here, you could head over to the abandoned sewage pipes over by the South Docks. They haven't been used for years, but they're structurally sound. So long as you keep near the entrance they're dry and safe. Natsiq can double check for any water there, but they should be okay. You know how to get into them? Back past the warehouses on Bay Street?"

Ine nodded. "I know how."

"The underpass is okay, too, but only if you stick together as a group. Sometimes the Triads hit that area, but they'll leave you alone if you stick together. But please, stay out of those buildings downtown. You have a problem, you tell the cop on the beat to come and find me. Mako. They know who I am."

"Some of them cops, they're real assholes," said Jin-Jin. Cork punched him in the arm.

"Hey, don't be sayin' that in front of the princess," he said, scandalized. "She's a *princess*. She don't need to be hearing those words!"

"Asshole," said Naoki, and she clapped her hands, pleased with herself. "Asshole!"

Jin-Jin looked chagrined. "Sorry 'bout that."

"Trust me, she's heard it before," said Mako dryly. "You kids have a problem with any of the other cops, you come here and find me."

"Mister! We can't go up to your fancy door!" Ine looked shocked at the mere suggestion.

"You know Qi?" asked Mako. At their nods he nodded back. "Well, find Qi, then. Qi can come and get me."

"Qi told us if we tried to roll Yer Highness or the baby that'd we'd be in for it," said Cork. "Me, I ain't messin' with Qi. Qi don't hardly never get mad, but a mad Qi?" Cork let out a whistle. "That's real bad news. Everybody knows that. Nobody be messin' with Qi."

The other children nodded. Even Zip. Mako looked amused.

"Well, darlings, I will inform Qi that we told you it was all right to contact Mako through Qi. That being said, it *is* getting late, and I should get Naoki home. If you come here tomorrow, I will bring you some more dinner. What do you say?" Wu smiled.

"Really? You mean it?" Cork's eyes were wide.

"I do, indeed."

"Can we bring somebody else?" Spring asked.

"Of course you may. There is plenty of food. Bring whomever you wish. I will see you tomorrow, yes?" Wu beamed at them. There was a rousing chorus of yes's, and good nights, and Yer Highnesses. Mako slung Naoki up on his shoulders, where she waved bye-bye in

proper princess fashion at everyone. Wu gathered together the pot - which was empty - as well as the bowls and spoons and walked off with Mako, arm in arm.

"Where did you get the idea to do that?" Mako asked, looking down at him.

"You were saying, last night, how you and Bolin used to make up pretend meals in your head, and it got me to thinking. I've seen the children in the park before, and Mako, they are all so very thin. I know it isn't enough. It's not nearly enough. But you know we have plenty of food, and I can certainly make sure we have enough for the children in the evenings. It's probably foolish of me, I know."

"You done real good, Yer Highness," Mako said with a smile, slipping into the street dialect. He looked back over his shoulder towards the children, still sitting together under the trees. "Real good."

In Battle, Side-By-Side

"But I still don't understand. Why don't you just pay them what they ask?" Wu surveyed the stalls of the outdoor marketplace, the bright colors of the canvas walls rippling a little in the breeze.

"Well, you can, but that's not the point. The point is, you haggle. They ask a price, you counter with something lower, and then it begins until you agree on a price you both can live with. I mean, nobody actually thinks you are going to pay them what they ask for. It's just not how it works." Mako put his hand to Wu's back and guided him into the first row of stalls. "What I really should have done was brought Bolin to show you. He haggles like a master. I'm nowhere near as good as he is. He's got a gift."

"I can't believe you never brought me here before!" Wu was practically bouncing with excitement.

"It wasn't really safe before. No decent bodyguard would bring their employer here." Mako scanned the crowd for potential problems. He might no longer be Wu's bodyguard but that didn't mean he couldn't keep a sharp eye out.

They wandered through the rows, Wu exclaiming in delight over everything he saw. Fresh fruits and vegetables; cloth and beautifully carved chopsticks, hair ornaments and buttons. Mako kept close behind him, making sure no one tried to pickpocket him. Wu screamed wealth; teenage Mako would have zeroed in on him in a heartbeat. Mako hauled one small boy off of him with a warning growl and a shake; when Wu realized what was happening he immediately pulled out a fistful of yuan and gave it to the boy. Mako sighed. Great. Now the rest of the street rats wandering the market would catch on and give him a go.

Wu was a hopeless haggler; he showed far too much excitement and his heart wasn't in it anyhow. He just wanted to buy what appealed to him and money had never been an object. Pretty soon his hands started to fill with bags, his cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling. Everything enraptured him, including the tea stand where buyers drank out of communal metal teacups.

"Oh, Mako! Do you really just drink out of the same cup as everyone else? Anyone could have used this cup!" Wu was laughing as he paid to get them both some tea. It was terrible tea, watery and scorched at the same time, but Wu didn't seem to care.

Wu sampled everything that there was to be sampled. He bought sauces, a bag of deliciously fragrant moon peaches (which they ate right there, standing to the side of the walkway, juice dripping all over their fingers), a pair of fine green leather gloves, a dancing butterfly on a stick and an old book by some two-century-old obscure Earth Kingdom poet that Wu knew and spent twenty minutes discussing with the bookseller.

"I'm having so much fun," Wu said, and Mako had to smile at him. It was the happiest he'd seen Wu in ages.

"Good," Mako said, and he meant it.

The jeweler's stall was on the end of one of the rows. Wu stopped and was looking through the goods. It was fairly whimsical stuff; lots of pieces of spirit animals in bright colors, not the kind of thing Wu would ever wear. He gave a gasp of pleasure when he saw the badgermole cufflinks, however. "Mako! Oh, Mako, look at these! Look at the badgermoles!" They were of gold, with two tiny slivers of jet for eyes. "Oh here, hold these," said Wu, shoving the bags Mako wasn't already carrying at him. As he turned back to take the cufflinks to look at them, a woman standing next to them snatched the cufflinks up.

Wu looked at her in some surprise. "I beg your pardon, Madam," he said. "I was looking at those."

The woman sniffed. "Not now you're not."

Mako sighed. She was clearly a plant to drive up the price; there was no way, based on how she was dressed, that she was the kind of woman who could just buy a pair of gold cufflinks on a whim. Before he could say anything, however, Wu frowned.

"Madam, I was showing interest in those first." A bit of a line started to show between his eyebrows.

The woman shrugged. "Give you ten thousand yuan for them," she said to the jeweler, who immediately started to protest that it was simply too little. This was Wu's cue to offer more money. Mako knew the routine. In fact, Bolin had scrounged up some food in trade doing the same exact thing, back in the day. Granted, he was a little surprised that a jeweler, of all people, would engage in it, but what did he know?

Wu, however, had not taken his eyes off of the woman. "Madam. I insist. You clearly saw and heard that I wished to purchase those cufflinks. Please return them to me so that I may do so."

The jeweler started to offer his apologies that sadly, the cufflinks were one of a kind, never to be replicated, but that he would gladly sell them to the highest bidder. Mako rolled his eyes. Pretty blatant, really.

Wu wasn't even paying attention to the jeweler, his eyes still fixed on the woman. "I *insist*." He was using his most aristocratic tone, shoulders pulled back, his nose in the air. This side of Wu didn't come out to play very often. Mako had only seen it a few times. As always, it got him instantly aroused.

The woman scowled. Clearly she didn't appreciate the way Wu was speaking to her. It was at this point that she was supposed to offer even more money, trying to drive the price up. Instead, she leaned into Wu. "Or *what*?" she asked nastily, and raised one finger to poke Wu in the chest.

Wu's eyes flared and the corners of his lips thinned. "Did you just *touch* us?" he asked, incredulous, sliding into the royal *we*. "Did you just *lay hands* upon us?" His hands clenched up in outraged fury. The jeweler dropped all pretense of not knowing the woman and tried to grab for her arm.

"I'll do it again, you snotty little fuck," said the woman, and she jammed her finger again into Wu's chest. Hard enough to make him reel back.

"Oh, shit," Mako said conversationally, to no one in particular. Before he could do anything else, Wu's hand had flashed out and cracked the woman so hard against her cheek that she stumbled backwards a bit, her cheek already darkening to show Wu's palm print. *Huh, I had no idea he had it in him to hit that hard*, Mako thought as he dropped their bags to grab Wu around the waist. "Wu! Wu! Stop!" he said, pulling him backwards.

"You piece of shit," the woman screeched, and she launched herself at Wu. Mako grunted in annoyance, twisting Wu to the side and taking the fist she had meant for Wu on his shoulder. *Dammit, that hurt*, he thought, arms tightening around Wu.

"Okay, okay, that's enough," Mako bellowed. "I'm a cop! Everyone back off and cool down, right now!" Wu kicked between his legs, catching the woman on her shin. The woman howled and kicked back, catching Mako in the meat of his calf. He grunted in pain. "Wu! Damn it! Stop that right now!" The jeweler had grabbed the woman's arm, remonstrating with her, but she shook him off, trying to get around Mako's bulk in order to get at Wu. "Seriously! I mean it! Back off, lady! I *will* arrest you!" He caught the jeweler's eye. "Get her to back off! *Now!*" The jeweler ran around to the front of the stall, grabbing at the woman's arms. A crowd had gathered at this point, cheering and hooting. The woman yanked herself out of the jeweler's grasp and darted around Mako, aiming for Wu. Another kick from Wu caught her in the solar plexus and she shrieked.

"How *dare* you! *You do not touch us!*" Wu spat out, practically vibrating in his fury. Mako caught a young girl inching towards their bags.

"Touch those bags and I will toss your ass in a cell overnight," he said to her, fiercely, and she dropped the bag holding Wu's book and melted her way back into the crowd. He turned back to look at the woman just as she lunged forward, her head poised for a headbutt to end all headbutts. Mako yanked Wu up and out of the way without thinking and the woman staggered past them under her own momentum, flying head first into the crowd.

"ENOUGH," roared Mako, and he let go of Wu to shoot an arc of flame over his head. "That is ENOUGH!" People in the crowd skittered back. "Everyone! I'm a cop and I am telling you, back off! Right now!" He glared at Wu. "You! Pick up our bags and then don't you move again until I tell you to. And keep your mouth *shut*." He turned to the jeweler. "Whoever she is, you'd better convince her right now to back off or else I am not kidding when I tell you I'm going to arrest her." The jeweler nodded and pulled the woman up off of the street, speaking quickly and quietly to her.

