"You're my brother. That's got to count for something. Right, Zuzu?" If Azula and Zuko had always cared for each other, how different would their lives' paths have been?
The Beginning

Morality Chain

So.

This isn’t really meant to be much of anything beyond a ‘suppose if’ story – certainly nothing as ambitious as some other fics I could mention (like, say, ‘The Last Firebender’ or ‘Distorted Reality’). Azula as we see her in the show is almost physically incapable of relating to anyone on an entirely social level, and in the end is shown to be deeply insecure about anyone loving her.

Well, what if one little detail (well, not that little) of her life had been different? What if she had had one person that she had truly believed she could trust and confide in? What if there was one person that she could show herself to care for?

What if Zuko and Azula had genuinely loved each other? (Not that way…)

In crafting this story I’ve tried to keep Azula’s personality as close to the show as possible (Zuko, I noticed, is considerably easier to write for – I needed to change him less, anyway), based on my interpretation of what went on throughout the series. Whether or not I’ve done a good job in this, and other areas, I leave to the judgements of my readers.

This story was originally posted on FF.Net. As part of my drive to spread out more of my stuff in general, I’m posting it to AO3 as well.

With that said, let us begin.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

Five-year old Azula stared and blinked.

Her brother was currently standing in front of her, arms spread out in a manner vaguely reminiscent of him attempting to protect something. That was unusual enough, given the relative lack of danger that presented itself within the grounds of the imperial palace – or at least, danger of the overt kind. Stranger still was that he was facing away from her – the last time she’d seen him in this pose, he’d been attempting to protect some of the rice balls mother had made for him from falling into her grasp.

She’d gotten them anyway. She always got her way in the end.

Now, though… She sighed with impatience and confusion.

“Zuzu, what are you doing?”

He didn’t look at her, shifting slightly to the right instead. Driven by curiosity, she leant over to the side, catching sight of a snarling pile of fur and feathers as she did so. Wet strings of drool hung from snarling jaws, and the creature’s eyes were alight with a feral rage.

“Oh. A hawkhound.” She murmured. “I’ve never seen one in real life.”

“Az, what are you doing?” Zuko demanded. “Go and find somewhere safe! Don’t worry, I’ll-“

Dropping into a standard firebending pose – breathe in, draw arm back, right leg forward to absorb
the shock – Azula launched a burst of fire at the hawkhound. It wasn’t much, really, but enough to singe the beast’s fur. The creature gave a yelp of pain and anger before turning tail and running off.

With a smirk, Azula straightened herself up again. A tiny part of her had wondered if she’d really gotten the movements down perfectly, but that was absurd. She was Princess Azula, firebending prodigy. Of course she had gotten it right.

It was only then that she noticed Zuko was staring dumbly at the spot where the hawkhound had been a moment ago. She raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

He turned around, a grumpy expression on her face. “What was that for?”

“What was what for?”

“You, with the fireball, and the dog-“

“It’s called Firebending, Zuzu.” Her father had told her before – firebending was a sacred and mystical art, the purest of all the bending schools, and it had to be treated with respect, always.

“Whatever! You weren’t supposed to scare it off!”

“You’d have preferred it bit you?” She stared at her brother like he had grown a second head. In the few years that she had known her brother, she’d pegged him as a poor learner, and far too soft-hearted for his own good, but never crazy.

“No!” He snapped. “But I’m the big brother! I’m supposed to be the one protecting you!”

Silence descended upon them for several long seconds, until little Azula, princess of the fire nation, fell over laughing. Several more seconds later, when she had managed to stem the flow of laughter enough to speak again, she squeaked out, “You? Protect me ?” And the sheer absurdity of the idea sent her into fits again.

Suddenly she remembered her station, remembered that she was supposed to present a dignified face to everyone she met, remembered that she was face of the Fire Nation and could not afford to indulge in such frivolity, and she pulled herself together.

“Zuzu, I’ve beat you in our last five arm-wrestling matches. My firebending is just as powerful as yours, and only a little less accurate – and it’s not like I could have missed at that range anyway. I think I can take care of myself.”

Defeated by her flow of words and the logic in them, Zuko slumped. “That’s not the point.” He mumbled softly before he turned away, heading back into the building proper.

Azula watched him go, a smirk still planted firmly on her face. Honestly, to think of Zuko trying to protect her… It was just pathetic.

Pathetic, and yet strangely endearing.

(X)

She cracked open the door, staring at the two figures in the room illuminated by the cold moonlight. One was lying down on the embroidered silk sheets of the bed, one arm wrapped tightly around a stuffed turtle-duck. She had to suppress the urge to giggle as she stared at him. Was he still playing with stuffed toys? How… childish. She’d given up her own parrotmonkey a full year ago.
The urge to giggle was strangled off remarkably quickly as she noted the other figure in the room. Their mother – *his* mother – was sitting on the bedside, singing a soft lullaby as she slowly stroked Zuko’s hair. After a moment, Azula became aware that she was chewing her own lip. A familiar burning sensation rose in the back of her throat, one that she resolutely ignored.

Well. There was nothing to be done about it. Let pathetic little *Zuzu* get his mother’s attention for now. If her mother *wanted* to fuss and fawn over him and not *her*, who was *Azula* to say otherwise?

She was just about to close the door withdraw when she heard her brother’s voice. “Az?”

She suppressed the urge to use the word she’d heard their father say that one time when he’d heard one of their elite regiments had been destroyed. A moment later, her mother’s voice floated through the doorway. “Azula? What are you doing out so late?”

“I was just getting some water.” The lie slipped out of her mouth easily. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she noted how much easier it’d been getting to tell lies with a straight face lately. “When I was coming back, I heard some… noise.” Yes. Noise. That was easy and non-committal. Could have been her mother’s singing, could have been the chirping of the cricket-bats, could have been one of the servants working the night shift knocking over a vase.

There was silence for a moment, and then Azula lowered her head, enough for it to pass as a nod. “Goodnight, mother. Goodnight, brother.”

She didn’t acknowledge their replies as she trotted – fairly dashed – to her own room. Once there, she buried herself under her sheets (never mind that it was the height of summer), and kept her head in her pillow, eyes squeezed shut, willing away the pain in her chest.

So focused was she on trying to get to sleep that she didn’t notice her mother until she had sat herself on the side of her bed. “Azula.”

She nearly bolted straight out of the bed. “Mommy?” She said as she stared up at her.

Her mother only raised an eyebrow. “You are a very good liar, my child,” she said softly. “But not that good.”

Azula wasn’t sure whether to take her words as a compliment or an insult, and so after a barest moment of hesitation she settled on studied indifference as the proper response as she sank back into her bed.

“If I ask why you were spying on Zuko as I tucked him into bed, would you answer?”

Azula’s brows knit together in a frown. Mother was perceptive, she had to admit. Perceptive enough to tell when she was lying (she was going to have to work on that). And somehow she doubted that an honest answer would cut the ice. A part of her wanted to lash out with a fierce barb about how her mother had more time for Zuko than her, but she knew on an instinctual level that it really, really wasn’t the time for that sort of thing.

And so she said nothing, only turning her head off to the side and keeping silent. After a moment, she felt her mother’s hand moving gently across her hair, and she couldn’t help but stiffen slightly at the touch. And then she willed her own body to relax, cursing her lack of self control.

Fine, she thought to herself as she began to drift off to slumber, aided by the melody her mother was singing. Her mother felt guilty for abandoning her in favour of Zuko and was trying to make up for it with this single act of affection. Fine.
It was fine.

Because, as she drifted off to sleep, she could pretend that her mother was doing this because she really loved her after all.

(X)

Firebending practice. It was a daily activity now that Father had learnt both of his children were skilled in the art. For Zuko, it was two hours of boring drudgery, a mindless repetition of tasks he had never cared for in the first place. Only fear of his father’s displeasure kept him diligent in his training.

For Azula, it was perhaps the only time she truly felt alive. Each jab of the fist, each sweep of the leg brought about a fresh blast of brilliant flame that illuminated the darkened room. The thought of being able summon and dismiss such power at will thrilled her. Her surprising proficiency at it was only icing on the cake.

For some time now, she’d been suspecting that her skill at firebending was greater than Zuko’s. It couldn’t simply be a trick of the light that each time she summoned the flames, there was more of it than her brother’s, burning brighter and with greater intensity.

And then, she swept her leg back, striking forward to generate a thin whip of fire – a move used to destabilize opponents. A standard movement, one she’d practised a hundred times already and would practice a hundred times again.

Except this time the flames flared blue.

She let out an involuntary gasp of surprise, her shock knocking her out of the flow of her kata, and she wavered, unbalanced. Quickly, she regained her balance, her mind trying to figure out what had just happened. To her side, Zuko had also halted his own firebending practice to stare at her in unabashed shock.

She was dimly aware of several of their instructors dropping their scrolls and brushes and whatnot, and of several of them backing away before finally turning and running from the room. Confusion and fear arose in her mind. Had she just done something wrong?

It quickly became apparent that she had not. Indeed, as one of the tutors haltingly told her, what she had accomplished was something incredibly rare and noteworthy – the generation of blue fire, far stronger than the red and orange flames normally wielded by the spiritually attuned of the nation.

Pride surged through her. She was the best at something! Not just good, not just better than the others around her, but the best! Even her father had never used blue fire before! (Although, to be honest, she had never really seen him do very much firebending at all.) In her glee, she turned to Zuko, who was staring sullenly at her.

“Zuzu! Zuzu! I made blue fire! That’s great, isn’t it?”

“That’s awful.”

The words hit her like a brick. She stared at him for a long moment, trying to figure out the reasoning behind his disapproval. Sure, all the instructors had told her that it was great, but coming from her brother… Then realization dawned.

‘You’re jealous, aren’t you.” She said. It wasn’t a question. “Just because I can make blue fire and you can’t! Honestly, Zuko, of all the petty-“
“You can keep your stupid blue fire!” He had snapped suddenly, and with an anger that surprised her. He was obviously deeply upset about something. “If it’s so special and rare, don’t you think someone might start paying more attention to our practice classes?”

Oh. Oh.

At that exact moment, she wavered in her conviction, trying to decide if the blue fire she’d just created was a good thing or not. The feeling persisted to the next session where, true to Zuko’s prediction, her father sat in to observe them, the force of his presence enough to flood the room with a stifling sensation even though he did and said absolutely nothing throughout.

And that day, no matter how hard she tried, only orange and red sprouted from her hand. No blue. No matter how hard she tried.

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Chapter End

Thank you for reading. Comments are much appreciated.
I’ve been twisting the ideas around in my head for a while about what direction I want to take this story in. There’s a bunch of ways this could go, I’m still not sure what I’d consider to be the best for the story.

Oh well, that’s a question for another time. Right now the path I’m plotting is still pretty clear. Here’s the next chapter, and I hope you all enjoy what I have to offer.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

“Azula, you shouldn’t say things like that.” Zuko’s voice was hesitant, as if wondering whether or not he should have spoken up at all.

The young princess glared back at her brother, anger and disappointment in her eyes. “But I’m right, Zuko. He quit. He left the field of battle when he was about to win. What else am I supposed to call him?”

“Uncle just lost his son, Az. How do you think dad would react if he lost one of us?”

The eight year-old girl paused. “Hm. He’d probably say something like what a disappointment it was that we weren’t strong enough to survive or something.” She noted Zuko’s pained expression and rolled her eyes. “Maybe you’d like to use Mother as an example next time.” She helpfully supplied.

An uneasy silence descended upon the two siblings until Azula sighed. “It’s such a waste.”

“Oh?” Roused from his brooding, Zuko glanced over to his sister. “What is?”

“Uncle. He’s one of the best Firebenders in the nation – almost as good as Father, really.” It was true, too. While Uncle Iroh never firebended much – well, outside of warming his tea, anyway – the few times she could remember him doing so made her own abilities look about as threatening as a sparkler. “And he’s supposed to be one of our best generals, but one little mistake in the field and he completely falls apart.”

“I don’t get it. If the enemy really took something from him, he should be angry, He should be looking for revenge. It’s like…” She cast around for examples. “Like the two of us were fighting in a battle, and one of the enemy earthbenders launched you a hundred feet into the air, and when you came back down they brought up two walls of stone to smash them together on you like BAM! and…” She noticed Zuko’s expression and trailed off. “It was only an example.” She offered.

“Right,” he raised an eyebrow.

“Anyway, if something happened to you, I’d be angry! I’d hunt down the people who did that to you and burn them to the ground! I wouldn’t… I wouldn’t quit and leave!” She slumped back again in a huff, folding her arms. She didn’t know how to express herself properly, she lacked the words to
give shape to her feelings, and that just irritated her more.

“Hey, Az?”

“What?” She snapped, annoyed.

“Is what you said true?”

“Is what true? What did I say?”

“If something happened to me, would you get mad?”

Azula sighed and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Well… yeah.” She mumbled.

The beginnings of a smile found its way onto his face. “Thanks.”

“Hmph.”

(X)

Azula slumped down onto the stone steps, her expression gloomy. Although the garden stretched out in front of her in an arresting vista, her thoughts were far away, ranging instead to the overheard conversation between her mother and one of her friends from the minor houses.

“And then she burned the doll! Just because she didn’t like it! Honestly, I don’t know what’s wrong with that child…”

That last line ran its merry way through her mind again and again no matter how much she tried to push it away. No matter how much she tried to deny it, the simple truth of the words were unmistakeable.

Mother thinks there’s something wrong with me.

She bared her teeth in frustration. Why was her mother so difficult to please?

For all that their father was a harsh and unyielding man, his demands were simple to puzzle out – excel in areas directly related to becoming a true royal of the Fire Nation. Firebending, political intrigue, military strategy, the works. Do those well, and you would earn his approval. Such things came easily to Azula, and every time she made a new breakthrough in her practice, she could look forward to words of praise and acknowledgement from him. It was a simple system, and it worked.

But no matter how much she tried, no matter how well she answered her questions, completed her training regimens, her mother barely ever acknowledged it with anything more than a simple “That’s nice, dear.” Worse yet, to the perceptive girl, was that she could sense a growing unease from her mother every time she burst in to announce that she had accomplished some new task theoretically far beyond someone her age, almost as if she were being pushed further from her mother every time she succeeded in something.

Why? What did her mother want from her? And why did she disapprove of so many things that Azula considered inconsequential? Like the stupid earth kingdom doll – she hadn’t liked it, and so she had burnt it away. So what? What was the big deal? And when Ty Lee had completed the cartwheel when she couldn’t – well, that had been a threat, hadn’t it? Someone had challenged her claim – however indirectly – to being the best at anything. And so she had taken steps to prevent that from happening again. Her mother should have been proud of her, she knew her father would have been proud of her in the same situation. But mother hadn’t. She had chastised Azula.
Worse, far worse, was that Zuko seemed able to win her mother’s affections so readily. Her brother couldn’t do anything right! Okay, she acknowledged, that was being a bit too harsh – her brother exhibited a solid core of competency in most areas, but she had far outstripped him in almost every relevant field. And yet that didn’t seem to matter to mother. Whenever he scraped his knee or messed up an exercise or took time off from his studies, Azula knew that she could find him later curled up by his mother’s lap, and they would be playing a game with each other or feeding the turtle-ducks or simply doing nothing at all and enjoying each other’s company.

Why? Why? What did Zuko have that she lacked? Azula simply couldn’t understand it. And to the young prodigy for whom mastery in so many fields came so readily, the inability to understand anything was a rare and very unpleasant situation.

So intense was her contemplation that it took her several long seconds to realize that her brother had somehow found his way to the stone steps as well and was sitting there, chin resting on his knuckles. After a moment he let out a long sigh.

“What is it, Zuzu?” She questioned after a long moment. In response, his brother closed his eyes.

“I messed up one of my katas again.”

“Oh.” Ever since the first time she’d created blue fire all those years ago, she’d gradually been shunted into a different class from Zuko – apparently they felt she deserved more specialized teachings, ones that Zuko was simply not ready for. The blue fire seemed to come and go as it pleased, something that displeased Azula greatly. Her instructors had assured her that it was normal (how would he know, wasn’t blue fire supposed to be practically unheard of?) and that in time she would master it completely – an answer that left Azula feeling dissatisfied. But that was really beside the point.

After a moment, Zuko offered up his next statement. “Father was there today.”

“Oh. Ouch.” She retained enough sympathy to wince, although another part of her mind wondered why their father even bothered any more. Surely he knew Zuko wasn’t the powerful Firebender he’d wanted for a son by now?

Not for the first time, it struck Azula that their situations weren’t all that dissimilar. Both had one parent they could please, and one they could not. Of course, the sticking point was that Zuko’s question was of simple ability – he knew what his father wanted but simply couldn’t rise to the challenge – whereas Azula’s problem was of knowledge – she felt absolutely certain that she’d be able to accomplish whatever it was her mother desired of her, if only she could figure out what it was.

She let out a frustrated sigh herself, which caught Zuko’s attention. “What about you? What are you upset about?”

“…Mother thinks there’s something wrong with me.”

“What, like a fever? Maybe you should go lie down –”

“No, not like a fever!” Azula glared at her brother, although in the back of her mind she pondered the validity of Zuko’s words. Did her mother think of Azula as ill, somehow? “It’s like… it’s like…” She sighed, back at the same roadblock she always encountered whenever she contemplated her mother. “I don’t know what it’s like.” She confessed miserably. “But she didn’t like me burning the
“You mean the one uncle sent you?”

“Uh huh. It’s so stupid. It’s just a doll. It’s not like it was a puppy or something—“

“You’ve burnt puppies too, you know.”

“That was different. I just singed their fur a bit until they ran away.” Azula grumbled. If she recalled correctly, her mother had been upset then too. “Mother never tells me what she wants, but she keeps telling me what she doesn’t want me to do. I don’t get it.”

The two of them continued to sit in silence for a while, until Zuko scratched his forehead and spoke up again. “I think mom loves you.”

“Oh, sure you do.” Azula rolled her eyes. “She’s not doing a very good job of showing it if that’s the case. Besides, what makes you think that mother loves me? As far as I can tell, I’ve never done anything that’s really made her proud.”

“Maybe, but…” Zuko paused. “Being proud of someone and loving someone are two different things. I think.”

Azula made no reply to that.

After a moment, and apparently still trying to be helpful, Zuko spoke again. “Maybe you could just ask.”

Ask?

“Why should I have to ask?” She countered hotly. “Mother loves you, and she shows it, too. Did you have to ask her to do that?”

“Well, no, but…” The prince shrugged. “You’re different from me, Azula. You’ve knocked that into my head enough times.” He managed a brief smile.

“Hmph.” She crossed her arms and turned away, annoyed. To ask appeared to her too much like an admission of defeat, letting the world at large know that she had failed to earn her mother’s love the normal way. And yet…

Later, she resolved to herself. If there’s really nothing else I can think of, then I’ll ask mother. But not yet.

As the family bowed and made the standard gestures of obeisance to Grandfath – to Fire Lord Azulon, Azula wondered about why they were meeting. As far as she could gather, her father was the one who had asked for an audience with the monarch, but the reasons for why were sealed from her. Her naturally inquisitive mind had immediately sifted through a dozen possibilities, but none appeared particularly more likely than the others.

Apparently Gran – Fire Lord Azulon was curious too. “Come, Ozai.” He said in that ancient yet powerful voice of his. “Tell me the reason you have sought an audience with me.”

“In due time, father.” Her father spoke, his voice slow and measured. He gives every word meaning, Azula noted. “But first, I would like to present my children to you. Both of them have grown much
since the last time you’ve seen them.”

“Indeed.” Azulon’s voice was non-committal. ‘Very well. Come forth, Zuko and Azula. I would test you on your knowledge and skill.”

The questions were fairly basic – anyone who paid attention to the history books could have answered them easily. The young princess didn’t really pay any of that much attention, although she noted that Zuko stammered and slipped up on a couple of the questions – a date wrong here, a moment’s too long of hesitation there. Wreathed in the undying flames that surrounded his throne, Azulon’s silence gave little indication about what he was thinking, but she could note her father’s expression, the tightening of the lips and narrowing of the eyes that signified his displeasure.

Finally, Ozai spoke up again. “My daughter’s prodigious skills with Firebending have surely not escaped your notice, father. With your leave, I would have her do a demonstration for you.”

“Oh, very well.”

Well, that was unexpected. Still, nothing too difficult for her at all, and she’d certainly never minded being the centre of attention. Standing and bowing, she slipped herself into a ready stance, took a deep breath… and began.

Punch, kick, jab, block. It was a basic series of movements, executed competently enough, but nothing special. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted her father, and he could read the subtle signs that communicated his disappointment. She almost grinned at the thought of pleasantly surprising her father.

Don’t worry – I know just what to do. As she landed on a single foot, she was expected to throw her weight forward, moving into one of the finishing phase of this particular set. Instead, she focused for a brief moment, launching herself backwards in a perfect somersault.

How about that – all those afternoons with Ty Lee paid off after all! As she landed again, she immediately shifted gears into one of the most physically demanding of all the katas – one that should have been out of her reach for at least another five years. Whirlwind sweeps, spinning bursts of flames, whips and tongues of fire that flowed through the air, and for brief, eternal moment there was no Fire Lord watching, no father to please, no brother and mother to watch. There was just her, and the fire, and the harmony of the dance.

And then her feet rested once more on the polished wood and the world swirled back into focus as she slowly bowed to the Fire Lord, breathing heavily and feeling sweat run down her cheeks. A tiny part of her was unhappy – she’d hoped for at least one of the strikes to create the blue fire she longed to claim for her own so much, but mostly she was ecstatic – she could see the faint traces of a smile on her father’s face. She had made him happy again.

Fire Lord Azulon, however, was silent, and after a moment Azula realized he fully intended to remain silent, at least for the time being. Feeling a tad miffed, she silently reclaimed her seat. Would a ‘well done’ have been too much to ask? Mother’s face did not reveal anything, as usual. This was enough to offset most of Azula’s good mood by the time she had settled herself down again.

Scarcely had she begun pondering the issue, however, when her brother shot up from his seat. “I, too, would like to demonstrate what I have learned.”

Involuntarily, she glanced to her father. The smile on is face had vanished. She bit her lip. If anyone else had been the audience, she had no doubt her father would have spoken up and expressly forbidden Zuko to perform. But to refuse his son’s request in front of the Fire Lord would have been...
a gross breach of protocol.

As Zuko took his place in front of the throne, Azula’s eyes widened in alarm. What was – his stance was all wrong! How had his instructors allowed him to get away with such sloppiness for so long? In fact, the way he was moving, she’d be surprised if he didn’t fall over by the third moveme-

Yup. There he went. Quickly the princess glanced over to her parents. His father’s face currently looked as if it had been carved from stone, so still it was. Then her mother – she looked worried for Zuko.

_no surprise there_, Azula thought irritably. _I give the best performance of my life and she doesn’t turn a hair. Zuzu falls on his bum and she looks like she wants to rush over and hug him._ Before she could stew any longer, though, Azulon spoke up again.

“Enough. I tire of these sideshows. Ozai, have your family leave us, and we shall discuss in private.”

As they stepped through the darkened entrance to the throne room (why was it that the palace dedicated to the Fire Nation was always shrouded in shadows?), she hesitated for a moment, and ducked behind a pillar. Her father had always taught her to keep one ear to the ground, for information was power, and what information could be more valuable or powerful than that which was shared between the Fire Lord and his son?

Briefly she considered dragging Zuzu along too, to help teach him about the ways of politics – Agni knew he needed all the help he could get. But looking at his disappointed face, Azula suspected that he wouldn’t have appreciated the generosity of her gesture right at that moment.

Well, that was fine. Anything _really_ important could be passed on to him later, after all. And with that, Azula snuck up as close as she felt she safely could, leaned her back against the pillar, and listened.

(X)

She dashed through the hallways of the palace, heedless of anything in her path. Panting, taking great gulps of air, she tried not to pay attention to how loud her thudding footfalls sounded in the dead of the night. Finally, she skidded herself to a stop in front of Zuzu’s room. Briefly, her eyes fell upon the handles. No sign of forced entry. Good.

Her relief died along with discovery that he apparently slept with his door unlocked. She ground her teeth together. That trusting _idiot_!

Yanking the door open, she charged into his room, and upon spying the still form lying on the bed, she marched over, grabbed his shoulder and shook as hard as she could.

“Wake up, stupid!” She snapped, and as soon as she saw blurry eyes begin to come into focus, she leaned over. “Daddy’s going to kill you!” She hissed urgently

_That_ got him awake. He bolted upright, and if Azula hadn’t ducked back at the last second, their heads would have collided. “What?” He sputtered. “But I – what –”

“Calm down!” Azula wasn’t feeling particularly calm herself, but she needed a coherent Zuko for this.

Now that Zuko had gotten a moment to focus and think through her words, his expression was hardening. “You’re lying.” He said after a moment. “You _have_ to be. Daddy wouldn’t…”
“Daddy wouldn’t? Get real,” she demanded. “You know what he’s capable of.” She shook her head. “You know what daddy wants more than anything, don’t you?”

Zuko wasn’t an idiot – after a moment’s deliberation, his eyes narrowed. “To be Fire Lord.”

“Exactly.” Quickly passing a hand through her hair, she continued. “After Grandfather sent us out of the room, I snuck back in to listen to what they were saying.”

“You’re not supposed to…”

“That’s not IMPORTANT!” Frustration, anger and fear boiled over for a brief moment, but Azula prided herself on her control, and after a few seconds of deep breathing she was reasonably calm again. “Anyway, I heard daddy explain that since Uncle didn’t have an heir any more, he was far more suited to be Fire Lord than Uncle despite Uncle being he crown prince. After all, he has two children.”

“What? But Grandpa loves Uncle. He’d never agree-”

“He didn’t. In fact, he blew up. He demanded that if daddy wanted to even dream of having the crown for his own, he had to know the same kind of pain that Uncle had been through.” She swallowed. “Zuzu, do you understand? Grandfather ordered daddy to murder you!”

That appeared to stun Zuko into complete silence for a moment, and he collapsed back onto the bed. “Daddy’s… daddy’s going to…” He was babbling softly to himself now, and for a moment Azula despaired. How were they supposed to get out of this one?

The sound of the door being closed snapped Azula to full attention, and she whirled, already bringing her hands up and generating a tiny ball of fire in her palms. On any other occasion, she’d have been overjoyed to note the azure hue of the flames. Now she barely noticed.

No one was in the room. Azula blinked. Wait. She’d left the door open when she’d come in… Someone had been eavesdropping! Cursing her own carelessness, she swept her gaze around the room. She’d been in here dozens of times already, and gotten to know every nook and cranny. Now all the shadowed alcoves looked like they concealed assassins and spies just waiting to leap out at them.

This wasn’t working. She couldn’t stand guard all night. A plan. They needed… a plan…

“All right.” She said softly. “Here’s what we’ll do. First, we’ll go to my room.’

“What?”

“Shut up and listen. Daddy’s not going to move immediately.” Her father wasn’t one for impulsive acts – she was absolutely certain that if push came to shove he wouldn’t terribly mind offing Zuko, but he would do so in a manner that would leave his name beyond suspicion, and with the scapegoat being one of his personal enemies as well. And that required planning. “So you’ll be safe for tonight. But just in case, we’ll go to my room.”

“But, but…”

“Quit snivelling!” A part of her knew better, knew that Zuko was still holding up remarkably well for someone who just learned that their father was going to kill him, but she was afraid, and fear made her impatient. “In the morning we can go to… to mother. She’ll know what to do.” Hopefully. The last part she kept to herself. But their mother loved Zuko, and so she would try to protect him. That only made sense. With any luck Uncle would be back soon, too. She felt no great love for the
man, but he was still the Dragon of the West – surely he’d have some idea of what to do. Maybe they could appeal to the sense of loss he felt over his son…

A few minutes later, Zuko was under her blankets, still shivering silently, and Azula was rubbing the ache out of her neck. Now that they were in a relatively safer position, she was suddenly aware of how tired she felt. The Firebending demonstration from earlier had already taxed her more than she’d realized.

She couldn’t go to sleep, though. Nuh-uh. Pulling up a chair, she settled herself by the bed, keeping a close eye on the door. Zuko was depending on her.

She absolutely could not afford to fall asleep.

(X)

Azula jerked awake. After a second, memories of what had happened rushed back to her and she cursed under her breath.

She had fallen asleep! Of all the stupid- Her self-berating was cut off as she noticed a dark figure hunched over her bed. Her bed, currently containing Zuko.

She leapt into action, blue fire streaming from her fists. “Get away from him!” She cried. At that single moment she didn’t care if that person was her father or Fire Lord Azulon himself, she was not going to back down from –

“Mother?” Astonishment barely described what Azula was feeling. “What are – what are you doing…”

Her mother was dressed as Azula had never seen her dressed before. A rough, hooded robe was draped over her body, a tiny satchel hung at her side, and… her eyes. There was something in her eyes that made Azula pause.

“Azula. My daughter.” Ursa walked over and grasped Azula’s shoulders. The young princess’s mind was a convoluted storm as she tried to sort out what exactly was going on. “You were the one who brought him to your room, weren’t you?” There was a quality in her voice that Azula didn’t understand, couldn’t understand, and it both infuriated and frightened her. “You were the one who tried to protect your brother.”

Azula hesitated. There didn’t appear to be much to say, at least on her part. But she could tell that there was indeed a lot that her mother wanted to say. She took a quick glance over to the bed – Zuko was lying on the bed, wavering on the edge between sleep and wakefulness.

“Azula,” her mother continued. “Soon, I will be forced to leave this place for… for a long time. I… I won’t be able to look after you or Zuko any longer. I know you overheard what your father and grandfather were talking about back in the throne room. You know that Zuko was in danger.” Her mother paused, obviously unaccustomed to such bare honesty, at least to her own daughter.

“Azula, before I leave, would you promise me something? You know your brother isn’t the best at a lot of things. You know he’s sometimes too gentle for his own good. You also know your father has no time for those who aren’t the best or are too gentle,” her mother swallowed once and her voice came out oddly thick. “Azula, please, promise me that no matter what happens, you’ll always look after Zuko, that you’ll always protect your brother.”

Instantly a part of her arose in cold fury. Her mother was leaving, and even then her last words to her daughter were about Zuko? Another part silently chided her – reminding her that it wasn’t her life
that had been threatened tonight. Both parts were rapidly swallowed up by the stunning realization that for the first time, she knew, clearly and unambiguously, what her mother wanted from her and that she could finally make her mother happy.

“If I…” she swallowed, trying to steady her voice. “If I do that, would I make you proud?” For once, in my entire life, could I make you proud?

A moment later, she felt arms wrapping around her back, one hand reaching up to caress the back of her head. “Oh, Azula,” There was an odd catch in her voice. “I am already so very proud of you. No matter your faults, no matter how many things you’ve done that I disapprove of, and no matter how poorly I may have shown it, I love you. I will always love you. Remember that.”

Liar! LIAR! A part of Azula’s mind screamed at her. She ignored it, her hands reaching up to grasp her mother as well, and for the first time in her life, Azula cried into her mother’s shoulder.

(X)

Pale sunlight streamed in through the balcony. Azula stood, hands resting by her sides, as she stared over the vast capital of the Fire Nation.

Somewhere in the bustling masses that were beginning their day, their mother was walking resolutely towards the ships bound for the Earth Kingdom.

She swallowed. From behind her, she heard Zuko’s voice, sleepy at first, and then panicked.

“Mom? MOM?” With a sigh, she turned and entered the room.

“Mother isn’t here any more.” She said quietly.

Zuko stared at her, uncomprehending.

“Also, Grandfather’s dead. And he named daddy as the next Fire Lord.” The words seemed so hazy and unreal, she could barely believe them even as she spoke.

Zuko glanced around the room, eyes roaming wildly. “But, what about-“

“You’re safe.” Walking over, she sat on the edge on her bed. “Before mother left, she asked me to promise her something.”

Her brother was silent.

“She asked me to protect you, no matter what.” She set her jaw defiantly. “I promised her, and so that’s what I’m going to do.”

Leaning over, she placed one hand on her brother’s shoulder and offered him what she hoped was an encouraging smile, “So don’t worry, Zuzu. No matter what happens, I’m going to take care of you. Okay?”

And the two of them remained there until the servants came to knock on the door, and to tell them that breakfast was ready.

Chapter End

Thank you for reading. Please review.
To be honest, I don’t really think I can sustain this rate of updates for very long. But until I slow down, I’ll just keep churning these out. I hope I write well enough for all of you.

As a note, I assume that the de facto language of the world is archaic Chinese, since that’s the language that is actually used in all the writing.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

Azula was exhausted.

Every muscle in her body burned with fatigue. Her eyes were bloodshot and felt like they were literally aflame. Her hair was stuck to her forehead and temples in messy clumps. Sweat poured down her body, soaking through her training uniform until it clung to her skin in a most unpleasant manner.

But none of that mattered.

In front of her her father, Fire Lord Ozai, nodded once. “You have done well, my daughter.”

A single, brief sentence of praise, dispensed at the end of a gruelling five hour training marathon, and somehow that made everything worthwhile. All the aches and hurts faded into insignificance as she grabbed at the words like a treasure.

“I am honoured to have pleased you, my father.” She replied, keeping her head low.

Ordinarily, her father would have nodded once more and then dismissed her. That was the way it had happened countless times before. But today, he merely sat, silent.

Curiosity burned within the eleven year-old girl, but she held her tongue, knowing that her father would speak up soon enough. And sure enough, after a long moment, he roused himself.

“Azula, what is our creed?”

She blinked, surprised. The creed shared between father and daughter (and, as far as she knew, no one else) was something he had drilled into her head ever since she’d actually gotten around to understanding the concept of words and numbers. It was so utterly, simple, so basic, that she’d barely given it any thought for… well, years.

Still, it was easy enough to recall those words.

“In this world, there is but a single object that truly holds any worth,” she recited, focusing her mind on dredging the entirety of it from the depths of her memory. “And that is strength. Strength of body, strength of mind, strength of will. It is strength alone that has shaped our nation and allowed it reach its glorious heights. To have strength and not use it is the greatest of all sins, for in the end it is no better than genuine weakness.”

As she finished her recitation, Azula wondered to herself if her father had pulled that saying out from some dusty scroll in the library, or if he had simply made it up himself. Not that it mattered that
much, she supposed. It was apparent to all that her father believed entirely in those words and meaning behind them.

“That is correct.” Her father nodded once more. “Consider it your task to meditate upon the meaning behind those words until the next time we meet. You are dismissed.”

“Yes, father.” Deepening her bow for a second, Azula pulled herself to her feet, turned, and began to walk out of the training hall.

Meditate upon the words? Ha. She could barely summon up the energy to stay awake right now. But it didn’t take a genius to figure out that her father apparently believed that she had been deviating from that creed in some way.

But apparently, not enough that he would openly reprimand her for it.

At the end of the day, it amounted to a warning not to toe the line. Azula’s expression reshaped itself into a frown. Just as it didn’t take a genius to divine what father had meant, it also did not take a genius to realize who father had meant.

She rounded the doorway of the hall and failed to prevent her lips from curving upwards at the sight that greeted her. Zuko was sitting slumped over on one of the benches, eyes closed and breathing steadily. With a slight shake of her head, she leaned over and tapped him on the shoulder once.

He jerked awake, blinking away the sleep. “Huh? Oh, hi, Az.”

“I thought I told you stop calling me that.” She turned away and rolled her eyes. “I’ve also told you that you don’t need to keep waiting for me after my training sessions with father.” Especially since they always go on far longer than the scheduled time.

He offered her a sleepy smile and a shrug. “It’s no big deal, sis, really.”

Sis?

“Anyway, how was training?”

Azula blew out a long sigh. “I ache in places I didn’t know I had.” She said shortly, and left it at that.

The two siblings stood and began walking through the shadowed halls of the palace in relative silence. As they passed under one of the torches, Azula took the opportunity to sneak a quick glance at her nails – one of them had gotten broken in a previous training session and ever since then she’d been paying a lot more attention to them.

“Father’s been putting me through a new set of exercises.” She said in an offhand manner as the two of them entered the residential wing of the palace.

“A new set?” Zuko frowned in response. “That’s odd. I thought you’d mastered all the standard katas.”

“I have. That’s precisely why he’s pulling out all the specialized stuff.” Azula blinked tiredly. “If I master this… I’m supposed to be able to generate lightning.”

“The cold fire? Really?” Zuko's eyes widened.

“Uh huh. Apparently one of the most important things, as far as lightning is involved, is absolute clarity of mind.” The princess shook her head, feeling weariness seep into her shoulders. Agni, she
just wanted to fall onto a soft surface right now. “Trust me when I say that achieving that is not easy.”

“What, something that’s not easy for the great Azula?” Zuko said in mock surprise. “You’ll be telling me we draw our power from the moon next!” She let it pass without comment.

Finally they were at the door to her own room. Pushing the door open, Azula stumbled forward and collapsed onto her bed. From a corner of her mind, she noted that the maids had perfumed the sheets again in preparation for her arrival. Huh. They were learning.

“Az?” Her brother questioned softly. “Shouldn’t you, you know, take a bath first? Unwind a bit? Or at least change out of your training clothes?”

“Too. Tired.” She mumbled into her pillow.

“…You know you’re just going to make yourself feel like one of Uncle’s dirty socks in the morning, don’t you.”

“D’n care. G’way.”

After a moment, Zuko relented and closed the door to her room. Briefly, Azula realized she hadn’t locked the door yet. Even more briefly, she considered just leaving it for one night, but common sense prevailed and she wearily dragged herself off the bed, stumbled over to the door, and proceeded to secure her room for the night.

That task done, she flopped once more onto her softness of her mattress and let the darkness wash over her.

(X)

Her brother had been right, Azula reflected sourly the next day. Not that it had been the first time she’d fallen into bed immediately after the conclusion of a training session, so she knew what to expect by now.

That didn’t make it any less unpleasant, of course.

After taking a bath and consuming several cups of tea – helpfully supplied by her uncle; if nothing else, the man knew his tea – she was beginning to feel tolerably human again. She’d have gone for the total spa treatment if it were possible, but she had a calligraphy practice to attend that morning, and despite her overall lack of enthusiasm for the subject, she knew there’d be consequences if she skipped out on the class.

And so she was here now, attempting to write ‘Fire Lord Ozai is the enlightened ruler of our glorious nation’ in heavily stylized script, and for a moment, she thought she truly shared a kindred spirit with Mai and her utter ennui regarding the world.

Still, being in this class had its perks – it was one of the few areas in which there was no huge gulf of ability between Zuko and herself, meaning that he attended the same classes as her, and it afforded them some time to talk – the tutors apparently did not care if they did so as long as they turned in accurate scrolls at the end of each class.

“It’s been busier than usual today, hasn’t it?” She commented. At her side, Zuko didn’t look up.

“Yeah. The war council being held has gotten all the officers in an uproar.”
“Omashu again, I take it.” There hadn’t been any serious campaigns against Ba Sing Se in a while, not since uncle had failed after his siege – it was the focal point of all the refugees from the Earth Kingdom, and it had generally been accepted that leaving it to choke on all the logistical problems involved would be the best bet in ensuring a weakened capital in the long run. “The City of Golden Lilies fell last year, so there’s only the one left.”

“No, today’s scope is supposed to be bigger.” Zuko’s fingers wobbled ever so slightly as he continued writing. “Supposed to concern the entirety of the war.”

“Huh.” A distant corner of her mind was worried – she’d thought she’d kept up with the flow of information well enough, so why had she missed that today’s war council was bigger than all the other ones? She hadn’t planned on sneaking in for the proceedings, but if truly was that all-encompassing…

Her current sheet was finished. Setting it aside, she carefully drew out the next piece. ‘The Fire Nation seeks to extend the prosperity and power of our great country to the other downtrodden and backwards cultures’. With a slight roll of her eyes, she continued to work.

“I’m going to attend today’s war council.” Zuko said suddenly, and so quickly that he almost stumbled over the words. Azula snorted in response.

“Right. And I’m a platypus-bear. A platypus-bear with pink horns. And wings too, why not.”

“Az…”

“Stop calling me that. Anyway, you and I know that there’s no way father is going to allow us children into a war council.” Not the standard way, anyway. She felt fairly certain that her father was aware of her whenever she snuck into his supposedly private meetings, but he’d never brought the issue up in front of her, and Azula didn’t particularly feel like pushing it. It was easier to seek forgiveness than ask permission, and all that.

He noted the lack of expression on Zuko’s face – ever since the incident three years back, Zuko’s opinion of their father had cooled drastically, along with a gradual loss of enthusiasm for satisfying their father’s wishes. Azula found herself unable to blame him very much. Truth be told, for a while she’d had been conflicted too, wondering if she should really keep holding her father in such high regard after what happened. Eventually she’d justified it by bifurcating her life as much as possible – she would look up to her father and strive to please him, and the rest of her life, including Zuko, could be kept separate, to be lived her own way.

Unless, of course, her father’s interest in her life began extending to those areas she’d previously thought entirely her own… Azula’s face darkened as she recalled her father’s words the night before.

“Az? Something the matter?”

“Hm?” Looking down, she realized she had completed the second scroll. “No, nothing.” The third one read ‘The very act of earthbending is self-defeating. The essence of earth is steadiness, and to earthbend is to disrupt that steadiness. Thus, earthbenders are inherently inferior.’

Right. I’m sure this will make the soldiers whose heads got crushed by flying rocks feel so much better. Azula rolled her eyes again. Out loud, she said, “Back to the question – what makes you think you’re going to the war council?”

“Uncle’s attending, and he promised to bring me in with him as long as I didn’t draw attention to myself.”
“Uncle, huh…” Azula raised an eyebrow. “Why is he even attending, anyway? He hasn’t been involved in the war ever since he came back from the siege. Nowadays he just sits in the gardens sipping his tea and playing Pai-Sho.” And the occasional music night, of course. She was glad that her bedroom doors were reinforced to dampen sound.

“I’m not sure, but apparently he was specifically requested to come. I guess they still value his input – after all, he’s spent more time campaigning in the Earth Kingdom than almost anyone else.”

Azula was silent as she dipped her brush into the ink, and conversation was halted until both of them were done with their work. As they stood to leave, Zuko took a glance at the timekeeper candles out in the courtyard.

“There’s still a while left until the war council.”

“So there is.”

“Care to join me in a round of Pai Sho?”

The princess raised an eyebrow. “What would be the point? I’ll just crush you again, like always.” She couldn’t keep the slight tug at the side of her mouth from showing on her face.

His brother grinned at her, and for a moment, he looked younger than his 13 years. “Oh, I’ve been talking to uncle. He’s taught me a few tricks he says should come in handy.”

“Ha. He did, did he. Very well, I accept. Lead the way, brother dearest.”

Azula stared blankly at the board lying on the table in front of her. “That was a fluke.” She said quickly.

“Admit it, you lost.” Her brother’s infernal grin was still etched on his face – it was a rare occasion when he got to show her up at anything and he was apparently not going to waste any time in savouring his victory.

“By a fluke!” She insisted. “A slight miscalculation on my part, that’s all!” I really shouldn’t have played the Lotus tile like that… “Look, set up the board again and I’ll show you some real skill.”

“If you insist.” One hand quickly swept away the remaining pieces from the board, and both of them were reaching for their respective tiles when Azula felt a chill of nameless dread shoot up her spine.

Glancing around, she caught the briefest glimpse of golden eyes staring at her from one of the upper story windows, and the dread intensified, twisting through her gut. Father. She blinked, and the eyes were gone.

“Az?” Her brother’s voice pierced her mind, and she turned her attention back to him. “What’s the matter?”

“Stop calling me that.” She said out of reflex. And then, after a slight pause, she shook her head. “And no, nothing’s the matter. Just… I’m more tired than I thought. I guess I haven’t fully recovered from yesterday’s training. Can we put the rematch on hold for another time?”

Zuko blinked, but shrugged his acquiescence. “Sure, it’s no big deal. I should probably go meet Uncle now, anyway. The war council will be starting pretty soon.”
Azula didn’t say anything else as they departed for their respective locations, but when she remembered the eyes, she swallowed hard. Had that been a coincidence? Or was her father keeping tabs on her meetings with Zuko?

*Later.* She shoved the issue to the side. She could worry about that later. For now, there was a war council to attend. In secret, of course.

Shaking her head to force the more persistent doubts away, she strode purposefully through the hallways of the palace.

(X)

“Well, that was a rather unexpected conclusion to the meeting, wasn’t it?” She said with more than a hint of sarcasm as she joined Zuko in the hallway.

“Wha-?” Zuko glanced up, the determined expression on his face morphing into one of surprise as he caught sight of his sister. “How did you… never mind. You’re always sneaking around so much, I really should stop being surprised.”

Silently, she despaired at her brother’s complete lack of talent (or interest, for that matter) in backdoor intrigue. How was he going to head the court effectively in times to come if he took everything at face value? Once again, the issue was tagged away to be dealt with ‘later’ as she refocused on the matter at hand.

“For what it’s worth though,” she continued smoothly. “I agree with what you said.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” She nodded, her expression serious. “The general is an idiot and the plan to draw those troops out is never going to work. Veteran earthbenders have a dozen different ways to knock out a greenhorn regiment from a distance. I mean, they could just start a landslide from a mile away, and those troops are finished. You’re going to need master Firebenders and people who’ve spent their lives fighting earthbenders to counter their long-range efforts and draw them into fighting position.”

“…That wasn’t really the point of my objection, Az.”

“Hm? Oh, right, the whole ‘sacrificing our young soldiers’ thing.” Azula shook her head. “You’re too soft-hearted for your own good, Zuzu.”

“I’m sorry for caring.” He said snidely.

“Well… the point stands – the plan’s a lousy one from any angle.” Azula raised an eyebrow. “I wonder how a clod like Khanzo was able to keep his position for so long.”

“The standards for promotion and retaining of positions have been getting lax lately.” Zuko said as he raised and lowered his shoulders. “I guess they think it’s going to be a moot point pretty soon.”

Azula fell silent. The two of them knew what would happen in a few short years – the return of Sozin’s Comet, the same celestial being that had allowed the Fire Nation to completely eradicate the Air Nomads one hundred years ago. And when it returned, well, the defences of the Earth Kingdom’s fortresses might as well have been constructed from wet paper for all the good it would do them. Sheer disparity of power would conclude the Hundred Years War… or would at least break the back of the resistance so comprehensively that there would only be mop-up operations afterwards.
‘Well, lax standards or not, I’m kinda surprised you’ll be meeting him in an Agni Kai. Father really didn’t like you talking out of turn there, did he?’

Zuko shook his head and looked away. “What’s done is done. I don’t regret what I said.” He replied, pointedly steering the conversation away from their father.

“… Want me to take over for you?”

“What?”

“I’m the better Firebender and you know it. I bet I could wipe the floor with ten of him.”

“Az, an Agni Kai is an honor duel. I can’t just let someone ‘take over’ for me. What would the people say?”

“Right, right, I know.” Azula acknowledged her brother’s point and fell silent. She could feel the stirrings within her – even after three years, the promise her mother had extracted from her was fresh in her mind.

_Azula, please, promise me that no matter what happens, you’ll always look after Zuko, that you’ll always protect your brother._

Azula pursed her lips, irritated. _And now, of course, he’s charging straight into a fight right before my eyes and I can’t do anything about it._ Not that she considered a washed-up old general much a threat – Zuko was competent enough. Nowhere near as good as her, but still able to run circles around most rank and file soldiers. Still, there was always the niggling worry in the back of her mind.

“Hey, Zuko.”

“Hm?” He wasn’t paying attention to her. _Probably trying to get himself psyched for the duel._

“Promise me something.”

“What?”

She smiled slightly and leaned back against the wall. “Promise me you’re not going to lose a duel to some washed-up old general who probably hasn’t Firebended seriously in a decade, okay?”

Zuko smiled and nodded once. “I promise.”

(X)

Well, Azula decided as she tightened her grip on the armrests of her chair from the viewing area, she supposed that technically, Zuko would be keeping his promise to her after all.

Indeed, he was not going to lose in an Agni Kai to General Khanzo.

He _was_, however, almost certainly going to lose in a duel against their father, Fire Lord Ozai.

She swallowed hard as she caught sight of Zuko’s face, confusion slowly giving way to shocked realization, which rapidly melted away to growing panic.

Oh, this was not good at all.

_Okay. Okay. Focus._ Azula frowned, subsuming her own emotional reactions to the comforting familiarity of logic. _If father meant that the Agni Kai would be Zuko against him, that must mean_
Zuko didn’t have a prayer of defeating their father unless he held back – and giving the way he was carrying himself right now, Azula deemed that possibility ‘unlikely’ at best. *We both know that father respects strength above everything else. But surely he doesn’t expect Zuko to be at his own level in terms of Firebending. The only person in the whole palace who could even dream of that is Uncle Teatime sitting next to me.* Her frown deepened. *Maybe Zuko can get out of this relatively unscathed if he can pleasantly surprise father. It doesn’t need to be much – just get in one good hit, maybe. Yes, if he can just land one hit-

But as she caught sight of her brother’s stricken face, she realized that she might as well have wished for Agni Himself to descend from the sky and sear all the Fire Nation’s foes from the face of the earth.

Abruptly, Zuko fell to his knees in a gesture of supplication. “Please, father! I only had the Fire Nation’s best interests at heart! I’m sorry I spoke out of turn!”

“Stand up and fight, Prince Zuko.” Her father never raised his voice, but nevertheless it filled the entire chamber by sheer force of the power and authority within. In the back of her mind, Azula realized that her father had nor referred to him as ‘son’.

Oh no. Oh no.

“I meant no disrespect!”

*Stand UP, Zuko!* Azula bit her lip so hard she swore she could taste blood. *Don’t you understand? Father respects strength and nothing else! Your refusing to fight him is the worst action you could possibly take at this point! You have to show him you’re at least willing to fight for what you believe in. Stand up, Zuko! Stand up and fight!* She almost stood up and yelled the words her brother, but years of tradition and knowledge drilled into her head stayed her hand. An Agni Kai was sacrosanct – no one was to interrupt until the conclusion of the fighting. Or… well, what passed for fighting right now.

“You will fight for your honour, boy!” Her father’s words were an indignant growl, but he might as well have roared it at the top of his lungs given Zuko’s reaction – he kowtowed fully before the Fire Lord, his entire body shivering. Azula almost groaned out loud at this shameful display.

“I… I will not fight you.”

There was absolute stillness in the room for a moment. And then, almost faster than Azula could follow, her father lashed out with one foot, catching Zuko in the shoulder and sending him sprawling backwards on the arena floor. Her brother’s face was staring at their father’s, eyes wide, as the Fire Lord drew his arm back.

“Then you will learn respect, and suffering will be your teacher.”

At the moment of impact, Azula felt rather than saw, Uncle turn away, unable to watch any longer. But she herself remained staring at the scene before her in horrified fascination.

And then the agonized scream pierced her ears, seeming to vibrate through her very bones as her brother lay on his back, one arm reaching up clutch at the mass of charred flesh that had once been the left half of his face.

“**ZUKO!**” The horrified shout resounded through the chamber, and it took Azula a second to
recognize the voice as her own. An instant later, she was on her feet, jumping towards the duelling platform. A quick wave of her hand dispersed the flames that surrounded it, and then she was rushing to her brother-

“Leave him.” Her father’s words, cold as ice, cut through the air, rooting Azula to the spot. Silently, she took a quick glance to her father, who was already walking away, his back towards the two of them. “A weakling like him does not deserve our attention.”

At his words, Azula hesitated, torn between her obedience to her father – slammed into her by years upon years of teaching – and concern for her brother, who was now lying on the floor, failing the suppress the tiny whimpers of pain that escaped his lips every few seconds.

Finally, her father spoke up again. “As victor of the Agni Kai and Fire Lord of the realm, I hereby pronounce my sentence. For the crimes of Disrespect to One’s Betters, Impropriety in the Sacred Court, and above all, Cowardice in the Face of Danger, you are to be stripped of your title of Crown Prince and exiled from the land.”

“No.” The words from her mouth were a whisper, so soft she could barely hear herself.

“But I am not entirely without mercy.” Their father turned around, and his eyes bore towards the crumpled body on the floor. “If you, Zuko, can restore your honour and redeem yourself by capturing the Avatar, then I will withdraw my judgement, and you may return to your place in this court, and your honour will be restored.”

The words were apparently spoken in all seriousness, all emotion drained out of them, but Azula knew her father better than anyone else in the room, better even than his own brother, and she could see the cruel triumph in his eyes.

What stunned her was not that such emotion was there, but that it was directed towards her.

Puzzlement took Azula for a brief moment – why was her father focused on her instead of –

And then realization struck, and as the awful finality of her father’s vengeance took hold, the world wobbled around her, and Azula, Princess of the Fire Nation and now heir to the throne, had to fight the urge to throw up.

(X)

Azula sat on the bench, staring numbly at her brother who was lying in the bed. Shortly after the duel, Zuko had been hurriedly brought to the medical chambers, and was now so heavily sedated she doubted that he would so much as twitch an eyelid if someone else burned the other half of his face.

She watched from a distance as the finest medical minds in the nation worked to heal her brother, her mind a maelstrom of chaotic emotion, all of it centred around what had just transpired.

Father did this because of me. Zuko’s getting banished because of me. He’s going to carry a scar the rest of his life because of me he’s a disgraced prince because of me he’s lost his claim to the throne because of me all this is happening because of me me me ME

She clutched her head in between her two hands, at a complete loss as to what to do. It was the first time that this had happened in a very long while.

It was because of her. Father had warned her the night before – warned her not to push her luck, warned her against forming attachments to those weaker than her, warned her against becoming too close to her brother. But she had blithely ignored his words, and seeing them both relaxing over Pai
Sho – that stupid, *stupid* game, why couldn’t have just said no back then? – must have pushed to make his final decision.

He probably hadn’t expected to have an opportunity fall upon his lap so quickly, of course, but her father knew how to seize chances that came his way – he had a talent for it.

And now she had failed in her promise – the one thing her mother had ever asked of her, and she had *failed*. And she was going to *continue* to fail – her brother would be leaving, and she did not delude herself into believing that her father would allow her to go with him. She would no longer be able to protect Zuko by any stretch of the word. If her mother was here now… if she could talk to Azula… what would she say?

This single moment had hurt Azula more than the other eleven years of her life combined – not even her mother’s departure had hurt remotely this much. And her father had done this without lifting a single finger against her. As she sat there, fighting desperately to keep the tears that blurred her vision from spilling over her cheeks, Azula thought that, for the first time, she truly understood why her father spoke of attachments as a *weakness*.

And now Zuko was being sent away – forever. The lifeline of ‘redeeming’ himself by hunting the Avatar was little more than a cruel joke – salt upon open wounds. She would likely never see him again, they would never again be able to relax together in the lazy afternoons, she would no longer have a shoulder to lean on during harsher moments – just how her father wanted it, of course.

For a moment, a bolt of pure, black hatred shot through her.

She was dimly aware of Uncle entering the room and talking to the doctors, asking about her brother’s condition, and suddenly Azula felt as if she wanted to burst and she knew that if she remained in the room for one more second she would start screaming and never be able to stop and so she pulled herself to her feet, wiping at her tears and cursing at her own weakness and lack of control. She was then dimly aware of running through the palace until suddenly she found herself back in the sanctuary of her bedchambers.

Alone, Azula collapsed onto her bed and tried her best to keep her body from shaking and her tears from spilling down her face.

(X)

It was a cold grey morning the day Zuko was scheduled to depart – a morning, Azula thought bitterly, much like the one in which their mother had been banished as well.

The two siblings stood at port, watching silently as men strode up and down the gangplank, loading the ship with supplies.

“I’d come with you if I could, you know that?” She spoke softly. “If father had allowed me to come along, I would have.”

“I know, Az.” He smiled reassuringly at her, although she could see the pain in his eyes. The wound was still fresh on his face, gleaming a fiery red in the pale light, giving him a strange, misshapen appearance. He had also shaved his head entirely in the time between the disastrous Agni Kai and now – apparently he felt that having a bald head would look less awkward than having hair with a huge chunk of it burned off. “And don’t worry, okay? I’ll be back soon, once I find the Avatar and…”

“No you won’t!” Azula cut him off with a furious hiss. “Father, Grandfather, and Great-Granfather
have been searching for the Avatar with all the resources of the Fire Nation at their disposal for the past hundred years. And you know what they’ve found? Nothing! They’re not even sure if he survived the attack on the Air Nomads or was killed and reincarnated to the Water Tribes! You have one obsolete ship, a dozen men, and Uncle!” The last word was said with a snarl as she indicated the portly old man as he stood on the ship’s deck, apparently inspecting the make of the vessel. “What do you hope to accomplish with that?”

Truth be told, she was still surprised that Uncle had volunteered to accompany Zuko on the trip, citing that he was still a young man and needed teaching. Uncle had also claimed that in the event that he found the Avatar and returned to his place in court, it really wouldn’t do for the Crown Prince to have missed out on several months (or years… or decades…) worth of education. Father had simply snorted impatiently and acceded to Uncle’s requests with a curt nod.

“Az…” Zuko’s voice snapped her back to the present, and she felt her anger flare up again.

“I’m not finished.” She spoke over him easily. “Even if by some miracle, you do find the Avatar, what then? Are you going to fight him? You do know why it’s called the New Imperial Palace, don’t you? Avatar Roku pulverized the old one a hundred years ago, and he wasn’t even trying very hard! What can you possibly do against someone like that?” She wound to a halt, panting, feeling some of her anger drain away, to be replaced by an empty sadness. “Dad wants you gone, Zuko. He doesn’t intend for you to ever come back.”

Zuko was silent for a moment, before straightening his back and turning to face her.

“Azula, I will find the Avatar. I will restore my honour, and I will return. That is a promise.”

Azula almost opened her mouth to give another scathing retort, but found herself silent. There really wasn’t anything to say, after all.

After a moment, the call came that the ship was ready to depart. Zuko took a couple of steps towards the ship, before halting in his step and turning to face her.

The silence stretched for several eternal seconds before Zuko nodded.

“See you soon.”

Azula almost smiled. “Yeah… see you soon.”

She remained there, silent and watching, as the order to cast off was given, and the black vessel slowly pulled out of port.

She remained, watching, until it became a mere speck, finally vanishing to the horizon.

As she turned around to depart, she caught a brief glimpse of movement to her side. Even in that single glance, she could tell that her father had been watching.

Keeping her face carefully neutral, she left the port and returned to face a life without joy.

Chapter End

I’m kinda worried that I made Azula a little too ‘nice’ in this chapter, but most of the interactions in her was between her and Zuko, and, well, the point of this story is that Zuko and Azula are nice to each other. If all goes according to plan, Azula should be getting a chance to flex her muscles pretty
soon.

In any case, thanks for reading, and please review.
Alright, the last chapter (I think…) before Azula gets involved with the main plot proper, and we get to see her strut her stuff. (That… sounded better in my head.)

Anyway, thanks to everyone who’s kept up with the story so far.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

“Hi – YAH!” Azula cried out, letting her breath billow out of her in a single large rush as she landed, her foot slicing downwards. Upon impact, a brilliant rush of blue flames surged upwards in a cloud of heat and light, temporarily throwing shadows all across the dimly lit room they were in.

Not stopping, she pivoted, lashing out again and again with her legs to send plumes of scorching fire out in concentrated bursts, letting the fire rush forth to consume the area in front of her.

Even as she continued her furious attacks, her mind continued to note what she’d already done, and how much more she needed to do – complacency on the training grounds was unthinkable.

Nine kicks. Ten kicks. Eleven kicks. And… twelve!

The instant she completed the final strike, she leaned forward, swinging her arms in the wide arcs necessary for the technique she would use to complete this particular set of exercises. Even as she did so, she began to clear her mind – absolute concentration, absolute clarity of mind was required for this. And so she shut out everything else, letting her eyes focus upon the far end of the room, upon the black scar that the wall bore.

Her target. Focus on the target.

Nothing else mattered.

She brought her hands together, and a bolt of crackling lightning roared across the room, burning itself into the far wall with pinpoint accuracy. The walls of the dojo were strong – and they had been reinforced specifically to handle the strength of the young princesses’ increasingly powerful fire – but they still shook slightly under the impact of the lightning strike.

Panting, breathing heavily, she pulled herself upright and turned to face the raised dais. As she did, she inclined her body into a bow, her head facing the ground. And as she did, she silently prayed that her father would give his approval.

But that did not happen. He merely sat for a long moment, the silence stretching on for interminable seconds. Azula’s heart sank. She knew what the next words out of his mouth would be, knew what he would demand before he could even say it. Still, she hesitated, hoping against hope.

“Again.” Her father’s voice was low. Deliberate.

Unseen by her father, Azula’s golden eyes flashed dangerously. She’d performed the set perfectly, she knew she had! Just like she had for the past seven times.

But the word of the Fire Lord was law.
She forced down her exhaustion, forced her trembling legs to remain still, forced her face to remain an impassive mask, forced down the anger that flared within her, and she nodded once.

She turned again, shifting once more into a battle ready stance as she tried desperately to ignore the fact that her legs felt more like they made of jelly than solid bone and muscle. Again she advanced, a blur of graceful motion – just her luck that today’s session was almost entirely devoted to kicking and jumping attacks, of course.

Again, she performed the fast, fluid strikes. Again, the sweeping kicks. Again, the lightning bolt. As she made the last jump, she wobbled slightly upon landing, and a snarl of frustration made its way onto her face.

“Again.” The demand was marked by an icy edge – her father had noticed her slipup. Her father always noticed her slipups.

And so she began again. And again. And again. Until, on the eleventh repetition of the same exercise, she missed a landing, her feet twisting under her in a manner she would have found comical had it been anyone else. And then suddenly she realized she was lying on the ground, heaving for breath, feeling the world spin around her.

Anger at her own weakness was quickly eclipsed by shame and fear. What would her father say?

Nothing at all, as it turned out. The highest authority in the realm merely sat, silent, for several long seconds. Azula didn’t dare move, not even to pick herself up from where she had sprawled on the floor. She hardly dared to breathe.

Abruptly, her father stood and left the room. He did not even glance his daughter’s way, and the sound of his fading footfalls echoed through the room for what seemed like an eternity.

Shakily, Azula managed to pull herself into a sitting position on the ground, still fighting for air. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Li and Lo staring at her silently. No matter. They were inconsequential.

Gritting her teeth, Azula forced herself to stand, to walk out of the training hall, and to her own room. Every time her legs threatened to give way beneath her, she would clutch at the railings, trying desperately to steady herself.

As she left the hall itself, she instinctively glanced to the right. That was where the benches were, where people could wait and rest.

They were empty.

As always.

(X)

Her father had taken over more and more of her teaching as time passed. At first, she had been surprised – didn’t the position of Fire Lord demand much of from him, especially in times of war? But somehow he had found the time to come teach and lecture her, day after day.

In her weaker moments, she liked to believe it was because he cared about her.

Still, regardless of reason, he would sit and talk to her of history. Of the glories of the Fire Nation, of its immense strength. Too, he would talk of strategy, of deceptions and crushing blows and desperate last stands. He would talk to her of her role as princess of the Fire Nation and now heir to the throne,
of the uncompromising strength and devotion to the country that would be expected from her.

And always, no matter his stories of the glorious past, no matter the lesson on military strategy or the future that awaited her, it would boil down to a single unchanging point.

Strength alone was what mattered. Those stronger than you were obstacles to be surpassed, those weaker than you were tools to be used – at best. Attachments were for sentimental fools. Forming attachments to those weaker would drag you down to their level. Forming attachments to those stronger would mean that you merely became a tool yourself – a cog in the machine.

Her father’s voice was heavy and driven as he impressed this point on her. He considered it the single most important thing to be taught to his ward. The unshakeable bedrock that everything else his worldview rested upon.

Azula had believed it once.

She almost believed it now.

Her father was compelling and charismatic and clever. He weaved crafty arguments in favour of his worldview – there was no shortage of examples to draw from, both in history and fiction, of people who had let their attachments doom them to ignoble fates – and he would paint dreamlike visions of a glorious future – if only there were firm, strong hands with which to guide their nation.

But beyond all that, there was the simple fact that he was her father, and that ever since she had been old enough to reason she’d wanted to please him and live up to his expectations, and that even now a part of her (a fairly significant part, she would admit, if only to herself) craved for his attention and approval.

She almost believed.

Almost.

Because on quiet nights, after he had departed for the day, after his duties as Fire Lord had called him away again, Azula would lie on her bed and close her eyes and remember. She would remember her brother – one of the ‘weak’ ones – and the times they’d shared. Playing games, sniping at one another, discussing their lessons and Firebending techniques.

She would remember a time when she was happy.

And she would remember her whispered promise in the middle of the night to a departed mother she’d longed to please but never could, and she would remember golden eyes glinting with a malice that chilled her to the soul as it stared down at her brother, lying vulnerable and wounded on the arena floor.

And then she would open her eyes and all of a sudden the wonderful words her father had just spoken would have a hollow ring to it.

(X)

One day, as she made her way back to her room after yet another day – they all did tend to blur together after a while, and especially ever since anyone she could have ever considered a friend had gone their separate ways – she paused at the doorway and sighed.

It hadn’t been a particularly good day for her, all things considered. The training session in the morning had gone well enough (if primarily because her father hadn’t shown up for once), but the
meeting she’d snuck into in the early afternoon (just too early, as it turned out, to grab a decent lunch first) had droned on interminably without anything particularly noteworthy being said. To top it off, they’d chosen one of the smaller conference rooms as a venue, with the upshot being that the hiding spots there tended to be horribly cramped.

And now, she was nursing a wonderful headache.

Wearily, she pushed the door open – and paused.

A single piece of straw was lying on the ground in the doorway.

Eyes narrowing, she stooped to pick it up. She’d been the one to place the straw piece there in the space between the closed door and the wall – one of the most basic ways to detect if someone had been into her room unannounced.

*The servants won’t make their cleaning rounds for a few more hours.* And if by some chance they’d changed the schedule without her knowing, Azula knew that they would be thorough enough to have cleaned up that piece of straw from the ground. It wasn’t *that* inconspicuous.

Which left only one real conclusion – someone had entered her room without permission. Quickly, her eyes darted to her drawers – it was still open the fractional inch she’d left it in this morning. The blanket on her bed – the corner she’d tucked in was still there. Not satisfied, she yanked it straight – the tiny piece of white paper she’d tucked inside the fold fluttered to ground.

Right – so someone had come into her room, but apparently not to search it – anyone who’d been careful enough to replace the paper into the blanket would have done the same with the straw. So, then why…

Slowly, her gaze tracked the room, looking for anything that had been different from how she’d left it –

There. The shelf in which she kept all her writing materials (not that she used them particularly often, but it never hurt to be prepared). The pen’s brush tip was no longer resting on the corner of the shelf. Someone had moved it. Striding over purposefully, she quickly rifled through all the contents of the shelf, finally coming up with a small, unlabelled, unsealed scroll that hadn’t been there before.

Pausing a moment to ensure that her door was closed, she settled herself down on her desk and slowly opened it.

*Azula,*

*This is Zuko. How’ve you been?*

She nearly dropped the letter from sheer shock. Blinking in rapid succession, it was several long seconds before she could continue.

*If you’re surprised that I’m writing this letter to you, then I guess you should know that I’m pretty surprised too. I know anything sent home from me will be monitored by father, and he’s unlikely to let these sort of things pass on to you.*

*But we’re in luck, apparently. I was talking to Uncle the other day about how I wish I could talk to you or at least send letters, and he told me that if I really wanted to, he knew how to get letters to you without father noticing. I asked him how, but he said that there are some things best kept secret for now, so I’ve decided to trust him on that.*
As she read, she couldn’t keep the slight smile from tugging at the edge of her lips. “Same old Zuko…” She whispered to herself.

Anyway, it’s been nearly a month since I’ve been banished

Three months, now. Azula pursed her lips. Whatever delivery method Uncle used wasn’t particularly fast, that much was apparent.

and I’ve been to three different towns. It’s kind of amazing how they’re all from the same country, and yet can have such different feels and cultures. Uncle’s enamoured with the instruments they have on sale on the markets, and —what else? — the various blends of teas they have on sale at each new stop.

It was surprisingly easy to envision her uncle haggling in a port market. Azula wasn’t sure if that image was an amusing or disturbing one, though.

Still no luck in finding the Avatar, however. Though it’s only been a month, I shouldn’t be surprised.

“Oh, Zuko.”

I guess I’ll start by asking about people performing feats of airbending — since the airbenders are all extinct, anyone airbending would have to be the Avatar, right?

Azula frowned. I’m pretty sure the Avatar needs to learn the individual bending schools. If there’re no airbenders left, there won’t be anyone to teach airbending to the newest Avatar — whoever he is. Well, that was something that might be advantageous to Zuko should he ever find the Avatar...

“Ha, listen to me.” She chuckled without humour. “Here I am, acting like he’s going to actually find a phantom of the past.” Shaking her head, she continued reading.

Anyway, sis, I know you tend to worry about me, but seriously, don’t. I’m fine. Uncle’s good company, in his own way. And the rest of the crew are pretty competent at what they’re doing. Also, as much as this banishment hurts, I can’t say I don’t enjoy the chance to experience see the world outside the Fire Nation.

Azula doubted that the world outside the Fire Nation really had that much to offer, but she hadn’t experienced it firsthand, so she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Anyway, I think I’ve been rambling for a bit too long, so I’ll just end here.

See you soon.

Your brother,

Zuko

After she finished the letter, Azula sat there quietly for a very long while. Finally, she let out a long, slow breath of air. She didn’t know why — in reality, very little had changed — but the simple fact of knowing her brother could communicate with her cheered her up considerably.

Then, almost as an afterthought, she rolled the letter up tightly, clutching it in her palm. A moment’s concentration, and a fire blossomed, rapidly eating its way through the parchment.

Well, Azula thought as she watched the last remnants of the letter crumble away to charred ash. That’s the safest way I know to ensure this letter doesn’t get read by unwanted eyes.
And with that, she stood and departed from the room, not bothering to give the remains a second glance – with all the Firebending that went on around the palace, accidents were a simple fact of life and the servants would be used to dealing with the results without comment.

(X)

The letters from Zuko continued to arrive, generally two months late (at least to the times when he remembered to give a timeframe for his writing), and about once a month. It would always appear in the same spot in her room, and as much as she tried, she could never find out who it was that constantly left it there. He (or she) had even become skilled enough to properly replace the warning signs she’d left for herself. That annoyed her, but not that much. For the princess, whose life now consisted of little more than repetitive training in all sorts of fields needed to be Fire Lord, the letters tended to be one of the few things she could genuinely look forward to each month.

Once, he’d mentioned that he’d sent at least three letters via the official channels, so if none of them had reached her (they hadn’t), that meant their father was most likely intercepting them. When she’d read that, she felt a tug at her heartstrings, although she wasn’t sure why.

And then one day, six months after his exile, she opened the newest letter, and read Zuko’s latest missive.

Az,

I’m an idiot. For a while I’ve been wondering why you’ve never written back to me, and Uncle pointed out that there was never an address to send your letters to.

So, sorry about that, and here’s a list of the stops we’re planning to make over the next few months. Uncle says he expects a lag time of approximately two months for a letter to travel from writer to reader, so that’ll make it four months in terms of replies. Not the best setup, but I guess we make do with what we can.

If you want to send a letter out, Uncle says to leave it where you always find my own missives. I’m not really sure what it means, but I guess you do, so I’ll just leave it at that.

See you soon.

Your brother,

Zuko

Azula had smiled to herself, and later, in the silence of the night, she’d brought out her own scroll and pen.

Dear Zuko,

Thanks for the consideration, but to be frank, there’s really not much to write about back here. It’s just boring. There’s always the Firebending training, and I’m still good at it, of course, but aside from that there’s surprisingly little going on back here. Even the council meetings have stagnated. I think we’re in a bit of a deadlock as far as the war is concerned; they can’t decide if they should renew the offensive on the Earth Kingdom or reallocate resources to a killing blow on the Northern Water Tribes.

She paused, trying to find something to write about. Well, there was always those two… With a shrug, she continued to write.
Ty Lee’s left – apparently she managed to convince her mother to let her join the circus. I’m not even sure how, and personally I think it’s demeaning, but it’s not my life.

And I can’t shake the feeling that she did it in part to get away from me. The last sentence she kept to herself. She shook her head. No time to waste on ‘what-might-have-beens’.

Also Mai. You remember her, right? She had a crush on you when we were kids. I think she still does, actually. Anyway, she’s been shipped off along with the rest of her family to the Fire Nation colonies in the Earth Kingdom – her dad’s supposed to help with the jurisdiction of the subjugated areas. I’ve been debating whether or not to try to get him settled down in a particular area as a favour to her – but I can’t decide whether she finds travelling around the same areas again and again or staying put in a single area more boring. Maybe you’d have some ideas?

Anyway, all that aside, I’m glad to hear that you’re still well. I

Azula paused, pen to paper. She prided herself on not going off on flights of fancy, and the notion of someone capturing the Avatar was exactly that. Yet she could not find it in herself to discourage her brother from his quest. Finally, with a sigh, she continued to write.

wish you good luck in your search. Don’t get discouraged, you hear?

Finally, at the end, Azula paused. Then, closing her eyes, she let out a deeper sigh, and penned three more words.

See you soon.

And with that, she waited until the last of the ink dried before rolling the scroll up tightly and stuff it into the same alcove that she got all her letters from her brother from. Her task completed, she promptly went to bed.

In the morning, the letter was gone.

I’ve got to figure out how whoever it is keeps doing that.

(X)

As the months faded into years, the two of them continued to keep up their correspondence – their one link to each other. As Zuko had predicted, a four month lag in delivery made responses to each other pretty worthless, so they mostly wrote about whatever was happening around them, each keeping the other updated on the situation.

As time went on, Azula began to detect changes in her brother’s attitude – relatively gradual, but hardly subtle when one took it all in together. When before he’d go into great lengths about some new cultural attraction or site at the latest port of call, now he’d only mention the name of the town in passing, at best. Before he’d noted Uncle’s indulgences in a rather playful manner – one could almost picture shaking his head and grinning to himself as he recounted his anecdotes, now whenever he brought Uncle up it was mostly in an impatient tone, to complain that he didn’t seem very serious about the quest at all.

Azula had never had much patience for her Uncle herself, but the change in Zuko was rather jarring, nonetheless. Added to his rather consistent complaints that they were wasting valuable time at each port of call, it didn’t take a genius to see the reasoning behind her brother’ actions.

After destroying the latest letter, Azula leaned back in her chair, one hand reaching up massage her forehead. She’d known this task set upon him by their father had been a hopeless one from the first
day, and Zuko must have known it too. But somehow he’d manage to keep his hopes up for a rather long time…

*He has a remarkable capacity for self-delusion.* She knew others would have referred to it as ‘optimism’, but really, it came down to the same thing in the end. If Zuko wanted something to be true badly enough, he tended to convince himself that it would indeed come to pass.

A frown crossed Azula's face. In fact, it would be remarkably easy to manipulate him with such promises. All the more reason he should never have been sent out to fend for himself.

But apparently over two years of fruitless searching had begun to take its toll – Zuko was still entirely determined on finding the Avatar, but the search had gone from an eager young man believing that his goal lay *just* around the next corner to a frantic hunter tearing through everything he could find as quickly as he could and overturning every stone in his path.

*You knew this would happen, didn’t you, father?* Azula thought coldly as she continued to stare placidly at the ceiling. *You know Zuko, you know the weaknesses in his character – you knew he’d be driven to desperation by his failure.* Her lips pulled back into a snarl. Thinking about her father and Zuko at the same time was never a particular pleasant experience. It always ended with an uncomfortable feeling in her gut, one that would arise again the next few times she faced the Fire Lord, and one she continually fought to push down.

*Zuko’s tearing himself apart slowly. And I can’t do a single thing to help hi-*

Light.

A blazing pillar of radiance soared through the inky depths of the night, temporarily flooding the area in an eerie glow. Azula blinked in surprised, quickly pulling herself to her feet and hurrying out into the open.

It was coming from the temple.

The light faded after several brief seconds, but the talk about it refused to die down. Speculation ran rampant, but the pervasive theory (and one that was shortly confirmed anyway by the Fire Sages) was that the Avatar had returned.

The princess of the Fire Nation stood in the night air, staring off into the distance from which the light had bloomed. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath.

Maybe there was hope, after all.

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**Chapter End**

I actually intended for a single, very long chapter, but I think splitting it up would be better in the long run.

Anyway, thanks for reading, and please review.
I'm back! And here's the next chapter. I hope you all enjoy this.

Once again, I hope I give all of you a good time.

Disclaimer: Nothing it is that I own.

It was only expected that news of the reappearance of the Avatar would have sent shockwaves through the court. The physical embodiment of the ideal of balance, it had always been taken for granted that the Avatar would be opposed to the Fire Nation’s plans for conquest. After all, that had been the entire rationale for Sozin’s annihilation of the Air Nomads.

As she sat in the solitude of her own room meditating, Azula found herself unable to disagree with that assessment – if the Avatar were to exist, he or she would inevitably come into conflict with the Fire Nation’s goals. The Avatar would have to be neutralized.

But how?

Even if they knew the Avatar was back in the mortal world, they still didn’t know where he was. They had pinpointed the energy that lit the temple coming from the south, so perhaps the Avatar was there as well, but none of the people who’d seen the light had been able to narrow down the source with any accuracy.

Once again, her thoughts drifted to her brother. Silently, she wondered if he’d already discovered that the Avatar had returned. Had he seen that pillar of light? Did he understand what it meant?

The last letter in which he’d included an itinerary of the stops had indicated a southward course, and if they’d stuck to their schedule they would in fact be in the vicinity of the South Pole at approximately the time the light had appeared. Maybe Zuko would have even been in position to confront the newly reawakened Avatar shortly after he had appeared. Now wouldn’t that have been serendipitous.

Breathe in. The candles weren’t strictly needed for the meditation exercises, of course, but they were traditionally included, if for nothing more than to provide a point of focus for the Firebender in question.

So. Working under the assumption that Zuko knew the Avatar had returned and had in fact located the returned Avatar and had engaged the returned Avatar – a rather tenuous string to go on, she knew, but really, what else did she have to ponder right now? – the next question was obvious. Would he win? Could he win?

Against a fully realized Avatar, the answer was obvious – Zuko would lose, and badly. In a more candid moment, she admitted that she herself would also have lost in such a confrontation, and probably just as badly. But if the light that signalled the Avatar’s return had been any indication, his current incarnation was new to the world.

So maybe he did have a chance, after all. Maybe.
Breathe out. The flames on the candles flared brighter as she expelled the air from her lungs. It had always been a habit of hers to see how long she could make the candles last – her personal best had been five hours and seventeen minutes from a candle designed to burn for a quarter of an hour. It was a fairly simple exercise that demonstrated discipline and control – two essential traits of all Firebending.

At the end of the day, they simply didn’t have the necessary information. Nothing about the Avatar’s skills, knowledge, native bending style, what he or she looked like – Agni, they didn’t even know the Avatar’s gender. Nor did it seem likely that they would be finding out any time soon.

Father had been worried. She’d seen him in deep thought before as he pondered the war, how best to allocate the resources, where to strike next, when to retreat and regroup. However, this was the first time in a very long while she’d seen him upset. He’d never taken the threat of the Avatar very seriously – certainly he’d never diverted a fraction of the resources Sozin or even Azulon had to locating the entity.

Clearly that had been a mistake. Or maybe it hadn’t, considering the Avatar technically hadn’t even existed until two days ago. Or at least he’d existed in a state so inconsequential the signal braziers in the Fire Temple hadn’t bothered informing the Fire Sages that had existed.

Not much difference either way, she supposed. Regardless, they hadn’t been prepared for the Avatar’s return.

Breathe in.

Back to her father – he’d been worried. The entrance of such a powerful – or potentially powerful – figure into the grand scheme of things threatened to upend everything. Even beyond the Avatar’s own capabilities in combat, his return would instantly strengthen morale across all the lands that believed themselves on the poorer end of the scale – which basically meant everyone aside from the Fire Nation. On the other hand, she supposed morale across Fire Nation troops wouldn’t have taken too big a hit yet – not if and until the Avatar showed up in person and started wrecking armies on his own. Still, was the Avatar even capable of that currently?

And besides, what bending school was native to the current Avatar? The light had come from the south, and the largest (not that that was saying much, of course) group there was the Southern Water Tribe, so it would make sense that the current Avatar was a waterbender. But that would mean that the Avatar had somehow went from his last known incarnation of Avatar Roku from the Fire Nation to a nameless Air Nomad that had presumably died in the purge, and then… a hundred year gap in which the Avatar had suddenly disappeared before reincarnating to the next element in the cycle? That didn’t make sense. Nor did the alternative that he had cycled through the elements one more time over the past hundred years without anyone noticing, not least of which because it would have required him to have been reborn as part of the Air Nomads when they were no longer any Air Nomads to be reborn into.

Breathe out.

It just didn’t make sense. Azula suspected that her father and most of his planners had been running into the same roadblock as well. The Avatar had been the dominating topic of discussion at the last war meeting, and aside from assigning all bases in the southern region to be on high alert, there didn’t appear to be much they could do. The manpower needed to sweep the area would have taken far too long to draw up, and besides the Earth Kingdom had been launching several fresh counter-offensives that were tying down far more troops than the generals would have liked.

The wild card in all this, of course, was Zuko. While it was entirely possible that he’d simply missed
the whole thing – Agni knew her brother could be painfully oblivious at times – it was also entirely possible he’d been embroiled in the thick of the whole affair.

Her golden eyes flashed open as she stared down at the candles in front of her, now burnt down to stumps of melted wax.

The two months until her brother’s letter arrived to tell her about whatever he’d been doing during this time were going to be agonizing.

