

One More Question

Sometimes, even the Avatar needs a fool in a fake mustache to come to the rescue.

by BOLIN

Winter, 195. It was the end of a long week of junketing, somewhere in the eastern hinterlands of the Earth Kingdom – about as far away as it was possible to be from where the real work that needed doing was. Somewhere far to the west, Asami and Lin were scouting islands and Mako was... doing whatever Mako did when the rest of us were all out of the office. I try not to think very hard about that, to be honest.

Anyway, Korra and I had been trudging from town to town in this strange and far-off land, not because we woke up one morning with a serious yearning to explore the greater Chameleon Bay area, but because the Phoenix Flight's public image needed constant polishing in the Earth Kingdom. The Earth Queen had agreed to let her aerospace agency work with us, and kicked in some money (which is always nice), but in public she was lukewarm at best about her enthusiasm for the project. We had to keep her subjects' interest piqued without any help from her – kind of the opposite, since all her bureaucrats and minor nobles knew full well that she didn't like the idea and had only agreed reluctantly. Whatever their personal feelings were on the subject, they knew it was more than their jobs were worth to show any sympathy for us,

which made even little things like arranging to use function spaces for these public outreach sessions like pushing a reluctant elkdog up a hill.

By Friday we were exhausted – Korra more than me, since all the officials and more than half the press people would only talk to her, and they all wanted to ask the same questions and only about a tenth of them were ever satisfied with the answers. Even her spirits had started to wilt under the endless, grinding pointlessness of trying to get anything done in the Earth Kingdom. As she went out to face the last of the week's press conferences, in some dusty town hall somewhere to the southeast of nowhere much, her shoulders were visibly drooping, and I could tell that she was finding it hard to keep a smile on her face. She knew, just as well as I did, that there was going to be nothing out there but the same stupid questions ("Do you expect to find anything of value on the moon?") and passive-aggressive disapproval ("How many schools/hospitals/dams/etc. could have been built with the money spent on Professor Sato's vanity project thus far?") from people who not only just didn't *get it*, but had been picked to speak with her specifically *because* they didn't get it.

"Go get 'em, tiger seal," I told her, giving her a wink. "One more of these and it's all-you-can-eat at... wherever they do all-you-can-eat in greater Binjiang. I'm buyin'."

She gave me a half-hearted little smile and said unconvincingly, "Sounds great," and then sighed, collected herself, and went out to do it all again.

"Pabu," I said, "we have to do something."

While I listened with one ear to the start of the press conference – as I expected, it was the same stupid junk – it suddenly dawned on me that none of these reporters was going to file anything that was different in any meaningful way from the stuff the ones at any of the others we'd done that week had filed. A lot of them were probably the same people. So if we threw them a bank shot... their editors would probably assume they'd all gone crazy from the heat.

I got out my disguise kit (what? Doesn't everybody travel with a disguise kit?) and made myself the worst fake mustache I could come up with. Anyone who's seen my films is probably aware that my standard in fake mustaches is pretty darn low, and the one I threw together that day was a masterpiece – a big, drooping mandarin job that made me look like a Western Empire bureaucrat from 5000 years ago, as envisioned by the director of a '70s firebender exploitation mover. It did absolutely nothing to conceal my identity, it just made me look like the biggest possible imbecile. It was perfect in every way.

My preparations complete, I went out the side door, down the hall, and back into the meeting room (I think it was usually where the town council met) at the back. Everybody's attention was on Korra, and hers was fully occupied dealing with them without burning the place down. Nobody even gave me a glance. I waited through the whole thing, nearly an hour of such mindless boredom that

by the end, I'd started eyeing the structural members in the room and thinking Korra might actually thank me for simulating an earthquake at this point. Luckily, before I got so desperate I could convince myself of that, I heard her make her wrap-up noise.

Korra doesn't know she does this, but when she's giving a press conference, there's a little noise she does right before she says, "OK, one more question, and then I really have to wrap this up." It's kind of a combination of a sigh and a moan, only too quiet to really be either. Most people miss it, but I'd been right beside or behind her for dozens of these things by that point, and I heard her do it now. It was the cue I'd been waiting for.

The instant she'd delivered the stock line that came after it, I shot my hand up into the air and said in my best stage reporter voice, "Avatar Korra, are you a turtleduck?"

The reporters, who had all started asking their own Imperative Last Questions at once (as always happened at that point), all screeched to really satisfying verbal halts and turned to stare at me, incredulous. Korra looked over their heads, saw me giving her my cheesiest grin behind my idiotic fake mustache, blinked twice in complete bewilderment...

... and then grinned wickedly and replied, as she was required to by the immutable laws of the Ancient and Honorable Order of Turtleducks, "You bet your sweet ass I am!"

And we were *out of there*.

Nobody printed a word about it.