Mako turned back to Wu, who had gathered their bags together and was holding them, jaw still thrust out, trembling. "She touched me," Wu said. "She can't do that."

Mako sighed. "Wu."

Wu lifted his chin up again. "You don't need to tell me we aren't in Ba Sing Se and I am not a king any longer. I am aware of this." He swallowed, and brought one hand up to his face to cover his eyes. "She *touched* me," he said apologetically.

Mako sighed again and turned back to the jeweler and the woman. "You really a cop? Then you arrest *him*," she pointed to Wu, "for assault."

Mako raised one eyebrow. "Fine. And in return I'll arrest *you* for creating a public disturbance and fighting, since you were the one who started it. You want to talk about the little game the two of you were playing, trying to jack up the price of those cufflinks? Extortion? Fraud? Bet I could make something stick. Not to mention the newspapers would love to get their hands on it." He shook his head at the woman. "You know who that is? Prince Wu. Frankly, I'm shocked the paparazzi aren't already here." A glance towards the jeweler. "I don't know that you want people reading in the paper that you're using a plant to jack up your prices. And believe me, with *him* involved? The papers would jump at the chance to report it. Best that the both of you just walk away, forget this ever happened. You do it, so will we."

The jeweler jerked his head into a nod and pried the cufflinks out of the woman's fingers. She hadn't let go of them during the entire fight. He walked over to Wu. "Please accept my apologies," he said, and extended his hand with them. After a moment Wu reached out and took them. "A gift. Wear them in good health, Your Highness. Again, my deepest apologies." He looked over at Mako, who nodded at him. "Come on," he said to the woman, and yanked her away, still glaring, around behind the back of his stall.

Wu swallowed. "I'm sorry," he said softly. Mako sighed.

"You okay? Did she get you anywhere?" Wu shook his head. "Okay, good." Mako ignored the throbbing in his shoulder and his calf. "We should go before the paparazzi does actually show up. Here, give me the bags. Give me those cufflinks, too, before someone fishes them out of your pocket." He started walking back to where they had parked the car. Wu walked beside him, silent, head down. "Come on, don't look like that. It's okay. Just a little scuffle, no permanent damage." They walked on a bit in silence.

"Would you say that was good haggling?" Wu asked, suddenly. He looked up at Mako, his eyes dancing. "After all, I got those cufflinks for free. I daresay even Bolin isn't that good."

"Wu!" Mako didn't know whether to be amused or horrified. He supposed he was both, at the same time, as usual with Wu.

Wu just laughed and tucked his arm into Mako's as they left the marketplace.

Arguing

It was very late by the time Wu got home. Mako had spent the last hour of the wait pacing, looking out the window, fighting the urge to get in the car himself and go and find him. Finally a cab pulled up and Wu got out. Mako flung open the front door and waited, arms crossed over his chest.

"It's after two in the morning," Mako said as Wu walked past him, into the house. He kept his voice down in order not to wake anyone else up.

"If you say so," said Wu, just as quietly. He took off his coat and hung it up in the hall closet.

"Where have you been? And where the hell is Qi?"

Wu turned and looked at Mako, and his voice rose, just slightly. "I was at the dinner that you promised you were going to attend with me. Because you promised and I assumed that meant I'd have alternative transportation, I gave Qi the night off. When you neglected to come home from work this evening, I took a cab. Any other questions for me? I'm tired and I'd like to go to bed." Wu walked past him again, down the main entrance hall, towards the stairs.

Mako followed behind him. "Since when do these dinners last this late?"

Wu shrugged as he walked up the stairs. "They don't."

"Then where the hell have you been?" Mako grabbed at his elbow. Wu turned on him with a raised eyebrow before very deliberately removing Mako's hand.

"Out," was Wu's reply, and he continued to walk up the stairs, across the landing into their bedroom. Mako followed, shutting the door behind him.

"What does that mean? *Out*?" Mako's voice had gotten louder.

Wu walked over to his dresser and began to remove his cravat. Pin out first; into his jewelry case. "Well, last time I checked, out meant...*out*. Perhaps it means something different here in Republic City."

"Knock it off, Wu."

Wu didn't answer; just unwound the cravat and then took off his jacket, draping it neatly across the clothes stand next to the dresser.

"Seriously. Answer me, where the fuck were you until two in the morning?"

Wu turned his head. Mako could tell by the flatness of his gaze that Wu was truly angry; he was still and quiet, never a good sign. "No, darling. I believe the question we should be addressing at this particular juncture in time is where were *you* at seven this evening when we were supposed to leave for dinner?"

"I got caught at work! Look, I was going to call, but I wasn't anywhere near a phone."

"Of course you weren't." Wu took out his cufflinks and removed his shirt.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Wu shrugged his shoulders.

"You're starting to piss me off, here," said Mako, arms firmly crossed against his chest again.

"Oh dear. However will I cope?" said Wu, sitting down to take off his shoes.

"Look, are you going to answer me or not?"

"Hmmm," said Wu, placing his shoes neatly next to the clothes stand. "Apparently I have been unclear. My most abject apologies. To wit: I foresee that getting a response to your queries tonight shall be inexorably unsatisfying for you." The socks followed the shoes.

"Cut out that bullshit." Mako could feel his temper rising.

Wu sighed deeply. "You know what they say. Vulgarly is the sign of an unoriginal and lazy mind." The trousers were next.

"Oh, fuck off."

Wu tsked, and reached in to his dresser to pull out a pair of pajamas.

"Do you have any idea how worried I was? I had no idea where you were, no idea what time you were coming home!" Mako's hands were on his hips. Flame was surging up in his blood, teasing at the edges of his consciousness.

"It is a very troublesome feeling, is it not?" The pajama trousers were on.

"Is that what this is about? Is this some sort of revenge? That is so not fair. Wu, I don't stay late because I want to! It's my fucking job!"

Wu turned to him and raised one eyebrow. "And what I do is not, is that the case? My pursuits are just frivolous little pastimes, something to keep the purposeless royal busy and out of everyone's hair?"

"It's not the same thing at all and you know it. My job is important!"

Wu gave up any pretense of buttoning up his pajama top. "Oh, of course. Because everyone knows that there's nothing more important than fighting crime! Certainly, making sure that homeless children have at least one nourishing meal a day and access to some health care and the basics of education is simply trivial. After all, they are just street trash! We certainly can't allocate any tax money in order to help them!"

"Don't put words in my mouth-"

Wu cut him right off. "Do you know why I go to these dinners? Most of which are, yes, entirely tedious and full of simpering sycophants that are willing to give me money in return for my attention, for my attendance at one of their distastefully overdone *nouveau riche* parties. Do you know why? Do you think it's because I enjoy bland hor d'oeuvres or slightly inebriated society matrons trying to weave their perfectly manicured fingernails through my hair? Have you ever stopped to ask yourself *why* it is that I do all of this instead of just paying for these programs myself? You better than anyone else knows I have the fortune to do so."

"Don't even pretend that you don't love the attention!" Mako's head started to ache with the strain of keeping the fire banked down.

Wu stared at him, eyes narrowed. "If I donated all of the money myself, there might be a little attention. A short article in the papers, a photograph if I was lucky. By the next day, it would all be forgotten. And do you know why? Because no one wants to think about cold and hungry and illiterate children on the street! Because that makes people feel poorly about themselves! It makes them feel guilty and selfish and ashamed and no one likes to feel that way! And that's why there was nothing at all available for you and Bolin when you were growing up. That's why the two of you had to align yourselves with a Triad in order to survive." Wu pointed a finger at Mako's face, and his voice started to rise as he got more and more passionate. "But by creating these charities, by having these glamorous parties and constant mentions in the newspapers, by letting any miscreant with a camera take an unflattering photograph of me, I make sure that people aren't allowed to forget it. There's *my* name, yes, but there's also the name of the charity. And people, they can donate yuan and it's associated with all that razzle-dazzle and designer suits instead of guilt and shame. People give money! And even more importantly, people *think* about it. People talk about it! People contact the President and demand that something be done about it! The children themselves tell me that there are less kicks and more kindness on the streets now. I'm not under any sort of illusion that the problem is solved, because of course it is not. But every child that has at least some nutrition and some sort of prospects for the future is hopefully one less child that will be swallowed up by the Triads or stay on the streets as adults. And isn't that also fighting crime, in its own way?" Wu had two bright spots of color high on his cheekbones. "Well? Isn't it? You always think that you are the only one who knows the right way, that there is only one solution to a problem. But there isn't! There are many solutions! And you never give me any credit or support at all for my solutions. As always, you think Mako's way is the only way." Wu took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. It didn't work. "Do I enjoy some of the attention? I do. I'll admit I do. I like being the center of attention, my dirty little and not very covert secret. But how dare you think that's all it is for me? How dare you treat the things that are important to me as if they are just the frivolous indulgences of a spoiled rich boy? Because you do! You do!"

"I don't!"

Wu stared at him for a long moment, before speaking again. When he spoke, the calm was back in his voice. Marginally. "Do you want to know why I was so late? Because I was offered a ride home this evening, and I took it. The person offering me the ride clearly assumed that since I was, as always, without my husband, that I was interested in more than just transportation. After a bit of a struggle I disabused him of this notion and removed

myself from his vehicle. I was upset and so I walked for awhile. Then I stopped and had a drink. When I was done with that, I caught a cab."

Mako's eyes were closed, and he was fighting to keep his breathing even. "Who the fuck made a pass at you? Who?"

"It doesn't matter. I took care of it. Next time, I will be sure that Qi is always available to drive me. It won't happen again."

"WHO?" Mako roared, and he clenched his teeth and fists together in order to keep himself under control.

"I told you, I took care of it! You are not my bodyguard any longer, Mako. I'm an adult. I can handle myself, and I *did* handle myself."

"You just walked around by your fucking self in the middle of the night? Do have any idea how dangerous that is? Look at you! You may as well wear a fucking sign around your neck that says, *mug me please*. What the FUCK were you thinking? I can't believe you were that irresponsible!"