Of course, given the somewhat speedier official channels, it wasn’t too long before official confirmation was given that the Avatar had returned. Azula had not been privy to the meeting in which the details were discussed, but thankfully her father saw fit to provide her with the details after the fact. Apparently Zuko had run into the Avatar in the South Pole after all, but the encounter had ended rather badly for him, with the ship so badly damaged that they had pull into a port headed by Commander Zhao to make the necessary repairs.

Of course it would be him. Azula thought with a fair amount of distaste. The man wasn’t stupid, and he had had Zuko’s crew interrogated in the interim – which was really the only reason that they had gotten any new information about the Avatar, considering Zuko had been remarkably tight-lipped.

It’s frustratingly vague. The princess pursed her lips with distaste as she continued to peruse the report Zhao had sent the palace. What scant details had been included were barely enough to form and outline, and it was painfully obvious to anyone with an eye for details that the Commander was doing this purely for the sake of protocol.

He wants to hunt the Avatar himself. Azula set the paper back down on the table, one hand cupping her chin. The prestige associated with successfully subduing the Avatar would be immense; part of the reason why their father had listed that as his ridiculous condition for Zuko’s return – obviously Zhao wanted to claim it for himself. Somehow, she found the idea of Zhao and Zuko working in concert to capture the Avatar unlikely at best – if the rumours were right, Zhao had actually fought (and lost) an Agni Kai with Zuko over the right to hunt the Avatar. Naturally Zhao’s report made no mention of this.

Well, that wasn’t good at all. Zhao had resources far beyond Zuko’s scope, after all, and Zuko’s lifeline would be extinguished if he himself wasn’t the one to capture the Avatar. The thought briefly flitted through her mind of her father setting up a second task of an equally prestigious (and impossible) nature, but then they would be right back where they started. Once again, Azula rubbed her forehead as she retread the familiar ground of how her bumbling brother was going to get out of this one, and how she really should be out there helping him instead of stuck in the Fire Nation capital dealing with bureaucracy and courtly intrigues.

Not for the first time, the shape of a murky, half-formed plan began to churn in her mind. If she played her cards right…

Well, first things first; she had some research to do. Zhao’s report had been missing most of the necessary details, but one thing he’d let slip was that the Avatar was a young male airbender. The how of one apparently surviving unnoticed for a century could be dealt with later – the bigger problem was learning how to fight airbenders when literally no one had done so in the past hundred years.

It appeared she was going to need to pay a visit to the Imperial Library.
What an awfully defensive fighting style. Azula noted with distaste as she continued reading the scroll detailing several advanced airbending techniques. While the high spirituality of the Air Nomads had ensured that every last one of their kind were benders to some degree or other (something that would obviously befit the Fire Nation, whose numbers of new Firebenders had been dropping alarmingly over the past few generations), she couldn’t help but feel that it was wasted on such a… pacifist discipline.

Not to say that being able to defend oneself was bad, of course, and not to say that that airbending didn’t have its fair share of useful techniques, but even then their philosophies spoke of a reluctance for overt violence and distaste for inflicting fatal harm upon others.

And look where that got them. Azula shook her head impatiently as she skimmed through yet another tract expounding on the sanctity of all life. Rolling it up, she shelved the scroll. She could ponder the merits of living in mountaintops and eating three grains of rice a day later – right now she was concerned chiefly with their combat abilities.

What she could find (which honestly wasn’t that much), was that airbenders were apparently in love with the idea of avoiding and evading attacks – no reason to see if you could weather a blow when you could simply pass it by. Enclosed spaces were, therefore, a bad place for them – although even then their increased agility (something about manipulating air resistance) would make it tricky for others to land a blow. Scrolls which analysed the airbending fighting style generally spoke of it being extremely freeform and dynamic.

Not that it would help her much in the end – these scrolls could give her basic ideas of what airbending moves the Avatar might use against her should they ever meet up, but it was never going to replicate the actual experience of facing these moves in actual combat. Frustrated, she replaced the scrolls in their original spots and began to leave the library, her mind still occupied with thoughts about how to match the Avatar (as well as one or two moves she’d picked up from those airbending scrolls that she thought she could incorporate into her own Firebending routine), when a servant entered the room.

“What is it?” She questioned offhandedly.

“Your highness, you told us to inform you the next time there was a report of the Avatar making an appearance.”

“So I did. You have the report on hand?”

“A sighting at Kyoshi Island… why would he even go there?” Azula muttered to herself as she walked back to her room. That island was created by Avatar Kyoshi, of course, but if the Avatar wanted to commune with his spiritual past or some other nonsense, wouldn’t he have gone to Crescent Island? Avatar Roku was the Avatar before this one, after all. Then again, it’s in Fire Nation, territory, so he might not want to take the risk. True to form, her father had already sent word to the Fire Sages that if the Avatar showed his face there he was to be apprehended immediately.

Well, it’s probably a good thing he’s not coming into the Fire Nation anyway – Zuko wouldn’t be allowed to enter it, not even to capture the Avatar. Even as the thought crossed Azula’s mind, she had to wonder if her brother would actually pay any heed to something like that. Well, it was a moot point, anyway.
As she entered her room, her gaze fell upon her writing shelf, and she knew immediately that a new letter had been placed there. Shutting the door behind her, she quickly drew out the latest missive and quickly read through it.

Happy as it was for her to continue reading through her brother’s letters, she couldn’t help the feeling of hazy unreality of it being from two months ago, when dreams of hunting down the Avatar were just that – dreams. So much had changed, and so quickly…

Abruptly there was a knocking at her door. Azula’s eyes widened fractionally, and a moment later the letter in her hand had been consumed. Sweeping the ashes aside with a graceful motion, she turned to the door.

“What is it?”

“Fire Lord Ozai has requested your presence in the strategy meeting to be held in an hour’s time, your highness.”

Ah. Right. Azula sucked in air and allowed herself the beginnings of a smile. Her conversation with her father the previous night had been productive, after all.

Her presence in the gathering – seated to the right of the Fire Lord, as was only proper for the heir apparent – would help cement her status as one whose presence had to be acknowledged, whose opinions and ideas had to heeded even if they were ultimately rejected. Her youth was in this regard a boon – there had been more than enough talk flying around about her surprising skill at Firebending, politics, and tactical acumen. Seeing her officially recognized by her father at such an age would only increase her reputation, something which certainly never hurt. That she would no longer have to cower behind pillars and curtains to keep up with the flow of information was a pleasant bonus.

Too, she would be able to influence the direction the war would follow – even if such influence would be severely mitigated by nearly everyone else in the room. That didn’t bother her too much – once she got one or more of her ideas or plans to go through, the results would speak for themselves, with a corresponding increase in prestige.

But perhaps most importantly, it would take her one step closer to her ultimate goal – some actual, honest-to-goodness field work. She could hardly wait.

Closing her eyes and letting out her breath, Azula stood and quietly departed the room.

(X)

As time wore on, reports concerning the Avatar and the hunt for him continued to filter in. Most of them were conspicuously lacking in details, although Azula had to admit that she quite enjoyed the one in which Comman – Admiral Zhao (seriously how had he gotten himself promoted?) had to admit that he’d successfully apprehended the Avatar… only to have him rescued by a mysterious ‘Blue Spirit’.

Less amusing had been the report of the Avatar showing up at Crescent Island, with Zuko in hot pursuit. Her father hadn’t appeared to care very much that Zuko had apparently entered the Fire Nation without permission, paying rather more attention to the fact that for a brief moment, Avatar Roku, or his spirit or something along those lines, had reappeared to aid the current Avatar in his escape. Somewhere along the way, they’d also learnt that his name was ‘Aang’, although any significance that name might have held was lost on Azula.
Zhao had been there, of course. The man was as tenacious and annoying as a cockroach-flea, and any personal dislike Azula felt for him was magnified rather intensely by the simple fact that he was constantly getting in her brother’s way. Zuko was going to have a hard enough time of it on his own, and there was no reason for that insolent, pompous self-serving jackalope to constantly hinder his efforts.

True, in her current situation she could do little to overtly aid her brother, but she still had power and authority enough to do something. And every little bit helped.

“B – but your highness! The Lord Admiral has ordered us to send these troops to reinforce-“

“And I’m countermanding that order,” Azula replied, giving the colonel an icy glare, under which he quailed visibly. “He may be an Admiral, but he isn’t undertaking any major campaigns that would require those troops right now, whereas the Earth Kingdom has been getting increasingly restless, especially near the coast. Those troops will be put to better use defending our supply garrisons near the Green Jade Pass.”

At that, the colonel fell silent.

You want to make capturing the Avatar your personal goal? Azula thought with a scowl. Then you can do it personally.

Her frown only deepened as she continued to look at the troop dispositions. Over the past month or so, Zhao had apparently been using his position as Admiral to send out orders to all ships under his direct control – they were definitely gathering, although no word had yet reached the Imperial Palace as to for what. Her eyes narrowed, and she briefly pondered if her statement that he wasn’t planning a major campaign had been an accurate statement after all.

Well. It could be saved for later, if and when he finally gave notice to the palace about whatever his next set of actions would be. There was no way he would launch a major campaign without discussing it in a strategy meeting with the rest of the officers, or at the very least informing them first.

There was no way he would do something like that.

(X)

Of course he would do something like that.

When word had finally reached her father about Zhao’s campaign to subdue the Northern Water Tribe – a full week after the fleet had already assembled and begun their journey – the Fire Lord had been apoplectic. The diversion of so many able men and ships would leave them dangerously undermanned for protracted campaigns in the Earth Kingdom at precisely a point where the people had started to rally behind the idea of the Avatar coming to help them overthrow the Fire Nation. Even an eventual victory would likely result in horrendous losses, as was only to be expected when you assaulted the largest concentration of waterbenders in the world in a city made entirely out of water in the middle of the Agni-forsaken ocean.

And the worst part was that, for all his authority, her father could not give the order to halt and turn the ships round. To do so now, after Zhao had already progressed halfway across the world to his target would have created (or revealed) fatal cracks in the command structure that had allowed such a maverick like Zhao to a high position in the first place, which would in turn result in a massive loss of respect and prestige.
No, the only alternative was to simply pretend that they had known and approved of the entire operation all along – with the first opportunity to withdraw without losing face being when it was apparent that losses were heavier than projected. Not a good solution by any means, but the closest they had. Being Fire Lord was a rather delicate combination of strength and weakness – at least if you wanted to command the respect of the general populace, which her father did.

As she stared down at the copy of the damning massive, she could feel a cold rage building up within her, and quickly she bundled it all up and forced it down again.

*Right. Think this through clearly.* She let out a breath, and out of the corner of her eye, a candle flickered. Zhao’s not that much of an idiot – he’s got to know that he’ll be flayed alive once he comes back home unless this goes far, far better than expected. That’ll mean the defeat of the Northern Water Tribe with minimal casualties. But how in the world does he plan to accomplish that? For Agni’s sake, he’s scheduled to reach their fort at the full moon! The peak of their powers!

Regular combat projections all agreed that losses would be massive. So logically Zhao wouldn’t do it the regular way – and she dearly hoped she wasn’t giving him too much credit on this line of thought. It followed that he apparently thought he had some way to subdue or neutralize the waterbenders of the tribe. *Bribery? Blackmail? Some new reagent that prevents bending?* Azula’s face creased into a frown. *No, that doesn’t make sense. If he had a way to neutralize the waterbenders he wouldn’t have a reason to keep all this hidden from us. Unless…* A cold knot of suspicion formed in her gut.

*Unless he knows we wouldn’t approve. Unless he knows that whatever it is he’s planning would cause father to order him to halt immediately. Unless whatever it is he’s planning has the potential to completely blow up in everyone’s face.* Suddenly the prestige of the imperial court hardly seemed very important at all. Her father had to be told. It was entirely possible that he’d come to the same conclusions that she had and was already taking the necessary measures, but Azula was not one who believed in taking chances.

She stood, intending to leave her room, when suddenly the door was pushed open. Irritation pulsed through Azula; she’d made it expressly clear that she did not tolerate unannounced interruptions in her room. Whoever it was who had completely disrespected the protocol was going to-

“Li?” She raised an eyebrow. “Might I ask why you hadn’t knocked first?”

“Actually, I’m Lo.” The aged woman said. “A – and I’m sorry, your highness, but this is…” The woman was obviously distraught by something.

The princess resisted the urge to sigh. “Fine. I’ll overlook it this time. Now what’s all this about?”

“A report, your highness, I was asked to deliver this to you in person…”

Walking over, she plucked it out of her tutor’s hands while simultaneously shooting the old woman an annoyed look. “You may leave.” She said curtly. Simply reading the thing would surely be faster than hearing her instructor stammer the whole thing out.

Lo looked like she wanted to say something further, but departed quickly.

Once alone, Azula unrolled the latest report.

There was absolute silence in the room for a long moment. Azula’s grip on the paper tightened, to the point where her knuckles were now a pale white. Thought she did not know it, there was a fury in her eyes that would have given the Fire Lord pause.
Silently, she placed the scroll down on her desk, took a single step away, and then turned and left the room.

Chapter End

Yes, I did condense the vast majority of the events of Season One into a single chapter. Why do you ask?

Thanks for reading. Please review.
Yay! New update, and the last one before events coincide with the second season, and Azula can actually get into the action. She always was the type who thrived in the field, doing things.

At least I’ve taken the chance to try and insert several scenes of Azula being, well, Azula here.

Thanks for all the positive reviews, everyone.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

“An assassination?” Ozai’s voice was low, and all the more terrible for it. “You are certain?”

“Yes, my liege. The explosion was witnessed firsthand by General Iroh. He –“

“Former General.”

“My apologies. The former General stated that he had went out for a walk to enjoy the night air. And that he had scarcely departed the ship when it exploded. He goes on further to state that due to Zhao assimilating Lord Zuko’s crew into his own armada, the engines were inactive, and thus there was no possibility of a malfunction being the cause of the explosion, and certainly not one with the strength to completely destroy the entire ship.”

From her vantage point, Azula could tell that her father was angry. For the apparent death of his son? No, probably not, she thought sourly. Maybe he just hated being reminded of Zhao’s harebrained scheme.

The war council had been called with startling haste, with many of the officers unable to make it any reasonable timeframe, and as such the hall was remarkably empty. Azula swept her gaze over the assembly – most of them appeared dismissive of the loss of a single ship and one exiled prince, eager to get to the rather more pressing topic of what to do about Zhao. Azula knew instinctively that she couldn’t expect any of them to care about Zuko’s in the same way that she did, and that an exiled prince really had no standing any longer in the Fire Nation, but nonetheless she had to exert some effort to keep the anger from showing on her face.

The Fire Lord was silent, apparently pondering the next course of action, and Azula took a deep breath before speaking out loud.

“I believe Admiral Zhao is responsible for this.” She said clearly, and instantly the room erupted into a hubbub of consternated remarks. It wasn’t every day that the princess of a country accused a high-ranking official of assassination.

She wasn’t just making the accusation for the fun of it, though. First, she had good reason to suspect that he really was the one behind this attempt on her brother’s life. Second, she knew general opinion of Zhao in the court was at an all-time low, which would help immensely in convincing the others that she was right. Third, once Zhao could be found guilty – or even suspected – of the deed, her father now had every reason to call off the attack and order him back home, where he could be tried. Fourth, her offering this out to her father would lead to his opinion of her improving, which would definitely help in securing her ability to move freely. Fifth and finally, she just really, really wanted
to make the bastard squirm.

It’s amazing how so much can ride on so little, really…

Her train of thought was derailed by her father speaking up again, drying up the murmurings as effectively as a blast of superheated fire evaporating a puddle. “That is a heavy claim to make, my daughter.”

“And I believe I can back up this claim, father,” Azula replied smoothly. First, establish means. “We know that this assassination was carried out by bombs, spread across the ship in a manner designed to reduce the whole thing to a wreck in a single blast. This would require the work of a sizeable crew in order to place the explosives quickly enough that they wouldn’t be discovered in the process. Hiring such a bunch would take a significant amount of money, more than your average peasant or soldiers. But that would be something that the Admiral has plenty of.” Motive. “Furthermore, Zhao has good reason to want Zuko gone – the reports we’ve been receiving have made clear that the two of them have been in constant conflict over the pursuit of the Avatar. For all his resources, Zhao has still failed to capture the Avatar by himself, and worse yet, Zuko has actually come closer to success than him a couple of times – certainly sufficient reason for someone as spiteful as Zhao to want Zuko out of the way.” And modus operandi. “Lastly, everyone who knows the Admiral has spoken of his flair for the bombastic.” I would use the word ‘hamminess’, but that works too. “This attempt is…well, loud and attention-seeking, as far as assassinations go. It would have been more efficient to simply have Zuko’s throat slit in the middle of the night, but whoever it was chose an explosion.” None of this is particularly implicating, really, but at least some of the people here are stupid enough to buy it. And some of those that aren’t just want to see him take a fall, so I should have some popular support. She left unmentioned the additional details that made her absolutely certain that it was Zhao – there would be some uncomfortable questions about where she’d gotten the information from, and if she really needed to she could save it as a trump card for later.

The one big question was her father. He was most certainly not stupid, but he couldn’t be particularly fond of the Admiral right now, so maybe…

“Let us say that your belief proves correct, daughter.” His tone was unreadable, and Azula’s brow twitched ever-so-slightly in frustration. It was far easier for her to read a person’s feelings from the expressions on their face, but the flames surrounding the Fire Lord prevented anything of that sort. “What then, should be done?”

“I would advise that the Admiral be recalled immediately to stand trial. And if found guilty, to be summarily executed on charges of high treason.” Her voice was cold.

“Treason?” One of the generals spoke up. “The victim is a disgraced exile. What-“

“Exile or not,” she spoke over his words as she turned her gaze upon him, making him blanch visibly. “He is still royalty by birth and blood. That can never be stripped from him,” she paused briefly. “Not even by the Fire Lord.”

Absolute silence fell upon the room, and for a moment Azula wondered if she’d miscalculated and pushed things a bit too far. But then her father spoke up. “What my daughter says is indeed true. If Zhao is guilty, he is guilty of spilling the blood of the Royal family. But perhaps,” and here his voice carried the silky tones of amusement. “Death would not be the best judgment to pass upon him. Perhaps the Admiral would do well to experience the same sentence I set upon the boy.”

Azula didn’t bother to keep the smirk from her face. Your verdict’s already been decided, Admiral. You’re doomed.
“Order an immediate recall of Admiral Zhao, and the dispersal of the fleet he has gathered. Once he enters the Fire Nation, he is to be arrested.”

Well. This had rather handily solved the issue of Zhao’s little adventure to the North Pole at the same time. Azula’s eyes narrowed as she calculated the timing. Assuming the messenger hawks were not waylaid by anything, it would take a week for the message to reach the fleet – the assault should have begun by then. But they’d still have a chance to pull back before casualties became severe.

She’d settled her personal grudges with the man and prevented a potentially catastrophic campaign from taking place, all in one fell swoop. All in all, she thought wryly as she stood to leave the room, the results of the meeting had been rather satisfactory.

Especially since the private report she’d received had informed her in no uncertain terms that her brother was still very much alive.

(X)

Once secure in her own room, Azula pulled out the scroll and began to read through the letter again.

Azula,

By the time this message reaches you should have received word that I’ve been caught in an assassination attempt. Don’t worry – I did get caught in one, but I got out of it mostly okay.

If you’re wondering why this came so much faster than usual, Uncle has gotten hired by Zhao as a consultant for the attack on the North Pole and has access to Admiral-level resources again. Getting this letter out wasn’t easy, but he managed. Also, I’m stowing away on the flagship.

The princess shook her head. While she certainly couldn’t fault the audacity of the scheme – after all, she’d probably have done the same thing in similar circumstances – she silently wondered if Zuko could pull something like that off for long.

The Avatar’s heading to the North Pole as well – he needs someone to teach him Waterbending, I guess. The Southern Water girl with him is apparently also a novice, so she wouldn’t have been of much help to him. Maybe she wants to learn the trade too.

Ah, yes. She thought. Those two Water Tribe peasants that kept getting mentioned over and over. I guess I shouldn’t have to worry about them. The boy wasn’t a bender of any sort, and if the girl honestly thought that she was going to learn waterbending techniques from the Northern Water Tribe… She rolled her eyes slightly and returned to the letter.

Once we get close enough to land I’m sneaking off to find the Avatar – Zhao seems to have put that goal aside in favour of invading the North Pole so hopefully I won’t have him breathing down my neck this time. Even if he does though, I’ll be ready.

It just occurred to me that this letter might reach you before all of my others about what I’ve been doing these past couple of months while chasing the Avatar. Well, there’s nothing I can do about that, and I don’t really have that much time to write since I’m pretending to be an ordinary soldier on duty, so I guess I’ll end off here.

See you soon.

Your brother,

Zuko
She gave another weary sigh as she finally rolled up the scroll again. She hated feeling helpless, and that was exactly how she felt right now.

All right. She thought to herself as she stood from her chair. I guess it should be time, more or less. She pursed her lips. Or should I wait? Maybe the results of this invasion could be used to help sway him... The princess shook her head as she settled herself down again. Maybe a chance to talk in private with Father first would help... I’d be able to source out what he’s planning...

Yes, that would probably be the best way to do things for now. Preparation was key, after all.

(X)

It was several days later when it happened. She’d been able to secure a relatively quiet dinner with her father one day before. That was a rarity in and of itself, given how often he entertained nobles and merchants during his mealtimes; she’d sat in on one or two of those sessions, mostly to observe with glee as the hapless fools were invariably made to dance to the Fire Lord’s tune... or else.

But the appointment he’d had for tonight with a silk merchant had to be called off when word had reached him of his supply ships having been lost at sea to a freak storm, and he was forced to rush back to deal with the potential crisis. Azula could have tossed out a dozen reasons why this was an extremely bad idea, first and foremost amongst them being that he had displeased Fire Lord Ozai, but since it had opened the door to what she wanted, she couldn’t really say she was bothered. If the subject came up at the meal and she was in a really good mood, she might even put in a good word for him.

She waited in reverent silence as the food was brought in and set in their place by silent servants. Her father had apparently opted for the simpler approach tonight; there were only five separate dishes, all of them excellent Fire Nation cuisine. As the cupbearers began to test the food for poisons, she sneaked a glance at her outside window, noting the full moon hanging in the sky.

After a moment, they began to eat. Although under normal circumstances spiced salmon and peppered pig-goat were amongst her favourite dishes, she barely noticed the taste as she chewed methodically. Her mind was too busy trying to anticipate her father’s first statement – the Fire Lord always spoke first – and how best to respond to it. She thought she had a pretty good idea, but-

“You have done well, Azula.” Oh, this was good. He never said her name unless he was very pleased with her. A genuine smile crossed her face as she nodded reverentially. “Thanks to you, we will be able to prevent that fool Zhao from a prolonged campaign in the North.”

“I am honoured to hear your praise, father. I trust the message has been sent?”

“And is moving to him with all speed.” In the relative privacy of the dining room, both of them could afford to relax the tiniest bit, to let the stern mask of absolute authority slip ever so slightly. Here, for a moment, they could pretend to be an ordinary father and daughter, and not two of the most powerful people in the most prosperous nation in the world.

“Good. His comeupance is long overdue.” Azula said, injecting an edge of bitter venom into her voice as she picked at her rice with chopsticks. She’d eaten just enough before the meal to take the edge of hunger off – she needed absolute concentration for this.

“You seem bitter, my daughter.” He had the slightest traces of levity in his voice, something Azula knew to be well wary of. “Surely his recent exploits have not given you cause for you be so opposed to him on such a personal level?”
“His actions hurt the Fire Nation, and have you not always said that we are indeed the nation, its beating heart?” She favoured him with a smile of her own. “And yes, his incompetence is rather unpleasant to me, not least of which is because he’s spent so much resources and time chasing after the Avatar when he could have been doing more productive things.”

“Oh? You do not believe the capture of the Avatar is vital enough for him to devote the time and energy to it?”

“He still has his responsibilities as a commander of the Navy. Chasing the Avatar is important, but he’s still spent far too much time on it, considering the Avatar hasn’t done anything particularly devastating to our cause yet. His… obsession with capturing the Avatar to the detriment of his responsibilities as Admiral speaks poorly of his self-discipline and control.”

Her father was silent as he picked up his goblet and took a long drink from it.

Now, drop the bait. “At least others engaged in similar pursuits had nothing else they needed to be concerned with.” That was close. I almost forgot to refer to him in the past tense.

“You are speaking of your brother.” That was not a question.

“Yes. And Zhao saw fit to eliminate Zuko over a little competition over who could catch the Avatar. Once again, a demonstrated lack of self-control and clear-minded judgement.” Azula lifted her own goblet, feeling the rice wine burn pleasantly down the back of her throat. “It’s quite a shame – according to the reports Zuko got closer to success than Zhao ever did. It must have galled him, really.”

She saw the look in her father’s eyes, but kept her face impassive. That’s right, father. We’ll each play our own games. I’ll pretend I care nothing for Zuko’s apparent demise, and you can pretend you ever had any intention of Zuko being able to redeem himself via the Avatar’s capture. Silently, she lifted another piece of meat to her mouth.

Her father was silent for a long moment. “So… you did this for revenge on your brother, then?”

Inwardly, Azula tensed up, but she managed to put a relaxed smile on her face. Just play my cards right… Act distant. “I can’t say I’m overjoyed by what happened.” She said dryly. “And what I said during the council meeting stands; raising his hand against royalty is something I can’t overlook.”

“That, I am aware of. I would not do so either.” Her father lied smoothly.

Azula let a mask of thoughtfulness cloud her features, as if this were an idea she’d come up with on the spur of the moment instead of something she’d planned out for weeks. “Although, I do think that hunting the Avatar is a serious matter that should be paid attention to.”

Her father shrugged. “You know as well as I do that I cannot simply order the armies to drop everything and pursue him. Like you yourself said, the Avatar is a potential threat, and all of the Fire Nation’s resources are currently rather tied down dealing with actual ones.”

She smiled to herself. The prize was in sight, “Well, not all,” she said.

“Indeed?” From the look in her father’s eyes, it was apparent that he knew full well what she was talking about. All she had to do was convince him of the merit of her idea, and that was going to be no problem at all. “Well, then, daughter, what did you have in mi-“

Through the window, the moon turned crimson – the colour of blood. Father and daughter were instantly on their feet – and Azula was able to note the naked alarm on Ozai’s face. What was-
Zhao. The conviction burned its way into her mind as securely as any branding iron, and her face tightened in anger – and more than a hint of fear. What was that idiot doing at the North Pole?

A moment later, the door burst open, a guard stumbling into room. “Your majesty!” He sputtered. “The moon! It’s turned red! The moon’s turned red!”

“I can see that, you fool!” Ozai thundered. “Order an immediate meeting! Everyone is to be in the Royal Hall in half an hour!” Not even pausing to look at his daughter, he stormed out, his fists clenched tightly.

Alone in the silent room, Azula continued to watch the moon as scarlet light splayed across the entirety of the area. Her concerns were not assuaged by the moon gradually fading back to its pale white glow – especially not when the light was outright extinguished a moment later.

What in the world was going on?

(X)

The first reports had trickled in slowly over the course of the next week. Most of them were vague and contradictory, but sifting through them had allowed a fair number of significant and relatively uncontested facts come to light.

The first, most obvious, and almost certainly most significant fact was that the Fire Nation had lost. Badly. The vast majority of the ships had been wrecked beyond anyone’s ability to salvage them, and the few that remained seaworthy were now limping towards the nearest friendly port for desperately needed repairs.

The second was that Zhao was no longer with the fleet. He had made land with a task force near the beginning of the assault, and while no one could confirm actually having seen him perish, he was still nowhere to be found. So he was either a prisoner of the Northern Water Tribe or dead – Azula couldn’t bring herself to care either way, aside from a brief spark of regret that she wouldn’t be able to watch him get executed like she’d desired.

Third was the reason that he had gone ashore in the first place – this was trickier. Apparently one of his elite guards had made it onto a surviving ship, and according to his testimony Zhao had indeed been the cause of the moon turning red and then disappearing temporarily – although the report glossed over many of the details about how. Well, the problem had been fixed somehow, and there didn’t appear to be any long-term consequences of his foolhardy venture, so they would just have to wait for the more thorough debriefing once those ships managed to make their way back to the capital.

Fourth was that Uncle had been confirmed present during whatever it was Zhao had been doing to destroy the moon, and that Zuko was confirmed alive. Well, Azula already knew about the latter, and so she didn’t pay that too much heed. More troubling was Uncle’s actions – he had deliberately assaulted Zhao’s elite guard, and Zhao himself, ostensibly to dissuade Zhao from whatever it was he planned on doing to the moon… Azula shook her head wearily. The entire thing was just a giant mess.

Fifth was that the Avatar had been present during the siege of the North Pole, and that he had been instrumental in the staggering defeat of the Fire Nation Navy. Various reports spoke of a giant humanoid ocean wave fusing with the Avatar and destroying the ships with casual abandon – others likened it more to a giant koi fish. Azula was inclined to be sceptical – it was probably just a gigantic tidal wave or something… not that it made the Avatar being able to destroy their fleet so easily any less unsettling.
And problematic. Azula’s eyes narrowed. The reports of the Avatar’s earthshaking power at the North Pole stood in direct contradiction to everything else she’d learned about his abilities ever since he’d awakened in the South Pole. Mastering a single new element shouldn’t have given him such a massive boost in power, after all.

There’s something I’m missing here… and I don’t even know what it is. She rubbed her forehead, irritated. The earliest the ships would be able to return to the capital for a proper debriefing would be in a month’s time, and Azula did not have a month to wait. Much as it frustrated her to leave loose ends hanging, her plan still took precedence. The complete disaster that was the Northern campaign would alter some parts of it, of course, but in other ways, it would make it easier.

For one, she thought to herself as she hurried to the audience she’d scheduled with her father, it would make him more worried about the Avatar. More convinced of the threat he posed.

The doors to the throne room creaked open and Azula entered. Her father was already there as usual, the fire surrounding the throne once more obscuring his face. Azula resisted the urge to frown – this was precisely why she’d waited for a private dinner with her father – the ability to read his moods would have helped immensely. Oh well, she’d already gotten a pretty clear idea of what he’d wanted from the meal – now it was just a matter of letting the pieces fall into place. Aided by a few slight nudges from her, of course.

She knelt down before the throne, keeping her head low. Once more, she sifted through the possibilities that her father would open with – probably something about the Avatar or Admiral Zhao –

“Iroh has betrayed us.”

That… she did not expect. Of all the things he considered worthy of attention, Uncle’s assaulting of Zhao was what he paid attention to? For a brief moment, Azula was left floundering, trying to decide what to say next. Finally, she settled on silence, trying to discern if her father was going somewhere with this.

“We could have succeeded in our invasion of the North had he not interfered.”

If anything, that simply left Azula even more confused. If Zhao had succeeded in his invasion, it would have meant the end of the Moon, and she was reasonably sure that no one, Fire Nation or not, considered that a desirable outcome.

“I understand that Unc – that Lord Iroh believed Zhao’s course of action to be… unwise.” Silently, she cursed at her almost-slip.

“Regardless, he assaulted members of the Fire Nation and disobeyed orders from his nominal superior.” Agni, why was father harping so much on the point? She knew he’d always disliked his brother, but-

Oh. Oh.

Two can play that game, can’t they, Azula? Like she’d attempted her revenge against Zhao by cloaking under the veneer of protocol and justice, her father was likewise taking out his hatred on his brother by seizing upon his supposed betrayal as a means for punishment.

In that timeless moment, Azula quickly reassessed the situation, trying to decide how this helped or hurt her own cause. Still, this was enough of an unexpected tangent to throw her off, perhaps it was best to let her father lead for now.
“What would you have me do, father?”

At this, the Fire Lord fell silent, and once more puzzlement coursed through the princess. If her father wanted to talk to her about Iroh… would he send her out after him? Well, that might make sense, and she could adapt that to her own plans easily enough, except he hadn’t given the order for it. Why?

Unseen by her father, her expression hardened. Because Zuko’s with Iroh, of course. And father doesn’t trust me enough to send me after Zuko. Smart man.

“Truth be told, daughter, I had hoped for your view on this matter.”

Azula bit down the instinctive reply. Careful, now… “Uncle is a single man.” Analyse this from the perspective of someone really thinks Uncle has turned against the Fire Nation. It’s what father wants to hear. “He may be a master Firebender, but he cannot make a great difference either way. Further, he has not been involved in any of the court’s proceedings for at least three years. He does not have valuable information to give the enemy aside from outdated battle plans,” Azula hesitated. “I believe it best that we do not waste much time or manpower on him. There are more important targets.”

“Indeed.” Azula could tell her father was pondering the issue. She frowned. They’d gone off on a rather unrelated tangent to her goal. Perhaps a more direct approach would be better.

All right. Here goes nothing.

“Father,” she spoke deliberately. “I am your servant and I am ready to serve. Command me as you will.”

There was a long silence. And then he shifted in his seat, imperceptibly. “You wish to be the one to track down Iroh?”

Distance myself emotionally from that. “As I said, father, I do not believe Lord Iroh to be of great importance one way or the other. I spoke of more… challenging hunts.”

“The Avatar.”

“Indeed, Father. You let Zuko out to pursue him at the age of thirteen. I am a full year older, and I am ready.” Inject a competitive element into my words… don’t let him suspect the truth. “I have trained all my life, been forged into the warrior you wish me to be. I will not disappoint you.”

Silence. Azula kept her head low – she wouldn’t be able to tell anything if she looked anyway, and the last thing she needed was for him to accuse her of disrespect. The only sound in the hall was the crackling of the flames as Azula waited with bated breath.

Finally, “Your words have merit, daughter. Indeed, I think it best that you be given a chance to prove yourself.”

She kept her face neutral and composed as elation soared within her. Finally! Finally!

“Well then, by your leave, father, I will begin making the necessary preparations at once.” She said in a neutral tone.

“I look forward to news of your success,” that was the closest he would ever come to wishing her luck, or saying farewell, and Azula accepted it. Slowly, she left the grand hall, her mind already buzzing with numbers and supplies and routes.

Once alone, once she was in a quiet corner of a quiet corridor that no one could see her, Azula,
princess of the Fire Nation leaned her head back against the wall and smiled.

*Hang on, Zuko. I’ll see you soon.*

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**Chapter End**

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Well, thanks for reading. Please review.
Given my reviews, a few people have been wondering how the Azula from my story will interact with people who aren’t Zuko or Ozai. Well, there’s more of it in this chapter, and I hope I live up to your expectations.

Also, there will be slight timeline fudging here, wherein I cut and paste events and gloss over how long things take to occur. I justify this by the fact that even in original ATLA they were never very consistent about that sort of thing. So yeah.

Disclaimer: I own the DVDs.

“He certainly wasted no time in setting out the bounty.” Azula sighed as she held out and stared at the wanted poster for her Uncle. Silently, she wondered if Uncle and Zuko already knew about the price on their heads, but she quickly dismissed the notion – the posters wouldn’t have had time to get to where they were. Where exactly that was, Azula was still working on pinpointing, but so far she’d narrowed the possibilities to the a series of villages on the northern coast of the Earth Kingdom – not a particularly difficult deduction to make, given that the two of them had set out from the Northern Water Tribe.

She’d make her way there soon enough, but first… her gaze shifted to another poster lying by the corner of her desk. In contrast to the wanted poster for her relatives, this flyer was splashed with bright colours, large words loudly proclaiming their welcome to anyone and everyone who wished to enter.

How utterly tacky. Azula sighed as she looked down at the advertisement that proudly proclaimed the arrival of the circus to some town whose name she couldn’t be bothered to remember. Still, it had served its purpose well enough – it had given Azula had next destination.

She was under no illusions – the Avatar was a bender of the highest calibre, and she had to assume he had already mastered both airbending and waterbending, which would make him a truly dangerous foe. She was entirely confident in her abilities as a master Firebender, but it certainly never hurt to give oneself a little edge over the opponent.

The ability to remove a person’s bending would definitely be very useful for any upcoming fights. And of course, Azula admitted silently. I do want to see her again. I wonder how she’s doing. Probably not too bad, all things considered. She had always liked being the centre of attention and the circus seemed a good place for that, so Azula had to conclude that she would be reasonably happy there, even if the princess couldn’t see any draw in it herself.

What should I even say to her when I see her? I know how she’ll greet me, of course – one of her bonecrushing hugs as usual.

Standing up from her desk, Azula glanced out the window. The journey from the Fire Nation capital to this sleepy port had taken over two weeks, and Azula was starting to feel a little antsy. Leaving her cabin, she strode purposefully out onto the deck, taking in a breath of the salty ocean air as she looked out over the Fire Nation troops she’d brought along with her as they went through their training.
It seems such a waste, really. Azula continued to watch them, and not for the first time she wondered how men twice her age could still be so... amateurish in their Firebending techniques. Especially when this lot were supposed to be Elite Firebenders.

Agni, some of them are painful to watch. She almost groaned out loud as she spotted one of the men leaving himself wide open to an assault from the left – and had it been her standing in his opponent's place, she would have fully exploited by now.

She was suddenly aware of the ship’s captain – a thoroughly colourless individual if there ever was one – coming up behind her. “Excuse me, your highness, but—”

“I presume you have a reason for why we’re behind schedule.” She cut him off without bothering to turn around and look him in the eye. Truth be told, she didn’t really care all that much – her target would apparently staying in that single location for the better part of a month. But if he was going to approach her... well, it wouldn’t do to let them think she would tolerate lax standards, would it?

“Well, yes, about that, your highness...” he was visibly nervous around her. “The, um, the tides will not allow us to make port now.”

“The tides.” She repeated softly as she turned to look him in the eye. “I was not aware, captain, that the will of the tides outranked a command from a princess of the Fire Nation. Perhaps I missed a memorandum?”

The captain blanched visibly. ‘Well, no, of course not, your highness, but-“

“You’ll bring us in, captain, uncooperative tides or no.” She offered a frosty smile. “Don’t worry. I have faith in your abilities.”

As the captain hurried off, Azula sighed and rubbed her forehead. Was this really the best the Navy could dredge up on short notice when she’d departed the country? Her musings were interrupted by an errant ball of fireball zipping past her left cheek to smash into the reinforced hull of the ship, leaving a soot-black stain. It had come close enough for her to feel the heat radiating from the poorly aimed shot.

All at once, the entire deck had fallen silent.

Slowly, she turned around, noting the two soldiers closest to her whose expressions were strongly reminiscent of a kid caught with his hands in the cookie jar. The others were glancing nervously at each other and backing off ever so slightly.

Well then.

With measured, deliberate steps, Azula moved closer to the both of them, one hand reaching up to rub at her cheek – a useless gesture, aside from reinforcing the knowledge in the two soldier’s minds that they had seriously messed up.

“You.” She said with deliberate calm as she lifted to point at the one on the right. “And you,” she shifted her finger to the one on the left. “Will be my sparring partners for the next hour.” Of course the term might as well have been synonymous with ‘punching bag’ as long as Azula was involved, and everyone knew it. Finding volunteers was difficult enough at the best of times, hence why it was a rather satisfying moment when she could face someone who could still end up grateful after getting knocked around like a kuai ball for any extended period of time.

Shrugging off her cloak, she let it crumple silently to the floor as she shifted into a Firebending stance, noting the expressions on their faces – relief mixed with uncertainty and apprehension – with
wry amusement.

A long, timeless moment passed – and then Azula began.

(X)

Today was going to be a good day. She had gotten an unshakeable feeling from the moment she had woken up that today was going to bring nothing but delight and wonder.

Of course, she’d gotten that feeling every single day for as long as she could remember, but since they had almost always proven to be correct in the end, Ty Lee had absolutely no problems with following her feelings.

From her position in the middle of the grassy field where the circus had set up camp, she could see her friends and colleagues as they continued to bustle about, preparing themselves for tonight’s show. Maybe that was where all the day’s goodness was going to be stored up – tonight was going to be the best show ever! She’d been practising her new routines for the longest time, and she was going to steal tonight’s performance – she just knew it.

Suddenly, she became aware that a person was standing in front of her and looking down at her.

It took her a moment to recognize her – even for someone like Ty Lee, being upside down tended to mess with your perception, if ever so slightly, but once she did, she quickly flipped herself upright, a huge grin spreading over her face. She almost forgot to bow, but after a swift bending of her knees and lowering her face to the ground, she leapt forward to envelop her friend in a hug.

“Azula! It’s so good to see you again!”

“It’s been nearly three years, hasn’t it?” The princess of the Fire Nation replied. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been just great! Everyone here’s really kind and caring and they don’t even care that I’m from a noble family – they just treat me the same as everyone else!” She could see one of Azula’s eyebrow rise.

“Is that supposed to be a good thing?” She finally ventured, but before she could say any more Ty Lee gasped and pointed at her friend’s arm.

“Azula! Your sleeve… is that a burn mark?”

The princess fingered the scorched material with an air of distaste. “This? Oh, it’s nothing. Just a training session that was a little more intense than normal.” She then shook her head, shutting down that line of talk. “Anyway, Ty Lee, it’s nice to see you again, but this isn’t really a social visit.”

“Oh.” Ty Lee settled her torso onto the ground, arcing her legs back until the toes were touching her head. If Azula was disconcerted by her behaviour she gave absolutely no sign of it – she’d done it often enough back in the Royal Academy for the princess to be used to it by now. “Okay. Shoot.” She didn’t know much about what was going on back in the Fire Nation capital, but she knew if Azula was out here, it had to be pretty important.

“Have you heard about the Avatar?”

“The Avatar? Oh yeah! Him! There were posters and stuff everywhere in the last few times we visited.” With a quick flip, she was on her feet again. “He looks like a cute kid, huh? And that arrow tattoo on his head’s a really neat idea too! Maybe I should get one for myself!”
“Yes, well,” Azula coughed once, apparently feeling that the conversation was in danger of going off the rails. “I’ve been charged by my father with the hunting down of the Avatar, and I would be honoured if you’d join me on my mission.”

“Oh.” Ty Lee’s own voice was softer now. “Well, that’s – I mean, I’d love to help you, Azula, but…” She glanced around at the brightly coloured tents and the people bustling about. “I’m really happy here. I mean, my aura’s never been pinker!” She tensed slightly as she spoke, waiting for Azula’s anger.

Instead, the princess appeared to visibly deflate before her eyes. “Oh. Well, I… I suppose I couldn’t have expected you to give up so much just for me.” She gave Ty Lee a rueful smile. “It’s just that the Avatar is supposed to be one of most powerful benders ever, and I thought that, well, with your chi-blocking abilities, you’d be a great help to me. You’re the only one I know who has that skill, after all…”

“Uh… well, that’s true, but –”

“No, never mind. I guess I’ll manage somehow. You just go back and enjoy… uh, whatever it is that circus people do.” Azula waved slightly and turned away. “Good bye, Ty Lee. And good luck.”

As she watched Azula’s retreating figure, Ty Lee felt a something deep in her stomach seizing up, and her throat suddenly felt very, very dry. She knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that she wanted to remain here in the circus, the first place where she had been truly valued for her uniqueness and abilities. But there was a second tugging in her heart too, one that quietly but insistently pulled her after her friend that she hadn’t seen in three years.

Azula values my abilities too, doesn’t she? She swallowed. And the reason why she would do that – Azula had told her that she was hunting the Avatar, and he was supposed to be extremely powerful – one of most powerful beings alive, really. And it all came down to his incredible bending ability. Which Ty Lee knew how to nullify.

If Azula got hurt during her mission and I could have been there and done something to prevent it… The knot of dread that had welled up in her gut tightened. Unconsciously, she clenched her fists. No. No. She was about to run away again, to leave her friend in the lurch when she needed her. Just like she had done three years ago…

(X)

“Azula! Wait!”

The princess smiled to herself as she slowed her place. Like putty in my hands. She hadn’t seen Ty Lee in three years, but she knew enough of her friend’s soft-hearted personality and she could tell that it hadn’t changed much at all. It had been easy to guide the conversation along so that Ty Lee would be guilted into coming along with her.

Coming to a halt, she turned to look at the acrobat as she ran up.

“Yes?” She questioned – she could already see her friend opening her mouth and agreeing to accompany her on her trip-

“Let’s make a deal.”

Azula blinked. Not what she had anticipated, to say the least.

“… What about?” She ventured.
“I’ll agree to come with you to hunt the Avatar,” she was grinning so wide it was a miracle her face didn’t split in two. “But! You have to do something for me first!”

“And that is?” She was getting an unmistakably and uncomfortably bad feeling about this.

“You have to come watch me in tonight’s show!” The acrobat burst out exuberantly, and then a moment later her cheerful face collapsed into a mask of fretfulness Azula would have found comical in most any other situation. “I mean, that’s okay, right? You’re not in that much of a hurry, are you? You can stay one night?”

Azula fought to keep the dismay from her face. That’s definitely not what I had in mind. I mean, the part where she agrees to come with me, yes, but… She glanced at the chaotic revelry around her, wondering for the hundredth time how anyone could find this a fulfilling lifestyle. All right. I can handle this. Just… just keep her happy. Somehow, she managed to dig deep down and find a smile to plaster onto her face.

“No, it’s fine. And I guess I’m interested to see how your little routine goes. All right, Ty Lee,” she nodded once. “You have a deal.” The perky acrobat responded to this in her usual manner, which meant a hug so tight it squeezed most of the air out of the princess’ lungs and a cartwheel off to continue preparations for the performance.

Rubbing her forehead, Azula turned to the soldiers who had come down with her and had been waiting at the perimeter of the encampment, telling them to return to the ship first and that she would be along the next morning. As they departed, she turned to gaze at the central tent in which the performance would be held. With a shake of her head, she started walking towards it.

Oh, well. It can’t possibly be that bad, can it?

(X)

As it turned out, yes. Yes, it very well could.

(X)

Today was going to be a good day. She had gotten an unshakeable feeling from the moment she had woken up that today was going to bring nothing but delight and wonder.

It probably wasn’t to be good in the way Ty Lee expected, though – after all, one day prior she’d expected that today she’d be preparing herself for another performance instead of following Azula to a massive Fire Nation ship, flanked on both sides by soldiers of the Fire Nation.

But that was okay – just because it was different and unexpected didn’t mean that it stopped being good. In some ways it had the potential to be even better, because this goodness would carry with it the element of surprise, so you weren’t just happy but delighted.

“Wow, this is a nice ship!” She said as she finally made her way onto the deck. “It’s so… open!”

“Glad you like it.” Azula said in a distracted tone as she walked over to talk to the captain, probably to discuss logistics and supplies and other boring stuff like that – meanwhile, Ty Lee contented herself by running around and greeting most of the crew. She’d just finished with a few of the Royal Firebenders (and she couldn’t help but note that one of them looked rather beat up), when she heard Azula coming up behind her.

“Ty Lee, can we talk?”
“Sure, just hang on a sec. Bye, cutie!” She waved cheerily to the soldier, who waved back with a rather soppy expression. As she turned around to regard the princess, she could see a frown on her friend’s face. “What is it?”

“I advise you not to get too attached to any of the people on this ship.”

“Huh? But –“

“Look, an explanation right now will take too long, but just trust me on this, okay? We won’t be sticking with them for much longer.”

“Oh. Okay. Where are we heading next, then?”

At this, Azula paused. “To the northern coast of the Earth Kingdom. One of the villages there, anyway – I’ve narrowed it down to about five of them or so.”

“Oh, we’re looking for someone else?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Who –“

“You’re asking far too many questions, Ty Lee.” Azula said in a tone of voice that made it clear she wanted the conversation to end immediately.

Same old Azula. Ty Lee thought as she watched her friend stalk off. Still, there hadn’t been any anger in her friend’s voice – more like she just didn’t want that information to come out.

Huh. This mission might be more intriguing than she’d thought.

(X)

A resort. Of all the places Uncle and Zuko would end up in after the Siege of the North Pole, a resort. She looked up the stone cliff at the building, surrounded on all sides by boughs of cherry blossoms – a rather aesthetically pleasing sight, she had to admit. I’ll bet any amount of money that this was Uncle’s idea.

“Are we going up there?” Ty Lee questioned from beside her. Azula nodded once in reply.

“The people I’m looking for will be here. I’m sure of it.” Shouldering her pack, she gazed over at her friend. “You brought along everything you need?”

“Uh-huh. Ready to go!” Another boisterous smile.

Turning slightly, Azula regarded the captain. “Let the men out on shore leave for the day and keep the ship idle. I’ll be back soon.”

“Of course, your majesty.” The men bowed and scurried off. With a gesture of her head, the princess and the acrobat both started up the steps that led to the resort.

Several minutes later, she was in the doorway, and she could faintly hear the excited tones of her Uncle excitedly proclaiming the beauty and grace of several seashells he’d picked up recently. She rolled her eyes.

“Ty Lee, would you mind waiting outside a bit? I’ll call you in if I need you.”
“No problem. Why don’t you leave your packs with me? I can take care of them.”

Azula acquiesced to that request, except for one that she kept slung across her back. And then she took a deep breath, and stepped towards the doorway.

(X)

“Look at these magnificent shells! I’ll enjoy these keepsakes for years to come!”

Zuko kept silent as he stared forward at the ground. While his Uncle continued to prattle on about the ‘delicate curvature of this one’s inner rib’, he was lost within the furious storm of his own mind.

The first, most obvious emotion he felt was anger. Anger borne of frustration. He’d had the Avatar in his grasp and at his mercy. And if he’d managed to best that stupid Waterbending girl, then he would’ve succeeded in ferrying him away once the blizzard subsided. But he had lost. He had lost at possibly the single most critical battle he’d been in so far, and he had barely been able to put up a fight.

So now they were back at square one. No, worse than that. The last time he’d hunted down the Avatar he’d had a ship crewed by capable (if somewhat resentful) men. Now it was just him and his Uncle – he didn’t even know if Lt. Jee and the others had survived the battle or not. They didn’t have any idea where the Avatar was going, where he was right now, or what his plans were.

Which led to the second emotion – despair. The first time he’d realized the Avatar was truly still in the world, hope had flared in him so strongly that it had almost been a physical sensation. He’d finally seen his chance – right in front of him. And that hope had sustained him through the next few months, as he clashed with the Avatar time and time again.

But it hadn’t lasted. Slowly, but surely, it had become apparent that the Avatar was too good to be defeated by him at his current level of skill – and worse yet, his companions had been getting better too, to the extent that any one of them – okay, maybe not the Water boy – could face him down in single combat. The only reason he’d gotten as far as he did at the North Pole was because the Avatar had been in some strange trance – and what were the odds he’d be lucky enough to stumble on something like that a second time?

What was he supposed to do? What could he do?

And the third emotion – longing. Pure, violent, uncontrolled longing for the Fire Nation. He wanted to see his home again. He wanted to sit by the garden and feed the turtle-ducks and wander through the halls of the palace and talk with his sister. He wanted to show his father, show everyone that he was worthy enough to be the crown prince. He wanted the honour that had been stripped from him three years ago in a single disastrous moment. And he wanted the Avatar, the one thing that would allow him access to everything else he dreamed of.

He closed his eyes, trying to quiet his heart. He almost wished aloud for the spirits to open up their bounties and drop a solution onto his lap, but pride kept him from doing something so ridiculous. Besides, what were the odds of that actually happening-

“Well, it looks like both of you are enjoying yourselves.” The voice was clipped and precise, couched in slight mocking undertones, and so familiar that Zuko’s head shot up instinctively and he stared at the doorway. For a long moment his mind did not process what he was seeing. He couldn’t be absolutely sure – it had been three years since he’d last seen her, but everything about the person in the doorway looked right – the golden eyes, the bangs framing her face, the sharp, calculating features, the smirk that he’d come to know so well…
“Az?” Without thinking, he reverted to the pet name he’d always called her as a kid and one that he’d never really outgrown, and in return she smiled as Uncle turned around to face her as well.

“Long time no see, brother.”

(X)

As she looked into the room, she could feel a surge of emotions that she wasn’t quite familiar with – it wasn’t exactly an unpleasant feeling, really, but she’d never been one for big emotional breakdowns, and so she kept her face passive, Mostly passive – she let a smile come out as she looked at her brother.

The years had changed him, certainly. Her face looked more weathered – and it wasn’t just the angry scar that covered a fourth of it. He could see signs of stress and anger on them clearly, and his eyes… once those eyes had been wide and innocent and she had mocked him relentlessly for his simple idealism. Now the left eye was sealed into a permanent glare, while his right simply looked tired and – and haunted. Haunted, that was the word. Suddenly she found herself missing the wide-eyed innocence.

And sitting off to his left, one hand still clutching a seashell, was her Uncle. Azula felt another pulse of irritation sweep through her at the mere sight of him. She’d never understood her Uncle – oh, she knew what he liked to do as hobbies, but trying to discern his motivations and goals had left her coming up with a big fat blank far more often that not. As a rule Azula did not like anything she did not understand, and given that her Uncle was sitting surrounded by seashells that he had been toying with a moment ago, she suspected that he could be considered as big an enigma as ever.

There was a shocked silence in the room for a long moment, broken when she stepped deeper into the place, glancing around. “May I come in?” She asked rhetorically.

Finally Zuko did react, pulling himself to his feet. “Az…” He began - Agni, three years on and he was still using that stupid nickname? – haltingly. “How did – I mean, when did you – what are you doing here?”

Settling herself down on a chair that creaked under her, she steepled her fingers and looked over at him. “What? Can’t a sister pay a visit to her dear brother to check up on how he’s doing?”

“She can,” Iroh said. His voice was now grave, and instantly Azula felt herself on edge. Her Uncle had never really liked her for some reason she hadn’t been able to figure out, but seeing as the feeling was mutual she’d decided that the both of them simply keeping out of each other’s way would be to their mutual benefit. Now though, she was going to have to deal with him one way or another. “But to take a several week trip to the Northern Earth Kingdom implies a little more than a courtesy call.”

“You’re right, of course,” she nodded agreeably. “I’ve come bearing news – a little good, and a lot of it bad.”

She sighed and reached into the pack. “I suppose I might as well get the worst bit out of the way.” Taking out the scroll, she quickly unfurled it to a cry of outrage from her brother and a sharp intake of air from her Uncle. “Father – Fire Lord Ozai has declared both of you criminals. Uncle… he claims that your betrayal at the North Pole cost the Fire Nation their victory there.”

“Uncle didn’t betray anyone, Az!” Zuko declared hotly. “He just-“

“What happened isn’t really the issue here. It’s what father has proclaimed did happen.” She replied as she took a glance down at the wanted poster. “We can just consider ourselves lucky I was able to
get here faster than the official couriers. And Zuko… father has also decided that your constant failure to capture the Avatar is an embarrassment to the Fire Nation and the throne. He wants you somewhere where he won’t need to worry about you any longer.” Which means jail. Or worse. She left that last part unsaid – he’d already figured it out anyway.

For the first time since her arrival, Zuko looked utterly crushed. He slumped backwards in his seat, gazing forlornly down at the wanted poster.

Iroh, meanwhile, simply stared down at the poster with an unreadable expression on his face. Finally, he sighed and looked at her. “You said something about good news?”

“Well, I suppose that depends on your point of view.” Azula shrugged elaborately. “But father has apparently seen fit to assign me the task of capturing the Avatar.” And you wouldn’t believe how much work I had to do to nudge him into a position where he’d agree to that.

Zuko looked up at her. “You?’ He said, as if the connection was refusing to form in his mind.

“Yes, me.” She glanced up at him. “And as to why I’m here… well, I’ve decided I’ll need some able assistants in my little hunt, and what better than someone who’s faced off against the Avatar several times already?”

Zuko’s right eye widened. “That’s…”

She sighed and rolled the scroll up again. “Let’s say we find the Avatar, and we fight the Avatar, and we beat the Avatar. Well, most people aren’t going to have a very clear idea of what exactly happened during the fighting, are they? It’d be easy enough for anyone to claim the credit for the finishing blow – if the glory couldn’t be split amongst all the participants, anyway.” She sighed and closed her eyes. When she opened them again she found herself looking at her brother, her expression open and earnest. That had always been rare for her, and rarer still after her brother had departed. But now… “It’s not a perfect solution, I know. There are so many ways that this could go wrong,” not least of which is we have no idea how father will react once he finds out. “But right now, this is the best shot we have at helping you capture the Avatar and letting you home again.”

Zuko still seemed in shock. “You did all this, you came out here… to help me?”

Actually I did a great deal more. “Well, yes.” She shrugged. “Why are you so surprised?”

“It’s just…” he looked conflicted, his eyes open and searching as he stared at her. “Just… why?”

“Why?” she repeated. “You’re my brother. That counts for something. Right, Zuzu?”

“Well,” Uncle had finally spoken up again. “Given you intend to pursue the Avatar, we should-” Azula slashed the air, cutting him off midsentence. This isn’t going to be pleasant, so I should just get this over with quickly.

“No ‘we’.” She said softly, and Zuko’s face grew confused again. She ignored him for now and stood to face her Uncle.

He was frowning as he looked back at her, as if already knowing what she was going to say.

“My brother’s fault was that of simple ability,” she said as she began to pace the room. “He tried his hardest to capture the Avatar time and time again – but the Avatar simply proved too good for him. Well, there’s nothing to be done about that except to assault the Avatar again, this time with superior forces. But you, Uncle? You turned against the Fire Nation, you assaulted the Imperial Guard, and you led to our defeat at the Siege of the North Pole.”
“Az, I told you Uncle didn’t do anything of that sort!”

“And I told you that that’s not what’s important,” She said, her voice calm and betraying no trace of the anxiety and frustration she felt. “It’s what father has said he did.” She gathered herself and turned to regard the both of them. “If Zuko captures or defeats the Avatar, all the shame and embarrassment goes away, just like that. That, I can help him with. But as for you, Uncle… I can’t erase what happened at the North Pole. I can’t help you.” She shrugged. “No matter what happens, you’ll always be branded a traitor.”

There was silence in the room as Zuko looked helplessly back and forth between his Uncle and his sister. Azula stood by the window, her face passive, while Uncle simply looked at the ground. Finally, she sighed and spoke up again.

“In the pack I brought with me… there is enough food to last you two or three weeks, and enough Earth Kingdom currency for several months.” She closed her eyes and turned to look out the window. “I’m sorry, Uncle, but this is all I can do for you now.”

“I understand. And thank you.” Her Uncle’s voice was soft. Zuko, however, was still indignant.

“Come on, Az, think! You’re supposed to be the smart one, surely you can –“

“Prince Zuko.” Iroh’s voice cut through his tirade before it could really build up. “That’s enough. Sometimes you must simply let go of what you’d want and let the river of life carry you where it will. This, I suspect, is one of those times.”

“But…”

“I will be fine. And you should go with your sister. It will do you good.” Somehow Azula could tell he was looking at her. “It will do both of you good.”

There was silence, and the soft rustling of cloth. Finally, her uncle spoke up again, this time with more than a hint of amusement in his voice. “I see you neglected to mention the sachets of tea leaves you so thoughtfully included.”

At this Azula did turn around, her smile sardonic. “White Dragon leaves.” She raised and lifted a shoulder. “Your favourite.”

“Once again, thank you.”

I didn’t do it for you, Uncle. I did it for Zuko – he’d never be able to stop worrying about you, otherwise. Not a word escaped her lips, although as her uncle looked her, she got the feeling he knew what she was thinking anyway.

“I’ll leave you two to say your goodbyes, then.” She continued as she stepped out of the house and down the path where Ty Lee was waiting. As she approached, she saw the acrobat giving her a questioning look and she merely shook her head once.

Several minutes later, Zuko joined them, eyes still downcast, but bearing something that Azula hadn’t seen when she’d first went into the house – burning determination and fiery hope.

“So where’s the ship?” He finally asked.

“Down there – not that it matters, since we’re not going back by that route.”

“What? But –“
“Once you capture the Avatar, your honour will be restored, but until then you’re still wanted as long as you’re in the Fire Nation territories. Even if I cowed the crew into letting you on board with no questions asked, it would only take one soldier who’s too brave or too stupid for his own good to send out a messenger hawk, and we’re sunk.” Azula drew in a deep breath. “No, from now on, we travel overland, and by ourselves.”

“Okay!” Ty Lee perked up. “So where to?”

“Huh? Ty – you’re here too?”

“Uh huh.” She nodded energetically. “Azula asked for my help, and well, I couldn’t really say no.”

“And as for your question, Ty Lee.” Azula smiled. “We’re headed to Omashu, and we’re going to pick up someone else that both of you probably want to see again.”

The two of them turned to her, question marks written on their faces, but Azula pretended not to notice and hefted her own pack.

“Well then, shall we be on our way?”

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Chapter End

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I tried to communicate the idea that Azula is just as manipulative as ever, but this time she understands the value of positive reinforcement and how bonds of trust and camaraderie can be used to get someone to do things for you. I hope it came across clearly enough.

Anyway, thanks for reading. Please review.
I think it’s been established that even angry and sullen Zuko can be pretty dorky around people he’s comfortable with, and I hope I brought it across well enough. Well, let’s go.

Disclaimer: I wish there was an Azula action figure, because I would buy one.

Of course, the first order of business would be to secure proper mounts for transportation. Time was of the essence, and as long as Azula continued to travel on foot she would be at a disadvantage. Of course she wasn’t going to be able to match the Avatar’s flying mount any time soon, but it would still be better than nothing.

Naturally, that the resort did not have anything of the sort available.

“Not even a single ostrich-horse.” She muttered angrily as they left the compound, heading southwards in the general direction of Omashu. “What sort of shoddy excuse for a hotel is this, anyway?”

Of course the Fire Nation ship would have kept several Komodo-Rhinos in its hold, but having them brought out for no discernible reason when she’d first arrived would have led to raised eyebrows. One thing she absolutely had to do was ensure that everyone on the ship was left wondering about her intentions as long as possible.

Well, no use complaining about it. They would have to make do.

“There’s a village a couple of days to the south.” Ty Lee said helpfully from her side as she peered down at the map. “They should have ostrich-horses there.”

“A couple of days.” Azula grumbled to herself. Well, we’re off to a promising start.

Still, they were able to make decent time, given the cooler weather and lack of any real obstacles. As the three of them continued down the road, Azula sneaked a glance at her brother. Ho was walking slightly behind the two of them, his eyes downcast. Slowly, she decreased her pace, letting Ty Lee take the lead as she fell into step beside her brother.

“Anything on your mind?” She finally spoke up as a conversation starter. That he was brooding over something was fairly obvious – one thing that hadn’t changed about Zuko was that he still wore his heart on his sleeve.

Zuko gazed down at the ground. “Just… thinking,” he said. The princess didn’t respond immediately, waiting for him to go into more detail. Finally, he sighed. “It’s just… about what happened at the North Pole. Uncle didn’t betray anyone – he had the Fire Nation’s best interests at heart, and now it’s all come crashing down for him. This is even worse than exile – he’s a fugitive, and he’s alone. I mean, I know he told me he’d be fine, but he’s old and alone.”

I suppose I can’t fault him for being upset about the situation. Come to think of it, Zuko probably has a pretty good idea of what happened at the North. I should ask him about it. Azula paused for a moment before opening her mouth to speak, but Zuko beat her to it.
“Uncle was right to protect the koi fish!” He declared hotly.

Azula’s mouth snapped shut. Then she opened her mouth and closed it again. Finally, she simply said, “The… koi fish.”

“Well, the moon spirit or whatever. The point is that Zhao shouldn’t have tried to kill the moon!”

“…Kill the moon.”

“Yes!” He was getting more and more heated up as his rant continued. “And then the Avatar wouldn’t have merged with the ocean and created the giant koi fish and destroyed our navy!” Zuko’s voice dropped slightly. “And the ocean wouldn’t have grabbed Zhao and killed him.”

“…” Azula pinched the bridge of her nose. “Zuko.”

“Yes?”

“Has the Avatar mastered earthbending yet?”

“Oh, not since the last time I saw him. Why?”

“Because something obviously hit you on the head rather hard, and I’m wondering if it was a boulder.”

“Az!” Zuko snapped. “This is serious!”

“Yes, serious. Which is why we’re discussing koi fish and moonslaying.” She raised an eyebrow. Zuko’s face rearranged itself into something remarkably resembling a pout, and the sheer incongruity of it all forced her to stifle a snicker of laughter.

“What?” Her brother demanded, and she shook her head.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just…” she gave him a long sideways glance. “I’ve missed you. It’s good to see you again.”

Zuko fell silent as a smile crept across his face, and for a moment, he almost looked like the bright and eager brother she remembered from long ago. “I missed you too,” he replied.

A comfortable silence descended upon them as they continued the journey.

(X)

Later that night, after they made camp, Azula settled herself back on her pack, folded her hands behind the back of her head, and began to think.

From what she understood, the Avatar would need to master earthbending next in the cycle after waterbending, which narrowed his location down to the Earth Kingdom. Of course, the fact that there was a whole lot of Earth Kingdom made things rather problematic.

The crackling of flames being summoned drew her attention momentarily to Zuko, who was standing by the edge of the campfire’s light and practising his Firebending. After watching his forms – far too stiff, didn’t flow right, didn’t centre his weight properly – for a brief moment, she glanced to the left and saw Ty Lee.

To her complete lack of surprise, her friend was currently engaged in toasting marshmallows.
She closed her eyes and returned to her musings. True, the Earth Kingdom was vast, but that didn’t mean the Avatar would simply be anywhere within its borders. His goal, after all, would be to find someone who could teach him earthbending.

He’ll probably look for the best earthbender he can find. Well, that was only natural. A fully realized Avatar was supposed to be the strongest bender in the world, and he probably wouldn’t want to sabotage his efforts with subpar teachers. The Fire Nation’s information network wasn’t complete, of course – for one, the interior of Ba Sing Se was a complete mystery to even their best spies, but they still did a decent enough job of keeping tabs on the most powerful earthbenders to watch out for.

And one of the absolute best in the field would be King Bumi of Omashu – now kept under lock and key within the recently conquered city. Azula shook her head. No. Things in life didn’t happen come along that easily. Even if the Avatar had entertained the notion of having Bumi teach him earthbending, surely he had to have heard that the city had been conquered by now.

Still, trying to get some information from the old king might prove useful – maybe she might even pick up on a lead she’d missed. In her mind, she marked off the nearest cities that had master earthbenders – still a lot more than she truly felt comfortable with, but in between these leads and keeping an ear to the ground, she ought to be able to pick up his trail easily enough.

“Oh, monkeyfeathers!” Azula opened her eyes long enough to note that Ty Lee’s current marshmallow had caught fire before she returned to her trying to puzzle out the Avatar’s movements.

Aside from finding the Avatar, they would have to defeat the Avatar. Zuko had helpfully supplied her with information about the group he was travelling with – two Water tribespeople. The girl was a waterbender, and if her brother’s evaluations had been correct, she’d somehow convinced the idiots in the Northern Water Tribes to break tradition and actually teach her combat waterbending. The boy was apparently of no threat to anyone, and so Azula left him out of her calculations for now, with the caveat that he might potentially prove dangerous somewhere down the line – and Azula intended for this whole issue to be settled before it ever came to that. That left the Avatar himself – a master airbender and at least an adept waterbender. After a moment, she revised her assessment – he would likely have an earthbending teacher of some sort by the time they caught up with him, so they would have to watch out for that too.

Oh well. The three – soon to be four – of them could handle that just fine. Especially if she took the time to make sure Zuko’s own firebending was up to snuff…

On that note, she looked over to see Zuko bringing his palm up in a slashing gesture that completed his kata. As she watched him execute his finishing strike, a frown crossed her features.

“What are you doing?”

“What?” He looked at her, confused.

“If you sweep your palm out like that when you strike, you’ll dissipate the force of the fire blast. That attack is supposed to be the finishing strike against your opponent – you need as much force as you can behind the blow.”

Zuko hesitated, eyes confused. “But… Uncle always told me to do it like that.”

At this, the princess’ brow wrinkled even further. Her Uncle had been a master Firebender back in his day, and even if he had been acting like an indolent dullard for the past three years (which she definitely wouldn’t have put past him), he shouldn’t have forgotten so much that he would be able to mess up such a basic attack.
Well, that could wait for later. Right now… “Well, he told you wrong. Remember that Firebending is an aggressive art. You need to have as much power behind each of your blows as possible – especially the finishing strike.” She hesitated, mentally weighing the pros and cons of what she wanted say next, but finally, “Do it again. And properly this time.”

A sudden silence fell across the little camp. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Ty Lee looking at her, a surprised expression on her face. Zuko, on the other hand, was more or less completely nonplussed. Azula merely sat and looked at him, her face passive.

After a long moment, it was Zuko’s turn to surprise her by bringing his palms together and bowing slightly. And then he resumed his Firebending stance, beginning to move through his kata again.

Meanwhile, Azula continued to sit and observe, watching him move through the basic steps as she pondered this newest turn of events. She had to admit that she herself was surprised at how easily their relationship as brother and sister had taken on the new aspect of student and teacher, but it wasn’t a bad feeling.

“You’re putting too much weight on your right foot. You have to balance yourself properly to prevent you from losing your footing.”

No. Not bad at all.

The village was small – so small, in fact, that upon first entering it Azula wondered if they really would be able to find the mounts she needed here. But as soon as she entered the perimeter of the settlement she could spot an ostrich-horse grazing at the side of a building and she sighed with relief.

“I can’t see many mounts at all.” Ty Lee said, disappointment in her voice as she looked down the row of ramshackle houses.

“Even one will be helpful.” They were all in excellent physical condition, of course, but having a beast of burden to carry their supplies would be a boon to them – especially since they needed to make their way to Omashu as quickly as possible, with as few pit stops as possible on the way – which in turn meant that they had to carry as much as they could with them.

Striding up to the house, she rapped on the doorway twice, her gaze already sweeping the village, scouting for any potential signs of danger. Of course it would be unlikely that there would be anyone looking for them, at least in this early leg of the journey, but her sense of caution (some would have called it paranoia) remained as fine-tuned as ever.

A moment later, the door slid open, revealing a young Earth Kingdom girl in a hanbok. “Yes, how can I—” Her voice cut off and her eyes grew wide as she took in Azula, standing in front of her in her Fire Nation uniform. While certainly less regal than her royal armour, it communicated the essentials well enough. There was also the flame headpiece, of course, but Azula doubted the peasant in front of her would have any idea what it symbolized.

“I presume you are the owner of this house?” She asked conversationally. Well, maybe not, the girl did seem rather young…

The girl withdrew slightly. “We haven’t done anything to give the Fire Nation trouble.” She said, with only a slight tremor in her voice.

“Good.” Azula said dismissively. “Now, I have need of your ostrich-horse. As of now, it's been co-opted by the Fire Nation.”
“What?” The girl’s eyes widened. “But you – I’m sorry, it’s not for sale.”

“Perhaps you misunderstood.” She aimed a glare at the girl. “I said, I have need of your ostrich-horse. You can choose to be compensated for your loss, or not. Now. How much?”

“I, uh…” The girl swallowed. “That is…”

Azula sighed. “Ty Lee.”

“Uh huh?”

“What’s the market rate for a healthy ostrich-horse?”

“Huh? Uh, well… when we bought some at the circus, it was usually for five silver pieces each.”

“Five it is.” Azula reached into her purse. Drawing the coins out, she reached over and grabbed the girl’s hand before placing the money into it. As she did so, she noted how she instinctively flinched away – the girl had probably had a bad experience with Firebenders before.

With that, she turned away. “A pleasure doing business with you.” She called back over her shoulder at the dumbstruck girl.

Several minutes later, they were leading the mount away from the town, their packs now strapped securely to the creature’s back.

(X)

It did not take long at all for Zuko to realize that training under Azula was definitely different than his tutelage under Uncle.

In some ways it was surprisingly similar, at least in terms of subject matter covered.

“Firebending comes from the breath! Stop wasting the air in your lungs and conserve it for the actual strike.”

But she was definitely harsher, more critical. Uncle’s teachings had been more focused on the forms and flows of the discipline, with at least as much of the lesson dedicated to the philosophy behind each aspect of the art of Firebending as it was to actual combat training.

Azula was different. In line with his sister’s perfectionist nature, her focus was on the results – how to create the strongest, most powerful fire, how to increase his stamina for a sustained assault, how to recover from being surprised and blindsided, how to let your attacks flow naturally from one form to the other.

It was different. Harder, certainly. But in its own ways, it was also more agreeable. Azula would set standards for him to reach and surpass, readily identifiable goals, so that even in a short time he could gauge how much better he was getting.

“See that boulder over there? I want it in pieces within three attacks from you.”

…

“Well, two pieces still fits what I said, so… good work. I think.”

That’s not to say there weren’t difficulties inherent in having Azula be his teacher. For one, as a prodigy, there were several things that simply came naturally to Azula, techniques and concept she
grasped so readily that she had never bothered to pay much attention to the why and how of their functions. Hence for all her skill at actually performing them, she was woefully unsuited for communicating these techniques to him.

That usually led to a frustrated Azula and an angry, resentful Zuko. And whenever that happened it could be agreed that everyone (including Ty Lee) was in for a bad day.

“Just separate the positive yin and negative yang energies! It’s not that difficult!”

“But how?”

“What do you mean, ‘How?’ Feel the energies within your body, and then part them! Like this,” as she spoke, she swung her arms in a circular motion. “There. And once the energy is separated, it’ll naturally try to come back together. After that, it’s easy. Just focus your mind, guide the energy, and-” She thrust her arm out, and a bolt of blinding blue arced from her fingertips, throwing up a huge cloud of dirt and soil as it slammed into the ground.

Zuko’s own attempts at lightning mostly ended up with massive balls of fire that blew up in his face – if anything happened at all. After the fifth time for the day, Azula had wearily proclaimed the lesson over and stalked back to her tent, shaking her head.

And that led to yet another problem, the tiny knot of resentment that was buried in his heart. That worried him, but not half as much as the fact that it appeared to be growing.

That wasn’t right. He should have been overjoyed that his younger sister, Firebending prodigy and almost certainly one of the best Firebenders in the world, was teaching him. Under her guidance, he almost felt like he’d progressed farther in the month or so he’d been with her than the three years he’d spent on a Fire Navy ship.

But that was just it. His younger sister was teaching him, and by that very act there was an acknowledgement, stated or otherwise, that she was indeed superior to him, and to an extent where she could instruct or guide him in his own training.

Even back in the palace there had been a strong undercurrent of jealousy at her sister’s skill with Firebending, but he’d managed to suppress it most of the time and she’d had the common sense not to openly flaunt her skills in front of him once she got a bit older. The issue was simply not discussed. Now, though…

With a sigh, he slumped to the ground, feeling his shoulders heave as he stared at the scorched landscape around him. Behind him, Ty Lee was busy practising her own acrobatics, blissfully oblivious to Zuko’s anger.

“Circus freak.” He mumbled to himself as he staggered to his feet and headed back to his own tent.

(X)

“Your form is sloppy, but passable.” Azula said calmly as he swung his arms in circles again. “The only thing I can think of is that you’re not clearing your mind of turmoil.”

“Turmoil?” Zuko glared back at her. “I’m not in any turmoil!”

She sighed. “Zuko, even if you weren’t a terrible liar, the fact is that you need to have your mind completely clear of doubts in order to generate lightning.” She focused, looking intently at him. “You’re worried about Uncle, aren’t you.”
In response, Zuko looked away, his shoulders still heaving with his deep breaths. Azula shook her head.

“Zuko, Uncle can take care of himself.” At least, if the fact that he’s been tailing us ever since we left the resort is any indication…

“It’s not like that.” Her brother shook his head. “You weren’t there during those three years, Az. You have no idea what kind of trouble Uncle could get himself into. And now he’s all alone, and…” His clenched fists tightened, and at an apparent loss for words, Zuko let out a roar of frustration as he sent a plume of fire into the night –

Flames that inadvertently illuminated the group of armed people rapidly approaching their camp. Azula was on her feet in an instant, hands held at the ready. “Identify yourselves!” She said in her harshest, most imperious voice as she slipped into a combat stance.

“Identify ourselves?” the voice was rough and uncultured, and Azula’s eyes narrowed. “We should be asking you that, shouldn’t we, lads?”

“Too true!” another, rather nasal voice piped up. “We don’t want Firebenders in the Earth Kingdom. So you lot can just go back to where you came. After leaving everything of worth behind, of course.”

“Nah,” a third voice chuckled. “You Fire Nation types are like ants! Always scurrying about and coming back with more numbers. I say we just finish you lot right here and now! It’ll serve as a warning to anyone else who wants to mess with the Earth Kingdom!”

“Patriotic bandits.” Azula muttered to herself over the raucous cheering. “Now I’ve seen everything.” For all their bluster, they did appear to have a modicum of tactical sense, the most apparent demonstration of this being that they stayed just beyond the perimeter of the campfire’s light, leaving the three of them brightly illuminated by its orange glow. Of course that also made it painfully apparent that they had never actually fought Firebenders before – staying outside of the range of the light source wasn’t much use for someone who could create their own light, after all…

Azula burst into action, sweeping her leg out in a wide kick that sent a wave of blue fire rushing forward – it would send the nearest wave of enemy combatants back, as well as illuminating them enough for her to assess their numbers and disposition.

Her eyes narrowed as she caught sight of two men in the back not apparently holding any weapons – well aside from the one on the left who had a rock floating above his palm.

“Ty Lee! Get the earthbenders at the back!” She didn’t bother to look as she turned away, catching sight of a swarthy man rushing at her, warhammers raised. She knew Ty Lee would be able to handle them. As for herself…

Ducking under the clumsy swing, she jabbed her fist into his midsection, knocking the breath out of the man and knocking him backwards. Behind him, more yelling men rushed up, apparently secure in their belief that superior numbers would lead to victory.

They were quickly disabused of the notion by several swift blasts of fire – while some had shields with which to absorb the weaker blasts, most of those rushing forward fell back, clutching burnt faces and chests.

During a momentary lull in the fighting, she glanced over to her left to see Zuko fending off three others considerably well, and then her attention was diverted once more by a broadsword slashing down at her. Dodging to the side, she launched a firebomb at his chest, already turning away to her
next foe as the explosion consumed him.

Suddenly, she became aware that the members of the bandit gang who were capable of doing so were retreating. Briefly, she considered a parting shot of lightning to the back, and even more briefly thought about chasing them down, but in the end those people really won’t worth the time and effort.

She turned to regard the bodies lying strewn across the ground – five of them all told, two of them the earthbenders Ty Lee had immobilized. The acrobat was standing over their still forms, as if unsure about what to do.

Azula shook her head as she stepped over, daggers of fire already flaring in her palms. “Look away.” She said softly to the acrobat, who complied. Even in the dim glow of the fire, she could see that Ty Lee was chewing her lip.

She stood over their prone bodies – they were both lying facedown, which she supposed was a small mercy. With a deep breath, she plunged the daggers deep into their necks. There was the sound of sizzling flesh, and the one on the right jerked slightly, but it was over mercifully quickly.

“Azula!” She heard her brother’s shocked cry and looked up to meet his gaze. He was looking at her, an expression of disbelief on his face. “You didn’t have to –”

“Yes I did.” She said softly as she stepped away from the bodies. “Ty Lee’s chi-blocking doesn’t last that long, and we don’t have any way to restrain them that’ll last – at least not unless we bring them along with us, which is out of question. Furthermore, we’re still in Earth Kingdom territory, so it’s not like any of us can just drop them off at the nearest guard post. And anyway,” she spat. “They’re bandits. They don’t deserve any mercy. And you can’t tell me they wouldn’t have done the same to us had our situations been reversed.”

Zuko made no direct reply to this, but he lowered his gaze to the ground. Azula gazed over at him.

“What?”

When he looked up again, she could see sadness in his eyes, mixed with something else Azula couldn’t readily identify. “You’ve grown colder.”

“And you’ve grown more sullen.” Neither of us are the same person we were from three years ago, brother. I almost wish we were, but… She stepped past him, back towards her tent before she noticed a tiny black bundle on the ground. “Zuko?”

“What?”

“Your topknot.” She stated flatly as she reached down to pick it up. “It’s been… uh.” Evidently one of the bandits’ swings had come a little closer to him than he would have liked.

Zuko ran a hand over the remains of his hair. “No big deal.” He muttered sourly. “My hair always grew quickly anyway.”

“If you say so.” She said. “Anyway, pack up. That gang may be back with reinforcements, and even if they’re gone for good, I don’t think any of us want to spend the night next to a bunch of corpses.”

The others complied, and soon they were on their way again.

(X)

“Omashu always seemed untouchable.” Azula said as she gazed proudly at the city spread out before her, the flags of the Fire Nation clearly visible even at this distance, and in the gloom of evening. “It
was always only a matter of time, of course, but no matter how far the war spread, it always held out.”

“Until only a while ago, right?” Ty Lee spoke up. “There were flyers everywhere announcing it.”

“Right. When we finally amassed a big enough army to crush the defences, King Bumi surrendered without even a fight.” Silently, she wondered at the man’s motivations, but since it had delivered the city to the Fire Nation relatively intact, she supposed she couldn’t complain.

As she gazed over the stone bridge leading to the city, she could see a crowd of people slowly making their way down it, and she frowned. What was going on?

“Hey, Az.” Zuko came up beside her, a layer of peach fuzz already covering the top of his head – he was right, his hair did grow quickly. “Who’s the person you wanted to pick up from here?”

“Why, Zuzu, you haven’t guessed yet?” She injected just the right amount of mockery into her words. “We never did have the widest of social circles even as kids, so how many people could there possibly be to choose from?”

“Mai?” Ty Lee brightened up. “It’s Mai, isn’t it? She’s in there!”

“Her father’s been made governor of Omashu.” And I wish I could say I had something to do with that. Azula’s gaze travelled to the evacuating crowd again. “And so his family naturally followed. Anyway, let’s go. I want to know what’s going on in that city.” With a quick tug at the reins of the ostrich-horse, she set off down the trail that led towards the city’s entrance.

Chapter End

Next Chapter – in which I demonstrate that I am an unashamed Bumi fan.

Thanks for reading. Please review.
The Mad King of Omashu

Morality Chain

Trying to write for Bumi can be kinda difficult – especially when you do so from the viewpoint of others. Straddling the line between genius and insanity is always a delicate balance.

Well, I hope that you all like what I've done, anyway.

Disclaimer: I wonder if I could get one of those special edition DVDs…

There were precious few ways to enter the city of Omashu – the single most prominent method being the long and winding stone bridge that led to the main gates. Azula supposed it fit the earthbenders' tendencies towards straightforwardness and head-on tactics, but as for herself, she felt horribly exposed as she strode up the ramp.

As she neared the newly made gate, she could see two Fire Nation soldiers standing guard – and her mouth twitched in annoyance at their lackadaisical attitude towards their duties. They were barely paying any attention to the three of them. At her side, Zuko pulled the cloak over his head tighter.

Well, this was the first obstacle she had anticipated – from here on out, she would have to assume that all Fire Nation territories would have received word that Zuko was to be hunted down on sight. And her brother did have a rather prominent feature which made it difficult to avoid attention…

Well, there were always ways to ensure he didn't draw any of their attention.

Finally she stood before the two guards, and they reacted by moving to bar the gateway.

"Who are you, and what business do you have in Omashu?" The guard snapped.

Azula simply stared at him wordlessly, her expression making it quite clear that she believed him to be an idiot. The guard's own expression grew wary, obviously realizing that something was wrong. His gaze darted back and forth over her features, until suddenly they settled on her headpiece, and his eyes widened.

"P – Princess Azula!" He sputtered. "F – Forgive me! I didn't know – no one informed me you were coming!"

"Well, you know now." Her voice was cold. "Although I didn't send word of my coming, so I suppose I can forgive you just this once. If you'll let us through without delay."

"Y – Yes! I'll, uh – I'll send word to the governor immediately!" The guard saluted hastily and hurried off, allowing the three of them (along with ostrich-horse) to enter the city unmolested.

"I don't think they even noticed me." Zuko muttered from beside her.

"And right now, that's a good thing." She replied as she caught sight of a poster hastily affixed to a wall. It detailed some criminal she had never heard of before, but it served as a stark reminder nonetheless. "Come on, let's find Mai, and then we can be on our way."
"Please tell me you're here to kill me." The voice was dry and dull, slightly scratchy with relative lack of use, and stripped of any overt emotion.

Azula smiled to herself. It was like Mai had never left at all. As her friend looked up, a tiny smile flitted across her face, and Azula stepped forward to embrace her stoic friend.

"It's good to see you again, Mai." Any reply Mai would have formulated was cut off as Ty Lee piled in too, crushing the both of them in a group hug. As Azula successfully extracted herself from her overenthusiastic friend's grip, Mai looked at Ty Lee, a question on her eyes and lips.

"What are you doing here? I thought you'd found your calling in the circus?"

"Well, Azula called a little louder." The princess' eyes narrowed. Had she seen a flicker of sadness across Ty Lee's face? Well, she supposed it was natural the acrobat would miss the circus, but…

She was going to have to make sure Ty Lee stuck with her in the long run. But that could be saved for later. Right now she had more pressing concerns.

"Mai, I need your help. I'm on a mission, and I have need of supplies…” she paused, letting a smile dance briefly across her face. "As well as your skills."

"Count me in. Anything to get me out of this place," Mai returned Azula's smile with a small one of her own. "Supplies, though? I'd have assumed you could have stocked anything you needed straight from the capital."

"Yes, well, circumstances have made that method somewhat difficult," Azula gestured behind her and Zuko stepped out from the shadows. The move had been calculated, of course – if there were too many soldiers around Azula didn’t want the risk of them turning on the prince and causing a messy scene. And frankly, it was worth it just to see Mai display some genuine emotion for once.

Her eyes had widened far beyond her usual bored stare, and her mouth was even hanging open in a manner that reminded Azula vaguely of a gold-piranhafish.

"Zuko?" she finally whispered. "You're here?" And then she seemed to remember herself and her expression hardened again. "But the news of your status has reached Omashu already. You're wanted."

"Yes, he is. Through no fault of his own." Azula stepped in smoothly again, guiding her conversation down the lines she wanted it to go. "But we have a chance to make things right again. And it would be much easier with your help. What do you say, Mai?"

She knew Mai's answer before the words passed through her lips. Her hunch had been right after all. Azula nodded. "Good. Now, if you'd lead me to your father, there are some issues I'd like to discuss with him…"

(X)

Azula's mouth hung open as she digested the news that had just been relayed to her.

"You had empirical evidence that there was a rebellion operating within the city limits, and you ordered an evacuation?"

"Forgive me, your highness!" Even as a child Azula had always thought of Mai's father (and for the life of her she could never remember the man's name. Okano? Ukon? Something like that, anyway.)
as a weak and rather ineffectual individual, but she'd assumed him at least competent at basic bureaucracy. Well, she admitted grudgingly, this went slightly beyond the scope of what was expected when running a city, but she still wasn't about to let it go that easily. The thick walls of the city could have been easily turned against the people living within as well as without – it would have made the rebels little more than rats in a trap. But now…

"The governor believed that the outbreak of the plague was severe enough to warrant an evacuation. We did weigh the consequences of our actions, and we deemed this best."

"Yes." Azula said as she looked down at one of the many scrolls detailing the situation. "This plague of… pentapox, was it?"

"Yes, your highness."

"I can't say I've ever heard of this particular disease," she glanced over to her friends and brother, all of whom shrugged silently. "And based on the reports, the symptoms of this disease appear remarkably inconsistent across the sufferers, aside from the spots across the body. For example, this one here, appears to note that the spots were remarkably painful, while this one seems to behave as if they were little more than skin discolourations," her eyes narrowed, her suspicious mind a fertile ground for theories of deception and trickery. "During the evacuation, did anything else of note occur?"

Mai's father and his wife exchanged glances, which answered the question as far as Azula was concerned. And if they hadn't seen fit to tell her upon her arrival, it would be something they knew she wouldn't have approved of.

With a sigh, she leaned back into the governor's chair and closed her eyes. "Tell me what happened." She said in a voice that could have drained the heat from the Si Wong desert.

"Well, during the evacuation, the resistance, they, ah, they kidnapped Tom-Tom. And, well, we offered a trade to get our son back."

Azula had never met Tom-Tom personally, given that Mai's family had departed the capital three years ago and the lad was only two, but she supposed that there was nothing unusual in the governor wanting his son back. However… her eyes snapped open.

"What, exactly, are you trading him for?" The closer she got to the heart of matter, the more Mai's father clammed up, apparently not making the simple connection that it would cause her to dig all the harder.

Another shared glance. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mai with her palm to her face, letting out an exasperated sigh.

"Well…"

"I'm waiting, governor."

"King Bumi." The word came out so quickly it was little more than a squeak.

Azula sat like she had been turned to stone – aside from, as Ty Lee would later helpfully inform her, the gradual whitening of her knuckles and lips.

"King Bumi," she repeated, very softly. "You agreed to their idea to trade the King of Omashu, one of the most powerful earthbenders in the entire world, an established tactical genius, and the single most valuable prisoner in probably the entire Earth Kingdom, for a two year old baby. Have I got
"Well, actually, your highness, it was the governor's idea, not the other way around." One of the guards who apparently had more courage than brains spoke up.

Azula took in a very deep breath, held it in for a moment, and then let it all out again. "When is this trade to take place?"

"Ah, today, your highness. At noon."

Absolute silence descended upon the room. Azula closed her eyes, sifting through each and every possibility she could find, trying to find some way to turn this situation in their favour.

Finally, she rose from the throne, striding down the polished steps. "I and my retinue will be the ones to oversee this trade, governor. I trust you have no objections."

There was none (not that she honestly expected any), and so Azula continued out of the room, silently fuming to herself.

The rebel's actions didn't make sense. At least, Azula thought to herself as she walked through the hallways of the palace, not by the standards of the Earth Kingdom. As stubborn and unyielding as the rock which they claimed as their birthright, they seemed to have a predisposition for holding their ground to the absolute last man – a tactic which many a Fire Nation general had exploited over the long war. Not to say that the Fire Nation's predisposition towards wild and relentless assaults hadn't cost them on more than one occasion, but that was neither here nor there.

So why their decision to flee the city? It would make sense from a tactical standpoint, especially when one took into account the probability that it, like most resistance movements, was small and poorly organized. An objective assessment would have revealed that staying within the city, without a clear escape route, would ultimately lead to their doom. But that was just it – objectivity was hard to find anywhere. The resistance leader (or leaders) would probably have spouted some morale-boosting nonsense about this place being their home and that fighting the Fire Nation would be the only path to freedom and that they would be willing to lay down their lives for freedom or some such rot. It certainly would fit with the standard Earth Kingdom mindset of meeting problems head-on.

Well, maybe she could have given them some credit. A predisposition wasn't the same as blind adherence to a standard, and if they really had decided that things were too dire they could have chosen to cut and run. It would have galled them, but they could have done it. Except that not one day before they'd evidently felt secure enough in their position to launch a direct attack on the governor. What could have possibly caused them to change their minds so quickly? Running away, avoiding and evading instead of standing and confronting –

No. No. She arrested those thoughts and stuffed them back into a corner of her mind. Wishful thinking got one nowhere, and she wasn't about to start making connections that existed nowhere but her mind. The Avatar wouldn't have shown up here in this city. That was simply too much of a logical leap based on such scanty evidence.

Finally, she descended the last flight of steps, ending up in a decidedly less inviting surroundings. Like so much other Earth Kingdom architecture that had been newly seized by the Fire Nation, a doorway had been hastily torn through the wall that led into the prison – it would properly remodelled when the architects currently fixing the more serious structural damage finally got around to the aesthetics.
She stepped through the doorway, and as soon as she did so, she was given a cheery greeting.

"Good morning!" A pause. "I think it's morning anyway. My internal clock is pretty accurate, but after a month or so without the sun, I can't really be sure."

Azula didn't bother to reply as she slowly stepped around the steel cage – although coffin really seemed to be the more apt term. It had been specially designed to constrict earthbenders, leaving all of their limbs unable to move beyond even feeblest of twitches. Against master earthbenders, it was the only way to be sure. That, or surrounding them with nothing but metal, but that wasn't really in the cards right now. As it was, the walls and floor of the room were already coated with steel.

Finally she completed her slow semicircle, allowing her to look into the face of the ancient king of Omashu. In a small concession, the coffins (Azula really couldn't think of them any other way) were designed to leave the earthbenders faces open instead of enclosed. The act was less merciful than it would have seemed on the surface – it made prisoners easier to interrogate.

"Hello, princess," the king of Omashu gave her a chipper smile as Azula regarded him coolly. "A pleasure to meet you at last! Normally I'd throw you a feast to welcome you into the city, but I'm a little tied up at the moment." He then launched himself in a cackling laugh, interspersed with more than a fair share of snorting. Finally, he calmed down and shook his head. "Okay, that joke would have gone better if you'd actually tied me up. Still, can't blame me for trying!"

She knew that some regarded the king of Omashu as stark raving mad. Others regarded him as a genius, and still others shrugged and said that there was no reason why he couldn't be both. If nothing else, he certainly did not behave in a manner that fit Azula's conceptions of how royalty should carry themselves.

"Anyway, to what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting?" Bumi raised an eyebrow. "I heard about the trade, of course, but that's not for a while yet, I don't think."

"Oh, I'm just curious," she replied with a calculated nonchalance. "I wanted to see what kind of king would surrender his city without even a fight."

Despite the fact that his body was completely immobile, Bumi managed to give the impression that he was shrugging. "Well, don't get me wrong, there were plenty of people who wanted to fight and keep you lot out of the city. I almost agreed with them, myself! But then I remembered that I'd gotten out of bed on the wrong side that morning, and you know how nothing ever goes right once you've gotten out the wrong side of bed. So I surrendered," another almost-shrug. "Less bother for everyone involved, you see."

Her eyes narrowed. She was almost prepared to dismiss this man as a rambling idiot, except for two things. The first was that she knew, on an entirely objective level, that this man was far smarter and competent than he seemed. The second was his eyes. For all that his face seemed affixed into a permanent leer, there was a spark in his eyes that Azula found impossible to ignore – a look that spoke of him constantly watching and waiting, assessing the situation and never missing a single detail that might prove useful down the line. That hadn't changed from the moment they'd caught sight of each other – for as much as Azula was trying to get a read on Bumi; he was doing the same to her.

"You're remarkably cheerful for someone who's been immobilized for over a month," she turned away, making a show of being fascinated by the blank wall.

"Oh, well, I don't really mind that much. The food's not great, but they give me enough. And it gives me time to think!"
"Really. And what would you have to think about in a place like this?"

"Oh, lots of things. Like, for example – d'you think Ozai would look better with or without his goatee? I understand you Fire Nation types think it's dignified, but-"

Her eyes hardened and she whirled around. "You will refer to the Fire Lord with the proper respect!" She hissed. Her fingers itched, and she resisted the urge to bring a fire up into his eyeballs. No one disrespected her father and got away with it. No one.

If Bumi was perturbed he gave no outward sign. "Well, none of you ever call me King Bumi, so…"

"When you have defeated our armies, marched into the Imperial Palace and thrown down the Fire Lord, then you can do the same." She shot back.

"You didn't do any of that either. I surrendered, remember?"

Her eyes narrowed, and in response he gave another cheery grin. Just then, a servant entered the room.

"Your pardon, princess, but we are ready to begin transporting the prisoner for the trade."


"Hang on just one sec," Bumi spoke up again, and Azula tensed inwardly. "Would you mind telling the governor to take good care of my city? I'll want it in good shape when I get it back, you know."

"You will never rule this city or any other ever again!" Azula snapped. "Take him away! NOW!"

The servants hastened to comply and Azula watched go, keeping her temper under control. Too easy. It had been too easy for him to get under her skin.

"Whoa! Hey, I was right! It is morning!"

She would have to watch herself in the future. Rubbing her temples wearily, she began to leave the room – only to find Mai's father standing in the doorway.

"What is it, governor?" She said testily.

"Your highness… might I ask a question?"

"I'm not in a particularly good mood," she replied as she walked past him. "Make it a quick one."

"Ah, I couldn't help but notice that Prince Zuko is travelling with you."

After remaining silent for a long moment, she slowly turned to regard him in the eye. "And?" She asked coolly.

"It's just, well… surely you must have heard that your fath – that the Fire Lord has issued a warrant for his arrest?"

"Why, yes, of course I have," she replied. "It just so happens that he is currently in my custody. And I can treat my prisoners however I want. Rest assured he will not turn tail and flee over the horizon." She turned so that her entire body was now facing him. "Do you wish to challenge me on this, governor?"

"No, no, of course not. I merely – I just wanted to clarify the issue."
"Consider it clarified. Anything else?"

"Well, no."

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a hostage trade to oversee."

(X)

She felt Zuko stiffen as soon as the people making the trade came into view. Why? Looking over, she almost dismissed the young boy with the funny hat at first glance. He certainly didn't look anything special.

Well, except for the fact that he walked in front, indicating that he was the spokesperson for their group, despite the fact that the two Water tribes-people behind him were clearly older and –

*The two Water tribes-people.*

A hundred possibilities surged through her mind in that single moment. Suddenly, Azula *saw*, clearly and completely, how to make this work.

"Keep out of sight." She hissed to Zuko beside her.

"Az," he whispered back, just as urgently. "He's –"

*I know. Trust me on this. Stay back." Zuko began to back off, and she whirled around to confront the group just as soon as they came in close enough for their individual features to be recognized. And for the first time, Azula found herself looking into the face of the enemy.

The boy's eyes were grey. A lot like Ty Lee's, really. His face was honest – open and trusting. It would, she thought, be painfully easy to scam him should it ever come down to that. He wore clothes in a shade of orange and yellow she'd never seen before – Air Nomad clothing, perhaps?

Behind him, the two Water Tribes-people could be identified as such mainly by the colour of their skin and their eyes – the sea-blue clothes didn't do much for hiding their identity, either. The boy was the one holding the baby – and Azula had to wince at how rough and unsteadily he was holding Tom-Tom. A boomerang and club dangled from his belt, standard weapons of warriors of the Southern tribes. His arms were wiry; indicating strength, but the way he carried himself revealed that he'd probably never been through much, if any, formal warrior training.

The girl was slightly younger, hair tied back in a neat braid, her eyes like two points of shining ice in the middle of the darker skin of her face. At her side hung a reinforced water pouch, the signature item of any waterbender away from a ready water source. Her walk was lighter than her brothers – more assured and balanced. It looked like she had been through her fair share of training in the North. *I wonder how she convinced them?*

She kept her face carefully neutral as they finally came to a stop several meters in front of her. She didn't know whose idea it had been to arrange the trading location to be in front of a giant edifice of her father that was still under construction (certainly not her) but she supposed it was fitting in its own way. Behind her, the winch used to lower the captive king landed on the ground with a thump – and Azula noted the relieved smile that spread across the leader's face. *So the king means more to him than a simple hostage in need of rescue.*

"Hi, everybody!" Came the king's cheerful call. Azula ignored him.

"You brought my brother?" Mai questioned. The leader – the *Avatar* – stepped forward and nodded.
"He's here. We're ready to trade."

Azula cocked her head to the side. "You know, I'm just not sure…"

Both Mai and the Avatar turned to her, a question in their eyes.

"I've been thinking about it," she explained. "But really, I just can't see how trading the earthbender king of Omashu for a two-year old is even remotely fair. Wouldn't you agree?" She aimed the question at Avatar, and she could see the relief in his eyes being quickly replaced with wariness and fear. He was pathetically easy to read.

At her side, Mai hesitated for a brief, timeless moment. As Azula turned back to her, she could see the conflict – small and well-hidden though it was – in her friend's eyes. Tom-Tom was her brother, after all.

But in this instance at least, Mai's loyalty to Azula took precedence over everything else.

"You're right." She turned and stepped forward. "The deal's –"

"I didn't say that." The princess said as she laid a hand on her friend's shoulder. Silently, she reminded herself to reward Mai's loyalty later. "The deal can still go on – after all, we both have something the other side wants, don't we?" She could see the Avatar and his friends relaxing ever so slightly. "I just thought we could… negotiate over the terms a little more."

The three of them exchanged glances while Tom-Tom continued to coo and gurgle happily. Finally, the Avatar spoke up again – come to think of it, that ridiculous hat was probably to hide his airbender tattoos. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well… King Bumi here is one of the most powerful benders in the world, isn't he? So, I thought we could exchange one master bender for another. That's much fairer, isn't it?" She took a couple of steps forward, every muscle in her body tensing up, ready to spring into action. "After all, aren't you all about the fairness and balance," and the fake-sweetness in her voice was replaced by caustic venom as her expression morphed into one of ferocious concentration. "Avatar?"

*The element of air is one of freedom and expression. That means airbenders can adapt to new and surprising situations quickly with minimal difficulty. Of course, that also means that they are impulsive and prone to acting before properly thinking things through – The Avatar had already sprung forward, one hand already unfurling his staff-glider. Bingo. Azula burst into action, hand arcing outward and sending a wave of searing fire into the air, right into the path between the Avatar and the King. First, deny him the sky. An airbender's chief advantage was his mobility. They would have to nullify that.*

"I guess the deal *is* off, after all." Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the Water peasants moving up to support the Avatar. Good thing she had her own backup, then.

"Mai! Guard the King!" *Good thing they hadn't drawn him back up into the sky. It'd be too easy for the Avatar to reach him then. "Ty Lee, get Tom-Tom back safely!" That shouldn't be difficult, considering her opponent. "Zuko, you're with me!"

She could hear the female peasant's startled shout as Zuko burst from his hiding place, a war cry on his lips as he launched twin blasts of flame at the Avatar, who was now forced to break off his attempted flight and go to ground.

And then the battle began in earnest.
Aang wasn't quite sure at which point in time exactly he'd realized that everything had gone utterly and spectacularly wrong, but it definitely was around the point where the Fire Nation girl with the headpiece had begun talking. Something about the way she carried herself, and the look in her eyes, sent a chill up his spine. Even then he'd simply assumed that once they'd completed the trade they could be on their way, with the strange woman little more than an unpleasant memory.

Well, so much for that idea…

But she'd pegged him _how had she managed that?_ _He'd hidden his tattoos well enough, hadn't he?_ almost immediately, and Aang had realized that he wasn't going to be able to get out of this one without a fight.

But when she'd starting shooting the crazy blue fire, and when Zuko _why was he even here?_ had appeared from his hiding spot and started attacking them in tandem with the girls, He finally realized just how much trouble he'd gotten himself into.

The plumes of fire were making glider-travel impossible – even leaving aside the need to dodge two or three blasts of fire every second, the intense heat was causing the air to rise unevenly, seriously destabilizing the young Airbender's movements.

He could have concentrated and kept the air stable enough to fly properly. He could have concentrated on dodging the blasts of scorching flame. He wasn't good enough to do both.

Quickly he folded the glider back into a staff, swinging it in an arc and letting out a gust of wind to dispel a fire blast that the Creepy Girl was aiming at him. It was a standard move he'd done a dozen times before against Zuko, and it had always worked before – which was why his surprise when the fireball blew straight through his own gust of wind and slammed into him was all the greater.

Gathering the air around himself, he twisted in mid-air _gotta land well gotta land well gotta land well_, managing to land properly with both feet on the ground. His defensive manoeuvre had still managed to take most of the force of the blast – at least his clothes weren't singed or damaged. Still, it was stronger than almost anything Aang had gone up against before, and that wasn't good at all.

He barely had time to react before she was rushing at him, two fingers thrust out to send another jet of blue fire at him. Quickly, he dodged to the side _seriously, blue fire? I've never heard of blue fire_, retaliating with a burst of air of his own that she dodged in turn.

Off to the side he could hear Katara and Sokka engaged in battles of their own, but there was no time to go out of his way to help them – he had enough on his own plate.

His target was still Bumi – the problem would be trying to get to him. Quickly, he faked to the left before pivoting and rushing the air around him to help him turn faster and make a break for the right.

He'd almost thought he'd succeeded until a boot _thin and sharp-toed it's the Creepy Girl again_ appeared in front of him, connecting solidly with his chest. He was knocked backwards, and for once his smaller body and lighter frame ended up working against him – he was sent right over the edge.

Luckily there was a lot of construction work going around the place and so he managed to crash onto yet another wooden platform slightly below without severely injuring himself. Any relief was quickly dispelled by the sight of Zuko and Creepy Girl _they're working together, are they related?_ jumping down themselves and rushing up to engage him again. Quickly he flipped himself onto his
feet, eyes narrowed. He knew he could take Zuko – he'd done so several times already. But Zuko and Creepy Girl together? That was going to be more problematic...

A ponderous growl sounded to his right, and relief washed over the young Airbender. "Appa!" He called, and a moment later the Sky Bison came down in front of him, his large body serving as a roadblock against the two Firebenders,

Or at least it blocked one Firebender – while Zuko didn't appear, Creepy Girl simply vaulted straight over Appa's back, how did she do that? I've never met a non-Airbender who could jump that high her leg scything forward to send a crescent of azure flame at Aang.

Focusing, he sent forth his strongest air funnel forward, catching the flames, whirling them about, and – barely, just barely! – dispersing them before he reached him. Taking a deep breath, he tightened his grip on his staff and looked around. She had disappeared. Where to?

"That girl," he said to himself as he hurried over to Appa. "She – her Firebending's on a completely different level from Zuko…"

"Oh, you noticed? I'm flattered." It took him a split second to notice the muffled tone of the voice, and direction it came from, and that was a split second he couldn't afford, because suddenly the ground (or wood) exploded from under him how did she get under there so quickly, and she leapt out, golden eyes flashing with triumph as Aang was once more forced backwards. And then as she landed, twin jets of fire spewed forth from her finger tips once more, every strike calculated and precise, always powerful enough to send him reeling back, back, back, and then he was on the edge again and this time there was no more lower-level construction site to soften the fall and he swerved down into scaffolding, into the maze of poles and tarps and planks, hoping against hope that it would deter her, even momentarily.

An intense beam of fire carving its way straight down from the top, and Creepy Girl dropping down from the newly made entrance her eyes, it's those eyes, that focus is totally uncanny quickly dispelled that notion. But at least it had given him a moment to collect his bearings and steady himself. Taing an deep breath, he brought his staff up and prepared to fight.

(X)

"Whoa, hey! Wait!" The water tribe boy was dodging frantically, trying desperately to stay out of range of her striking fists. Ty Lee frowned. He had good reflexes, at the very least. But this was wasting time! She needed to rescue Tom-Tom, get him somewhere safe, and then she could help Mai or Azula face their opponents – they were benders, this boy wasn't.

"Just give back the baby and you won't get hurt!" She snapped. As she threw herself forward, the boy once more stumbled back. "You should be ashamed of yourselves, kidnapping a poor, innocent, defenceless baby!"

"Okay! OKAY! TAKE HIM!"

"Look, you're just making it harder for yourself in – huh?" She paused, in the middle of a striking stance, one leg cocked backwards and one hand bent forwards. "Take him? You mean it?"

"Yes, take him! It's what we came here to do in the first place!" The water tribe boy was thrusting Tom-Tom at her, who merely looked at her with a confused expression.

"Oh. Uh, okay then." Quickly, she scooped the baby back, hugging him close to her chest. "Thanks,
mister. Maybe you're not so bad after all." She said cheerfully as she bowed to him in gratitude.

"Thanks… I think." The water boy looked at her. "Um… any chance you could do the same with Bumi?"

The acrobat's eyes widened. "Ah. Um, I think you're going to have to ask Azula about that one."

"Azula? You mean that creepy chick with the crazy blue fire?"

"Well, yeah, but don't let her hear you call it that. She's really proud of it." Ty Lee paused. "Well, thanks again. See you!" Quickly, she rushed off – she had to get Tom-Tom someplace safe and then return to the fight.

You know, that guy was actually kinda cute. She thought to herself as she swung through the scaffolding at dizzying speeds, all while Tom-Tom gurgled happily. His aura was kinda… orangey, though. I'm not sure I like that.

(X)

"I've faced your knives before." Katara said calmly as she froze the water in front of her, creating a shield that deflected the gleaming instruments. "I know what to expect."

Her opponent gave no visible reaction, but a slight movement of her wrist later, a stiletto was slicing through the frozen shield, its thin smooth shape allowing it penetrate even the ice. Only a last second jerk to the side saved Katara from being nailed to the wall.

The Waterbender frowned and quickly reshaped her water into a whip shape. Shifting her stance, she lashed out – Knife Girl managed to dodge once, twice, and another knife flew her way.

Clearly standard long range tactics weren't working. Where was Aang? She wasn't too worried about him facing Zuko, but the other girl – something about her just unnerved Katara. Was he going to be okay?

No, I've got to have faith in Aang! And she had to focus on the opponent in front of her. She focused, keeping her eyes trained on the flicker of movement that would signify Knife Girl's next assault.

There! As her opponent lashed out, so did she, most of the water in her pack gushing forth in a torrent. Caught in the force of the rushing water, the knife was knocked aside. But that was not Katara's real target – the girl's outstretched hand was.

In a moment, the gush of water had enveloped the girl's hand, her eyes widening in surprise, and then narrowing in anger, as Katara quickly froze it, leaving one hand immobilized. Katara smirked. Score one for the waterbender. Now all she had to do was get to Bumi…

And then all of her sudden there was something speedy and pink at her side, jabbing her in several locations almost too quickly for Katara to catch, and it didn't hurt, not really, but when the pink thing – a girl, it was one of those girls – darted away again she was suddenly aware that the water wasn't obeying her, and then the ice was melting, and the rest of her whip was just falling apart and she just couldn't do anything with the water any more –

"What did you do?" She sputtered, her eyes wide. How did she remove my bending?

There was a clicking sound of something sliding into place, and she looked up to see Knife Girl with something that looked an awful lot like a sai in her hand.
"Surrender."

Katara's only response was a defiant glare. Knife Girl's eyes narrowed and she drew her arm back. Katara tensed, ready to move. She wasn't quite sure what she could do in this state, she only knew she couldn't give up here and –

**Clang!**

"Yeah, boomerang!" Sokka cheered as he came into view beside her. "Two on two! The odds are even now!" Knife Girl glanced sourly at her latest weapon that had been knocked away and shook her head.

"An untrained warrior and a bender who can't bend. I'm quaking in my boots." Another flash of movement, and another set of knives appeared in her hands. *How many of those things does she have?!*

"You know, she has a point." Sokka said after a moment's deliberation. "Maybe a tactical retreat is in order."

Katara glanced behind her opponents at Bumi, who appeared to be watching the proceedings with rapt attention. "What about Bumi?"

"He looks okay. Mostly. We can always come back for him later – you know, when there isn't the crazy acrobat girl and the crazy blue fire girl around."

Katara grit her teeth. Must as she hated to admit defeat, knowing when to call it quits was only good sense. Maybe they could – "Wait a minute – where's Appa?"

"Oh, he's over there fighting Zuko."

"Oh, okay, that's – wait, what?"

(X)

"Get out of my way, you stupid cow… bison… thing!" Zuko snarled in frustration as he tried to circle around and get to where his sister and the Avatar were. But the Sky Bison was fast despite his large bulk, always managing to move quickly enough to block Zuko.

"Look, I don't want to hurt you, but –" A part of him wondered why he was even bothering to negotiate with a Sky Bison, but that particular thread of thought (along with every other one in his mind) was blasted away by the beast sending out a massive air burst that knocked Zuko flat on his back.

*I am fighting, and losing, to the Avatar's PET. That is how low I have sunk.* Zuko thought dimly as he lay on his back staring up at the sky. With a groan, he launched himself back onto his feet, a fireball already building up in his palm.

"All right. No more mister nice guy!" *That… sounded a lot better in my head.* A roar of flame erupted from his outstretched fist, far too fast for the Sky Bison to dodge or blow away. The creature bellowed in pain and staggered back, a smouldering patch readily visible on its formerly snow-white fur.

Zuko raced past the distracted Bison, trying to banish the sudden pangs of sympathy he felt for the beast. *It was asking for it. Besides, I didn't hurt it that bad. It'll be fine after a couple days.*
Quickly, he scanned his surroundings, looking for the telltale blue fire that would give away his sister's location – and by extension, the Avatar's.

*There. Down near the chutes.* He broke into a sprint, looking for a way down the scaffolding, seeking to reach the pair as quickly as possible.

(X)

King Bumi was a master of neutral *jing*. What master earthbender wasn't?

Of course, Bumi being Bumi, he chose to approach the idea of watching and waiting in his own unique way. More than one person had questioned his methods of doing things, and after the seventh time or so Bumi had realized that simply doing whatever it was he was planning to do and letting the results speak for themselves was far more effective as far as proving his point went. It also saved far more time too – he had noticed that explaining his actions tended to use up even more time than simply carrying them out.

He still wasn't quite sure if it was because his plans were that complicated and far out or if everyone else around him was just that slow. Maybe both.

Well, the point was that he was considered odd by most. Like his decision to surrender the city to the invading Fire Nation. That hadn't really gone down well with most of his staff – even the ones who had been in his service the longest and were used to most of his oddities had baulked at the idea.

But the plain, undeniable fact was that it would prove for the better in the long run. And it had its short-term benefits too. The city was still *standing*; now that was one heck of a benefit, if you asked him. The Fire Nation had finally decided that it really didn't like having an enemy city so close to its home country, and the army they had assembled to rectify that was large enough that even if by some humongous stroke of cunning (and luck – couldn't forget the luck) Bumi had managed to pull off a victory, his armies would still be decimated, the city would still be in shambles, and the next army they sent over would have rolled over them easily.

Sometime sheer disparity of power was what decided the day. A time and place for everything, after all.

No, all in all, the decision to surrender was the wiser one. The newly appointed governor wasn't going to be too hard on the local people – he was, at heart, a family man, and Bumi could respect that. He knew that if he simply watched and waited, there would come the opportune moment to act, but until then…

Now, though, it looked possible that he going to have to shift his plans around a bit. That in itself was unusual – thinking out of the box generally implied that you turned around and saw into the box, saw all the pieces at once, and so you could build knowing how things were going to play out.

But something had gone wrong. The city being occupied he could live with. The Avatar – his *friend* – being threatened, he could not.

The Fire Nation princess was good; even in the few moments of action he'd been able to catch, he had already been able to gauge her fairly well. And in the first few moments of Aang's flustered reactions, he could tell that the Avatar was almost certainly going to *lose* this particular fight.

Unless someone helped him.

Bumi heaved a sigh. The two girls who were ostensibly guarding him were in a tense standoff with the Avatar's friends – Katara and Sokka, if he recalled correctly. The fact that they were largely
helpless aside, neither side appeared particularly keen on exacerbating the conflict.

Well, nothing for it. Plans do change.

"Excuse me, ladies." He said pleasantly. The girl – the governor's daughter, he believed – shifted slightly, watching him out of the corner of his eye. "Would you mind taking a couple of steps away from the cage?"

Now he had her attention – as well as the acrobat's. She gazed at him, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Well, you see, I'll be breaking out in a couple of seconds, and I'd really hate for two nice young girls like yourselves to be hurt by accident. I could never live with myself." He smiled his most innocent smile – which, truth be told, still wasn't all that innocent, but heck, he'd tried.

"What!" The girl with the knives had already brought her hand up – she wasn't going to throw, though. The only exposed spot was his face, and she was too well trained to go for a killing shot on an unarmed prisoner like that. And so in response, he stuck his tongue out at her.

From her blank stare, he could tell that this hadn't been the response she was expecting. In fact, it was so disconcerting that she failed to notice the mud patches that had disconnected themselves from the construction work until they made contact with her eyes.

"ARGH!" One hand went up to brush away at the mud – the acrobat girl was likewise preoccupied, and so Bumi concentrated, inclining his neck slightly.

His month (or so) in the cage had given him a pretty good feel for his new home, especially since he'd spent his time sourcing out the confines of his new home, sending tiny tremors through the metal until he was certain of the stresses and vital points of the contraption. The ability to detect via the impurities in the metal was one he'd developed fairly recently, and – who knew? – in time he might be able to push it even further.

But for now, knowing the metal was enough.

Rocks popped out from the nearby ground, slamming into the metal cage at specific points and angles. One time, two times, three times – and that was it. Flexing his muscles, he pushed outward, feeling the satisfying sound of the weakened metal giving way with a terrible groan, and he stepped out, standing to his full height.

The Mad King of Omashu was free once more.

(X)

Fighting on a flat, open rooftop, with endless sky in every direction, the rest of the vast city stretched out around him, with no obstacles or boulders or pitfalls in the vicinity, Aang could not recall a single point in his life where he had ever felt this completely, utterly and hopelessly boxed in.

The blue fire was everywhere. Everywhere he sought to run to, a streak of flame would land first. If he tried to jump, a sheet of fire would soar overhead, cutting off his escape route. If he wanted to go on the offensive, a wall of fire would spring up in front of him before he had even begun to attack.

How? How was the Creepy Girl with the creepy eyes this good? How could she anticipate his every action, his every movement?

And how in the world was he supposed to get away this time?
He jumped at her, gathering the air around his fists for a head-on confrontation – except that she had already sidestepped the attack and was whirling around to send a kick at his back. He ducked, threw himself to the ground – and suddenly she had shifted her weight, shifted her angles, all in the blink of an eye, and her foot was now stomping down at him. He rolled to the side and boosted the air around him again to flip himself back upright.

She was once again in a Firebending stance, a tiny smirk on her face dear spirits; she's not even out of breath as she stepped to the left slowly. Her hands were held in a strange two-fingered stance that he'd never seen in any other Firebender before.

Well, he supposed that made sense. She wasn't like any other Firebender he had ever seen.

"Tell me Avatar," she said softly in a mocking, superior tone of voice. "How many hours a day do you spend training?"

"Huh?" The suddenness and unexpected nature of the question threw him off for a moment – a moment that she quickly exploited, leaping forward to send a jet of fire straight at him.

He dodged to the left – and she was already there, arms already swinging around to attack him again and there was no way she could be that fast, there was no way any Airbender could be that fast, so how – Another wrench to the side, and Aang fell from the rooftops, down into the shaded streets below.

After a moment to get his bearings, he realized that this particular street led to a dead end.

Crud.

He turned – and she was already at the far end, one arm already slashing down to send out a stream of fire – Aang dodged to the side, and a little to the back, each and every one of her attacks forcing him slightly backwards.

It was only a matter of time until she reached the far wall – only a matter of time until he had nowhere to run.

(X)

Azula glared down at the Avatar with anger – and not only that, with disappointment.

This was the one destined to 'bring balance to the world'? The one Fire Lord Sozin had feared so much that he had devoted the last quarter of a century of his life to hunting down? The one Zuko had been unable, time and time again, to defeat and capture?

It would be funny if it weren't so insulting.

That he had some measure of raw talent was undeniable – even at such a young age, his air blasts were powerful, and those tattoos all over his body was the sign of an airbending master. But he had no form, no real idea of what to do with all that power. He was faster than her, but what did that matter when he left himself so utterly open that she would have to be blind to not be able to tell what he was planning to do? His air attacks had power behind them, but he couldn't focus and let them flow properly and so most of the force dissipated far too early. He had stamina, but he wasted so much of it on wild, unnecessary actions she was surprised he still had the energy to stand.

A few moments later, she had him with his back up against the wall, and she held a steady flame out in front of her, daring him to try and escape again. He gazed back at her, fear in his eyes.
"Pathetic."

"Let me guess," she said conversationally. "You thought you could get by on raw talent. You're the Avatar, and so of course you're going to be the best bender in the world. It's the way it works, after all. Is that it? Am I right?"

*To have strength and not use it is the greatest of all sins, for in the end it is no better than genuine weakness.*

"Well, let me tell you something, Avatar. I'm talented too – I've been talented from birth. But you know what else? I worked to get to where I am today – I've devoted more hours to training than anything else in my life." Her eyes narrowed. "And now, I am stronger than you, I am more skilled than you, and I have you cornered. Come quietly, and I won't hurt you." She paused. "Much."

The Avatar seemed to gather himself, taking a deep breath when all of a sudden a cheerful voice sounded from above the two of them.

"Well, *I'm* talented, *I* train, *and* I've got a hundred years on the both of you!" There was a blur of motion and suddenly a hulking brute of a man was standing in between her and the Avatar. She glanced up at his face, and her eyes widened in shock.

"You!" She snarled at mad king of Omashu. "When did you-"

He grinned cheerily at her, and suddenly a wave of earth slammed into her from the side, so fast that Azula had no time to react before she was thrown off her feet and through the nearby wall. As she landed on the ground, coughing and sputtering, she pushed against the ground, eager to get back into the action and to teach that arrogant fool not to cross her – but then stone clamps burst from the ground, tying her down, even sinking in between her fingers so securely that she couldn't even twitch them, couldn't summon any fire at all with which to free herself from her bonds, and as she struggled and cursed she could see the King leading the Avatar away.

With a cry of frustration, Azula pulled her bonds once more, only stopping when the pain in her shoulders grew too intense and she realized that she would dislocate her shoulders before she could get the damnable clamps to move, and so she slumped down again, trying to regain the breath that had been knocked out of her lungs, and cursing Bumi's name with each new breath she drew in. It had all happened so quickly, it was a level of earthbending that Azula had never even heard of before, and -

And for the first time in her life, Azula had lost.

(X)

"Well, it should be fine to stop for a chat here." Bumi said as he dusted off his hands.

"Bumi! You're safe!"

"Of course I'm safe. There's hasn't been a point in the last decade where I wasn't safe. Your friends and Appa are up there waiting for you, by the way."

"Great! Then let's get out of here before that girl or her partners show up again."

"Let's?" Bumi questioned and he shook his head. Suddenly Aang felt his a twist in his gut. "I'm sorry, Aang. But I can't leave just yet."

"What? But you broke free – or Katara and Sokka helped break you free – and now there's no
reason for you to stay here!"

"Aang, I broke free to help you. You need to go and master the four elements so you can stop the Fire Lord, and you can't do that if you're captured."

"I know that! And I need you to be my teacher!" From that brief display with which he had saved Aang, the young Airbender now realized that the bout they'd had the last time he'd been to Omashu had been little more than play-acting on the King's part – if Bumi had used his full power he would have destroyed Aang, Avatar or no.

Bumi crouched down so that he and the Avatar were seeing eye-to-eye – and Aang could see the regret and sadness in his old friend's eyes. "No, Aang," He said softly. "You need an Earthbending master to be your teacher. And there are a total of two-hundred and nine master Earthbenders out there right now." Then he paused. "Or was that ninety-two? Twenty-nine? Well, there's a nine and a two in the figure somewhere, and the point is – you're spoiled for choice. There are plenty of people who can teach you Earthbending."

"But -!"

"But," Bumi continued as he held up a single finger. "There is only one King Bumi, and the people of Omashu need him. That's why I'm here – and that's why I let myself get captured. If I'm here, I can listen and wait – wait for the correct moment to strike."

"Wait?"

"Yes. Tell me, Aang, what do you know about jing?"

"Az? Why are you – what happened?" Zuko's surprised voice sounded from somewhere out of the edge of her vision.

"Just get me out of here!" She snapped. A moment later, she felt blasts of heat against the stone clamps at her hands and wrists, weakening the hardened earth and allowing her to finally wrench her hands free. And once those were free, she was able to remove the rest of the restraints rather quickly.

Pulling herself to her feet she stormed out of the stone house, leaving her brother behind. She was going to hunt down that so-called King, and then she was going to-

He was right there, sitting in a meditative pose in the middle of a town square, his eyes closed. She paused, once more at a loss for words.

"Oh, you're free. Your brother helped you, I suppose?" He said, without ever opening his eyes. "Sorry about the rough treatment there, but I needed to make sure Aang and I had the time to talk."

"Where is he?" She demanded.

"Oh, Aang? Long gone by now," he paused. "You're not sore that I beat you, are you? I know the type – young prodigy, think they're the best in the world until they get taken down a peg, and then they completely lose it." He snorted with laughter. "Eh, don't worry too much. Like I said, I'm pretty good myself, and I've got years and years under my belt."

Her eyes narrowed in fury and she shifted into a battle stance so quickly she was barely aware of it herself. "A fair fight, no surprises, and then we'll see who beats who!"
"Hmm… no. Pass." Bumi shook his head. "Just hurry up and capture me again and then we can move on with our lives."

"Capture you? I'm going to kill you, you arrogant –"

"Well, that is a bit more serious." Bumi said as he opened his eyes. "But I don't think that's a very good course of action at all. Do you?"

"You were able to break out with your entire body immobilized – I don't know how, but that means we can't contain you, and that makes you a threat." She launched a bolt of fire at the king – and a wall jerked up from the ground to shield Bumi from the blast.

"I only did it to save Aang." Bumi shrugged. "He's gone; I've got no reason to escape now."

Silently, she took a single step back and lowered her arms. He cracked a grin. "Ah, so you do listen to reason after all. I knew you had brains as well as braw-"

She burst into action again, arms wheeling around as energy flowed through her entire body. As the separated energies collided with each other, she focused her entire mind, one hand darting out to send a lightning bolt-

"NO!" From her side, one hand reached in and yanked her hand away, sending the lightning crackling away from its intended target, crashing into a wall and obliterating with a sound akin to a thunderclap. Dust and pebbles scattered around the square, the smoke slowly clearing to reveal a panting Azula staring with wild eyes at her brother.

Through it all, Bumi had not moved an inch. Now he turned his head to look at the destruction behind him, and an appreciative whistle escaped his lips.

Azula could hardly have cared less at that moment. "What," she demanded as she stared at her brother. "Do you think you're doing?"

He glared back at her. "I'm stopping you from making a mistake, that's what I'm doing."

Her eyes narrowed. "Zuko, let me make one thing perfectly clear," she hissed at him. "For as long as we're on this journey, for as long we are brother and sister, you do not question my methods. Not now. Not ever."

"Your methods!" His golden eyes flared. "So killing unarmed, surrendering prisoners is how the Fire Nation goes about things now? Is that something that father taught you to do?"

Eyes that had been narrowed in fury now widened in surprise. She stared, silent, at him, and he returned her gaze without blinking.

"Well, as entertaining as this all is, I'm not sure the Fire Nation Royal Family airing their dirty laundry in public is really the best way to go about things," a familiar voice broke in. "Anyway, if the princess here doesn't feel like capturing me, I guess I'll head back to the palace and turn myself in. Good day, everyone." And saying so, Bumi stood, turned and began to walk off.

Azula simply watched him go. A distant part of her mind felt like she should stop him, but suddenly she felt far, far too tired to do anything.

After several meters, he halted as if a thought had just occurred to him.

"Oh yes, your friends have been encased in stone cocoons for the past half hour. It's not particularly
uncomfortable, but you know how it gets when you can't move anything for a while. Thought you might want to look into it, free them and all."

And then he continued walking.

"If one clod of dirt gets within a hundred feet of him, I assure that you will regret it. Very, very much." Azula said softly to the construction workers as she stared down at the newly recaptured Bumi. Now that he had been able to break out once already, they weren't taking any chances.

The steel coffin was still there, but this time he was suspended in the middle of a massive web of steel and iron. A gigantic cage encased the whole thing, created specifically for this one man, designed to deny him the earth he needed to be the dangerous force that he was. There were no gaps in between the thickly welded steel sheets, save a single hole that allowed him to, with considerable effort, peer up at the noonday sun.

No earthbender would ever be able to break out of this. Not in a hundred years.

She turned away to see Mai and Ty Lee standing behind her. Their time spent trapped didn't appear to have left them any worse for the wear, a fact for which she supposed she was grateful. She needed them in optimal health for their journey.

"Have you got the supplies I requested?" She asked. Mai nodded.

"Enough food and water to last us a month and a half." She said tonelessly. "Several sets of Earth Kingdom clothing – mine have been modified to let me keep my knives and weapons inside. Money equivalent to two hundred gold pieces. Maps and other miscellaneous supplies..."

"And we got four – count 'em, FOUR – mongoose-dragons to ride!" Ty Lee said joyfully.

That was good news. Mongoose-Dragons had high stamina and speed, could traverse terrain that would stymie most other mounts, and could eat almost anything – many riders simply released them during idle periods and let them scavenge for their own food. Definitely a leg up over a single ostrich-horse, at any rate.

"Good work, Mai." She nodded as she stepped away to finish her own last minute preparations.

As she rounded the corner, she came face to face with Zuko, sitting there and staring awkwardly at nothing in particularly. A rush of confused emotion welled up in her, and she sighed.

"Hey." She said softly.

He turned to face her, and pulled himself to his feet. "Az… back there, with King Bumi…"

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "What's done is done, Zuko. There's no use talking about it anymore."

"That's not what I meant, although I still think you were wrong to try and kill him." Zuko paused, drawing in a deep breath. "I need to know, Az – Are we equals?"

"…What?" It wasn't a particularly eloquent response, but then again it hadn't been a particularly eloquent question.

Zuko sighed. "What I mean is… is..." one hand ran through the swiftly growing hair on his head.
"You're as bossy as ever, you know."

"I would have used 'decisive'."

"Well, call it what you want – the point is that you're used to always ordering people around. I guess I was too, back when I was still prince, but no..." he shook his head. "No, that's not relevant. Anyway, you keep giving commands to Mai and Ty Lee, and I guess they don't mind, since this is only their journey by proxy – they're here because they agreed to come with you. But this... this is important to me."

She raised an eyebrow. "Is this going somewhere, Zuko?"

"Az, I know you came all the way out here for my sake. I know also that you agreed to help me with my Firebending to prepare me for facing the Avatar, and I'm grateful. Believe me, I am." He drew in a deep breath. "But I consider this my hunt. I'm willing to let you take the lead most of the time – you're a natural at it, really, but when I give an opinion, I want it to be heard."

Azula bit back the instinctive reply, that Zuko was in no way fit to command a troop – which was true, at least as far as she could tell. She could tell that he considered his honour to be wounded, and that it ran rather deep. Hearing his suggestions out couldn't do that much harm, and if it was flawed she could correct him and help him make better ones down the line. And of course, once they succeeded in capturing the Avatar he would become Crown Prince again, and then he would need to make decisions one way or the other. Best to start early.

So she nodded. "I can't promise I'll go along with whatever you say, Zuzu. But I will hear you out first before making big decisions from now on. Fair?"

He nodded, and the hint of a smile entered his face. "Fair."

"Good. Then we should be getting ready to set out soo--"

"Your highness."

She turned. The governor of Omashu was there, which wasn't that unusual, considering that the nobility usually turned out to see royalty off when they departed on trips. Less reassuring was the presence of several armed guards that were moving forward in a flanking movement.

Keeping her face neutral, she straightened her posture and nodded once. "Governor. Thank you for coming to see me off. I appreciate the effort."

He hesitated. Not an act that was reassuring, by any means. "Princess, while you were engaged with the Avatar and his allies... a new edict from the capital came in."

She kept her face carefully composed. "I suppose its contents would be considered significant to me?"

"Yes, well." He coughed and held up the scroll. "It says that Former Crown Prince Zuko is to be apprehended on sight and returned to the Fire Nation capital."

"Yes, and I've told you that Zuko is my prisoner, and that-"

"It also specifies," Oh, this was bad. He wouldn't have cut her off otherwise. "That the demand for him to be returned immediately to the capital overrides all other authority. Including yours, princess."

There was absolute silence in the courtyard for a moment. And then Azula drew in a deep breath.
"I could tell you that if you wanted to force my hand, I could let my father know what an utterly **execrable** job you've been doing as governor of this city. I could threaten to tell him about how you let a resistance movement form right under your nose and how you let them escape. I could let him know about how you wanted to trade King Bumi away for a two-year old baby. I could let him know about how you had Bumi in captivity for a **month** and yet failed to realize that he was fully capable of breaking out any time he pleased." She kept her voice low. "I could completely and utterly **destroy** you with nothing but a few well-chosen words."

He kept his gaze steady, and then after a moment she smiled.

"But I'm not going to do that, because I've known you since I was a little girl, and I know you have a spine," not much brain, but definitely spine. She leaned in closer. "So what I am going to do is to remind you that if it weren't for Ty Lee, Zuko, and me, Tom-Tom wouldn't be taking his nap in the palace nursery right now. Just something for you to consider."

His eyes widened and he swallowed reflexively as she stood back and folded her arms, waiting for his decision. After a long moment he nodded once and bowed. "I wish you a safe journey, princess."

"May the flames of life sustain you, governor." She replied, the smile on her face never changing. The governor then looked to her daughter, who was standing at the side.

"Mai."

"Yes, father."


"Of course, father."

(X)

Night had fallen upon Omashu. The princess and her retinue had long since departed, and most of the people that remained within the city limits had turned in for the night.

But not Bumi. He lay in his prison, silent, eyes closed, but he was not asleep.

He was pondering. On some level, he felt rather proud of himself that they considered him enough of a threat to construct a massive metal prison just for him. It was a proof of his abilities, if nothing else.

But proof of his abilities had come by often enough that he didn't particularly pay this newest one much heed. More worrisome was that they had removed his trump card – his ability to Earthbend using nothing but his face. They didn't know how he'd done it specifically, but they knew that Earthbenders couldn't work with metal, and so they'd piled layer upon layer all around him. It was almost overkill, really.

Others might have despaired – and Bumi could certainly name names, if pressed. But that was really beside the point. Others might have despaired, but for the Mad Genius of Omashu, this was merely another problem to solve.

And like most problems, the solution was absurdly simple once you paused for a moment and started thinking outside the box.

Instead of worrying about the insurmountable obstacle that so much metal presented, started pondering how to turn the abundance of metal into an **ally**.
Within the confines of his cage, Bumi’s little finger twitched. There was barely any room for it really – his fingers were long, thick and callused. But there was a hair's breadth enough for it to move, and in the end that was enough.

The finger twitched. And then it did it again. And again. And again, building up a steady, almost entirely unnoticeable, rhythm against the thick metal.

And the metal responded. Not by much, but it did respond. For every action, there would be an equal and opposite reaction. Or, as Bumi liked to phrase it 'If you hit something, it's going to hit you back.'

Of course none of his staff had understood – one of the older ones had even launched into a long lecture about pacifism and how turning the other cheek was the way to go. He was rather fond of that particular old bat, and he'd made sure she was safely evacuated before surrendering. But that was, once again, beside the point.

The metal thrummed against the tiny beat of his little finger, and as the minuscule, almost imperceptible shockwaves travelled out through the thick plate, he could feel it.

He could feel the solid, processed metal. And he could feel the impure, irregular sections of ore embedded within the plate. And the longer he did it, the more he could feel, through the metal cage to the steel web to the massive metal cavern that was holding him.

It was unlikely he would ever have bothered with this had he remained back in the room – his ability to bend with his face would have served him well enough. But then again, they did say the necessity was the mother of invention.

He now knew what to do, and how to do it. All that was left was to wait and watch for the correct moment – the correct time.

In the darkness, Bumi smiled.

Chapter End

Wow. This is easily the longest chapter I have written for anything. Ever.

I dearly hope you all enjoy it.
The Next Phase

Morality Chain

I’m back! Nice to see all of you again.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

The newest addition to their little group had brought along some complications with her.

In truth, Azula had half-expected it, and back when this whole operation had still been in its planning stages she’d deemed it a worthwhile trade – her skills were simply too valuable to pass over so lightly.

Which wasn’t to say she wasn’t annoyed.

“Zuko! Firebending training! Now!” She snapped at the two figures huddled several feet away. “You two have already been talking to each other for the whole day!” And she could have sworn she’d heard giggling coming from them earlier, except that the very idea of her brother or Mai giggling was almost too horrible to contemplate.

As Zuko reluctantly separated himself from Mai and came over to her, Azula resisted the urge to roll her eyes and to make a snide remark. There were slightly more important things to be concerned with.

“We'll go through the Phoenix Wing form today. I assume you remember how to perform it?” She clasped her hands behind the small of her back as she watched him nod and move into the stance. Credit where credit was due; he appeared to be focusing on his training once it started, no matter how reluctantly he had separated himself from Mai in the first place.

“Arms wider.” She noted, and Zuko complied.

As Azula kept one eye on her brother’s training, she also immersed herself in pondering the Avatar’s next goal. She had to assume that the Avatar had, however briefly, entertained the thought of having King Bumi be his teacher. Now that option was clearly out of the cards, and she had to wonder if he had any other backup plans in mind. Given what she knew of the Air Nomads (and what she had seen of the Avatar himself), she deemed that rather unlikely, but it was still a possibility that she couldn’t ignore.

“Keep your upper body forward.”

The guards stationed at the walls had reported the direction that Avatar had flown of on that mount of his, and Azula had been momentarily surprised that it led straight to the swamplands of the south. Well, even if the Avatar was going to head there, he wouldn’t be staying for long – there wouldn’t be anything of interest to him.

Her attention was drawn by the sound of sizzling flames as Zuko went through the rest of the set. As he finished, she cocked her head to one side. “Is your wrist sore? The fire from your right hand is a little… off.”

“Wow. You can even tell something like that, Azula? You really are a genius!” She heard Ty Lee’s
voice over Zuko’s mumbled acknowledgement.

Azula turned around to look at Ty Lee as she stepped out of her tent.

The acrobat paused and scratched the side of her head. “It’s… not really my colour, is it?”

Her friend was now dressed in Earth Kingdom green – specifically, Earth Kingdom peasant green, which was unquestionably one of the most drab and dingy colours amongst the fashions of the various cultures. Azula had to admit it didn’t really suit her friend – although in a concession to her usual dress sense, Ty Lee had removed the middle of her outfit, leaving her midriff bare as always. Silently, she wondered why her friend always insisted on doing that – it was logical in the Fire Nation, especially in the heat of summer, but here? Maybe old habits just died hard.

“You look fine.” She said aloud. And it was true, at least as far as Azula was concerned; far be it for her to claim she didn’t care about appearances, but she was pragmatic enough to realize that she needed to move as quickly as possible through the Earth Kingdom, and that she could no longer throw the authority of the Fire Nation around; in Fire Nation colonies that would simply bring the guards down on her as the sought to claim Zuko’s bounty for their own, and in unoccupied areas it would result in the locals either fleeing or trying to lynch her.

Not that she didn’t believe she’d be perfectly capable of dealing with those sort of problems should they arise, but that would simply waste time and energy in the end. No, being inconspicuous was the best approach here.

On that note, she looked down at her own clothing. It was certainly brighter in shade than Ty Lee’s, and of a better make – an unconscious bias on Mai’s part, perhaps. Unhappily enough, she had to remove the flame headpiece but she’d substituted it with a bright green ribbon to secure her topknot. Zuko had commented that it made her look ‘innocent’, and she’d merely rolled her eyes in response. Well, she should be able to pass inspection as long as nobody looked too closely (and she doubted that many Earth Kingdom peasants had the slightest idea what her golden eyes signified, so that wasn’t a big issue either).

She glanced up in time to note that Ty Lee had abandoned the current line of conversation in lieu of practising her cartwheels and backflips. At her side, Zuko was continuing his own training, and even Mai, now deprived of one of the very few things she found genuinely interesting, was lazily hurling some of her knives at a nearby tree.

She nearly began to move through her own sets herself, but common sense and long-standing habit stopped her. Back when Zuko had still been living in the palace it had been an unwritten but acknowledged rule that neither of the siblings practised their Firebending in front of the other. She knew her brother’s fierce pride better than most anyone (Uncle perhaps, would have seen more of it in recent years), and she wasn’t blind to the fact that her outstripping him so thoroughly in Firebending was a rather sore spot. Back when they had been younger her natural desire to show off her skills had often collided with the knowledge that it would drive her brother into deeper resentment, and most of the time the desire for a strong relationship with Zuko had won out, although she had to admit it had often been close. Silently, she pondered how their relationship might have changed had she taken the opportunity to rub her superiority in his face.

Well, that was beside the point; she didn’t go through her own training until Zuko wasn’t watching, and that was that.

After all, old habits died hard.
Zuko opened his eyes, letting his gaze dart back and forth. It was springtime, but the lack of rain in recent weeks had been enough of a signal for the group to sleep under the stars, with a single tent set up to preserve the modesty of the three ladies he travelled with. As such, the young prince of the Fire Nation was currently afforded an excellent view of the predawn sky.

That wasn’t why he’d snapped awake, of course. He was a Firebender to the bone, and even in his slumber he could sense when the flames were being stirred by someone else.

Slowly, he shifted his gaze to the left, where he could see his sister sitting near the remains of the campfire, her back as straight as a sword-edge. Her eyes were closed, her breathing steady, and every time she breathed out the dying embers of the fire flared briefly.

He blinked, looked up at the sky that was still flecked with stars, and silently wondered if she rose this early every morning to meditate. He had his own training regimen he stuck to as closely as possible, of course, but still…

Lying back down onto his sleeping bag, he thought back over the past few days. Her sister had been relatively tight-lipped about their next destination – Zuko suspected that it was because she wasn’t entirely sure herself. They had passed through a couple towns, but most of them were sleepy backwaters, with little in the way of news. They hadn’t had any word about the Avatar, and while he wasn’t surprised, he was disappointed.

There was a soft murmur to his other side, and Zuko’s attention was drawn to the sound of Mai turning over and grumbling to herself about how some rocks were poking into her back. A thin smile curled across his face. It had been so long since he’d seen Mai – he could still remember the withdrawn, quiet girl from his childhood, and it had come as a bit of a surprise to him that she had grown so quickly into a woman of grace and elegance (if not cheer). And despite not having seen each other for over three years, they’d gotten on wonderfully. It was actually pretty surprising how well he’d gotten on with Mai, how… comfortable he felt in her presence.

And Azula’s grouses weren’t without merit. He had been spending a lot of time with Mai, talking about everything and nothing, and sometimes simply being quiet and relaxing together. So much that it had started to cut into his training time more than once…

Zuko’s smile vanished. His drive to hunt the Avatar had been his one, all-consuming passion for the past three years. His last thought as he lay down to sleep, his first thought as he rose in the mornings. Some of the men who’d served under him had laughed, called him ‘obsessed’. What did they know? Their honour didn’t hinge on something like that.

But recently, ever since he’d seen Mai, that resolve had started to be pushed to the back, with the quiet girl occupying more and more of his thoughts instead. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath.

No.

It couldn’t go on like this. His friendship – and potentially more – with Mai could not be allowed to distract him from hunting the Avatar. That had to be at the forefront of his mind, always. After the Avatar was safely in custody, maybe he could pick up where they had left off, but until then…

His decision made, he rolled over onto his side, closed his eyes and tried to go back to sleep.
Approximately a week later, as they rose and broke camp for the day, continuing their journey, Azula couldn’t shake a creeping sense of frustration.

First and most importantly, the Avatar trail was cold. She had become increasingly certain that he had ended up spending some time in the swamplands, but there was no way to tell where he left from there on out. Maybe he had entered for the specific purpose of throwing pursuers off his trail, or he’d blundered into it by accident, there wasn’t much practical difference in the end.

The nearby towns hadn’t heard of anything relating to the Avatar, so no leads there. She was left with guesswork and estimation with which to try to ascertain the Avatar’s movements. Well, he would likely want to stay out of Fire Nation territory, so that was a start. Furthermore, almost all of the major fortified cities had fallen to the Fire Nation by now, which the Avatar would presumably know about. There were several mid-sized cities and towns scattered around that were still largely free of Fire Nation influence, so it made sense to continue the search there.

Second was the… well, something going on between Zuko and Mai. After Mai had joined she had had to deal with dragging Zuko away from her every time she needed him to do something… until suddenly and abruptly the exact opposite had happened and now he seemed to be throwing himself into his training with greater fervour than ever before. As far as she could tell Mai was confused (and rather hurt) by this sudden change, but apparently not sure enough of where they stood to press the issue.

As far as Azula herself was concerned, this was just another potential headache that she would have to watch and prevent from blowing up. Well, she’d just have to keep a closer eye on the both of them and see if things started to fall apart or not. However, she was unhappily aware that the initiative on such a move was entirely out of her hands, and that sort of thing always frustrated her.

Third, Ty Lee had been unusually mopey even since she’d gotten up this morning. No, correction, she’d become mopey after brightly wishing everyone a good morning and then deflating when they’d returned their standard greeting, which in Azula’s own case was a curt nod.

Now she rode at the back of their little group, eyes downcast. Under ordinary circumstances she would have been glancing up and down and making exclamations about everything and anything that happened to catch her eye. But not today.

Under ordinary circumstances Azula would have gladly welcomed the chance for some peace and quiet, but she also knew that keeping up morale was a rather important role of the leader.

Well, at least she knew how to solve this issue. And speaking of which…

“There’s our stop for today.” She said out loud as she caught sight of the ramshackle collection of buildings in the distance.


As he spoke, Azula pursed her lips. Zuko was right, - it was a rather run down place. But with a little luck, she’d be able to find what she needed here – it wasn’t that rare by any means…

“We should keep going,” Mai spoke up as well. “There’s no way the Avatar would come here, and we have all the supplies we need for a while.”

Not all… Azula shook her head. “We’re going in, and that’s final.” I’m working on a time limit, here.

Zuko let out a sigh of exasperation, and she could see Mai roll her eyes slightly. Quickly, they
dismounted the mongoose-dragons.

“Ty Lee,” she called.

“Huh?” her friend’s head shot up and for a moment Ty Lee looked like her cheerful self again. “What is it?”

“It’s your turn to guard the mongoose-dragons.” Azula said. It was standard procedure – the mongoose-dragons were native to the Fire Nation, and as such they were usually kept a safe distance away from the town whenever they entered.

“Oh.” Ty Lee’s shoulders slumped again and she slowly got down from her own mount. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Make sure nothing goes missing. We need those supplies.”

“I got it already. No need to nag.” As she finished tying down her own mount, she settled against a nearby flat rock and gazed listlessly over the mounts. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Zuko and Mai exchange glances.

“All right then. Zuko, Mai. Let’s go.”

(X)

Upon approaching the town, the first thing she noticed was the motley group of soldiers ostensibly guarding the place. They were currently intensely focused on a game involving dice and barely glanced up as the trio passed through the entrance. Sizing them up with a quick look, Azula wondered if the standards of the Earth Kingdom were really that lax that they would allow rabble like that into their army, or if they were simply so short of manpower that they would hire any able-bodied person available.

Maybe it was a little of both.

“So what’s your plan for our visit here?” Zuko questioned, eyes narrowed as he gazed over the dusty street.

“Split up, try to find information, gather whatever you think useful,” Azula said shortly as she spied several shops. They’d probably have what she wanted in there… “Meet back at the entrance at sundown.”

“Sundown?” Zuko questioned, one eyebrow raised. “Az, look at this place! It probably won’t take us fifteen minutes to find out that no one’s seen or heard anything, and then we’ll be on our way again.”

“Sundown.” She repeated firmly. She kept her gaze focused on the area around her.

“Everyone else has been acting weird lately, I suppose Azula wanted in on the fun.” Mai quipped as she brushed past the two of them and headed further into the village. Meanwhile, Zuko threw his hands in a gesture of exasperation and stalked off in a different direction.

Now alone, Azula let out a deep breath and turned towards the nearest of the shops. She supposed she could have told them of what she was planning, but knowing them they’d have wanted to help, which would mean that the credit would get split up. No, in this particular instance, she needed to be the sole person behind everything.

She paused in the doorway, letting the sunlight from behind her frame her outline as she gazed into
the quiet store.

“Not the most prosperous looking establishment.” She commented, almost to herself. In response, a shaggy-haired man shuffled out from the back of the store.

“Well, ain’t you a pretty little thing. What are you lookin’ for, miss?”

Ignoring that remark, Azula stepped into the shop proper, looking through the produce. None of what she was looking for was on the shelves, which she supposed was only natural. With a shake of her head, she turned to regard the storekeeper and told him what she needed.

His eyes widened slightly. “Well, that’s a rather tall order, miss. I’m not sure –“

Wordlessly, Azula withdrew a single gold piece from her pocket.

“No worries, I’ll get everything you need! Come back in about two or three day’s ti-“

“I want everything prepared by sundown today.”

“Sundown? But that’s –” She shifted her fingers, revealing that she was in fact holding two gold pieces. “Sure. Sure, sundown’s good.”

“Payment upon delivery,” she said dryly as she left the store. Well, that was her primary reason for being here settled (and if it turned out that oaf couldn’t deliver after all, she was going to make him pay dearly). Now all she had to do was come back at the end of the day.

That, and find some way to occupy her time until then. Azula stared wordlessly at the sun, still hanging low in the eastern sky. Then with a sigh and a shake of her head, she turned and headed off into the town. She might as well question some of the locals while she was here.

(X)

Zuko stomped through the centre of the town, eyes still focused on a stony glare. What on earth was his sister thinking? For as long as he’d known Azula, she had always been brusque and commanding, but most of the times her actions were always borne out of a line of common sense and logic. This, though… it was just odd.

Regardless, he’d already been to several of the houses, and they’d confirmed what he already knew – no one had heard anything about the Avatar. This was a complete waste of time.

“Hey.”

The voice was harsh and rough. Zuko turned to regard its owner and beheld an Earth Kingdom soldier – probably one of those stationed at the town entrance he’d seen earlier.

“Yes?” He questioned carefully. The soldier wasn’t approaching Zuko as if he were a threat, so his identity as one of the Fire Nation was probably safe for now. Still…

“Those are some fine swords you have behind you.” The soldier inclined his chin to indicate the broadswords Zuko had strapped to his back. “Wouldn’t want to go gallivanting around town with those, would we. Someone might get the wrong idea.” There was an unpleasant look in the man’s eyes.

“I’ve found it’s always best to have something on hand to defend yourself with.” Zuko's voice was tight as he regarded the soldier.
“Is that so? What, you don’t trust us fine men of the Earth Army to protect you? Is that it? In fact, why don’t you just hand over those weapons of yours and we’ll consider it your contribution to the cause. Don’t you know there’s a war on?” He thrust one meaty hand out.

“Yes I do,” Zuko snapped. “And if the Earth Kingdom is relying on people like you to win it, then they’re as good as finished.”

Judging by the soldier’s reaction, it clearly hadn’t been the response he was expecting. He lunged, hands reaching out to seize the prince. Quickly Zuko sidestepped the clumsy attack, one leg pivoting around to catch the soldier in the back of his knee. The was a loud thud as the soldier landed heavily on the floor and Zuko began to back away.

Quickly the Earth Kingdom soldier scrambled to his feet. Zuko shifted into a better stance. It felt unnatural – against his nature as a Firebender – to wait for an attack before responding, but he really didn’t want a scene here.

“I don’t want any trouble,” his voice was soft, but one hand drifted to the hilt of his blades, regardless.

The man growled as he struggled to his feet, one hand reaching up to wipe at the dirt on his chin. “Don’t think this is the last of it, boy,” he snarled as he turned and began to limp away. He’d probably twisted his ankle in the fall, Zuko surmised. A lucky break, then – in his experience men like that would have been too enraged to think right and would have continued attacking otherwise. A healthy dose of pain could do wonders sometimes.

“That was awesome!” There was exuberant shout from behind him and Zuko turned around, noticing for the first time that there had been a little boy sitting against the front of the house, his eyes wide and excited. “The way you talked back to the guy, that little move of yours….”

“I just wanted to be left alone.” He replied, hoping the kid would catch the hint.

Naturally, he did not and instead continued to chatter, “no one here likes these people. All the real soldiers are off doing the fighting, and they just come here and throw their weight around.”

Zuko didn’t reply.

“You’re not from around here, are you? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you before,” the kid noted as he stood in front of Zuko. “My name’s Lee. What’s yours?”

“…” He closed his eyes and made to walk pass the boy.

“….” He closed his eyes and made to walk pass the boy.

“Come on! You should introduce yourself properly when you meet new people. Didn’t your mom teach you that? I know mine did.”

Zuko’s eyes snapped open. Mom. He sighed, turning to look back at the kid.

“I haven’t seen my mother in a while.” He replied. “But she taught me a lot when she was still around. And didn’t yours teach you not to be so friendly to complete strangers?”

The kid pulled himself to his full height. “You’re not a stranger.” He beamed at Zuko.

“You don’t even know my name.”

“Yeah, that’s true, I guess, but… but you stood up to that soldier! As long as you do it around here, that means you’re a good guy.”
Zuko had to stifle a snort of bitter laughter. A good guy, huh…

“Hey, it’s almost lunchtime. Come on, I’ll take you to my house. My mom’s a great cook! And just wait until they hear about what you did!” Thus saying so, Lee ran off, apparently secure in the belief that Zuko would follow.

With a sigh, Zuko glanced up at the noonday sun, and then started off after the boy.

(X)

Mai gingerly settled herself on the bench, which made an unpleasant creaking noise as she sat on it. Folding her arms, she leaned forward, glaring out at the drab landscape.

There had been nothing in the town worthy of note, and now she had absolutely nothing to do. Just like always. Agni, this was boring.

Worsening her mood was the fact that one of the few things she did not find boring had been avoiding her recently. And she couldn’t figure out why, which just left her in an even more foul mood. Hadn’t he been happy to see her back in Omashu? He’d certainly given enough of an impression for her to believe that…

Now, though, he was always busy whenever she tried to talk to him. Busy with Firebending training, busy with sword training, or busy with meditating, or busy with – and this was his favourite – stuff. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what was going on.

But the reasons behind it? Mai knew she lacked Azula’s cold, analytical mind that allowed her to read people so easily, but she knew Zuko well. She should have been able to figure it out, but so far she was coming up with a nothing. Or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe she didn’t know Zuko well at all, she only thought she did, and so that was where all the confusion was coming from.

Well, if Zuko wasn’t going to open up to her, then there was really no reason for her to torture herself over it. Mai’s gaze hardened. Asking him to his face would be the simple, no-nonsense method, and it would likely work.

Unless she’d been reading the whole situation wrong and Zuko simply stared at her and asked what she was talking about. That would likely damage the relationship if it hadn’t been already.

This was harder than she thought. And she almost missed Azula walking up to her, but her senses were better honed than that, and she turned to regard the princess with a questioning gaze.

“Here,” Azula said without preamble as she tossed a small packet at Mai, who deftly snatched it out of the air. “You haven’t had lunch yet either, I assume.” The Firebender settled herself on the bench next to Mai (and it made had horrible groan again), unfolding another packet of her own.

“And this is?”

“The local speciality.” Her friend said dryly. “Some kind of meat stuffed into a bun. It's not exactly high cuisine, but it'll do.”

Mai lifted it to her mouth and took a bite. She chewed thoughtfully and swallowed. “Tastes like burnt rope,” she finally said.

Azula made no reply.

After the two of them had finished their food, Azula heaved a sigh and turned to Mai. “Any luck?”
“No.” Mai said as she shook her head. “One of the families didn’t even know the Avatar had reappeared.”

Azula sighed. “This place is even more of a backwater than I assumed,” she muttered.

“Don’t look at me. I didn’t even want to stop in this run-down excuse for a town.” She paused. “Can we find Zuko and leave y-“

“No, we cannot.”

Mai let out an exasperated sigh, turned away, and folded her arms. A moment later, two men dressed as soldier uniforms walked by. As they passed, the one on the right turned around, letting his gaze roam across the two girls far longer than Mai felt comfortable with. Just before he returned his attention to the road in front of him, he let out a rather lascivious whistle.

Mai could feel her friend stiffen. “Don’t cause a scene.” She said quickly.

“I have better self-control than that, Mai.” She shot back.

As the sun blazed overhead, the two of them continued to sit there in silence.

(X)

“So where are you from?”

“Far away.”

“And where are you going?”

“Lee, it’s not nice to pry. If he wants to keep things to himself, let him.” Zuko let the conversation swirl around him as he continued to eat his food.

“Okay. Okay.” The boy was clearly annoyed at the restriction placed upon him, and he continued to pick at his own meal.

As he continued to eat, Zuko couldn’t help but notice the glances the boy was giving to his twin broadswords every couple of seconds. Lee was bright and curious, eager to pick up and learn as much as he could.

He paused. Lee actually reminded him a lot of… himself. When he had been younger.

*Before I got this scar.*

Quickly, he tried to banish those thoughts. They weren’t going to help anyone.

“Say, mister? How’d you get your scar?”

Silently Zuko wondered if the heavens *did* in fact have it in for him. Before he could speak, the boy’s father cut in again.

“Lee, can’t you see he doesn’t want to talk about it?”

He was starting to regret accepting the invitation at all. Not that these people weren’t nice, but still… everything felt so… so *awkward.*

*This isn’t the kind of life I was made for.* Zuko sighed as he finished his meal and stood.
“Thanks for the meal, ma’am.”

“Oh, you’re leaving so soon?” The mother – Sela, was that her name? – paused. “Surely you can stay a little longer. You look like you could use a rest.”

Zuko almost opened his mouth to tell them that no, he had to leave, but then he paused and gazed out at the midday sun.

Meet back at the entrance at sundown.

He settled back into the chair. “I guess I could wait until evening,” he finally allowed.

He had barely closed his eyes when he felt a tug at his shirtsleeve. Opening them again, he found himself gazing into Lee’s eager expression.

“Can you show me how to use those swords?”

The prince sighed, glanced left, glanced right, and shook his head. Oh, whatever. It couldn’t hurt.

“All right,” he said as he stood. “Let’s get out where it’s a little more open. Now, the first thing to remember is that these are dual swords. This is one weapon in two parts…”

Azula rapped on the doorway of the entrance to the store. A moment later, the man appeared again.

“Oh, it’s you, miss!”

“Is it ready?” She asked.

“Oh, yes, of course! It’s piping hot, too! And it wasn’t easy to get the ingredients, let me tell you that.”

“I’m not interested in hearing you prattle,” She cut in smoothly. “Now, if you’d please?”

The tightly wrapped bundle was pressed into her hands. After taking a moment to check that it contained what it wanted, she nodded her satisfaction and placed a single gold coin on the counter.

“Hey!” The shopkeeper cried indignantly. “We agreed on two gold pieces!”

“No, I showed you two gold pieces. I never said I was going to give both of them to you.” Azula replied. “And let’s not fool ourselves – I’m drastically overpaying you as it is. Good bye.” Without waiting for a response, she stepped out, feeling the glow of the evening sun upon herself.

As she neared the entrance, she could see Mai leaning against the archway, looking bored as usual. Zuko came into view from the further end of town as she herself reached.

“Can we please leave now?” Mai sighed as she caught sight of Azula. “You’ll remember I agreed to come along to get away from the mind-numbing boredom.”

“Fine. We’re leaving.”

“Hm? What’s that in your hands, Az?”

“None of your business, Zuko.” She smiled wanly at him. “Where were you, anyway? I didn’t see you in the town for most of the afternoon.”
“Oh, I was…” he hesitated. “I was with-“

The roar of a commotion sounded from behind them, and Azula looked over to the centre of the town to see the group of Earth Kingdom soldiers from earlier, now with a struggling kid in their custody. In a few scant seconds, a crowd began to build of the villagers coming to see what the matter was.

“Time to go.” Azula muttered, and with a signal for Mai and Zuko to follow her, she turned to leave.

“Wait.” At the sound of Zuko’s voice, she paused and turned back.

“Now what?”

“That’s… they have Lee with them!”

Azula had absolutely no idea who ‘Lee’ was, but as she looked at her brother’s face, she could see concern in his eyes. And a moment later –

“I have to help him.”

“What? This is an Earth Kingdom affair – it’s nothing to do with us. Let them sort it out themselves, and –“

“No, Azula. It does. I have to help him. He’s no match for four soldiers.”

“Zuko, even if he and you were together for most of the day and hit it off buddy-buddy or whatever, were the soldiers around when you left his house? No? Then it has nothing-“

“Azula, this is not a debate,” he turned to glare at her, and Azula could see flashes of steel in his eyes. “And I do not need your permission to help people.” And then he was off, running towards the centre of the town.

“Hey, hang on a – Argh, that idiot!” Azula snapped. And then after a moment, “Come on, Mai.”

Silently, her friend fell into step behind her as the two of them hurried after Zuko. As they reaching, they could hear him confronting the leader of the soldiers.

“What do you want with the boy?”

“Him? Well, we dropped by his house to get our due – protecting the folks isn’t easy, after all, so we need every little bit of help we can get – and this little brat here chewed us out. So I thought we’d bring him here to make a little example of him – teach him, and the others, some respect.”

Azula resisted the urge to speak up. This had been her brother’s decision – let him play it his way. Silently, she moved to cover Zuko’s right – not that she honestly thought he’d need the help. He could probably defeat the whole lot with one arm tied behind his back.

Her brother’s eyes had narrowed. “Cowards.” He said clearly, letting the single word ring out through the plaza.

“What?” A dangerous expression was on the leader’s face.

“You’re all nothing more than cowards and bullies. Stationed to some backwater town in the middle of nowhere, far from the war, far from any real danger, and you keep oppressing the people. What does it matter if a little boy speaks out of turn? You’re going to punish him for that?” There was a ringing noise as Zuko’s blades were drawn. “You’re a disgrace to that uniform.”
A split second of complete silence – and then the four soldiers charged as one, spouting incoherent howls, eyes alight with malice and rage.

Instantly Azula darted forward to intercept the rightmost soldier, one hand reaching up to knock aside the halberd he had been aiming at her brother. He glared at her – and Azula’s eyes narrowed as she recognized the lecherous soldier from the afternoon.

“Lookit the big tough guy that needs girls to come cover him! Har!” The man snarled as he swung his poelarm again in a wide, clumsy arc. Azula ducked smoothly, letting the weapon sail harmlessly over her head.

“You know, I wish the Earth Kingdom had more soldiers of your calibre,” she said conversationally, as she brought her right hand up, extending the first two fingers. His face registered surprise at the apparent compliment. “It would make conquering you lot so much easier.”

His eyes barely had time to widen in shock before she jabbed her fingers at the soldier’s midsection, releasing a tiny dart of flame into the thug’s gut. Her opponent gave a howl of agony and collapsed to the ground, a tiny smouldering hole the only evidence of her Firebending. Quickly her gaze swept the area – Mai had pinned two of the soldiers to the nearby wall – and none of them appeared to have noticed what she had just done. Good.

The sound of rock on metal drew her attention and she turned to regard Zuko facing down the leader of their little band. A shattered rock was lying at her brother’s feet, and as she watched, the thug slammed his hammer into the ground, sending out another rock missile.

Zuko batted aside the second one too, but the third one came at him too fast to react and he was sent reeling.

Azula’s eyes narrowed and she turned to regard the leader. She took a couple of steps forward, bring her hand up-

“Wait!” Zuko had dropped back into his swordfighting stance. “Stay back. This is my fight.”

She resisted the urge to slap her forehead, but nonetheless complied as she took two hesitant steps back. Zuko charged the leader again – to be met by yet another flurry of stone projectiles. Once more Zuko charged through the majority of them, but another clipped his shoulder, sending him back again.

*His bending’s just too big an advantage – especially when we’re so used to being able to do it ourselves. Azula quickly analyzed the situation once more. Mai could get through to him – she’s got the range. Indeed, her friend had a knife in her hand on standby, but she was apparently respecting Zuko’s wishes as well. Maybe we can-*

Her musings were interrupted by a massive shockwave of earth that burst from the ground and sent Zuko sprawling. As she watched her brother crumple to the ground like a rag doll, something ignited in her chest, somehow both ice cold and burning hot at the same time.

She whirled to confront the leader, dropping into a combat stance. *To hell with honour and duels. I’m going to kill him.* She barely realized that she was moving her arms in a circle, it was so comfortable, so *familiar*-

A blast of orange and red burst soared through the air, slamming into the torso of the enemy soldier and sending him flying backwards. Shocked out of her action, Azula whirled to see Zuko standing again, broadswords in hand – and flames wreathing his entire body.
The leader of the soldiers tried to defend himself once more, but once the playing field evened out in terms of bending, he really had no chance. In a matter of seconds, the soldier had been defeated and was lying on the ground.

She swept her gaze over the defeated band, trying to decide if she should silence them. *No, no point. All the villagers now know we’re from the Fire Nation anyway. Killing these idiots would just give the army more reason to come after us.* She aimed a swift kick at the nearest of the enemy soldiers, hoping he was still conscious enough to feel it and headed after her brother. He was busy untying the boy – Lee.