Wu took a step towards Mako, and now he was shouting as well. "And I'd say I was shocked and disappointed that all you took from everything I just told you about what's important to me and why I do it was that someone made an aborted pass at me and I went for a walk without you, but I'm not shocked at all. Not at all! Nothing I say to you ever makes a difference! Mako is always right and everyone else is wrong!" With that Wu flew into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him. The lock clicked.

"Dammit," Mako shouted, and he stormed out of the bedroom, down the stairs to his basement training room, where he started to set things on fire.

Making Up Afterwards

The bathroom door was still locked when Mako returned, his fury burned out by a savage pummeling of his punching bag and a great deal of fire hitting concrete walls. He sighed, and then knocked.

"Wu, come out of the bathroom." He closed his eyes and attempted civility. "*Please*. Please come out of the bathroom."

"No." Wu's voice was all clogged up and snotty, the way it got when he had been crying.

"Please come out. We should talk."

"I don't want to talk to you." Now his voice was clogged up, snotty and petulant.

"Come on. It's nearly four in the morning. I'm tired. You're tired. Please come out and go to bed. If you don't want to talk it through, fine, but at least come to bed."

The door opened. Wu's eyes were swollen and his nose was bright red. "I'm not talking to you," he announced and blew his nose before stalking across the bedroom and flinging up the coverlet before sliding inside. He put his back deliberately to Mako's side of the bed.

Mako shucked off his own clothes before sighing and crawling into bed himself. He turned off his lamp and waited.

He didn't wait for long.

"I'm still angry at you, you know." Wu sniffled.

"I know. I'm still angry at you that you walked around the city alone in the middle of the night. Wu, that's really dangerous. You have to promise me that if anything like that ever happens again you will call me to come and get you. Or Beifong or Bolin or whoever else if you're mad and don't want to call me, I don't care, but please, promise me you'll never do that again. It scares the shit out of me that you did that. Where were you, even?"

A small silence. "The big intersection over by the railway station."

Mako took a deep breath. And then he took another, and did everything he could not to shout. "That's not a safe place to be at night. Even I'd think twice about going there at night."

"I know. I wasn't thinking straight. I was upset."

They both lay there in the dark silence for a time.

"I won't do it again," Wu said.

"Okay," Mako replied. He tried not to let every single possible scenario that ended with Wu laying dead on the side of the road run through his mind. It didn't work.

They lay in silence.

"I don't think your charity is stupid. I wish Bo and I had had something like that when we were kids, I really do. And the kids out there now, it helps. I know it does. I know I don't say it enough, but I really do think what you are doing is important. And good. And necessary. I really do. You were right when you said I wasn't thinking about it as being something long-term that impacts crime, though. I wasn't really thinking about it that way at all, and I should have been. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted."

There was another silence.

"I just...Wu, you know I'm not at my best at those dinners. I'm terrible at making nice dinner conversation. I always say the wrong thing and someone's always offended. That's never going to change about me. I wish I was more like you, or my brother. I wish I could charm people and make easy conversation. I've always wished that, you know I have. I'm just no good at it."

Wu didn't answer.

"Besides, those people all look down on me. You know they all think I married you for your money."

"Well, they think I married you for your looks. And yet I still go."

"Wu..."

"Just go to sleep."

They lay in silence.

"It was that fucking Reiji that made a pass at you, wasn't it? Don't think I haven't noticed how he follows you around!"

"Since when have you been around any of my events to notice? Go to sleep."

"Did he really think that you were available just because I didn't show up tonight?"

Wu turned around to face Mako, even though he couldn't see him in the darkness. "You're joking, right? Everyone has a theory as to why you never show up. We're estranged. You're seeing someone else. You're seeing Korra again. Or Asami. Or both. Even the newspapers speculate. It's just you don't read that section, so how would you know?"

"Wu...I didn't know that. I...but that's stupid. I'm not seeing anyone! I'm a cop! I'm working!"

"It's gossip, Mako. Of course it's ridiculous. It doesn't stop people from gossiping, however. It doesn't stop people from coming up to me and pretending to be sympathetic to my imaginary marital woes while stabbing at me with their proverbial daggers. And for the sake of the children, I just have to keep smiling. I'll do it, of course. It doesn't kill me to do it and in any

case I'd put up with just about anything to help the children. But I have feelings too, you know."

"I know you have feelings. I didn't realize all this was happening. I'm sorry."

Wu sighed. He sounded so sad, so tired, that Mako's heart sank. "It doesn't matter. Let's just forget about the whole thing. Just go to sleep." He turned himself back over and was silent.

Mako lay there, eyes open in the dark. "Next one. I'll go to the next one. I promise."

"Don't make promises you won't keep," Wu said. "Because then it gets my hopes up and hurts worse when you don't come through."

Mako reached over in the dark and put his scarred left hand on Wu's shoulder. "I promise," he whispered, but Wu didn't answer. "I love you," he said.

"I know," Wu replied. He rolled over until he was in Mako's arms. "Can we please just go to sleep?"

"Yeah," Mako said.

It was some time after Wu had fallen asleep before Mako finally closed his own eyes.

Gazing Into Each Others' Eyes

They were just about ready to sit down for dinner when Wu, much to his surprise, heard Mako's voice.

"I'm sorry for arriving late. Sometimes my work keeps me longer than I'd like."

Wu turned his head and watched Mako bow towards the hostess, Jun-Yi. He was wearing a suit that Wu didn't recognize at all; a very deep wine red with a dark yellow shirt and a matching vertically striped waistcoat, cut to be slim and revealing of Mako's figure. Fire Nation tones, and it went beautifully with Mako's coloring. Mako had never worn anything like it before, not to the best of Wu's knowledge.

He was, by far, the most devastatingly handsome man in the room.

Jun-Yi - a well-preserved and deceptively sweet-looking matron with a wicked sense of humor - put her hand to her bosom and smiled slowly. Wu nearly laughed; Jun-Yi was known for her predilection for attractive young men and he was sure he'd hear all about Mako from her later. She'd met Mako a few times before, of course; however, he'd never been dressed quite like this. "Understandable, Prince Consort. We're very glad to have you this evening."

Jun-Yi turned to the room and smiled. "Let me make some introductions before we sit down to dinner." Mako politely offered his arm and she took him around the room, introducing him to the few people that he had not already met at one of Wu's social functions.

Wu met Mako's eyes across the room. *Qi?* he mouthed.

Home, Mako mouthed back, and then he smiled.

After making introductions Jun-Yi led everyone into her formal dining room. Wu was certain the table had not originally been set for Mako's unexpected arrival; however, Jun-Yi's staff would have seen to it immediately. Wu was seated next to Jun-Yi herself at the head of the table; to his other side was the Chancellor of Republic City University, a stifflingly boring woman whose only topics of conversation - when she made conversation, which wasn't that often - tended towards her stable of ostrich horses and her collection of of rare glass candy dishes. In that order. However, she was always very generous with her donation money, so Wu had promised to keep her occupied during dinner. Mako sat one chair over and opposite Wu, sandwiched in between Risa, the recently wed aristocratic Fire Nation bride to the heir of one of Republic City's largest shipping magnates (who was seated at the opposite end of the table) and Reiji, a wealthy Republic City entrepreneur who was regularly featured on the Republic Times' Annual Most Eligible Bachelor list.

"Aren't you going to take your glove off?" This from Reiji, to Mako's left, staring down at the glove. Mako ignored him.

"Is there a story behind it?" asked the bride to Mako's right as they were served the soup. She was twenty if she was a day, Wu was sure, lovely in that finely-boned way that many residents of the Fire Nation were prone to.

"Ah. My hand is scarred pretty badly," said Mako politely. "I usually keep it on."

"You may not know it, Risa, since you are so new to Republic City, but it was Mako here who used his lightning bending to stop Kuvira's Colossus when it attacked the city." Jun-Yi nodded to Mako.

Risa's eyes widened. "Oh! We heard about that in school, of course. Who trained you, if I may ask?"

Mako met Wu's eyes diagonally across the table and raised a single eyebrow in a question. Wu raised his eyebrows in return with a barely repressed smile, giving permission. "Lightning Bolt Zolt, although I trained myself a lot as well."

Risa cocked her head, puzzled. "Your master allowed you to self-train? I'm surprised."

"Zolt wasn't my firebending master." Mako put a spoonful of soup to his mouth.

"Oh," said Risa, clearly confused. "Then who was he?"

"Leader of the Triple Threat Triad," said Mako matter-of-factly. He took another swallow of soup.

"Er..." Risa looked about for help. "You don't mean the criminal gangs, do you?"

"Oh, Mako here used to work for the Triads," said Reiji. "Oh. Dear. Was that supposed to be hush-hush?" He chuckled.

"Why would I have said it if I had wanted to keep it a secret?" Mako turned to stare at Reiji until Reiji looked away, uncomfortable. He turned back to Risa. "My brother and I were orphaned when we were little and grew up on the streets."

"Oh, that's so sad," said Risa, and then her face cleared. "So *that* is why you have this charity, Prince Wu?"

Wu smiled at her; his most sparkling smile. "One of the reasons, yes."

"His Highness does seem to like his charity cases," said Reiji snidely. "Mako here is now an officer of the law. Isn't that just a charming twist of fate?"

"So you took on the Colossus all by yourself?" Risa asked, a little breathlessly. "Weren't you afraid you were going to get hurt?"

"Actually, I was pretty sure it was going to kill me," replied Mako. "So the scars were a good trade off, I thought."

"Oh!" said Risa. There was a slightly awkward silence at their end of the table. "That was very brave of you."

"It was, yes," said Wu, and he and Mako exchanged another look.

"Your Highness, my wife tells me that you rode a badgermole under the city that day? Is that possibly true? I think she's trying to tease me." Risa giggled slightly at Wu.

Wu laughed. "Oh, I actually did that. It was an exceptional day, all around. Although I'm pretty sure the Avatar topped us all by creating a new spirit portal."

"You used to date the Avatar, didn't you?" This was Reiji to Mako. "And Asami Sato, as well. You really *do* get around, don't you?"

"Can't compete with the Bachelor of the Year, though," said Mako, and the next course was served. Wu managed to get the Chancellor into the conversation; granted, he had to do it by discussing the means of heating glass hot enough to avoid unfortunate bubbles within bowl-shaped structures, but she seemed happy, and that was the point.