“Don’t worry. You’re safe now,” he was speaking in what was probably meant to be a soothing tone as he finished untying the boy and stepped back. “They won’t come after you anym-“

“Go away! I hate you!”

Silence fell upon everyone present. And then Azula stepped forward, fists clenched tight.

“Say that again,” she said, very softly. “Look my brother in the eye and say that again.”

Lee glared at her – at the both of them. “I said, I hate y-“

She thrust one hand out, and blue flames blasted forth in a raging torrent, the fire reaching out to completely cover the youngster’s body. Cries of horror arose from the assembled crowd.

“AZULA! NO!” She heard her brother’s horrified cry, as well as a sharp intake of breath from Mai. Pursing her lips, she waved her hands, dispelling the raging blaze to reveal Lee on the ground, completely unharmed, surrounded by scorched earth all around him. The boy gazed at her, eyes wide with shock and fear.

“A coward, a weakling, and an ingrate.” She said, every word dripping with disdain. “What a delightful combination.” There was a pause, pregnant with expectation, and then she spun on her heel. “Zuko. Mai. We’re leaving.”

As she strode towards the exit, the crowd parted ways, and Azula could see the dull hatred in their eyes. Shrugging it off, she strode through the archway.

Mai was the first to break the silence. “Well,” she muttered as they headed off into the deepening gloom. “So much for the public relations campaign.”

(X)

It was fully nightfall by the time they returned to their mounts, and they could see that Ty Lee had taken the initiative to build the campfire on her own. As they neared, they could also see that she was lying on her back, staring up at the sky – yet another sign of her funk. Ty Lee was almost always practicing her gymnastics, especially when she had nothing better to do.

“Ty Lee,” Azula called as soon as they came into earshot. “We’re back.”

“Welcome back, Azula.” She said listlessly. “How’d everything go?”

“Not so well, actually. No one had any information on the Avatar.”

“Bummer.” She didn’t even look up.

“Yes, but on the plus side, I got this.” Holding the package up into the light, she saw Ty Lee
glancing over with idle curiosity which quickly morphed into wide-eyed surprise as it was

“But – but that’s-“ Her friend had jerked into an upright sitting position. “Did you-“

Azula allowed a genuine smile to grace her features. “Happy Birthday, Ty Lee.”

A moment later she found herself enveloped in what was probably the tightest hug she’d received
from Ty Lee, ever. “Azula!” She cried, delighted. “You remembered!”

“Of course I remembered. Back when we were together in the palace you were always harping on
about how important it was to you.” She paused, head cocked to one side. “Why so surprised? You
mean they didn’t remember in the circus?”

“Well, no, not really. They had a lot of people to keep track of, and it’d be like a monthly celebration
thing…” The acrobat gazed down at the pie. “It’s the first time in four years anyone did this sort of
thing for me.”

Folding her arms behind her head as she leaned back against a smooth rock, Azula felt rather pleased
with herself.

(X)

“All right, we need to decide where we’re going to next. I think talking to random villages isn’t
getting us anywhere, or at least getting us at an incredibly slow pace.” Azula stared down at the
unfurled map.

“We should head to one of the larger cities. One that gets a steady flow of travelling merchants and
news.” Zuko opined. “And once we’re there, even if there’s not been any news, we should wait a
while, because there’s bound to be some soon.”

The three others turned to look at him. “Why do you sound so sure of that?” The princess
questioned.

He shrugged. “Well, if there’s one thing I learnt from my hunting the Avatar during the last few
months, it’s that they are incapable – and I stress, incapable – of keeping themselves out of trouble
for long. If they’re active, we’ll hear about it soon enough.”

Azula nodded. “Fair enough. Let’s see… where's the nearest city of a decent size?” Her eyes darted
over the map, trying to pinpoint a location.

Mai leaned forward, finger stabbing towards the scroll. “This one. It’s about four days travel from
where we are, and it’s fairly popular in terms of merchant travel. It fits what we need.”

“All right, then. I guess that’s our next destination.” Azula nodded and rolled up the scroll again. “I
hear they have some decent earthbenders in Gaoling, as well. I wonder if there are any full-fledged
masters there?”

Mai shrugged. “I think I briefly heard about some sort of famous teacher there… I wasn’t paying
much attention at that time.”

“Hm. Well, we’ll know sooner or later, I suppose. Go get the mongoose-dragons ready, would you?
I don’t want to waste any time.”
Chapter End

Thanks for reading. Please review.
Hey, I’m back!

I hope you enjoy the latest chapter.

Disclaimer: Soon, I will own the world. (For a given value of ‘soon’.)

“Father?”

“Yes, daughter?”

“I’ve been wondering – I mean, I have a question for you.”

“Speak.”

“I was practising some of the moves you taught me, but I didn’t have a real target to practice on, so I asked one of the servants to stand still so I could practice my accuracy on her.”

“And?”

“Well, mommy – I mean, mother saw me doing it, and then she… she yelled at me. She asked me how I could even think of doing such a thing, and then she… she slapped me!”

For the first time since the star of the conversation, her father put his brush down and turned to look at her. “Did she, now?”

“Yes.”

“I will have to talk to her about that.” He said, and there was an undercurrent in her voice even the young girl had learned to be well wary off. He glanced back at the letter he had apparently been writing on his desk, and then turned to face her again. “Azula, are you free now?”

“Well, Zuzu said he wanted to play hide-and-seek with-“

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’. What I’m going to teach you is far more important than some frivolous game with your brother.”

“O – okay...”

“Azula, as you grow older, you will meet many people who talk to you about the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ thing to do. Your mother is one such person, and your uncle another. They’ll hold you to some arbitrary standard of what a person should and should not do, and they call this ‘morality’.”

“Okay...” yes, she could certainly remember occasions where her mother had gone on long lectures about how this was ‘wrong’, while never bothering to actually explain why.

“That is a trap. They are weak and afraid, and so they try to drag others down to their level to ensure that they cannot be harmed. Whenever you try to get a leg up on them, whenever you try to exploit their weaknesses, they will cry foul and try to hide under the guise of morality,” her father’s
face had twisted over the course of the conversation, and Azula could recognize it as anger. “Their so-called morality is a chain – a chain that binds the strong and makes them weak. Those who would be strong must break free of such shackles. Azula, do you understand?”

To be perfectly honest, she didn’t, not really. Her uncle, for example. He was a general, wasn’t he? And a master Firebender, to boot – certainly not weak. But father had lumped him in with mother, and it was true he had also lectured her before, and…

But she knew how to please her father and make him happy, and so she shoved those doubts to the side and gave him a bright, eager smile. “I understand, father.”

“Good. Run along now, daughter. And if your mother ever tries to talk to you like that again, tell her to take up the issue with me first.”

Well, this was a fair bonus indeed. Having apparently secured amnesty for any future actions that her mother might be unhappy with, Azula scampered out of the room, a grin on her face. Maybe if she hurried, she’d still be able to join Zuko in time to play…

Azula hated the rain. She supposed that, being a Firebender, this was only natural, as was her uneasiness with anything that had to do with water. The oceans that the Fire nation had to traverse weren’t quite so bad – at least, not with the metal ships they had designed that allowed them to traverse the world freely. With the power of technology, it was possible to mitigate most of the unpleasantness associated with the ocean.

But the rain. The damnable rain. Even if you took shelter under some convenient overhang or roof, the cold would permeate the very air until it seeped straight through your very bones, and the humid air afterwards always made her skin feel horribly clammy. And that wasn’t even considering what happened after the rain stopped, where in contrast to the dictates of common sense, the sun could be shining high in the sky, and it would still be cold and damp and ugh.

As Azula sat at a bench of an outdoor eatery staring at the torrential downpour in front of her with her arms folded and released intermittent waves of heat to warm herself up, if only marginally, she reflected that this was the first time since she had set out on her journey that she was truly miserable. At her side, Zuko appeared less affected – perhaps his years on the ship and travelling to the poles had inured him somewhat. Gaoling was almost completely devoid of Fire Nation presence, so they had to keep themselves discreet – and in this regard Zuko’s scar was a bit of a boon, since everyone who saw it immediately assumed he’d gotten it by fighting Firebenders.

Ty Lee loved the rain. In complete defiance of everything one would expect from Fire Nation nobility, the energetic girl was currently in the middle of the paved streets, doing cartwheels and handstands over the slippery ground, and giggling with delight. Idly, Azula recalled that this was one trait that she had apparently retained all the way from childhood (and this memory brought up a rather more embarrassing one where she had, as a child, accused Ty Lee of treason for not hating the rain like any proper Fire Nation citizen should. Mother had all but fallen over laughing at that outburst).

In a bid to ignore the steady drumming noise in the background, she turned over and stared down at the hastily scribbled notes on the table. “So,” she began without preamble. “What do we know?” Ty Lee could be left alone for now – the girl knew little and cared less about the planning aspects of any operation.

Mai glanced up. “There’ve been recent shakeups in Gaoling recently, most of it centred around
House Bei Fong, the most influential family in the city. We can’t directly link it to the Avatar, though.”

“Rumours of kidnapping are the most prominent,” Zuko continued. “But that falls apart, because there’s apparently no one missing in the first place. More to the point, the Avatar and his friends aren’t really the type to kidnap people in the first place.”

“Aren’t they?” Azula shared a glance with Mai.

“I think Tom-Tom was the idea of one of the Earth Kingdom rebels. According to Ty Lee, they were perfectly willing to return him once she asked.”

“All right, so this may be a dead end.” Azula shook her head in frustration. “There was that news from that merchant about the Avatar making an appearance at Chin village, but that was a while ago, so it’s probably not entirely relevant.”

“Hey! You guys started the discussion without me?” Ty Lee leaned over Azula’s shoulder to stare down at the paper. “What did you do that for? I got some important information too, you know!”

Azula went very, very still, and clenched her fists. “Ty. Lee.” She said calmly.

“Yes?”

“You are dripping on me.”

“Wha – Oh! OH! Sorry, ‘Zula, I just – I didn’t mean to –“ Her friend jerked away in consternation, which unfortunately sent her long braid swinging around and slapping into Azula’s face with a rather squishy sounding thwap!

Closing her eyes and counting very slowly to ten, Azula fought once more to keep her temper under control and to behave rationally. “Please. Sit.” She managed to say in a somewhat strangled voice as she opened her eyes again.

Ty Lee quickly settled herself onto one of the stone benches, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, an effect that was somewhat ruined by the continuous dripping sound around her.

Taking a deep breath, Azula turned to look at her. “Now. What was it you found out?”

“Okay, well, when I went to check out the Earth Rumble ring, I heard that-”

“Earth Rumble?” Her brother said in a disbelieving tone. “You mean that stupid underground tournament thing? Why’d you go there?”

“Well, I thought there might be some strong Earthbenders there. Azula told us to keep an eye out for those, after all. Plus, I kindasortawantedtocatchoneofthematches, and also I know-“

“Wait, you wanted to watch one of those things?” Azula raised an eyebrow. She’d always known Ty Lee’s interests were somewhat out there, but still… “I’d never have pegged you as the type to enjoy these kinds of violent sports.”

“Are you kidding?” Ty Lee burst out, her natural exuberance coming to the fore again. “They’re hilarious! I mean, most of them aren’t really that good at fighting, but it’s just as much about the performance itself. They have these guys that go ‘You stand no chance against the might of my GRANITE GRENADE!’ and then the other guy goes, ‘You’ll never have a chance to use it, because first I’m gonna bury you in a ROCK-ALANCHE!’ and then…” she trailed off as she realized
her three companions were staring at her in complete silence with looks of varying levels of disbelief on her face.

Azula shook her head and raised her hands to rub her temples. “Just tell us what you found out.” She said wearily.

“Okay,” settling herself down again, Ty Lee tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Okay, see, there’s this girl, they call her the Blind Robber or something, and she’s the champion of the last few Tournaments, and she’s only twelve years old.”

“And how is this even remotely relevant?”

“Because during the last tournament, she fought a match against a young kid. A kid that beat her without actually touching her once.”

Azula’s eyes widened. “You mean -?”

“Wait, wait, wait, there’s more. Okay, so the girl stomps off, and later that night she gets captured and held ransom because they thought she was cheating or something, because you know, the other guy beat her without touching her. Her family – they’re the Bei Fongs or something – they paid the ransom, but the other guy they refused to let go of, because they thought he was the Avatar, and that the Fire Nation would pay a lot for him.”

Well, they’re not wrong. Azula thought wryly. “And then what happened?” She questioned, a note of urgency in her voice. If the Avatar was already on his way to the Fire Nation…

“The girl beat the lot of them up and freed the Avatar.” Ty Lee grinned. “Pretty tough, huh?”

“The Bei Fongs?” Mai finally cut in. “Why would they pay a ransom? From what I understand, they have no children or close relatives.”

“They don’t? Huh. Weird. I mean, from what I heard the patriarch was really worried about the girl. Anyway!” Ty Lee shook her head. “That’s not the really important part.”

Azula sat up straighter. “There’s more?”

“Right. I went down to the ring, like I said. But there were no matches for the foreseeable future, because the announcer guy had left recently. I asked around a bit, and it turns out there’s rumours he left to go chasing down the Avatar, because the Avatar took the girl with him and the Bei Fongs want her back.”

Azula sat back, processing this information. This was… critical information, certainly. If that earthbending girl was as good as Ty Lee claimed, there was every reason to believe the Avatar had chosen her to be his earthbending teacher, and that they were now on their way off to… to…

“Do they know where the Avatar headed off to?”

Ty Lee’s shoulders slumped. “Sorry, Azula,” she confessed. “No. Apparently they left in the middle of the night.”

“Don’t worry about it. What you’ve already told us is invaluable.” Azula stood. It looked like a visit to the Bei Fongs was in the cards. And maybe the Earth Rumble ring…

Of course, there was the rain to consider. With a glare of undisguised annoyance, Azula reached for the umbrella, opened it, and stepped out into the storm.
The visit to the Bei Fong manor had been singularly unproductive. The guard at the gate had unceremoniously turned them away, despite their attempts to pass themselves off as merchants of some import. Apparently the Bei Fongs hadn’t been seeing anyone for the past few days, which lent credence to the idea that they had just lost someone dear to them, but did little to help Azula’s own cause.

Now, as she stepped into the relative dryness of the Earth Rumble ring, she took an impatient glance around the place, being reminded once more of just why she had such a low opinion of the Earth Kingdom peasantry.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s just try to find someone who works here and might know a bit more about that earthbending girl and then we can-“

“HEY!” Ty Lee’s delighted shout cut through her own. “I’d recognize that aura anywhere! Miki! You’re Miki, aren’t you?”

Azula turned to regard the figure that Ty Lee had called out to – and was confronted by an overly muscled man who was walking with a pronounced swagger up through the stands. As the man heard her, he looked up, and his eyes widened in surprise and recognition.

“Ty Lee! Never did The Boulder expect to find you in a place such as this! What are you doing here?”

“Huh? ‘The Boulder’?” Ty Lee wrinkled her nose. ‘What’s with that funny title? Aren’t you Miki?’

“C – cease referring to me with such an unflattering moniker! The Boulder will no longer acknowledge such a feminine name as his own!” The man blurted out hurriedly.

“Friend of yours?” Azula inquired in a bored tone. Dear Agni, she’d met the man for all of ten seconds and he was already giving her a headache.

“Uh-huh!” Her friend grinned. “I knew him from back in the circus – he was our strongman, you know.”

“Isn’t the circus from the Fire Nation?”

“Azula.” Ty Lee drew herself to her full height, and a faintly lecturing tone entered her voice. “Talent is talent, regardless of what country one comes from.”

‘Whatever.” The princess muttered in response. “Hurry up and say goodbye and we can move on.”

“What? I haven’t seen Miki in over a year! How can I just-“

“I am The Boulder! Not Miki!”

“Okay, okay… how about I call you Mik instead? Does that sound any better, Mik?”

“… I see that your mannerisms have not changed one iota, Ty Lee.”

Behind Ty Lee’s back, Azula traded a despairing glance with Zuko. Mai simply stared off into the corner of one of the chamber and sighed deeply.
“Oh yes! The Boulder engaged the Blind Bandit in an epic bout of earthbending prowess! It was a mighty clash that resounded all the way to Spirit World as stone and rock shattered under our colossal might!” The Boulder – Miki – paused, “And then The Boulder lost.”

Ty Lee smiled sweetly. “I’m sure it was a close match, though.”

“Indeed! Why, had The Boulder reacted but a split second faster, it would have been her that had been sent flying out of the ring! Come to think of it, The Boulder probably underestimated the Blind Bandit due to her diminutive stature. If ever we meet again on opposing sides, The Boulder will not be so lenient!”

Azula pinched the bridge of her nose and counted to ten again. She had been doing a lot of that every since she’d entered Gaoling, she realized.

She felt a tap on her sleeve and looked up to see Zuko’s annoyed face. “Azula, we’re wasting far too much time here.” Here being the bar that they had been dragged off to so that Ty Lee and her buffoon of a friend could catch up. “We need to figure which way the Avatar is heading so we can continue chasing him.”

She jerked a thumb over her shoulder, “You want to break them up? Go ahead. I’ll wait.”

Zuko glanced over at Ty Lee and back again before finally settling himself on the seat next to his sister. “This better not take too long.” He muttered. “I mean, who knows where the Avatar and his friends could be by now.”

(X)

“And I telling you, Sugar Queen, that I can take care of myself!” Toph snapped, glaring with sightless eyes. “So if you would kindly butt out, I would-“

“Butt out? Butt out? I cannot believe this!” The blind girl could sense Katara’s agitation, and it was increasing by the second. “I come up here to you and I ask you nicely to help – because that’s what we do, you know, we all help each other-“

“I don’t. Need. Any. Help.” Toph spoke slowly and deliberately, arms held in front of her for emphasis.

Something softer entered Katara’s body language – Toph noted the subtle changes in her weight distribution and movement – and when she spoke again, it was in a voice that was softer and almost sad. “Toph, I’m just saying that all of us here pull our own weight.”

Wordlessly, Toph stomped the ground once, feeling the earth rumble in response, and a moment later a tent formed of stone rose from the ground. “There,” she said, a smile on my face. “I’ve pulled my weight, so none of you need to worry about me. Okay?” And before Katara could respond, Toph leaned back into the earth tent, letting it open enough to swallow her. It was pretty rare for her to sleep like this back in the manor, but it was usually a comforting experience, and this time was no different. “Night.” She called out before rolling over and closing her eyes – not that it made much difference, of course.

For several long seconds, she could sense Katara standing outside her tent, not moving. Toph crinkled her brow in frustration. What did she want now? Just as she was about to raise her head and fire out a piece of snark – maybe place an order for some lettuce or something – she felt Katara spin on her heel and walk off, each footstep noticeably heavier than normal.

With a shrug, Toph settled herself down and went to sleep.
“Ah, the Avatar…” The Boulder furrowed his brow. “Yes, The Boulder remembers seeing the girl in the company of that individual.”

“And?” Azula’s eyes gleamed with anticipation. “Do you know where they went?”

“Well… no.” He shrugged, and Azula had to resist the urge to set him on fire. “But The Boulder knows someone who might!”

“Oh?”

“Master Xin Fu, head announcer of the Earth Rumble tournament, has left the city in great haste, and The Boulder has reason to believe that it involves the pursuit of the Avatar.”

Azula shared a glance with her brother. “If he’s left the city, how does that help me?”

“Master Xin Fu is a meticulously organized individual. If you were to peruse his notes in his office, you might discover some piece of information to aid you in your search.”

“Fair enough.” Azula stood from her chair. “Looks like we’ll have to visit the Ring once more, then.”

“Ah, Azula!” Ty Lee looked up at her. “Are we leaving already?”

The princess hesitated and shook her head. “No, you stay here and catch up with your friend. Zuko and I can handle this ourselves.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks!” flashing them a cheery smile, she turned back to The Boulder and continued to prattle on, “You know, Mik, just before I left the circus, they’d just gotten a Boar-Q-Pine as part of the exotic animal collection. Isn’t that neat? We-“

With a sigh, Azula stepped out into the rain once more, Zuko following close behind.

“What are we even supposed to be looking for?” Zuko questioned as he stared down the garishly decorated room. “A diary that goes ‘I am going to hunt the Avatar in a north-eastern direction?’”

Breaking into the man’s private office had been simplicity itself, but more problematic were the leads that had apparently failed to present themselves.

“And wouldn’t that be convenient,” his sister replied dryly as she flipped through a few pages of a book before returning it to its place on the shelf. “While I have my doubts about this Xin Fu being kind enough to leave a deliberate message on where to go, most people leave behind far more clues than they’d intend to.”

Zuko looked over the room once more – nothing seemed particularly implicating to him, so he sighed in frustration. If he asked, he knew his sister was going to go into a long lecture that would make him feel like a complete idiot for not picking up all the hints, but… “Like what?” He questioned.

“First, for all of this talk of Master Xin Fu being a meticulous records keeper, he was obviously in a hurry when he left. Case in point,” she lifted a scroll from the writing desk. “He didn’t even bother to clean up after whatever research he was doing.”

“A wanted poster for the Avatar.” Zuko stated as he looked at it. “That’s nice, Az, but we already
She sighed. “I did say that this was the first step, didn’t I? It confirms what that idiot of an earthbender was saying – he’s after the Avatar, so now if we can figure out where this man is, we can go after him.” Walking away from her desk, she scanned the rows of books, and her smirk grew. “My, how interesting.”

He looked up. “What? None of the books or scrolls are missing.”

“Perhaps not, but one has been misplaced.” Reaching over, she plucked the offending tome from the shelf. “Hm. A study of the Si Wong desert.”

“You don’t know that he didn’t just leave it in the wrong place by mistake.”

“True. But it’s a hypothesis to start with, especially this man is supposed to be so organized. Now we can start looking for evidence to confirm or disprove that hypothesis.”

The two of them continued to search the shelves in silence for several minutes, until Zuko pulled a scroll out and unfurled it to reveal a map. He raised an eyebrow, and pulled out the next scroll in line to check as well.

*Also a map. Of a different region.* A thought flared through his mind, and quickly he continued to pull map after map out, checking the area they covered, hoping that he didn’t find one particular area.

“Nothing.” He said, unable to keep a note of triumph out of his voice.

“What’s that?” Azula glanced up from the drawers she had been checking. “Found something important?”

“Yes. These,” Zuko held up one of the map scrolls triumphantly. “Cover all the major regions of the Earth Kingdom. Except for the one detailing the Si Wong desert, which has apparently gone missing.”

A predatory smile graced her sister’s face. “Good enough for me. Good work, Zuko. Now, let’s –“

“Hey!” A gruff voice sounded from around the corner. “Why’s there light coming out of Xin Fu’s study? Isn’t he on some trip with that earthbending teacher?”

“Time to go.” His sister was already heading for the doorway. With a brief nod of acknowledgement, he discarded the map and ducked out of the room, his sister following close behind.

(X)

“So.”

Azula looked up at her brother, who was following close behind. Thankfully, in the period between the entering the room and coming out of it, the rain had apparently deigned to let up to a drizzle. “What is it, Zuko?”

“Where’d you learn to root around for clues like that?”

“That?” Azula snorted. “Leaving aside that in this particular case nothing was particular well-hidden, Father would put me through a dozen of those exercises back in the Capital.”

“How’s that?” Zuko raised an eyebrow – the one he still had, anyway.
Azula sighed. “He’d rearrange a room a little, then let me enter it and ask me to tell him what was wrong with it. Sometimes he wouldn’t tell me at all, and simply leave it to me to spot the fact that something wasn’t quite right. That happened about once a week, as I recall.”

“What did he do that for?”

“Well obviously it helps with picking up clues, like you saw for yourself. But more importantly, Father wanted me to be wary of assassins and the traps they could use to waylay me.”

Zuko fell silent with an astonishing speed, enough so that she paused in her step to look at him.

“Zuko?”

He shook his head once and looked away. “Father never gave any training of that sort,” he said in a low voice, so low that Azula wondered if he’d actually intended for her to hear him.

She was about to formulate a response when she heard Ty Lee’s cheery shout. “Hey! There you guys are! We were wondering what took you so long, so we came to look for you.”

“She’s complaining about holding us up?” Zuko muttered, and Azula simply shrugged in response. At her side stood The Boulder, and at several paces behind was Mai, arms tucked into her sleeves and giving Azula an ‘I will make you pay for leaving me with those two’ look.

“Anyway, like I was saying,” apparently satisfied that Azula hadn’t run off to abandon them or something, Ty Lee had turned back to her conversation with The Boulder. “Back in the Fire Nation Azula would always—“

“TY LEE!” Azula cried, horrified. “You told him that we’re from the Fire Nation? And my name? How could you be so careless as to—“

“But… but he already knew!” The acrobat cringed away. “I mean, it’s like you said, Azula – the circus was from the Fire Nation, and he was hired into it, so…”

The princess folded her arms and fumed. “Enough is enough, Ty Lee. We have what we need, and we’re leaving now. Say your goodbyes,” and with that, she turned and stalked away.”

Ty lee watched Azula go, feeling an uncomfortable tugging in her stomach. Azula was upset again, and it was all her fault. “I… I’m sorry, Mik. I guess I have to go now.”

“No worries! The Boulder understands!”

“So where are you gonna go now? I mean, with the Earth Rumble ring closed and all—“

“Well, to be honest, The Boulder has always considered a career in the military. After all, it is the perfect place to demonstrate my immense earthbending prowess!”

“Oh… you mean the Earth Kingdom Army, don’t you?”

“Indeed! And don’t worry, Ty Lee! Should The Boulder ever meet you or your friends on the battlefield, I will be sure to give you a five-minute head start!”

Ty Lee thought back to a visibly enraged Azula and chuckled nervously. “Sure. Thanks. That’s… uh… very generous of you, Mik.”
“TY LEE!”

“Gotta go, bye!” She waved once and dashed off.

(X)

“Okay. Enough is enough!”

Toph halted in her walk away from Katara, grinding her teeth. Back when they’d first met in Gaoling she hadn’t really gotten the chance to form a strong impression of the Waterbender girl. An oversight that had been quickly rectified, much to Toph’s disappointment.

“Now. What.” She countered testily as she turned around to face Katara. In the distance, she felt Aang and Sokka stand up, both showing signs of uncertainty in their movements. Toph supposed she couldn’t blame them. Tensions between the two females of the team had been getting steadily worse over the past few days.

“Now what? Now what? Toph, from the very first day, you have not lifted a finger to help us with any of our work!”

“This again? Look, Sweetness, I told you, I take care of my own, you take care of yours, and that’s all-“

“I’m not finished. Yes, you ‘take care of your own’, and it’s bad enough that you do, but what you just did is…”

“What?” For the first time since the argument began, Toph felt some of her anger peel back, to be replaced by confusion. “What did I do?”

She heard Katara take in several deep breaths in an attempt to slow her heart rate down. “Toph, I know all of us like to practice our own bending skills. But sending a shower of dust into the clothes, after I have just finished washing them, is completely over the line!”

Oh. Had she done that? Toph blinked. Ergh. She was definitely going to have to get used to reining in her Earthbending now. Back when it had been just her and the badgermoles, she’d been free to try for as powerful and explosive attacks as she pleased. But now…

“Oh, Had she done that? Toph blinked. Ergh. She was definitely going to have to get used to reining in her Earthbending now. Back when it had been just her and the badgermoles, she’d been free to try for as powerful and explosive attacks as she pleased. But now…”

“Okay,” she sighed. Man, what was the big deal anyway? Her clothes were caked with earth twenty-four seven, and she certainly never minded. “Fine. I’m sorry. There, happy? It’s no big deal, but-“

“No big deal? Toph, you just wasted a good hour of work, and you don’t even do anything to help! How can you be so completely obnoxious?!“

She could hear Aang and Sokka whispering in the background, wondering if it was time to step in. Toph’s eyes narrowed with determination. No. She could handle her own battles, thank you very much.

“Well, maybe I’d be nicer and more understanding if you weren’t acting like such a stuck up priss!” She fired off the next line – and immediately thought that Katara was about to suffer a stroke, so spectacular was her reaction.

“I’m acting like a-? Well, excuse me, princess! At least I don’t act like a spoiled, pampered, noble brat!” The last few words were practically a screech.
“Okay! OKAY! Time-out!” Aang leapt into the middle of the two of them. “Okay, look, we’re all a little on edge right now, but-“

“On edge? Me? Nuh-uh.” Toph shook her head. “If anyone’s about to blow her top it’s Sugar Queen here,” she drew in a deep breath. “Don’t lump me in with someone who’s got no way to let off steam other than being rude and condescending-“

“Toph, stop it.” The blind girl pulled her face back into a snarl as a new voice entered the fray. Even Sokka was- “I’m not even sure who’s in the wrong anymore, but-“

“But you’re all ganging up on me anyway. Because I’m the new girl,” she said, her voice hard.

‘What? No! Don’t be ridic-“

“Save it, Twinkletoes.” She waved her hand in his general direction and turned around. “Catch ya guys later.”

“Huh? but – wait, where are you going?”

She paused in her walk and rolled her eyes heavenward. “Don’t worry, Snoozles. I’m not leaving, if that’s what you’re worried about. I’ve still got a job as Twinketoes’ teacher, remember?” She shook and lowered her head. “I just… Just leave me alone for a while, okay? I’ll catch up with you in the next town.”

She stalked off into the tranquil woods, hearing the uncomfortable silence that had fallen on the trio behind get swiftly swallowed up by the sound of songbirds and the rustle of leaves in the wind.

(X)

“So we’re heading in the general direction of the Si Wong desert?” Mai looked up.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Azula pursed her lips. “There’s an oasis town at the entrance of the most commonly used routes. I think heading for that and sourcing for news would be our best option. Meanwhile, though…” She looked down at the map in her hands. “There are several towns on the way. We can try out those.”

Ty Lee looked over. “Um… Azula. How old is this map?”

“Hm? It was made last year, I think.” She glanced at Mai, who gave a slight nod of confirmation. “Why?”

“Because, well, I know that this town doesn’t exist anymore.” Ty Lee jabbed down at the map. “It… kinda got on the bad side of a Fire Nation guard detachment.”

“Oh. Huh. Strike that one, then.” Azula said. Pity – it would have been a rather good location to replenish their supplies. “I guess this town would be better for our needs then. It’s close enough.”

Glancing up, she saw Zuko re-emerging from the woods – for what reason he’d decided to go there, Azula decided not to ask. “Zuko, ready to head out? We’ve got a destination now.”

“I’ve got a better one.” At this curious statement, the princess realized that her brother had an expression on his face akin to eager triumph. With the air of a tournament champion displaying his trophy, he held up a handful of pale white fur.

There was silence for several seconds. “And that is?” Azula questioned mildly.
“Fur. From the Avatar’s bison. He’s *shedding*. We follow the trail-“

“And we’ll find him in no time.”

(X)

Toph wasn’t sure exactly how long she had kept walking – always in the vague direction of the town, of course, but that was still a fair bit away. Still, judging by the heat on her head, it was near midday.

She shook her head, feeling another wave of irritation sweep over her. Why was Katara so stubborn? She always seemed to want to shove off work onto her, but as far as Toph could tell she’d been perfectly fine before, so why should it be any different now? After all, she’d made sure that her presence in camp hadn’t led to any increase in workload for any of the others.

Well, except for her accidentally blowing dust over the washing like just now. Okay, her bad, but Katara didn’t have to take it so *personally*. Toph huffed in frustration and crossed her arms.

It was then that she noticed the steady, thudding footfalls of someone riding an ostrich-horse. That in itself wasn’t particularly unusual – more suspect was that Toph knew that she was about as far removed from the main roads as one got, and that drastically narrowed the reasons for riding an ostrich-horse around the place. Hunting was out – the rider was being far too noisy and obvious for that.

The rider was close now, close enough to be within earshot. Toph sighed and leaned against a tree. If the person turned out to be hostile, well, she’d be able to handle it no sweat. If the person simply passed by, then…

The ostrich-horse was pulled to a sudden stop, and the thud of footsteps told Toph that the person had dismounted.

*Hm. Pretty old, kinda pudgy, body’s still in good shape, though…* The way he moved *appeared* gentle, but Toph could tell the man carried himself like a soldier – probably he’d been so drilled with it at an earlier age that he did it regardless now. The man drew in a breath, and her eyes widened. *Wow. He’s got pretty strong lungs. Almost as good as Twinkletoes’, actually.*

“And who might you be, miss?” The voice was gentle, almost… *jolly*. “Should you really be wandering around the woods by yourself?”

She sighed. Typical. Everyone met her and thought she was a helpless little girl. “I’m fine. I can take care of myself.”

“Oh course. And may I add that it is indeed rare to see such a talented Earthbender at such a young age.” The tone of the voice was still warm and inviting, but Toph nearly tumbled over her own feet in shock. He *knows*? He can tell that… Wow. This guy was *good*. “But my question stands. If one is to enjoy the beauty and tranquility of nature, I’ve found it is best to have companions to share the experience with. *And* some hot tea, of course. Would you like a cup?”

Toph paused. *He’s not lying… Aw, what the heck.* She nodded and plopped herself onto the forest floor. “I’m in. What sort of tea do you got?”

“Well, I’m feeling like a nice brew of jasmine right now…”
The trail veered off some distance from a town, but Azula surmised that it was merely where the Avatar had decided to park his mount temporarily. After all, they were so near a town, it only made sense that they’d enter it.

“Ty Lee, Mai. You guys take the far end of the town. Zuko, we’ll start together from this end. Don’t draw any attention to yourselves until we’ve found them.”

“Got it!” Ty Lee said enthusiastically before bounding off, while Mai followed at a more sedate pace. Placing one hand on her hip, Azula tapped her finger thoughtfully with her chin as she surveyed the area.

“This place is decent-sized.” She murmured. “Let’s start with the inn there. We’ll ask around and…” she trailed off. “Zuko?” He was staring around, eyes glancing about furtively.

“Fine. I’m fine.” He brushed off her question. “I’m just… eager. I want to find the Avatar as quickly as possible.”

“Well,” she replied, an amused tone in her voice as she stepped towards the entrance of the inn. “You might want to rein in that eagerness just a little, because we’re not going to just bump into them like- umph!” She stumbled back as someone who obviously hadn’t been paying attention walked headfirst into her.

“Ow…” The dark-skinned girl rubbed her head and winced. “Oh, sorry about that. I wasn’t looking–” Her eyes widened, revealing pupils the colour of shining ice.

“YOU!” Both girls shouted simultaneously.

Azula was already reaching forward, sending a bolt of fire at the girl, but her opponent’s reflexes were good, and she ducked out of the way. A quick twist of the waterbender’s hands, and a stream of water lashed out from under her arm, forcing Azula back.

With a short jump back to put some distance between herself and the waterbender, Azula took the opportunity to assess the situation. The waterbender was standing in the doorway, a globe of water floating over one hand. Her eyes were narrowed in determination. Behind him was the Water boy, eyes wide but still fumbling for his weapons.

There was no sign of the Avatar.

“Where’s the Avatar?” Azula demanded harshly. The waterbender responded about how she’d expected her to, which was to say another gush of water at the Fire Nation princess.

She dodged to the side, and she saw Zuko retaliating with a burst of fire, forcing the waterbender to the side, and the warrior to duck hastily. It exploded in the interior of the inn, and screams of fear and pain soon began to fill the air.

Hm. Messy. Azula shook her head, noting the presence of several town guards responding hastily to the disturbance. Stepping forward, she loosed a whip of fire at the waterbender, forcing her back again. She reached her hand out, made a motion to attack – but then Zuko followed up with another strike and she was forced away again without a chance to retaliate. Azula smiled. If they could just keep this up, they might be able to–

Abruptly a third shot of flame soared through the air, and Azula had to take a rather inelegant dive to the side to avoid the fireball caused by that blast. As she pulled herself to her feet, she noted that the newest attack had been significantly rougher and less controlled. Who-?
“There he is! Get the exile!”

*What?* Azula whirled, catching sight of komodo-rhinos moving to intercept Zuko, who gazed at them with a bewildered air that quickly morphed into fierce determination.

“Princess Azula.” The leader of the group gazed down at her from his mount.

“Colonel Mongke of the Rough Rhinos.” She said angrily. “What are you doing here?”

“Apprehending your brother and returning him to the Fire Nation – as the Fire Lord has specifically requested.”

She clenched her fists. “I do not have time for your games, Colonel.” She snarled. “Order your men away at once, or I will–” A blast of water struck with incredible force from the back, and Azula was sent sprawling forward onto the dusty ground.

*Coward!* A sneak attack? Twisting as she fell, Azula absorbed the shock of the fall as best she could and sprang to her feet again. Apparently deciding to let the two Fire nation groups duke it out, the waterbender and her brother were rapidly moving into the centre of the town. “Oh, like I’m going to let you–” She began, and then a battle-cry from behind rooted her to the spot. The Colonel had turned away from her and rejoined the rest of his men in attacking Zuko.

For a moment, Azula hesitated, torn between pursuing the waterbender and going to aid her brother.

(X)

Zuko twisted to his side, narrowly avoiding a shot fired from the Yu Yan archer. The one with the halberd was rushing him now, his weapon sweeping down on Zuko. With a growl of irritation, Zuko brought his broadswords to bear, managing to parry the blow.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. He wasn’t supposed to be fighting Fire Nation soldiers. He was Fire Nation, like them. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the leader preparing to Firebend and he leapt as high as he could, sailing pasting the one with chain. As he did so, he brought his swords up in several sweeping slices, sending waves of fire at the leader and forcing him back.

Another arrow – Zuko slashed it out of the air – where was the fifth one? Catching movement out of the corner of his eye, Zuko brought his blade up, barely managing to stave off another sweeping attack from the halberd. Another flash of movement, another whirl to block – and a chain wrapped itself around his sword, yanking it away.

Damn. But he was still a Firebender. He was *never* without a weapon. Using his free hand to shoot a blast of fire at the chain-wielder – it scored a glancing blow – Zuko ducked away again, trying to catch what all the others were doing.

And then the world around him exploded, and Zuko was sent flying. *Of course. The fifth one. The explosives expert…* he thought dimly before he crashed to the ground with the wind knocked out of them.

This wasn’t working. He knew he would be a match for any two of them, maybe any three. But five of them working in concert meant that there were simply too many people to keep track off, too many attacks to fend off. Slowly, he pulled himself into a sitting position, feeling the coppery taste of blood in his mouth.

Abruptly, twin blasts of shining blue flame roared through the air, burning through the stunned rider’s defences with pinpoint accuracy. The archer and the chain wielder were sent flying from their
rhinos to crash into the ground – taken out of the fight in a single hit.

“Come on, Zuko, on your feet.” Her sister never lifted her gaze from the glaring colonel. “Are you okay?”

“I’m…” He took a deep breath. “Okay. I’m fine. Where’s the girl?”

“She ran off. Towards the plaza.”

“What? Go. Find her!”

“What? But-“

“I can take care of the rest of them.” With his single remaining sword, Zuko settled into the hybrid stance he’d practised over the years. “I promise.”

His sister shot him the briefest of glances – and the briefest of encouraging smiles – before she turned and rushed for the centre of the town. And then Zuko let everything bleed out from his mind except for the three glowering foes in front of him.

One Firebender. One with a halberd. And one bomber.

Taking in a deep breath, Zuko lunged forward.

(X)

Aang had been settling himself on the rooftop of one of the houses, partly to mope, and partly to keep a lookout for Toph.

He’d been pretty depressed over her departure, considering that it hadn’t been on particularly good terms. And he couldn’t shake the feeling that as nominal team leader (as close to their group ever got to leadership anyway), he should have been able to stop them from arguing so much.

“Guess I screwed the pooch on that one, huh, Momo?”

Any response the lemur might have made was drowned out by the sound of an explosion in the distance. Whirling, Aang settled himself into a fighting stance, looking for the source of the disturbance,

The crowds were running around and fleeing, mostly away from the far end of the town, mostly from the inn the inn where we were going to spend the night that’s where Katara and Sokka are! Adrenaline surged through his veins and he leapt into the air, already unfurling his glider-

Only to see something bound up at him from the nearby roof, moving even faster than he was, forcing him away why does everything always have to go wrong all at once and towards the ground.

Tucking his glider back into a staff, Aang landed on the ground. A part of him was grateful that this area was largely deserted, and that what few people that remained were quickly emptying out.

As the smoke cleared, two women approached him. One walked slowly and would have looked almost entirely regal if not for the knives glinting in her hands. The other was is that an actual skip in her step? practically bouncing as she walked, as if she couldn’t wait for the action to begin.

Aang’s eyes narrowed. “I know you.” He said. “You were with that girl from Omashu.” Sokka told me her name was Azula.
“Wow, you remembered!” The cheerful one said. “That's nice of you! I'm Ty Lee. What's your name, huh?”

“Ah – huh?” Aang blinked. “I'm... my name's Aang.”

“Aang... that's a nice name!” She grinned and flashed him a quick thumbs up, which mainly served to confuse him even more. “She's Mai, but she doesn't like to talk too much.”

“Ty Lee.” Mai said, a warning tone in her voice.

“Okay, okay, fine. Sheesh. So, Aang, if you promise not to struggle too much, I promise this isn’t going to hurt too much, okay?” And before Aang could react, she launched herself at him like a pellet from a blowdart.

(X)

“Mmm... ahh.” Iroh smiled. “To truly appreciate tea, one must always inhale the fragrances first, do you not agree?” He smiled at the blind girl sitting several feet away from him.

“Yeah.” She smiled back. “This is really good tea, gramps. Even better than anything from the brewers my parents hired.” After taking a small sip, she leaned her head back, pouring the rest of the cup down her throat in one smooth motion.

“Hm. You enjoy taking your tea like that, then?”

“Hah!” She wiped her mouth and grinned at him. “If it's not steaming when you drink it, you're missing out on the best part.”

“Oh, a girl after my own heart.” He hummed with amusement and lifted the pot. “Seconds?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

As they continued to drink their tea, Iroh could tell that the girl had something weighing heavy on her mind – he could tell from almost the moment he’d first met her. Still, he knew not to pry. Just as he was about to lift the pot for a refill for himself, she spoke up again.

“You know, everyone keeps assuming they have to do things for me, and that I can’t take care of myself. Like just now – I always like my tea scalding, but my parents would always have someone blow on it first to cool it down to lukewarm levels.” The girl sighed and leaned back again. “You’re the first one who’s been pretty cool about it, but even then,” she glanced down at the cup in her hand. “You didn’t have to pour the tea for me, you know. I’ve done it myself plenty of times.”

“I poured the tea for you because I wanted to,” he replied pleasantly. “And for no other reason.”

The girl fell silent at that, and Iroh could tell she didn’t entirely believe him. Another warm chuckle escaped him. “Ah, you remind me a bit of my nephew.” He said. “He’s a lot like you – proud and stubborn.”

He saw her roll her blind eyes. “Thanks, gramps. I’m so touched.” Her voice was thick with sarcasm.

“I didn’t say those qualities were bad. He has a spark of blazing determination that allows him to fulfil almost any goal he devotes his mind to – and I can sense that same spark in you. After all, it’s not just anyone who could have achieved such a high level of earthbending mastery at such a young age.”
“Heh.” She grinned. She obviously took great pride in her prodigious talent in earthbending. *Just like…* Iroh paused and shook his head.

“But both of you have trouble accepting help from others. It’s a pity, really. There is no shame in accepting help freely offered, especially from friends. After all, in my experience true friends should want to help each other. It’s one of the true delights of life.”

The girl did not reply to this immediately. “So, where’s your nephew?” She finally asked.

“Oh, I believe he should be near the local town right about now. He’s travelling with someone he trusts very much, on an important quest.” Iroh sighed. “He’s been through a hard time in his life recently. I’m glad he has someone he feels that he can rely completely on.” *Even if I am worried about other influences my niece may have on him.*

“If he’s near the town, and you’re here too…” an eyebrow was raised. “Are you following him?”

“You could say that. If it turns out that he needs me, I’ll be there for him.”

The girl sat silent for a few moments. “Well, I think your nephew is lucky to have someone like you for an uncle.” She stood. “Thanks for the tea, and for the advice. But I should going back to my friends now.”

He stood and bowed slightly as well. “The pleasure was all mine, my dear.”

(X)

The crowd was thinning. While that was good in some ways, it was problematic in that it left Azula with every possibility that the girl would simply merge into the crowd and disappear with it. Maybe she could find the boy instead – if anything, he would certainly be easier to find and capture. Such thoughts were driven from her mind as she caught sight of a flash of blue cloth.

*There!* Focusing, Azula struck, sending a firebomb sailing for the girl – but she was good enough to sense it and to duck aside at the last moment. The firebomb sailed past her and exploded in a loud roar.

“MY CABBAGES!”

Ignoring the anguished cry, Azula spun, sending thin streamers of fire at the water peasant. Her blue eyes flashing dangerously, the waterbender retaliated in kind, thin mobile whips reaching out from her pack to intercept and knock aside the fire streams.

The two of them faced each other across the largely deserted town square. “I’m not going to tell you where Aang is,” the water peasant said in a low, dangerous tone.

Azula chuckled. “Oh, really? Well, I’ll find him myself, then. But first, I’ve a bone to pick with you.”

The waterbender’s eyes widened slightly in confusion.

“You see, the last time you met my brother, you beat him up rather badly.” Azula let the silky undertones of menace slip into her words. “I don’t *like it* when people do that.” With an easy grace, she settled into a Firebending stance.

“Hah!” The waterbender snorted. “Now Zuko needs his little sister to come fight his battles for him? What a brave hero of the Fire Nation he must be.”
Not wasting any more breath on words, Azula spun on one leg, sending a blast of flame with her other at the girl. The waterbender swerved and twisted, letting the water around her warp and fly at Azula. Even as it did, it quickly hardened into gleaming daggers of ice.

A quick wave of her hand sent out a fire sheet that knocked aside the ice daggers, melting them in the process, and then Azula retaliated with another series of jabs, shooting tiny darts of flame at the waterbender.

To her credit, the girl was able to avoid most of them – but not all, and Azula’s smirk widened as she heard the hiss of pain – but that had given her the opening she needed. Twisting her arms, she quickly formed a whirling circle of fire and hurled it at the girl.

The waterbender quickly sidestepped the strike again and summoned yet more water from her pouch, sending them at Azula in slashing waves. Azula had heard tales of how powerful waterbenders could slice through even metal with ease, and she didn’t particular feel like finding out if such tales had any truth in them – not firsthand, at any rate, and so she weaved her way through them, gathering more fire in her hands as she did so.

A quick burst of fire from the soles of her feet propelled her forward, and she swung her hand forward in a fire-enhanced punch. It was a rather inelegant attack, but sometimes that was what you needed – force at the right point at the right time. Instinctively the waterbender brought up her own water covered hand to catch the blow, but Azula had the advantage of momentum on her side, and so the waterbender was sent careening backwards, hitting the ground hard.

Landing in a crouch, Azula quickly straightened herself again as the waterbender pulled herself to her feet, coughing and hacking. As she succeeded in standing, the peasant shot Azula a murderous glare.

“Where’s that arrogance from two minutes ago?” She questioned coyly. Her only response was a water whip that shot out at her so fast she barely dodged in time.

That was… a lot closer than I would have liked. Her smile vanished and Azula quickly began building up another firebomb to attack with.

(X)

Sudden strikes at precise points along his arm, and suddenly his staff was clattering away as his arm hung limply from his side. Aang’s eyes widened in consternation. Katara had told him about this. Frantically, he used a boost of air to propel himself backwards to a safer location.

The whoosh of thrown projectiles alerted him to a new threat where is she hiding, I can’t figure out where she’s throwing the knives from, and bringing his arm up he created a sphere of air that caught the knives and tossed them aside harmlessly.

“Hey!” He called at the acrobatic girl bearing down on him again. “What did you do to my arm?”

“Huh? Oh, that.” Ty Lee shrugged. “I blocked your chi flow.” At his look, she frowned back. “Why are you so surprised? I mean, I already know where to hit anyway, but you guys had it tattooed over your bodies. Surely you knew what it meant?”

Aang grunted in response I knew it, she’s easily distracted… not that I’m one to talk and using his functioning hand, he created a burst of concentrated wind that knocked the acrobat back into a pile of discarded crates.

“Hey! No fair attacking me when I was talking and caught off guard!” Aang barely paid any
attention as she ran past her, slightly more focused on avoiding the seeming hail of sharp implements was that a fork? as they thudded into the walls and ground all around him. “Guess I couldn’t expect any more from the bad guys.”

Aang screeched to a halt, which turned out to be lucky as a knife hit where he would have been had he continued running. Quickly picking up his discarded staff which lay nearby, he turned to stare at Ty Lee. “Wait, ‘bad guys’?”

“Uh huh.” Ty Lee somersaulted out of the wreckage and entered a battle stance again. “The Fire Nation are the good guys, and the people fighting against the Fire Nation are the bad guys, and you’re the Avatar and everyone says you’ll fight us, so I guess that makes you a bad guy.”

Aang swung, blowing away another three more knives how many of those things does she have?! as he turned to face Ty Lee again. “Um… have you ever considered that maybe the Fire Nation are the bad guys?”

Ty Lee paused her advance and raised an eyebrow. “Okay, see,” she shook her head. “Now you’re just being silly.”

(A)

Azula slammed to the ground, feeling a streak of pain up her side where the water whip had scored a blow. Nevertheless, given that the waterbender was currently lying on the floor in an immobile heap, she supposed she could consider herself having gotten more out of their exchange. Wearily, she stood.

As she watched, the waterbender slowly began to move, fighting against her injuries as she tried to stand. Azula shook her head pityingly as she took a couple of steps forward. Unless I miss my guess, she takes great pride in her waterbending, so… “Don’t feel too bad. You were never going to win. After all, I’m a Firebender and you’re not.”

That certainly got the girl’s attention. “What?” She snapped menacingly, the effect somewhat ruined by how the girl’s eyes were swimming in and out of focus. She probably hasn’t recovered from that last blow to the head.

“Oh, don’t take that the wrong way,” Azula continued in a conversational tone. “You’re really quite good for a waterbender. But, well…” she glanced up at the midday sun. “It’s the middle of the day. We Firebenders are empowered by the sun, you know. Secondly, I can make as much fire as I please. You’re rather limited in what you can use your water for – it’s tragic, I know. Third,” and her smile grew. “You care about collateral damage.” She waved her arms once, summoning a wall of flame easily twice the waterbender’s height. “I don’t.” And with a single gesture, she sent the flame wall careening towards the waterbender.

Katara’s eyes widened in shock. Oh no! Hurriedly, she summoned forth all the water she had in reserve, using it to create a shield directly in front of her as the wall of flame engulfed her. Squeezing her eyes shut, she focused all of her concentration on maintaining the water, trying to ensure it could hold out for the critical few seconds.

Finally, the wave passed, and she slumped in exhaustion. Behind her, the wave of flame continued, noisily eradicating a house behind her.

And then, before she could react, a boot slammed into her stomach, sending her flying backwards and slamming onto the newly created rubble. With a groan of pain, Katara crumpled to the ground, staring wearily up at the princess. “Which means,” her tormentor continued pleasantly. “I’m free to
make my attacks as destructive as I want.”

Azula paused, gazing down on the defeated girl. If she was going to be honest with herself, the girl had actually offered a better fight than the Avatar. *That* was unusual enough-

She was distracted by a war cry from behind, and she turned in time to see a club swinging down at her. She ducked quickly to her left, wincing as pain flared in her abdomen again. That water whip had hit her harder than she’d thought. Driving the pain away, she glared up at her assailant – the Water Tribe boy. Of course.

“Sokka...?” She heard the waterbender gasp out. “What are you... told you to... help evacuate the town...”

“I am *not* going to abandon my sister!” He yelled in fury as he charged at Azula, swinging his weapon wildly again. In a smooth motion, Azula ducked under the attack and reached up to grasp his hand in her own, effectively immobilizing his arm.

“So you wish to protect your sibling.” She said softly. “I can respect that devotion.” And before the Water boy could react, she kneed him in the gut and then stepped back to watch him double over in pain. “But determination without ability to back it up is ultimately worthless. You’d do well to remember that.”

Turning, she left the two defeated siblings where they lay – they could be dealt with later. She had to locate the Avat-

There was the sound of crumbling rock behind her. Slowing her steps, she turned around to see that both of the Water peasants were now on stone slabs that were being slid away from the town square. Where the waterbender had been lying was now standing a young girl dressed in the yellow and green of the Earth Kingdom.

“Looks like I got here just in time.” Toph said softly to herself.

(X)

The lackeys had been defeated, Now only the Colonel remained. The two of them continued their tense standoff, circling each other around the narrow street

“You are good.” Colonel Mongke acknowledged. “I would expect no less from the nephew of the Dragon of the West.”

“You knew Uncle?” He said tightly.

“Indeed. Once, he was a legend who conquered vast swathes of land for the Fire Nation. Now he is nothing but a dreamer.” He snorted.

Zuko clenched his fists. “Don’t you *dare* talk about my Uncle like that!”

“I will say whatever I wish. Is he not a fugitive now, just like you?” Mongke retorted.

Pausing in his stride, Zuko drew his arm back and sucked in air. Everything he had was going to go into his next attack.

No one was going to insult his Uncle and get away with it.

(X)
Dodging, twisting and whirling, Aang was always able to stay just one step ahead of his attackers. However, going on the offensive was impossible, at least until his paralysed arm recovered. At least it didn’t appear to be taking too long – he was certain he could feel a tingling in his arm that signified that sensation would be returning soon.

As he dashed past a row of houses, he finally caught sight of the Knife Girl Mai. Ty lee told me her name was Mai leaping from rooftop to rooftop. Every time she landed, she would sweep her arm out, and another flurry of knives would fly at him. Is she using some sort of infinite knife spirit charm… spell… thing?

Ty Lee was constantly harassing him, forcing him to halt, veer, dodge, duck, and weave to avoid her precise strikes. She leapt from place to place she’s almost as agile as an Airbender bouncing off the walls to strike at him from every angle. Once or twice he was able to catch her in powerful air currents that sent her flying away, but she soon rejoined the battle-cum-chase with fervent enthusiasm.

All in all, not his best day. And that wasn’t even counting the fact that if they were here, Creepy Girl – Azula – was probably here too. Along with Zuko. Aang shook his head. Why wouldn’t they just leave him alone?

Suddenly, he was in the town square, by now long cleared of any noncombatants. He glanced around briefly, saw Ty Lee crouch down in preparation to lunge at him, saw Mai from the corner of his eye readying yet another set of knives, saw - Toph! It’s Toph! And she’s fighting Azula!

(X)

Azula knew she was in trouble.

The earthbender girl was good. She was using some sort of unorthodox style that Azula had never really seen before – she thought she recognized some brief strikes, but otherwise the patterns and flows were alien to her, forcing her to only be able to react to the attacks instead of anticipating them. She had power – brief twists of her wrists and feet could send large columns of stone bursting from the ground. With each impact against the ground, clouds of dirt were thrown up, quickly obscuring Azula’s vision; and for some Agni-forsaken reason, the earthbender didn’t seem the least bit perturbed by all the dust.

She had control. More than once, she’d caught tiny lines snaking their way through the dirt, softening the soil and creating traps that would have snared Azula’s foot had she stepped on them. So far she’d been able to keep one step ahead, but that led to the third problem.

She, like almost every other earthbender, had stamina. Buckets of it. Azula knew that in a fair match against two people of equal skill, the earthbender would always, always beat out the Firebender in stamina. If this kept up, Azula was going to collapse long before the earthbender did.

And the worst part was that despite all this, Azula was still one-hundred percent certain that she would have managed a comfortable victory had she not been drained by fighting the waterbender prior. As it was, she was already tired and hurt – not a good thing to be when facing a fresh, powerful bender.

Right. I’m going to have to end this quickly. Leaping onto one of the stone pillars, she saw the girl standing amidst the dust, arms still up in that strange battle pose – as soon as Azula landed, she saw the girl’s head snap up to focus in her direction – and Azula noticed the milky film over her eyes.
The girl’s blind? Pulling both arms back, she prepared herself for a quick, precise strike, and she could see the earthbender clench her fist, preparing to retaliate. Time seemed to slow down for a brief moment.

**BOOM!**

The wall of a nearby building exploded outward, and the bruised, battered, and rather charred form of Colonel Mongke was sent sailing through the hole to land in an ungainly heap at the far end of the town square. At the same time, Zuko leapt through the hole, both hands clenched and glowing slightly with more pent up energy.

“Wha-!” The earthbender girl’s head whipped to the side to face in the general direction of the noise as she took a single step back. At the same time, Azula thrust her arms forward, sending twin streaks of blue fire forward. While they had been aimed at the earthbender’s midsection, her step back now meant they hit the floor in front of her – and they spread quickly to catch her feet in the backwash.

Toph’s eyes widened and she gave a cry of agony as she felt searing, blinding pain flare through her feet. In an instant, the world around her spasmed and then shattered.

“Dam – Damn it!” She cried, falling forward. As soon as her hands touched the earth again she could feel the reassuring images of her earthsense revert into place, but she was mainly distracted by the searing, mind-numbing pain that stormed through her soles. She’d always been extra careful not to let her feet get hurt or injured, because they were her only link to the world, and now they – A fresh wave of pain broke through again, and she fought against the urge to whimper.

Abruptly she was aware of light, delicate footfalls carrying themselves towards her. The Firebender girl. Panicked, she thrust her hand out, but not in anything remotely resembling a battle stance and unable to focus properly, she did little more than send out a clod of dirt to crumple against the Firebender’s knee. She hadn’t even bothered to dodge.

“Damn it…” she whispered again as she slumped. She had… she had failed. When her friends had been counting on her to save them… she had failed.

(X)

So her feet… her feet are her weakness. Azula stood wearily, drawing in deep gulps of air as she stared down at the earthbender girl. Then she shifted her gaze to Zuko and nodded in affirmation. *I can only assume that’s the last of the Avatar’s companions. Now, where’s the Avatar hims-

Her instincts screamed of danger and she weaved to the right, letting a water bullet splash against the wall. With a scowl, she whirled to confront the waterbender girl, back on her feet.

“You just don’t know when to quit, do you.” She said softly, in a voice filled with venom. “Just don’t know when to crawl away like the filthy peasant you are.” As she finished, she launched three brutal fireblasts in a row, putting most of her remaining strength into the blows.

The waterbender did her best to defend herself, and even managed to deflect the first blast without injury. But she was tired and wounded, and she just wasn’t good enough and the second and third shots slammed into her, sending her sprawling to the ground where she lay, unconscious.

Azula stood over the fallen form. “You know,” she began, although she knew full well that the waterbender could no longer hear her. “I was almost willing to let you live after roughing you up a bit, but now I-“

“KATARA!” The voice was raw, cracked with grief and rage, and as Azula looked up in shock she
saw the Avatar at the far end of the town square, with Ty Lee and Mai trying to box him in. Even as she watched, his eyes and tattoos began to glow with an otherwordly radiance, and he began to float in the air. A howling wind whipped through the area, whirling the rubble through the air and sending them flying. A flick of his hands and Mai and Ty Lee were sent crashing away into buildings.

Azula fought to stand her ground, fought to keep her eyes open against the howling wind, fought to keep her gaze on the Avatar. What on – what on earth is this? This power… I've never even heard of anything like it… Suddenly her mind flashed back to days she had spent at her desk, sifting through reports of a living ocean that had single-handedly annihilated the Fire Navy, and Azula felt afraid.

Abruptly the howling winds died, although the Avatar remained suspended in the air, glowing eyes still staring straight at her. And then his arms were swinging in arcs, impossibly familiar arcs – It's lightning, he's generating lightning – except far faster than she could ever accomplish, far faster than she had ever seen her Father accomplish, and there was a blistering white streak of cold fire coming straight at her, far more powerful and more forked than she had seen before in her entire life, and –

“GET DOWN!” Suddenly her cheek was pressed against the hard dirt, and she looked up to see, of all people, her Uncle, one hand reaching out and impossibly catching the lightning, his body twisting in some manner that seeming vaguely familiar, and suddenly lightning was sprouting from his other hand, aimed at the far corner of the square where no one was, and he was somehow channelling the lightning away.

She watched as her Uncle’s face screwed up in absolute concentration, eyes narrowed, teeth pulled back in a wordless snarl, and suddenly he didn’t look like a fat, jovial, kooky Uncle that Azula could never understand, but the legendary General who had breached the Outer Wall of Ba Sing Se. Tearing her gaze away from his face, Azula’s eyes widened in alarm as she saw the hand he was using to catch the Avatar’s lightning – it was raw and blistered, flesh already beginning to peel from the palm, and she realized that he was in utter agony.

“GRAMPS!” The cry came from the earthbending girl. “Twinkletoes! Aang! CUT IT OUT!”

The desperate cry seemed to rouse something from the Avatar – abruptly he jerked, the glow faded and the lightning died out, leaving Uncle to stagger back before finally falling to the ground. She was vaguely aware of Zuko letting out a cry of grief and hurrying to their Uncle’s side, but she remained staring at the Avatar as suddenly a mournful bellow came from above as the Avatar’s bison came swooping down. She stared, silent, as they quickly piled onto the bison – those that could walk carrying the ones that couldn’t, the Avatar staring at her with an unreadable expression on her face as the bison flew off into the horizon. She remained there as Ty Lee and Mai eventually picked themselves from the rubble, slowly walking to join the others.

Finally she turned and stared dumbly at her Uncle. His eyes were closed, his breathing troubled. Staring at the massive burn wounds covering his hand, arm, and most of his torso, and something clicked in her mind that she should help, after all he had just saved her life, and she began to move numbly to get the medicinal kits.

( X )

“We got creamed.” Toph’s statement was blunt and to the point, much like nearly everything else she said. She was sitting near the edge of Appa’s saddle, letting her legs rest on the bench as a tired Katara worked to heal her feet.

“I wouldn’t put it quite like –” Sokka started, and was interrupted by a nut hitting his nose. “Ow.”

“We. Got. Creamed.” Toph repeated with added emphasis, “The Firebender girl.~“
“Azula.”

“She can called herself Agnila for all I care. The point is that she took on three of us in a row – although Snoozles barely counts –“

“Hey!”

“Three of us in a row, and she beat us. Okay, she had a bit of help, and I got distracted, but outside of a tournament, that’s no excuse. If Twinkletoes hadn’t done that… whatever it was, we-“

“It’s called the Avatar State.”

“Would you quit interrupting? If Aang hadn’t saved our butts, we’d be dead or worse right now. And you can’t do that whenever you want, right?”

“No. I have to be in serious danger or serious emotional pain.”

“Right. And we’re going to face that bunch again sooner or later?”

“…most probably. They’re the Fire Nation, so they’ve got a bit of a thing about hunting me down.”

“Right. Find a rock quarry.”

“Huh?”

“Find a rock quarry,” she said again, “You’re going to need every advantage you can get, Twinkletoes. Earthbending training starts tomorrow.”

Despite having just narrowly escaped with their lives (again), Aang felt a smile come onto his face.

Chapter End

Thanks for reading. Please review.
“Ngh!”

An annoyed grunt sounded through the garden for the third time and Azula glanced up from her reading in anger. Who was it that kept making that annoying sound?

It was a fine, balmy day in the Fire Nation capital, and the Fire Nation princess had decided to spend it outdoors, whiling the hours away. Finding a good book – one that detailed the exploits of the great heroes of the Fire Nation over the past hundred years – and curling up under the shade of a tree had sounded like a good idea from the moment she’d gotten out of bed, and so far she’d been enjoying herself immensely.

Now, if only the stupid noise would go away…

She waited for nearly half a minute, ears pricked to catch the slightest sound coming from anywhere in the garden, eyes darting back and forth to ascertain that all was indeed silent and tranquil. With a sigh, she lowered her head and continued reading.

‘It was in the fifth month of the campaign that General Furin realized—’

“ARGH!”

Azula’s head shot up, her eyes blazing. That was it! Snapping the book shut, she stood up and stomped over to the source of the sound. Walking around a rock formation that had been created because Grandfather had liked that particular sculptor’s work, and over to a hidden grove amongst the trees, she parted the leaves and glared at the occupant of the tiny clearing.


Her brother whirled, an expression of alarm and guilt washing over his face. “N–nothing.” He stammered. Azula rolled her eyes. Her brother was an awful liar.

Silently, she swept her gaze around the area, noting the charred, blackened grass and the fact that Zuko was panting and sweating.

“Were you Firebending?”

“I–”

“You know what daddy said! Firebending is dangerous, and we’re only supposed to do it with the tutors and supervisors present!” she snapped. Not that she ever kept to that particular rule herself, but at least she was smart enough to do it where there wasn’t anything flammable present.

“I’m sorry! I –” An expression akin to panic was now on her brother’s face. “Please don’t tell dad.” He finally said in a soft voice.
She rolled her eyes. “Don’t be such a worrywart. I’m not going to tell…” she trailed off. Dad? Why would Zuko be scared of his father in this instance, considering that mother was always the one to discipline him after any wrongdoing? (That, incidentally, was why Azula had largely fallen out of the habit of tattling on her brother. Oh, he would look miserable for a while, and that was enjoyable enough, but their mother had never done much more than to speak to him in a mildly stern tone for a few minutes. And any attempts to talk to her father about Zuko’s transgressions merely resulted in him giving an annoyed grunt and little more.)

Azula frowned, sifting through her memory… of their last joint Firebending practice, when Zuko had messed up their newest kata, and their father had been present to observe them. She stared at her brother and raised an eyebrow. He sighed and hung his head.

“I wanted to practice the Kirin’s Roar form a little more… and then I could surprise dad the next time he watched.”

“Oh,” she said flatly. “Any luck?” Then again, if those snarls of frustration had been any indication…

In response, he turned away slightly, bringing his arms up in a manner that might have been sloppily reminiscent of the kata they were supposed to be practicing. Swinging his palms out once, twice, Zuko stepped forward as Azula eyed his footwork warily. And then the short leap forward and the resultant flame burst-

That suddenly flared out of control and was now headed straight at her. With a gasp of shock, Azula let the book drop to the earth and brought her hands up to catch the flare. With a wince of pain at the sudden pressure in her palms, she exerted her control on the flame raging in her hand, subverting what had been Zuko’s blast and making it entirely her own before sweeping her arms out and dissipating the flame..

Silence descended on the little clearing as Azula took in deep gulps of air and glared bloody murder at her older brother, who looked like a combination of sheepish and horrified. Finally, Azula spoke up.

“Your footwork stinks.”

“I – huh?”

“Your timing is off, your fingers weren’t steady when you released the flame, and your movements are far too stiff.”

Now Zuko flushed angrily. “Hey, I didn’t ask you-“

“Do you know why we have instructors, Zuzu? Because they can tell us when we’re doing something wrong.” Azula sighed and looked over her shoulder once to ascertain that aside from the two of them were alone in this area of the gardens.

“If I help you do this kata right, then will you quit practicing out here in secret?” And maybe leave me to read in peace? The second half she left unsaid.

Zuko frowned at her. “I’m not a baby, Azula, I can practice on my own.”

“And you were doing such a wonderful job before…” she said snarkily. “But if you don’t want my help, fine. Just don’t yell so loud when you mess up again.” With another roll of her eyes, Azula turned and stalked away from the grove, leaving Zuko behind.
Azula had an important task weighing on her shoulders: the capture of the Avatar, the single greatest potential threat to the Fire Nation. Failure would more than likely result in the Avatar eventually overthrowing all the gains and progress the Fire Nation had made over the last century, and the Fire Nation being made weak and vulnerable. That simply could not be allowed to happen.

And that wasn’t to mention the added dynamic of all this – that she had to protect her brother and keep him close as she hunted the Avatar, so that she could plausibly pass the credit onto him and return him to his place as crown prince. Zuko’s honour and future were resting on her shoulders. Which was why it absolutely should not, could not be that she was –

“AH – CHOO!”

“You’re sick.” Zuko stated flatly as he looked down at her.

“I am not!” She aimed a piercing glare at her brother, or at least a glare that might have been piercing if her eyes weren’t bleary and watering. “I just have a bit of a runny nose, that’s all.” Well, that was a bit of an understatement. Her nose felt like it would fall off her face any minute, her throat felt dry and scratchy no matter how much water she drank, there was a dull pounding in her ears that absolutely refused to go away, and her head felt like it had been clogged up with seaweed.

“You’re sick and you’re lying about being sick.” He replied as he idly took a drink from his water skin. “It’s probably from the rain back in Gaoling.”

She growled. “So what? I’ll just work it off. There’s no reason for us to break off our hunt and –” she was interrupted by another massive sneeze.

Zuko sighed. “I honestly cannot believe that I,” and he glanced over to his Uncle sitting by the campfire, “am the one saying this now, but no. No, we are taking a break from Avatar hunting until you have fully rested and recovered.”

Azula bared her teeth. “You don’t get to order me around, Zuko.”

“No, and that is why Mai and Ty Lee have asked me to tell you that we’re overruling your decisions via majority vote. We are not going after the Avatar. We are headed to the nearest town that still has people in it so we can find a place to rest and some proper medicine.” He sighed and lowered his voice. “It’s not just you, Az. The stuff we have on hand really can’t treat the wounds Uncle got during the last fight. He’s been acting gamely, but I know him well enough to see that he’s hurting bad. We need a trained healer.”

With a deep growl of frustration, she wrapped her blanket tighter around herself and glared balefully up at the setting sun. After their battle in the town, they’d departed as quickly as possible before the townspeople could start coming out of the homes or re-entering the town and asking questions. The Rough Rhino’s they’d left behind to deal with the fallout.

Now they were once again in the middle of the wilderness, setting up camp for the night. Their Uncle had regained consciousness shortly after they’d left the town and predictably enough, the first thing he’d asked for was some tea. Now he was sitting by the campfire, heavily bandaged and eyes closed in apparent meditation.

Or maybe he had just fallen asleep. Azula couldn’t really tell.

After a moment, she felt her brother’s hand on her shoulder. “Come on. You should go sit by the fire. It’ll make you feel better.”
Somewhat numbly, she allowed herself to be led to the fire and settled near to it, closing her eyes and letting her body exult in the warmth of the fire. A moment later, she heard the rustle of Ty Lee poking at the sticks.

“Uh, Ty Lee,” she heard Zuko call, “you might not want to…”

“Huh?”

“Have you ever sat near a fire and a powerful Firebender with a cold?”

“Well, er… no.”

“Then trust me, move back a bi-“

“Ah - CHOO!” As Azula sneezed explosively, the campfire abruptly blazed up to double the size, flaring blue as well for a brief moment, causing Ty Lee to fall backwards in shock.

Ty Lee blinked once, twice, and then a smile split her face. “Wow! That was awesome! Do it agai-“ Azula raised her eyes and gave her a look so powerful it was a miracle Ty Lee’s brain wasn’t blown out of the back of her skull. The acrobat froze. “Eh… heh. Nevermind.” Quickly, she scooted to the side opposite Azula while the princess of the Fire Nation glared at everything and nothing in particular.

Meanwhile, Zuko had crouched at his Uncle’s side. “Uncle?” Iroh opened his eyes and gave his nephew a weary smile. “I, uh… I made you some tea. I tried to do it the way you like it, but I’m not sure I got it right…”

Obviously hesitant, Uncle reached out with his undamaged hand to grasp the teacup and bring it to his lips – and despite feeling like a buffalo-yak had sat on her, Azula couldn’t help the smirk that came as his eye’s widened in barely concealed shock.

“It’s very… bracing.” He smiled at Zuko and as soon as her brother turned away he hurriedly poured the contents out onto the ground. Azula rolled her eyes. Her brother’s tea was spectacularly bland, and while she didn’t care much for it, she could only assume that someone like her Uncle would find it particularly unpleasant.

After sneezing once more, she looked up at him, her expression hard. “Uncle.”

He looked over to her, and something that might have been a smile flitted across his features. “Azula. How are you feeling? Zuko has told me about the adventures you had during your travels and-“

“What are you doing here?” She snapped, speaking over whatever it was he might have said. “I know you’ve been following us since the Northern Earth Kingdom, and you must know that I’ve tried to shake you off our trail more than once.” Her Uncle was now watching her intently, an unreadable expression on his face. “So why are you here? Why did you step in to save me when you never liked me?”

And how in the world did you manage to catch the lightning and not be reduced to a smoking pile on the floor?

“Azula!” Zuko’s voice cut through the deepening gloom. “Uncle just saved your life! How can you-“

“Azula!” Iroh glanced at him. “I have indeed been trailing you, and without your permission. For that, I apologize.” He shifted his body into as much of a semblance of a bow as his wounds would allow. “And as for your other question,” Iroh sighed and paused for a moment before continuing, “There is a rather large gulf between someone whom I feel no great love for, and
someone for whom I would willingly stand by as she got herself killed.” Their gazes met, and Azula could not see any lie or hesitation in his expression.

“Hey!” Ty Lee’s voice sounded off and they all turned to look at her. “Why’s everyone so gloomy? Okay, sure, we didn’t get the Avatar yet,” she looked over at Uncle. “And Uncle Iroh got hurt, but we’re all alive and together now, aren’t we?”

Iroh chuckled. “Yes, yes we are. And it is good to see you again, Ty Lee.”

Azula sneezed again.

(X)

“Uncle.” Her voice was low and harsh.

He paused, turned to look at her, a raised eyebrow on his face. “What is the matter, Azula?”

They were on approaching the outskirts of another town now, after having spent the night out in the wilderness. Azula still felt rather ill, but at least she wasn’t sneezing so much any longer. Her Uncle, by contrast, was obviously growing more and more pained with each passing moment.

“Yesterday, when we were facing the Avatar…” she hesitated, “when he fired lightning at us, the technique you used was one I’ve never seen before. Now, I’ve been through all the scrolls in the Imperial library that detail the various Firebending techniques, and none of them have ever mentioned being able to manipulate lightning the way you did,” her eyes narrowed. “So. What was that skill and where did you learn it from?”

Uncle remained silent for a long while as they continued walking up the dusty road towards the town. “Would you believe that I developed that technique myself?” He finally said.

Azula resisted the urge to snort with disbelief. The very idea of her indolent slob of an Uncle actually creating such a useful and powerful technique was utterly farcical. And even beyond that…

“And how, exactly, did you manage to create a technique that somehow eluded every other Firebending master in recorded history?” The sarcasm in her voice was thick.

Her Uncle looked to the sky. “Well, part of it would be that the ability to utilize lightning is rare enough in and of itself that learning how to redirect it wouldn’t be a high priority amongst the Firebending masters.” There was a significant pause. “Another reason would be that I learnt this style from studying waterbending.”

Azula pulled up short in her walk. “What? That’s…” Her mind tried to wrap herself the idea. Waterbending… an art so soft and lax and… She sneezed once. She cast a suspicious glare at her uncle, but he appeared entirely unconcerned.

Silently, she fought an internal debate with herself. Up until that conversation she hadn’t expected much more than asking her Uncle a few surreptitious questions, enough to figure out where to start studying the technique herself. But he had apparently developed the skill all on his own, and while under most circumstances Azula would have taken it to mean that she herself was perfectly capable of figuring it out too, her Uncle had apparently learnt it from waterbending. Waterbending! That dying art practised by tiny clumps of humans huddled in their frozen fortresses at the forsaken ends of the world! Not, Azula thought unhappily as the ache at her side intensified ever so slightly, that it didn’t have its uses in actual combat.

More to the point, she knew nothing about waterbending. If her Uncle had studied waterbending for
whatever asinine reason and managed to develop a technique as useful as that… She ground her teeth together. Azula had her pride, yes, but she also liked to think of herself as being pragmatic, and so she let out a tiny sigh.

“Uncle, would… you… could you tell me how to redirect lightning?” There. She had said it, and aside from that tiny acidic lump hissing in the pit of her stomach, it hadn’t been that hard.

Her Uncle gazed at her silently for a long moment. “Why would you feel the need to begin learning such a skill?” He finally asked, silently.

She bit back a snarl. Getting openly angry at her Uncle wasn’t going to help her. “Why would I not want to learn such a skill?”

Iroh sighed. “Azula, think this through carefully. As of now, exactly three people in the entire world have the ability to generate lightning: your father, you, and me. You’re obviously not going to be shooting yourself, you have my word that I will never attempt to kill my own niece, and it is plain that my brother t – he values you greatly.” Azula didn’t miss Uncle’s slight stumble over her father, but she let it pass for now. “As far as I am concerned, it would be a wasted skill you do not need to learn.”

“What about the Avatar?” She demanded fiercely in between a slight sniffle. “Have you forgotten the reason that we even need to find a healer for you is because he shot lightning at you?”

“I do not think that will be of much concern. That ability of his only manifests in extreme circumstances.” This time Azula caught the subtle facial cues that she had been looking for since the start of their conversation. He’s lying. He knows something I don’t. With a snarl of frustration, she turned away.

“Well, in that case why would you need to invent this stupid skill? After all, like you said, there’re only three of us who can generate lightning, and I’m certainly not going to – to…” She trailed off as the implications of what she had just said began to come to light. Iroh looked at her for a long time with an unreadable expression on his face.

“Treasure the relationship you have with your sibling, Azula.” He finally said softly.

“Uncle! Az!” Zuko interrupted their conversation with an excited shout. “I think they have a healer here!” He was pointing at a nondescript building with a man standing in the doorway looking over another man’s broken arm.

“I don’t need –“ Azula began and then decided against it. Meanwhile, her Uncle had brightened up considerably.

“Perfect. I really need a place to rest these aching bones of mine. And some salve, of course, for these wounds. Oh, and some tea! I hear the region has an exquisite blend of several different herbs-“

As she had done so many times in her childhood, Azula tuned her Uncle out and focused on what was in front of her. As she neared, the owner of the establishment smiled at the man with the broken arm and sent him on his way. That done, he looked up as Azula’s group approached him, a warm smile on his face.

“Welcome, welcome! I’m Healer Yi Sheng, but you can call me Yi. Now, what seems to be the prob –“ He broke off as he noticed Uncle, and his expression morphed into one of alarm. “Have you been walking around with wounds like that? Oh, this won’t do at all!” He half turned. “Oisha!”

“Yes, dear?” A woman stepped out into the sunlight, one hand clutching a walking stick, and Azula
nearly fell over from shock. The healer continued to prattle on about preparing a room, and she vaguely noted her brother asking for two instead, but most of her attention had been grabbed by the lady – Oisha.

She wore loose-fitting garbs that allowed her freedom of movement, and her hands were well-worn, along with a rather heavy tan that showed she was no stranger to physical work. But all of that paled into insignificance next to her hair that was as black as sable and her eyes that were deep amber. In between those features and the shape of her face, it was impossible to mistake her for anything else.

She was from the Fire Nation.

Azula sighed as she stared up at the ceiling of the room. Zuko had insisted she get a room of her own to rest in until she was fully recovered, and the Healer – Yi – had made some vile herbal concoction that was supposed to aid her in a swift recovery or something. Azula had taken an experimental sip from the stew and promptly thrown it out the window (and she could have sworn she’d heard an annoyed yell from Ty Lee from the street outside). After all, all she had was a stupid cold, she’d be fine in a few days.

Just then, there was a soft knocking on her door, and a moment later the woman – Oisha – stepped in, holding a cloth and a small basin of water. “Are you feeling any better, milady?”

Azula grunted. “No, I – “ Wait. “ She pushed herself up onto her elbows to glare at the woman. “Milady?” She repeated, a dangerous tone in her voice. Silently and under the blankets, she shifted her fingers, preparing to Firebend if necessary.

Oisha’s hand went to her mouth. “Oh, forgive me! It’s just…” she sighed and walked over. “I used to work as a Royal Guard in the Fire Nation capital – I can tell what Fire Nation nobility looks like, is all,” she bowed in obeisance. “My apologies. If you wish your identity to remain a secret, then a secret it shall remain. Now, please lie down.”

Hesitantly, Azula lowered herself to the bed. As Oisha dipped the cloth in water and began to gently wash Azula’s forehead, every instinct in her body screamed at her to jump out, twist away, strike Oisha, do anything but simply let a complete stranger touch her in a such a weak, vulnerable state. She fought those urges down as best as she could, tried to give no outward sign of her discomfort.

After a few more minutes, the tension in the room became unbearable, and Azula spoke up. “Why?”

“Hm?” The lady paused in her work. “Why what?”

‘Why are you here? If what you told me is true, if you really were a Royal Guard, then what are you doing out here in some backwater Earth Kingdom village, working with a healer?’ A thought flitted through her mind. “Are you some sort of espionage mission?” Even as she spoke she knew that it didn’t make sense – there was nothing of value here worth spying on.

Oisha’s face remained calm as she dipped the cloth into the basin again. “Well, first, this place has already been Fire Nation territory for nigh on three decades, so no, they don’t need a spy of any sort. As for why I am here…. Well, it’s a bit of a story.”

Azula barked out a harsh laugh. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s true, I suppose.” Oisha hesitated. “It’s been nearly fifteen years, hasn’t it. Back then, Fire Lord Azulon still reigned in the capital, and I was a Royal Guard at the palace after having proven my worth in combat. My parents were common folk and they were proud of me – to be able to serve
in such close proximity to the Fire Lord was a high honour for our household.

“But then,” she paused in her work, her face shadowed. “My hometown – it got implicated in a plot against the Fire Lord – something about aiding and abetting dissidents and insurgents. Overnight, my village vanished – and I never saw my family again.” She paused, reaching up to dab at the corner of her eye. “I’m sorry, it’s just… I still don’t really know what became of them.”

Lying on her bed, Azula continued to stare silently at her until she continued.

“Well, they knew I was from that town, and they also knew I had been serving there for too long to have been part of anything that happened, but I was still no longer trustworthy. So they had me demoted to a common footsoldier and sent to the frontlines of the war.

“I suppose I was confused, and more than a little upset. All the friends I’d made in the palace were no longer around, and being a Royal Guard was far different from being a footsoldier who was engaged in constant battles,” Oisha was no longer even pretending to work anymore as she gazed off into the distance, eyes lost in memory. “More than anything, I was angry. Angry that my parents, whom I knew were completely loyal, had been taken away. Angry that I had been forced into a strange, alien situation that I didn’t know how to adapt to.” She paused again.

“Well, I spent a couple of years fighting, until the 3rd Battle of the Valley of Dust. My company had been assigned to make a surprise strike against the Earth Kingdom forces, to try and cut off their troops. That battle went badly for us – so badly that as far as I know, there weren’t enough survivors and they disband my entire troop.

“During that battle, I was wounded in the leg; you might have noticed my walking stick. We were trying to retreat then, and they left me behind after that sword wound. They thought I would slow them down too much, so they just… left me to die,” Oisha closed her eyes. “I would have died if Yi hadn’t found me.” She chuckled, a soft melodious sound in the dusty room.

“Think about it – a young Earth Kingdom citizen who’s had nearly a hundred years of hatred and anger built up against us for attacking his home country, and yet when he found an unconscious, dying soldier of the Fire Nation, he simply brought her to his home and took care of her until she was well enough again. He was never anything but kind and gentle with me – to him, I had been injured, and so he would help me, and that was all there was to it.” Oisha shook her head, “It took nearly six months for my leg to be healed enough for me to walk,” unconsciously, she ran a hand down the side of her robe. “During that time, none of my officers – no one from the Fire Nation – came to look for me. They had just assumed me dead. And after he diagnosed me well enough to leave him, well I – I found I didn’t want to.” A tiny smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “So I stayed here. I stayed as his assistant, and helped him run his business. And after a while, I – guess you could say it progressed naturally from there,” a blush tinged her cheeks. “And now here I am. Yi is… he’s the kindest, gentlest, most forgiving soul I’ve ever met.”

“I see,” Azula said in a low controlled voice. The burning sensation in chest had been growing steadily throughout the woman’s recounting of her life story, and now she almost felt like she was about to burst. “So in the end, you’re nothing but a traitor.”

“What?” Oisha’s eyes widened. “I–”

“How dare you?” Fighting against the sudden dizziness, Azula yanked herself upright, letting all her rage out in a torrent. “How dare you! That you, a daughter of the Fire Nation, would even consider lowering yourself to such a level! Don’t you have any self-respect? You abandoned your standing, your birthright, your nation for some filthy healer from the Earth Kingdom and his run down shack of a clinic? How on earth – why would you –” A series of coughs wracked her body, forcing her to
cut off her tirade, and when it had finally subsided, she glared murderously at Oisha who was completely still, her eyes wide and her face pale.

“You disgust me,” she finally whispered. “Get out of my sight.”

Silently, Oisha gathered her things turned and left the room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

Alone, Azula sank back onto the bed, coughing.

(X)

“Uncle?” Zuko creaked the door open. “How are you feeling?”

His Uncle sighed. “About as well as can be expected. I will say that this Yi really knows his work. *And* his tea.” With a chuckle, he turned to pick up the cup that had been left at his bedside. “Come on, Zuko, join me for a drink.”

Zuko sighed and entered the room. Settling himself onto the creaking chair by his Uncle’s bed, he accepted the tea cup and brought it to his lips, taking a cautious sip. “It’s… not bad.” He finally said.

“Indeed. It’s fantastic!” His Uncle happily drained his cup and set it down again. Meanwhile, Zuko stared at the brew in his hands. “Uncle…” he began after several seconds.

“Yes, Zuko?”

“What Azula said… was it true? Have you really been trailing us all the way from the resort?”

“Well, there were a few times I had to make detours, but, yes, more or less.”

Zuko hesitated. “But… why? I thought you’d accepted your status as a fugitive. *You* were the one who told me to go with Az!”

“Well, yes, I was, but…” Iroh closed his eyes. “I was… worried about you, Zuko. I wanted to be nearby, so that if you ever needed my help, I would be there for you.”

Zuko shook his head. “And here I was, worried about *you* instead.” He said softly.

“I know I told you this at the North Pole already, but ever since Lu Ten…” One hand reached up to grasp his shoulder.

“I know, Uncle.” Zuko reached over to hold his Uncle’s hand as well, and a brief smile graced his features. “You don’t have to say it. I know.”

Iroh stared down at his bandaged body. “I do not think I could bear to lose another son.”

Zuko nodded. “You don’t need to worry, Uncle. I promise this will all work out. Once we capture the Avatar and I’m allowed to return home, I’ll find some way to fix all this. I’ll explain what really happened at the North Pole, and then you’ll be free to come home as well. I… I promise.”

His Uncle barely seemed to hear him. Finally, he looked up into Zuko’s eyes, and the Fire Prince was stunned at the intensity of his gaze.

“Prince Zuko. Have you ever asked yourself why you want to capture the Avatar?”

“Why I…” He paused, wrong-footed. *Where did that come from?* “What do you mean?”
“Let us take your sister. She wants to capture the Avatar, and she wants you to take the credit, so that you’ll be allowed back into the Fire Nation. That is her choice and her decision. But you? Why do you want the Avatar captured? What do you gain from this?”

“Why? B – but…” Zuko paused, flustered. “T – the Avatar is the enemy of the Fire Nation; as long as the Avatar exists we can never truly-“

“I didn’t ask for propaganda slogans, Prince Zuko. I asked for why you want to capture him.”

The young prince was quickly becoming flustered – as well as frustrated. “I – the Avatar’s capture, it… I’ll be allowed to return home, and…”

“Is that it? Are you saying that you’re selfish enough to sacrifice the future of a young boy for your own? Him, and his friends? Are their combined worth somehow less than yours?”

“I – I don’t -! W – why are you asking me this now, Uncle? You never said anything about this before! A- and my sister! You yourself acknowledged Az’s reasons, so why isn’t mine good enough?”

“You and I both know what Azula is like, Prince Zuko. There is no need to ask questions about her,” his Uncle’s eyes were boring into him with an intensity he had never seen before. “And I am the one asking the questions now. Your turn can come later, but first – Why do you want to capture the Avatar? Why?”

“Be – because I-“ Zuko halted, nearly stumbling over his own words. “Because I want my honour back, all right?! I want to be able to go home again! I want everything that was lost to me on that day returned! Is that good enough for you, Uncle? Is that too selfish as well?” His temper was well on its way to spiralling out of control.

But Iroh merely shook his head once. “Your honour. Remind me, Prince Zuko, why were you banished?”

“What? I–” He bared his teeth. “Don’t play with me, Uncle. You know why! You were there! You heard Father!”

“Refresh my memory.”

Why was his Uncle being so ridiculously obtuse? “I spoke out of turn in a war council meeting that I wasn’t supposed to be in. Father took that as an insult to his standing and challenged me to an Agni Kai. After he won, he had me stripped of my honour and banished,” he said tightly. “There, Uncle. Any other questions?”

“And how,” his Uncle said in a low tone. “Is capturing the Avatar related to any of that?”

Zuko’s eyes widened. “What are-“

The door behind him swung open. “I’m sorry,” Yi said. “But I’m afraid the patient really needs his rest. Master Lee, if I could ask you to wait outside…”

Zuko hesitated, glanced at his Uncle, who had sank down onto the mattress and closed his eyes, and then at the physician again, before shaking his head and heading out.

(X)

He had scarce stepped out into the evening sun when he saw Mai standing in front of him, her gaze
narrowed and her arms folded.

“We need to talk.”

“Mai?” He said weakly. “This really… this isn’t a good time.” And it was true. His head was whirling with so much thoughts and questions that it would be a small miracle if he could concentrate on anything.

“Oh, and when has it ever been a good time?” She snapped. “The past month, it has never been a good time with you. You’re always busy with something that apparently couldn’t wait for a five minute chat with me. So, what is it now?”

Too much. Everything his Uncle had just said to him, flashes of some hidden meaning he couldn’t really grasp, a niggling feeling that he was missing something about the Avatar at the back of his mind, his Uncle and his sister’s condition, and now this. With a groan, he sank onto a nearby bench, head in his hands.

Mai had apparently noticed the genuine discomfort he was showing, because she relaxed ever so slightly, the peeved expression on her face lessening somewhat. “What’s the matter, Zuko? What happened?”

He almost opened his mouth and spilled everything to Mai right then and there. Everything his Uncle had said, everything he didn’t understand… Almost. But somehow, he didn’t think Mai would understand.

He wasn’t sure anybody would understand.

“I’ve… just been given a lot to think about.” He said. It was a lame line, and he could tell it didn’t cut any ice with the quiet girl.

“You know, you’ve been giving me a lot to think about, too.” Mai stated flatly. But she turned and settled herself down next to Zuko. “I’ve been kept wondering the past few weeks have been all about.”

“Huh?”

Mai shifted her gaze to him. “Please don’t tell me you really haven’t noticed.” Her tone was still hard, but even though Zuko had never considered himself particularly perceptive when it came to the opposite sex, he could tell there was a deeper layer behind Mai’s words.

She was… Agni, she was afraid.

But afraid of what? Why would she be afraid… that Zuko thought that there wasn’t anything wrong over the past month, where he had been avoiding her and trying not to let himself get distracted by her…

Oh. Oh no.

“Mai,” he said, quickly, and perhaps a trifle desperately. “I’m not trying to avoid you or anything.”

“Could have fooled me.”

“Okay, I mean, maybe I was trying to avoid you, but not for the reasons you think. It’s not that I didn’t enjoy spending time with you or anything like that. In fact, I did enjoy spending time with you. I enjoyed it so much that it… it became a little too much.”
The only visible response was a single raised eyebrow.

“Mai, you know that we’re on this quest to capture the Avatar, and…” he broke off momentarily as his last, frustrating conversation with his Uncle came to the fore again but he quickly shoved it aside. “And… and I needed concentrate on this. I can’t… afford distractions. That’s not to say you are a distraction – I mean, normally. But now I can’t afford to let my mind wander and I…” He paused, out of things to say. “Please don’t be mad.” He finally said softly.

Mai continued to watch him for a very long time, and Zuko was sure he could feel sweat trickling down his forehead. Finally, she closed her eyes and shook her head once.

“You,” she said calmly, “Are such a dork.”

“Ah – I… huh?”

“Why didn’t you just say something? Did you really think I wouldn’t understand?” Shifting her gaze to the sunset, Mai leaned back against the wall. “I didn’t know why you were pulling yourself away – I thought it was my fault, somehow.”

Zuko laughed weakly. “Well, sometimes it’s not you, and the other guy is just a big jerk.”

A smile briefly flitted across her face. “Maybe.”

A comfortable silence descended upon the two of them, and they sat there in silence, watching the sunset. Then Mai shifted slightly and sighed, “Orange is such an awful colour,” she muttered.

Zuko smiled.

(X)

“Az?”

She glanced up from her book. “Yes, Zuzu?”

He stared down at the ground. “I… uh, I still can’t figure out how to do the form properly, so…”

She remained where she was, although a smile began to spread across her face.

“So… uh… could you show me how?” A pause. “Please?”

“Well, okay.” Snapping the book shut, Azula stood and laid it at her side. “But remember, you owe me.”

“All right, all right.”

“Okay, now, the first thing to do is to make sure your stance is correct…”

Chapter End


Thanks for reading. Please review.
Hello, all. I’m back.

Here’s another chapter.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

“Az?”

She cracked open one eye as she heard the knocking in the doorway. “What is it?”

Zuko stepped into the room, a hesitant look on his face. “How are you feeling?”

She reached up and rubbed her forehead wearily. “Fine. I told you I could just sleep it off. We didn’t need to come to a doctor after all.”

He shrugged. “Well, the doctor doesn’t agree with you. He says you’re not to leave for at least another three days.”

She glowered at him. “Three days? Zuko, I have been here for a week! Doing nothing! He won’t even allow me to train! Meanwhile, who knows what the Avatar and his gang are up to right now! They could be in Ba Sing Se right now for all we know! We’re wasting time here,” she finished sourly.

Zuko sighed and looked out the window. “Actually, I wanted to ask you about Oisha.”

“Who?”

“The doctor’s wife.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What about her?”

“Have you gotten the feeling that she’s, uh, she’s avoiding you?”

“So what if she is? It’s not my job to care what random -traitorous- peasants think of me,” Azula dismissed the question with a wave. “More importantly, what have Mai and Ty Lee been doing? Have they been able to figure out anything?”

“Well, a group of merchants mentioned seeing the boy with arrow tattoos going into the Si Wong desert,” Zuko paused. “I guess that means we’ll head for the desert next.”

“No.”

“What?"

“The desert is a vast, seemingly endless expanse of land with absolutely no landmarks whatsoever. I am not wandering around that place on the off-chance that we run into him.” Azula rubbed her forehead. “If he’s entered the desert, he’ll need to come out again. All we need to do is determine where.”
“All right, so I guess a trip to that oasis is in order. Maybe we could find out what he wanted to do there.”

Azula was silent.

“…Az?”

“Zuko,” she sighed. “I’ve been thinking, and I’ve come to the conclusion… when we find the Avatar, we’re going to have to kill him.”

“What? But we—Father wanted me to capture him!”

“Yes,” Azula acknowledged with a nod. “And that would be because we thought we could figure out a way to contain him. But,” she stared out the window, the memory fresh in her mind. “When we fought him in that town, when he… powered up and went into his super mode—”

“I don’t think that’s the correct name for it, Az.”

“We can figure out the correct technical term later. The point is that when he’s in that form, his power is too much for me to handle, and I’m not too proud to admit that,” the lightning he’d created had been so far above her own that the very idea of comparing them was laughable. She took a deep breath. “I don’t think even Father could handle something like that.”

“But he can’t control it! I’ve seen him do that a few times before— he doesn’t seem to know how to activate it by choice.”

“That just makes him even more dangerous. If such an ability can’t be controlled, even by the wielder, then we have no way of predicting or properly countering it,” she clenched her fists. “If that uses that form again, I don’t think any jail or cell in the world could hold him. We’d always be worrying about whether he’d escape.

“By contrast, if we actually do kill him, he’ll reincarnate into the Water Tribes. We can hunt him or her down as a baby—”

“And then kill him again?”

She shrugged. “If we need to. Then it’ll be the Earth Kingdom’s turn. Admittedly it’ll be trickier, but if we can gain jurisdiction of the Earth Kingdom before the Avatar reincarnates into it, we should be able to locate him again. After that, the Avatar gets reborn into the Fire Nation. We could raise him to be on our side, and if that doesn’t pan out, we’ll just kill him again.”

“But that would mean he just reincarnates into…” Zuko trailed off, realization striking him.

“Into a race that no longer exists,” Azula said briefly. “Thereby ridding us of the Avatar forever. It’s going to be a long and tedious process, but this is the first step. Besides,” she smiled. “Father didn’t ask you to kill all incarnations of the Avatar before you return home, so after that you can just leave it to our soldiers.”

Zuko looked away, conflicted. “But… killing the Avatar?” He shook his head. “I mean… I always thought that I’d just have to bring him home.”

“Plans do change.”

Zuko was silent for a few moments longer. She raised an eyebrow. “Zuko? Anything the matter?”
“I just… never thought about actually having to kill him,” Zuko swallowed. “Az, he’s a twelve year old boy…” he trailed off into an uneasy silence

“Please don’t tell me you’re going soft,” she said warily. “If it galls you that much, I’m more than willing to be the one to put a lightning bolt through his back. The point is that we’re going to need to remove him as a threat,” she paused and added, almost as an afterthought, “besides, death is probably more merciful than what we were planning to do anyway.”

“Huh?” Zuko looked at her, confusion on his face.

She sighed. “Zuzu, please don’t tell me that in the past three years you’ve never once stopped to think about what would happen if you’d actually succeeded in capturing the Avatar.”

“Well, I – I just assumed that we’d throw him in prison or – or something.”

“Or something,” she repeated with a snort. Sighing, she glanced upwards and dug into her memory. “Hands and feet are to be amputated in order to prevent any controlled bending. A single ten-by-ten cube cell constructed entirely out of metal to prevent earthbending. Dry air to be pumped into the room constantly and just enough water as rations that would keep him alive in order to prevent waterbending. An airlock system with a pump that can be disabled at a moment’s notice in order to prevent Firebending or airbending. Also we’ll drop his daily rations through a hole in the ceiling to prevent him from coming into contact with anyone and possibly arousing their sympathy. There was also talk of putting out his eyes, which admittedly wouldn’t be really useful in terms of nullifying his bending, but hey, why not?” she finished and looked over to Zuko, who now looked rather green.

“All that for one kid?”

“All that for the Avatar,” she corrected. “Potentially the most powerful bender on the planet.”

Zuko still didn’t look entirely satisfied, so Azula sighed and tried again. “Zuko, this is what you’ve been looking forward to for the past three years. Don’t tell me you’re getting cold feet now, okay?”

Zuko’s chuckle was grim and without levity. ‘Don’t I know it. Even Uncle –“ and then suddenly he clammed, as if realizing that he was going down a path he really shouldn’t.

“Even Uncle what?” she raised an eyebrow.

“Nothing. It’s not important.”

She shook her head and let the matter slide. Zuko, Zuko, Zuko. When are you going to realize that you are a terrible liar? She kept her face impassive as she reached over and seized the cup of water at her bedside to take a drink from it. I don’t know what Uncle’s been talking to Zuko about, but if it’s making him doubt himself, then it can’t be anything good.

She sighed as she set the cup back on the bedside table, and took a look outside her window at the sun shining outside. Time to take matters into my own hands, then.

(X)

“You’re sure you want to leave now?” Yi questioned as he followed her to the door. “Your case of the flu was a rather bad one – you really shouldn’t be up for another couple of days.”

“Yes, I know about your misgivings,” Azula cut him off with a wave of her hand. “But I need to leave urgently. Thank you for your help, doctor.”
Yi was clearly unconvinced. “And what of your, ah, your uncle? You’re leaving him here?”

“Yes, we’ve already said our goodbyes,” she lied. “His injuries are rather severe, aren’t they? I’d have preferred to bring him along with us, but until he’s fully fit to travel, I believe leaving him in your care will be best for everyone involved.” I never thought knowing Uncle’s napping schedules would come in handy. Just more evidence that it pays to be prepared, I suppose.

“Azula!” Ty Lee called from the doorway. “Everything’s been packed onto the mongoose-dragons. We’re ready to go!”

“All right,” she called back and turned to the doctor. “So that’s two gold pieces for our stay here so far, and another two pieces to cover my uncle’s stay for another two weeks or so, as well as all the medicines.” She pressed the coins into the healer’s palm. “Take good care of my uncle, please.”

“Of course,” he nodded and bowed slightly. “Safe travels.”

With a nod, she turned and stepped out into the sunlight, ready to head for her mount – until a soft cough at her side drew her attention.

Oisha gave her a smile that held the faint traces of hesitation as she held out a tightly wrapped bundle from which the faint smell of warm food could be detected. “For your journey,” she said softly. “It… it should help you keep your strength up… milady.”

Azula paused, glanced over to where Zuko, Mai, and Ty Lee were looking at her expectantly, and then back again at the bundle being offered to her. With a deep sigh, she reached out and plucked it from Oisha’s hands.

“Thank you,” she said curtly as she turned away from Oisha and towards her companions. “Everyone ready?”

Zuko glanced up at the clinic. “I hope Uncle will be okay.”

“He’ll be better off staying in here than following us halfway across the Earth Kingdom with those wounds on his body,” she pointed out as she stashed the bundle she’d received onto the back of her mount. “You’ve had a week to see how the doctor works – you know Uncle is in good hands.”

Zuko nodded. “I guess,” he acknowledged, although he couldn’t shake the reluctant look from his face.

Azula shrugged it off – he’d get over it soon enough. “Everyone ready? Than let’s head out.” Next stop, the oasis.

(X)

“Ah, Yi.” Iroh smiled at the doctor as the door creaked open and he stepped into the room again. “Thank you once again on the prompt delivery of your tea.”

“Of course,” the doctor smiled back. “It helps to soothe your lungs and body – it is important for your speedy recovery.”

“And it tastes heavenly!” He smiled as he picked the cup up and took a long sniff of the fragrance. “I’ve heard that the ingredients for this particular blend are hard to come by in this region, though. Will that be a problem?”

‘Not at all,” Yi replied. “I keep a ready supply of it on hand at all times due to its medicinal
properties – and your niece was kind enough to pay me for any possible expenses before she left.”

Very slowly, Iroh set the tea cup down and looked at the doctor. “I’m sorry, but could you repeat that last line?”

(X)

“So this is the Misty Palms Oasis,” Azula said tiredly. “I can’t say I’m impressed.”

It had been a week since they’d set out from the doctor’s clinic, and now they were staring down at a dry, dusty town, surrounded by people milling about all over the place. Exactly the sort of environ Azula hated with a passion.

“Hey!” Ty Lee’s voice cut through her musings. “There’s an ice block there! Right in the middle of the oasis!” Her voice dropped to conspiratorial levels, as if she was imparting a great secret. “I bet it’s cold.”

Azula ignored her.

“Whose turn is it to guard the mounts?” She questioned as she stepped down from her own mongoose dragon.

“I don’t really think anyone will try anything,” Mai said. “Not with so many other people about.”

“Yeah, this is as close to a commerce hub that you’re going to find in this area,” Zuko said. “I don’t think they’ll care too much if we bring them into town.” Silently, Azula noted how quickly Zuko had spoken up in defence of Mai’s opinions. Had they somehow patched things up? Well, she wasn’t going to press the issue unless she could foresee it becoming a problem, so she simply shrugged.

“Have it your way.”

After tying down the mongoose-dragons, they entered the town, splitting up quickly to find see what they could find. Or at least, that was what Azula did. After a few questions, she had determined that people had seen a massive, white-furred beast flying in several days ago – and that it had entered the Si Wong desert after that. Well, Azula already knew that fact, and so she tried to see if she could figure out anything more.

Another piece of the puzzle had been a man – apparently a professor from a university in Ba Sing Se. He’d been to the oasis before on several occasions already, apparently, and after several trawls through the desert, always searching for something. And after his latest appearance, he’d departed with the Avatar.

That gave Azula some food for though. What would a professor want with the Avatar? More to the point, why would the Avatar follow the man into the desert, or alternatively, allow the man to tag along on their journey?

According to the local populace, whenever the professor came back from the desert he would always be dejected for a period of time – the obvious answer, then, would be that he had been looking for something, and had been unable to find it. But why would the Avatar now venture into the desert alongside the man?

Unless he thinks whatever he’s looking for would be of mutual benefit to the both of them. Some forgotten knowledge of bending arts, perhaps? She knew the sandbenders of the region were technically earthbenders, but the style they practised was really closer to airbending. Maybe there were other skills like that – and the Avatar would be just the person who’d want to seek them out.
Well, that was a possibility. The second was what to do about it. After buying a drink from the local canteen and finding a quiet corner near the back, Azula closed her eyes and pondered the possibilities as she drank.

The first was that the professor and the Avatar did not find anything and once more came out empty-handed. That would mean that they would leave the desert again, and the professor would likely come back to the oasis to rest, recuperate, and find the next group willing to allow him along for the ride. But more importantly, would the Avatar follow him? Or would he simply drop the professor off somewhere and be on his merry way?

She hesitated, and then shook her head. No. If the Avatar had a modicum of common sense, he wouldn’t be staying in any single place for too long in case the Fire Nation got wind of it and came after him again. She knew from Zuko that he apparently didn’t like villagers and civilians getting caught in the crossfire, so he would seek not to make himself a target – at least, not in any populated area.

So that meant that staying in the oasis and waiting wouldn’t work. Now, where would the Avatar go instead? She suspected that whatever his destination may be, it wouldn’t change much even if he found what he was looking for in the desert, so at least that was somewhat easier to anticipate.

She opened her eyes into a frustrated glare. If only she knew what the Avatar was looking for, she might be able to get the drop on him! *Think, Azula. What would an Avatar and a professor from Ba Sing Se want to fi- Azula paused and blinked. A professor from… Ba Sing Se.*

**Ba Sing Se.** The last great bastion of the Earth Kingdom. If the Avatar wanted a safe haven to hide in, what better place than there? At least until he had mastered earthbending and needed to venture out again to find a Firebender teacher – and good luck with that, she thought sourly. In fact, this trip might all be for the sake of currying favour with the professor so he could pull the strings necessary to get them into the city itself!

She pursed her lips. **Ba Sing Se had withstood a hundred years of assaults from the Fire Nation, and the Fire Nation had decided to leave it alone for the time being – although she’d heard rumours shortly before she departed the capital that War Minister Qin had put some sort of scheme (and contraption) into motion for breaking through the wall. But even if that were the case, Azula knew she couldn’t involve outside Fire Nation troops in this endeavour – it had to be a quiet affair so Zuko could receive the credit without too many questions.**

Azula blew a sigh out and stood. She was now convinced that the Avatar was indeed headed for Ba Sing Se – and equally convinced that she had to – *had to* – intercept him before he got there. She would need to procure transportation across the desert-

Abruptly, the room exploded into a hubbub of excited yells and shouts. After blinking once, Azula quickly sprang into action, trying to discern the source of the disturbance.

*(X)*

*Five minutes earlier…*

“So, where’s Zuko?” Ty lee questioned Mai brightly as the two of them entered the welcome shade of the watering hole.

Mai gave Ty Lee an odd look. “How should I know?”

“Well, the two of you have been spending more time together lately.” She shrugged. “So I just
“‘Spending more time together’ is not the same as ‘joined at the hip’. He left earlier – something about some fruit the merchants were selling having caught his eye,” Mai shrugged and settled herself onto the nearby table. “Anyway, you brought me here because you said you wanted a drink and you’d misplaced your coin pouch, so hurry up.”

“Okay!” Ty Lee quickly made her way to the bar. “Wow! There are so many fruits to choose from, here! I’m not sure which to pick!”

Mai tried to rein in a sigh of impatience while the bartender shrugged. “Why not go for the fruit punch special? A mix of our best flavours!”

“Really? Okay! What do you want, Mai?”

“Whatever. Mango.” She pointed to the first fruit she saw and turned away, already bored. A moment later, she brought out two coins and dropped them on the counter.

Several seconds later, they were seated, and Ty Lee was happily slurping away.

“This stuff is delicious!”

Mai took a short sip. “Too sweet.”

Ty Lee rearranged her face into a pout. “You should learn to enjoy more things, Mai. You’re always so gloomy, you know that?”

“I don’t have many things to not be gloomy about,” she replied. “Just hurry up and finish your drink, okay?”

“Hey! Fire Nation Wanted posters!” Came a rather rough voice from behind the two of them. Instantly, Mai tensed and looked over her shoulder. Two people were conversing silently, and as first glance they looked so far apart from each other in terms of personality and temperament that she wondered how those two could ever deign to work together.

Then again… she snuck a glance at Ty Lee before returning to eavesdropping.

“So?” The neater and more refined looking (not that that was saying much) of the two said. “We’re looking for their daughter, not some random Fire Nation exile.”

Exile? Mai blinked and slid a knife out from her shirt sleeve, trying to remain inconspicuous. By now Ty Lee had cottoned on to the fact that something was up.

“Yes, but I’m telling you – I’ve seen the guy! Just outside a couple minutes ago, in fact! There’s no way to mistake that scar on his face!”

Well, this wouldn’t do at all. Silently, Mai considered her options. She could simply stand up, turn around, and pin them to the wall with knives, and she was certain Ty Lee wouldn’t terribly mind helping her out in this endeavour. But this would draw attention to her and why she had attacked the men seemingly without provocation. Mai suspected that neither Azula nor Zuko would be overjoyed to learn about what happened here.

So, they’d need a way to slow the two bounty hunters down, and without drawing attention to herself. Sitting upright in her chair, Mai snuck a glance to the other patrons of the area. Mostly the rowdy type that hung out here because they couldn’t make a decent living elsewhere. And a couple
of sandbenders, but those hardly counted.

*Should I act drunk? Does this place even serve alcohol?* Standing and turning, Mai regarded the two men curiously before stumbling over to them.

“What’s that you have?” She said in what she hoped was a friendly tone as she peered over their shoulders. The two men started and half-turned, the taller of the two of them attempting to stuff the poster he’d torn from the wall into his pouch.

“Hey!” She continued in an unnaturally bright and chipper voice. *How does Ty Lee do this so naturally?* “I think I know that guy! I just saw him a couple minutes ago!”

“Be quiet, you fool!” The rougher-looking one hissed. “Do you want to-“

“I bet we’d get a lot of GOLD for apprehending him!” Ugh, even she could tell how unnaturally shrill her voice was sounding now.

Reactions did not disappoint. Instantly, heads whipped around to stare at the two men still clutching onto the wanted poster. Quickly, Mai backed up a couple of steps, hoping that it would distract them long enough.

As an all-out brawl to get their hands on the wanted poster (or at least to catch a glimpse of what the person on it looked like) ensued, Mai quickly backed up to the table where Ty Lee had been calmly finishing her drink all this while. Somewhere in the corner of her mind, she noted that the bounty hunters were apparently earthbenders.

She was just turning to leave when she felt a strong grasp on her arm. Instinctively, she started to twist away from her captor until she realized it was Azula, and that she had seized Ty Lee too.

Quickly, the princess of the Fire Nation dragged the both of them out of the cantina, away from the commotion.

It wasn’t until they were safely away from the brawl that Mai noticed Azula had been looking at her with a funny look on her face. “What?” She asked, somewhat self-consciously.

“I didn’t know you had something like that in you,” her friend replied bluntly.

Mai simply shrugged noncommittally.

“Were you in there as well, Azula?” Ty Lee questioned as they began walking away from the place. “I didn’t see you.”

“That would because I didn’t want to be seen. Now go find Zuko. We’re leaving as soon as I can secure transportation through the desert.”

Mai didn’t bother to ask why exactly Azula felt the need to head through the desert; with a nod of acknowledgement, she turned through the rather small town, keeping an eye out for him.

They spotted him shortly after, gazing somewhat forlornly at what Mai took to be a souvenir shop.

Ty Lee bounded ahead. “Hey, Zuko! Azula says we need to get going!”

“You’ve become rather popular here.” Mai followed up dryly.

To his credit, he was able to catch the underlying meaning and hastily fell in step with them. As they walked down the street, Mai lay her hand on his shoulder.
“And by the way, you owe me one.”

At Zuko’s puzzled glance, she merely smiled serenely and continued walking.

(X)

Several hours later, Azula was starting to wonder if this was really the preferred method of transportation through the Si Wong desert. Sure, they were moving along at a decent enough pace, but the glider was rocking so much that she was currently suffering from a rather bad bout of nausea.

“Sorry,” one of the sandbenders who’d noticed her discomfort turned to her. “It’s usually not so bad as this, but the desert winds have been pretty bad recently.”

She didn’t bother to reply, and after a moment, the sandbender returned to his work of pushing the craft along.

At her side sat Zuko, who looked noticeably more at ease than she did – and she couldn’t keep a scowl from her face at this revelation.

“Are you feeling all right, Az?” At least he’d noticed her discomfort.

“Never better,” she mumbled. Zuko seemed to take it as a sign that she didn’t really want to talk about it, because he turned his gaze to the second, noticeably larger craft, trailing behind them.

“I hope Mai’s okay…” he muttered, low enough that he apparently thought Azula wouldn’t be able to hear him. The princess rolled her eyes. Her two friends were riding in the larger craft behind them, mostly because Azula trusted the sandbenders to not disappear over the horizon with their supplies and mounts about as far as she could throw them.

Of course it would probably be a bit more uncomfortable with the mongoose-dragons being kept in the hold and presumably being terrified out of their wits, but that, she felt, was a small enough price to pay.

“She’ll be fine, Zuko,” Azula said in a bored tone. “And even if she isn’t, she’s not really going to let anyone know it.” She’s as stoic as they come. A ‘well-trained’ Fire Nation noble girl. Azula rolled her eyes as the thought flitted through her head. “By the way, I heard from Ty Lee that you went shopping around the town?”

“Well, yeah. But I made sure I got the info I needed first!”

“That’s nice,” Azula nodded. “But why did you go shopping in the first place?”

Zuko remained silent, prompting Azula to look over at him. “Zuzu?” She questioned with a raised eyebrow.

“I wanted… I wanted to find something to buy for Mai,” Zuko finally admitted as he crossed his arms.

“Is that so?” Azula let out a brief chuckle as she looked away to the endless hills of sand. “You could probably do a lot better than a random watering hole in the middle of the Earth Kingdom.”

“Yeah, but they still had some stuff on sale. The real problem was… well, what does Mai like?” He looked over to Azula. “You know how she is, Az. Almost nothing catches her eye at all.”

She rolled her eyes again. “If whatever the gift is comes from you, I’m sure she’ll coo and bat her
eyes and claim how wonderful it is because you gave it to her.”

“I hope not.”

“Huh?” Now she was legitimately confused.

“Az, one of the things I like… no, one of the things I admire about her is that she always give it to me straight. She doesn’t lie to me to make me feel better – it’s sorta the same with you, actually. So if I give her something she doesn’t like, she’ll tell me,” he gazed off into the distance. “At least, I hope she would.”

The two were silent for several minutes until Azula leaned over slightly. “Well,” she began in a conspiratorial voice. “I happen to know that Mai loves a good fruit tart…”

(X)

“Never. Again,” Azula stated flatly as she hastily dismounted the glider.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Zuko glanced at her.

“Maybe in comparison to being trapped in an earthquake or something,” she grumbled and folded her arms. “Anyway, hurry up and get our stuff unloaded.”

“You should be able to find a populated town about an hour’s walk that way,” one of the sandbenders pointed. “Now, if you don’t mind, my pay, please. Five silver pieces, as promised.”

“What?” She laughed humourlessly. “Afraid I’ll just run off without giving your money or something?” She dropped the coins into the man’s hands. “Now, you and yours can be on your merry way after we finish unloading.”

Several minutes later, Azula watched as the sandbenders floated away in their craft.

“All right, we’ve managed to get through the desert. Now we just need to move to intercept the Avatar.”

“You really think he’ll be headed to Ba Sing Se?”

“Yes, and there’s every reason to believe that he’s making his way to Ba Sing Se with all speed, so we absolutely cannot afford to waste any time.”

(X)

“Cactus juice! It’s the quenchiest!”

(X)

“But, doesn’t he have that flying Bison of his?”

“He’s not going to simply fly straight into Ba Sing Se,” Azula pointed out. “Whenever the Avatar’s entered a town or settlement, he always leaves his bison outside and calls it when he needs it. And if he doesn’t fly in, he can only either enter through the main gates or the refugee ferries.”

“He’s not a refugee…”

“No, and neither is the professor,” clambering onto her mongoose-dragon, Azula drew out a map. “So they’ll probably fly near the main gate, get off the bison there, and then proceed in on foot. He’ll
also probably take a straight line to Ba Sing Se once he leaves the desert, so that means we have to intercept him somewhere round here,” she pointed.

“We’re going to have to cross the Serpent’s Pass to do that,” Mai noted. “That’s supposed to be extremely dangerous.”

“And we’ll be camping near Ba Sing Se itself,” Zuko mused.

“Plus, there’s a Fire Nation detachment near the river here, right? We’re trying to avoid those too.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” Azula replied dryly. “Otherwise, this is the best shot we have. The next thing would be infiltrating Ba Sing Se itself, but we can keep that on standby in case this plan doesn’t work out.”

And with that, the discussion ended.

Azula sighed and concentrated, increasing the strength of the campfire by just the tiniest bit. Just her luck to have drawn first watch of the night.

She was distracted by a rustling sound and she looked up.

“Ty Lee?” She questioned as she saw her friend making her way to the campfire. “Why are you still up? Your turn at watch isn’t up yet.” And you’re usually the first one to fall asleep. And snore. She was tactful enough not to say the last part out loud.

“I had trouble sleeping,” her friend admitted as she settled herself down by the campfire. “I… had some things to think about.”

Ty Lee? Thinking about things? That’s a first. Out loud, all she said was, “What about?”

Ty Lee remained silent for a few more minutes as she fiddled with her braid – a clear sign that she was nervous. Just as Azula was about to write it off as a lost cause, Ty lee abruptly blurted out, “Azula?”

“Yes?”

“Are… are we the bad guys?”

With a grunt of satisfaction, Iroh slid the last Pai-Sho piece into place. Across the table, his ‘opponent’ smiled.

“Welcome, brother. The White Lotus opens wide for those who know its secrets.”

“Yes, thank you. Now, I heard that there was quite a commotion in this place just a couple of days ago?”

“Yes, a rather bad one, as a matter of fact. Why?”

“Would you happen to know,” he slid a folded up piece of paper across the table. “If any of these four were involved?”
Thanks for reading. Please review.
A couple of action sequences in this one. A part of me wants to burn through these as quickly as possible so we can get to the more important plot points, but it’ll only work if things are properly built up, aren’t they?

I hope you enjoy what I have here.

Disclaimer: I own jack.

The Imperial Palace was a maze.

Literally.

Fire Lord Sozin’s decision to rebuild the Imperial Palace after it had been destroyed by Avatar Roku had also included the addition of a rather elaborate system of passageways, trick rooms, hidden doors, and whatnot; apparently he had been worried about assassins and wished to use the confusing layout of the place to his advantage.

And there HAD been assassins, especially after he’d started the war. Some people had come to him because they honestly believed the war would lead the nation down the path of ruin, others had come out of some misguided moral conviction that the war was wrong and that the Fire Lord had to be stopped before the atrocities could continue. Others were the usual power hungry idiots who wished to seize authority for their own.

Sometimes, as she sat in one of the numerous passages that crisscrossed their way through the palace, Azula wondered how effective all these secret hideaways really were. After all, if a child like her could find them, they couldn’t be that secure, could they?

But of course she wasn’t an ordinary child. She was Princess Azula of the Fire Nation – it only made sense that she’d be able to accomplish things that others could not.

And she was the daughter of Prince Ozai. That certainly couldn’t hurt.

She sighed. She’d discovered the first of the hidden doors that led through the underground passages only a couple of weeks ago, and the novelty of wandering around in the darkness was starting to wear thin. Turning around and heading for the nearest exit, she quickly decided that if she was going to get anything more out of this maze of tunnels than stumbling around with only the weak light of her Firebending for aid, she would need to be methodical about it. Maybe a map of the place – but then she would risk it getting discovered…

“Have you heard?”

Several steps from emerging into the quiet storeroom she knew the door in front of her would lead to, Azula paused. The female voice was unfamiliar to her, but then again, with so many servants and hired workers in the palace, that was no big surprise. Curious, she slowed her pace and sidled up closer to the door.

I wonder what this conversation is about, she thought. Probably just some idle gossip. Let’s see…

“The princess,” Azula nearly fell on her bum, which would have been utterly undignified for someone of her stature. “Last week, her mother got a dressmaker to come design a dress for her to wear to the Veteran Commemoration Dinner. Well, the princess took one look at the dress, and she set the dressmaker’s hair on fire!”

Azula remembered that. The dress offered to her had been hideous – she had been shocked that mother had ever thought such a thing worthy of being brought to her attention. She had been entirely justified in making her displeasure known – and a smirk crossed her face as she remembered the horrified scream the dressmaker had let out upon realizing that her hair had been set ablaze.

The second voice sighed and Azula brought her attention back to the conversation, “I wish I could say I was surprised, but that’s Princess Azula for you.”

“I know! Her brother’s such a quiet boy; honestly, he’s a little wimpy, but he’s good at heart. How did his sister end up like she did?”

“Who knows? Who knows what that little brat is thinking at all?”

Azula stood as if she had been turned to stone, her mouth hanging open in horrified shock. WHAT had that person just called her? She, a lowly servant, had dared to-

“Well, at least we can be glad she’s never going to get high enough on the ladder to make any real decisions. Can you imagine if someone like her became Fire Lord?”

“Agni forbid!” there was a light chuckle. “Even if General Iroh and Lord Lu Ten somehow passed away, her older brother would still take the throne over her.”

“You know, I heard that even her mother thinks that there’s something wrong with her.”

“Hey, put yourself in Lady Ursa’s shoes. Would you be happy having to raise a monster like her?”

A sudden increase in heat and light in the darkened alcove was what led her to realize that she had unconsciously loosed a breath of pure flame. Abruptly, Azula realized that she had clenched her fists and gritted her teeth so hard that they physically hurt. How… how dare they! How could these two lowly insects ever presume to speak of her in such a manner? Was this the opinion of the rest of staff as well? Why did they speak of her in such a flippant manner, lacking all the reverence and respect that was due her by birthright? Why did they act as if they had any right to judge her actions or behaviour?

And why… why did it hurt so much?

Before she could collect her thoughts and decide on the next course of action (it would likely have involved fire and a lot of screaming), she heard an indignant yell as the main door to the storeroom burst open.

“I HEARD THAT!” Azula blinked. That voice was –

“Prince Z – Lord Zuko!” The female’s voice was flustered.

“Zuzu?” Azula whispered to herself.

“You were talking about my sister, weren’t you? You just called my sister a monster!”
“Lord Zuko, I-“

“How dare you! My sister is not a monster! What gives you the right to judge her like that?”

“But-“

“Shut up! Don’t… don’t think that my dad isn’t going to hear about this!”

More silence, this time stretching on for an uncomfortably long period. Finally, she heard the sound of boots stamping away as Zuko apparently left the room. A moment later two more subdued pairs of footsteps indicated the maids were leaving as well.

Waiting until she was absolutely sure that no one else was in the room, Azula cracked open the door enough for her to wiggle out and hastily scurried back to her own room.

Later, she learnt that the two maids in question had been fired.

(A)

“Are… are we the bad guys?”

The question hung in the air uncomfortably for a long period of time as princess and acrobat sat looking at each other. Well, Azula kept her steady gaze on Ty Lee. Her friend, by contrast, was currently putting on a show of being extremely fascinated by a twig on the ground.

Finally, Azula shifted her position into a slightly more comfortable one and sighed. “And what, if I may be so bold as to ask, brought this question on?”

“Oh, n – nothing much. I was just… wondering.”

“Ty Lee, if you want me to answer this honestly, then you’re going to have to answer my questions honestly as well. That’s only fair, isn’t it?” the sarcasm in her voice was thick.

Her acrobat sighed “Okay, okay. It… kinda started back when we met the Avatar and his friends in that town. I don’t know the name, but he went all glowy and stuff and-“

“Yes, I know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, well, I fought the Avatar, and he… talked to me.”

Knowing Ty Lee, Azula thought, she would have been the one to initiate the conversation anyway. Out loud, she simply asked, “About what?”

“Well, he kinda sorta said that we were the bad guys. I mean, I didn’t pay much attention to something ridiculous like that!” she gave a fake giggle that trailed off remarkably quickly as she noticed the expression on Azula’s face. “At first, I mean,” Ty Lee hastily went on. “But then, I kinda started thinking about it. I mean, the Avatar’s an airbender, right? We kind of killed all his countrymen a hundred years ago. And – and I know the war is just and righteous and everything, but when we were travelling around in the circus I kinda saw a lot of the Fire Nation people mistreat the Earth Kingdom civilians. Sometimes they even hurt them for – for no good reason. So… so I was just wondering,” she finally trailed off into a miserable silence as her gaze came to rest on the earth once more.

Azula sighed as she shifted her attention briefly to the fire, making it flare out again. Satisfied that the blaze was strong enough, she turned back to Ty Lee.
“You’re right,” she said simply. “We are, as you so eloquently put it, the ‘bad guys’.”

Ty Lee’s expression was crestfallen. “But – but then…”

“I’m not finished. The Avatar is one of the bad guys too. So are his friends. So is the coward of an Earth King entombed up in Ba Sing Se. So are the fools huddled up north in their cities of ice and snow. They are all ‘bad guys’.”

Ty Lee was silent.

“Ty Lee, what I’m going to tell you is the truth. It is also extremely important. There is no such thing as a good person. There have only been, and there forever will only be, bad people. The only thing is that sometimes the bad people end up on opposing sides.”

Azula paused, took in a deep breath, and continued, “At the end of the day, people are selfish, self-serving creatures. Everyone wants to gain as much as they can for themselves. That’s why strength is needed; it’s what allows you to seize what you want, whenever you want.”

“But… but what about when people help each other? I mean, like now. We’re doing this to help Zuko, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Azula conceded. “I am doing this to help someone. But at the end of the day, I do this because this is what I want. I want Zuko to come home again. I want him to be happy. I want him to have his honour back. So I help him. It’s that simple. Someone who drops a pair of coins into a beggar’s bowl as he passes isn’t doing it because he’s selfless. He’s doing it because whatever nebulous system of morality he’s subscribed to has stated generosity and compassion,” she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “As values worth upholding and he does it for the feeling of moral satisfaction. Do you get it now? Everyone is selfish at their core.”

Ty Lee frowned, still trying to process what Azula had just told her. “I don’t think I’m selfish,” she mumbled.

“Oh, you’re not selfish?” there was a tone in Azula’s voice that trickled ice water down Ty Lee’s spine, and as she glanced up reflexively into her friend’s face she could see a quick flash of emotion that had fought its way out of her carefully composed expression – and suddenly they were no longer in the centre of the Earth Kingdom but within the ornate and decorated halls of the Fire Nation Palace, and a younger Azula was sitting on her bed, mouth open with surprise and eyes wide with hurt and shock.

“What do you mean, ‘you’re leaving’?”

“I…” she stammered and swallowed once. “I have to go,” she said, forgoing any attempts and casualness or deception – Azula wouldn’t have been fooled for a second anyway – and she stood up and walked – nearly sprinted – for her tent.

Alone once more, Azula closed her eyes, shook her head once, and turned to face the fire.

“We should be reaching the Serpent’s Pass soon.”

Zuko heard the words, gave a short grunt of acknowledgement – but his mind simply was not focused on the task at hand. Well, that wasn’t quite right. It would be more accurate to say that he was, in fact, pondering their task with immense trepidation.
“…when we find the Avatar, we're going to have to kill him.”

Zuko didn’t want to admit it, but his sister’s words troubled him far more than they should have. He had already been dedicated to hunting down the Avatar for three years; the step up towards actually killing the Avatar shouldn’t have been that big, right?

So why did this feeling of unease refuse to go away?

“…death is probably more merciful than what we were planning to do anyway.”

“Are you saying that you're selfish enough to sacrifice the future of a young boy for your own?”

He shook his head, frustrated. When had it become like this? Before, while on the ship, it had been a simple affair – hunt the Avatar down and capture him, and that would be that.

With an uneasy sigh, he reached up to rub wearily at his forehead as the mongoose dragons rounded the bend and the Serpent’s Pass finally came into view.

Along with the small group of travellers already taking their first steps onto the narrow walkway.

“What-” he started in surprise as he recognized the group in front of him, but Azula had already reacted faster than him, throwing her mount into a forward dash.

It wasn’t long before the tiny group noticed their pursuers and reacted accordingly, moving into battle stances. As the two groups neared, Zuko tried to force his doubts down into a dark corner of his heart.

He couldn’t afford to second-guess himself. Not now.

(X)

Even as Azula realized that they had somehow stumbled upon the Avatar again, she had noticed several oddities in the situation presented to them.

First and foremost was that the Avatar and his companions were, for whatever reason, travelling on foot. His flying bison was nowhere to be seen. That was odd enough.

Secondly, he had apparently picked up a few new companions along the way. A couple of Earth Kingdom people – and neither of them looked very much like someone who would the professor of a university. She pursed her lips – another newcomer near the back of their formation was unfamiliar to her, but her dress (and that ridiculous facepaint) marked her as a warrior of some kind.

She shrugged and dismissed the matter. If she turned out to be a decent fighter, it would be that much more pleasant to defeat her. As she neared, she let loose a bolt of lightning at the group – the blind earthbender was the first to react, quickly creating a wall that took the blast.

The Avatar was quickly summoning several bursts of air to hurl at her, but she was able to guide her mount to dodge most of them – and those she couldn’t she simply countered with her own fire blasts. At her side, Mai hurled a trio of daggers at the group – the Water boy quickly knocked them aside with his club. She briefly noted that the Avatar was motioning for the newcomers to move further up the pass – well, let them, she wasn’t interested in them except maybe as hostages – and snarled with impatience as she urged her mount faster – she was almost close enough, just a split second more and-

She released the reins on her mount and kicked upwards, launching herself into the air. As she did so
she swept her leg out, releasing an arc of flame across the entire group. Twisting in midair, she landed on both of her feet-

And staggered back slightly, eyes widening in surprise as a sudden rush of dizziness washed over her. *What in the world*— The Avatar was already charging at her, rocks leaping from the ground to form a gauntlet around his hand, and she dodged his hastily thrown punch.

Retaliating, she fired an expanding burst of flame at him, and he met it head on with a breath of air that burst away the flame. Briefly she noted that Ty Lee had gotten herself engaged in the fray as well, and focused all her attention on the Avatar.

Quick sweeps of wind were sent at her, and then the Avatar shifted his stance in a deliberate, almost clumsy movement – obviously trying for earthbending, he still wasn’t good enough to move into it naturally and so he telegraphed his attack from a mile away. Azula leapt forward as the ground where she’d been standing a moment before crumbled under her, bringing up a tiny dart of fire at the Avatar-

Then a pillar of water rushed at her from the side, and she was forced to break off her attack and veer backwards frantically. She glanced up, saw the waterbender bringing her arms up in a series of smooth, graceful motions, and from the wave that had crashed down around her tiny jets streamed forth, forcing her on the defensive.

*A waterbender’s effectiveness in combat is directly proportional to how much water they have available.* Azula ducked away as a whip of water lashed out at her. *And we’re right next to a massive lake.* She scowled as she saw the Avatar mimicking the waterbender and raising up his own gush of water to strike out with. *And there’s barely any room to manoeuvre here.* Of course, that wouldn’t be a problem for either the waterbender or an airbender.

Suddenly flame roared in between them as Zuko stepped forward, kicking at the ground and sending a jet of fire along the ground. Quickly, the waterbender summoned forth a tiny crest of water that caught the flame and quenched it, protecting herself from injury.

Granted a slight reprieve thanks to her brother’s timely intervention. Azula took a step back and several deep breaths, feeling a dull ache resonate through her entire body. This wasn’t right. She’d barely been in combat for a minute. There was no way she should be so drained so quickly. What was going on?

In front of her Zuko hurled a steady stream of flame at the Avatar, who replied in kind with a concentrated funnel of air that sent Zuko’s fire spiralling out in all directions. From behind, the waterbender was running up again, more water already gathering behind her. Snarling with anger, Azula pushed herself forward, gathering more fire into her fists. There was a battle to be fought. All other considerations took second place.

At first, Suki had been inclined to pay attention to the Firebender boy – the one who’d attacked her village before. She *would* have stepped forward to engage him, but her way was quickly barred by two of the girls who’d been travelling with him.

Now Sokka and her were engaged in fighting off a disturbingly energetic girl with a long braid hanging behind her. She had speed and agility – but then, so did Suki, and she was more than able to hold her own. At times, it almost felt like her opponent was hesitating, leaving herself open for split seconds that Suki, trained warrior that she was, couldn’t help but exploit.
Her fan swept down again, blocking another strike from her foe. As she did so, she twisted, her other arm coming up and aiming a strike at the midsection. Her opponent leapt backwards, pivoted on one foot, blocked a strike at her head from Sokka’s club and aimed a kick at her shin.

Quickly, Suki skipped backwards slightly – and let out a cry of alarm as the ground under her began to crumble. Before she could start to fall, however, the rock jutted out from the sheer cliff face, providing a platform for her to tumble somewhat inelegantly onto.

“Be careful!” she heard the earthbender – Toph – admonish. The blind girl was currently facing down another of the opponents – one with throwing knives aplenty in her arsenal – and despite her obvious handicap she seemed perfectly aware of the moment the knife thrower hurled her weapons, earth walls constantly raising themselves to shield her from the sharp implements.

On stable footing once more, Suki blocked a couple more blows from the braid girl and lashed out again with a well timed kick, knocking her back slightly. With a smile on her face, Suki began to take the offensive.

(X)

Aang couldn’t shake the feeling that something was just off about his opponents today. When he’d first realized that the group had somehow caught up with him again, he’d felt a rush of dread well up inside him – not least of which was because they had several bystanders that they were supposed to be protecting, and they would now be in danger because of him.

But they were several meters away, alarmed but not injured, and none of the Fire Nation people appeared interested in targeting them, which was a pleasant bonus.

More importantly, the fight wasn’t turning out anywhere near as hard as he’d thought it would be.

Part of it definitely had to do with his relatively recent ability to Earthbend, of course. In between it, his natural agility, and his airbending, the restriction of fighting on a narrow walkway barely affected him in the least. And if by some freak chance he fell into the water, he was proficient enough in waterbending to get out again. And so he was able to fight with relative abandon.

Katara being at his side was another massive plus. Before, whenever he’d faced down Azula or her minions, he’d done so alone, and usually against two people at the same time. Now, with her backing him up, the tables were finally even. Her presence at his side was a calming, soothing one.

But most of all, neither of his opponents were performing particularly well right now. Aang couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but he was absolutely certain that Zuko had been a harder fight the last time they’d met. And not to mention Azula – when he’d last faced her she had been able to shut him down with an almost contemptuous ease, but now she was clearly struggling simply to keep up with him. Her face was flushed, and there was sweat pouring down her brow, and her movements lacked the deadly, easy grace he’d come to associate with her.

Jumping over a wave of flame it’s not as strong as it was before, waved his staff quickly, a concentrated air shot shooting down at her. She dodged to the side, almost stumbling okay something is DEFINITELY wrong over her feet. She turned, one hand reaching up, but Katara was already striking at her, forcing Azula back until Zuko stepped in to aid her, orange fire blazing from his hands as he tried to get her to break off her attack.

Not if I have anything to say about that! Still in midair, he boosted himself forward slightly, landing in a crouch behind Zuko. Just as the Firebender realized that he had been flanked, Aang dropped into a crouch, sweeping his leg out and catching Zuko in a rushing wind that sent him tumbling – over
the edge of the cliff side.

Pausing long enough to make sure that Zuko had been able to grab hold of a stone to arrest his fall well, he’s not going to fall, but he’s also not going to bother us for a few minutes, so that’s a plus, Aang whirled to confront Azula, Katara at his side.

(X)

Not good. Azula thought dimly. She was currently on the defensive – a problematic enough situation from the get-go, given that the art of Firebending were woefully lacking in proper defensive techniques. The general philosophy was that a good offence made for the best defence, which served Azula well enough most of the time.

Now, though… she attempted a retaliatory fire blast, only for it to be quickly washed aside by one of the waves summoned up by the waterbender. Her blue eyes were narrowed in fury – and hatred. Why were her attacks so much weaker than normal? Her gaze flickered to where her brother was slowly pulling himself up over the ledge – she should be there helping him! But now these two… these two were barring her way.

She growled in anger, a low guttural sound. She should have seized one of the other companions earlier, used them as a hostage. One of them had looked heavily pregnant – perfect hostage material to prevent attacks. It was too late now though – to get to them would have required her to fight her way past the waterbender and the Avatar.

Why? Azula thought bleakly as she was forced back again. Why were all her attacks so ineffectual? Why was she so short of breath? Why did her muscles ache so much? Why?

Another water blast came at her, and Azula jerked to the side – a half second too slow. She was caught in the stomach and sent tumbling backwards. Shakily she tried to pull herself to her feet, but her ebbing strength finally gave way and she fell to the earth again. For a moment, the world around her faded in and out of focus as she felt a rush and rage, shame, and disgust wash over her.

She had lost.

(X)

Panting for breath, Zuko finally managed to pull himself back onto solid ground. With a shake of his head, he stood, ready to pull himself back into the fight.

Damn it all, he shouldn’t have been letting himself be distracted by his misgivings. Any potential issues could be dealt with later – first he had to get the Avatar, and everything else could come afterwards.

Quickly, he turned to the source of the conflict – and he was prepared to swear that his blood froze in his veins. The Avatar and his waterbending friend were standing over the limp form of his sister.

All of a sudden, all his doubts and misgivings, all of his internal rage and anger and resentment, everything flew away to be replaced by a single thought with complete clarity and the focus of a razor’s edge.

Protect Azula.

“Get away,” energy surged through him, painfully hot, and from the depths of his mind he remembered half forgotten lessons as his arms moved through a low, familiar arc. “From MY SISTER!” the last words were said as a bestial roar as he brought his hands together, and suddenly
there were streaks of cold blue light crackling across the air in wide, wild arcs, and the roar of an explosion that swept through the entire battle.

Suddenly the world began to swirl back into focus for him, and he could see the waterbender on her knees, one hand clutching a bleeding arm. The Avatar had apparently escaped injury, but that thought was driven to the back of his mind as he hurried over to his sister.

“Az!” he cried out. “Are you all-“

A croaking, watery sort of scream that sounded from behind him, and as he turned to confront the latest change in the situation, his eyes widened in alarm.

(I)

I guess we know why they called it the Serpent’s Pass. Sokka thought numbly as he stared at the immense form of the sea serpent rearing up behind them. “Suki? You’re the expert on giant sea monsters. How do we deal with this?”

“Just because I lived next to the Unagi doesn’t mean I know how to chase off every giant sea creature!” she retorted. “But why’s it even attacking us?”

“Maybe it doesn’t like us fighting on its home turf? At least we’re too high for it to lean over and eat us."

Just then, the creature lunged forward with a deep scream, slamming into the pass with a bone-shuddering force, causing the entire pass to wobble and shudder under the impact.

“I swear the universe waits for me to say these sort of things before it lets them happen,” Sokka muttered as he felt the ground sway under his feet. No, wait, not sway. The ground was crumbling!

Letting out a rather girlish scream (although he would later strenuously deny it ever happening) Sokka began running down the pass, trying to get onto more solid land. Later he would have realized that the more logical thing to do would have been to get off the pass altogether and back onto what counted as the mainland, but seeing Zuko as his gang come up from that direction had subconsciously sealed it off in his mind as enemy territory – not to be crossed upon pain of death.

Besides, it all seemed to be a moot point – even as he scrambled frantically, he could tell that he wasn’t going to make it, he simply wasn’t fast enough, and-

The crumbling ceased, and he could see Toph, feet sunk into the stone and arms outstretched, face screwed up in concentration as she stabilized the collapsing stone as best she could.

“HURRY UP!” she bellowed at him, and at that exact point in time Sokka had no objections whatsoever to her snappish attitude. Pouring all of his energy into his legs, he sprinted across onto the not-crumbling section of the past, unknowingly beating his personal best time in the hundred meter dash. Once across, he collapsed in a panting heap as Toph let go off the rock letting it tumble into the water with a thunderous roar.

“Everyone okay?” Aang questioned. “I think the serpent’s not coming back, so we’re safe.” It was true, too. Apparently ramming headfirst into a sheer stone cliff had taken more out of the serpent than it had realized it would, and with a final screech it sank back under the waves. Of the Fire Nation people, there was nothing to be seen.

“That was amazing,” Than said, his voice full of wonder. “Your skills in battle are incredible.”
“Yes, well, we’ve had plenty of practice,” his sister said sourly. “More than we’d like, really.”

“Yeah, but all’s well that ends well.” Toph said sardonically.

“All’s well?” Sokka rejoined. “We’ve still got a whole lot of Serpent’s Pass to cross over, its namesake is still around somewhere, and now we can’t even go back the way we came,” he said as he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Suki, back me up on this.”

Silence.

“Suki?” Sokka craned his neck, trying to see where his maybe-friend-maybe-girlfriend was. After a moment, the awful truth became apparent.

Suki was missing.

“I don’t think they’ll be able to find us if they come for us now,” Zuko said as he glanced over his shoulder. The party had retreated to a forested area, any were now in a small clearing, resting and figuratively licking their wounds.

Azula, meanwhile, hung her head and seethed with anger. They had been forced to retreat. They were the ones chasing the Avatar and they had been forced to escape and hide in order to avoid capture or injury. The sheer degradation and humiliation of it was so thick that she could practically feel it as a physical sensation in her body.

If only she hadn’t fallen ill earlier… if only she’d recovered sooner. If only that incompetent doctor had treated her better!

Still…. She glanced up at Zuko, a bitter smile on her face. “Zuko?”

“Hm? Anything the matter?”

“Thank you,” she said shortly. “For saving me.”

“Oh? Oh!” he flushed and nodded. “It was no big-“

“But,” she said smoothly. “Next time, use two fingers to direct the lightning instead of a fist – it helps you to control the aim better.”

He paused, surprised, and then nodded as a tiny smile made it’s way onto his face. After a brief moment, Azula gave him a tiny smile in return.

“Hey,” Mai said dully. “Not to interrupt your heartwarming moment or anything, but what do we do about her?” She gestured, and as one, all eyes turned to regard the form of the unconscious female warrior they had brought with them from the earlier battle.

As he walked down the hallway to the dining room, Zuko rubbed at his eyes sleepily. He’d slept in late again, which was a surefire way to ensure that Azula had already taken all the best parts of breakfast for herself. Oh, well, there was nothing to be done about it. With a sigh, Zuko rounded the door to the eating hall – and blinked in surprise.

Azula was sitting there, arms folded, and in front of her was an entire plate of lava cookies. His favourite! His mouth began to water at the mere sight of them. But then he frowned. that didn’t make
sense. They were Azula's favourite too – and even if they weren't, she'd have eaten all of them as a matter of principle. So why the full plate?

Just then, Azula caught sight of him. "There you are, Zuzu," she said. "I was beginning to wonder when you'd show up."

He rolled his eyes at his sister's usual attitude. "Some of us aren't morning people, Az."

"We're Firebenders, Zuzu. We're morning people by default."

"Whatever." he said, irritated.

"Anyway," she said as she pushed the plate of lava cookies towards him. "Here, these are for you."

"What? But why? Don't you like them?" then his expression narrowed. "You didn't fill these with salt or something, did you?"

"Please, Zuzu." She rolled her eyes. "I already did that trick. There's no fun in doing it twice, although I'll freely admit that expression on your face was absolutely hilarious. And yes, of course I like them."

"Then why are you giving these to me?"

She hesitated, and Zuko could have sworn he'd detected a hint of vulnerability in her golden eyes

"To say thank you," she replied softly.


Chapter End

I've realized that fight scenes that involved at least two people on both sides of the battle field can get very messy very quickly. Consequently, this chapter was a total pain to write, and I'm still not sure I got it down well enough.

Anyway, thanks for reading. Please review.
Heyo, all. I’m back.

Let’s get down to business.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

“Hey, Az.”

She sighed, turned back and looked at her brother. “What now, Zuko?”

Her older brother was looking at her with an uncertain expression on her face. Under ordinary circumstances she would have dismissed that as nothing unusual and returned to gazing out the window.

But of course nothing in their life was usual or unusual anymore.

And ever since their mother had left her brother’s expression had rarely wavered from its remarkable resemblance to a kicked puppy. Well, until now, anyway.

He sighed and rubbed the back of his head. “Az… you know what happened, don’t you?”

“What happened about what?”

“About… about mom. About why dad became Fire Lord.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “I told you, Zuko, I don’t want to talk about it. Not now.”

“Then when?” the uncertainty melted away, to be replaced by growing anger. “No one will tell me anything! None of the servants know anything about what happened that night, and you’re the one who came up to me with all that ‘Daddy’s going to kill you’ stuff!”

Azula didn’t reply for a long moment. “You mean you don’t remember?”

That gave the prince pause. “Remember what?”

“That night… when you were in my room. Mother came to see you before she left.”

“She did? What did she say?”

“To you?” Azula snorted. “How would I know? She was just bending over your bed and whispering to you. Don’t blame me if you were too sleepy to remember what happened.”

Silence. Briefly, Azula wondered what was going through her brother’s mind as he heard all of this. With a shake of her head, she turned and began to walk away.

“Az?”

“What?” she said, more snappishly than she had intended to.
“Do you… do you miss mom?”

Azula paused for a long moment. And then she turned slightly, enough so she could look at Zuko out of the corner of her eye.

“I don’t know.”

And before Zuko could respond to that, Azula had hurried out of the room.

(X)

“Sokka, stop pacing and sit down before you wear a groove into the earth,” Toph mumbled from her position leaning against an outcropping of rock.

“How can you all be so calm?!” Sokka snapped by way of response. “Those Fire Nation creeps have Suki, and we don’t even know what they’re going to do to her!” he paused, mouth working silently, and then he turned on Toph again. “You’re sure she didn’t fall into the water?”

“For the seventh time, yes! I told you already, if anyone had fallen into the water, I would have sensed it!”

“Like you sensed it when they grabbed Suki and ran off, huh?’

“Just so you know, there’s just this tiny little difference between a bunch of people running off in a certain direction and someone losing their balance and falling down a cliff side. So maybe you could get off my—“

“Hey! Aang’s back!” Katara, who had hitherto stayed out of the argument in lieu of tending to Ying, interrupted Toph’s tirade with a glad shout. And as Sokka glanced up, he could indeed see a tiny speck in the clear sky that was quickly growing in size, and in a few seconds it morphed into the easily identifiable shape of a glider, and the Airbender carrying up.

“Well?” Sokka demanded as soon as Aang came within earshot. In response, the Airbender simply shook his head.

His heart sank. “No… no, maybe you missed something—“

“I scoured everything around the entrance to the pass. Twice.”

Katara laid a hand on his shoulder. “You did your best, Aang.”

“Yeah, well, maybe it just wasn’t good enough,” Sokka said bitterly.

“Sokka!”

Sokka gazed back at the ruined entrance to the Serpent’s Pass. “What? It’s true. He tried, and he couldn’t find anything. Now we’re going to need to search for them on foot.”

“Whoa… what?” Toph glanced up. “We’re going to be looking for her?”

“What? Don’t tell me you plan to abandon her here?”

Toph winced. “I didn’t say that, Snoozles. But in case you’ve forgotten, we’ve kind of got an escort mission underway.”

His eyes widened, and he looked over to Than and Ying, who were talking quietly to themselves.
“There’s no expiration date on one of those immigration passes. We find somewhere safe for them to camp out, and then we go look for Suki. There, problem solved.”

His satisfaction at finding an apparent solution began to drain away at the expression on Katara’s face. “Actually…” she began hesitantly. “Actually, Ying’s going to give birth pretty soon. It would be the best if she was in… well, in a place with medical facilities.”

He glared at her for a long moment, not wanting to believe what he’d just heard. “Well, that’s great. That’s just peachy. Now what do we do?” He knew what he wanted to do, of course. He wanted to turn around, have Toph rebuild the ruined section of the pass, and then rush over and hunt down the Fire Nation people. He ground his teeth.

“All right,” Aang finally said. “You guys go on ahead. I’ll stay behind and continue looking for them.”

“What, by yourself?” Toph shook her head again. “Twinkletoes, you know as well as I do that if you took those girls on alone, you’d get your butt kicked in like three different ways.”

“I know, I know. But I’m not gonna confront them head on,” Aang looked up. “You guys go ahead with Than and Ying. Hopefully you’ll reach Ba Sing Se before too long. Then I’ll contact you guys when I find Suki and we can go rescue her together.”

“Together? How are you going to contact us? I know you’re a good Airbender and all, Twinkletoes, but I don’t think you can blow a note across a lake like that.”

“And how long will it take to contact us anyway? They could have…” Katara glanced at Sokka and hastily amended her statement. “I don’t think we want Suki to suffer any longer than she has to.”

“Don’t worry,” Aang managed a tiny smile. “Zuko may be Fire Nation, but we’ve seen he doesn’t hurt people if he doesn’t have to. Suki won’t be harmed too much.”

“Well, yeah,” Katara looked doubtful. “But you know the girl that Zuko’s with? The one with the blue fire? I think she’s currently the one running the show.”

The Avatar slumped, a tired expression crossing his features. “I know. We’ll just… have to hope for the best, won’t we?”

There were no other objections, and soon the team got ready to part ways. As he shouldered his pack, Sokka turned to see Aang take off on his glider again, zipping into the sky. Then he closed his eyes and sighed.

“Be safe, Suki.” He prayed silently.

(X)

“Hey.”

The voice was coming from somewhere very, very far away, from a place where there was bright light that stung her eyes, and her whole body hurt. Suki didn’t want to go there – she much preferred staying right where she was, where it was dark and comfortable and she could slowly slip away back into the smooth silky darkness-

“Get up.”

There was a sudden impact in her side, and pain exploded in her stomach. Suki lurched violently into
wakefulness, a coughing spasm wracking her throat as she did so, and when it passed she slumped to
the ground, feeling not unlike a cleaning rag that had been used one too many times.

As she lay there, she gradually became aware of two fingers that were waving back and forth in front
of her eyes. From those fingers a steady blue flame crackled. Silently, Suki gazed at the flame,
confused.

“Oh, good, she’s responding.”

The flame went out, the fingers went away, and Suki found herself looking into the face of a girl
she’d never seen before.

She coughed once. No, that wasn’t right. She’d seen her, back at – back at…

The Serpent’s Pass. She had been one of the firebenders attacking them. She blinked and tried to
struggle to her feet, tried to put some distance between her and her enemy. It took her almost five
seconds to realize that none of her limbs were responding.

“In case you’re wondering, I’ve had Ty Lee seal off your limbs. It’s mainly used for blocking
bending, but it comes in handy if you need someone paralysed for a while,” the firebender smiled at
her and Suki felt her gut twist slightly.

“Now, perhaps you’re wondering what happened. Well, the simple answer is that you got yourself
defeated and captured, and now what happens to you is entirely in my hands.”

Suki bared her teeth in a snarl, and for some reason the firebender appeared to find this amusing – at
any rate, the smirk she was wearing widened slightly.

“Ordinarily I wouldn’t care much about what happened to one little prisoner, but you’re different.
You see, you happened to be travelling with the Avatar, and I happen to be seeking information on
him.” Suddenly the fingers were being held up to her face again, and there was the flickering blue
flame.

“You can tell me what I want to know and I’ll drop you off at the nearest Fire Nation encampment
unharmed… well, aside from whatever you’ve already suffered. If I’m in a good mood I’ll even
leave word that you’re not to be mistreated, and for your wounds to be tended to,” she paused
briefly. “Or… you can be difficult, and I’ll have to extract the information I’ll need by force. That
won’t be good – I’m running on a bit of a tight schedule. I trust you don’t want me in a bad mood?”

There was a pause. “Let’s begin with something simple, then. Is the Avatar going to Ba Sing Se?”

Her mind whirled. She definitely wasn’t going to be helping her anytime soon, but silence would
only anger her captor. She’d seen the way the firebender and her friends fought – they were good
enough to give Aang a run for his money, even if they had ended up losing. She needed some way
to throw them off the trail –

“Your mouth’s not paralysed, by the way. You can talk any time you want.”

Suki swallowed once. “…No. The Avatar isn’t headed to Ba Sing Se.”

“Is that so? Then why was he on the Serpent’s Pass?”

_Damn._ “…Refugees.”

The firebender arched one eyebrow.
“He decided to help some refugees enter the city. The Serpent’s Pass is dangerous,” Suki paused. “and he wanted to make sure they crossed safely.”

The firebender nodded. “I see.”

And then, almost faster than Suki could follow, the firebender pressed one hand to her stomach, and crimson agony seared through her gut. Caught by surprise, Suki could only let out a tortured squeal of pain.

She was dimly aware of the firebender raising her hand away, but the red hot pain refused to go away, and Suki lay on the cold earth, unable to suppress the soft whimpers or to stem the tears that leaked from her eyes.

And then she heard the firebender’s voice again, filled with amusement and soft menace. “Liar.”

She drew in another deep, shuddering breath.

“I probably should have told you this before, but I can tell when someone’s lying to me. Call me a people person. But then, I didn’t think it would come up. After all, what reason could someone like you have to lie to me?”

Suki drew in another deep breath, and managed to spit out a faint “Damn you,” at the firebender.

“I take it that means you’re not going to help me willingly?” she said in a conversational tone. She stood, and Suki had a brief, fleeting second to wonder what the firebender was planning when there was a sudden impact against her temple –

And then nothing.

Azula stood over the unconscious warrior and sighed. Well, that was singularly unproductive.

From behind her, Zuko gave a frustrated sigh. “So we didn’t get anything out of her?”

“No. Not that we really needed it that much,” Azula shrugged. “We’ve confirmed the Avatar is headed for Ba Sing Se, anyway.”

“Then what do we do with her?”

Azula shrugged. “She’s of no use to us. I guess we could just dump her at Qin’s base, or if that’s too much trouble, we can just kill her right now.”

“No.”

Azula blinked and looked over to Ty Lee. “Pardon?”

Ty Lee swallowed nervously, but refused to break her gaze from Azula’s. “No. I mean, we shouldn’t kill her here. Like this. It’s not right.”

“You certainly didn’t complain when I killed those bandits.”

“That was different. Those were bandits. They just hurt people and steal things.”

Azula bared her teeth. “And this is our enemy. Do you think she’d hesitate to kill any of us if the situation-“
“A hostage.”

“What?” Azula turned to face Mai.

“You said she’s of no use to us. That’s wrong. We can use her as a hostage, since her friends will probably be looking for her.”

Azula pursed her lips and looked at Ty Lee. She had no doubt that if she truly pressed the issue, Ty Lee would ultimately give way. Her friend was too soft-hearted for her own good, but complete strangers still took second place to friends. She would feel bad about it, but Azula was certain she wouldn’t actively attempt to stop her.

But her feeling bad about it could create potential problems down the line – their hunt for the Avatar was nowhere near complete, after all, and she needed to secure the loyalty of her companions for any other trials they might come across in the future. And after their little talk about morality the other day… Azula shook her head.

“Fine,” she said in a weary tone. “No killing. In which case we can’t leave her here either – if she makes her way free she’ll just be trouble down the line. And as for the hostage thing,” she looked to Mai. “I don’t think that’ll work either – at least, not when we’ve entered Ba Sing Se. Maybe if by some chance we run into the Avatar outside the walls, but that’s unlikely at best.”

Mai shrugged as if it were of no consequence and turned away.

“So we’re left with…” Zuko said softly. “Turning her over to a Fire Nation outpost.”

“And War Minister Qin’s is the closest one,” Azula acknowledged. “Come on. The sooner we’re rid of her, the better.”

(X)

After bringing the warrior back to consciousness by way of a cup of water, Azula had bound her hands and had her climb on the back of Ty Lee’s komodo-dragon. As they departed, Azula couldn’t help but wonder if they would be the victim of any ill-advised escape attempts.

However, the warrior, while appearing resentful, didn’t appear to be planning much, so Azula let the issue slide – while keeping a surreptitious eye on the warrior, of course.

As night fell and the small group made camp for the night, Suki was left near the campfire’s edge. She kept quiet, watching and listening as the two firebenders – from what she could gather they were apparently brother and sister – debate about getting a boat to get to the Fire Nation encampment. She frowned. It almost sounded like they wanted to avoid actually meeting any Fire Nation soldiers, though. Why? Were they renegades of some kind?

Suddenly, Suki remembered that she was trying to escape the place. Glancing over to the two of them to ensure that they weren’t looking, Suki silently gripped onto the piece of sharpened flint she had picked up earlier and began cutting at the bonds around the wrist. It had been a stroke of good luck that she had managed to grab that without anyone noticing, and now-

“Here,” a dark shape plopped itself down next to her, revealing itself to be the girl with the long braid, holding up a bowl of what was presumably food. “You’re hungry, aren’t you? This is for you.”

Yes, she was indeed very hungry, Suki suddenly realized. The last time she’d eaten had been back at the refuge dock, and that had been over a day ago. And the smell wafting from the bowl was awfully...
tempting. Still, to accept food from the enemy…

“Come on. It’s not poisoned or anything,” the girl with the braid said. “You want me to take a bite and prove it?”

After a long pause Suki relaxed and shook her head. A huge smile spread across the girl’s face. “Great! Oh, I guess you can’t use your hands, huh… well, don’t worry, I’ll feed you!” and with that, she scooped up a portion of the stew and slowly brought the spoon to Suki’s mouth.

Confused and more than a little apprehensive, Suki opened her mouth and let the girl feed her. For a moment she was reminded of home and Kyoshi Island, and she was a little girl again, her mother balancing a spoonful of gruel and bringing it to her mouth-

Wait, no. No! This was nothing like home! Suki shook her head and swallowed the bite.

“How was it?” the girl asked, and Suki shrugged slightly as a response.

“I... guess that means you like it?” there was a long pause, pregnant with expectation. And then, “My name’s Ty Lee. What’s yours?”

Was she for real? The Kyoshi Warrior paused for a long moment, and then said, “I’m Suki.”

“Suki,” Ty Lee repeated. “That’s a nice name.” As she said so, she scooped up another spoonful of stew. “Okay, here goes-“

“Why are you doing this?” Suki demanded. Ty Lee paused and blinked, clearly not expecting such an outburst.

“Doing… what?”

“This! Being so… why are you feeding me? I’m your enemy, aren’t I?”

“Oh, that,” Ty Lee chuckled. “Well, just because we’re on opposite sides doesn’t mean we have to hate each other or anything. I mean, back when I was in the circus I had lots of Earth Kingdom friends! They didn’t like the war much, and honestly, I don’t like it much either, but we can still help each other out,” Ty Lee grinned at Suki. “And maybe when the war’s over and all the fighting’s stopped, we can be friends.”

Suki simply stared at Ty Lee, openmouthed. Don’t be ridiculous, she wanted to say, but somehow the words refused to form themselves. After a moment, Ty Lee shrugged. “Well, that can wait until later. Here, open wide…”

(\X)

“Enjoyed yourself, Ty Lee?” Azula’s voice dripped sarcasm as the acrobat settled herself by the fire. Either Ty Lee didn’t notice the sarcasm or chose to ignore it – in Azula’s estimation, either was equally likely – as she nodded enthusiastically.

“Her name’s Suki, and she’s from this island called Kyoshi Island to the south. They have this bunch of warriors there called the Kyoshi Warriors, and Suki’s their leader! Isn’t that neat.”

“The Kyoshi Warriors of Kyoshi Island. Original,” Azula remarked. The name sounded familiar, somehow, but it probably wasn’t all that important, and Azula dismissed it quickly. “Anyway, don’t get too chummy with her, we’re dropping her off at the base in a couple day’s time and we’ll probably never see her again.”
“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Ty Lee mumbled.

“By the way, the flint.”

“The what?”

“The flint. The one she was using in her attempt to cut her ropes. I said that if you were going to bring her that dinner, you could at least deal with that.”

“Oh, right. Here.” Ty Lee tossed the sharpened rock to the ground.

Azula sighed and closed her eyes. “Right, thanks. And with that, I’m going to bed. Ty Lee, you have first watch. Make sure the prisoner doesn’t go anywhere.”

“Got it.”

Azula stood, turned to head back to her tent, and paused, a frown coming over her face. Had she… She glanced up at the night sky. There had been a strange sound, almost like the wind catching on something. She scanned the area for several long seconds, and after finding nothing, shook her head and entered her tent.

Meanwhile, with the darkness of night as his cloak, Aang flew as fast as the winds would carry him back to his friends.

(X)

“Finally,” Mai stated flatly as they noted the Fire Nation encampment in the distance. “That took way too long.”

Azula heard Mai’s grouse and barely paid any attention to it. Even at this distance, she could tell that there was a significant amount of activity in the Fire Nation base. Her eyes narrowed. What was going…

“There!” the shout came from behind them and Azula twisted in time to see the Avatar drop down from the sky, with the rest of his gang following up behind him.

“Give Suki back!” came a shout from the Water Tribe boy, and Azula gave that remark all the attention it deserved as she turned her sights to the Avatar himself.

“Well, look at you. You’ve become confident enough to start chasing me down, have you?” despite her bravado, Azula could still feel the ache in her torso from the injury she’d suffered during the last confrontation.

*If we fought now, we’d be at a major disadvantage. We need to find some way out of this.*

Just then, the Avatar stepped forward, one hand raised in a non-threatening manner.

“We’re not here for a fight.”

Azula paused. “What?”

“We just want Suki back. That’s all. Just let her go and we can both walk away from this without having to come to blows. Okay?”

Azula was silent for several long seconds, pondering what the Avatar had just said.
And then she let out a snort of derisive laughter.

“I don’t think so, Avatar.”

The Avatar let out a long breath and nodded. “So be-“

“Aang!” came the call from the prisoner. Azula whipped her head around. “Don’t worry about me! I’ll be fine! Just get to Ba Sing Se and warn the king! Just-“

“Be quiet!” Azula snapped as she sent a bolt of flame out – it didn’t hit anyone, but impacted with the ground and billowed up for a brief moment, casting a pale blue light.

A deep rumbling noise that resonated through the entire area drew the attention of everyone present, and they whipped their heads around to stare as the ground in front of the encampment cracked and shifted away, revealing a massive metallic drill. With a thunderous groan it slammed onto the ground began to turn slowly, until it was pointed at the massive walls of Ba Sing Se.

Suddenly a plan, formed on the spur of the moment, leapt into Azula’s mind, and she tugged at the reins of the komodo-dragon.

“We'll just be going now, Avatar. I wonder which of us needs to be dealt with more urgently,” as she spoke, she began guiding the komodo-dragon away down a steep incline. After a moment’s hesitation, the other three komodo-dragons followed suit.

As Azula rode away, she could hear a cry of frustration from the Water Tribe boy, and the snap of a glider unfurling as the Avatar took to the skies – in the direction of the drill.

Azula smiled.

(X)

“There we go,” Azula looked down at the captive as she landed in the rough stone floor. “Once the rest of the army comes back they’ll be sure to find you, along with the note I left for them. So don’t worry about being left here for too long,” and not stopping to acknowledge Suki’s glare, Azula turned and left.

With the majority of the forces in the encampment having left to continue their assault on the walls of Ba Sing Se with the drill, evading the skeleton crews on patrol had been simplicity itself. And without the dead weight of a prisoner slowing them down, getting out would be even easier.

Azula paused as she looked out over the encampment and she sighed. Everything in here was so completely Fire Nation that she couldn’t help but feel somewhat nostalgic for the palace and home. Shaking her head, she pushed away those lingering thoughts to the back of her mind and turned away.