Risa peppered Mako with questions throughout the next two courses; Mako, for the most part, answered her very patiently. Wu kept the conversation flowing effortlessly; he was all smiles and charm, always ready with a witty anecdote and able to gently steer even the most stubborn conversationalist away from uncomfortable subjects. Mako had never really paid all that much attention to Wu in social situations before; usually he was so busy dreading having to make small talk with strangers that he was focused on himself only. *No wonder everyone loves his parties*, Mako thought, and he made a mental note to tell Wu he'd noticed later.

Conversationally, however, Wu left Reiji to Mako. Mako knew it was no accident; he knew it was Wu's way of letting Mako choose to either address the incident in Reiji's car the week before or to let it go. He believed Wu when he had told him that he had dealt with it in his own way; that being said, Mako was still furious over the whole situation. He felt sick thinking about what might have happened to Wu in that neighborhood. Not to mention a large part of him wanted to grab the smug little asshole and beat him stupid for trying to stick his tongue into Wu's mouth. He was aware that this was neither a mature nor an enlightened viewpoint. More than a little hypocritical of him, too, considering his own romantic past. Not to mention he was pretty sure that if he grabbed the back of Reiji's neck and slammed his face into his plate of Five Spice Beef in Oyster Sauce it would mean he'd never get invited back to one of these events again. Tempting, though. Very tempting.

Reiji aside, the dinner was delicious, Mako had to give it that. The girl next to him was a little on the chatty side, but she was very sweet and earnest and wasn't trying to play footsie or anything under the table, for which he was grateful.

That Reiji, though. That fucking Reiji.

He glanced across the table at Wu, who was, to all appearances, listening with avid attention to whatever the Chancellor was going on about. Something about stud fees? There was another thing Wu could do, appear like he was paying attention when most of his mind was engaged elsewhere. Knowing Wu he was probably writing a letter in his mind or going over his schedule for the next week. Wu met his eyes for the briefest of moments and dropped a wink.

"So, Mako, tell me, is there any truth to the rumor that has been going around that we might get the Fire Ferrets to play at the charity match in a few months?" Jun-Yi smiled at him.

"I'm not sure. We'd like to, but Korra can't always plan her schedule ahead of time."

"What are the Fire Ferrets?" asked Risa.

"My dear, they were one of Republic City's own pro-bending teams, back in the day. Mako here played with his brother, Bolin, and the Avatar." Jun-Yi laughed. "One of my granddaughters still has a poster that the three of you autographed. You've no idea how excited she was when you signed it."

Mako smiled a real smile at that one.

Wu laughed. "It's my one regret," he said. "I'll confess to never following the sport, but I do wish I had been living in Republic City when Mako was actually playing."

"That's right," said Reiji. "Mako worked as your bodyguard when you first came to Republic City." He leaned forward to speak to Risa around Mako. "It's just like something out of a romance, you know. Boy from the street works for a prince, falls in love, gets married!"

"Yeah, I just married him for his money," Mako said. He met Wu's eyes across the table. Wu smiled slowly and put his hand to his cheek, damsel-style.

"And everyone knows I only married *him* for his looks, of course." Mako smiled right back.

"Well, who wouldn't?" threw out the Chancellor, and they all looked at her. She shrugged. "Always did think he was a damn good looking man, even when he was pro-bending." She nodded at Mako. "Never missed a game, you know. Never forgotten that triple-hat move you pulled off to win that game against the Wolfbats. Yelled so loud I was hoarse for days." She toasted Mako with her wine glass.

Risa laughed. "Oh, my parents were completely against me marrying Hong. They told me I was too young, didn't want me to move here to Republic City. What could I do? I was just crazy about her from the first moment I saw her." She glanced down the table at her wife, who looked back at her questioningly. Risa smiled and gave a little wave. Hong shook her head with a smile and went back to her own conversation.

"I felt the same way about Mako, the first time I saw him," Wu said, and Jun-Yi laughed.

"You children and your love stories," she said. "You'll make me feel maudlin here if you aren't careful."

Risa impulsively reached out and took Mako's hand in hers. "I'm hosting my first event next month. I'm terribly nervous about it. I probably shouldn't confess this, but I'm so worried it won't go well. Will you come, please? You've been so kind to me, all evening."

Before Mako could answer, Reiji jumped in. "Oh, Mako never does show up to these things. He finds himself above all of it, I think."

Mako ignored him. "I would be honored to come to your party," he said, and he meant it. She gave him a brilliant smile back. She really was beautiful. "Is Wu is invited as well?"

Risa laughed at this. "Oh, of course His Highness is!" She turned that brilliant smile to Wu.

"It's just Wu, darling." Wu smiled at her. "Just Wu is fine among friends."

They finished dinner and Jun-Yi announced that dessert was going to be held in her Conservatory, where she had a harpist accompanying a soloist from the National Opera for a small concert to round off the evening. The guests mingled and chatted as they made their way from the house across her grounds. Mako deftly moved himself so that he was left alone with Reiji in the dining room.

Reiji sneered. "Oh, I suppose this is the point where you are going to threaten me with violence?"

Mako stared at him, unblinking. "I'm a cop. I'm not going to threaten you with anything. Or hit you, even though you and I both know you deserve it. It's not only that you made a pass at my husband. It's that you left him in a bad part of town in the middle of the night."

Reiji scoffed. "He's the one the jumped out of the car, not me."

"He jumped out of the car because when he told you to stop kissing him you didn't stop. Which is a criminal offense, by the way. He could press charges for that. He's close to the Chief of Police too, in case you didn't know." Mako took a deep breath and reminded himself to be calm. "But because I am a cop I'm not going to threaten you or lay a finger on you. I would suggest you get a lawyer, though."

"About the thing in the car?" Reiji looked incredulous. "It's his word against mine. My lawyers would eat him alive!"

Mako shook his head. "Not about that. See, you pissed me off. So because you pissed me off, I started to do a little bit of digging. That's what I do, by the way. I'm technically a detective nowadays. I haven't been a beat cop for awhile, in case you didn't know. Not important, though. What is important is that, like I said, I did a little digging. Do you know what I found?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

Mako continued. "It's funny. Your company showed a loss last year of several million yuan. I kept thinking that couldn't possibly be right. You know, what with the market being what it is and with the amount of rebuilding that's happening in Republic City. Your company has some exclusive contracts with several firms that are providing new city infrastructure, so a loss like that made no sense to me. So I gave my friend Asami - you know, the Asami Sato I used to date, like you pointed out at dinner? Yeah, anyhow, I gave Asami a call and she handed all of Future Industries' financial records of their transactions with you over to me. Sometimes it's good to have connections, you know?"

Reiji paled.

"Anyhow, long story short is that within a few hours of going through those records it became crystal clear to me that there was no way that your company could have suffered the

losses you claimed. So I did a little more digging. All sorts of interesting things popped up, including a connection to a highly suspect construction company based out of the Fire Nation. So I met with my boss and showed her what I had found. The words money laundering were thrown around. The good news is that she and I agreed that I had too much of a personal connection to the case, so I handed over everything I found over to another investigative team. So I'm off your back. Of course, the bad news for you is that my boss got permission to take her team to your home and offices to search for other papers. They've been doing that the entire time we've been having dinner tonight."

"You fucking bastard," said Reiji in a whisper.

"Just doing my job as an officer of the law," said Mako. Reiji spun around and started to walk very quickly towards the front door. Mako wanted to call him back. He did. He wanted to threaten to beat him into a pulp. For that matter, he wanted to plant his fist right into his husband-kissing mouth. But he kept his own mouth shut. Wu said he'd handled it, so as much as Mako wanted one last dig, one last personal threat, he let it go.

"I take it this is why you were late tonight? And why you've been working so late this past week?" Wu moved out of the shadows near the door across the room. He arched one eyebrow questioningly.

"Yep. Pretty much." Mako looked Wu in the eyes.

"You kept your temper very well there, I must say. Reiji was baiting you all evening."

"Believe me, I wanted to let him have it. Still do. You told me you handled it, though. If you had wanted me to handle it, then you would asked me."

Wu nodded thoughtfully. "Undeniably true, officer of the law." He moved farther into the room, never taking his eyes away from Mako's. "So. The suit? I'm sensing Asami's touch there." Wu briefly broke eye contact to look Mako up and down before meeting his eyes again.

Mako nodded. "I wasn't sure about the color, but Korra told me to go large or go home."

"Well, normally I wouldn't trust the Avatar's opinion on fashion, but in this particular instance, she was absolutely right." Wu smiled. "I've been wanting to put my hands on you from the moment you walked in. As was Jun-Yi, I'm certain."

"Jun-Yi's out of luck," Mako said. He started to smile as well. "Speaking of which, I've just had something come up and we're going to have to leave early."

Wu frowned slightly. "Oh? Work thing?"

Mako deliberately walked across the room before pressing himself against Wu, wrapping his arms around him.

"Oh, I *see*," said Wu. "Something certainly *has* come up." His breathing quickened a little as he stared into Mako's eyes. "I'll let her butler know. I'll make my apologies for it later."

"You do that," Mako said. "I'll get our coats and meet you out at the car."

"You think you can make it until we get home?" Wu ran his hand down Mako's hip.

"Probably not," said Mako, and he spun around and walked out of the room. "Make it snappy, Your Highness," he said as he went.

Wu made it very snappy indeed.

Getting Married

Chapter Notes

This one was a little tricky as I had already talked about their wedding in both my [Five Times...](#) and [Honeymoon](#) stories! So I just tried to fill in some details that I hadn't already gone into with those pieces.

For the rest of his life Mako would associate the smell of sandalwood incense with getting married.

It wasn't just because there was incense burning in the temple itself. As he and Wu, hand in hand, walked through the temple - Tenzin beckoning them on, a genuinely happy smile on his face - several of the airbenders sent it spiraling gently through the air, much as they had when Jinora had undergone her ceremony for her mastery. He could also smell the perfume of the flowers that were liberally festooning the walls and floors. (He found out later that evening that Ikki and Rohan had spent most of the day gathering flowers from around the island and arranging them in the temple itself.) The mood was different as well; Jinora's ceremony was solemn and gravely beautiful; a celebration with a temple full of new airbenders that not even Aang himself could have foreseen. The wedding was different, however; the airbenders were smiling at them as they moved the air about them, and the irrepressible Ikki called out, "Finally!" before her mother shushed her with a laugh.