“Come on, we should be leaving soon.”

“No, wait, hang on!” there was a muffled but excited voice from Zuko, who emerged from a rather large tent, grasping several pieces of paper. “Look what I found!”

Azula glanced over, and her eyes widened. Surely those couldn’t be…

“Refuge passports to Ba Sing Se?” Mai questioned as she held up one of the scrolls. “Looks like a rather good forgery…”
“So Qin *does* understand a bit of subtlety and sneakiness,” Azula said dryly. “Colour me impressed.” Of course he also apparently failed to utilize this to any degree, so I guess I shouldn’t give him too much credit. “Zuko, Mai, we’ve just found our tickets into Ba Sing Se.”

Chapter End

This was largely a transitional chapter which was meant to keep moving the plot along. I tend to find these a little harder to write. Still, I hope it turned out well.

Thanks for reading, please review.
"Hey, did you hear?" At the sound of her brother's excited voice, Azula looked up.

"Hear what?"

"Uncle's reached Ba Sing Se!" he smiled a smile the size of a cantaloupe slice. "He's managed to fight his way up to the city walls!"

Azula gave a brief snort and returned to her book. "So what."

That threw Zuko off a bit. "S- so what?" he sputtered. "So Uncle's going to conquer the biggest Earth Kingdom city and win us the war-"

"Him and the other seven generals who've tried the exact same thing already," she said and flipped a page of her book. "The walls have never been successfully breached by an outside attack, what makes you think they'll do it this time?"

Her brother folded his arms indignantly. "Because Uncle's leading them," he proclaimed, with more than a hint of stubbornness. "They don't call him the Dragon of the West for nothing, you know. He's won us tonnes of land already, and – and Lu Ten's with him!"

"Land isn't measured in tonnage, dum-dum," she muttered. "And Ba Sing Se alone is nearly the size of the whole Fire Nation. Direct assaults are just asking for trouble, and it doesn't matter if it's Uncle leading the charge or not."

"Oh, yeah," Zuko rolled his eyes as he settled himself on the chair next to her and pinched a grape from her bowl. Azula's eyebrow twitched in annoyance. "Like you'd know so much more about invading cities. The only thing you ever invade is my room."

"Maybe if you hadn't stolen my Fire Lily comb I wouldn't have had to go inside to get it back!"

"Well maybe I wouldn't have stolen your comb if you hadn't burned the picture scroll mother gave-"

"Are you two fighting again?" Ursa's voice cut through both of their own, shutting down the argument effectively. Instantly the two siblings were upright in their seats, giving angelic smiles that wouldn't have fooled a blind Owl-rat.

"No, mother," the two of them chorused. Ursa merely raised an eyebrow before sighing and turning to leave the room. Once her back was turned, brother and sister looked each other in the eye and promptly stuck their tongues out.
"Hurry up, guys!" Ty Lee waved to the rest of them as they finally entered the immigration centre of
Ba Sing Se. The other three failed to respond in any appreciable fashion, instead choosing to gaze
around at their surroundings.

Ugh, Azula thought distastefully as she walked through the crowds. What a squalid, dirty bunch.
The refugees had come from all over the Earth Kingdom in an effort to escape from the war,
believing the great walls of Ba Sing Se to be more than a match for the Fire Nation's armies.
Irritatingly enough, they had been proven right, at least so far.

And if the massive wreck of the drill parked at the outer wall was any indication, they would
continue being proven right, at least insofar as the near future was concerned. The princess shook her
head. Their priority was hunting the Avatar now; Ba Sing Se could be taken at their leisure, or
alternatively when the comet arrived-

Thud.

"Hey, watch it," a youth with shaggy hair snapped at her before turning away. Azula briefly
considered responding in kind, but he had already moved too far away to hear. With an irritated
shake of her head, Azula dismissed the matter. She had more important things to look to.

"These passports should work," Zuko said to her as she walked up. "I've been looking through them
and I can't see any flaws."

"Have you actually seen genuine Earth Kingdom passports before?" she inquired.

"… No."

"Then we won't know if they're flawed or not," Azula shook her head. "And I'm not going to risk
turning in passports that will alert the people here about us." What little information that leaked from
Ba Sing Se placed internal security extremely high on the list of things to watch out for…

"What?" Zuko looked over at her. "Then what did you bring us here for if you're not going to let us
get in?"

"Did I say that?" Azula glanced around. "Ty Lee, there's a restroom over there. You know what to
do."

The acrobat nodded. "Got it! I'll be back in a jiffy!"

"Mai," Azula turned to her other friend, who glanced up.

"Hm?"

"Find us a male station attendant. Preferably a young one."

(X)

Piao was bored. No surprise there, considering his job. Stamping passports and tickets, day in and
day out, he was little more than a cog in the vast bureaucracy that comprised Ba Sing Se's logistical
arm.

And he was fine with that, mostly. The pay was good enough, and he liked to think of himself as
contributing, however minutely, to the greatest of the Earth Kingdom cities.

If only it weren't all so infernally boring.
With a sigh, Piao glanced at the hourglass beside him. It was almost empty – just a little while more until he could take his break…

"Hey there, handsome," the voice was light and perky and Piao glanced upwards.

A vision of beauty stood before him, clad in one of the most revealing dresses he had seen in quite a while. He swallowed hard.

"C – can I help you, ma'am? Miss?" he stammered.

"Oh, yes!" she smiled at him. "I'm been walking for hours out in this dreadful heat and I'm feeling ever so faint," as she spoke she leaned back and pressed her palm to her forehead, revealing an impressive amount of cleavage in the process. "So, well, if you'd be so kind as to help me with getting entry as soon as possible…"

"O- of course," Piao stammered, trying his best not to stare at a trickle of sweat that was making its way down the girl's collarbone. "May I see you? Your passport! I meant, may I see your passport?"

The girl smiled and reached into the fold of her dress, withdrawing several sheets of paper that had apparently been pressed up close against her chest – they were still warm, and there was the faint air of perfume about them. "Here you go, sweetie. These are for me and my friends."

"F – friends?" letting his eyes stray, Piao thought he caught sight of several bored looking people standing behind the girl.

"Yes, my friends. They thought it'd be quicker if I just did it for everyone. That won't be a problem, will it?" the girl leaned down, letting her dress fall down to reveal – No! He had to focus on his work!

"N – no, of course not," hurriedly, he stamped down on the papers and handed them back to the girl. "H – here you go. Welcome to Ba Sing Se. We wish you a pleasant and productive stay."

The girl winked at him as she collected her passports and sashayed into the inner station. A moment later, her friends followed and Piao was left to tug nervously at the collar of his suddenly-too-tight robe.

Zuko shook his head as he slumped down on a stone bench, noting somewhere in the back of his mind that a voice was announcing departure times for the Inner City. "That was… demeaning," he finally said.

"Ty Lee thinks any attention is good attention," Azula said dismissively as she settled herself down. "If she's more than happy to do it, I see no problems with taking advantage of that fact."

He merely sighed in response and leaned his head back.

(X)

As the train rumbled smoothly along the tracks, Ty Lee began wandering the cabins, looking at the other people sharing a ride with her. A fair number of them had the weary, dishevelled look of refugees, although the cleaner clothes and bored expressions of several marked them as people whose jobs simply took them to the outer wall.

As she continued walking she noticed that she was drawing several stares from people around her. The reason for this wasn't really hard to figure out – she hadn't yet changed out of the outfit she'd used to attract that man's attention, and it was rather… outrageous.
Passing by a young couple holding a newborn baby (Ty Lee's smile widened a little at the sight), she settled back into the seat Azula had thoughtfully saved for her. The princess was staring out the window at the vast expanses on farmland.

"So this is Ba Sing Se," she whispered, almost to herself.

"I know!" Ty Lee bubbled. "It's so… grand, isn't it? From the outside, anyway."

"I suppose," came the reply. "More importantly, it's humongous. The single biggest city in the world."

"And we're going to have to find the Avatar in here," Ty Lee nodded. "Do you think it's gonna be difficult?"

"Not particularly," Azula said as the train passed swiftly through the Inner Wall, revealing for the first time the vast, sprawling metropolis of the city. Ty Lee couldn't keep her mouth from hanging open at the sheer size of everything that spread out before her, but Azula simply gave the entire thing a dismissive once-over glance. "The Avatar should be well known here, especially after that stunt with the drill."

"Huh?"

"I asked around a little. Some of the refugees saw the fight, and the Avatar was the primary reason the drill was halted. The guards on top of the wall couldn't figure out any better way to stop the thing than hurling rocks," the princess rolled her eyes. "He's going to be hailed as a hero to the city, so all we need to do is to ask around a little for news. Once we find him, we just trail him until he's not as well protected, and… well, there's that."

"Gee, Azula, you make it all sound really easy."

A brief snort of laughter. "I suppose I do," she said grimly as the train slid smoothly to a stop at the first station. "But with any luck, things will start going our way in this city."

(Approximately three days later, Azula was just about ready to tear her hair out in frustration. The they were stuck moving through the muck and mire of the squalid, cramped Lower Ring was bad enough, but absolutely no one appeared to have heard of the Avatar.

Or appeared to be the least bit willing to talk about him.

"But surely you must have heard something," she said to the man she was talking to. "After all, didn't he save us from another invasion just the other day?"

"I don't know about any Avatar and I don't know about any invasion," he replied gruffly. "Now go away."

Azula watched the man walk off and blew out a long breath of air. That the citizens of Ba Sing Se were hiding something was obvious, at least. None of them appeared willing to discuss the war and how it was progressing. None of them appeared to acknowledge that a war existed.

She supposed on some level she could understand not wanting to talk about a war that had stretched on for a hundred years – especially of late, when Fire Nation campaigns had scored greater and greater successes in the field. But right here, right now, it did absolutely nothing to quell her impatience of anger.
Picking up her cup and draining the last of the tea from it, she shook her head and stood to leave the building. This had been a massive waste of time, and she didn't harbour much hope that any of the others were doing any better-

"Hey."

She paused and turned around to regard a heavyset man who had just slid into the recently vacated seat directly opposite Azula. She paused for a brief moment, glancing to the left and right. "Yes?" she asked, biting out the word.

"You're new around here? Don't think I've seen you before."

"Rather new. We came in with another batch of refugees around three days ago," no one else appeared to be paying attention to the man, but Azula wasn't one for taking chance.

"Right. That explains it," the man sighed. "Sit down, girl. You've got to learn a few things about the way the city works."

A chance for some information? After weighing the risks for a brief moment, Azula settled herself down again as the man raised his hand and gestured for two more cups of tea to be brought over.

"Okay, first thing you need to know," the man paused and corrected himself. "First thing everyone who comes to Ba Sing Se needs to know is that we don't talk about the war here. And that includes the fancy-pants Avatar."

"Yes, I figured that part out rather quickly," she replied with a hard smile. "But why?"

The server brought the cups over and the man raised the steaming cup to his lips before replying. "Official line is that we don't need the news or we'll panic. All we need to know is that our walls have held and they'll continue to hold, so we don't worry," a bitter smile came across his face. "We are ever so lucky to have our walls, aren't we?"

Abruptly the steady drone of voices in the cafeteria quietened noticeably and the man gestured with his teacup towards the entrance. "And there's one of them."

Azula turned around to regard the man in a green wide-brimmed hat and a dark coat as he stepped into the room, his dark eyes slowly turning to survey the area. Wherever he looked, people quailed or suddenly became immensely interested in the floor. And then, for a moment, his eyes' locked with Azula's and both of them held the other's gaze.

And then that moment passed and he continued his way to the counter. Despite the cafeteria being jam-packed with people, a way was automatically cleared for him as he moved.

"The Dai Li," her companion informed her, hatred all too evident in his voice. "The 'cultural authority' of the city, whatever that's supposed to mean. In practice, they run the city, so what they say goes. And they say no talking about the war."

Azula continued to watch the Dai Li agent for several long seconds. "You sound like you have something personal against them," she noted. The fear in everyone else was evident, but she could sense a deep current of resentment and hatred from the man talking to her.

He sighed and stared down at the tabletop. "My boy always wanted to become a soldier. So he grew up and trained himself and finally made the cut. Then, seven years ago… well, everybody knows what happened. The Outer Wall was breached by the Fire Nation, and my son got killed trying to keep them out," he closed his eyes and shook his head once. "And you know what they did? They
put his status down as 'Unconfirmed'. That's what happens to every soldier who dies on the Wall. No gravestone. No memorial. Just 'missing'. Forever. Hey won't even acknowledge that he died protecting all of us," another shake of his head and he took a long drink from his teacup. Finally, he stood to leave. "Enjoy your stay here," he said bitterly as he began to walk away. "We're so lucky we have our walls to create order."

"This place is a dump," Mai stated flatly.

"Oh come on!" Ty Lee looked over at her friend. "We're lucky we were even able to get an apartment at all! And all it needs is a little bit of fixing up."

"Ty Lee, the bedroom walls are covered in mildew."

"...Okay, a lot of fixing up. But we can make it into a good home!"

"We're not going to be staying here long enough for any of that to matter," Azula said forcefully as she stepped in through the doorway. "A month, at maximum."

"A month's still an awfully long time to spend in a rundown shack," Zuko commented from the kitchen. "I'm with Ty Lee on this – we need to make the place... I dunno, sanitary."

Azula paused. "I suppose simply setting fire to the mildew is out of the question?"

"Yes," came the simultaneous response for the three other occupants of the apartment.

"Always making things harder for yourselves," Azula rolled her eyes. "I'm going out for some fresh air."

Once Azula was gone, Ty Lee looked over to Zuko. "You know, don't you think it's kinda weird?"

"What is?" he replied as he appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, several cups of tea balanced on a serving tray. "Here you go, Mai."

Wordlessly, his girlfriend accepted the offered teacup and the instant Zuko's back was turned, she poured its contents down the nearby potted plant. Ty Lee smiled nervously – that had happened so often in the past couple of days that the plant itself was starting to stink of tea. "I mean," she continued as she raised her cup to her lips. "Azula's... well, she's a princess. She grew up in the Imperial Palace and she was always so proper and refined..."

Zuko made a face. "Proper? She could put on a good show for the nobles and officers as a kid, if that's what you mean. But once we were alone..."

"Well, kind of. I know what you mean. But the point is that she always grew up in luxury, and now... we're in an apartment in the poorer side of town."

"It can't be helped. We're acting as refugees, after all."

"Well, yeah. I don't really mind all that much, and you, well..." Ty Lee coughed hesitantly. "You haven't really lived really comfortably the past few years, have you?" Zuko didn't reply aside from a slight shake of his head, so Ty Lee continued. "But Azula... I dunno, but I don't think she's at all used to something like this. I think... I think living like this galls her more than she's willing to admit."
Zuko paused and looked at the doorway that Azula had stepped out earlier. "I guess," he finally said softly. "But I think that she doesn't want to be seen complaining about it if the rest of us are accepting it."

"I complain about it," Mai said as she scraped at an unidentifiable black stain on the wall with her knife.

"Yeah, but you complain about everything! So you don't count."

As Mai glared at a smirking Ty Lee, Zuko stepped out into the streets. Within moments, he had found Azula, sitting cross-legged on the flat rooftop of their home and staring off into the distance.

"Anything on your mind?"

"Not particularly," she sighed. Raising her chin slightly, she indicated the Grand Palace of Ba Sing Se, visible even at this immense distance. "I'm just thinking about the day when we finally stand in there as conquerors."

Zuko folded his arms and looked over too. "That won't be for a while," he said softly.

"Never hurts to plan ahead," her smile was sardonic.

Silence fell upon the two siblings for several more minutes until Zuko finally spoke up again. "Az?"

"Hm?"

"I've just… I've been thinking."

"Well, that's new."

"Har har. Anyway, if – no, when we find the Avatar and capture him…"

"Or kill him," Azula reminded him. "And yes, once we do that, you'll be allowed to return home, and you'll be restored to your rightful place as Crown Prince."

"Yes, about that. If I go back and become Crown Prince, doesn't that mean… well, you'd be Crown Princess without me, wouldn't you? If I never went home, I mean…" he paused.

Reaching up to tug at one of the bangs that framed her face, Azula hesitated a brief moment before replying. "Maybe. But the title is yours by birthright. I'm just restoring things to the way they were meant to be," she hesitated and a smirk spread across her face. "And of course, once you've started your reign, there's nothing preventing an accident, say, four or five years down the line."

"Az…"

"It wouldn't be a fatal one, of course."

"Az."

"But just crippling enough that you won't be able to perform your duties effectively. And who better to step in to fill your shoes than your dear sister?" her smile was angelic, and Zuko had learned that she was at her scariest at those moments.

"Az! Don't even joke about things like that," Zuko groaned. The moment passed and Azula lay a hand on her brother's shoulder.
"On a more serious note, have you ever considered that maybe the position of being the Fire Lord's sister has more than enough clout in the court? Almost all of the prestige, almost none of the duties. Not that I won't be willing to help you out with those, of course. If you ask nicely."

Zuko smiled and looked at the ground. "Maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves. Even if we got the Avatar and returned home tomorrow, father still has plenty of years left in him."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." And she left it at that.

As the sun continued to set, the two siblings stood there in comfortable silence, watching the vast expanse of the city spread out before them.

(X)

Two days later, Zuko stepped out of the back of a restaurant, smelling faintly of stewed pork. While he knew that Mai still had more than enough money to provide for whatever they needed – and a large portion of the budget was going into renovating their apartment too – he'd decided that having some personal money on hand never hurt.

The job he'd managed to land left something to be desired, however. Blinking away the tiredness, he was about to turn down the street and head on to their residence when an unmistakable sound froze him in his tracks.

A scream. And judging by the pitch, it was from a rather young girl.

Quickly, he pivoted, searching for the source of the sound. As it died off, he found himself heading down one of the dark alleyways, looking for –

There! A young girl cornered by a group of four glowering men.

"Please! I need this money! My mother, she's sick and-"

"Shut up!" one of the men, probably the leader, snarled. "If your mother's sick, then you'll need to be in good health to take care of her, won't you? So just give us the money and nobody gets hurt."

Zuko's jaw tightened, and he stepped forward, raising his hands into a fighting stance and -

"Get away from the girl," a voice from behind him spoke calmly.

Blinking in surprise, Zuko looked over his shoulder to see a shaggy haired youth advancing on the muggers. As he neared, he withdrew two hook-shaped swords from his belt, holding them in a battle stance.

The muggers now looked up, and noticing they had company, the nearest of them stepped forwards, nostrils flaring. "This is none of your business, kids. Now get out of here."

"I'm making it my business," came the smooth reply, and the boy with the swords charged. A half-second later, Zuko fell into step behind him, moving to intercept the two that were coming at the boy from the right.

He was unarmed, and both of his opponents were armed with knives. I can't Firebend either. As the first thief lashed out, he pivoted and kicked him in the stomach, dumping him to the ground. The second one was slightly more skilled, and Zuko had to evade a couple of his attacks before he was able to catch him with an elbow to the gut that sent his opponent staggering. Another swift kick, and he was down for the count.
A groan and the thud of a body falling to the earth signified the boy with the swords defeating his own opponent, and the two of them turned to regard the last remaining thief. After a brief moment, he threw down his weapon and turned to run.

"You okay?" the boy looked down at the girl. "Did they hurt you?"

"I – I'm fine," the girl stammered, picking herself up from the ground. "I – thank you."

"No need to thank me," he smiled briefly before turning to Zuko, who had already begun to walk away. "Hey! Thanks for the help."

Zuko paused. "It was nothing," he said softly before continuing to walk away.

"W – wait! Please!" it was the girl this time. "I – I work at a tea shop not far from here. Would you… would you like to have some tea? It's on the house, of course. It's the least I can do for the both of you."

Zuko paused and looked up. "I… guess that sounds nice," he finally allowed as he turned around to face her.

"Great! I mean, good. It's this way," the girl hesitated. "By the way, my name's Jin. Might I know the names of my gallant rescuers?"

The boy with the swords smirked. "I'm Jet."

Zuko closed his eyes. It wasn't likely that they would recognize the name of 'Zuko' here, but there was no point in taking risks. "Lee," he finally said.

As they followed Jin down the alleyways, Jet turned to Zuko. "So, Lee, that's a pretty good fighting form you have there. Who taught you that?"

Zuko raised and lowered one shoulder. "My family, I guess. We have… a bit of a history with fighting."

Jet nodded. "Guess you would, what with the war and all. And family, huh?" He looked up thoughtfully. "Must be nice."

No more words were exchanged until they stepped through the doorway of a small but well-kept teahouse. As Jin hurried to the back to change into her work clothes, Jet and Zuko settled themselves down at one of the tables.

"So what's your story?" Jet said without preamble.

"It's a pretty long one," Zuko replied. "But the long and short of it is that I'm a refugee here."

"Aren't we all," Jet turned to look over at the rest of the people filling this place. "So many of us came here for a fresh start."

He paused, "You too?"

Jet nodded and fingered the piece of straw in his mouth. "You could say that. I did some things that I'm not too proud of, so… here I am. I thought maybe I could find a new path in life."

Zuko looked down at the table. His path in life had been set out for him three years ago. It wasn't going to change now. "Well, I hope you find what it is you're looking for," he ventured.
Jet smirked. "Same to you," and at Zuko's surprised expression, his smirk grew even wider. "You're looking for something too. I can tell."

After a moment, Zuko nodded. "Yeah. I guess I am."

Just then, Jin returned, bearing two cups of steaming hot tea. Nodding his thanks, Zuko picked up his cup and raised it to his lips. Then his eyes widened in surprise. "This tea... it's fantastic! You're a great brewer!"

"Heh," Jin grinned. "It's not me, actually. The owner hired a new tea brewer a while back, and he's the one who's really made business in this place boom," then her eyes and smile widened as she looked over his shoulder. "There he is now!"

Raising an eyebrow, Zuko turned and looked.

The tea cup fell from slackened fingers and smashed against the stone floor.

"Hey, did you hear?" At the sound of her brother's excited voice, Azula looked up.

"Hear what?"

"He did it! Uncle did it!"

"Did what?" she snapped, increasingly irritated.

"Uncle broke through the Outer Wall! That's the strongest of Ba Sing Se's defences and Uncle's beaten it! There's no way Uncle can lose now!"

She blinked and shook her head. "Wow. That is pretty good."

"Fire Lord Azulon said we're going to have a celebratory feast soon, too!"

"A feast? Shouldn't that wait until we've actually conquered the city?" she raised an eyebrow.

"Think about it this way," Zuko grinned. "We can have a feast now, and then when Uncle wins the whole battle, we can have another feast! So that's two feasts and twice the food!"

Sound logic, she acknowledged. Of course, if there was going to be a feast, that also meant that-

"Azula," her mother appeared in the doorway. "We'll be having a celebration to commemorate Lord Iroh's victory at the Outer Wall. You know what that means."

"Not another dress, mother!" she whined. "I have so many already! And they're all tight and uncomfortable and I have to stand still for hours while they take my measurements! Why can't they just use the ones from the last time?"

"Azula, we've been though this so many times," her mother sighed. "First, we can't have you showing up at an official celebration in old clothes. Second, you're a growing girl – any measurements they've taken before won't fit you properly now. And lastly, your brother's already done the same just now, and if he can do it without complaining, so can you."

She shot a half-hearted glare at Zuko who merely shrugged, and then a forlorn look at her mother. Finally, with a shake of her head and a sigh, she stood up from her chair.
"All right," she muttered. "Let's get this over with."

Chapter End

Thanks for reading. Please review.
Standing in the doorway of the nursery, Azula peered curiously at the occupants of the sunlit room. Her brother, Zuko. Her cousin, Lu Ten. And... her Uncle Iroh.

The three of them were crouched together near the farther end of the room, playing a game of some kind.

"Nothing in my hand, nothing up my sleeve," her uncle was saying to Zuko. "Now, where could that Pai Sho tile possibly be?"

"It's in your robe pocket!" her brother declared triumphantly. "I saw you put it there earlier!"

"Really now!" Uncle made a huge show of turning his pockets out while Lu Ten simply sat back and smirked. "No, it looks like nothing's in there after all."

"What? But-"

"Ah! What's this?" reaching over, Uncle made a quick tugging motion by Zuko's left ear, from which the prince instinctively jerked away. "It was in here all along! Now, Zuko, you really should know better than to try and hide Pai Sho tiles from me! And especially in your ear!"

"What – But I –" Both Uncle and Lu Ten burst into laughter at Zuko's flustered reactions. Unnoticed by the three of them, Azula rolled her eyes and turned to walk away.

Her mother had been standing there, looking down at her the whole time. It took all of Azula's self-control not to let out a startled cry. She settled for furrowing her brow.

"Yes, mother?"

Her mother smiled and tilted her head slightly. "Don't you want to go play with them?"

She hesitated for the briefest of seconds before shaking her head. "No, I don't."

Something Azula couldn't easily identify flickered through her mother's eyes. "Why not? Azula, you only ever play with Zuko when he's alone. Why won't you play with other people?"

Because they don't like me. "Because whenever other people play they come up with stupid games like the one Uncle is playing now, and I don't like it," Azula turned and began to walk down the hallway.
"Azula! Don't turn your back on me when I'm talking to you!" she heard her mother's reproach but Azula merely quickened her pace and ran down the hallway back to her own room, where she could be alone.

(X)

For several very long seconds, Zuko sat there dumbfounded as he beheld the portly figure of his Uncle serving tea to Earth Kingdom peasants. He wasn't sure what was more stunning, that Uncle was currently in Ba Sing Se, or that Uncle was here in Ba Sing Se.

Fortunately, before Jet or Jin could question him on why he had inexplicably lost his grip on a porcelain teacup, Uncle noticed their little group and walked over, a broad smile on his face. If he was surprised by Zuko's presence, he certainly didn't show it.

"Ah, Jin!" he said, a broad smile on his face. "Are these your friends? It's always nice to have some company to drink your tea with."

"No, they saved me from a bunch of thugs, and I thought this was the least I could do," the girl replied. "Jet, Lee, this is Eeroh. He works here, mainly tea brewing, although he helps with the serving during the busy hours too."

"Nice to meet you, old man," Jet smirked and offered one hand.

"The pleasure is mine," Uncle accepted and gave him a firm handshake before turning to Zuko. "And who's our clumsy friend?" he inquired, eyes travelling down to where Zuko had spilled his teacup. "Lee, was it?"

The obvious prompt was enough to rouse Zuko from his stupor – somewhat, anyway, and he rose mechanically to shake Uncle's hand. "Yes, that's my name. Lee."

"I'll just go get you a new teacup, Lee," Jin said as she turned towards the back room. "Wait just a moment…" Jet turned to look at Jin as she departed, giving Zuko several precious seconds to lean close to his Uncle.

"Eeroh?" he hissed. "That's your idea of a fake name? Changing the pronunciation of one syllable?"

"I don't think anyone who calls himself 'Lee' is in a position to criticize the creativity of chosen names, do you?" came the reply, which instantly sent a flush up the prince's neck.

"I… had to think fast," he mumbled as he slumped back onto his seat.

"What are you two talking about?" Jet said as he entered the conversation. "You two know each other?"

"No, he was simply telling me how much he loves the tea here. Really, it makes him dropping it all the more inexcusable," Uncle shook his head sadly. "If you'll excuse me, I really should be checking on the next batch. In tea, timing is everything!"

As Uncle wandered off, Jet leaned back in his chair, and Zuko glanced over at him. "So, how long have you been in the city?"


"Huh, me too," Zuko paused, weighing his options. "Hey, have you heard about the Avatar?"
He'd intended to start a short discussion about the Avatar, and then maybe segue into asking if Jet had heard anything about him, but Jet's reaction was rather unexpected. His eyes widened for a split second, a quick flash of something – pain? – showed on his face, and even when his usual demeanour returned, there was a hint of a darkness hanging about him.

"Yeah," Jet said quietly. "Yeah, I've heard about the Avatar. I met him once, as a matter of fact."

Zuko barely managed to rein in his startled reaction. "Really? Where was this? How long ago? What did you--"

Jet turned away abruptly. "I don't want to talk about it," he said, sharply enough that Zuko knew not to press the issue. He grit his teeth in frustration. He had been so close to getting more information!

He sighed and slumped. "Well, it's a small world, I guess. Especially since the two of you ended up in the same city again."

"The Avatar's here?" Jet whirled and gazed at Zuko in shock at the same moment that Jin returned with Zuko's replacement tea.

"Ah, yes!" she said brightly. "There's nothing official, of course," there was an uneasy glance towards the entrance of the tea shop. "But anyone who's in the know knows that he helped us fend off another attack from the Fire Nation just the other day. There was some kind of… giant drill that they wanted to break through the Outer Wall with."

"Huh," Jet mused. "Guess I wasn't paying enough attention. Not that it matters," he shook his head and took another drink from his cup. "We've gone our separate ways."

Once more, Zuko tried to ponder how the boy in front of him could have met the Avatar, while Jin neatly settled herself into the chair next to Jet with her own teacup, prompting a raised eyebrow from the boy.

"Don't you work here?" he said teasingly.

"I happen to be on a break," she said primly. "Anyway, how long have you guys been here? You're not locals, I can tell."

Jet and Zuko glanced at each other shrugged. "About a week," both of them said at the same time. Jin chuckled.

"Well, if you newcomers like, I could show you around the Outer Ring. There're a lot of places of interest in just this section."

Jet grinned. "Wouldn't half mind having someone in the know show me the ropes."

Zuko, meanwhile, glanced down at his cup. "Thanks, but that won't be necessary."

Jin pouted at him. "Oh, come on! You're going to be staying here for a while; you're going to need to know your way around the place."

"I'm not--" Zuko started but then pursed his lips. His assumed status as a refugee would lead to the basic assumption that he would be spending quite a while here. And if he tried to brush it off by saying that he wouldn't be staying long, that would only open up more questions…

"Fine," he finally said. "I'm in."
"Great!" Jin smiled and stood from her table. "I'll meet you outside here at, say… sundown?"

With a brief nod, Zuko stood to leave the tea shop, wondering just what he had gotten himself roped into.

From the inner alcove of the tea shop, Iroh smiled at the figure of his departing nephew.

(X)

Breathe in.

The candle flames in front of her flickered slightly. Even though her eyes were closed, her intrinsic connection with fire allowed her to feel the most minutes changes in any flame around her.

Breathe out.

What with their constant travelling and general lack of downtime, she'd rarely gotten the chance to properly meditate, and she fully intended to make up for lost time now.

Breathe in.

Calm. Absolute calm.

Breathe out.

There was nothing else except her and the fire. Nothing but herself and-

"Uncle's in the city."

Azula's eyes snapped open and the candle flames billowed upwards into a scorching blaze that melted the candles to puddles of wax in seconds. She whirled around to confront Zuko standing in the doorway. "What!"

He leaned against the doorway, not looking at her. "You heard me. He's working in some tea shop a couple of streets down."

Azula slumped herself back against a chair, a low growl escaping from the back of her throat. "He knew. He knew that we'd be coming here, he found his way here ahead of us-"

"Actually," Zuko paused. "I… don't think Uncle knew we were here."

"What?"

"He looked pretty surprised to see me, actually," Zuko folded his arms and gazed off into the distance. "Like he hadn't expected us to be here."

Azula pursed her lips and turned back to regard the candles she had been using for meditation. What to do about her uncle? Removing him from the equation by force wasn't an option – even ignoring the tiny voice whispering in the back of her mind that it was by no means certain she could manage such a feat in the first place, it would definitely cause a commotion and avoiding attention was rather high on her priority list right now.

As always, her Uncle being a completely unknown factor threatened to upset all her plans once more. Shaking her head, she settled herself down on the floor again. She certainly couldn't leave Ba Sing Se now, not with her target so close (and yet so far…)
"If he doesn't bother me, then I won't bother him," she said shortly. "But… where's this tea shop you were talking about?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I like to know where potential sources of problems could come from," Azula said shortly. "And since I have no idea what Uncle's doing in the city, he counts as a source of trouble."

"You're too paranoid, Az," Zuko remarked as he pulled up a chair and sat himself heavily on it. "He's probably headed here because that's where all refugees go."

"I got where I am today by being paranoid," she replied bluntly. "Where's the tea shop?"

With a sigh, Zuko provided her the address and Azula tucked it away into the corner of her mind. Meanwhile, her brother stood and headed for his room. "I'll be heading out tonight," he said.

"What? Where to?"

"Some… I met someone from the Earth Kingdom, they offered to give me a tour of the place," at her sister's raised eyebrow, Zuko sighed. "You can't tell me knowing the place better won't be helpful."

"No," she conceded. "But be careful, Zuko. You don't want to associate too much with people from the Earth Kingdom. It's not good for you."

Zuko sighed. "Az… it's not their fault they were born into the wrong country."

She remained silent as he entered his room and after a long moment, she closed her eyes.

Uncle… what are you doing here, really?

(X)

The sun had all but set by the time Zuko came into view of the tea shop where he had agreed to meet the Jet and Jin. As he neared the establishment, he could see the girl dutifully cleaning the tables – from the looks of things, her shift was just about done.

"Hey," at the brief word of greeting, he turned to see Jet walking up, with two people coming up beside him. After a brief moment of hesitation, he gave them a short nod of acknowledgment.

"What'd I tell you? Almost as quiet as Longshot," Jet smirked. At that moment, Jin stepped out of the place, wiping her hands on a piece of cloth.

"Jin, these are my… uh, my friends," he waved his hand in their direction. "She's Smellerbee, and this one's Longshot. You don't mind if they come along, do you?"

"Of course not!" Jin smiled. "After all, the more the merrier. All right, let's be on our way."

"Where to first?"

"Oh, there's this fountain I want to show you – at night, they light the lanterns around it and it all reflects into the water and it's beautiful…"

As the small group set off down the streets, none of them noticed the lone figure in the darkened alleyway. Azula stared at the tea shop with hard eyes for several long seconds before turning and walking off into the night.
"When she told us that she wanted to show us around the place, I didn't really have a sightseeing tour in mind," Zuko whispered to Jet as they strolled through the streets. Up ahead of them, Jin was chatting animatedly, pointing out places of the city she found interesting – which was just about everything.

"Well, I'm not complaining," Jet said, his hands in his pockets. "I kinda like the cheerful types."

"Cheerful types?"

Jet raised and lowered one shoulder. "You don't see much of those outside the walls. Best you get are those who keep a stiff upper lip. But the war's spread everywhere," he gave a sidelong glance to Zuko. "But I guess you'd know all about it, huh?"

It took several long seconds for him to realize that Jet was looking at his scar, the reddened skin shimmering slightly in the light of the torches. He looked away. "I guess," he said quietly.

Nothing more was said until they were at the fountain, and Zuko found that he had to agree – it was beautiful.

"My parents met here, you know," Jin said softly. "So I guess this place always had a special place in my heart," her words trailed off as the others slowly spread out across the plaza, silently admiring the scenery. After a moment, Jin stepped closer to Jet and Zuko.

"Hey, Lee?"

"Hm?"

"Where're your parents?"

Zuko stiffened and coughed. "They're… no longer together. I haven't seen either of them in a while, actually."

"Oh! I'm… I'm sorry, I didn't mean to –" in a transparent bid to move away from an awkward conversation, she quickly turned to Jet. "So, uh, what about yours?"

Jet gazed towards the pool. "My parents are dead. The Fire Nation killed them," it took all of Zuko's effort to keep a neutral expression on his face, but Jin simply looked ever more mortified.

"Oh – oh, I'm so sorry!" Jin blurted out.

"No, it's all right. It just reminds me of who I am… of what I need to keep doing," Jet closed his eyes, and let out a long, slow breath.

A few minutes later, all of them were walking down the streets of Ba Sing Se's Outer Ring, a visibly embarrassed Jin leading the way, Jet and Zuko hanging near the back of their little group.

"You've known those two for a while?" Zuko gestured towards Smellerbee and Longshot.

"Yeah, we go back a long way," Jet smiled, but it was bitter and hard-edged. "They were with me when… when our village got attacked. As far as I know, we're the only survivors."

Zuko didn't respond.

"I've had other mates over the years, but the two of 'em have stuck with me always," his smile
became warmer. "It's nice to have someone you know is always watching your back, you know?"

Zuko glanced down at the street and nodded. "Yeah, I know," he said softly.

"Well, that's that!" Jin smiled brightly at them. "All the stuff... at least in this area. Ba Sing Se's really too big for anyone to know everything about the place, but I think I got this part of town covered pretty well."

"That you did," Jet chuckled. "I don't think we'd have ever known about all these restaurants and other places if it weren't for you pointing them out."

"Yeah," she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her head. "I've lived here pretty much my whole life, and well, since you're all refugees here, I thought I'd do whatever I could to help you all get settled. I mean, we all have to do our part, right?"

Jet chuckled and nodded. "Thanks, Jin."

"Yeah, thanks," Smellerbee piped up. Behind them, Zuko let out his breath.

"Thanks for being our guide, Jin," he said softly before turning away.

"Hey, hang on!" at the sound of Jet's voice, Zuko paused and looked back.

"Yeah?"

Jet cocked his head to one side. "See you around sometime, huh?"

Zuko almost smiled. "Yeah, okay."

"Ty Lee, why'd you even buy that doll for?" Mai questioned as the two of them walked down the street.

"Because it looks cute! Also, if I jiggle this lever at the back, her mouth moves up and down! Isn't that amazing?"

Azula closed her eyes, tuning Ty Lee out and trying to keep her temper in check. Over the past few days she'd managed to discern that the Avatar was currently sequestered in the Inner Ring of the city, and access was severely restricted to those from the Outer Ring. Of course, she felt confident that she could sneak, bribe, intimidate or otherwise make her way inside, but even the Inner Ring of Ba Sing Se was a large place and she didn't want to make a move until she could feel certain.

In any case, she had time. As expected, the Avatar wasn't too interested in moving out from behind the supposed safety of Ba Sing Se's enormous walls, and so long as he remained, Azula could slowly and safely find a way to worm up to him and put a lightning bolt into his back.

Or perhaps a dagger. She wasn't picky.

"Hey, Az?" Ty Lee's question snapped her from her musings, and she glanced up.

"Yes?"

"Mai and I are going to get something to eat. You want to come with us?"
Azula shook her head. "No, I had a big breakfast this morning. You two go ahead," pausing for a moment to watch the retreating figures of her two friends, Azula shook her head and begun to head back to their residence.

"... like fragile, tiny shells, drifting in the foam..."

Azula pulled short in her walk and nearly tripped over in what would have been an entirely undignified manner. Her eyes widening, she quickly scanned the street.

*I know that song, I know that voice!*

There! Near the far end, her Uncle was... serenading a little boy. Azula raised an eyebrow. Her Uncle was forever doing things that she could never fathom anyone doing, and yet whenever she chanced on him doing so, she was somehow never surprised.

Even as she watched, her Uncle finished his song, patted the little boy on the head, and stood to go on his way. On an impulse, Azula began to walk after him.

At first, it was largely an uneventful affair, and Azula was beginning to wonder if she'd wasted enough of her time already. But the items Uncle were carrying and the path of his walk didn't seem to suggest a simple afternoon stroll, and some corner of her mind caused her to persist in following him. If nothing else, she might get a chance to talk to him in private.

Aside from a couple of middling delays, Uncle was able to progress on his walk unimpeded, and the further they moved, the more Azula became aware that they were heading out of the city limits and out into the farmlands beyond the Inner Wall. Pursing her lips, she quickened her pace, eager not to let her Uncle out of sight.

Gradually even farmland gave way to wild, unspoiled hills of grass, and just as the sun was beginning to sink fiery red in the horizon, Uncle halted at a small stone marker at the top of a grassy hillock.

For a long moment, she lingered in the distance as he unpacked what he had brought with him. It was only when the joss sticks were brought out that Azula took a closer look at the marker, and at the picture resting there.

*Lu Ten?* Taking a deep breath, Azula walked forward, her boots making soft crunching noises through the springy grass, until she was standing just beside the seated figure of her Uncle.

"Ah, Azula," he said softly. "It's good to see you again," and Azula could hear that his throat was tightened with grief.

Silently, she lowered her body, until she was kneeling in front of the makeshift memorial. Closing her eyes, she bowed her head for several seconds.

When she had finished, she sat back, and opened her eyes again. Her Uncle was looking at her, a curious expression in his eyes. "I did not think you were close to your cousin."

"He fought and died for the Fire Nation," she said stiffly. "That is enough reason for me to pay my respects."

"Indeed," her Uncle's voice was soft, but Azula barely heard it; with questions long buried now starting to surface again. Closing her eyes, she opened her mouth.

"Why'd you do it, Uncle?" her voice was hard, tinged with bitterness and hostility.
"What do you mean?" if her Uncle noticed her anger, he gave no sign. On the contrary, his voice was nothing but puzzled.

"Why did you call off the attack?" her eyes snapped open, and although she could not know it herself, they blazed with passion and anger. "Why did you order the retreat? I've read the battle plans and studied the troop dispositions – you could have won. You *should* have won, and Lu Ten's death should have spurred all of you to fight even harder, not run away with your tail tucked between your legs! Lu Ten's memorial should be a massive, glorious edifice looking down upon the city back there, as befitting a prince of the Fire Nation! Not... not this!" *Not a forgotten, untended stone in the countryside that only a single old man knows exists.* "Why didn't you do it, Uncle? Why didn't you take revenge on those who took your son from you?"

Her Uncle was silent for a very long moment, so much that Azula was on the verge of storming away in anger when he finally let out a long and low sigh.

"Azula," his voice was steadier now as he raised his head to look her in the eye. "Let us say I did what you wanted. Let us say I stormed Ba Sing Se, found the men responsible for ending Lu Ten's life, and I took my revenge on them. Would they know why?"

"What?"

"Would they understand or care that I did that because they took something from me? Or would they simply see it as an unnecessary act of brutality and cruelty that would in turn cause others to seek revenge against me?"

"Don't be absurd. You're the Dragon of the West. There's no way a bunch of random Earth Kingdom soldiers could ever get the better of you."

"You'd be surprised," and Azula was indeed surprised to see a smile crinkle the side of her Uncle's face. "But that's not the point, Azula. You were right, we could have won the battle. But winning a war is more than just conquering cities. Look at the City of Golden Lilies and Da Chen – they were massive hotbeds of rebellion and revolt from the day we raised our flag there. And we have no one to blame but our own brutality and harshness."

"Are you saying that if we were nicer they'd step in line?" Azula chuckled. "You'll forgive me for doubting that that's the case."

"I didn't say that," her Uncle replied. "It's true that many people – most people, in fact – do not think highly of the Fire Nation. There's no need to add even more grievances to the list," from somewhere within his robes and bag he had magically produced two cups of steaming tea, and he offered one to Azula, who took it hesitantly. "And now, returning to the question of why I left Ba Sing Se..."

"Yes, when father asked you about it on your return, you spouted some nonsense about how 'you were tired, and your men were tired'."

Uncle chuckled. "Yes, I knew Ozai wasn't as interested in the reason for my failure so much as the simple fact that I failed," and he turned to regard Azula with a keen eye. "You read the reports, you say. Then you would know the estimated casualties and losses if we had continued on our campaign to take Ba Sing Se."

She grunted her affirmation as she took a sip of the tea. Ginseng, something in the back of her mind noted.

"They would have been horrendous," her Uncle confirmed with a nod. "Thousands upon thousands
of the best men from both sides – an entire generation – sacrificed in what would easily be the bloodiest battle of the war. Blood that would be on my hands."

Azula bit down the instinct to call her Uncle a coward, and instead simply asked, "But you were willing enough to start the campaign, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was. It wasn't until I lost Lu Ten that I realized just what I was doing. The pain of standing over the cold body of a loved one… it is a grief no words can describe. No words…” Uncle trailed off again, and Azula could see tears glimmering in his eyes once more.

A short, sharp image of Zuko lying broken on the ground flashed through her mind, and she resisted the urge to flinch.

"It was only then that I realized that this was the kind of grief and suffering I had sown through the Earth Kingdom – and not only of those who lived there, but all the soldiers who fought and died at my command. What are promises of a greater, unified world next the corpses of your father, your husband, your son, your brother and best friend?" Uncle shook his head.

Silence descended upon the two of them once more until Uncle shifted his gaze over to the Outer Wall in the distance.

"Nine times we have hurled ourselves against the Walls, and nine times we've broken like water against a rock," he said, shaking his head. "This city has seen enough bloodshed already."

Feeling oddly muted, Azula stood, carefully placing the teacup by the stone marker. "Thanks for the tea, Uncle,” she said curtly.

He nodded, "It was my pleasure, Azula."

And Azula turned and walked away.

(X)

Standing in the doorway of the nursery, Azula peered curiously at the occupants of the sunlit room.

Her brother, Zuko. Her cousin, Lu Ten.

And… her Uncle Iroh.

The three of them were crouched together near the farther end of the room, playing a game of some kind.

Azula shook her head and turned away, mentally counting off the days until Lu Ten returned to the front lines. At least then there'd be one less person to-

"Hey, Az!"

She froze and turned around. Zuko had spotted her. She resisted the urge to scowl. "What, Zuzu?"

"Come play with us! Uncle's teaching me how to play Pai Sho, and he says that when you learn it, we can play together!"

Azula glanced at her Uncle, who had a warm smile on his face, and Lu Ten, who was looking at her with a raised eyebrow, and she sighed.

"This better not take long," she muttered.
And then she entered the room.

Chapter End

Thanks for reading. Please review.
Azula’s eyes flew open. Quickly her gaze darted to the left, and then the right. Waking up at the slightest of disturbances was something that had been thoroughly drilled into her from young, and now, as she focused, she could hear… Ty Lee whimpering?

Not bothering to suppress her groan, Azula pulled herself upright and glared at the lump under the blanket that was presumably her friend. Some corner of her mind noted that Mai’s bed was empty.

“Ty Lee,” she snapped. “What is it?”

The bundle writhed and her friend’s head poked out from one end. “Oh…” she mumbled. “You heard me, Azula?”

“You weren’t exactly being quiet,” the princess yawned and folded her arms. “What was it, anyway? Did someone say something mean to you again?”

“N – no, it’s… it’s nothing,” she shook her head, letting her long curtain of dark hair splay out across her bed.

“Well, that’s an awfully strange ‘nothing’ if it could make you cry like that,” Azula pointed out bluntly.

Ty Lee sighed. “I had a bad dream, okay?”

“Ty Lee, how old are you, again?”

“See, this is why I told you it’s nothing. If I ever come to you about this sort of thing you just make fun of me.”

“You call it ‘making fun’. I call it seeking to help you improve as a person.”

“Hey, I like who I am!” Ty Lee snapped.

“I’m sure you do, Ty Lee,” Azula said and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. With another sigh, she settled herself back down onto her bed, letting her eyes drift shut. “What were you dreaming about anyway?” she mumbled into the night air.

There was a long enough pause that Azula had begun to think Ty Lee hadn’t heard the question or simply ignored her, and she was on the verge of rolling over and going back to sleep when Ty Lee’s voice piped up again.

“It was about you.”

Her eyes flew open again she craned her neck to look at Ty Lee in the eye. “Oh?”
Her friend pulled her knees up to her chest, hugging her legs against her body. “You were broken.”

Azula’s only response was a single raised eyebrow.

“On the inside, I mean. I was like… I don’t know. Your aura was going all black and crackly, and drawing tighter and tighter around your body, until it finally… snapped,” the acrobat paused. “It was awful.”

Azula’s laugh was short. “Well, I’m happy to inform you that I am not in any danger of ‘breaking’, whatever that means, so you can safely dismiss your little nightmare. Now go back to sleep,” and with that, she rolled over in her bed.

There was a short pause before Ty Lee responded. “If you say so, Azula,” and then a moment later she heard the sound of Ty Lee pulling the covers over herself.

Several moments later, Azula drifted off to slumber once more.

Settled down on a stone bench, watching the bustling crowds of Ba Sing Se milling about all around him, Zuko drew in a deep breath and tried to calm himself down.

He was getting impatient. The Avatar was in the Inner Ring, and he was in the Outer Ring. Several miles now lay between him and his goal, and ever since they’d entered Ba Sing Se, he hadn’t been moving any closer to it. He almost wanted to run off after the Avatar on his own again, but after Azula had dragged the story of his misadventure at the North Pole out of him, she’d made him promise that he wouldn’t go off on any solo adventures without the agreement (and, it was implied, the involvement) of the rest of their party.

So right now he was stuck without ideas, and he knew Azula was busy formulating her own plans, but Azula being Azula, she preferred to keep her cards close to her chest until she was ready to reveal it all at one go. Which meant that he was currently left in the dark with nothing to do but wait.

He hated having nothing to do but wait.

He sighed and ran a hand through the tousled mop of his hair, idly wondering if he should go pay his Uncle a visit. On the one hand, he just wanted to make sure Uncle was doing okay for himself. On the other hand… Zuko’s thoughts briefly drifted off to Jin, working in the same tea shop as her uncle was. It was probably for the best for the both of them that they not appear to be connected to one another.

Zuko let out the briefest of amused snorts. Since when had he started caring about consequences so much?

“Azula must be rubbing off on me,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Lee!” the glad shout came from the left, and Zuko glanced up in surprise to see Jin running up to him, her face radiant.

“Jin? What’s the matter?”

“Lee! It’s, oh it’s fantastic! I can’t believe —”

Zuko merely raised his eyebrows, wondering what had just happened as Jin pulled to a stop in front of him, panting for breath.
“It’s – it’s Eeroh.”

“Unc – You mean the old man who works at the tea shop?”

“Not anymore,” Jin flashed him a grin. “Lee, you’ll never guess what just happened! One of those bigwigs from the Inner Ring stopped by our shop earlier today, took one sip of Eeroh’s tea, and offered him a job!”

“A… a job?”

“Eeroh’s getting his own tea shop. In the Inner Ring! The rich guy told us not to worry, he’d provide the building and all the materials and everything! And! And Eeroh offered me a job! As his assistant! Lee, do you understand what this means?” Strong arms were grasping his shoulders before he could react. “My pay’s going to triple! I’ll be able to pay for all of my mom’s medicine now!”

“That’s…” Zuko smiled. “That’s great news, Jin.” Uncle can gain access to the Inner Ring now? That means that we should be able to get in with him with a bit of work. I should probably go talk to him later.

“I know! I’m going to start the day after tomorrow!”

“This sounds like something worth celebrating,” Zuko said thoughtfully. “Did you have anything in mind?”

“Oh. Actually,” Jin paused, as if trying to gauge his reaction. “Actually, I was wondering if you’d like to go to the zoo with me.”

“The… the zoo?”

“Yes. See, the Ba Sing Se zoo recently moved to the outside of the Inner Wall, and from what I heard, it’s supposed to be really good now. People didn’t really visit it before, but now it’s ridiculously popular,” Jin trailed off. “So, I thought maybe we could go have a look. You know, have a day out.”

“It’s already past noon.”


Zuko sat there for a moment, considering his options. It wasn’t like there were plenty of other things in the way for him to do, and anything that took his mind off his inability to do anything right now…

“All right,” he said hesitantly. “I guess that sounds nice. But how do we get there?”

“Funny you asked,” Jin grinned at him as she slid a piece of paper out of her robe. “See this?”

He frowned. “A map of Ba Sing Se’s train system?”

“If you’re going to be travelling, it pays to know how to find your way!” she pointed down at one of the many dots that denoted a station. “This is the station we’re closest to. If we take this route…”

(X)

“Hey, Mai?”

At the sound of Ty Lee calling her (as well as the insistent tug on the side of her robes), she halted and turned to face her friend.
“What?”

“Over there! Isn’t that Zuko? He’s with someone!”

Raising her head to look in the direction that Mai was pointing to see someone who did indeed look like Zuko talking with an Earth Kingdom girl. A frown furrowed her brow for the briefest of moments.

“Azula told me he had found some Earth Kingdom friends,” she said after a moment’s pause. “I guess this is one of them.”

“Oh. Wanna go say hi?”

“And spoil their fun?” Mai let a slight smile grace her lips as she waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. “No need for us to get involved.”

“If you say so, Mai,” Ty Lee shrugged and turned to walk away. Mai took two steps after her, before turning to look at the two of them sitting on the bench. Then, with a shake of her head, she followed Ty Lee.

(X)

“…” Zuko folded his arms and stared at the camel-llama in front of him. The camel-llama, in turn, simply stared back.

At his side, Jin giggled. “I think it likes you.”

He shook his head and turned away, glancing out over the rest of the place. “This is a pretty nice place.”

“Yeah, for sure,” Jin nodded. “The funny thing is, they say that it almost sprang up overnight. They took only a single day to move nearly all the animals.”

*That might explain why the placement is so haphazard.* Zuko thought as he continued walking past more of the animals. Just then, a rattling sound from of the enclosures caught his ear, and he glanced over the edge to look at the source of the noise.

“A Gila-rattlemonster!” he exclaimed in surprise. “Aren’t these only found in the volcanic regions of the Fire Nation?”

“Well, it’s a zoo. It’s kinda of meant to showcase animals from all around the world,” Jin pointed out.

“Well, it’s extremely uncomfortable like this,” Zuko insisted. “They like the heat that comes from being near volcanoes – it must feel like it’s freezing all the time here.” *Whoever designed this zoo obviously had no idea what they were doing.*

It wasn’t after a long moment had passed that Zuko realized that Jin was staring at him with an odd expression on her face. “You know, Lee,” she cocked her head to one side. “You seem to know a lot about the Fire Nation. Or, at least, the animals in it.”

Cursing his carelessness and trying to keep his expression neutral, Zuko raised and lowered one shoulder. “I like studying animals,” he knew it was a lame line even as he said it, but Jin seemed willing enough to buy that explanation because she grinned and cocked her head to one side.
“Well then, Mr. Scholar. Maybe you should try to apply to the university of Ba Sing Se. It could be your ticket out of the Outer Ring, you know.”

As they walked past an exhibit featuring turtle-cows, Zuko shook his head. “I’m not staying here permanently, Jin. I’m just a refugee.”

“Yeah, but…” Jin sighed. “Almost every refugee who comes here ends up living here anyway,” she paused in her step and gazed up the sky. “After all, it’s not like the war’s ending up anytime soon.”

Following her lead, Zuko glanced up at the sky and for a moment he saw it, not bright and clear and blue, but painted crimson and orange, a streak of hellfire blazing across its great expanse. “Actually, I heard that the war’s going to be brought to an end a lot sooner than we think.”

Jin chuckled. “There’re always rumours about that – some super weapon that the Earth Kingdom’s cooked up to turn the tide, the Fire Nation getting some sort of power boost that will let them tear through the walls… well, it’s been a hundred years, and we’re still in a stalemate.

“…” Zuko kept silent as they rounded another enclosure, and the two of them were about head further into the zoo when a familiar voice caught their attention.

“Lee, Jin? You’re here too?” Zuko looked up in time to see Jet waving at him as he approached, a familiar smirk firmly on his face. “What are you two doing here, then?”

“Same goes for you, Jet,” Jin cocked her head to one side. “I didn’t think you’d be the type to be interested in coming to the zoo.”

“Well, that goes to show you how much you know,” Jin laughed as she patted Zuko on the shoulder. “Lee here knows all sorts of things about the animals here!”

“Just a few in particular,” Zuko stammered, but Jet wasn’t really paying attention anyway.

“Anyway,” he replied. “To answer your question, Smellerbee decided her old clothes were getting to be a bit too tight and she decided to go out and grab a new set. Longshot went with her because… well, she thinks he knows more about clothes than I do,” the frown on Jet’s face only deepened at Jin’s laughter.

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re here in the zoo,” Zuko pointed out.

“Nothing better to do, I guess. And I guess I shouldn’t be interrupting the two of you on whatever it is you’re doing together.”

“What! Don’t be silly!” Jin burst out. “We just had some free time and decided to spend it here. It’d be best if we all went together, right, Lee?”

Zuko sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Anything’s fine.”

“Then it’s settled! Oh, look, a lemur-koala exhibition!” Jin pointed, and after Jet and Zuko shared an amused glance, the three of them set off down the path.

(X)

“All right, these should be good enough to gain us access to the Inner Ring,” Azula held up a pass up to the light from the window. “I guess the next step would be to get ourselves the clothes we’d need to pass for people who live in the upper echelons of Earth Kingdom society.”
“So, where’d you get this anyway, Azula?” Ty Lee questioned from over her shoulder.

“There are always places to find what you need if you know where to look,” came the reply. “By the way, Mai, we’re out seventy gold coins.”

Mai merely nodded once.

Azula paused for a moment and then set the papers back down on the table. “Is something bothering you, Mai? More than usual, I mean?”

“… No.”

A two second pause. She’s lying. And she doesn’t want to talk about it. Given the number of things her friend cared enough about to be affected by, discerning the cause wasn’t very difficult at all. Speaking of which…

“By the way, where’s Zuko?” though she directed the question to the room in general, she did not miss Mai’s features tightening ever so slightly.

“I dunno. I saw him with some Earth Kingdom girl earlier this afternoon. I think they were planning to go out somewhere,” Ty Lee helpfully supplied from the floor, where she was engaged in another impractical stretching exercise.

“Ah, right. Those Earth Kingdom friends he’s made,” come to think of it, I haven’t even gotten the names of those people that he’s hanging out with. I should probably fix that. “Well,” she continued out loud. “It probably won’t lead to any problems, so we can just pick him up later. Although I really wish he’d be more involved in the planning.”

“Well, you’re always so secretive, Azula. Remember two days ago when you asked him about what you were doing and you just told him to wait and see?”

“He’s supposed to try to pry and figure it out on his own!” Azula grumbled. “I even left my notes out in the open for him to sneak a peek at!”

Ty Lee sighed and flipped upright into a standing position. “Azula… not everything has to be about deception and intrigue, does it?”

“It does when you’re Fire Lord. Getting Zuko back home is just one part of the equation, Ty Lee,” the princess sighed and pressed one hand to her forehead. “As he is, Zuko is just one more accident away from Father blowing up in his face.” Or just blowing him up, which I honestly wouldn’t put past Father. She blew out another sigh. “Zuko’s too soft for his own good.”

“But I’m even softer!”

“And you’re not going to be in charge of the greatest nation on earth one day, so that’s a moot point,” Azula shook her head once. “Whatever. Just drop it.”

“Okay!” Ty Lee nodded enthusiastically and glanced out the window. “Wow. It’s almost dinner time already. Anyone else want to get something to eat?”

Azula paused, tapping her finger against the desk once. Then she shook her head. “No, I’m not hungry right now. Just buy something back for me on the way.”

“Got it. What about you, Mai?”
“I’ll be fine.”

“No kidding. Free passage to the Inner Ring, huh?” Jet whistled as the two of them strode back down the streets of Ba Sing Se’s outer circle. Jin had already left their trio earlier, heading back to her apartment to tend to her mother. “Guess dreams really do come true in Ba Sing Se after all.”

Zuko nodded as he tried to mentally calculate how far it was from here to the tea shop Uncle worked at – well, for now. It would be sundown soon, and Zuko still didn’t know where Uncle lived, so once the tea shop closed and Uncle left for the day he’d lose his chance to talk to him. He had to find some way to break off the talk with Jet quickly enough that he wouldn’t attract attention to the connection between him and Uncle…

“So what do you think?”

“Huh?” Zuko blinked and glanced at Jet. “What do I think about what?”

“Not paying attention, huh. Figures,” Jet let out an elaborate sigh. “I was asking if you wanted to join up with me.”

“Join up with you… to do what?”

“I dunno about you, but all this ‘There’s no war in Ba Sing Se’ stuff is starting to get on my nerves. The Fire Nation’s out there, and pretending that everything’s just sunflowers and lilies isn’t going to make them go away,” making a fist with one hand, he punched the palm of his other. “So I figure we’ll get a little resistance force going aga… going. There are enough Fire Nation camps in the area outside the city for us to make life difficult for. What do you say, Lee?”

Zuko had to bite his tongue for a long moment as he scrambled to formulate a response. Finally, he opened his mouth, “Why ask me?”

“Well, I know you didn’t get that scar from a Waterbender,” Jet smirked as an invisible claw tightened its grip on Zuko’s heart.

Zuko ground to a halt, turning to face Jet. “Okay, Jet, first off I’m not going to be joining any resistance group against the Fire Nation, so you can drop that idea. And while we’re on the subject, you should probably also drop the idea of forming this resistance group of yours.”

“Why not?” Jet was getting agitated now. “The Fire Nation is out there right now, hurting people and ruining lives! Those of us who have the power to fight back should! It’s not like we’ve got any lack of motivation right now – my parents are dead because of them, and you’ve got that scar that-”

“Don’t. Talk. About my scar,” Zuko’s voice was low, but still carried enough weight behind it that Jet knew to back off.

“All right, the scar’s a touchy subject, sorry. But I still think you should at least think about it a while before-“

“I have thought about it a while. Long before you ever came up with this idea of yours, and no, I am not going to-“

A sudden cry of anger distracted both parties, Jet turning first towards the source of the noise down a narrow alleyway, leaving Zuko to plod along behind him, staring angrily at the ground. Ugh. It wasn’t supposed to end up like this. I’d better just get this whole stupid thing over with quickly – I
guess I could sneak off while he’s distracted to go find Uncle-

It soon became obvious that the cause of the disturbance was a street brawl between two Earthbenders, and that a sizable crowd was quickly gathering – although at a reasonably safe distance. Standing further back from the others, Zuko could see a hurled rock flying through the air, and the sound of breaking stone.

“What are those idiots doing?” someone yelled. “The Dai Li will be here any minute!”

For several long seconds Zuko stood, watching the spectacle. Then he shook his head and began to leave. This has nothing to do with me.

Then it happened. An errant stone missile soared through the air, slamming into the stone walls rising above the alley that Jet and Zuko were currently in. For a moment, there was no reaction, and then with a crumbling sound, a chunk of stone was dislodged from the building, hurtling towards the ground – and a lone figure standing beneath it.

Jet! That single thought seared its way into Zuko’s mind as his body exploded into action, moving by instinct. He’s further ahead of me, he’s too far, I’ll never reach him in time-

A surge of energy within him, a blaze of orange and red, the sound of cracking, crumbling stone, and a sudden hush that descended on the crowd, and Zuko stood there for a very long moment, his outstretched fist trembling, the rest of his body frozen in shock and horror.

“Was that…?” came a soft whisper from the back of the crowd, sounding as loud as a roar to Zuko’s ears.

Jet’s eyes were wide with shock and disbelief. Slowly, his lips began to form the words that Zuko knew had to come.

“Firebender,” the voice was soft, hesitant, as if Jet couldn’t believe was he was saying. Then again, with more conviction – and mounting anger. “You’re a Firebender!” a flash of movement and suddenly Jet was advancing on him, twin hook swords held at a ready position. “You’re from the Fire Nation!”

“No, I –“ trapped and desperate, Zuko cast a quick glance around for an escape route, but could only see a press of people, staring at him with expressions of revulsion and horror on their faces.

“You’re one of them!” the last words from Jet came in a roar of anger as he lunged forward, blades slashing downwards. Instinctively, Zuko parried the blow with his fists, summoning just enough flame to prevent the blade from cutting into his hand. Dodging, weaving, always moving backwards to get away from Jet’s wild attacks, the prince of the Fire Nation tried desperately to find some way out of his current predicament.

“Jet, stop it! I’m not your enemy!”

Suddenly, he spotted the slightest of gaps in between two people, and he whirled, legs pumping as he tried to flee from the area. Once he could get away, he could find and alleyway or some corner to hide until they’d given up looking for him, and then-

Suddenly his legs were seized by an incredible force and Zuko was sent tumbling to the ground, face impacting hard with the dirt. As he tried to pull himself back to his feet, the same pressure suddenly appeared at his wrists, and as he glanced up, he could see the objects that had seized him to be… stone hands?
Raising his gaze, he caught sight of a trio of men standing in front of him, dressed in robes of thick green and wide-brimmed hats that easily signified their status, and Zuko felt a chill go down his spine.

“Now. What’s going on here?” the eldest of the Dai Li agents stepped forward.

“Officer,” Zuko could hear Jet’s voice from behind him. “This man is a Firebender! He’s found his way into the city to try to subvert us!”

The man’s eyes widened slightly. “Is this true?”

“Yes!” another voice piped up from the crowd. “I saw it myself! A blast of fire from his hands! That’s what Firebenders do…. Right?” murmurs of agreement came from the rest of the crowd as the Dai Lis’ eyes hardened.

“You’re coming with us,” strong hands seized Zuko, pulling him to his feet. “The rest of you, disperse. There’s nothing to see here.”

“Let go of me!” Zuko snapped as he struggled against the two men. He could have taken them on in a fair fight, but with those glove things restricting his arms, he was all but helpless against them.

“Quiet,” the elder Dai Li snarled. “I don’t know how a Fire Nation dog found your way into Ba Sing Se, but we’ll find the truth out soon enough. Now, march!”

As Zuko was dragged off, still cursing and protesting, Ty Lee, her face still pale with fright, turned and scampered unnoticed back in the direction of the apartment.

(X)

“So that’s everything, isn’t it,” Iroh nodded with satisfaction and turned to the owner of the tea shop. “It’s been a pleasure working with you, Pao, but then, all good things must come to and end.”

The owner sighed and nodded, obviously dejected at the prospect of losing Iroh’s tea-brewing expertise. “I take it Jin’s following you?”

“Yes, well, she’s told you about her sick mother, hasn’t she? I should be able to give her a good wage at the Jasmine Dragon,” he stroked his beard contemplatively. “She’s a good girl; bright and eager to please,” he paused, his smile widening. “The kind I wouldn’t mind my nephew settling down with.”

“Oh, you have a nephew? I’ve never heard you mention him before.”

“Yes, well,” Iroh heaved a sigh. “We’ve been… distant for a while, but lately I think that there are signs that we’ll be moving closer again.”

“Well, good luck on that end, Eeroh. And… and with the Jasmine Dragon.”

“My thanks,” Iroh gazed up at the sun, all but set over the horizon. “And yes, I do believe that things are looking up for me.”

(X)

“Azula! Azula!” Ty Lee burst into the door, panting and gasping for breath.

“Well, you’ve been gone a while, Ty Lee,” Azula smirked and held up a poster. “Take a look, apparently the Avatar’s bison has gone missi-“
“They’ve taken Zuko!” she burst out.

Absolute silence descended on the tiny room for several long seconds. Smoke began to rise from the pamphlet that Azula was clutching in her hand, until there was a sudden, brief flare of light, and the ashes of what had been the pamphlet crumbled to the floor.

“What.” Azula’s tone was entirely flat, and all the more terrifying for it.

“The – the Dai Li,” Ty Lee stammered. “Earlier, Zuko Firebended for… for some reason, I’m not sure, I didn’t get there in time. All I saw was this boy with hook swords fighting and Zuko yelling at him to stop or something. And then the Dai Li showed up and cuffed Zuko and led him away.—“

“And you didn’t stop them?” Mai’s voice rose in outrage from behind Azula. “You just let them grab Zuko and leave?”

“I – there was a crowd all over the place! I – I didn’t want to blow our cover.—“

“And you did that by letting them arrest Zuko?” Mai’s glare was poison. “They’ll be free to interrogate him at their leisure, and who knows what kind of torture instruments these Earth Kingdom savages have in their dungeons! You could have done something! Why didn’t you?”

Ty Lee took a step back, shaking her head. “I – I wasn’t sure – I didn’t know what to.—“

“Enough,” one of Azula’s hands descended on each of her friend’s shoulders in a grip of iron. “Ty Lee, you did the right thing under the circumstances. Mai, I cannot believe I’m saying this to you, but you can’t let your emotions get the better of you.”

“What?” Mai’s wrenched herself free from Azula’s grip. “Zuko is your brother, and he’s been captured by the enemy.—“

“Which is exactly why we can’t afford to let our emotions get the better of us. We need to plan out a proper course of action, and I didn’t travel halfway across the Earth Kingdom to recruit a nervous shrew who loses it the instant her boyfriend gets threatened; I need Mai, the girl who can give me an objective view on everything because she’s equally disinterested in everything, and the girl who’s skilled enough to pin a fly to a wall at a hundred paces with a knife. Now, are you the person I need, or not?”

Ty Lee could practically feel the rainbow of emotions surging through Mai right now, to say nothing to the flaring colours that burst through her aura for a brief moment, but eventually they settled down as Mai took a deep breath. “I am,” she said softly.

“Good,” Azula turned and gazed out the window. “Ty Lee, what do you know about this boy that Zuko was fighting?”

“Oh? Oh! Um, I – I think his name was Jet or something like that.”

(X)

The door was shoved open with a resounding bang, causing both Smellerbee and Longshot to glance up at the doorway where Jet was standing.

“Hey, Jet!” Smellerbee grinned. “Was wondering where you’d gotten to. I got my new clothes and—“ she was cut off as Jet stormed past her into his own room without so much as glancing at the either of them, slamming the door shut with all his might.

After a moment, Longshot turned to look at Smellerbee and she nodded sympathetically.
“Yup, that’d be my guess too. I always thought that Jin girl would choose the scarred boy over him, but I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.”

(X)

“Jet,” Azula rolled the name off her tongue. “And the Dai Li…”

Ty Lee paused, hesitant. “So… um, what are you going to do, Azula?”

“I should think it obvious,” she said, in an eerily calm voice. “I’m going to hunt down every last person responsible,” she turned to face Ty Lee and Mai, her golden eyes glinting in the very last rays of the dying sun. “And then I’m going to burn them to the ground.”

Chapter End

Thanks for reading. Please review.
Morality Chain

Really sorry for the long wait, guys.

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

“Ow!” the cry of pain was sharp and piercing. Azula glanced up, her features settling into a frown.

“Zuzu? What happened?”

“Nothing, it’s just…” Zuko glared down at his thumb. “Got a splinter. Stupid.”

“Splinter?” her interest piqued, the princess trotted over to her brother’s side. “From what?”

“This,” Zuko held up a piece of wood that had been carved to vaguely resemble a turtle-duck. “A bit broke off.”

“Why are you playing with that shoddy looking thing anyway?” Azula questioned as she picked it from her brother and turned it over in her hands.

“Mai said she made it for me,” Zuko shrugged. “So I thought…”

“Well, if that’s the case we know Mai isn’t going to ever be a good woodcarver,” although at least she’s using those knives she keeps carrying around for something, Azula thought. “Anyway,” she continued as she tossed the wooden toy carelessly to the ground. “Let me see that splinter.”

“What? Why?”

“So I can help you fix it, dum-dum,” she snorted.

“No way, Az!” Zuko had jerked up and away from her. “There’s no way I’m trusting you to do something like that! I’ll just go find mom.”

“Oh. Of course you would,” Azula rolled her eyes and flopped back onto a chair. “Well, off you go then, Zuzu. Go crying to mother just like you always do.”

Her brother glared at her for a moment, then turned away. Two steps later, he’d turned back to face her. “You’re sure you can get this splinter out?”

“Uh huh. Here, hold out your thumb,” clambering back onto her feet, her own hands reaching out to seize Zuko’s hesitantly offered one. “Now, I need you to hold absolutely still…”

“Uh… Az?” Zuko began hesitantly. “Don’t you usually use a pair of-“

“Hah!” Concentrating fiercely, Azula released the rush of energy she had been storing up, and felt a flash of exultation as it left her body in precisely the way she’d wanted it to, and –

“AGH!” Zuko jumped back, frantically waving his thumb up and down. “Ow! OW! What do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.
“Stop being such a baby and just channel the heat away. Any first year student can do that,” she snorted. “And as for what I was doing, I was removing the splinter in the most efficient manner possible.”

“You were…” Zuko stared down at his finger, not making the connection for several long seconds. “You burnt it away?”

“No need to thank me,” she replied primly as she settled herself back onto her chair.

In the dead of the night, the Inner Ring of Ba Sing Se was quiet. Most of the citizens who dwelt within the Inner Ring had already retired for the night, or gone to one of the innumerable parties hosted by this aristocrat or other. That, or ventured under cover of darkness into the Outer Ring in search of less refined leisures.

Just the way he liked it, Long Feng, Grand Secretariat of Ba Sing Se, reflected as he stepped down the path. In the silence and darkness, he was free to plot the course that he and the grand city was to follow. And of course, to deal with the any particular problems that merited his attention.

The Avatar’s search for his accursed Bison has only intensified ever since my last warning. Shaking his head, he pursed his lips. I’ll need to find some way to mislead him. Maybe drop a rumour that some noble from a distant land has recently purchased an exotic animal. Best to keep it vague and hope he bites at the lead. And if that didn’t work… well his pool of resources to draw from was vast. The Avatar was a single boy – along with a handful of friends. As long as they remained within the city walls, it wouldn’t be difficult to isolate them and deal with them individually. Maybe even Lake Laogai…

Thoughts of the correctional facility under the Lake also reminded Long Feng of the second problem that had only recently been brought to his attention.

A Firebender. Captured within city walls. He’d always known as a matter of course that the Fire Nation would seek to send spies to observe and potentially undermine Ba Sing Se’s defences, but the Dai Li had thus far been extremely efficient in rooting them out. Most of them had been summarily disposed of, with a select few being reconditioned into sending back false and misleading messages to whatever passed as intelligence headquarters in the Fire Nation. But all this had been carried out in absolute secrecy, with none of the local populace being allowed to know of the Fire Nation presence within the walls. Now, though…

A public demonstration of Firebending. A suicidal gesture if there ever was one. And an administrative headache for me. Silencing the witnesses would be of utmost importance, and his frown only deepened as he thought of the incompetents who had arrested the youth without bothering to deal with the crowd gathered. Also disturbing was the most recent report he had received from the correctional facility. Resistant to attempts to convert him. Wonderful. I should order him executed and be done with it. But the possibility of more of his kind having snuck in alongside him made drawing as much information out of him as possible the first priority.

And with that, he pulled to a halt, glancing over his shoulder. “I know you’re there,” his voice was flat. “What do you want?”

For a long moment, there was only silence. And then a soft chuckle. Female. Long Feng half turned, trying to peer into the inscrutable darkness of the alcove. She’s in there… isn’t she? After a moment, he tapped the ground with his toe once, sending out a brief wave through the earth, trying to pinpoint his stalker’s exact location.
“So you are an Earthbender. I suspected as much,” the voice said. “I was right to take precautions after all.”

Keeping his expression studiously neutral, Long Feng closed his eyes. “I repeat: What do you want?”

“Oh, nothing much,” A pause. “But what I do want, only the one who rules Ba Sing Se can provide.”

“You wish to meet the King? I’m afraid I cannot permit-“

“We both know that’s not who I’m talking about. I want the head of the Dai Li. And I do believe he’s standing in front of me.”

Perhaps he could find her location on the basis of her voice… but here, in the midst of so many buildings, it would be a most difficult affair. And if she had a line of sight to him, she’d be able to tell if he started searching.

And so after a long pause, he said, “Well, then. Let’s say I do indeed have the authority to give you whatever it is you want. And what is that?”

“One day ago, you apprehended a Firebender and carted him off to whatever hole passes for a prison in this city. I would like him released, if you would be so kind.”

“A member of the Fire Nation, then,” Long Feng’s voice grew hard. “And what on earth possessed you to make such an absurd request? The Dai Li should notice if I divert too much from my schedule. Perhaps I can delay her long enough…

“Well, the way I see it, you really don’t have any use for a random Fire Nation refugee.”

A refugee. Indeed. “I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Hm. Well, more importantly, if you give him up, I could lead you to a far greater prize.”

This was too much. Long Feng barked out a harsh laugh. “A greater prize? I suppose you’ll deliver me the Fire Lord’s head on a platter?”

“Don’t be absurd,” there was a confident quality in the woman’s voice that Long Feng found himself disliking. “But I’m sure what I can offer will be more than enough.”

“Indeed. And what is that?”

“Well, Grand Secretariat, permit me to ask you a question. Who, in these past hundred years of war, has done the greatest damage to great Ba Sing Se? Who was it that besieged this place for six hundred days? Who was the one who smashed straight through the walls of the city?”

“You cannot mean…”

“The Dragon of the West. One General Iroh,” the voice continued. “And he can be your prisoner within twenty four hours – if only you agree to a trade.”

“And I am supposed to believe some random Fire Nation whore knows how to capture the great General?”
“You don’t need to trust my words. Trust the results. If I don’t deliver, then there’ll be no trade, and you’ll be no worse off than you are right now.”

“… And how,” he said after a long moment of hesitation. “Will I know when you’re ready to deliver?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll find you. Now, do we have a deal, or not?”

He closed his eyes and chuckled. “Hm. A hard bargainer, are you not? Very well, we have a deal. Give me the General, and I’ll let the boy go.”

There was no reply, and after a very long moment, Long Feng shook his head and continued walking.

*Hopelessly naïve, that one.* He nodded, trying to convince himself of what he’d just thought. *We’re going to have to accelerate our program with that boy. I must find out what exactly it is he knows.*

(X)

“You’re sure he’s the one?” Resting in the shade of a large building to avoid the worst of the midday sun, Azula gave the youth sitting at the roadside stall a closer look. He was flanked by two others, and a quick scan of them told her that they had seen their fair share of combat before – not enough to be a match for her or her friends, of course.

Ty Lee nodded, her expression unusually sombre. “There’s no way I’d forget that face. And no one else has swords like his. I trailed him all the way from last night like you told me to, and he never left my sight once.”

“So, what do we do?” To anyone else, Mai would have been a picture of impassivity, but Azula could read her well enough to know that she was boiling over with impatience. “I don’t think attacking them in broad daylight is a good idea.”

“No. No, it’s not,” she glanced over at Ty Lee. “We’ll just have to improvise, then.”

A nod from her friends.

“All right then, this is what we’ll do.”

(X)

Jet had been in a rather foul mood for the past two days. And as much as he hated to think about it, it was all tied up with that boy – Lee.

A part of Jet could still barely believe Lee had been from the Fire Nation. Another part howled endlessly at him for not being able to spot the tell-tale signs sooner. And yet another part…

“Jet, stop it! I’m not your enemy!”

Jet shook his head. Nonsense. He was from the Fire Nation! That meant he was an enemy. He was probably a spy or something that had wormed his way into the Fire Nation to gain their trust and had been waiting for the perfect moment –

“I’m going back,” he snapped as he stood from his seat. Both Longshot and Smellerbee started at him but didn’t say anything. They hadn’t said much to him to past couple of days, actually. For some reason, that just made him madder.
Fists clenched, his gaze fixed on the ground directly in front of him, Jet barely noticed when he bumped into someone on the street. But something about that jostle had been different. Off.

What’s… my arm? Hurriedly, he tried to flex his fingers, but his entire arm had gone dead. What happened-

“Oh, hello there!” Jet jerked reflexively at the sound of a woman’s voice in his ear as a strange girl he’d never seen before clamped down on his other arm. She tightened he grip, and he felt his other arm grow dead as well. “It’s this way!” she continued in a perky voice as she yanked him into the darkened interior of a nearby building. To anyone who might have been observing, it would have looked like nothing more than a friend displaying more enthusiasm than was strictly necessary as she brought Jet into a room.

Once inside, she twisted, using the momentum to send Jet staggering forward. Unable to use his arms, he collapsed heavily onto a chair, glaring angrily at the girl.

“What do you want?” he snapped.

“It’s not what she wants,” another voice came from the corner of the room. Shifting his gaze, he caught sight of a girl dressed in green, a cruel glint in her golden eyes. “It’s what you’ve taken from me.”

“What?”

“Feeling a little slow today, are we?” she circled a table, walking closer to him. “Let me spell it out nicely and clearly for you then. You got my brother arrested. That ring any bells?”

His eyes widened for a brief moment before narrowing in fury. “Then you’re from the Fire Nation too!”

“Clearly we’re dealing with a genius here,” the girl folded her arms. “And don’t try to yell, or I’ll have my friend her paralyse your jaw as well. I’m going to be talking either way, but I’d really prefer if the conversation weren’t entirely one sided.”

Jet grit his teeth. “If you want your revenge, then go ahead. But don’t expect me to give you the satisfaction of begging for my life!”

“Now why would I want that?” she shook her head. “I came to give you a chance.”

“A… chance?”

“Mm hm,” a thoughtful nod. “To make recompense. To help me get my brother out of prison again.”

“What?” he nearly spat out the words. “Never! You think I’d lift a finger to help the Fire Nation?”

“Who said you’d be helping the Fire Nation?” the girl shook her head. “I want you to be helping me.”

“Your brother’s a firebender,” Jet’s voice was thick with rage. “That spells Fire Nation to me. You’re all the same – liars, warmongers, and murderers. I’d sooner die than aid any of y-“

“Shut up,” the girl’s voice took on a new cast – quivering with pent up fury and emotion. “That’s how it is, isn’t it? We’re firebenders, and so we’re part of the big, bad Fire Nation! Do you know why my brother was even here in Ba Sing Se, Jet? He’s an exile! For refusing to support a battle plan that would result in civilian casualties. How do you think he got that scar? He was burned, punished,
marked for life – because his honour refused to let him sit idly by and let those atrocities happen,” her voice trailed off and she shrugged. “But I suppose none of that is anyway near as important as the country he happened to be born in, isn’t it?” shaking her head, she turned and headed for the doorway of the room. “Your arms will recover in about five minutes. Thanks for nothing.”

As soon as she left with the other girl following behind her, Smellerbee and Longshot burst into the room. “Jet!” Smellerbee cried as she rushed forward. “You all right?”

“Arms can’t move. It’ll get better soon,” he grunted.

“Sorry we couldn’t come in sooner. There was another one of the girls outside and she wouldn’t budge, and, well-“

“It’s okay. No big deal.”

“…” Smellerbee glanced around the room. “What did they want?”

Jet closed his eyes and let out a long, heavy sigh. “They wanted me to help them rescue Lee. One of the girls is his sister, apparently.”

“…” Longshot tilted his head to one side and raised an eyebrow.

“Of course I said no! They’re Fire Nation!”

Smellerbee folded her arms. “Jet… don’t you think that might not be a good enough reason?”