It wasn't the first airbender commitment ceremony Tenzin had done; Hye and Misu and Zhao had been committed to each other the year before, and both Hye and Misu were already pregnant. Everyone was hoping for a new little airbender babies. Mako found himself smiling at Hye, and she laughed back at him, sending an extra little gust of incense his way.

Everyone he cared about was there, sitting on embroidered cushions. His grandmother was sitting next to his Aunt LiLing, beaming with joy. LiLing was fanning herself, dabbing at her eyes with a hankie. His Uncle Chow was shedding a few tears as well, and gentle Chow Junior nodded with a smile when he caught Mako's eye. Meng-Meng waved her own hankie at Wu and he tipped her a wink back, making her giggle. Even Tu was there, sprawled on his own cushion. The rest of the extended family had all shown up, dressed in their best, divided between staring at Mako and Wu and craning their necks around to look at the temple itself.

Tenzin's entire family was sitting in a clump, including Kai. Even Kya had made it up from the south pole, which surprised Mako. He hadn't seen Kya in years. It was a long way for her to travel.

The Beifongs - short of Toph and Baatar Junior, of course - had all shown up. Wu had blown a kiss at his former secretary, Nuo, who was sitting with Wing as they walked past them, and Lin had sat down next to her sister, little Naoki in her lap. Mako recognized Yun, the former

representative of Gaoling, as well as his husband. Yun's sister, Chun, was there with her two daughters. Chun had been very close to Wu's mother; in fact, most of what Wu knew about his mother had come from Chun, who was still living in Gaoling as well.

Mako wouldn't have expected Gun, Wu's former Grand Secretariat, but he was there, actually looking happy for once. He was more than a little shocked to see Firelord Izumi and her son Iroh, but then again, Wu was royalty. He supposed that was the kind of thing royals did, go to each others' weddings. That would explain Tonraq and Senna, as well. No sign of Eska and Desna, but no great loss at that.

Korra and Asami were sitting next to Korra's parents, holding hands, smiling at him. Korra gave him a big thumbs up when he caught her eye.

Bolin was sitting in the front row, one hand curved protectively over Opal's belly, Pabu wrapped around his neck. Mako wasn't sure if animals were technically allowed in the temple, but he supposed that Pabu was considered part of the family by now. Bolin was crying his eyes out already, and on impulse Mako broke away from Wu and went to his knees, grabbing Bolin in a hug, kissing him. "Don't cry," he said into his ear, which only made Bo cry all the harder.

"You're not helping," said Opal, but she reached out to squeeze his hand with a smile. Mako kissed Bolin again for good measure before standing up and going back to Wu. They walked up the steps to Tenzin, hand in hand.

"Friends and family," Tenzin started, his voice easily filling the temple, "We're here to celebrate the joining together of Mako and Wu."

Wu smiled. Mako wasn't sure if he had told Tenzin not to use any of his titles or if Tenzin had done that on his own, but Wu was pleased, he could tell.

"When my father was a child, only airbenders were allowed to use the temples. Much of what he knew has been lost now. It's a different time, and as a nation and as a culture we've had to make many changes. We've welcomed non-benders in as air acolytes," here was a loving look to his own wife, "and here on Air Temple Island we've welcomed anyone who has needed sanctuary. I hope, as our nation begins to grow again," this time, most of the people in the temple looked towards Hye and Misu, who nudged shoulders together, smiling, "that we can continue to welcome, with open arms, anyone who might find peace and love and acceptance within our community."

Jinora was smiling, eyes shining, nodding along with her father's words.

"In that spirit of welcome, I want to-"

"Daddy!" Three year old Naoki had managed to squirm free of Lin and was determinedly making her way towards them. "Papa!"

"Sorry, she got away from me," Lin said as she scrambled after her. "Naoki! Come back here!" She reached out to snag the back of Naoki's dress. Naoki kicked out her foot with an indignant squawk and shot a burst of flame towards Lin. "Hey! Stop that!"

"No! No, Lin! I want Daddy!" said Naoki with a scowl, and flame shot out of her hand this time.

"Uh oh, here we go again," said Chow Junior, and his mother started to fan herself even harder.

"I beg your pardon, young lady," said a frosty voice, and the Firelord was there, frowning down at Naoki. "We do not bend in a temple. We also do not bend at other people, no matter where we may be. Apologize this instant and sit back down with Lin."

Naoki's mouth dropped open in outrage before she narrowed her eyes and thrust her hand out at Izumi. "NO." Fire sputtered out from her hand.

A collective gasp went out over the temple.

"You will most certainly not bend at *me*, Princess," said Izumi, and with a flick of her fingers Naoki's flame was extinguished.

Naoki stared at Izumi's fingers. A speculative look crossed her face. She kicked out her foot; the resulting flame was extinguished again. She stared up at Izumi. "Show me. You show me, okay." She held out her hands and tried to repeat the flicking movement with her own chubby fingers. "Like dis? I do it like dis?"

"Not right now. Right now your fathers are getting married, and it is time for us to sit and be quiet and watch. However, if you behave yourself nicely and sit quietly, I will show you *after* the ceremony is finished. Can you sit nicely and behave and wait?"

"Okay," said Naoki, and she put her little hand into the Firelord's.

"Please continue, Tenzin," said the Firelord, unperturbed. "I have her, Lin."

Lin snorted and went to sit back down. After Izumi sat back down, Naoki crawled into her lap. Iroh leaned over to ruffle her hair.

Tenzin took up from where he had left off, composed as only the parent of four bending children could be. He spoke about love; he spoke about joy and family and the future. Mako lost the thread of it, trying not to cry. He held Wu's hands in his, and he wasn't sure which one of them had the fingers that were trembling. Maybe both of them. Finally, Tenzin crowned both of them with flower crowns and told him he could kiss his husband. Which he did, deeply, not caring who was there to see them.

Afterwards, they walked out of the temple together and down to the main house, where the air acolytes had prepared a wedding feast. Lin took them aside as well; Tenzin didn't have the authority to actually marry them legally, but she did as the Chief of Police. She flagged down Bolin and Opal to stand as witnesses, pulled out the certificate, asked Mako if he would take Wu as his husband. He answered he would; she asked the same of Wu, and he answered, laughingly, that he hoped so after all this time. Lin rolled her eyes at him and called him a smartass. She pronounced them married and had them all sign everything - after informing

Bolin that no, she didn't need Pabu's paw print - and told them she'd file it for them in the correct office in the morning.

"Is that all it takes?" asked Mako. He was a little surprised. He had expected it to be something a little more...well, a little more *anything*, actually.

"Yeah. Just the two of you saying you will and me pronouncing you married and getting everyone's signatures. The rest is just soy sauce," replied Lin. "You're legal now."

"When my parents got married it took four days," said Wu. "According to rumor my father got drunk and fell asleep in the middle of the second day and had to be woken up with cold water to the face. Charming fellow, I'm sure."

Mako looked out the window to see the Firelord in all her finery standing in the courtyard demonstrating firebending forms to his daughter, who was watching her intently, throwing her small body into it wholeheartedly.

The meal was delicious; Mako sat between Wu and Naoki, making sure Naoki ate something.

"I hope you will allow her to come and train with me for a time when she is older," Izumi said, sitting across the table. "She has a great deal of control and natural talent for a child her age. She reminds me a great deal of Iroh. I suppose she's had a few mishaps?"

Wu laughed. "We lost the curtains in her bedroom just last week."

Izumi nodded and leaned a little closer. "Iroh incinerated a wall hanging that my great-grandmother spent nearly twenty years embroidering when he was her age."

"Mother!" called Iroh from down the table. "Are you telling that story about that wall hanging *again*? I was three years old! Let it go!"

"As if you've ever stopped getting into trouble," said Izumi with an aristocratic sniff. She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Mother, *please*!"

Izumi ignored him to look at Wu. "I've always been sorry that I was unable to convince Hou-Ting to let you come to stay with us. I wrote to her several times over the years, but she always refused to allow you to leave the Upper Ring." She sighed.

"You did?" Wu looked very surprised.

"I was always worried about you there. I knew your father, don't forget." She made a slight face. "It's not unheard of, you know, for Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation nobility to host one another. In fact, my great-great-grandfather Sozin spent time in the Earth Kingdom court himself. I once stayed a few weeks with your great-grandfather Kuei." She thought for a moment. "I was disappointed that his bear had already died by that time. My father always talked about the bear." She smiled. "Well, in any case, when your Naoki is older, perhaps you can send her for a summer. My younger grandchild, Sozui, just turned five this year. Perhaps

he might visit you as well. It would be good for him to learn something else besides the usual mastery techniques." Here she made a respectful nod towards Mako.

"That's the one you wrote me about, right? The one that tried to set your pond on fire?" Lin leaned forward with a grin.

"Takes after his uncle," said Izumi, shooting her son a beautifully executed side-eye.

"Mother!"

"I would be honored to show your grandson anything I could, Firelord," said Mako, and he made the best bow he manage, seated at the table.

Naoki interrupted the conversation at that point by pitching forward, face first, into her noodles, fast asleep.

After dinner Wu and Mako mingled, chatting with the guests. There was no band; no dancing, no elaborate party. The wedding cake had been made by Pema herself; all of her children (as well as Kai) had helped her decorate it, and it was served with tea. Baatar produced a camera and did take some candid shots as well as a few staged shots, but nothing too formal. It was very relaxed, people smiling and chatting in the warmth of the courtyard outside after dinner was over. Mako knew everyone there. He *liked* everyone there. At one point he managed to get Wu to himself, and he quickly ducked with him behind a rosebush.

"This was the best wedding ever," Mako said, and he meant it. Wu laughed.

"Well, I'm glad you liked it. I hoped you would."

"You did surprise me, that's for sure. I had no idea you were planning this." Mako reached over and straightened up Wu's flower crown.

Wu wagged his eyebrows. "I'm a man of many secrets."

"I owe you one," Mako said, and kissed him.

"You can throw me a real whizzbang of a party on my birthday or something sometime," Wu said, and he laughed again. "I won't hold my breath though, okay?"

Mako grinned. "Best not."

Wu looked up at him in the moonlight. "Hello, husband," he said softly.

"Hello, husband," Mako replied, and then he kissed him again.

On One Of Their Birthdays

"Come on kids, let's move it out. We got a ferry to catch." Qi was holding both Meili and her overnight bag. "I'm talkin' to you, Zhi. Less chat, more movin'."