“What? Have you forgotten what the Fire Nation did to our village? To our families?”

“No! I won’t forget! I’ll never forget what Fire Nation army did to us! But Jet, these are just people!”

“They’re probably spies.”

Smellerbee sighed. “Jet, from what you told me, the only reason Lee firebended was to save your life, remember?”

“It was a trick,” he insisted, but even he could tell that his argument was weak. Closing his eyes, he slumped back down in his chair, and cursed under his breath.

(X)

Azula stood in the doorway of a store, pretending to be intently studying the goods on display within.

Three.

Ty Lee was within the store proper, excitedly gushing over what appeared to be a set of antique teapots.

Two.

To her side, Mai was sitting on a bench, gazing steadily down at the door. She knew her friend would still be stewing about Zuko, and there really wasn’t much to talk to her about right now.

One.

She felt the hand tap her hesitantly on the shoulder, and she turned to regard Jet, flanked on both
sides by his two friends. She raised a single eyebrow in iniquity.

“Let’s make something very clear,” Jet said, hands in pockets. “I don’t trust you. Not as far as I can throw you. And I don’t trust Lee either,” he paused, obviously struggling with the next words. “But he saved my life. And I don’t like going through life owing things to other people. So I’ll help you bust him out. But once I’ve done that, we’re done. Got it?”

Azula let a smile play across her features. “I never expected anything more.”

(X)

Everything… blurry… What’s going on? Where…

Darkness. Brief bursts of light.

Light…? Was it bad? He remembered stabbing fear and pain… but he always remembered warmth. Comfort.

Where was he?

Who was he?

I am… Lee… an Earth Kingdom refugee… he’d repeated those lines again and again to vague shadowy figures for the past… he didn’t know how long.

I am Lee… something… didn’t seem right about that. Wasn’t it true? Earth Kingdom… Kingdom… King? Fire?

Why was there Fire?

Fire… Nation. Was he from the Fire Nation? Was he from… hard to concentrate. Hard to… think…

“Remember this Zuko. No matter how things may seem to change, never forget who you are.”

… Mother?

And suddenly clarity flooded his mind again.


Pain. His head hurt. Everything hurt.

I am Zuko!

Sweating, snarling, he grit his teeth and focused his mind and will.

I am Zuko! Son of Ursa and Fire Lord Ozai! Prince of the Fire Nation and heir to the throne!

He gasped and lay back, panting. He knew where he was. He knew who he was.

They haven’t broken me. Not yet. Not ever. Forcing himself into a sitting position, Zuko steeled his mind for the next, inevitable encounter with his captors.

(X)

“You’re not going to tell me your name?” the boy questioned.
“No. What would be the point? We’re not friends. We’re partners. We’ve a job to do, and once we’ve accomplished it, we can part ways again.”

“But knowing each other’s names couldn’t hurt. I’m Jet.”


“Are all Fire Nation types as grouchy as you?”

“No. Most of them haven’t had their brother unjustly arrested while in exile in a foreign land.”

“… Fine. What is it you want me to do?”

“I need you to tail the Dai Li. My brother isn’t being kept in one of the conventional prisons.”

“I guess not. After all, he’s a Firebender.”

“Right, which means there’s a special facility somewhere the public doesn’t know about. The Dai Li are our best bet for finding them. Six of us should be able to pick up a lead.”

Jet was nodding and rubbing his chin. “All right, I get what you’re saying. And when do we meet up again?”

Azula smirked. “Where we first met up, of course. See you later, Jet.”

(X)

As soon as the girl left, Jet whirled, a glare on his face. “She’s toying with us, somehow.”

Smellerbee glanced after her. “You sure about that?”

“Of course I’m sure! Everything about her is just… off. She won’t even tell us her name!” It’d probably be a fake name anyway.

Smellerbee sighed. “Jet, remember, we talked about this. You keep seeing monsters in people as long as they’re Fire Nation. That’s got to stop, all right?”

Jet closed his eyes and took in several deep breaths. “All right. Fine. Got it. I’m cool,” he rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Come on. We’re supposed to be tracking Dai Li, so let’s split up and find some Dai Li to track.”

“Right. On it.”

And with that, the three of them headed out.

(X)

“Excuse me! A red jasmine with almond lacing, a mint with extra mint, and a white dragon special!”

“Coming right up!” Iroh called back as he wiped his hands. “Ah, business is booming. I couldn’t have asked for a better start for the Jasmine Dragon! Wouldn’t you say so, Jin?”

“Hm? Oh… right,” she nodded and took another glance at the doorway. Iroh frowned.

“Is anything the matter?”

“Hm? Oh… oh, no. I just… never mind,” she shook her head. “Is the next batch ready?”
“Indeed it is,” he nodded as he placed the tea tray in her hands. “These are for the fine gentlemen sitting over at table four.”

“Got it, Iroh!” she nodded, smiled and headed off, although not without another sidelong glance at the doorway of the Jasmine Dragon. Noting this, a frown crossed Iroh’s face.

I really should have a chat with her when I get the time. Well, after we’ve closed down for the day, I suppose.

(X)

“Still nothing?” Long Feng’s expression was dark. “I thought I told you to escalate the drug treatments.”

“We… we did, Grand Secretariat. It seemed to have some initial effect, but the prisoner appears to have rebounded.”

Clenching his fists, Long Feng sighed and shook his head. “Fine. Clear my appointment with the general tomorrow.”

“Sir?”

“I’ll be heading down in person. We need to finish this affair quickly before that girl gets back with her offer, assuming she can deliver at all. Let’s see if I can’t help with applying my own personal touches to the system,” he hesitated, shifting his glance to another scroll. “And what of the Avatar?”

“Oh, making the Joo Dee assigned them more helpful has done wonders. The boy appears to be trusting to a fault. He’s chasing false leads all over the city – soon we’ll be able to feed the rumour of the beat being sold off to a foreign land.”

“And he’ll be out of my hair, then,” one less problem to worry about. “Very well, as you were.”

As the agent departed, leaving Long Feng alone in the chamber, he cupped his chin, dark eyes staring at the fireplace and yet seeing only shadows.

The girl… no, the woman who waylaid me that night. Something about her voice… her tone. He would never admit it to another living soul, but something about that voice, had scared him.

I need to find the identity of that person. And quickly.

(X)

“So this is the meeting spot,” Jet glanced around. “Where’re the girls?”

“No one here?” Smellerbee scratched her forehead. “That’s odd.”

“…” Longshot glanced left and right.

“Nah, they wouldn’t have bailed on us. The girl’s really bent up about finding her brother. She’s probably late or something.”

“Wait,” walking over, Jet picked up a scrap of paper that had been folded neatly and left on the table in the room. “What’s this?” quickly, he unfolded the paper, and his frown deepened as he read the contents.

“Follow these instructions exactly,” he said softly. “Upon leaving the room, turn to your right and
walk until you pass the vegetable vendor with the orange sign on his store. Turn to the left, head straight down to the warehouses district until you pass a square that has a fountain with three spigots in the centre, and then-” he broke reading and shook his head in disgust. “Is this what those three wasted their time with instead of tracking the Dai Li?”

“Well, are we gonna follow their instructions or not?” Smellerbee asked.

Jet pursed his lips and let out a low growl of frustration.

(£)

“You took longer than I expected,” Azula said pleasantly as Jet and his friends entered the room.

“Shut up.”

“I’m sorry, but you understand that I have to take precautions. You could have contacted the Dai Li and set up an ambush at that place.”

“And aren’t you the expert in avoiding ambushes.”

“It comes with being a Firebender in the Earth Kingdom,” Azula shrugged and sat up straighter. “All right, what have you found out?”

Jet paused for a moment. “First off, the three Dai Li we trailed didn’t go anywhere that looked like a prison.”

Azula kept her face impassive. “Go on.”

“But, after we compared notes we realized that all three of them came from the same place – the gate at this end of the city. Now, I’m not saying it’s for real, it could be a coincidence, but-“

There was the soft rustling of paper as Azula brought out the map she’d worked on alongside Ty lee and Mai. She looked down at it. Two of the paths – Mai’s and her own – could both be traced to start somewhere near the gate Jet had pointed out. The last – Ty Lee’s – started out near the centre of the city but had eventually worked its way to the border of the city, at the same gate that all the others had started from.

Jet nodded solemnly. “It looks like we’ve found our target,” he pointed down at the map of the city. “Most of this area out here is farmland – you can’t build something like a prison out there. With all the earthbending they do to till the soil, it’d only be a matter of time before it gets discovered. There’s only one large area that’s also usually undisturbed…”

“The lake,” Azula finished. “Probably underground, from the looks of it.”

Jet nodded. “So your brother’s probably in there. Now what?”

Azula paused, pursed her lips. “Breaking him out might take some work… We’d need firepower.”

“The Dai Li only hire from earthbenders,” the girl – Smellerbee – said. “If we’re getting into a scrap, it’ll be a tough fight, no matter how you look at it.”

“True,” Azula sighed. “And that leaves us with a bit of a conundrum, doesn’t it? What to do…”

As she talked, Azula could sense from the telltale signs that Mai had left the room, likely as soon as they’d determined the Lake as the most probable location. Good. Now all that remained was to lead the three people sitting in front of her in circles for a while, and then they could be safely dropped
from her plans for the time being.

(X)

Gaining entrance to the Inner Ring had been relatively simple – with the passes Azula had acquired the other day, plus their upbringing in the courts of the Fire Nation, none of the people had given them a second glance as they entered the privileged quarters of the greatest Earth Kingdom city in the world.

And despite the reluctance of many people to speak of the Avatar, it wasn’t long before they’d found the home he’d been assigned for the duration of their stay in Ba Sing Se.

“Empty,” Mai said tonelessly as she gazed in through the window.

“Well, of course! The Avatar and his friends should be in the city looking for their pet bison. That’s why Azula sent us here now, isn’t it?”

“Right,” Mai glanced down at the scroll in her hand. “Let’s get this over with, then.” With a single smooth movement she’d thrown it in through the bars of the window, letting it land perfectly on the pillow of one of the mattresses in the house.

“Come on, let’s go,” pausing for one last glance back (and to memorize the location of the place should she ever need to return, Mai and Ty Lee left the place.

(X)

“Ugggh,” Sokka mumbled as he stumbled through the doorway of the place. “My feet are killing me.”

“I hate to say I told you so, but – ‘I told you so’,” Toph shook her head from behind Sokka. “I grew up with these noble types, remember. They’ll say whatever rumours come to mind and pass it along just like that. Chasing these things is like chasing… I dunno, things that are hard to chase and aren’t worth it. You know what I’m talking about.”

“If they give us any leads on Appa, they’re worth it,” Aang said. “And I don’t care how long it takes, I’m going to keep searching until I find him.”

“Even that ‘sold to Whaletail Island’ rumour?” Toph sighed as she settled herself on a chair, elbow rest on the table and propping up her head. “Not that I won’t be glad to get out of this city, Twinkletoes, but it’s a long shot with very little to go on.”

“I don’t care. If it-“

“What’s this?” Sokka picked up the scroll that had somehow found its way onto his pillow. “A scroll?”

“What’s it say?” her sister leaned over his shoulder as he unfurled it.

“Let’s see… ‘Avatar, we know where your bison is being held’, there was a gasp from Aang and a whoosh of wind later, he was reading over Sokka’s other shoulder. ‘East of the city limits is a lake known as Lake Laogai. Underneath it is a facility run by the Dai Li. If the Dai Li were to keep a sky-bison like that prisoner, then that is the only location that it could possibly be in. Please understand, we cannot speak in public about this. We are taking a massive risk as it is’, he looked up as he finished reading the letter. “And it’s not signed.”
Toph sighed. “Boy, this has ‘trap’ written all over it.”

“You think so?” Katara glanced down at the parchment. “It makes sense that it’d be anonymous. We’ve seen how the Dai Li run things in this place.”

“Plus, if Appa’s in the hands of the Dai Li, it’d make sense that they’d use him for leverage,” Sokka was pacing back and forth now, hands cupped in his chin.

“Well, it’s definitely a better place to start than Whaletail Island,” Toph stood and stretched. “So how are we doing this? Right now?”

Aang glanced down at the scroll. “Yes. Right now“

“Well then, what are we waiting for?”

“Do the trains run at this hour? If we have to walk all the way there…” Aang and Katara both turned to glare at him, and he put his hands up defensively. “I’m kidding, okay?”

(0)

“You think he’ll make his move now or later?”

“Now. The Avatar’s an impulsive one,” Azula turned to face Mai and Ty Lee. “And that means we’ll need to be moving out too.” Using the Avatar as a distraction to find Zuko… Well, strange times call for strange bedfellows.

Her friends nodded and turned to the door. “Wait,” came Azula’s voice.

“I can’t afford to be identified. One of the advantages I have is that Long Feng doesn’t know who I am yet. I can’t let him see me.”

Ty Lee scratched her forehead. “You have something in mind, Azula?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” with a clatter, Azula lifted up a set of carved masks. “Call it a little bit of Zuzu’s exploits leaking over into ours.”

(X)

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” A red blast of flame exploded from her hands, slamming into the polished wall of her room. It had long been reinforced against errant flame and so no fire caught on the wall, leaving nothing but a sooty stain on the wall.

Pausing to take another deep breath and to brush a strand of hair from her forehead, Azula’s features tightened again and she launched another wave of searing heat out at nothing.

“HAAAAAAAAAHHHH!”

“Az! What-!”

Again. Another burst of fire. Again. Aga-

“Az! Stop it!” hands grasped her shoulder and she swung around, glaring at her brother. At the expression on her face he stepped back instinctively, eyes widening in shock.

“WHAT!” she snapped. “What are you doing in my room? Just leave me alone!” Why? Why is it so easy for you, Zuzu? What do you have that I don’t?
“You know you can’t Firebend inside your room! If Mom or Dad found out, they’d be furious!”

“Hah,” she spat out a bitter, angry laugh. “Mom’s already furious with me anyway! So what does it matter!” despite her words, she let her arms fall to her sides as she glanced around at the dozens of scorch marks around the room. With a shake of her head, she reached up to wipe the sweat from her temples.

“…” Zuko stared at her. “What happened?”

After a long moment of silence, she shook her head and softly began to tell of how she’d met her mother earlier in the day, when Ursa had idly inquired if anything had happened that day, and Azula had launched into an enthusiastic account of how she’d helped to remove a splinter from her brother’s thumb.

Even as she spoke, she could feel the pride and enthusiasm that had slowly melted away to an icy cold trickle of unease at the expression on her mother’s face. And then the sharp reproof from her mother that had stung even more than usual.

She shook her head and walked over to her bed. “She told me that I was being careless! Careless! Does mother even know me?” she snarled as she flopped down on the soft mattress. “I’m never careless. I’m not allowed to be careless.”

After a moment, Zuko shrugged and settled down on the bed next to her. “Well, trying to remove a splinter by burning it probably wasn’t very safe.”

“Maybe for a Firebender that isn’t as good as I am,” she muttered. “And why are you complaining? I helped you, didn’t I?”

Zuko paused, and after a moment, he chuckled. “Yeah, Az. You did.”

Chapter End

Thanks for reading. Please review.
“We shouldn’t be here,” Zuko’s voice was hesitant.

“Hm? Why?” Preoccupied as she was with studying the map she’d made of the hidden passages of the palace, Azula didn’t pay much attention to whatever it was her brother was saying. “Our classes have finished for the day, or at least mine have.”

“I mean that we’re not allowed to be here,” Zuko said irritably.

“Not allowed?” Azula scoffed. “We’re prince and princess of the Fire Nation, Zuko. These passages were built for us to use in the first place!”

“When we’re grown up, maybe. But I don’t think mother would like us sneaking around like this.”

“Mother never likes anything I do anyway,” Azula muttered. “And I’m sure father would approve of us learning more about the palace. Don’t you think so?”

Silence was her only answer. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Zuko simply looking at the ground.

“Come on, Zuzu!” she snapped, annoyed. “If you keep worrying about getting permission to do anything you’ll always end up missing out on all the fun things in life.”

“This is one of the fun things?” Zuko questioned with more than a hint of scepticism.

“You don’t like it? Exploring and finding out more isn’t exciting to you? Like that hidden room we discovered with all the scrolls and treasures-“

“And you went around poking all of them!”

“What did it matter?” tugging at one of her bangs, Azula shrugged. “All the dust in the room meant that no one’s been in there for ages. We won’t get in trouble, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Silently, she replayed the mental image of her brother sneezing violently as they’d entered the room and stifled a chuckle.

After another moment of silence, Azula paused at the entrance to another of the room and glanced back at her brother. “Look, if you’re really worried about mother scolding us for this later, don’t worry. I’ll just tell her it was my idea and that I dragged you along, okay?”

Zuko’s expression brightened. “Really? You promise?”

“I’ll promise if you promise to stop being such a wet blanket,” was her reply. “Come on, hurry up, I want to see what’s on the side of this door.”

“C’mon, hurry up,” Sokka said to Toph. “I want to see what they’ve got under the lake.”
“Yeah, yeah, hold on a sec,” the Earthbender grumbled as she tapped her foot on the ground, making sure that the passage was where she’d first sensed it to be. “And… there we go!”

The was the soft rumble of shifting earth, and a path slowly rose up from the lakebed, ending in a tiny stairway that led further down.

“Good work, Toph!” Aang nodded. “All right, guys, let’s go free Appa.”

“Be careful,” Katara spoke up as they moved forward. “This is the Dai Li’s base. We don’t know what will be waiting for us there.”

As they entered the cavern, Toph turned around, preparing to sink the pathway behind her.

“No, leave it,” Sokka placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Huh?”

“If we need to make a quick getaway, it’s better to still have that path open for us, isn’t it?”

“And that’s worth leaving evidence that we’re sneaking around here to you?” the Earthbender raised an eyebrow in a display of scepticism.

“If we find Appa here there’s going to be a lot of evidence of us sneaking around anyway,” Sokka took a slow glance down the dimly lit hallways. “And have our attempts at stealth ever worked out? We always get discovered or tracked and then everything goes to pieces.”

“Maybe the Dai Li aren’t as tenacious as the Fire Nation,” Katara pointed out, but nonetheless she nodded. “We might need a quick escape route, though, so I’m with Sokka on this one.”

“I’m not going to escape,” Aang’s eyes were set as he stared down the corridor. “I’m finding Appa and breaking him out of here, and I’m not going to leave until that happens.”

“Right, right,” Toph nodded. “And once we’ve found Appa, we can leave this city and never come back again. I can hardly wait!”

A quick look was shared amongst the group (except for Toph, for obvious reasons), and then the four of them headed deeper into the depths of the Dai Li’s base.

(X)

“They even left the path open for us. How thoughtful of them,” Azula said as she stared down at the shore of the lake from her vantage point. After a moment, she turned to look over her shoulder. “Mai, Ty Lee. Are you ready?”

Mai’s only reply was a wordless nod.

“Boy this mask is uncomfortable,” was Ty Lee’s muffled response.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Azula muttered as she paused to take a closer look at her friends.

They were all dressed entirely in dark blues, to help them blend further into the night. To be frank, she didn’t expect this to be as useful once they’d actually entered the underground base, seeing as how there would probably be actual lighting down there, but every little bit helped.

More striking were the masks she’d appropriated for them. Each coloured a rich maroon, they were carved to represent what were supposedly famous spirits of the Earth Kingdom’s mythology,
although none of the specific names came to Azula’s mind just now. Not that it was particular important either, she supposed.

“Well then, let’s—"

“Wait,” Mai’s warning stopped her at the last second, and Azula crouched low again, eyes peering through the holes in her mask in her attempt to catch sight of what it was that had made Mai sound the alarm.

Illuminated by the moonlight, Long Feng and a small entourage of Dai Li agents were walking purposefully towards the Lake, only stopping in surprise when they came close enough to realize that someone had left the path open.

“What, well,” Azula murmured under her breath. “Things have just gotten more interesting.” Or dangerous. I don’t know if Long Feng being here is usual or if something big is going on tonight, but either way we’ll need to finish this quickly.

“If they sink the bridge, won’t we end up stranded out here?” Ty Lee asked as she slowly crept up beside Azula.

“I don’t think so,” Azula shifted her head slightly to indicate the group before them. “He’s leaving a guard,” a smile behind the carved wood of her mask. “Mai, Ty Lee, you know what to do.”

The soft rustle of cloth next to her, and the presences at her side vanished. Azula kept low, watching as Long Feng’s group vanished into the base as well, with the path sinking back under the waves. The lone guard stood on the shore of lake, keeping a bored vigil – up until a sudden jab at his knees caused him to tumble to the ground.

Smiling, Azula stood, and after another quick check to ensure that there was indeed no one else in the vicinity, made her way to the fallen guard, who now had a knife pressed close to his neck courtesy of Mai.

“Can you raise the bridge without letting the people inside notice?”

A hasty nod.

“Good. You’ve just saved your own life.”

(X)

“I still say splitting up was a bad idea,” Toph grumbled as they plodded through the silent hallways.

“It can’t be helped, can it?” at her side, Katara’s eyes narrowed as she peered through the gloom, trying to see if there was anything she’d missed. “The place is a whole lot bigger than what we’d imagined from the outside. Splitting up is the only way to cover everything in a reasonable timeframe,” a pause, and then a smile quirked Katara’s lips. “Or don’t tell me you don’t think you can take any Dai Li we meet in a straight fight without Aang backing us up?”

“As if,” the Earthbender folded her arms as she continued walking, letting her earthsense spread out to warn her of any approaching threats. “If you want to be worried about someone, worry about Snoozles. He’s not on the level for taking on Earthbenders all by himself.”

“He’s got Aang with him,” Katara said, trying to reassure both Toph and herself. “He’ll be f-“

“Sh!” Toph slashed her hand down in a silencing motion as her body tensed. Instinctively, Katara
got herself into a battle ready pose as well.

A tense moment passed. Then two.

Then…

“We’ve been discovered,” Toph said softly.

*So quickly?* Katara barely had time to react to Toph’s words before the Earthbender began her attack, swinging both arms forward to tear down the wall the Dai Li had been hiding behind in their attempt to ambush them. Taken by surprise, the first of the Dai Li went down quickly to a water whip that Katara lashed out with.

Surrounded as she was by the earth, Toph was in her natural element, and shifting her stance, she stomped the ground once, sending a rippling wave through the ground that knocked two of the remaining three agents off balance. As if to take advantage of the distraction, a follow-up boulder smashed into one of the disoriented agents, taking him down for the count.

Two down within five seconds. *Good.* Katara prepared to lash out with her next attack when a premonition warned her of danger, and she whirled in time to see a hole in the ceiling open up, and three more Dai Li dropping down smoothly.

“To-!” her word of warning was drowned out in a rumbling noise as the three newcomers raised their hands, attacking as one with a huge pillar of stone that lashed out towards the diminutive Earthbender. The sudden intrusion had not gone unnoticed, however, as Toph whirled, bringing up her own earthen wall with which to counter their attack.

As the two attacks crashed into each other, Katara took a step back, wincing from the force of the impact – and then her eyes widened as she caught sight of cracks, spreading across the walls.

Frantically she brought a water whip out, trying to restrain one of the Dai Li and to maybe slow the damage down – but it was already too late. With a rumbling crash, the walls and ceiling of the cavern gave way and Katara’s vision was lost in the dust and rubble.

(X)

“Now, if I were a repressive agent of the government, where would I hide an Air Bison in my elaborate underground base?” Sokka mused from behind Aang as they rounded a corner.

“I don’t know,” Aang admitted as he peered down a hallway filled with identical, unlabelled doors. “But I get the feeling Appa isn’t in any one of these rooms. It’d be a bit small for him.”

“Aang, I don’t think the Dai Li had Appa’s comfort in mind when trying to figure out where to shove him and keep him under lock and key.”

A pause. Then, “you’re right, Sokka.” Aang conceded and snuck close to one of the doors that was slightly ajar. Deftly twitching his fingers slightly, Aang caused a tiny knot of earth to jut out and slowly ease the door slightly wider open. Leaning over, he peered into the doorway, and his eyes widened in horror.

*What – what is this?*

“We are so lucky to have our walls to create order.” The Dai Li agent who had said that stood near the doorway of the room, lit by a series of lamps that gave of an eerie green glow. And…
“We are so lucky to have our walls to create order,” repeated a room full of glassy-eyed women in perfect monotone.

“There is no war in Ba Sing Se.”

“There is no war in Ba Sing Se.”

Aang reeled back from the doorway bad, this is bad. Very very bad his thoughts in disarray. So this is what they’ve done to Joo Dee… both of them shaking his head how could they he signalled for Sokka to follow him further down the corridor, away from the eerie room.

“Come on. Before we get noticed by anyone,” he said in a shouting whisper to Sokka who nodded, his usual snark having been effectively dried up by the scene before him. Quickly, the two of them crept further into the darkness of the cavern.

And then, something shifted in one of many shadowed alcoves behind them, and a figure in black slipped into view.

“Too late for that, Avatar,” Azula muttered to herself as she began to silently follow behind the pair.

(X)

“I still say splitting up was a bad idea,” Mai mumbled to herself as she peered into a room containing what appeared to be row upon row of identical green clothing. It wasn’t the Dai Li uniform, but something about it seemed vaguely familiar anyway. With a shrug, she dismissed that wisp of thought and turned back to Ty Lee.

“Yeah, but this place is a lot bigger than we thought it would be,” Ty Lee, sharp of hearing as always, had overheard her. “If we want to track down Zuko in any reasonable timeframe, we’d be better off dividing our search, wouldn’t we?”

“Maybe,” a paused, and then both of them flattened themselves into one of the dimly lit rooms, as a bored Dai Li patrol that was obviously paying absolutely no attention whatsoever walked past them. After a moment’s hesitation, the two of them crept out again. “But do you think Azula will be all right on her own?”

“Come on, Mai!” Ty Lee chuckled as she randomly flipped into a handstand halfway through their walk. “This is Azula we’re talking about! She can do all this sort of thing on her own.”

“I wonder…” was Mai’s only response as they entered yet another series of doors. Her face twitched in annoyance. “How big is this facility, anyway?”

“Well, this is the Dai Li’s base, after all. It’s only natural that they’d have a lot of stuff in here. Besides, so many rooms means that it was easy to stuff the guys who attacked us just now into a random place that people wouldn’t notice.”

“True,” Mai cupped her chin and glanced down another fork in the road. “Now, which way seems like it would hold the prison facilities?”

Ty Lee glanced down the right, and then the left. “This way?”

“As good as any,” Mai acknowledged with a sigh.

They travelled in silence for a few more seconds, Mai keeping a tight grip on a knife just in case she ran into any unexpected trouble. Then she halted.
"There’s a chamber at the end of the hall,” she said softly. “A big one.”

Ty Lee nodded. “Well, let’s go see what it is!”

“It probably won’t hold Zuko,” Mai said dismissively. “It’s not built like a prison. At least, not for humans.”

“We should at least check it out!” Ty Lee’s voice was petulant. Mai sighed and resisted the urge to rub her forehead.

“It’ll be a waste of time,” she said, but nevertheless she headed forward, knives held at the ready.

Slowly, she pushed the door open, hesitating to see if there were any calls of alarm or surprise.

There were none of that. What she heard instead was –

A low, rumbling growl. Almost like some huge beast-

“You have got to be kidding,” she said to no one in particular as she stepped into the chamber room.

Chained to the far end of the wall, the Avatar’s bison growled in apprehension and shifted farther away from the two of them.

(X)

Katara shook her head, staring at the pile of rubble that had once been the passage way leading back out of the base. After a quick moment of hesitation, she spun, looking for her assailants and Toph.

There was no one else with her.

Gritting her teeth, Katara hesitated for a long moment before deciding to risk alerting other enemies of her position. “Toph!” she called into the gloom, as loud as she dared.

Nothing.

Maybe she had decided to chase the Dai Li further down. Maybe a stray rock had hit her on the head and she was now unconscious. Maybe the Dai Li’s combined strength had overpowered her and she was-

No. Katara shook her head. Toph was fine. She had to be fine.

And now what Katara needed to do was find Appa and hook up with the others. Not necessarily in that order, of course.

Taking a deep breath, and keeping a wary eye out for enemies, Katara continued to move forward through the underground caverns.

Eventually, she began to notice that the doors around appeared heavier and more bulky than the ones from earlier on. Almost as if they had been built with the intention of keeping something or someone out… well, that or keeping whatever was inside the room on the inside of the room.

After quickly glancing back and forth to ensure that there were no guards or patrols, Katara edged closer to one of the doors, and boosting herself to stand on tiptoe, peered into the slot built into the door.

Well, she’d definitely found was counted as the prison block, if the manacled skeleton lying on the
metal floor was any indication. Hastily, Katara turned away, already sickened by the sight. Appa probably wasn’t here –

“You! Halt!”

Katara whirled at the sight of a Dai Li agent coming at her, one of his hands coming up to launch a stone fist at her. Instinctively, she brought forth a thin screen of water out from her pouch, collapsing and freezing it around the projectile to render it harmless as she tossed it to the side.

Annoyed that his initial strike did not have the desired effect, the Dai Li raised his other hand, firing off what appeared to be a stream of tiny bullets from the segments of his rock glove. Throwing herself to the side, Katara slashed out with one hand, the whip of water rising forth to catch the Dai Li full on the chin. The Earthbender staggered, and before he could recover an iceball hurled as hard as Katara could manage rendered him unconscious for the time being.

Pausing to wipe the thin sheen of sweat that had accumulated on her brow, Katara turned to venture deeper into the depths of the base when she heard a low groan coming from one of the cells and froze.

For an eternal moment, Katara played a silent debate with herself, wondering if she should go check what it was. On one hand, it could well have been a dangerous criminal trapped in there. On the other hand, given what she knew of the Dai Li’s methods, it could just as easily have been an innocent person unjustly imprisoned.

Finally, with a sigh, she crept up close to the door. Just her luck that this one didn’t have a viewing hole. Not a problem, though. Opening her pouch again, Katara let a thin whip of water out, letting it seep into the keyhole before freezing it solid in the shape of the needed key.

Jiggling with the lock for a moment, Katara allowed herself a small smile of satisfaction at the sound of the click, and swinging the creaking door open, she peered into the room.

Zuko, prince of the Fire Nation, sat chained to the wall of the cell, head lolling weakly to one side.

Tonight was not going particularly well, Long Feng reflected with more than a hint of ruefulness as stood in the central chamber of the Dai Li’s Correctional Facility. His journey here to oversee the finishing up of the rogue Firebender’s processing had been rather rudely interrupted by the unforeseen intrusion of the Avatar and his friends, presumably in their search for the accursed Bison. Even after dealing with them, he was going to have to hunt down and plug the security leak that had allowed this situation to come to pass in the first place.

At least they had split their numbers and their firepower in the process of searching the place, which meant that picking them off would be far easier than it would be otherwise. Impulsive and rash. Long Feng almost shook his head in distaste. The Avatar was an outdated relic of the past ages – if this was how he was going to behave then there was no way he could enforce peace in the current world.

“You,” he began without preamble, making sure to pour emphasis into every word as he stared down at the Avatar and the Water Tribesman at his side. “Have made yourself enemies of the state with your actions here. I will no longer suffer your presence within the Walls of Ba Sing Se,” he raised his hand in a dismissive gesture towards the Dai Li flanking him. “Dispose of them.”

As he turned away to let his men deal with the interlopers, he paused. Had there been a flash of movement from the far side of the room? He glared down towards the darkness, trying to see if it had
been a trick of the light.

After a long moment, he shook his head and turned away, heading deeper into the facility.

(A)

Azula almost shook her head as she watched what appeared to be two squads of Dai Li agents strike at the Avatar simultaneously. She had to admit that the boy was holding his own in an impressive manner, but given that the Water Tribesman at his side was little more than deadweight, he would be overwhelmed before too long.

She would have snuck off and left the two of them to their fate if not for the fact that she needed to ensure that the Avatar at least survived this particular bout. Feeling a rather unpleasant sensation in the back of her throat at the thought of willingly helping one of her enemies, she jumped to the top of one of the stone platforms that the Dai Li were chucking rocks at the Avatar from, ready to take on some foes of her own.

Two of them on this one. The first one was already turning towards her, his eyes widening in surprise at the sight of a masked figure coming at him. Before he could attack, she dropped low, sweeping her leg out in a kick that sent the man tumbling. A follow up kick swept him off the platform, sending him to the floor with a rather loud of thump.

The second of the Dai Li took the opportunity to make an attack of his own, his signature rock gloves shooting out at Azula. Ducking low, she let them fly harmlessly overhead before she lashed out and caught him in the neck with her elbow. He crumpled without a sound.

Her lack of a Firebending was a disadvantage, true, but not enough that she would really have to struggle against these ants. Nodding to herself, Azula continued moving further in through the shadows.

(X)

Shock rooted Katara to the spot for a very long moment as she stared at the man who had, more than anything else, become her symbol of everything rotten and bad about the Fire Nation. A flash of anger, red hot, seared its way through her mind for an instant, and she nearly staggered from the sudden rush of emotion that wound its way through her.

Questions such as what he was even doing here in an Earth Kingdom prison were quickly shoved aside by the pure, simple fact that he was here and helpless before her. Almost unconsciously, her trembling hand went to her water pouch. It wouldn’t take much at all – just a tiny little bit of water, maybe frozen into a sharp spike of ice, at exactly the right spot-

Zuko’s eyes flashed open as he jerked upright, the back of his head slamming hard against the metal of the cell. Shaking his head, his eyes blinked blearily as Katara took a step backwards in spite of herself. After a long moment, he raised his head, enough to look her in the eye.

“You…” he rasped out, his voice hoarse.

That same vindictive anger flooded her again, and Katara glared down at him. “Yes,” she all but spat. “It’s me.”

He blinked once. Then again. “Who… are you?”

Katara froze.
“Are you…” he was shuddering, staring at the floor. “Don’t bring that light again… hate that light. Hate that voice. Tells me thing. Makes me forget. I am…” he trailed off into silence. “I am…” he repeated, his voice nothing more than a whisper.

Katara swallowed hard.

Then, in a low voice, he spoke again. “I am…” he jerked up, staring at her with wild eyes. “Can’t tell you! Can’t let them know! Can’t.” he broke off as a coughing fit struck him, and when it subsided he slumped over again, the outburst having apparently drained all his strength.

Katara’s fingers twitched slightly as she stared down at the helpless boy in front of her.

( X )

“There, there, it’s okay,” Ty Lee said soothingly as she stroked Appa’s fur. Turning over her shoulder, she looked at Mai. “How’s it coming along?”

“We shouldn’t even be doing this,” Mai replied as she unfastened another one of Appa’s chains. The Ski Bison had two of his legs free now, and her mask lay at her side, allowing her freedom to solve the locks.

“Come on! They had him chained up in this cramped room and everything, and look! They didn’t even take good care of his fur. I bet they didn’t feed him properly, either. That’s just animal cruelty, that’s what it is,” Ty Lee lifted the mask from her face for a moment to take a closer look at the discoloured marks on his fur, and her expression clouded over. “I saw enough of those things back in the circus.”

“The animal they’re being cruel to is the Avatar’s bison,” Mai said.

“Yeah, maybe doing this will make it friendly enough to us that it’ll help us capture the Avatar, huh?” a low growl sounded from the back of Appa’s throat, although he didn’t do anything else. “Or maybe not.” Ty Lee chuckled.

Click. The third of the chains was unfastened. “Azula won’t like this. Freeing the Bison could give he Avatar the mobility he needs to evade us again.”

“Yeah, you say that, but you agreed to help me, didn’t you. We’ll deal with tracking the Avatar down again if we have to, but I know even you care enough that you can’t leave this poor guy be,” Ty Lee hesitated. “Besides, Azula doesn’t have to know, does she?”

There was a significant pause, the only sound the soft clink of metal against metal as Mai worked on the final lock. Finally there was a soft click and Mai sat back as the Sky Bison pulled his legs, the last of the bindings slipping from her body. “No,” she said in a soft voice. “I suppose she doesn’t.”

( X )

“That was… closer than I would have liked,” Sokka gasped as the last of the Dai Li ambush retreated to safety. “Come on, Aang, we’ve got to get out of here before they regroup.”

Aang nodded and set off for the far end of the room. “Hey, Sokka?”

“Huh?”

“Was it just me, or did that seem a little easier than it should have been?”
“Easier?” Exhaustion wasn’t helping Sokka process very many words right now. “You call that easy?”

“Well, to be honest, I don’t think we could’ve taken that many on our own. It almost seems like there were less of them than I thought at first,” Aang’s face was knotted in contemplation.

“Yeah, well maybe the Dai Li are just good at appearing intimidating and all that jazz, but when push comes to shove they blow it?” Sokka threw out.

The next chamber was likewise empty, and Sokka was starting to get the creeping sensation that maybe they had been going the wrong way all this while. Then again, Long Feng had been here, so maybe he was guarding something valuable.

That, or he’d just made his way here to confront them or something.

“Maybe we should go back and ask one of those Dai Li guys we beat up for a map.”

(X)

The sound of crumbling rock instantly sent Katara into a combat-ready stance as she stared.

“Easy there, sugar queen, it’s just me,” Toph called as she stepped through hole she’d made in the wall.

“Toph! What happened?”

“I got separated in the big fight earlier. Kicked their butts, then came looking for you. Ran into more of ’em on the way, so I kicked their butts too. Sorry it took so long,” Toph spoke with a casual air, although even in the darkness she could spot a discoloured bruise on Toph’s arm.

“Are you injured?”

“Not much,” the Earthbender shrugged. “Couple of hits here and there. If you wouldn’t mind healing me, though?”

“Of course,” Katara was already opening her pouch before she paused. “Ah, I’m almost out of water, so I’ll have to careful with what I’ve got left. Hang on.”

“Out already?” Toph raised an eyebrow. “What happened? You ran into a bunch of soldiers, too?”

A frown appeared on Katara’s face as she bathed Toph’s arm in the healing light of her waterbending. “Not exactly. It’s complicated, all right? I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Toph nodded after a moment’s hesitation. “If you say so. Come on, we’ve still got to find our way around this place.”

“Right behind you.”

(X)

Alone once more, Azula slunk through the shadows of the base, always keeping a lookout. She’d already gotten a pretty good idea of the layout of the entire place, and assuming that their design conventions were standardized, the prisons would be…

Right in the same direction where the sounds of a scuffle taking place were coming from.
Quickening her pace and ignoring the dull thuds of pain from injuries she’d sustained earlier, Azula rounded the corner to see Mai and Ty Lee – still in their masks – facing down yet another squad of Dai Li soldiers. *How many of these pests does Long Feng even have?* Azula thought with a growl as she launched herself at the back of the unsuspecting soldiers, dropping one with a swift kick to the abdomen.

With Azula showing up to present an unexpected reinforcements, the Dai Li were summarily dispatched, and the princess shook her head in disgust as she stared at the heap of soldiers lying on the floor. After that, she turned to her friends.

“Found anything?”

“Not yet,” Ty Lee shrugged, her expression hidden behind her mask. “We just came here a moment ago, but this looks like a prison complex.”

“True,” Azula tapped her chin thoughtfully. “One of the entrances to this section was blocked by fallen rocks, so I have to assume that was made recently. Probably our earthbending friend from the Avatar’s group.”

“Anyway,” Mai spoke up. “We haven’t started searching the cells yet.”

“Well,” Azula said softly. “No time to waste, then.”

Some of the prison cells had viewing ports in the doors, allowing for easy checking. After ascertaining that nothing of interest was in one, Azula could quickly move on to the next. Others, however, were completely sealed, forcing them to waste valuable time as Mai had to slowly pick the lock before confirming that there was nothing inside. More infuriating was that Azula was certain Zuko would be kept in one of the higher-security cells, which meant she couldn’t afford to simply leave them be.

It was only as they were passing the fourth set of doors in the wall that Azula felt a ripple of unease sweep through her. Something wasn’t right about the situation, something-

The ceiling above her burst open, and Dai Li agents burst through, one of them almost landing directly on Azula’s head. Twisting out of the way, she aimed a kick at the earthbender that was blocked, and she jumped back to give herself some room.

*Just how many of them are there?*

Her opponent settled himself into the same (predictable) stance of preparing to fire his rock gloves at her, one that Azula took full advantage off by throwing herself forward, grabbing his arm, and twisting. There was an audible and satisfying *snap*, and as the Dai Li gave a cry of pain, Azula’s knee came up to send him slamming into the wall.

“Ah-!” a strangled cry of pain from Ty Lee caught Azula’s attention, and she glanced up in time see her friend frantically trying to evade the simultaneous attacks of two Dai Li agents while her right arm hung limp and useless. Even as Azula watched, a stone shot fired from one of the Dai Li clipped Ty Lee in the stomach, sending her to the ground with a cry of pain.

*Ty Lee! A body a blur of motion, a jet of blue fire was striking out from Azula’s outstretched fingers even before she realized it, burning through the chest of the closer of the Dai Li agents. The other agent’s eyes had time to widen in surprise before a flurry of Mai’s knives pinned him to the wall, rendering him immobile.*

Standing still, Azula cursed her own carelessness for allowing herself to be caught by surprise and firebending. She cast a quick glance over the defeated Dai Li strewn about the corridor. If any of
them had caught sight of her blue fire...

A pained groan from Ty Lee brought her focus back to the immediate situation and she squatted down next to her incapacitated friend. “How bad is it?” she questioned. “Can you walk?”

There was a pained groan. And then, “S- sorry, Azula,” came Ty Lee’s weak voice. “I’m sorry for… being… so useless…”

Azula closed her eyes and reined in a sigh. “Be quiet and save your strength,” she said brusquely. “Mai, come here. I’ll need you to-“

The low rumble of shifting earth heralded the arrival of yet more Dai Li, and Azula had to physically force herself not to let loose with a string of invectives. With Ty Lee unable to fight, there was no way they could continue this operation. Shaking her head, she picked Ty Lee up and slung her over her back. It wasn’t particular comfortable, but speed was what was important now.

“Let’s move. Help me harry pursuers and slow them down,” Azula instructed Mai, and she was awarded with a quick nod. Turning, she began moving down the corridor with all the speed she could muster. And with each step, the thudding of her heartbeat seemed to remind her of the failure of her objective.

*This isn’t over, Long Feng,* she swore to herself. *I’ll make you pay for everything that’s happened, and soon.*

(X)

Approximately one hour later, an absolutely furious Long Feng was striding through the Dai Li’s facility as his agents hurriedly moved everything that they couldn’t afford to destroy. With this base as compromised as it was, there really wasn’t much else of an option.

How had the accursed Avatar’s bison gotten free? Who were the second group of masked intruders? And what on earth did the Avatar plan on doing now?

“Sir,” came the voice of an aide from behind him. Long Feng barely glanced his way.

“I do not wish to be disturbed.”

“But sir,” the aide continued. “This missive comes from the Earth King.”

Long Feng paused and ground his teeth. Just what he needed. A meeting with the royal idiot right now. With a sigh, he turned and accepted the scroll.

“Also,” the aide cleared his throat before producing a second scroll. “One of the Dai Li agents had a rather unusual report concerning one of the intruders.”

Long Feng accepted the second scroll with considerably more reluctance, but as he scanned the contents his eyes widened. “Blue…?”

“Sir?”

It’s nothing.” Long Feng dismissed the servant’s question as his mind whirled. *Interesting. Most interesting.* With a nod, he rolled the scroll up again.

“Well,” he began. “I’d best get ready for my audience with the Earth King. We wouldn’t want to keep his exalted majesty waiting, would we?”
“Honestly, creeping about all day in the secret passages?” Ursa’s face was set into a frown. “Just look at the both of you! All your clothes are covered in dirt! And Azula, you missed the recital your father and I planned for you weeks ago!”

Azula fidgeted with her hair as she endured another one of mother’s scolding sessions. This was nothing new to her, but Zuko apparently wasn’t used enough to it, and he looked remarkably like the time Azula had broken his favourite painting brush. Even though she had repeatedly stressed that it was an accident...

Well, she had promised to claim responsibility after all. She just needed a good opening to claim responsibility for the whole thing without looking like she was covering for Zuzu...

“Honestly, Zuko, you should know better than this!”

There it was. Azula cleared her throat and began to speak. “Actually, mother, it was my-

“I’m sorry, mom,” Zuko spoke over her while looking at their mother in the eye. “I just got so excited at the thought of exploring that I didn’t think about the consequences, or whether or not Azula had anything else to do.”

Her mother let out a long sigh, and Azula silently stewed at the fact that she always gave in so readily whenever Zuko was in the picture. “Just make sure it doesn’t happen again, all right?”

As soon as Ursa departed Azula whirled on Zuko, a question in her eyes and on her lips. “What was that about, Zuzu? I thought you wanted me to take the blame for this?”

“Ahaha…” rubbing the back of his head, Zuko turned to look at Azula. “Well, I can’t let you take the blame all the time, right? I mean, I already owe you for that time with the broken teapot…”

Azula snorted and folded her arms, but she still couldn’t keep the tiny smile from forming on her face. “Dum-dum,” she muttered, just loud enough that he could hear.

His only response was another chuckle.

Chapter End

Wow. Honestly, this was a really hard chapter to write. Juggling a rapid shift of so many viewpoints, less Azula than usual, trying to balance the deviations from canon… the list goes on.

Regardless, I hope you enjoyed this chapter.

Thanks for reading. Please review.
Good lord, my update times are insane. I’ve got to start working harder,

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

“How is she?” Azula didn’t bother to look in Mai’s direction as the quiet girl exited Ty Lee’s room.

“Her wounds aren’t serious, but they’ll take some time to fully heal,” Mai looked behind her. “Are you sure you don’t want to find a healer—”

“For the third time, yes,” Azula snapped. “I gave away my identity back in that facility, and now Long Feng is probably be scouring the city as we speak. I can’t afford careless movement, and if Ty Lee’s wound isn’t serious, then she can stay here and recover.”

There was another pause, and Azula could tell Mai wasn’t too happy with Azula’s decision. Well, she hadn’t expected her to be.

“Without a proper doctor, she won’t be able to fight for a while.” Ah, of course. Having failed to appeal to Azula’s sense of sympathy (something even Azula herself wasn’t certain actually existed), she was speaking in practical terms.

“If things go as they should, the next part of the plan shouldn’t need us to physically exert ourselves, anyway,” and with that, Mai’s last argument was shot down. Azula didn’t need to turn around to know her friend was glaring daggers at her back.

This was because of my own carelessness and impulsiveness. Azula knew she was the root cause behind Ty Lee’s current injury, and she resisted the urge to grit her teeth. In any case, the only thing she could do know was to finish this as quickly and efficiently as possible. For Ty Lee’s sake, and for her own.

Meanwhile, a tiny nagging sensation in the back of her mind told her to go see Ty Lee for herself. After a brief moment of hesitation, she turned and brushed past Mai (who was studiously ignoring her) and ducked into the gloom of Ty Lee’s bedroom.

Her friend’s torso was bandaged, as was her arm. According to Ty Lee she had taken a direct hit to it from one of their stone fists when the Dai Li had caught her off guard, and this was the result. It wasn’t broken, which was a small blessing, but it was the single most serious injury any of them had received throughout the entirety of their travels (unless one counted Uncle’s lightning-inflicted burns, and Azula refused to acknowledge him as actually being part of their group).

“How are you?” she questioned, and at the sound of her voice, Ty Lee squirmed under the covers, turning her head away from her.

“I asked you a question, Ty Lee,” Azula let enough of an edge enter her voice to make her friend react, and after a long moment Ty Lee shifted to face her, her face a mask of despondency.

“I’m okay, Azula,” she said softly. “Don’t worry about me.”
“If you’re fine, you certainly don’t look the part,” giving her bangs a quick tug, Azula leaned over to take a closer look at the arm.

“Hm, it’s worse than I expected, actually,” Azula’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t strain yourself for at least three days, you understand?”

Ty Lee nodded slightly, and Azula sat back on a chair, a brief feeling of discomfort coming over her. She simply wasn’t used to dealing with people in a position like this, and in the end it was nothing more than a brief sense of obligation that had led Azula into this room in the first place.

She was on the verge of standing and leaving Ty Lee to her rest when she heard her friend’s voice again.

“Azula, I’m sorry,” it was barely more than a whisper. The princess narrowed her golden eyes.

“Sorry? About what?” She’d said the same thing back in Lake Laogai, Azula recalled, but there hadn’t been much time to pay attention.

“About…” her friend shifted uneasily, unable to hide the small wince of pain as she did. “About everything, I guess. How I’m so useless, how-”

“Ty Lee,” Azula put a hand to her head, certain she could feel a headache coming on. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’re most certainly not useless.”

“But I-“

“I chose you to come with me on this mission because I thought your abilities would be of great help to me,” she stared directly at Ty Lee with an unflinching gaze. “Are you saying that I was mistaken?”

“N-no, of course not, but-“

Silently, Azula considered whether to let the matter drop right then and there. Not only was this venturing into territory Azula was uncomfortable with (although she would never admit it to anyone other than herself), she still had more plans to think through and refine.

On the other hand, it was better that if Ty Lee had any grudges or discontentment she let it out now instead of letting it fester inside. Azula suppressed the urge to sigh. Ty Lee definitely took a lot more maintenance than Mai did, even if she was more openly loyal to Azula. And so, Azula folded her arms and leaned back in her chair.

“But what? Do go on, Ty Lee, I’m curious.”

“But… but I haven’t been able to help you capture the Avatar yet,” Ty Lee continued speaking while steadfastly refusing to look at Azula. “You know why I came with you on this journey, Azula?”

“Because I asked you to?” she responded archly.

“No. Well, yes, I mean, you came up to me and everything,” Ty Lee chuckled, and her laugh was sad. “But really, I wanted to…” she paused. “I wanted to make up for what I did to you.”

“What you did to-“ Azula shook her head. “Ty Lee, that’s in the past now. I don’t care about something like that.”
Ty Lee’s turned to look at her, and this time there was a look in her eyes that even Azula found difficult to identify. “I thought you were supposed to be a good liar,” her voice was soft.

And Azula found that she had nothing to say in reply.

(X)

“Arrested,” Azula leaned back in her chair, a hard gaze on her face. “Are you certain?”

Mai nodded. “There’s no official word, of course – it would introduce far more complications to the defence of Ba Sing Se that they really can’t afford right now, but at the same time, this means that there’s officially no change to the Dai Li and there’s a general loss of direction amongst them.”

The princess blew out a long breath. “Well, that’s something I’ll have to thank the Avatar for the next I meet him, then,” she muttered to herself.

More importantly, though, what about Zuko? Azula’s feature rearranged itself into a frown. Like it or not, I needed Long Feng to lead me to him.

“Anyway,” Mai continued. “Now that Long Feng’s out of power-“

“No.”

“What?”

“I know Long Feng’s type,” Azula gazed out past her at a Dai Li agent maintaining a meaningless patrol down the street. “If he’s at all competent, he’ll have ensured the loyalty of his men to him even if he’s arrested or discredited in public. Make no mistake, Mai. Right now, the head of the Dai Li is still Long Feng.”

“You’re sure?” Mai’s face betrayed her scepticism.

Azula smiled thinly. “Tell me, Mai, if some rogue group decided to overthrow my father tomorrow and somehow succeeded, how many people do you think would just drop all loyalty to him?”

“…” Mai nodded. “All right, in that case, what then?”

“In that case, the Avatar would probably have dismissed Long Feng and the Dai Li as an active threat,” Azula tugged at one her bangs. “We can use that. But first, I’m going to need to arrange a meeting with Long Feng.”

Preferably with the Avatar and his group nowhere near the place.

(X)

“Jin?” at the feeling of a hand on her shoulder, Jin shifted to look behind her.

“Eeroh? Um, ah – I still have another ten minutes left in my break, don’t I?”

“Yes, you do,” the portly old man smiled gently at her before settling himself onto the seat next to hers. “And as a matter of fact, I’ve just decided to take a break myself, and help myself to a cup of tea,” as he spoke, he handed a steaming cup to Jin, who accepted with a grateful smile.

The next several seconds were spent in silence, the two of them simply sipping and enjoying their brews. Then, after letting out a sigh, Eeroh spoke again.
“I just wanted to make sure that everything was all right. These past few days, you’ve have a
distracted air about,” he paused. “I am paying you enough to support your mother, aren’t I? Do you
need me to increase your wages?”

“Of course not, Eeroh, don’t be silly!” Jin shook her head. “I’m getting more money than I’ve ever
had in my life! It’s just…” she paused, and glanced down into her brew. “It’s a little silly, actually.”

“If you truly believed it was silly, you would have stopped worrying about it by now,” Eeroh
remarked. “If it is serious enough to have put a frown on your face for the past three days, then it is
serious enough for you to share it with someone.”

Jin nodded once. “Well, it’s like this. I had – have – some friends in the Outer Ring, and, well, they
agreed to come visit me in this tea shop as soon as possible. I even got them special passes and
everything. But… well, I haven’t seen any of them since we set up shop here. I’m a little worried
about how they’re doing, to be honest.”

“Mm,” Eeroh said contemplatively. “These friends you speak of, they wouldn’t happen to be the
ones who visited the old tea shop the other day, would it? Those two rough-looking lads.”

“Yes, those two,” Jin smiled and nodded at the memory. “To be honest, it was the first time I’d met
the two of them, but… well, we really got along.”

“You do have a talent for that, Jin,” Eeroh’s laugh was warm. “Well, while I too wonder what those
boys are up to, we still have a job to do, and a tea shop to run. So, let’s do our best at that, shall we?”

“You got it, Eeroh!” Jin laughed and stood to return to work, although not before, Iroh noted, giving
quick glance to the doorway of the teashop.

And the day wore on.

(X)

“What are you doing here?” In the darkness, Long Feng’s glare was that of a snake.

Azula received the glare, and replied with a smile of poison. “Well, I happened to run into one of
your stray agents running around, and I managed to convince him to let me hold an audience with
you after I told him my name. Your schedule is not too packed, I hope, your Excellency?”

“Enough games, princess,” Long Feng snapped, the title sounding like a pejorative as it left his
mouth. “I know what you want.”

“Do you,” a single eyebrow was raised. “I can only assume that after your little facility under the
lake was compromised, you were forced to move the various valuable prisoners to another secure
location. Might I have an idea as to whether the male I inquired about is still within your
possession?”

Silence for a long moment.

“Come, come, Long Feng. No need for reticence. In case you haven’t realized, I’m the one holding
more power between the two of us right now. I’m the one who can move to give you back
everything you’ve lost.”

“More power?” it hadn’t seemed possible, but Long Feng’s expression grew even darker. “You are a
single girl, princess. Do not be so foolish as to presume that you pampered upbringing will carry you
far in Ba Sing Se. I still command the Dai Li, and at a word I can offer your death.”
So easily revealing his cards... he’s more flustered than I’d thought. Azula mused silently. I suppose this must be the first time in a long while that he’s experienced such a loss of control.

This would call for a slightly different mode of negotiation, then.

“You’re right, as you say, you still command the Dai Li, if in secret,” Azula paused. “But it wasn’t so long ago that you commanded far more, was it not? All of Ba Sing Se was at your disposal, the king’s ear was yours... No matter how one looks at it, the heights from which you have fallen are lofty indeed.”

There was a pause. No, not a pause. More like a stony silence.

“Where are you going with this?” Long Feng finally spoke up.

“Actually, I was hoping to renegotiate that deal we had.” Azula spoke smoothly. “There are still things you can give me that would help me further my own goals. And of course, there is much I can offer you as well.”

Another silence. Azula could almost see the gears whirring in Long Feng’s head as he tried to suss out what it was that Azula wanted from him. She kept her own face impassive. Behind her, the Dai Li agent shifted slightly. She ignored him – she was after bigger fish right now.

Finally, “Well, what is it?”

“I want temporary command of the Dai Li,” Azula said simply. Before Long Feng could say anything further she held up a hand. “And before you start your indignant rage, you might as well know that as far as I’m concerned they’re a means to an end. I want the Avatar. Your Dai Li will help me get them.

“Now,” she continued smoothly. “You’re wondering what you’ll get out of this, aren’t you? It’s simple. Since the Avatar is currently in cahoots with the Earth King, taking down the Avatar will also mean getting rid of the Earth King. And with him and the Avatar gone, you’ll have your position and power secured again.”

The plan was a good one, Azula reflected. In fact, the single biggest danger was that it looked too good to Long Feng, whose suspicions were no doubt easily roused. He was a cornered beast right now, and he would no doubt fight ferociously against any perceived encroachments on his power.

Still... the bait she offered was tempting indeed.

“You surprise me, princess,” Long Feng’s voice was smooth and silky once more, dripping with undertones of menace. “After assaulting a Dai Li base you now wish to ally yourself with them. Also, nowhere in that deal did you mention that youth you originally wanted returned – the one I presume is your brother?”

Oh, so that’s how he wants to play it. Azula tugged at one of her bangs. “I should have thought it went without saying. Command of the Dai Li would mean gaining access to their secrets and prisons, would it not?”

“No,” for the first time since the conversation had started, Long Feng, stood. “You don’t need those records in order to carry out your little plan. You’ll be able to order my men to move as you see fit, but none of the state secrets of Ba Sing Se will be revealed to you.”

“We still have the terms of the original deal, do we not?” Long Feng waved a dismissive arm. “If you want that boy so badly, deliver me the Dragon of the West like you said you would.”

A thin smile spread across her features. “Then, we are in agreement.”

“It would appear so.”

As Azula turned to depart the gloomy prison, her smile changed into a frown. *Well, I’ve got the deal down.*

*All I need to do from here is command a group of suspicious Earthbender elites in order to overthrow the King of Ba Sing Se and his military command structure, while at the same time securing the Avatar.*

*This shouldn’t take too long.*

(X)

“Feeling better?”

At the question, Ty Lee nodded, giving an experimental flex of her wounded arm. “About as good as can be expected,” she replied honestly.

“Good,” Mai nodded once. “Wouldn’t want to show any weaknesses in front of our new agents, would we?”

“I’m still not sure about working with them,” Ty Lee muttered. “I mean, they’re creepy, somehow.” She could catch the tightening of Mai’s features out of the corner of her eye. She wasn’t any happier with having to work with the people who had arrested Zuko, but it appeared that she still trusted Azula enough to follow her lead for now.

As she neared the entrance of the hall where Azula was introducing herself, her voice slowly faded into clarity.

“… and I know what some of you are thinking. You’re thinking that you’ve just been exposed in front of the entire court of Ba Sing Se, and so it’s time to lie low. Don’t rock the boat. Don’t do anything to rouse the Earth King’s ire. Leave well enough alone. Is that what you think?” Rounding the last corner, Ty Lee could see Azula standing in front of the Dai Li agents of Ba Sing Se, hands clasped behind her back as she drew her gaze slowly across the entirety of the assembled men. “If that is indeed what you are thinking, then you are fools. The Earth King may be a spineless, cloistered weakling, but even he will not forget that you as an organization have been working to deceive him from the moment he ascended the throne. The way things are right now, you will never regain the trust of the Earth King, and you will never enjoy the prestige and power you once had. Were it not for the Avatar’s actions throwing all the schedules into disarray, they would already have begun moving to limit your powers and your duties.”

There was a pause, and Ty Lee could feel the murmurs rising with the men assembled, but they were too well-disciplined to chatter amongst themselves while still at attention.

“Gentlemen,” she smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. “The time to act is now. The palace is still in disarray. They are in the midst of preparing a new direction for the command structure of the city since they’ve realized they can no longer rely on the old one. They are incredibly vulnerable at precisely the moment they believe themselves at their strongest for overcoming a threat. And in this we have our chance.” she paused once more, letting her gaze sweep over the crowd once more. “I ask you this – are you with me?”
A single rumble of agreement came from the men standing before her, and her smile widened.

“Good. Now, your superiors have already received their briefing for the duties I expect you to discharge,” a brief pause. “Jade Squad One, we have things to discuss. The rest of you, dismissed to go make preparations.”

“Good speech, Azula. Inspiring.” Ty Lee laughed as the princess stepped towards the both of them.

“I should hope so,” was Azula’s only reply. “In any case, that’s one more task out of the way. Now I need.”

“You called, your excellence?” A heavyset man, flanked by four similar agents, came up behind her. Azula turned and nodded once.

“Yes. I need every available piece of information that you have on the Avatar. His living quarters, his habits, and if possible, his current whereabouts.”

“I shall see to it that is delivered with all haste,” the man said as he bowed deeply.

“Good,” Azula turned away, the matter already forgotten. “And now, we have other matters to settle.”

“Hm? We do?” Keeping step with Azula as she walked, Ty Lee raised an eyebrow as she posed her question.

“Yes. Some unfinished business with old friends.”

(Statement cut off)

“So where the heck where you the past couple of days?”

Facing down an annoyed Jet, Azula resisted the urge to set him on fire then and there. Aside from the fact that he was not a pleasant conversationalist at the best of times, what she had intended to be a quick conversation to get Jet steered on the correct path for the next phase of her plan was dragging itself out into a long, unpleasant affair.

“I had an unfortunate run-in with the Dai Li,” Azula said by way of response. “My friend ended up the worse for it, and we had to lay low for the next few days while she recovered.” She turned to indicate Ty Lee, whose bandaged arm was still clearly visible. “I don’t suppose you just lazed about when I couldn’t contact you?”

“No. And I wasn’t nearly as reckless as you,” came the sharp retort. “The Dai Li have been in a real mess the past couple of days. Apparently something happened out on the wall that shook them badly. There’s been a lot less Dai Li patrols over the last two days – like they don’t have the willpower to keep up enforcing the city or something.”

Azula nodded and acted like this was new information to her. “So they’ve been destabilized,” she mused. “This might be the perfect time to act. The lake-“

“The lake’s been wrecked.” Smellerbee cut in with a shake of her head. “I went with a bunch of curious people to see for myself. Whatever was under the water isn’t there anymore.”

“But what about the prisoner?” Mai spoke up for the first time.

“Yes, what about my brother?” Azula muttered as she gazed off into the distance.
“If they thought he was just a random Fire Nation guy, they might not have judged him valuable enough to be worth moving,” Jet said slowly.

Well, fortunately for me Long Feng dug deep enough to uncover some secrets about us. Azula thought. Out loud, she said, “My brother is alive. And I’m going to find him.”

“All right,” Jet nodded. “How?”

A pause. She glanced over to Jet. “I have an idea. But you’re going to have to trust me.”

“Well, you’ve certainly given me plenty of reasons to have every faith in your noble intentions.” Jet’s voice was sardonic. Nevertheless he folded his arms and leaned back against the wall. “I’m listening.”

“All right, then. This is what we’ll do.”

(X)

“All right, my Lady,” the Dai Li agent showed her to the desk with several stacks of paper neatly arranged on it. “This is the information we’ve managed to uncover on the Avatar, the Five Generals, and the Earth King. Unfortunately, the most recent documents were still on Long Feng’s desk to be confiscated when he was arrested, however we can still recall most of the important points concerning those documents.”

“A pity, but we’ll make do,” Azula said as she settled herself down on the chair. There was a slight pause on her part, and then she dug up a scroll from one of the pockets of her robes. “Have this taken to the Jasmine Dragon in the Inner Ring and hand it to the store owner there. This is to be done immediately, and he is not to find out that this came from me.”

“Understood,” as one of the Dai Li bowed and departed, scroll in hand, another stepped up.

“The Avatar has currently left the city, Princess,” he spoke softly. “Our latest report pegs him as heading for Chameleon Bay to rendezvous with a group of Southern Warrior Tribe warriors.”

“Indeed,” Azula’s voice was noncommittal. “I’d hoped I could sweep him and his companions up into our net as well, but if they’ve left for now—”

“Ah, my apologies Princess, but you appear to have misunderstood slightly. The Avatar has left, but two of his companions are still within the city. The only one that went with him was the male Water Tribe member. The earthbender and waterbender girls are still within Ba Sing Se, and the Waterbender is in fact liaising with the Five Generals right now.”

“Is that so?” a predatory look in Azula’s eyes. “So much the better. The perfect bait with which to snare the Avatar when he returns.” Although I really have to wonder what it is that the waterbender peasant would know so much about that she would appear at a meeting with the five generals. She tugged at her bangs. I suppose I’ll find out when I have them at my mercy.

“Very well,” she said out loud. “Continue on with your plans, and leave me to do my duty here.

“My Lady,” the Dai Li agent bowed once, and retreated from the room.

Left alone, Azula grabbed the nearest set of documents and quickly began rifling through them. What she was looking for… well, more accurately, what she was looking for to not be in there would be of vital importance in the near future.
“Her plan’s crazy,” and despite his words, Jet couldn’t help the note of admiration creep into his voice. “Crazy enough to work.”

“You sure about this, Jet?” at his side, Smellerbee was frowning deeply. “I mean, working against the Dai Li is one thing; they’re a bunch of oppressive bastards, but we’re talking the Earth King here. We definitely don’t want to get on his wrong side.”

“The Earth King,” Jet snorted. “What has he done for us people? Hiding behind these walls while the Fire Nation rampages outside? I don’t owe anything to him!”

“…” Longshot tipped the brim of his hat.

“No, that’s not going to be a problem. I told you, this isn’t a combat operation. Just a bit of sneaking around to find information. We’re not going to hurt anyone who doesn’t have it coming, okay? I’ve told you all this!”

Sitting unnoticed a table away from Jet’s gang, Mai listened in on his argument with his friends while sipping at a cup of tea and remembering the conversation she and Azula had shared the night before.

“You’re sure we can trust that Jet character on this?” she’d questioned.

“Long enough for him to accomplish what we need his help for,” had been the reply.

“Azula, Jet’s made no secret that he hates the Fire Nation and everyone in it. I don’t see how you can consider him a reliable ally at all.”

“Oh, that’s all you see when you look at Jet? A Fire Nation hater?” there had been a smile on Azula’s face. “It goes deeper than that, Mai. Deeper than specific targets of his ire. You see, people like Jet? They need a cause. Doesn’t really matter what it is, although in our case I suppose we make easy targets. They need something to stand up to, to kick against, something they can be absolutely one hundred percent certain is wrong, and that they are the only ones who can make it right. Even if by some hideous twist of fate the entire Fire Nation collapsed tomorrow, people like Jet won’t settle down – they’ll find some new crusade of righteousness to go on. Always.”

Mai had made no reply.

“And so,” Azula continued. “All I needed to do was to give him a cause. Convince him my brother was wrongly imprisoned. Once you’re past the initial hump of his prejudice against Fire Nation – made easier by the fact that Zuko apparently saved his life – he’s going to pursue this particular set of circumstances with reckless abandon and zeal. All the way to the bitter end.”

And as she sat there drinking her tea, Mai couldn’t help but note that it appeared Azula had been right after all.

“All right,” Azula nodded with satisfaction as she looked at the chart in front of her. “We’ve more or less decided on the best places to assault the generals come tomorrow. Now we need to see to overthrowing the Earth King directly.”

“Oh,” from her hand-standing position, Ty Lee looked up at Azula. “Did you have any plans for that in mind?”
“As a matter of fact—"

“My Lady,” the Dai Li agent he had sent to the Jasmine Dragon appeared before her again, dropping to one knee. “I have fulfilled your request.”

“That’s good,” Azula never looked up from her scripts. “Stay a moment, if you’d please. I’d like to ask you something.”

“Yes, Princess?”

“I’ve been looking through your records, and I can’t find any record of how you intend to deal with Sozin’s Comet when it arrives,” she looked up to stare him in the eye. “Surely you must have a plan for dealing with that?”

There was a silence in the room. Finally, the Dai Li agent cleared his throat.

“My apologies, but I know nothing of such plans.”

“Indeed? That seems odd. After all, Sozin’s Comet should give the Fire Nation more than enough raw power to tear through the walls of Ba Sing Se without exerting themselves hard, and it’s scheduled to arrive by the end of the coming summer. Surely someone like Long Feng would not be so careless as to ignore such a major threat?”

More silence. Azula hesitated just long enough for the words to sink in and then she shrugged elaborately.

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter. Back to business, shall we? We have a kingdom to overthrow.”

(X)

“Well I must say I’m surprised to see you here.”

“…”

“Don’t feel like talking? That’s fine. Anyway, for the time being, this is what I need you to do. Will there be a problem?”

“…”

“Ha. Thought not. Well, then, sweet dreams.”

(X)

After closing time, Iroh was busy wiping the tables clean as he and Jin prepared to close up the shop. A huge grin covered the old man’s face.

“Just imagine! An invitation to serve tea to the Earth King himself! What a privilege!”

“Will it really be okay, though?” Jin questioned. “I mean, I don’t know much about court niceties and all that… I may be able to come to the Inner Ring, but I grew up in the Outer Ring, and that’s where I got all my manners from.”

“Not need to worry, Jin,” Iroh beamed at her. “All those ceremonies I thought you on how to properly prepare tea will serve us just fine in the palace tomorrow,” there was a brief chuckle. “My only worry is that the tea I brew won’t be to his liking!”
“Don’t be silly, Eeroh!” Jin laughed at him. “Your tea’s the most popular in town. The fact that this place is jam-packed every single day is more than proof of that.”

“Yes, I suppose so – hm?” There was a sharp rap on the doorway, and Iroh looked up into the face of the last person he’d have expected to visit his tea shop.

“Uncle,” Azula began without preamble aside from a quick glance at the silent Jin. “My brother’s in trouble, and I need your help.”
Iroh paused and drew in a deep breath as he looked at Azula. She merely stared back at him, a silent question in her eyes.

*Are you going to help me, or not?*

After a long moment, he turned to Jin, who was still frozen halfway in the act of wiping the table, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Jin, perhaps you should leave for now,” Iroh said as he wiped his hands. “Just be sure to show up on time for our big event tomorrow.”

“Uh… okay, got it!” Quickly picking up that this was supposed to be a private affair, Jin nodded her acquiescence and hurried off into the back room to gather her personal belongings. “See you tomorrow, Eeroh?”

“See you, lass,” Iroh replied. There was an uncomfortable silence as Azula sat at a table, waiting for Jin to leave. Once she did so, Iroh sighed and turned to face Azula.

“Would you like-“

“No,” Azula snapped. “No tea. Sit down, Uncle. This is important.”

She was annoyed. Worried. Iroh mused thoughtfully as he observed her gaze darting around the shop.

Well, if she wanted to come straight to the point, then so would he.

“Zuko’s in trouble?” Iroh asked as he slid into a chair himself.

“Yes,” Azula blew out a long sigh of frustration and stared out the doorway of the room. “He’s gotten himself captured by the Earth Kingdom’s soldiers. Apparently he gave himself away as Fire Nation… somehow. I’m not sure.”

Iroh sighed. “Always the rash one,” he said in a tired voice. And for a brief, timeless moment, it seemed to him that he and Azula really, truly understood one another.

That moment passed soon enough. His niece sat up straighter, her golden eyes holding a dangerous gleam within them.

“My first priority now is getting Zuko out of whatever prison the Earth Kingdom decided to throw him in,” Azula continued, her voice clipped and harsh. “But I don’t know enough yet. I don’t know where he is. I need a way to get information. You’re the person I know who knows the city best –
after all, you planned to invade it all those years ago.”

Iroh nodded thoughtfully. “The Earth Kingdom is known for its powerful fortifications. There would likely be many prisons around the city. Zuko could be held in any of them.”

“Searching through all those places…” her frown deepened. “That’ll take a lot of time and effort.”

“Indeed,” Iroh stroked his beard thoughtfully. “Especially if they get wind of someone poking around for a member of the Fire Nation – they’ll be sure to increase security around him.”

“As if I’d allow myself to get caught,” Azula muttered in a low voice. “But regardless, that’s not feasible. Uncle, do you have any other ideas?”

“… Azula, from the expression on your face, I can tell that you have an idea of your own,” Iroh said. “Why don’t you share that with me first?”

She sat up straighter, hesitated for a moment and nodded. “The Earth King’s palace. It serves as an administration hub for the entirety of Ba Sing Se. If I could find a way into it, I should be able to track down Zuko’s whereabouts. A Firebender arrest within the walls would be a relatively high-profile affair, so that means I should be able to find information about him.”

“The Palace? The security there would be even tighter than any of the prisons,” Iroh sighed and shook his head. “Even someone of your ability would have a hard time of it infiltrating the Palace from the outside.”

Her golden eyes flashed dangerously. “Don’t doubt me, Uncle.”

“Of course not,” Iroh mumbled, his mind already turning elsewhere. “But the fact remains…”

His thoughts drifted to the scroll safely tucked away in his sash. A ticket into the Earth King’s Palace…

Before anything else, Azula was dangerous. That was a truth Iroh had long understood ever since he had seen the little girl latch onto his brother’s teachings with a fervour that bordered on the religious. Her belief in the absolute superiority of the Fire Nation, an idolization of strength in all of its forms, a willingness to engage in any manipulation or falsehood to get her what she wanted, all that and more had served to define her character in her growing years. Trusting Azula with free rein to the interior of the Palace would have been almost too foolish to contemplate.

Almost.

Because as much as Iroh knew that Azula had built herself up as an iron wall, cold and unyielding, there was a chink in her armour that she could never erase – indeed, one that she had no desire to. Azula’s concern for her brother was real, Iroh knew that much. That was why she had attached herself to him on this long trip across the Earth Kingdom when she could have been doing something else – anything else – instead.

If there was one thing on the planet that Azula would not lie about, it was about her brother needing help.

And so, with a deep sigh, he spoke up again. “There may be a way.”

She looked at him, golden eyes alert once more. “Explain.”

Slowly, he drew the scroll out. “I – well, the Jasmine Dragon – have been formally invited into the
Earth King’s Palace to serve tea to the Earth King tomorrow. So… this may be the chance that you
need to get into the Palace.”

“This is-!” Seizing the scroll, Azula looked it over with a practiced eye. “Uncle, you had something
like this and you didn’t think to tell me about it?”

“I do not see how it would have mattered,” Iroh said heavily. “At least, not until you informed me
that Zuko had been captured. This should get us into the Earth Kingdom’s palace.”

“…Us?” Azula questioned.

“Of course. It wouldn’t do for me not to show up for my appointment with the Earth King, would
it?”

“He had Zuko arrested, Uncle.”

“I’d be surprised if he knew anything about the affair,” Iroh said as he stood up. “And I doubt any
malice on the part of those who arrested your brother either. It wouldn’t be any more acceptable for a
Firebender to be running free in Ba Sing Se than an Earthbender in the Fire Nation’s capital.”

“… The date is tomorrow, then?” Azula asked as she folded her arms.

“Yes,” Iroh turned back to face her. “Meet me here at daybreak, along with Mai and Ty Lee. They
will be coming along, I take it?”

Azula nodded, her expression distracted as she stared at the ground.

Iroh hesitated for a moment. And then, “Azula.”

“Hm?” she shifted her gaze back to him.

“Zuko will be fine. I promise.”

A short snort that might have been a forced laugh escaped from Azula as she turned away. After a
moment, Iroh sighed and headed into the back room.

Alone in the tea shop, Azula blew out a breath and shook her head.

“Uncle. So old, so learned, and yet so naïve,” she muttered to the empty air before she stood and
vacated the shop.”

(X)

The next morning, a group of six people gathered outside the Jasmine Dragon, and Azula entered to
speak to Iroh while the others waited outside.

“Preparations are just about ready!” he called to Azula. “Although… I do wish I didn’t have to send
Jin away. She really was looking forward to visiting the Earth King’s Palace. Really a once-in-a-
lifetime opportunity for her.”

“She’ll be better off,” Azula replied shortly before turning to glance at the stacks of containers Iroh
had assembled. “What’s all this?”

“Strictly speaking, nothing,” Iroh shrugged. “But it would make a better cover story if everyone was
carrying something and looked like they had work to do there, would it not?”
“I suppose I can’t argue with that.”

“Well, you can let the others in to pick these up and head out,” Iroh said as he stood to go to the back room once more. “I’ll join you once I lock everything up. I won’t be opening today, after all!”

Alone in the tea shop, Azula walked over to one of the containers and gave it an experimental lift, feeling the pull of the wooden pole against her hand. And then, with a nod, she turned to the doorway.

“All right, come in and pick up your tea!” she called.

The five of them filed in – Ty Lee, Mai, Jet, Smellerbee, and Longshot. All dressed in simple workmanlike clothes, they also bore wide-brimmed sedge hats to make them more closely resemble simple workers – and also to hide their faces from view.

Not bothering with further words, Azula lifted one of the containers and stepped out into the early dawn.

(X)

“Halt!” one of the soldiers at the entrance to the palace raised his hand and stepped forward. “Who are you, and what is your business here?”

“Ah, I’m the proprietor of the Jasmine Dragon tea shop. Perhaps you’ve heard of me?” Iroh flashed the soldier a winning smile as he produced the scroll. “As for my business – I’m expected here. The Earth King would like me to personally serve tea to him.”

After taking a brief moment to look through the scroll, the soldier nodded and waved the group through.

“Well, that went more smoothly than expected,” Mai said from Azula’s right.

“Save that for later,” Azula murmured. “There’s supposed to be a private room for Uncle to set up. We can make our plans there.”

Several minutes later, after they had found themselves in a small, brightly lit room, Azula turned to regard the others.

“All right, this is how it’s going to work,” she said quickly. “The tea ceremony with the king will take about two and a half hours to go through, so in that time period we’ll need to split up and find the records about the prisoners and where they keep them, especially Fire Nation agents. That’s all. Go.”

As the others turned and left the room (or in Ty Lee’s case appeared to leave the room), Azula heaved a sigh. Her last contact with the Dai Li had been early in the morning, when it had still been dark. Right now, she could only hope that they were carrying out their plan to remove the Generals as efficiently as possible.

She turned back to Iroh, “Well, I suppose I have to ask you to take as long as possible, Uncle.”

“Not to worry, Azula,” Iroh smiled back. “Proper tea brewing is an art that cannot be rushed in any case. By the way…”

“Yes?”
“Those other companions you brought along…”

“Allies by circumstance, and nothing more,” Azula nodded. “I’d thought extra numbers would be useful in searching a place as big as this.”

“True enough,” her uncle nodded. “It’s just that I’ve seen that boy before. He was with Zuko, as a matter a fact.”

“Yes, that’s why he agreed to help me in the first place,” Azula cocked her head to one side. “I didn’t know you’d met him before, though.”

“Oh yes, he, Zuko and Jin appeared quite friendly when they appeared in the tea shop back in the Outer Ring,” a smile crinkled the sides of Iroh’s face. “He didn’t appear to remember me, and I suppose there’s no reason for him to, so I didn’t bring it up.”

“Well, that’s fine then,” Azula said, silently fuming at close her plan had just come to being derailed without her even knowing. If Jet had sensed that anything was awry… But no.

She had been fortunate.

Enough to leave it at that.

She turned back to her uncle. “Uncle, I…”

He raised her hand to cut her off with a speed that surprised her, his eyes narrowed in concentration.

“It appears,” he said in a soft voice. “That we are not alone in this room.”

Instantly Azula had turned, letting her gaze flit around the walls in an apparent display of searching for the intruder uncle had mentioned. In truth she of course knew where all the Dai Li were supposed to position themselves, and the only question in her mind was how Uncle had managed to figure out that they were being watched.

“Not alone?” she asked as she edged closer to her uncle. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” she could hear the tension in her uncle’s voice. “I count... four, no, five of them waiting.”

“…” Azula sighed. “I see. Then there’s no point in wasting any more time.”

If nothing else, the one thing that could be said was that she had caught her Uncle completely by surprise. Suspicious as he usually was of her (and generally with good reason), she had managed to get him to lower his defences, and that was the crucial heart of the matter. Whirling, she hurled a dart of flame right at her Uncle's eye level, who instinctively brought both hands together in a standard defensive measure.

“Azula, what-“

From the hidden alcoves came the stone hands of the Dai Li, latching onto his wrists that had been brought together by his defensive gesture, clamping down on and effectively trapping her Uncle’s hands.

Of course, there was always the probability that he would still be able to escape from the Palace, even with his arms bound, and so Azula raised her hand in a gesture for the final phase of the trap.
As Iroh took a step backwards, there was a blur of movement from behind him, and suddenly his right leg was no longer responding and he sank to the floor heavily, gritting his teeth as he did so.

“Ty Lee…”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Iroh,” Ty Lee said apologetically. “Really, I am.”

He made no reply as the Dai Li emerged from their hiding places, their head bowing to Azula.

“Princess.”

“Have the others secured the Generals yet?”

“To the best of our knowledge, that operation is underway.”

Azula nodded once and blew out a breath. “I see. In that case, let’s head for the throne room,” she glanced out the window at the morning sun, studiously ignoring her Uncle who was glaring at her with a ferocious intensity. “That’s where we’ll bring this little farce to its conclusion.”

“(X)

“Man, this place is a maze,” Jet muttered as he stepped through the endless hallways of the Palace, looking for any room that might hold the information they were looking for.

As he continued his search, he couldn’t help wondering about the old man who had provided the cover story for the rest of them to get inside here. Something about him seemed familiar, but try as he might Jet couldn’t remember ever meeting him before. Well, if it was really important he’d remember sooner or later.

As he continued walking around, it was perhaps inevitable that he would run into a few of the palace staff, but most of them simply took him as an assistant being sent to fetch something, and so he was safely ignored.

“Heh,” Jet chuckled to himself as he rounded the corner. “That’s what it’s like for us, I guess. We’re all little cogs in the machine.”

As he came upon a row of doors, he folded his arms as he stared down the row at them.

“Now, which one of these looks like it would hold records?” he questioned as he headed over to the nearest door and pushed it open.

Katara looked up from the desk, an expression of blank surprise on her features.

Jet blinked. “Kat – Katara? What are you-“

“Jet!” the expression that replaced her surprised one was all Jet needed to affirm that Katara had not forgiven him for the stunt he’d pulled the last time they’d met. The whip of water that lashed out at him was also a pretty big clue.

“Whoa! Hey!” he yelped as he ducked away from the striking water. “Hold it!”

“What are you doing here?” Katara hissed, her eyes shining with a ferocity that Jet had rarely seen in another person.