"Well, okay, Qi, but what-"

Qi pointed at the door. "I want your legs movin', not your mouth."

"Bye, Papa! Have a nice birthday dinner!" Naoki kissed Wu on the cheek and ran for the door.

"Thank you, darling! You children will be on your best behavior for Pema, I know. We'll see you in two days. Have fun!" Wu waved and blew kisses after them.

Mako herded Zhi out the door, following Qi out to the car. "Be right back," he said.

Lin and LoLo had already left for the evening, and Mako had promised to take Wu to Kwong's Cuisine, Wu's favorite restaurant, for his birthday. Wu headed upstairs to get changed for dinner. He debated between two suits before deciding to go with the slightly richer green, lined with yellow silk. Next was a shower, and then his hair. By the time he was dressed and ready, Mako was sitting in the living room, listening to the news on the radio.

Wu leaned against the doorjamb. "Am I interrupting your program?" Mako glanced up and smiled.

"You look good. And no, you aren't. I was just killing time until you were ready. Shall we?" Mako stood and offered his arm. He'd gotten showered and dressed within a half hour.

"Someday you must tell me how it is that you can look so good in such a short amount of time," sighed Wu, taking his arm.

"Superior bone structure," said Mako. "And what I've been told is a fairly nice ass." He craned his head to look down his back. "Looks pretty good to me." He winked at Wu, who laughed all the way to the car.

They pulled up to Kwong's and Mako handed the valet the keys. "Thank you so much for arranging all this with Pema," Wu said as they walked towards the entrance. "Not that I won't miss them, but I am not complaining about getting you all to myself for two days. So tell me, are you going to try something else besides Komodo Chicken tonight?"

"Probably not," said Mako, and he nodded at the maître d' as they entered.

"Your Highness," said the maître d' with a bow towards Wu, and he led them into the restaurant itself.

"Well, I was thinking I could..." Wu trailed off in bewilderment as they entered the grand dining room. The regular tables had been moved to the room's circumference, and there were

people standing around in formal clothing, holding glasses of champagne. People Wu knew. People who were smiling at him.

"Surprise," Mako whispered into his ear right before the room exploded in similar shouts, people toasting him with their glasses and smiling.

"I...well, I..." Wu put his hand to his heart and looked about the room, speechless for once. There were Lin and LoLo standing next to Su and Baatar, Lin shaking her head at him in mock censure.

"If I had known that this was what it took to shut him up I would have tried it years earlier," said Lin, and her sister laughed and stepped forward to kiss Wu on the cheek.

"Happy birthday, sweetie," said Su. Suddenly a crowd of people surged forward, bowing and congratulating and toasting him. Wu laughed and dove right into the crowd, taking a champagne flute from one of the circulating waitstaff. The band - a jazz quintet with a captivating singer that had been Wu's favorite for years - struck up a song.

Mako hung back towards the edge of the room, smiling as he watched Wu flit from person to person, smiling and chattering with excitement. Suddenly an arm slipped into his. He looked down to see Nuo, Wu's former secretary.

"Look at how happy he is," she said. She was smiling as she watched him. "This was a brilliant idea."

"Thank you," Mako said. "I could have never managed without your help. And you know I'm not kidding."

Nuo turned that smile up to him. "It was my pleasure, and I do mean that. Call me any time you need a party planned. Although don't thank me for the band. I tried, Risa tried, and even Jun-Yi tried, but it was your brother who convinced them. I'm still not sure what he said."

"Bolin could sell ice to waterbenders," said Mako, glancing over to where his brother was trying to decide between a crab won-ton or a shrimp puff. In the end, he took both. "It's his gift."

"Well, let me just say that I am glad young Madame Beifong here is a resident of Zaofu and not our fair city. I'm afraid I would have some real competition if she were." Jun-Yi had appeared next to Nuo. "My dear, you are an utter and complete terror, and I say that with nothing but the deepest respect."

Nuo dimpled. "Thank you."

Risa tucked her arm into Mako's other arm. "And you were so worried about everything, Mako! I told you it would be wonderful, and I was right." Just at that moment Wu looked over and saw all three women with Mako. He raised an eyebrow and then raised his champagne glass in a toast to the four of them before someone grabbed his arm and took his attention.

"Go and get yourself a glass of champagne, dear boy," said Jun-Yi. "You most certainly deserve it. And save me a dance for later, will you?" Mako promised, and then got himself a glass of champagne before dutifully making the rounds. Once he'd taken a turn around the room he took a fresh glass of champagne and quickly walked down the hall towards the toilets, bypassing them to slip out a side door into an alleyway. Qi was there, sitting on a clean box, propped up against the wall, smoking. Without a word Qi took a cigarette out of a silver case and handed it over, striking a match and lighting it for Mako.

"Kids get off okay?"

Qi nodded. "Yeah, Pema was there on our side of the bay, waitin' to take 'em on the ferry. Don't think she's much for these kinds of parties, anyhow."

"I don't think *I'm* much for these kinds of parties, either."

Qi snorted at that. "You know I ain't."

They sat and smoked for a bit in silence. Qi blew out a smoke ring. "You ever stop and think to yourself, hey, this is some kind of fuckery I'm livin'?"

Mako took a swallow of champagne. "All the time. I used to pick pockets and now I'm married to a *prince*. If that's not fuckery, then what is?"

"You're better at than I am. You pass with all them people in there. I don't."

Mako looked over at Qi. "I don't always pass, you know. Plenty of people think I'm nothing but a gold digger. When I do pass it's because I *try* to pass. You've been living with us for years now. If you wanted to pass, you'd pass as well as I do. Or my brother does."

Qi shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe. I ain't as pretty as you and your brother, though, and pretty goes a long way, you know it well as me. Not a bender, either, and that means somethin' too. Not to mention you had a better start than me. Don't even remember my own Mama. Fuck knows who my Daddy was." They were silent for a time, and then Qi shrugged again. "Don't know why it matters to me. But I guess it does. Maybe I'm just tired of people lookin' down at me, lookin' at me like I don't belong in that party there."

"It's my party, and I say that you belong. That should be good enough for anyone." Wu carefully stepped his way around a crate of empty bottles. Mako glanced down at the remains of the cigarette in his fingers, and Wu waved his hand. "I see nothing," he said, and Mako pitched it across the alley. "I couldn't find you two inside and I thought you might be out here." Qi moved off of the clean crate and brushed it off for Wu, who sat down on it. "It's a brilliant party, Mako. Thank you."

"It was my idea, but I didn't do the planning!"

Wu laughed. "I knew that without even being told, silly man. Parties are not your specialty. Even still. It was your idea, and I love it. I'm having a wonderful time. Thank you."

"Were you really surprised? Or just fakin' it for the crowd?" Qi shot an amused look down at Wu.

"I was genuinely surprised. I had not even the slightest inkling and I am not just saying that. I have no idea how you all kept it from me!"

"You almost caught me a few times," said Mako, and he smiled. "I thought for sure you'd figure it out."

"Ignorance is bliss," said Wu, and he drank the rest of Mako's champagne before standing up. "All right. Back in we go. Both of you, mind. Mako, I've been told that you owe Jun-Yi a dance and she's not a lady I would want to disappoint. And speaking of dances...Qi, my darling, I would like a dance with *you*."

Qi's head shook. "Boss, I don't think-"

"It's my birthday, and it's what I want. Please? Won't you, Qi?" Wu smiled at Qi, holding out his hand.

"Best do it, Qi, you know he usually gets what he wants in the end." Mako gave Qi a gentle shove between the shoulders. "If I can dance with that society dragon, you can dance with Wu."

"I'll do it, but I ain't gonna like it," muttered Qi, and Wu laughed, taking Qi's hand in his.

"That's the spirit!" He put his other hand in Mako's and pulled him along as well. "Just have some more champagne, the both of you. By the end of the evening you won't care *who* you've danced with."

"Likely fucking story," said Mako, meeting Qi's eyes, and they exchanged a grin. They both let themselves be dragged back into the party.

Doing Something Ridiculous

Wu was laughing. "I don't know, I don't think I can do it."

"Try it again, Yer Highness! You just gotta get the rhythm to it! Even little ones can do it!" Spring waved the jump rope enticingly.

"Oh dear, it isn't very encouraging that I can't manage what the little ones can do!" Wu thought for a moment. "Perhaps it would be better if I took off my jacket." He unbuttoned it and laid it carefully over a rock. "Well. Never let it be said I am one to give up. Ply your rope again, Spring!" Wu stood next to it and nodded.

"Okay! Come on, Jin-Jin, go slow this time, Yer Highness can't go so fast. You ready? One...two...three!"

The jump rope arced up and over Wu's head and he managed a small hop before it swung again, tangling up in his feet as he missed the jump, yanking his feet up and sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Oh, Yer Highness! Yer Highness! Are you okay?" Ine bent over him, looking anxious.

"Nothing hurt but my pride, darling. Although I would be grateful if someone would give me a hand up." A large hand grasped his hand and tugged, very gently. Wu looked up to see Mako, Naoki on his hip. "Saw that, did you?"

"I'd ask if you'd ever jumped rope before, but I already know the answer." Mako turned him around and brushed him off. "Hey, kids."

"Ah, I see someone has woken up from her nap!" Wu smiled at Naoki, who scowled right back at him. "Wakes up just like her father," he said, and gave her a very unwelcome boop to the nose.

"Hey there, Mister Mako! We're tryin' to teach Yer Highness how to jump rope!" Cork grinned up at him. "He kind of stinks, though."

"Alas! All true," said Wu agreeably.

"You've just got to catch the rhythm of it," said Mako.

"Yes, that's what Spring said, but I'm without rhythm, I suppose." Wu didn't look too distressed about it.

Mako looked at Spring. "Can you get it over my head?" He shifted Naoki off his hip and handed her to Wu, who settled her down on his own hip.

Spring nodded, and with a grin, she and Jin-Jin started to spin the rope in a tall arc. Mako watched the rope swing up and swoop down, and then jumped in, feet easily clearing the first skip. He jumped again as the next arc swept towards his feet, and again.

"See? You just have to get the rhythm of it. You can't look at the rope, you just have to feel when it's coming."

"This is another one of your explanations that make no sense, isn't it?" Wu was laughing.

"Pick it up a little, would you?" Mako asked Spring, and she and Jin-Jin started to spin the rope faster.

"Hey, you're pretty good, Mister!" Cork had his hands on his hips, watching Mako jump with a critical eye.

"Can you do two ropes, Mister Mako?" This was little Natsiq. Mako gracefully leapt out of the spinning rope.

"It's been a few years, but I can try." He unbuttoned his jacket and handed it to Wu while Natsiq handed the second rope to Spring.

"Let us get the rhythm goin' first," said Spring, and Mako waited for Spring's nod. When he got it, he dove in between the two ropes, both legs moving in time.

Naoki shrieked in delight and Wu hugged her. "Oh, Naoki! Look at Daddy jump!"

Mako jumped into the air and spun in between both ropes, landing before quickly spinning the other direction. He grinned.

"Mister Mako, do you know *Firebender Firebender*?" Natsiq was clapping her hands.

"Course I do," said Mako, never breaking his rhythm. "Do it." He raised his eyebrows at Natsiq, who immediately started to chant, with all of the other children but Zip gleefully joining in.

Firebender firebender spin around

Mako spun in a perfect circle, flame shooting between the twisting ropes.

Firebender firebender touch the ground

Mako dove forward, hands slapping the ground, body following into a forward flip, flame spraying out of his feet.

Firebender firebender kick real high

Mako kicked up into a backflip, flame following, nearly hitting the ropes that time. Spring gasped, but kept the ropes spinning.

Firebender firebender punch the sky

Mako punched both of his arms above his head, flame soaring between the arcs of both ropes before he spun through the flame and jumped out. "Whooooo," he said, and threw himself

down on the grass. "I think I might be a little too old for that," and he squinted up at Wu. Wu just laughed and sat down next to him, letting Naoki free.

"Me! Me!" She demanded, and Ine took her hands and jumped a little with her as Spring and Jin-Jin spun a single rope carefully and slowly.

"That was very athletic of you," said Wu, and Mako wriggled a little until he had his head in his lap.

"Training thing for benders. Huh. I wonder if airbenders have their own songs? I never saw Jinora or Ikki do it, but on the other hand, I wasn't really paying attention. Bolin was always pretty rotten at *Earthbender Earthbender*, though. He'd stand there talking until the ropes clocked him in the head."

Wu ran his fingers through Mako's hair. "I think for once I sympathize with your brother. The children have been trying to show me for at least a half hour. You saw how well I did."

"Up! Up and go!" Naoki was still holding Ine's hands, trying to jump.

"Come on, Princess! You can do it. Just give it a little jump!" Jin-Jin smiled at her encouragingly.

"Try just swinging it back and forth on the ground for her," Mako called out. "Might be easier for her to figure out than having it go over her head at first."

"Okay," said Jin-Jin, and he and Spring started to swing the rope gently across the ground. Wu and Mako watched as Naoki tried to jump with Ine; finally, by accident, she managed to hop at the same time that the rope swung under her feet. Her eyes were huge; she let out with a joyful shriek that echoed across the park.

"There you go, Princess! You did it!" Ine hugged her.

"My did it! My did it!" Naoki ran to her parents and threw herself onto Mako's stomach.

"Ooof," said Mako. "Take it easy on your Daddy, Butterfly."

"Papa turn," she said, and pointed at Wu.

"Oh darling, Papa is hopeless, I'm sorry."

Naoki scowled. "No. Papa turn! Papa turn!"

"Guess you better give it another go, Yer Highness," grinned Cork.

Mako rolled up and hauled Wu up as well. "Come on, Your Highness, I'll help you." He nodded at Spring. "Just give me one rope, and keep it slow." She nodded and waited for his cue. "Okay, put your feet on top of my feet."

"What now?" Wu stared at Mako as if he had grown horns.

"Here, face me, and put your feet on top of my feet. Then you can feel when I am going to jump and jump with me."

Wu shook his head with a smile. "You and your ideas. Fine. I'll try it." He carefully stood on top of Mako's feet, arms wrapped around his waist.

Mako nodded at Spring. "Okay, start it up." The rope arced and as it came down, Mako jumped. Wu clutched at Mako's waist. "Don't dig your nails into me, Wu!" Up they went for the next swing.

"There you go, Yer Highness! Now you got it!" Cork was approving.

Wu was laughing helplessly, head jammed into Mako's chest.

"Ooooooh, firebenner, jump," crooned Naoki, and she shot a gout of flame at them.

"Naoki! No! Don't do that!" Mako shouted, but it was too late. The rope ignited, eliciting a scream from both Spring and Wu. Spring dropped the rope, which tangled around Mako's feet, sending both he and Wu crashing to the ground.

"I can help! I can help!" shouted Natsiq, and she brought up a very large wave of dirty pond water, complete with three very shocked (and very offended) turtleducks. Both Wu and Mako were drenched, and one of the turtleducks promptly attacked Mako.

"Hey! You damn thing! Get the...ow! Get off!" Mako flailed at the turtleduck.

"Ooops. Guess that was a little too big," said Natsiq.

"Quack quack!" shrieked Naoki in delight, and she and Cork started to chase the two other turtleducks.

Wu was still on the ground, gasping. "Oh...oh my," he said, feeling at his hair and looking at the filthy wreck of his suit. "Mako, stop playing with that turtleduck, honestly."

"Little fucker," shouted Mako as the turtleduck attached itself to his earlobe in its fury.

"Your Highness?" Wu looked up to see the rather taken aback face of one of their very well-to-do neighbors who lived across the park. "Is...is everything quite all right?" Her poodle monkey was practically levitating in its desire to join in the fray.

Wu waved nonchalantly. "Oh yes. Everything is tip-top. And how are you today?"

She stared at him, sprawled on the ground, covered in mud. Her gaze turned to Mako, who was reduced to trying to punch the insistent turtleduck on its shell. She looked over Wu to see Naoki, screaming in joy, running with a ragged street child, shooting little splurts of flame at hysterically squawking turtleducks. "I...I'm fine?"

"That's just lovely," beamed Wu. "Do please give my regards to your husband."

"I will fucking give you to LoLo for SOUP!" The turtleduck made a terrible noise as it went flying through the air.

The poodle monkey took one look at the flying turtleduck and lost its *mind*.

The neighbor sniffed, yanked very firmly on her poodle monkey's leash and walked away very quickly without looking back.

Wu fell back on the ground in helpless laughter. Or tears. Possibly both.

"Oh, Mister Mako, I'm so sorry," said Natsiq, and she burst into tears.

"No, it's okay, don't cry. You were just trying to help. Everyone's okay, no harm done." Mako patted at her back. "Well, the jump rope's a loss, but we'll replace it. Naoki's the one who killed it, it's only fair. Speaking of which." Mako got himself up and trotted after Naoki, calling at her to leave the turtleducks alone.

Wu wiped his eyes and sat up, looking at silent Zip, who hadn't moved at all. "Well, then," he said.

Zip flashed him a thumbs up and a grin. Wu grinned back. "Indeed," he said.

Doing Something Sweet

Wu dragged his head out of the covers long enough to blow his nose. He moaned.

"You still don't sound very good," Mako said, and Wu opened his eyes to see him standing above him, staring down at him. Mako laid the back of his hand to Wu's forehead as well as his cheeks. "Your fever is finally gone, at least."

"I still feel terrible," Wu said, and proceeded to cough up half a lung.

"You look terrible," said Mako, and it was a measure of how rotten Wu felt that he didn't even take offense. Mako stood there for another moment and then walked into the bathroom. Wu heard the sound of water running.

"What are you doing?"

Mako came back into the bedroom. "Running you a bath."

"Don't want a bath."

"Well, you need one. You haven't bathed in days, and you're in the same set of pajamas." At Wu's petulant frown, Mako smoothed back his tangled hair. "Come on, you'll feel better. Nice hot bath, I'll bring you some tea, clean pajamas? I bet it will help."

"Nothing will help," Wu said, and dramatically flung the covers back up over his head.

"There, now you sound like yourself. You were worrying me there for awhile." Mako got up off the bed and went back into the bathroom. "Come on, up and at 'em. Out of the bed, now." When Wu protested, Mako flung back the covers and dragged him out, carrying him into the bathroom. He quickly helped Wu take off his pajamas and get into the tub. "There. Now soak. I'm going to bring you some tea. Be back in a sec."

Wu lay back in the hot water and closed his eyes. Maybe it felt pretty good. *Maybe*. He dozed for a bit until Mako brought him some tea, which he drank. Which was also maybe pretty good. Mako was busy doing something or the other in the bedroom. Wu wasn't too sure what, but he closed his eyes with a sigh and soaked. He opened his eyes to Mako kissing his forehead.

"Okay, shower time."

"I took a bath!"

"Yeah, well, you need a wash with some soap. You smell. Come on."

"Oh Mako, I'm too tired. I just want to go back to bed."

Mako kissed him again. "I know. I'll make it quick, I promise. I'll help you." He reached over and pulled the plug in the tub before helping Wu stand up. Mako quickly shucked off his own

clothes. Wu gave him a look. "No, no sexy times. I just want to get you clean. I promise, you'll feel better." He walked Wu over to the shower and helped him in. Once the shower started he took up a sponge and scrubbed Wu everywhere. True to his word, there was nothing sexy about it. He poured shampoo into his hands and scrubbed at Wu's scalp.

"That feels nice," Wu breathed, leaning against him.

"See? I told you. Okay, let me rinse you off. I'll even put in your conditioner, okay?" Mako worked his fingers through Wu's hair again.

Wu rested his head against Mako's chest. "I love you the best." He was shook with another coughing fit and hacked up some particularly juicy phlegm, which ran down the drain.

"That's just gross," Mako said, making a little face. "But uh...better out than in, I guess."

"You always know how to make a person feel better," said Wu, with a very feeble glare. Mako kissed him on the cheek.

"I knew that steam would help. Here, give me just a sec, I'll get your toothbrush." Mako hopped out of the shower, returning a moment later with Wu's toothbrush. "Okay, brush your teeth. I know you're getting tired again, just brush your teeth and I'll rinse this goop out of your hair."

"Not goop," murmured Wu with his mouth full of bristles.

Mako pulled Wu out of the shower and dried him off carefully with a towel, wrapping up his hair. He quickly dried himself off and pulled on a pair of clean undershorts before helping Wu into a fresh pair of pajamas, sitting him back down on the toilet seat. "Okay, let me run a comb through your hair. I know what will happen if I don't."

"Hate my hair," Wu said, his eyes drooping shut.

"I know, but I don't." Mako dropped a kiss on the top of his head before gently plying the comb. "There, it's still a little damp, but it's okay, I think. Okay. Let's get you back into bed." He wrapped an arm around Wu and gently stood him up.

Wu's eyes opened. "I do feel better, a little. Thank you."

Mako pressed another kiss to his forehead. "I hate it when you're sick. You aren't yourself at all. All sad and quiet."

That got a faint smile out of Wu. "Well, at least I'm quieter?"

"If I had wanted someone quieter, I wouldn't have married you," said Mako, and he helped him out of the bathroom. In the time that Wu had spent in the bathtub Mako had opened up the curtains and windows to let a little fresh air in. He'd also changed out the sheets on the bed as well as cleaned up all of the used hankies and other paraphernalia from Wu's side of the bed. Sitting on Wu's night table was a vase of fresh flowers and a stack of clean handkerchiefs. There was also the latest issue of the fashion magazine, *Snazzy*.

"For when you're feeling up to it," Mako said, gesturing at the magazine.

"Oh, Mako," said Wu, and he sniffled.

"There, now you are all cleaned up. Better?" Mako turned back the clean sheets and plumped up the pillows before he helped Wu crawl back into bed.

Wu nodded, and lay his head back onto the pillows. "So tired."

"Yeah, I know. You get some sleep. LoLo's making some hot and sour soup, so when you wake up you can have some of that, okay? The healer is coming again tonight to check on you, but he said that you are getting better. So." Mako rearranged the covers, tucking Wu in. He sat down on the side of the bed and stroked Wu's hair back from his forehead. "Rest and plenty of fluids, that's what you need now. So you take a little nap, and when you wake up I'll bring you some more tea and some of that soup." He kept stroking at his hair, gently, ever so gently. "Go on back to sleep. I'll be here."

Wu drifted off to sleep to the feel of clean sheets and Mako's fingers in his hair.

Doing Something Hot

Chapter Notes

This one is NSFW. Consider yourself informed!

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

Mako walked into the stately lobby of the Four Elements Hotel. The lot it was located on - as well as the few blocks around it - had somehow survived anything but the most superficial of damage from the Colossus, and the hotel itself was as elegant and as tasteful as it had always been. *Here's a trip down memory lane*, he thought as he approached the front desk. The concierge saw him coming and gave a little bow.

"Welcome to the Four Elements. It's very good to see you again, sir," he said.

Mako racked his brain for a moment. What was his name? Kwan? Kong? No, *Cam*. "Ah yeah, good to see you too, Cam. I got a message at work that Prince Wu was going to meet me here?" What Wu was up to, Mako had no idea. Maybe they were going to have dinner or something. Although he would have rather have gone home and gotten changed first.

"Yes, sir. His Highness said that you would be along soon. If you would follow me, please?" He came around from behind the desk and gestured towards the elevator. He pressed the button; after it arrived they got on together and Cam pressed the button for the top floor. The silence stretched on until the elevator chimed and the doors opened. Cam handed Mako a key. "Enjoy your stay, sir." Mako stepped out and the elevator doors closed behind him quietly.

Mako didn't need to look at the key to see the number. There was only one door on this floor; the door to the Presidential Suite, the rooms he had stayed in with Wu for two and a half years. He walked soundlessly across the plush carpet of the hallway until he reached the door, unlocking it and stepping inside. The familiar entrance was, for the most part, dark; all of the heavy drapes had been drawn in the suite and only a single lamp near the door was burning. Mako automatically pried off his shoes and dropped the key onto the marble-topped table next to the door. "Wu?" he called, but there was no answer. "Wu? You there?"

Silence.

Mako ventured farther in. "Wu?" He frowned. Maybe Wu was downstairs or something; maybe they had crossed wires and Mako was actually supposed to be in the restaurant. Although why he would have rented out the suite for the night was still the question.

"Do you know what day it is?" Wu's voice came from the main bedroom. Mako immediately turned and started to walk there. "It has been five years to the day since you first came to this suite."

That brought Mako up short. Of course; it *had* been five years, come to think of it. Oh, he remembered Wu on that first day; so slight that a good gust of wind might have taken him away, so nervous, so anxious to please, constantly looking for Mako's approval while at the same time being completely and utterly clueless as to how outrageous his own royal behavior was. How could he have known? How could he have possibly known how much he would love that foolish boy five years in the future?

"I'm surprised you rememb-

"We did not give you permission to speak."

Mako froze. There it was; that cold, condescending sneer, Wu's most aristocratic tones, precisely enunciated and sharp enough to cut glass. He caught his breath just slightly; Wu rarely used that tone, but when he did, Mako would inevitably tighten all over with desperate want. He didn't know why. There was something in it - something dismissive, something implacable, something *cruel* - that made the flame always coiled up within him writhe and ache.

"You may enter and present yourself."

Mako fought to control his breathing. Wu knew what this did to him; knew it rendered him weak in the knees and aroused, all at the same time. What was he playing at? He stepped into the bedroom and stopped.

The bedroom was lit by candles. There were candles on every available surface, their dim light flickering and casting shadows throughout the room. Wu was sitting in one of the leather armchairs facing the ornate marble fireplace, which was lit, his face in profile. He was utterly still, and in the uneasy light Mako could see that he was wearing robes of green and yellow, heavily brocaded and embroidered. A king's robes. Without turning his head Wu moved his hand in a come hither gesture, and a hiss escaped Mako before he could stop it. Wu had on several rings as well as heavily jeweled nail guards on both of his pinkies and ring fingers, their tips long and wickedly curved.

Oh shit, thought Mako, and for a moment he stopped breathing. He'd once confessed to Wu, under the influence of far too much whiskey, that the entire idea of nail guards made him hot enough to combust. "Wu," he said, and Wu's hand stilled.

"We have not given you permission to address us as such, concubine," Wu said, his tone one of contemptuous warning, and Mako caught fire. He took two more stumbling steps into the bedroom, his usual grace thrown to the wayside. He couldn't take his eyes off of the nail guards. He couldn't *breathe*. "You will refer to your king as *Your Majesty*."

"I'm sorry," he found himself saying, and Wu gestured to the floor in front of him. Without stopping to think about it - because if he thought about it, he'd get caught up in the pragmatics of the situation, like he always did, and right now he didn't want to be pragmatic at all, no, no, not at all - he went to his knees in front of Wu, staring down at his feet. "Your Majesty," he apologized - or perhaps pleaded - and dropped down into a perfect kowtow.

He waited, closing his eyes, trying desperately not to tremble. A long pause; and then the sharp curve of one of the nail guards slid across his cheek. He moaned - the sound of it shocking the part of his mind that was still desperately trying to rationalize this was just role play and nothing to get too worked up about - and then subsided. And waited. *Breathe*, he reminded himself. *Breathe*.

"If things had been different, if the Red Lotus had never come; if Hou-Ting had not been killed, if we had never left the Upper Ring, we would have been married by now. To a woman deemed acceptable, of high birth and spotless reputation. Her wealth and prestige would have been an ornament to the court. It would not have mattered if we had loved her or not. We would have married her, and we would have impregnated her. This is how it was done. This is what we were raised to. It is who we were always meant to be."

The nail guard trailed around the curve of Mako's ear before pulling away. It took everything in Mako's power to keep his head still and not follow it.

"We would have been allowed a concubine, one of our own choosing. This is also how it was done. The concubine of the King was a position of great honor. The concubine was expected to serve the King's wants and needs at any time. Whatever the King wished of the concubine, the concubine would provide, lest he displease the King. It is not...*wise*...to displease kings. Do you understand?"

"Yes," whispered Mako. He had meant to say it, but a whisper was all that he could manage. He felt dizzy with the conflagration of his desire, his usual restraint receding as he struggled to contain the chi surging up within him.

"You will not displease us, will you, concubine?" Wu spoke into his ear, and ran the nail guards across his throat and jaw.

"No, Your Majesty," Mako whispered again. He kept his eyes closed. He started to shake, just a little, with the strain of keeping his bending under control.

"You are a very beautiful concubine, and we are gratified. You may remove your clothing now." Wu sat back in his improvised throne. Mako unbuttoned his jacket with fingers that shook; he kept his eyes cast towards the ground. Jacket and shirt and singlet, all removed; the trousers and undershorts and socks were more difficult to do while still crouched on the ground, but he managed.

"Stand up," Wu ordered, when he had finished, and Mako stood up. He was nude before Wu every day - and Mako, unlike Wu himself, had never been much for modesty - but this felt different. He felt exposed. He felt *naked*. He fought to keep his hands from covering himself.

"Turn," said Wu, and Mako felt his face burn as he moved himself around in a slow circle. "Yes, beautiful," murmured Wu, and his tone had warmed just slightly. Mako closed his eyes again. He heard a rustle of silk and the creak of the leather and felt Wu move next to him. He hitched in a breath as the the nail guards made contact again, running along his body, slow, deep strokes that that stung as they slid across his skin. Suddenly he felt a deeper pain in his nipple when Wu bit down on it; he cried out with the shock of it and his knees threatened to give out on him.

"Oh, please," he moaned, not even knowing what he was asking for.

Wu removed his mouth. "Please *what*, concubine?"

"I don't know!" Mako cried, and he gasped as the nail guards trailed fire across the other nipple, his eyes flying open.

"Of course you do not," said Wu, into his ear. "You are a concubine. It is for us to know, and for you to obey without question. Can you do that, concubine? Can you obey your King without question?"

Mako closed his eyes again and then he let it go: his need to be in control, his need to bend everything to his will, his need to rationalize. He let it go. He surrendered. "Yes," he said, and he dropped to his knees heavily, burying his face into the silk at the King's thighs. "Yes, please, *yes*."

"Good," said the King, and he ran the nail guards down his concubine's spine. "Then we will begin."

Chapter End Notes

Breathtakingly gorgeous fanart by @court_painter on [Twitter](#). Posted with express permission of the artist. I strongly recommend clicking on the twitter link and looking at this art full-sized because the detail is luscious and sumptifificent, quite frankly.

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