“Do you really want me to answer, or are you just waiting to blast me with water again?” Jet countered as one of his hands drifted to the hilt of his hook-swords. Mentally, he slapped himself.
Pulling a weapon on Katara, even entirely in self-defence, would just be self-defeating.

“If it involves you, it can’t be anything good,” came her harsh reply.

“…” Jet spread his arms. “All right, fine. You don’t trust me. Not after what happened. I can accept that. But you sure you want to start attacking me in the middle of the Earth King’s Palace before you even know anything about what I’m doing here?”

There was a pause as Katara mentally assessed how she had to look by striking out at Jet without apparent provocation. And then, slowly, the rope of water that she had drawn out of her pouch slid back in.

“This had better be good,” she said as she stepped back slightly into the office, giving Jet the space he needed to enter.

He glanced around the rather cramped room. If Katara decided that she really did want to make a fight of it after all, the smaller conditions would work against him – someone whose fighting style had been honed in the forests of the Earth Kingdom.

“What are you doing in the Earth King’s Palace, anyway?” Jet turned to face Katara. “I guess knowing the Avatar must be a pretty handy ticket to all the high places in the world, huh?”


He raised both hands in a gesture of surrender. “All right. All right. I’m helping a… well, I can’t say it’s a friend, but someone I know. I got her brother arrested, so I decided to try and set things right.”

“By sneaking into the Earth King’s Palace?”

“That’s the thing – we don’t know where they’re keeping him, so we decided to come here to try and look for the administrative records about the prisons.”

“… As much I want to say ‘I don’t believe you’, that really does sound like your particular brand of idiocy,” Katara’s aura of hostility had not decreased one iota.

“Sorry, not my idea. It was hers.”

“Her’s”? Who is this person you’re helping?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Jet shrugged his shoulders. “She’s been keeping it close to her chest. Her brother called himself ‘Lee’, but given that he’s from the Fire Nation, who knows what his real name is?”


“It’s all right, Katara,” Jet smiled back at her. “I don’t target people just because they’re Fire Nation. Not anymore, anyway. This guy’s an exile, so it’s not like he’s helping the invasion or anything.”


“Katara?”

“Jet,” she turned back to him, her voice growing more intense. “Jet, does this ‘guy’ have a scar across his left eye? A burn scar?”
“Huh? Uh, yeah, but how did you know?”

“You… do you have any idea who that is?” Katara exploded. “Do you know what you—” she broke off suddenly, her eyes growing wide with horror. “His sister… Jet, is his sister in the Palace right now?”

“Uh, yes, but—”

A scream of rage and frustration burst from Katara’s throat as she stepped forward to seize Jet’s tunic. With strength that belied her slight frame, Katara physically lifted Jet from the ground, anger and terror combining to almost choke her voice away into nothingness.

“Do you have any idea what you have just done?”

Azula glanced over her shoulder. “Uncle, don’t try pulling your Dragon of the West firebreathing stunt, or I’ll have Ty Lee paralyze your jaw. I don’t particularly want to do that, so don’t force me to.”

Iroh shook his head as he glared at her. “Of all the lies and deceit that I have seen you engage in over the years, I never thought you would lie about your own brother to invoke my aid.”

“Did you?” Azula turned away and shook her head. “Then perhaps you don’t know me nearly as much as you’d like to believe, Uncle.”

Ty Lee shot Iroh a worried glance, but otherwise remained silent. A moment later, they were stepping through the grand double doors into the throne room of the Earth King’s Palace.

Most of the Dai Li had already assembled before the throne, and as Azula watched, another group entered from the side door, quickly marching into position. Briefly she recognized them as the lot she had assigned to capture General Fong. Well, it appeared that right now, their plans were on track.

The Earth King was sitting on his throne, an expression of controlled panic on his face as he stared down at the Dai Li agents assembling before him.

Well, at least he has a measure of physical courage. Azula thought as she stepped forward, ahead of the ranks of Dai Li agents. She caught the eye of two of them near the front. “You, and you. Get Long Feng out of his cell. He needs to be here for this,” at her command, both men bowed slightly and departed.

“What is the meaning of this?” The Earth King demanded of her, almost hiding the tremor in his voice.

“I believe you must know by now, your Majesty,” she replied smoothly. “You no longer—“

There was an excited shout from behind them, and Azula whirled to see the doors to the throne room flung open and standing in the doorway were Jet and his friends, alongside-

“Don’t let the waterbender escape!” she snapped to the Dai Li as they turned as one, hands being raising to subdue the latest threat. “Ty Lee, watch Uncle and make sure he doesn’t try anything funny!”

She barely caught a glimpse of Ty Lee nodding, and then she had charged forward to engage her opponents. The waterbender peasant, upon noting the vast disparity of armed forces present, had
already started to back up, but Jet… Jet was charging straight at her, fury in his eyes.

Twisting, she evaded his first slash, one hand moving up to block his followup blow by striking him at the wrist.

“You lied to me!”

“Yes, I did,” Azula nodded and dropped low, shooting a tiny stream of flame out at Jet. He leapt over it, one sword coming down in an overhead swing at where Azula was standing.

Or where Azula had been standing.

In one smooth motion she ducked behind Jet, and as he came down she lashed out with her foot, catching him squarely in the back and sending him tumbling forward. As he tried to recover his footing, Azula crossed the distance between in a single step, hands already reaching out to yank one of Jet’s arms behind him. Her eyes cold, she twisted it slightly, enough to force him to gasp in pain and drop his weapon.

Well, he had some crude skill, but nothing that could match Azula’s prodigious talent and training with Firebending.

Quickly, Azula raised her head up, letting her gaze sweep over the room. Jet’s companions had already been subdued, as was expected. The waterbender was putting up a fight, but the Dai Li were pressing her hard, and without any backup it was only a matter of time before-

A knife zipped through the air, forcing the peasant to dodge the projectile. This momentary distraction was enough—a stone fist smashed into her, sending her down for the count. Azula turned to nod her thanks to Mai as she stepped out of the shadows.

“Damn… you…” Jet hissed through clenched teeth.

“Well, Jet, I’m sorry it had to end like this,” Azula said as she tightened her grip on Jet’s arm. From her position, she could wrench it out of his socket with little effort on her part. “If you’d just remained ignorant for a bit longer, it wouldn’t have had to result in me manhandling you.”

Twisting his face around so that he could glare murderously at her, Jet spat out, “If you're going to kill me, then just do it!”

“Kill you?” Azula let out a laugh. “My dear Jet, why would I ever want to do that? To kill you would be to rob me of my revenge.”

“Revenge? What?”

“You did get my brother arrested, Jet. Did you think I would let you off so easily?” Azula leaned in close and whispered into his ear, softly enough that the surrounding Dai Li couldn’t hear. “I swore vengeance on everyone who played a part in having that happen. That includes you.”

Jet didn’t reply, his struggles merely intensifying.

“I didn’t need you, Jet. Not for any step of my plans. Oh you helped, but I never needed it. So do you know why I went to track you down anyway? The answer is simple. I know how very much you hate the Fire Nation, Jet. And after today, Ba Sing Se becomes Fire Nation territory. It will be our flag that flies on the city walls, our banner that will be draped across the front of the Palace. And from now on, every time you walk out of whatever hole you live in and see those flags, see that banner, see the Fire Nation soldiers stationed throughout Ba Sing Se, you will know that you helped
“make this happen.”

At that last sentence, delivered in a conspiratorial whisper, Jet slumped suddenly, as if all the fight had been drained out of him.

Perhaps it had.

Standing, Azula released Jet from her grip, watching contemptuously as he sank to the floor.

“Restrain the waterbender. As for the boy, bring him and his friends to the Palace limits,” she indicated three of the Dai Li. “After that, they’re free to go,” and having said that, she turned back to face the Earth King, who had remained on his throne the whole time.

He didn’t even try to escape. Not that it would have done him much good, but at least he could have tried.

“Now, where was I?” her tone was conversational. “Ah yes. Your highness, Earth King Kuei. Your services are no longer needed. From this moment on, Ba Sing Se, and indeed the entire Earth Kingdom, is no longer yours to command.”

And as for whose it actually is, Azula thought as two Dai Li agents stepped forward to cuff the Earth King. Well, the next few minutes should make that abundantly clear.

Sneaking a glance at Uncle to ensure that he was still behaving himself, Azula stepped up in front of the throne, clasped her hands behind her back, and waited for Long Feng to arrive.

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Chapter End

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Thank you for reading.
The two children sat on the stone benches of the palace garden, neither looking at the other.

“Anyway,” Azula spoke up, continuing the conversation from where they had left off. “The point is that Uncle didn’t succeed. Whether you want to say he quit or not, Ba Sing Se’s still standing. The war will still go on.”

“That’s okay!” Zuko smiled at her.

“Hm? Why?” she raised an eyebrow as she glanced at her brother.

“Because this means we’ll get a chance to fight, too!” jumping up onto the stone bench, Zuko struck what he no doubt thought was a heroic pose while Azula resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “It’s the patriotic thing to do, isn’t it?”

“There are ways to be patriotic other than fighting, Zuzu,” Azula said as stared up at her brother. “Keeping the country running smoothly, for instance.”

“Yeah, but those ways are boring!”

Azula shrugged and slumped back in her seat. “You’re not that good a Firebender anyway. I bet if you went out there you wouldn’t last a day before they got to you and put you down for good.”

“Hmph. A – as if you’d do any better!” Zuko glared at her.

“As a matter of fact, I do believe I would,” Azula said with a prim smile as she tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Why, I bet I could do better than Uncle himself.”

“Yeah, right!” Zuko folded his arms. “Uncle almost took Ba Sing Se by himself, and you think you can do better?”

Azula folded her arms right back. “Uh-huh. Give me the supplies and everything and I’ll take Ba Sing Se in a month once I get a little older. I bet I could do it with less casualties too.”

“Liar,” Zuko stuck his tongue out at her, and Azula saw red.

“Hey, nobody calls me a liar!”

“Liar!” Zuko shouted it this time, a gleeful expression on his face.

“Why, you -!” jumping forward, Azula tackled Zuko and the two siblings rolled around the grass, scrabbling at each other.

Azula won that wrestling match. As always.
From the moment the Earth King had been removed from his seat of power to the appearance of
Long Feng in the grand hall took a period of approximately five minutes.

It would not have been wrong to say that to Azula, it was an exceedingly long five minutes.

Hands clasped behind her at the small of her back, Azula gazed impassively at the assembled Dai Li.
Most of them were stony-faced – if nothing else, they were disciplined. If she’d judged everything
correctly, they would be the key factor in the next few moments.

She glanced at Ty Lee out of the corner of her eye. Uncle was standing slightly to the left, eyes
closed in apparent contemplation. Planning some way of escaping from this place, no doubt. Mai
was standing by the main doorway, fingering a knife as she stared down at the defeated
Waterbender.

Should I have removed her from the premises earlier? Azula pondered the peasant for a brief
moment before shaking her head.

As if on cue, the sound of footsteps approaching broke her thoughts, and she shifted her stance
slightly to face Long Feng as he marched into the hall. One look at the expression on her face and
Azula knew what the next words out of his mouth would be.

“So you’ve removed the Earth King for me,” Long Feng said without preamble. “You have my
gratitude. And now comes the part where I double-cross you,” he lifted a hand to point at Azula.
“Seize her!”

Silence. Screaming silence.

None of the Dai Li moved.

Ever so predictable, Long Feng. And with that line, I win.

“I said, arrest her!” Long Feng snapped as he whirled to face the agents. “What’s wrong with you?”
he demanded, the anger in his voice almost – but not quite – drowning out his fear.

Azula let just another brief moment pass to draw out the hesitation and fear before she stepped
forward. “Do you want me to tell you where you went wrong, Long Feng?”

He whirled to face her. “What are you-“

“You’ve set up quite the marvellous operation here,” Azula let her gaze sweep over the ranks of the
assembled Dai Li. “A whole organization of people, supremely disciplined and ruthlessly dedicated
to their cause. Why, the Fire Nation would be proud to have set up a service such as this for itself,“
she paused for a brief moment. “But what exactly is that cause, Long Feng?”

He remained silent, his eyes darting this way and that as he tried to find some way out of the net that
Azula was now tightening around him.

“It’s not ‘the preservation of culture in Ba Sing Se’ or nonsense like that,” Azula shook her head
once. “And, unfortunately for you, it wasn’t loyalty to you above all else. You taught them to value
strength. Control. Power.”

She paused halfway through her pacing, her golden eyes now staring straight at Long Feng’s green
“And that was fine as long as you were the one who embodied those traits the most within these walls. But then the Avatar arrived, and you were deposed from your position. Your grand schemes didn’t save you, did they?” she hesitated, as if considering an idea she hadn’t thought of before. “You know, you would still have been fine in most cases. Who would the Dai Li attach themselves to instead? The Generals are fools, the king is a spineless weakling…” a friendly smile in Long Feng’s direction. “Long Feng, your big mistake was agreeing to making that deal with me. And then trying to renge on it. You really should have known better than to try to match a member of Fire Nation royalty in a contest of control.”

Long Feng took a hesitant step backwards, leaving Azula to savour the open fear in his eyes.

“It’s over, Long Feng.”

“No…” his voice was soft. “No, it’s not.”

Azula raised an eyebrow.

“I… still have your brother,” Long Feng glared at her. “If you want him back, you’ll do as I say.”


“Zuko!” turning to face the ranks of the assembled Dai Li, Azula raised her voice. “You can take off that disguise now.”

(X)

“Well, I must say I’m surprised to see you here,” Azula smiled at Zuko as he stumbled into the apartment.

He supposed she had every right to be. The plan had called for no one – especially the Dai Li – to be able to tell that Zuko had managed to escape from the facility under Lake Laogai, and thus interaction between them had to be kept to a strict minimum. But with Azula having stopped Dai Li patrols for the purpose of preparing for the coup in Ba Sing Se, he could risk making his way back to their temporary home – if only through back alleys and in the shadows.

"Don't feel like talking? That's fine,” something softer entered Azula’s expression as she glanced at Zuko, noting the exhaustion on his features and the state of his clothes. “Anyway, for the time being, this is what I need you to do. Will there be a problem?” a tiny slip of paper was passed to Zuko, and he scanned the contents.

After a moment, he raised his head and managed a weary nod.

“Ha. Thought not,” Azula turned and stepped away as Zuko stumbled over to the bed. “Well then, sweet dreams… Zuzu.”

Zuko managed a brief smile before sleep rushed up to claim him.

(X)

A hushed silence filled the hall as one of the Dai Li standing at the back of the room removed his hat – to reveal glaring golden eyes and a scarred face

“If ever I needed more confirmation that you weren’t dealing fairly with me,” Azula said in a
conversational tone as she turned away from Long Feng, “there was always the fact that you neglected to mention that my brother was no longer in your custody.”

Another significant pause as Azula stood staring at Long Feng, letting the powerlessness of his situation sink in.

“You have failed, Long Feng,” she snapped, letting hatred and venom seep into her voice. “All your grand plans and machinations have come to nothing. And now, you are nothing. Not Grand Secretariat, not the head of the Dai Li, and certainly not the ruler of Ba Sing Se,” another brief pause to let the implications of the statement sink in, and then, “Yield.”

A single word, spoken in a quiet tone, and Long Feng’s knees buckled under him as he kneeled before Azula.

“You… have outwitted me at my own game,” he finally admitted in a low voice.

Azula shook her head, although she kept a careful eye on him to ensure that the snake would not try any last-minute tricks.

“Don’t flatter yourself. You were never even a player.”

(X)

As Long Feng was led off by several of his former subordinates, Azula turned to the matter of the defeated waterbender, who was by now starting to stir.

“And whatever shall I do with you?” she questioned in a tone of mocking insouciance as she stepped closer to the fallen peasant, letting one the toe of one boot nudge her ever so slightly.

“Azula,” she heard her brother’s voice and she turned to smile at him as he approached.

“Hello, Zuko,” she allowed a brief note of triumph to enter her voice. “We’ve done it, haven’t we?”

“Yes – but that’s for later,” Zuko stared down at the still form of the peasant girl. “Az, she’s the one.”

“The one?” Azula raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, she’s the one who… helped me. Back under Lake Laogai, she healed me from Long Feng’s brainwashing. She’s the reason I was able to escape.”

“I see. Interesting,” she leaned over, paying closer attention to the peasant's striking features. “One can only wonder why, though. She’s clearly established herself as our enemy at this point.”

“Az?”

Azula shook her head. “Well, no matter. I suppose one good turn deserves another,” she turned to regard the closest of the Dai Li. “You.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“It appears this young lady here has just earned herself a bit of special treatment,” Azula smirked down at the unconscious girl. “Are there are any prisons intended for keeping highly regarded political prisoners?”

“Yes, my lady, of course there are. However, they are located in the lower levels of the palace itself.”
Well, that would make things more convenient. Azula nodded as she took in this new information. “Well then, bring her there for now. I’ll deal with her personally later. Make sure you remove all water from the room before bringing her inside, of course.”

“Of course,” the Dai Li bowed and, along with another associate, began to move the waterbender from the grand hall.

*That’s one problem dealt with,* Azula thought with no small amount of satisfaction. *Now, there’s also the matter of—*

“Uncle!” Zuko’s voice broke through her thoughts as she turned to see Zuko rushing over to Uncle Iroh, who was busy massaging wrists that had only just been removed from their stone shackles. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, no thanks to your sister,” Iroh said as he aimed a glare at Azula’s way.

“I’m sorry for tricking you, Uncle,” Zuko said softly. “But it all worked out for the best in the end, didn’t it?”

“Did it now?” Iroh turned to Azula. “So this was your great plan, Azula? Subvert the Dai Li, arrest the generals, depose the Earth King, and win Ba Sing Se for the Fire Nation?”

“Yes,” once more, Azula allowed a genuine smile to flash across her face. “And I did it without taking a single life from any side. So, Uncle, how does the bloodless conquest of Ba Sing Se look to you?”

Uncle did not reply immediately as he turned to gaze upon the ranks of Dai Li, most of whom were leaving to room for the follow-up duties that would firmly establish their hold on the palace and the city itself.

“… And you brought me here to gloat as I watched you succeed where I had failed?” he finally questioned.

“Uncle!” Zuko said.

“It’s all right, Zuko,” Azula raised a hand to forestall her brother. “I did have him cuffed up and paralysed his leg, so he has every right to be unhappy. I am just a little surprised you haven’t realized what I’ve done yet, though.”

“What?” Iroh raised an eyebrow. “What have you done?”

“Uncle, think about what’s going to be reported about what went on here. The Prince and Princess of the Fire Nation, taking a daring undercover operation to seize Ba Sing Se from within, along with the aid of two attendants – and their agent already within the city.”

Iroh’s eyes widened. “That’s—“

“No one’s going to know the exact details of what went on in this throne room. But everyone will know that you were here, and that you were indispensable to the success of our operation,” Azula nodded, as if confirming something for herself. “You were at the North Pole, you did something that no one really knows anything about, and you caused the invasion to fail. But now, here you are in Ba Sing Se, and you did something that the world won’t know about, only that you were here, and that we succeeded because of you. Don’t you see, Uncle? I’ve redeemed you!”

That thought appeared to have taken Uncle completely by surprise, and for a long moment he simply
stood there staring at Azula, mouth open.

“After this, Father won’t have any justification for keeping up that bounty on you. You’re free to return to the Fire Nation alongside us…” Azula paused as a new thought struck. “Or, well, to keep running that tea shop if that’s what you really want.” The idea was incomprehensible to her, of course, but from what she could tell Uncle did seem to really be enjoying himself working in that place…

At that, Uncle appeared to collect himself as he drew in a very deep breath, “So…” he finally said. “That was your plan from the very beginning.”

“More or less,” she acknowledged. “Although… Uncle? To be perfectly honest with you, yes. Yes, a part of me really did want you here to see me accomplishing what you could not.”

At this Iroh smiled, although Azula could tell it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Now that sounds more like the Azula I know.”

“Come on, Uncle Iroh,” Ty Lee laid a hand on his shoulder. “I’m really sorry about what I did to you before. Let’s go find a maid or something to brew you a nice cup of tea.”

As Uncle allowed himself to be led off, Zuko stepped closer to her, his jaw set. “I can’t go back to the Fire Nation, Azula. Not quite yet.”

“I know,” she nodded and turned to look in the direction that they had brought the waterbender away. “But we have complete administrative control of Ba Sing Se now. It’s only a matter of time until the Avatar is at our mercy.”

“That’s if they even decide to return,” Mai pointed out. “They might decide to simply find another safe haven.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Azula reached up to tug at one of her bangs. “We have the waterbender in custody. There’s no way the Avatar would allow one of his friends to be abandoned if he can help it. He’ll return. And when he does, that’s where everything ends.”

(TOP)

“Toph!”

The sudden yell was probably the one thing she did not need at that exact moment, and with her concentration broken, the earth wave under her feet came apart as she fell to the floor with a yelp of surprise.

“Ooh… sorry,” she heard Sokka apologizing and aimed a glare in his direction.

“Here, come on up,” Aang’s voice sounded next to her, and soon the three of them were seated on Appa, and continuing their flight through the air. Toph reflected unhappily that while flying on Appa before had been uncomfortable, at least they’d had a saddle back then.

“So what’s the big rush, twinkletoes? I thought you were supposed to spend time mastering the Avatar State or whatever.”

“I got a… really bad feeling,” Aang said urgently. “Katara’s in danger of some kind, so I came back to help her.”

“And what about you?” Sokka’s voice now. “I thought you were visiting your parents in the city?”
Toph frowned at the memory. “I really do not want to talk about it,” she mumbled as she slumped back. After a brief moment, she brightened up. “Although, I might as well mention that you are now looking at the world’s very first Metalbender!”

And halfway across the Earth Kingdom, a mad king sneezed as he swung in his iron cage.

“Metalbending? For real? That’s awesome!”

“Don’t I know it,” Toph smirked. “And what about you, Twinkletoes? You got the Avatar State under control yet?”

A pause. “Yup. All mastered now. Boy oh boy do I feel powerful. Yeah.”

Toph scratched at her chin. She didn’t have the benefit of her earthsense right now, but then again she didn’t need it to tell that Aang had just told them a big, fat, stinking lie.

Well, whatever. Her experience with the Avatar State hadn’t been a very positive one anyway, and if it came down to power Toph was willing to bet her brawn against just about anything any potential enemies had to throw at them.

And so the three of them continued their flight back to the city.

(X)

“Hello, Long Feng. I trust you are comfortable?” Azula smirked as she stared at the former head of the Dai Li from the bars that separated the two of them.

There was no reply.

“It’s funny, really, how you came out for so brief a time only to end up back here.”

Long Feng lifted his head, but it was mostly to glare balefully at her.

“Not up for a conversation right now? Well, I suppose that can hardly be helped, given everything that’s happened between us,” Azula said as she shrugged. “Well, Long Feng, in any case, I’m here to tell you what’s going to happen to you.”

“Happen to me?” at this he did respond, although his voice was dark.

“Of course. You’re now a prisoner of the Fire Nation, albeit a rather high-ranking one. I thought it would only be fair to let you know of your fate.”

“You plan to execute me?”

“And lose a potential source of valuable information?” Azula barked out a laugh. “Please, Long Feng, I’m not so crude as that. Although I suppose that would be the first conclusion someone who sets up brainwashing facilities for use on their own citizens would jump to.”

Long Feng’s lips curled back into a snarl. “Everything I did, I did for the stability of Ba Sing Se.”

“And I’m sure the citizens of Ba Sing Se adore you for it,” Azula said dismissively. “Anyway, back to the matter at hand. For you, permanent house arrest.”

“…”

“I’m picturing an average sized house, somewhere in the Middle ring. Guarded at all time by several
royal Firebenders. You’ll be able to send requests for writing materials, books, or what-have-you, although everything will be strictly monitored, of course. And if you ever try to earthbend again, we’ll remove your limbs,” she let a crooked smirk cross her lips. “What do you say? Fair?”

A long pause from Long Feng as he tried to gauge her sincerity. After a long moment, he nodded slightly. “Fair,” he agreed.

“Good,” Azula nodded once. And then she brought her right hand up and plume of blue flame billowed out from it.

Shadows flashed along the walls of the brightened room, an agonized scream, and Long Feng fell backwards, one hand reaching up to clutch at the mass of charred flesh that had been the right half of his face.

“That’s for what you tried to do to my brother,” Azula said softly. “Only fair, isn’t it?”

Not waiting for a reply, she turned and departed the prison cell. As she passed by the Dai Li standing guard at the doorway, she quietly bade one of them to get a healer.

It wouldn’t do to have Long Feng dying after all. She wanted him to suffer.

(X)

“The reports have been sent to War Minister Qin. The Dai Li will break down large portions of the Outer Wall at daybreak tomorrow, and he’ll be able to march in the Fire Nation army unopposed.”

“That’s good,” Azula nodded once. Subverted Dai Li or not, at the end of the day they were still Earth Kingdom and Azula would feel a lot better once Fire Nation troops were running the show and able to reinstate proper order in the streets. As it was, most of the Dai Li had been ordered to remain on standby within the palace to prepare for the Avatar’s potential return, where they could help subdue him and his friends.

Their absence for approximately two days wasn’t likely to get the populace upset or anything, but with her having just successfully seized control of Ba Sing Se via coup, Azula wasn’t in the mood for taking chances. If she could be certain that she would not have to put down a restless populace, so much the better.

“Where’s Ty Lee?” Azula questioned.

“Making friendly with some of the Dai Li.”

“… Of course. Uncle Iroh?”

A brief frown crossed Mai’s face. “I don’t actually know. I haven’t seen him since this morning when we overthrew the king.”

“Figures,” Azula grumbled. “Well, he can’t cause much trouble on his own anyway. Zuko?”

Mai stiffened. Apparently this topic was not one she wanted to discuss. “He… wanted to talk to the waterbender we captured.”

“Did he,” Azula muttered. “He’s really too soft for his own good.”

“Azula?”

The princess sighed. “We can worry about that later. First, work.”
“All right. First up on the list of things we need to take care off after the coup is…” as Mai scanned the list, he expression deepened. “Um, the king’s pet bear.”

“… Bear?”

“Yes… apparently he was very fond of it.”

“And I care in the least bit what a deposed Earth King likes to keep as a pet because?”

Mai shrugged. “The Dai Li apparently thought it was important enough to put at the top of the list.”

Azula sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Fine, then-“

“Hey, Azula!” Ty Lee burst into the room. “You should check out the cooking staff in this place! They’ll make you anything at the drop of a-“

“Ah, Ty Lee, perfect timing. You’re in charge of the bear,” Azula said before she strode out of the room, already flipping to the next item on the list.

Ty Lee blinked. “I’m in charge of the what now?”

Mai simply shook her head and sighed.

(X)

Zuko sighed as he paused at the entrance of the room that Katara had been kept in.

It wasn’t the first time he’d been saved by the Avatar or his allies.

The last time had been in the freezing cold wastes of the Northern Pole, where he could vaguely remember the Avatar refusing to abandon him to his fate.

And now this waterbender had reached out to help him too.

He wasn’t sure what to do, to be honest. Thanking them would appear to be in bad taste – they would still be his prisoners at the end of the day, but they were dangerous enough to the Fire Nation that they couldn’t simply be let go either.

He shook his head. Dammit, he did not need things like this to complicate his life. It was supposed to be simple – they were enemies of the Fire Nation, and so he would hunt them down, and depending on how the fighting went, either capture them or…

Zuko sighed, and mustering his courage, he stepped forward and rapped on the metallic door.

It swung open to reveal an empty room – except for two unconscious Dai Li agents slumped in the corner.

He paused, blinked, and glanced left and right, his senses instantly on alert.

After a long moment, he relaxed somewhat.

I thought she wasn’t allowed any water in the room? How did she escape?  

At that moment, Azula rounded the corner.

“Zuko,” she said without preamble. “I thought I’d find you he-” she drew to a halt as she noticed the
open door and the defeated Dai Li agents.

Azula’s lips peeled back into a snarl as she muttered a stream of curses. Then, whirling, she turned to regard the two Dai Li agents that had followed up behind her.

“You, get those two idiots back on their feet and figure out what happened and how she escaped. You, run through the palace and gather all the Dai Li you can find. No, wait, first tell me which parts of the palace this area connects to.”

“The entrance we came by leads straight past the guardhouse. There’s no way she could have passed it without being noticed.”

“And the other direction?” Azula jerked a thumb behind her.

“… The crystal catacombs of old Ba Sing Se.”

“Mostly like where she went, then,” Azula sighed. “All right, Zuko, you’re with me. Let’s hunt down a stray waterbender.”

He nodded. “All right, let’s go.”

( X )

“All right, we made it!” Toph grinned as she jumped down from Appa’s back. “… Now what?”

“Anything that would threaten Katara would probably threaten the Earth King as well,” Sokka mused as he clambered down himself. “So…”

“You guys go make sure the Earth King and everyone else are safe,” Aang said as he stared up at the palace. “I’ll look for Katara.”

“You sure that she’s somewhere else?”

“Positive. In my vision she was in… a cave of some kind. With a lot of green crystals.”

“All right, good luck, Aang,” and with that both Sokka and Toph headed off into the palace in the direction of the throne room.

“Cave… crystals… probably underground,” and with that, Aang took off running, on the lookout for stairs that would lead him further down into the depths of the palace.

And abruptly he pulled to a halt.

Sitting on a stone bench in the middle of the hallway, a portly old gentleman raised a steaming cup of tea to his lips. Seemingly ignorant of Aang’s presence, he took a long drink from the cup before placing it on the bench beside him with a satisfied smile.

Only then did he turn to face Aang, with the smile growing ever wider.

“Hello, young Avatar,” he said softly. “I assume you are searching for your Waterbender friend?”

Caught by surprise, Aang managed to nod once.

“Well, would you like some directions?”

( X )
“A fork in the route?” Zuko groaned as they came to a split in the path between two caves.

“You take that one, I’ll take this one,” Azula said without missing a beat as she charged down one of the two tunnels.

After a moment, Zuko nodded and began running down his path.

(X)

Heart pounding in her chest, Katara continued to run through the crystal maze of Ba Sing Se's underground.

She’d been conscious – just barely – when she had heard Azula discussing where to take her, as well as her statement that there was to be no water provided her.

It was fortunate, then, that when the Dai Li agent had paused at the guardhouse to fill out the paperwork needed for bringing her inside, Katara had noticed a single unattended cup of water in the room.

And when they had finally tossed her inside, the Dai Li had not noticed that her clothes were slightly more damp than what would be considered normal.

After a moment of silence Katara had made sure that the Dai Li weren’t watching her before drawing out the water that she had allowed to soak into her clothes – Waterbender garments being what they were, they got soaked easily, and silently working at the lock from the inside.

She’d been a little surprised by their presence outside the door, but nothing she couldn’t handle – if nothing else, her travel through the Earth Kingdom had taught her a lot about using a limited amount of water wisely in her Waterbending.

Not that it would be an issue right now, Katara thought as she ran past several large pools of what appeared to be clear water. Come to think of it, if she had managed to shake off pursuit, it would probably be in her best interests to stop and figure out-

A blast of blue flame soared through the air at where Katara had been standing a moment ago, and she leaped back, twisting her wrists to summon a wave of water from the pool beside each other. The fire blast hit the ground, searing the stone black and throwing crazily flickering lights through the cavern.

At the far end of the chamber, the Fire Nation princess emerged from the shadows, her face hard, one hand still raised in a firebending pose.

There was a silence in the room for several seconds before Azula shook her head.

“You helped my brother.”

“And do I ever regret it,” Katara hissed through clenched teeth.

“Nevertheless, that goes a long way in terms of keeping in my good books,” Azula continued. “So, surrender now, without any fuss, and I promise that you’ll be unharmed. I’ll even spare you the standard treatment we give to captured Waterbenders. Well then, what do you say?”

Katara swung one hand out, and the water she was controlling surged forth in the form of a thin blade towards her opponent.
Azula simply ducked under the wild attack, bringing her other hand up to a ready position in the process.

“Hard way it is,” she murmured, a tight smile on her face.

(TX)

“Told you checking out the jail cells first would pay off,” Sokka muttered as Toph placed her palms on the metal door, concentrating. “I mean, after we saw all the Dai Li wandering about I knew that whatever was going to happen had already happened.”

“So at this point, we’re just damage control,” Toph grumbled. “Swell.” The door buckled and fell away, allowing the Earth King to step out.

“Your majesty, we should go,” Sokka said hurriedly.

“Wait!”

“Hnh? What is it?”

“I’m not leaving without Bosco!”

(TX)

Ducking, leaping and swerving, Azula quickly closed the distance between herself and the waterbender. The girl had apparently let the abundance of water nearby go to her head somewhat, and now she was focusing on large, powerful attacks that were nevertheless rather easy to dodge.

Or at least that was what it looked like, Azula noticed after a moment. The peasant was trying to corral her to one side in actuality, and was using the large, flashy attacks to disguise it.

She smirked slightly as she shifted her weight, kicking the ground at a hard angle to change her direction. A blast of flame cut through the waterbender’s attempt at a herding attack, and then she was in range for close-quarters fighting.

She ducked low, sweeping her leg out in an attempt to undercut her opponent, but the waterbender saw that move coming and jumped back. The next ball of water turned into shards of jagged ice that flew at Azula, a transparent attempt to buy the waterbender some time to fall back and regroup.

Making a split-second decision to press the offensive, Azula released a wall of flame that caught and melted most of the ice shards – the few that got through and nicked her skin she ignored as she leapt forward.

Surprised, the waterbender retreated again, although now she had drawn more water and coated her arms in the clear liquid. As Azula moved forward, the waterbender thrust her arms out, turning the liquid coating into a writhing jet of water that shot at Azula directly.

Caught by surprise, Azula barely managed to duck to the side at the last moment, although such a powerful attack did leave a good enough opening for her to retaliate. Sweeping her leg out, she struck the waterbender in the side, sending her staggering backwards.

“Remember, this is your own fault,” Azula said to her before she moved forward again, going in for the kill.

A whip of water lashed out at her and Azula whirled to the side – almost dodging the strike entirely.
But a slicing pain in her cheek told her otherwise, and this time it was Azula who jumped back, one hand cupping her cheek. The damage was... superficial. Good.

Both warriors sized each other up again for a long moment – and then crouching low, Azula started to leap forward-

A sudden shift in the earth around her forced her to changed that forward leap into a long backwards one as a pillar of rock erupted from where she had been standing a moment prior. She shifted her gaze to the far corner of the room, noting a flash of yellow and orange.

_Ah, it appears using the waterbender to bait the Avatar into showing himself was a success._ A frown crossed Azula’s face. _Now if only he hadn’t shown up at the worst possible time._

Azula may have been proud, but she was not an idiot. She could take on the waterbender. She could take on the Avatar. She might even be able to, on a good day, take them on one after the other in a sequential fight.

But two of them at the same time? No. They had improved too much from the last time she’d faced them. She grit her teeth, eyes darting back and forth between the two as they shifted their stances and spread out to cover her from both angles.

Well, the important thing now was to buy time, she supposed. Either that or feigning defeat so it would be easier for her to back up and lure them into a position for her Dai Li backup that she called for to arrive.

She sent out a burst of flame the Avatar’s way, noting with satisfaction that he reacted how she had expected him to do so – by leaping into the air. After learning earthbending or not, he was still an airbender at the end of the day.

That attack had given the waterbender an opening, and so of course she exploited it, twin whips of water lashing out at Azula. The princess jumped backwards, sending another blast of flame at Aang, who twisted in midair to avoid the blow.

For several long seconds, this dangerous game of cat and mouse continued, Azula constantly targeting the Avatar and ducking and weaving away from the waterbender’s violent attacks. For his part, the Avatar appeared to focus mostly on evading Azula’s assault, the occasional blast of easily-avoided win his only offensives gestures.

The waterbender’s attack were getting harder and harder to dodge, one almost landing a direct hit on Azula when she landed on the ground, shifted her stance, and then struck out at the waterbender with twin blasts of flame, because people really _did_ get into rhythms of battle, and the waterbender had subconsciously absorbed the idea that Azula was focusing primarily on the Avatar and she could be lax in her own defences. The blast hit her hard, sending her crashing to the floor.

Any triumph Azula might have felt from landing the hit was blasted away when a whirlwind of air appeared in front of her, too quickly and too large for her to dodge, and she was sent flying backwards herself.

Twisting her body, she leapt to her feet – saw the Avatar shifting his stance to begin earthbending, saw the waterbender leaping at her on a wave that she had summoned –

_Until another blast of flame from behind_ her forced her to swerve, the wave dissipating onto the floor as the peasant’s concentration was broken.

From the corner of the cavern, Azula could see –
“Zuko!” You’ve no idea how glad I am to see you.

“Sorry I took so long, Azula,” Zuko apologized as he leapt towards her. “Apparently all the routes lead to this central chamber – some are a bit more longwinded than others, though.”

Azula drew in a deep breath. “Good to know,” she murmured. So the Dai Li will definitely come here then. As long as hold out long enough, we win.

“All right,” she said out loud as she shifted her stance to reflected her brother backing her up on her left. “Let’s show these two what real teamwork looks like.”

“Right beside you, Az.”

There was a single, timeless moment of hesitation, and then the four combatants leapt at each once more.

(X)

“Just take the bear.”

(X)

Zuko stared at the waterbender, mixed feelings in his mind.

“I can’t believe I ever felt pity for you!” she raged as twin columns of water burst from behind her, turning into giant, striking whips at her command. “I can’t believe I ever wasted the time, energy, and water to heal you!”

“Just surrender, and we won’t treat you badly!” he snapped back as pillars of flame erupted from his hand as well, meeting and countering her own watery strikes.

“You really think it’s that simple, don’t you?” she said bitterly as she stepped forward, lashing out. Zuko twisted, letting the attack sail harmlessly by as he retaliated in kind.

There were no words for the next few minutes, merely the roar of flame and the gurgling of water as Zuko and the waterbender clashed, each vying for an advantage over their opponent.

He could hear blasts of fire surging from behind him, and he was aware of Azula facing down the Avatar from his back, and so began to back up, moving slowly towards his sister.

The waterbender’s eyes narrowed, and suddenly, the force of the water he was pushing back increased, and Zuko was forced to leap back as his defences were extinguished. Shaking his head he retaliated with a series of fire punches, which the waterbender evaded by summoning a stream of water and skating to the left in a smooth motion.

Abruptly, he heard the stamp of a boot behind him that had a particular cadence to it, and Zuko nodded briefly before twisting to face the Avatar instead while Azula eapt to the side to deal with the waterbender. The sudden shift had apparently surprised the Avatar, and he wavered for a critical second, allowing Zuko to nail him with a blast of flame that sent him crashing into one of the crystal formations in the cavern.

With the Avatar disabled for the moment, Zuko swung back to face the waterbender, adding the strength of his own attacks to his sister’s. Faced with a double threat, the waterbender was quickly overwhelmed, and a kick from Azula knocked her down.
The sudden sound of crumbling rock from all around them drew the attention of everyone present, and Azula glanced up to see Dai Li agents enter the room from every conceivable direction – at least fifty of them by her estimate.

What took them so long? She thought, annoyed. Well, no matter. This little game would be drawn to a close at last –

The waterbender leapt to her feet, a wave of water rushing out from another of the pools. Azula watched, mildly intrigued. So many foes and she still intended to make a fight of it?

The water rose and split into separate tentacles, whipping all around the waterbender as it covered all angles of attack upon her person. Azula raised an eyebrow. That really was an ingenious trick. But it wasn’t going to save her.

Nothing would.

Approximately a dozen Dai Li agents stood around her, apparently content to be containing her, and none eager to make the first move and become the first target. Azula drew in a deep breath and stepped forward.

Light.

Light and energy pouring off in incredible amounts from behind her. Azula glanced behind her to see the Avatar on the ground in a meditative pose, the tattoos on his body giving off a glow of light.

And she remembered that day in the town.

I can’t fight it.

It’s too powerful.

If I take it on head-on I’ll be destroyed.

So don’t fight.

Just end it.

End it before he has a chance to fight at all.

The Avatar had bended several of the crystals around him as a protective shield of sorts, but that was quickly rendered moot as he slowly began to rise into the air, a pillar of light surrounding his body.

Azula wasn’t sure if this idiotic move of leaving himself so openly vulnerable was necessary to use his full power, or it was simply an offshoot of his inexperience, but she wasn’t about to waste this golden opportunity.

Ducking behind him, she began to move her hands in those familiar circles.

One strike.

And everything ends.

As the lightning bolt lanced from her fingers and struck the Avatar squarely in the back, Azula wondered for the briefest of moments if she had actually miscalculated – if the Avatar could simply
shrug off damage in this new form of his. But her worries were allayed as she watched him twitching and jerking helplessly as the electric current tore through his body.

Then the lightning stopped, and the Avatar began to fall to the ground. Azula was vaguely aware of the waterbender’s cry of grief, of a great wave sweeping over the Dai Li and bearing the waterbender to the Avatar’s side-

But it was meaningless. Her blow had rang true. Even before she had caught a glimpse of the Avatar’s sightless eyes, she knew.

The Avatar was dead.

Her hunt was over.

She watched dispassionately for a moment as the waterbender wailed over the Avatar’s body before she shook her head. No reason to leave loose ends hanging.

She took a step towards the waterbender, who responded by her head whipping up. She started to move into a combat stance, as futile as it would have been, but then hesitated, obviously torn at the prospect of letting go of the Avatar’s body.

Such sentimentality will only get you killed. Azula shook her head, raised her hand and-

“GO!” a shout from a familiar voice and a blaze of flame landed directly in front of Azula, forcing her backwards. As she glanced about for the source of this new threat, she caught sight of a familiar figure, and for a brief instant her brain felt like it had shut down.

“U – Uncle?” Zuko’s confused stutter.

Uncle paid Zuko no heed as he entered combat stance, protecting the waterbender and the Avatar – protecting the waterbender and the Avatar – from attack. A few of the Dai Li hurled attacks at him, but they were confused, having assumed the aged man to be an ally.

“Go!” he repeated to the waterbender. “That waterfall will lead you to the surface!”

Now the truth came into Azula’s mind that unless she did something that waterbender would get away with the Avatar’s body and so she leapt forward – but then Uncle was there, moving faster than she’d though possible with that bulk of his, not attacking her, just effectively blocking her from moving forward.

“Uncle, what do you think you’re-“

The sound of the waterfall reversing cut through the room, and Azula glanced up to see the waterbender escaping through the waterfall. At that, Uncle lowered his own hands too, apparently having no more interest in prolonging the fight.

Azula stared at Uncle, aghast. Why was – what was this – Why had Uncle… betrayed the Fire Nation? Now, of all times?

“Uncle…” she finally said, in a voice choked with rage. “What were you doing?”

He met her gaze steadily. “The Avatar cannot be captured by the Fire Nation. If that happens, the last light of hope would be snuffed out.”

More impossibilities. It sounded like – it really truly sounded like –
“What are you saying, Uncle?” Azula spat out through a mouth that didn’t appear to be working properly. “What’s this about? After everything…”

He was silent.

“After… everything,” Azula repeated. “Everything I did for you. I conquered Ba Sing Se without spilling a single drop of blood. I made sure that you were in a position that your name would be cleared, and that you would be free to do whatever you desired afterwards. After everything I did… and this is how you repay me?” The last words were almost a shriek of rage and disbelief.

Uncle merely shook his head once. “If you think anything you did for me was something I wanted, then perhaps you don’t know me as well as you think you do.”

For a moment, Azula simply felt lost. The way Uncle had said it, the sheer finality of that statement… she suddenly felt uncharacteristically confused and frightened, like a little child.

That didn’t last. The discomfort burned away, to be replaced by the fiery, soothing sensations of an emotion she was very familiar with.

Anger.

“Fine,” she said in a low voice. “Fine. That’s what you’ve chosen, Uncle? So be it. Dai Li!”

At her command, the stone rose from the ground to entrap Uncle in a circular prison. He did not resist, merely bowing his head in response.

Breathing heavily, Azula turned away from the scene – only for her eyes to catch Zuko’s.

He looked as shell-shocked and stunned as she herself felt.

For a moment, Azula felt like it was really important for her to say something.

But she could find absolutely nothing worthwhile to say.

And so, with a shake of her head, she simply began to long walk away from the cavern.

(X)

“Azula!” Ty Lee’s voice as she re-entered the throne room.

“Anything happen while I was gone?” she asked Mai tonelessly.

To her complete lack of surprise, the Avatar’s friends had apparently rescued the Earth King and flown away on the Sky Bison. Briefly Azula wondered at the stupidity of them rescuing a pointless figurehead and neglecting the generals who would at least have information and plans, but she finally decided that it was simply par for the course with that team.

“Azula…” Ty Lee began again, and when Azula looked at her she realized that Ty Lee was cringing.

“What is it?”

“I… are you going to punish me?”

“What?” it wasn’t a particularly eloquent reply, but Azula was really, really not at her best right now.
“I… I couldn’t protect the bear,” Ty Lee hung her head. “You told me it was my responsibility, but then the earthbender was able to trap me and just walk up and take it. So… I deserve to be punished, don’t I?”

Azula raised one hand to massage her forehead. “No, Ty Lee,” she finally muttered. “I am not going to punish you for losing the bear.”

“Really? Thanks, Azula! You’re the greatest!”

Ignoring her friend, Azula slowly ascended the throne of the Earth King and settled herself on it. She spent the next few minutes staring off into empty space, brooding.

This was stupid. She had, in the space of a single day, overthrown the largest Earth Kingdom city in the world, made it Fire Nation and she also managed add killing the Avatar into the bargain. Even if Uncle had let the waterbender escape, there was nothing she could do now with a simple corpse.

It was, without a doubt, her finest hour.

She should have been jubilant.

But instead all she could think about was Uncle, and what he had said to her in the crystal catacombs. How everything had appeared to fall apart in a single instance.

Abruptly she became aware of her brother’s presence at her side, and she looked up at him.

“Copper piece for your thoughts?”

Zuko simply stared at the ground.

“I’m worried about Uncle,” he finally said.

Azula heaved a long sigh.

“She too,” she muttered softly. “Me too.”

Chapter End

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed it. Please review!
The Occupation

Morality Chain

Disclaimer: I own nothing.

A distant booming noise was what had jerked Ping out from his peaceful slumber. Blearily, he fumbled in his hammock and leaned over to grab his spear. Not that he really expected anything serious right now – the Fire Nation had been quiet after their rather embarrassing defeat regarding the drill, and that hadn’t been too long ago, so it was generally understood that there wouldn’t be any large Fire Nation campaigns any time soon.

Not that that justified sloth or carelessness, of course, and so, like a good soldier, Ping hefted his spear and ran out of the barracks.

The sight that greeted him rooted him to the spot in shock and horror.

The Outer Wall of Ba Sing Se was crumbling away. Directly in front of him, a massive section of the wall, far, far larger than the breach that even the Dragon of the West had created back in his day, was slowly sliding down into rubble.

That would have been bad enough, but even at the distance he was at, Ping could see figures on the walls, their bodies moving through familiar Earthbending poses. But they didn’t appear to be trying to repair the wall…

If anything, they appeared to be the ones tearing it down.

And abruptly, with a slow, rumbling roar, the entirety of the sunken section collapsed down, throwing up great clouds of choking dust and obscuring all vision.

His heart in his throat, Ping hurried forward as the dust slowly began to clear, and his heart sank as he saw what lay beyond the walls.

The Fire Nation’s armies, arrayed in marching formation, were pouring through the broken walls, column upon column of grim soldiers walking unchallenged into the most strongly fortified city in the world.

As he watched the wave of soldiers approach, Ping instinctively raised his spear, preparing to charge the invading army, and to drive them back again. All around him, other Earth Kingdom soldiers raised their weapons, prepared to do likewise.

But then –

“Put your weapons down, soldier,” the voice came from behind him, and Ping turned to see a sight that made his skin crawl on the best of days.

The Dai Li agent stepped forward, letting his gaze roam over the confused soldiers. “The Earth King has already surrendered. Ba Sing Se is now in Fire Nation hands.”

What? That statement made no sense to Ping – the Fire Nation soldiers were only just now beginning
to enter the city! How could the Earth King have already…

Then he remembered the Earthbenders on the walls of the Ba Sing Se tearing the structure down, and he felt a chill run down his spine.

“To hell with what the Earth King says!” one of the soldiers to Ping’s left roared. ‘I’m not letting those Fire Nation bastards into my hommmmph!” As he’d spoke, rock clamps had come out of the ground and wrapped around his mouth, effectively gagging him. The ground under him gave way as well, causing him to sink into the muddy earth up to his shoulders.

“If any of you attempt to fight, you will have to deal with both the Dai Li as well as the Fire Nation,” the agent said calmly. Even as spoke, the march continued, wave upon wave of troops that the surprised defenders of the walls could never have matched in the open plains.

And so, with a mixture of rage and despair, Ping and his fellow soldiers could only stand and watch as the Fire Nation marched unopposed into the hitherto unconquered capital.

(X)

“Jin, where are you going?”

Jin glanced over her shoulder and smiled at her mother. “It’s fine, mom. I’m just going down to the market to pick up some things for dinner.”

She stepped out into the tightly packed streets of the Outer Ring, weaving her way through the crowds as she headed for the shopping district.

She rounded the corner – her path taking her past the tea shop where she had worked before Eeroh had offered her her new job in the Inner Ring.

I wonder how his tea ceremony yesterday went. Truth be told, she’d been rather disappointed when Eeroh had suddenly informed her that her services would not be needed that day. She had been nervous about being presented before the Earth King – her, an Outer Ring peasant! – but still, she couldn’t deny that the opportunity to prove herself would have been nice too.

If nothing else, it would have made a grand story to tell her friends.

Thoughts of friends in general led to thoughts of Jet and Lee in particular, and Jin frowned. Them not coming to the Inner Ring to visit the Jasmine Dragon was one thing, but after receiving her unexpected day off yesterday she’d combed their usual hangout spots and hadn’t seen hide nor hair of them.

And truth be told, she was starting to get a little worried.

Well, that could be dealt with another time. She had to hurry and get to the market so she could get the ingredients for tonight’s dinner. And then she could head on to the Jasmine Dragon and help Eeroh-

“Make way!”

The proclamation sounded across the bustling square that Jin was crossing through, and Jin instinctively backed up. Though rare, it wasn’t unheard of for high-ranking officials to travel through the Outer Ring, and that invariably meant large processions that could waste up to a quarter of an hour just letting them walk by.
As she pressed herself against the walls, Jin glanced up – and froze.

It was indeed a procession, but instead of the men being dressed in the vibrant green of the city’s officials, they all bore maroon clothes and similarly coloured armour. There was no litter bearing a bored, fussy diplomat, but instead row upon row of grim-faced men marching in formation. Behind them, she could even see the hulking shape of what appeared to be a war tank.

*It can’t be…* Jin’s mouth was dry. All around her were confused and alarmed murmurings as the soldiers continued their march.

Jin stood, stunned, as column after column of troops passed through – finally they were gone, except for the several dozen soldiers stationed at the Square, visible proof of the Fire Nation’s new presence in their lives. More and more of the populace ducked and scurried away, or simply stood staring in shock. But there were no overt moves against the soldiers – what could they have done, anyway?

Numbly, Jin stumbled away, her feet carrying her mechanically away from the square, towards the market, her stomach churning the entire way.

What had happened? Had Ba Sing Se fallen? With no battle, no struggle? She’d gone to sleep yesterday secure in the belief that the walls would repel the Fire Nation, and all of a sudden they were in the middle of the city, marching in as victors of a war already won.

What had happened at the Walls?

And… what was going to happen to everyone now?

(X)

So it was in that manner that the greatest, most powerfully fortified city in the world fell.

The soldiers ordered to stand down and to watch helplessly as the Fire Nation marched in.

The civilians confused and panicked from the sudden appearance of conquering troops appearing on the streets.

No bloody battles.

No heroic last stands, with desperate soldiers holding their ground to the last man.

Ba Sing Se had fallen.

The war had ended, not with a bang, but with a whimper.

(X)

Seated on what had until recently been the Earth King’s throne, Azula spared a cordial nod as a rather unhappy looking man entered the chamber, flanked on both sides by elite Firebenders, both of whom saluted upon catching sight of her. It wasn’t until she was looking at them that she realized just how much she had missed this familiar sight.

She really had been spending far too long in the Earth Kingdom.

Well, with any luck she’d be able to tie up the several remaining loose ends quickly enough, and then – at long last! – she’d be homeward bound.

For now though, she sat and waited as the man approached her.
"All glory to you, princess Azula." War Minister Qin said by way of greeting.

"I should hope so," Azula replied. "After all, I did bring Ba Sing Se under my thumb." All right, perhaps this was laying it on just a little thicker than absolutely necessary, but she'd never liked the War Minister and if she had the chance to rub in his face that he'd succeeded where he'd failed, well.

The War Minister made no direct reply, but Azula could tell that her remark had stung.

She let the silence linger for just a moment longer to let her snub sink in, and then nodded and stood from her chair.

"I trust you have brought your troops into the city?"

"Yes, princess," Qin nodded. "We've already deployed them in a manner following the plans we had drawn up for occupying the city. We expect little trouble going forward."

Azula nodded thoughtfully. "Good. Well then," she gestured to the side of the chamber, where a squad of Dai Li were standing, awaiting further orders. "I'm sure you'll want more information about the city – groups that could prove troublesome, infrastructure issues – that sort of thing. And since we'll be in charge of Ba Sing Se from now on, I've asked the Dai Li to compile all the information that could prove useful. Please liaise with them and get their reports at first opportunity."

She could see the discomfort in the War Minister's eyes at having to so openly deal with the 'cultural authority of Ba Sing Se', and she resisted the urge to sigh. Working alongside members of the Earth Kingdom was a matter of course, whether it was those who could be persuaded by loose purse strings or the disgruntled with a chip on their shoulder. Qin must have known this and would have been perfectly fine with it – as long as it was far enough down the chain that he wouldn't have to deal with it personally.

"Is there a problem, War Minister?" She raised an eyebrow.

"No, of course not, your Highness," he bowed deeply. "Well then, by your leave."

Azula nodded and watched as he turned and began walking in the direction of the Dai Li agents, with a noticeable hesitation in his step.

"So," Mai said from behind her. "Feel better yet?"

She turned and gave a brief smile to her friend. "Even better once we're on a ship headed for home."

---

Zuko sighed as he paced back and forth in his room. It was, by any account, a very comfortable room – far better than any he'd lived in since... since three years ago. It really had been that long, hadn't it?

Still the comfort of the room was... well, little comfort. The past night had seen sleep elude him for most of it as thoughts of Uncle kept him tossing and turning, and the rising of the sun hadn't changed much.

"Why would Uncle do something like that?" He'd been asking that question, both silently and out loud, ever since the incident had occurred, and he was no closer to an answer than before.

Or was it that he knew the answer but simply refused to admit it?
“The Avatar cannot be captured by the Fire Nation. If that happens, the last light of hope would be snuffed out.”

Uncle’s words, delivered in as grave and serious a manner as he could possibly have done so.

Did that really mean what Zuko though it meant? Did Uncle… did Uncle really not want the Fire Nation to win?

The idea, the very thought was so alien, so repulsive to Zuko that he nearly rejected it out of hand. Of course Uncle couldn’t have meant that! Hadn’t he travelled with Zuko the past three years to help him capture the Avatar?

Travelled with him… and constantly wasted their time on distracting side trips and pointless excursions. But he had helped with Zuko’s plans once the Avatar had showed up, hadn’t he? Like that trip to the North Pole… Uncle had made sure that Zuko had gotten to where he’d needed to be.

But that had ended with Zuko alone and on the verge of freezing to death, spared only by the Avatar’s mercy.

Zuko shook his head. His Uncle couldn’t have planned for that.

Could he?

Almost without knowing about it, he found himself heading further down into the lower reaches of Ba Sing Se’s palace – through the jail cells – and one in particular.


“P – Prince Zuko!” one of them hastily saluted. How long has it been since people treated me with respect? “Have you come to see the prisoner?”

The prisoner. Not Lord Iroh or General Iroh. Not anymore.

Just ‘the prisoner’.

Zuko took a deep breath.

“… Prince Zuko?”

“Nothing,” he snapped as he turned on his heel. “As you were.”

Not waiting for a response, he turned and stalked away from the cell. Once he rounded the corner, he swung his arm out, letting a wave of fire wash over the darkened corridor, leaving a long blackened mark across the stone.

“What were you thinking, Uncle?” Zuko muttered, his throat tight.

What were – what are you thinking?

(A)

“A project?” Ty Lee looked at Azula. Even from her upside position of a handstand, Azula could see the curiosity in her friend’s eyes.

“Yes, a big one too,” Azula said as she rolled up the scroll in her hands. Most of the assets on her
desk had been seized from the desks of the five Generals, and while a lot of it had to do with the daily tedium of running the Earth Kingdom’s army, there had been enough tantalizing clues dropped about something that Azula had decided that it was apparently worthwhile to take a personal interest in it.

A calendar with a date circled…

A letter intended to be sent to the Northern Water Tribe, asking for aid…

And then there had been the map in the planning room. A stroke of luck had allowed them to seize it with the troop dispositions still arranged for the world to see, the guards stationed in the room having been subdued before they’d had the chance to clean up after the latest meeting.

It had indicated some sort of offense on the Fire Nation and at first Azula had almost dismissed it out of hand. The Earth Kingdom was certainly in no position for any sort of direct assault on the Fire Nation, moreso now that Ba Sing Se had fallen.

And yet…

Placing the scroll back on her desk, she folded her arms and leaned back. The waterbender had been in talks with the Generals until the day of the coup itself, that much she knew. It only made sense that she would be part of the planning for such an operation, if only because of her connection to the Avatar, where she could serve as his representative.

The question, then, was what sort of offensive operation would involve the Avatar. The obvious answer was that they had simply planned on using the Avatar as a spearhead for the assault forces, where he would hopefully be able to crush any resistance the Fire Nation put up. That was a disturbingly plausible theory, especially given what he had achieved in the North Pole and what he likely would have done just two days ago had Azula not put a lightning bolt in his back.

Well, now that the Avatar was dead and Ba Sing Se was safely in Fire Nation hands, any plans involving that would have to be shelved. So it would almost certainly be something she could easily drop and never think about again.

Almost.

Azula had not got to where she was today by leaving dangling threads to lie. Even if the primary plan was called off, variants or modifications did exist, and a surprise attack on the Fire Nation could still do a significant amount of damage.

She would have to arrange for a talk with several of the Generals, and soon. Idly, she wondered if she should include Zuko in those talks. Thoughts of that reminded her she hadn’t seen Zuko for most of the day.

“Ty Lee, would you find Zuko and bring him to me?”

“Huh? Oh, er, okay. But why?”

“If I know him he’ll be busy moping about Uncle,” Azula said. Well, it wasn’t like she hadn’t been wondering about the old man either – she was simply better at keeping her feelings under wraps. “I’ve got something for him to do. Hopefully it’ll keep him occupied for a while.”

"A city inspection?" Zuko repeated dumbly as he glanced at his sister.
Azula never so much as looked up from her paperwork. "Yes, a city inspection. Take a little trip to the Outer Ring, let the Earth Kingdom citizens see who's in charge now. It's all symbolic of course, but no one ever said symbols don't have any power."

"But... what about you? I mean, you're the one who actually conquered the city."

"Yes, but they don't need to know that," Azula said, finally raising her gaze to meet his. "The Avatar's dead, Zuko. You're crown prince again. The only thing left is to have father formally recognize it, which he will once we return home. But there's no harm in letting our troops and the locals know you've already reclaimed your honour."

Zuko drew in a deep breath. Reclaimed his honour? Yes, that was what capturing – killing – the Avatar was supposed to have done. Right. His honour.

"Besides," Azula said as she lowered her head to the papers again. "There's a lot of paperwork here that needs to be gone through. The generals were planning something big, and I intend to get to the bottom of what it is."

"Something big?"

"Yes. Whatever it was, that waterbender peasant was involved, and that means the Avatar might have been involved somehow. Which means it's important enough for me to look into."

Zuko almost opened his mouth to ask his sister if he could help with that, but then he shook his head. Knowing Azula, she'd planned the whole thing out already and had decided that this was the best way for him to contribute overall.

Besides, maybe the walk would do him good. Help him clear his mind. Or something.

Zuko turned and walked out of the room. As he did so, he fleetingly wondered where Mai was and what she was doing at that moment.

(X)

"Hello. I am Joo Dee. Welcome to Ba Sing Se."

Mai sighed as she stared at the collection of women standing in the room, most of them with empty, vacant smiles on their faces.

Seizing control of the Dai Li had the rather unfortunate side effect of seizing control of most of the Dai Li's projects. In some cases it had been immensely useful, such as the information network the Dai Li had spread throughout Ba Sing Se which in turn allowed them to gather news of subversion and to stamp it out before it had time to grow.

But in other cases...

"So," she said, making sure to put an extra amount of withering contempt into her voice as she turned to regard the Dai Li representative that Azula had assigned her. "A rehabilitation program."

She could remember the conversation she'd had with Azula the other night regarding the Joo Dee that the Dai Li had brought with them even after their lake facility had been destroyed. Azula had made no secret of having very little regard for dealing with what she referred to as 'a bunch of faceless, nameless Earth Kingdom peasants', particularly as the new Fire-Nation occupied Ba Sing Se would have very little use for such handlers. And truth be told, Mai might not have bothered interceding so strongly on their behalf had it not been for one crucial factor.
This was what they had tried to do to Zuko. They had failed, of course, but had they continued the program to its conclusion this would have been the result.

And so Mai had determined to eradicate any trace of this. Forever.

"A rehabilitation..."

"Yes," Mai nodded once. "You broke their minds, surely you have some way of fixing it?"

The awkward silence that followed told Mai what she needed to know. Well, she'd expected that much. Not having a very high opinion of the Dai Li in the first place, every time she interacted with them only served to further confirm her belief that they were low, even for Earth Kingdom denizens.

"Well," she said. "If you don't have one in place, then make one. I want a guideline for how you plan to achieve this by the end of the week."

"The end of the – that's two days away!"

"Yes it is," Mai glared at him. "Fail and perhaps we shall introduce you to the Fire Nation's methods for dealing with dissidents and traitors."

The Dai Li lowered his gaze. "I'll see what I can do."

Mai watched as the Dai Li fairly scurried away, resisting the urge to sigh. She'd finally been able to convince Azula to spare her the resources using the argument that they'd be able to turn these otherwise-useless Joo Dees into productive allies after they had their minds fixed – with the bonus of them being grateful to the Fire Nation for having helped them. Of course both Mai and Azula knew that was about as likely as Zuko taking up Fire Lily ballet, but it had served as a decent enough pretext for Azula to do her friend a favour.

Of course that also meant that she would be in Azula's debt. But she could live with that.

(X)

The streets of the Outer Ring were still busy, Zuko noted as he walked under the bright afternoon sun. Notwithstanding the shock many of the ordinary citizens would feel as their city suddenly came under Fire Nation rule, the need for the daily necessities of life still led many of them out of their homes to their jobs and to the market.

Thus far the Fire Nation hadn't instituted much in the way of changes that would affect the daily lives of Ba Sing Se's denizens, but then again they had only been there for a grand total of two days. They would start the usual process of controlling the economy and food production of the city soon enough – the reconfiguring the vast industrial and agricultural producing power of the city to best serve the needs of the Fire Nation.

As he walked, he could hear the tramp of boots behind him. The bodyguard he'd been assigned were following obediently behind him as usual. After spending so long in exile and learning to do things on his own, the knowledge of their constant presence was... well, unsettling. Somewhat.

Well, it was something he was going to have to get used to. After all, he'd be heading back to the palace soo-

"Lee!"

The startled cry blasted away his thoughts, and he turned just in time to see a familiar sight rushing
"J – Jin!" Zuko sputtered.

"Lee, thank goodness!" Jin said as she neared him. "Where have you been? I haven't seen any sign of you or Jet for so long, and then the Fire Nation came in and... and everything's been so confused, I just don't know what -" she broke off as she noticed his clothes for perhaps the first time: a red Fire Nation robe that denoted his rank as nobility, and a confused frown appeared on her face. "Wait – what are you -"

And then his bodyguards were all around him, placing themselves between him and Jin, two of them reaching out to seize her and to drag her away.

"No – wait!" Zuko called out. "Stop! It's all right!"

The nearest of his bodyguards turned to him, a confused look on his face. "But, Prince Zuko, she's-

Not wasting time with words, Zuko pushed past the soldiers, roughly shoving the two soldiers grabbing Jin out of the way. Aside from confused looks at each other, they quickly backed down.

"Sorry, I'm… Look, are you okay?" Zuko reached out a hand to her – and Jin recoiled.

"Zuko?" She repeated, staring at him, her eyes wide. "… Prince Zuko? You’re… a Fire Nation prince?"

Zuko swallowed and reached out a hand. "Look, it's not what you think. I-

Jin backed up several steps, her expression saying what no words could. "Don't! Don’t… don’t say anything! Don’t touch me! Don’t come any closer!"

"You will treat the Prince with the proper resp-"

"ENOUGH!" Zuko whirled to yell at the overeager Fire Nation guard before turning back. "Look, Jin, it’s not what you-

Jin had vanished. And suddenly, Zuko realized just how many Earth Kingdom people were staring at him in silence, confusion, resentment and anger mixed through the expressions.

Swallowing, he waved his arm to indicate that the rest of his guard should follow him, and continued his slow march through the streets of the Outer Ring.

(X)

"Well then, General Fong," Azula said pleasantly as she looked up at the General who had just been brought into her room. "Have a seat."

The pleasant nature of her statement notwithstanding, he was rather roughly shoved into the chair by the Firebender guards that had accompanied him.

They were in a metal room – no surprise that the palace of Ba Sing Se would have some – mostly they would be used for dealing with criminal earthbenders, and now they could be put to good use while under the Fire Nation’s care.

"I trust you found your new accommodations suitable?"

No response. Not that Azula had really expected any.
“No? I could arrange for significantly better living conditions – and quite a bit more freedom to act. One word from me and all that can come true,” she smiled. “Of course, that depends on how well you cooperate.”

Staring at his sullen expression, Azula could read flickers of growing anger behind the man’s eyes. She smiled at him.

“Now then. The reason I’ve called you here is simple. I want to know what the Earth Kingdom army had planned for this day.” She tossed a slate that had the date inscribed on it across the table, letting the general glance down at it.

There was absolutely no reaction on the man’s face. Azula resisted the urge to smile. The effort they went through to show how much it didn’t affect them was entirely telling in its own ways. Most significantly, it showed that they still considered the date important for some reason. If the invasion of Ba Sing Se (Azula saw no reason to inform them of the death of the Avatar) had derailed these plans, they would have mentally written it off by now.

That, in the end, was as much information as she’d hoped to get – whether the people involved in this plan thought they had any chance of still pulling this off. After that, she’d just need to find out why this date was considered significant enough to stage whatever it was they were planning on this day. Assuming it had gotten off the ground with the involvement of the Avatar, it would be a surprisingly rushed operation – a complete contrast to the slower, more meticulously mapped out methods of the Earth King. Which meant the date itself had to be significant.

That didn’t mean she couldn’t still needle him for extra clues, of course.

“Well, general?” Azula said as she tapped her finger against the desk, producing a sound just rhythmic enough to be annoying. “It’s no good pretending this date isn’t of any significance – I got it from your calendar on your desk.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any idea,” the general said without looking up at her.

“Oh, so you can talk,” Azula said. Then she steeped her fingers. “You’re certain you don’t know?”

General Fong simply glared at her.

Azula sighed and sat back in her chair. “Well then, I must admit that I find it odd they would exclude one of their own generals from planning an invasion as important as this one.”

She resisted the urge to smirk as she saw the look of dismay flit across his face.

The nice thing about having five generals kept in complete isolation from each other was that it had given her five different chances to guess in front of them, all while keeping a close gauge on their reactions. General How had barely blinked at the word ‘assault’, and General Sung had let the barest traces of a smug smile come across his face at the word ‘coup’, letting Azula know that they would most likely be dead ends. Either that or the generals were spectacularly good at not letting anything slip – but Fong here had just disproved that notion.

“Still, if you can’t tell me anything more than what the others did, then I’m afraid I can’t give you any special privileges,” she shrugged. “My deepest apologies. Take him away.”

“Who was it?” the General demanded as the Firebenders seized him by the shoulders.

Azula raised an eyebrow. “Pardon?”
“Who told you? Was it Sung? I knew it! I knew that soft spoiled aristocrat couldn’t be trusted. I bet he-” his voice vanished abruptly as the Firebenders dragged him out of the room, slamming the heavy steel door in the process.

Alone in the room, Azula resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

(X)

“Zuko?” Mai’s voice was soft. “What’s the matter?”

Standing on a balcony overlooking the city, Zuko drew in a deep breath and let it all out in a sigh. “Today wasn’t a good day.”

“What? Why?”

“I did an inspection today. The city… looks a lot different than when you’re walking through it as a peasant and when you walk through it as a conqueror.”

Mai didn’t say anything for a long moment.

“The people don’t react so nicely to you, either,” Zuko’s voice grew softer.

“Mm,” Mai nodded. “Well, do you want to take another look at the city?”

“Huh?”

“Just the two of us. Find a restaurant somewhere in the Inner or Middle Ring. Have a nice, quiet dinner.”

Zuko turned to face her and cracked a brief smile. “You’d hate it.”

“Maybe,” Mai smiled back as she stepped closer and took his hand in her own. “But we won’t know until we try, will we?”

Zuko leaned in closer and gave Mai a quick kiss on the lips. “No,” he said. “I suppose we won’t.”

And hand in hand, they left the palace.

Chapter End

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed it. Please review!
It was dark in the carriage.

Of course, it was dark outside too, but at least outside there was the light from the moon and stars. Not that Azula had ever particularly cared for the moon. To her it was merely a pale reflection of the shining radiance and power that the sun – the far more prominent and powerful celestial body – possessed. The long and dull poems penned in dedication to the moon’s supposed beauty had mystified her.

But now, at least, she would have preferred even the moon’s pale light. The curtains covering the windows of the carriage had been tightly drawn, leaving the interior extremely dark.

Briefly, she considered simply lighting a fire in her palm but ultimately decided against it. Her father wouldn’t have cared, but her mother was sitting next to her and she tended to get annoyed at what she deemed ‘careless’ Firebending.

With a grumpy sigh, she leaned over, yanking aside the heavy curtain that obscured the window and stuck her head outside.

“Azula!” her mother’s tone of voice was sharp.

“I just want to see the surroundings,” Azula replied, more for the sake of disagreeing with her mother than anything else. The surroundings were, frankly, rather dull. All around her was the quiet landscape of the Fire Nation – endless and unchanging.

“Not with your head sticking out the window like that! Show some sense of propriety!”

Begrudgingly, Azula flopped back onto her seat. “At least leave the window open,” she mumbled.

Her mother apparently conceded to her request, for she made no further action as the carriage continued to trundle along. Behind and ahead of them were the bodyguard units, and truth be told, Azula half-wished that someone would try attacking them, just to alleviate the boredom of the journey.

Opposite her on the carriage, Zuko’s head bobbed downwards. Her brother had been fighting a losing battle against sleep for the better part of the hour, and frankly it had only been the fear that in his slumber he would end up slumping against his father that kept him awake. Watching him nod off and on again had been amusing for a few minutes, but now it bored her just as much as everything else.

Slumping even further down in her seat, she let out a long heartfelt sigh.
Her mother glanced at her, and in the gloomy darkness, Azula thought she had caught a hint of a smile on her face. “Don’t worry, Azula,” she said softly. “We’ll be home soon.”

“Someone’s in a good mood,” Mai said as Azula appeared in the doorway. “Now, let me just see if I can’t guess why.”

Azula smiled and nodded. “We’re almost ready to begin the journey home. Oh, this place is rather luxurious as far as the Earth Kingdom goes, but I can’t deny that their taste is sorely lacking against Fire Nation culture,” she glanced at Mai. “I suppose you’re happy to be heading back too?”

“Why would I?” Mai shrugged. “Same old boring house, same old boring customs and routines.”

“I could arrange to send you back to your parents, if you’d like.”

“Don’t you dare,” Mai fixed a glare on Azula.

“Yes, Agni forbid I do anything that might separate you from Zuko,” Azula muttered. She didn’t need to look at Mai to know that her friend’s glare had sharpened.

Well, she still had other matters to take care of before they could set off for home, and so, pausing briefly for the attendants to push open the doors for her, she entered the throne room of Ba Sing Se once more.

She let her gaze briefly sweep over the assembled attendants before she slowly ascended the throne. Power plays were nothing new to her, and this simple gesture of acknowledging their presence but granting them minimal significance in her eyes was just another one in a very long list of them.

Slowly, she ascended the throne as Mai took her customary place down by its side. Those present already knew what the princess wanted of them, and so the closest of them scurried towards her, making a deep bow.

“Have all the posts for the occupational government been properly set up?” Azula asked without preamble as she picked up the scroll offered her by an attendant.

“Almost, your highness,” one of the ministers said as he bowed.

“‘Almost’ isn’t ‘yes’,” Azula turned her gaze on him, silently enjoying the way he squirmed under her gaze. “What’s the matter? I gave you ample time.”

“It appears that… well, we have a bit of a hard time untangling the social infrastructure of Ba Sing Se. The social care duties are far more complicated than we had anticipated. As well… our men are not used to dealing with infrastructure of such scope. More men are needed than we had originally anticipated. So we are still… adapting.”

For a brief moment, Azula pondered. On one hand, she certainly understood the difficulties that would be involved in such a task. Looking through the endless paperwork had given her firsthand knowledge of that. On the other hand, what had these incompetent clods been doing the entire time they hadn’t overthrown the city yet? Wasn’t their entire job to prepare themselves for this day?

Of course they probably hadn’t expected the conquest to come quite so soon. She sighed.

“Have this sorted out by the time I am ready to leave this country. Or else,” she left the specifics of what she would do to them up to their imaginations. That tended to result in fanciful horrors
completely detached from any sort of reality, and when they realized what she actually planned to do was even worse, well. It had a positive effect on productivity, and that was all that needed to be said.

As the man scurried away to continue with his thankless task, Azula kept her gaze steady as the next person in line came and bowed before her.

Just a little more.

Just a little more and she would finally be heading home.

(X)

“You look troubled.”

Zuko didn’t bother to look up. “I thought you were helping Azula.”

“Sure. Helping.” Mai slid into the seat opposite Zuko’s. “She’s got everything figured out. At least, as far as wrapping up any administrative loose ends goes.”

Zuko remained silent. He was under no illusion that the victory over Ba Sing Se’s had been anything but his sister’s alone. It had been her plan, and she had been the primary one to execute it. She had made use of his abilities, of course, but they both knew that didn’t count.

Silently, she wondered. Azula had already sent off messages towards the Capital telling them about her capture of Ba Sing Se – and of Zuko’s defeat of the Avatar. As far as Azula was concerned, that had left the two of them at roughly the same level, and having fulfilled the terms of his Father’s conditions.

It was what he’d wanted, after all.

So why this creeping feeling of dissatisfaction? Did he feel jealous of his sister? Resisting the impulse to immediately shove that question away, Zuko took a deep, calming breath. Well, yes, it would have been nice to have received some credit for the capture of Ba Sing Se, but he knew he didn’t really deserve it. And he couldn’t complain – especially after Azula had reduced the role of anyone else other than Zuko in the Avatar’s defeat. Fair was fair, after all.

But his heart was still heavy.

Maybe it had less to do with the matter of Ba Sing Se and the Avatar’s defeat, and more to do with the people who had suffered it in the process. It would be made right in the long run, once the war ended and the Fire Nation could start properly handling the territories with the intent of spreading the power and prestige of the Fire Nation. But that wasn’t much comfort right now.

Heaving a sigh, he stood from the table.

“Zuko?” Mai’s look was curious.

“Just… tying up some loose ends,” he smiled at her as he showed her the scroll he had been writing in earlier. At the same time, he called for a servant.

“Yes, my lord?” the man said as he bowed before Zuko. It still felt strange, having people treat him like that.

“Have you found her yet?” he asked without preamble.

“You mean the Earth Kingdom girl called Jin? Yes, we have located her home in the Outer Ring,”
the man bowed lower. “Would you have us bring her to you?”

“What? No,” Zuko shook his head hastily. “No, it’s just… her mother’s sick. Get the physicians from the palace to go to her and look after her mother. This letter should smooth up any issues about payment.”

“Of course, my lord,” the servant bowed one more time before leaving the room.

“You seem to care a lot about the girl,” Mai’s tone was studiously neutral, but Zuko wasn’t that dumb. He knew the implications behind her statement.

“I can’t say she treated me badly during our time in the Earth Kingdom,” he shrugged. “It’s no skin off our back to pay back the favour.”

“No, I suppose not,” Mai’s tone belied her posture. She didn’t seem jealous. More… puzzled. As if what Zuko was telling her fit, but didn’t seem like the whole story.

Truth be told, Zuko wasn’t sure himself either. All he knew was that whenever he had an idle moment, he would remember the look of shocked betrayal etched on Jin’s face when she had realized that he was Fire Nation.

In some ways, it made him… angry. It was as if the fact that his country of ancestry had somehow negated the times they had spent together. Sure, it had been under false pretences under Zuko’s part, but the acts themselves were still real.

Weren’t they?

In any case, this act was somewhat petty on his part. A silent way of saying ‘See, just because I came from the Fire Nation doesn’t mean that I’m a bad person.’ He didn’t know why he felt it important to prove himself to her, but it did.

He shook his head wearily. What was done was done.

“How are your preparations for returning going?” he asked instead, a not-so-subtle indication that he wanted the subject to be changed.

“About as well as can be expected,” Mai shrugged. “They’re still sorting out the logistics of transporting the prisoners, but other than that it’s just a matter of getting on the ship and setting sail.

“The prisoners?” Zuko repeated.

“Political dissidents, some prominent military figures. Mostly people Azula wants to be able to take her time with interrogating in the Capital,” there was a brief pause. “And… well, Iroh, of course.”

Zuko grit his teeth. “Uncle…”

“We could leave him in the care of Ba Sing Se’s gaols,” a new voice came from the doorway, and the two of them turned to regard Azula. “But given that he stands accused of treason, anything less than a trial in our high court seems inappropriate.”

“Az…”

“Stop,” she said without looking him in the eye. “I know what you’re going to say, so save your breath. Whatever possessed him to act the way he did, those actions were unmistakeable, and inexcusable.”
“I know!” Zuko countered. “So I want to know why! Why would Uncle do something like…” he trailed off into silence.

“Well, have you tried asking him yourself?”

Silence. Slowly, Zuko shook his head.

“Then maybe you don’t want to know that badly. Or maybe you have a guess at the answer and you’re afraid to find out it’s true,” Azula closed her eyes. “The question’s academic at this point, anyway.”

“…Az, tell me. What’s going to happen to Uncle in the end?”

Azula let out a snort. “Fire Nation law hasn’t changed that much in the three years you’ve been gone, Zuzu. If –” when, “ – he’s found guilty he’ll be sentenced to death. Since he’s nobility it’ll be by beheading.”

Zuko swallowed hard.

“Well, maybe you could sway the trial in his favour?” Mai suggested.

“With Father present? Not a chance,” Azula’s laugh was humourless as she turned away. “And now, if you’ll excuse me…”

“Az. Tell me something.”

Azula paused for a long moment before turning back to Zuko, “What is it?”

He took a deep breath, “Do you want Uncle to die?”

She stood still, not meeting his gaze. “I want all enemies of the Fire Nation to be properly dealt with,” she said levelly.

“And is that why you’re bringing him back to be tried? When you know the only realistic outcome is him being executed? Is that why?” His voice was rising, but Zuko couldn’t find it in himself to calm down. It was yet another thing – something else to stoke the burning intensity he felt in the pit of his heart. “Answer me!”

A long moment of silence, and then Azula shook her head.

“No, it’s not. I’m bringing Uncle back to the homeland because that’s what he requested. Maybe he wants to die where he was born or some other sentimental nonsense. Like I said, if you want to know, ask him.”

And with that, she turned and left the room.

(X)

The day they were to depart was marked by perfect weather. The sun shone bright in the stunningly clear blue sky.

“No delays,” Azula nodded. “That’s good.”

Zuko, meanwhile, was distracted by the sight of Uncle being marched up the gangplank of the ship, his arms firmly bound behind him by chains of black iron.
“… Under ordinary circumstances transports of a Firebender prisoner should be done by keeping him in a cooled chamber, but this time I think we can dispense with that,” Azula said as she followed Zuko’s gaze. “It probably wouldn’t be good for the disposition of someone of Uncle’s age anyway.”

“You’re bringing him on board the flagship?”

Azula flashed Zuko a quick smile. “Let’s just say there are a few things I want to ask him while we’re away from the ears of either country’s governments.”

Zuko sighed and shook his head. Leave it to Azula to never miss a chance for more information on others. Keeping a close eye on Uncle, Zuko strode for the gangplank himself, pausing only when he caught sight of Mai talking with a Dai Li agent.

He drew to a halt. He knew Azula had insisted on bringing a fair number of the Earth Kingdom operatives back to the Fire Nation with her, although he still wasn’t too sure why.

He waited, silently, for Mai to finish her conversation before walking up to her. As he neared, he could hear the ending snatches of the discussion.

“… And I want a full implementation within a two month period. I’ve already arranged for a steady flow of reports to be sent back to the Capital, so don’t think you’re going to weasel your way out of paying the piper on this one.”

“Of course not, my lady,” the Dai Li agent replied as he bowed. “I would never dream of it.”

As Zuko approached, she waved her hand to dismiss the Dai Li man and turned to face him. “Zuko? Anything the matter?”

“What was that about?”

“Hm? Oh…” Mai glanced off to the side, an expression he couldn’t really read on her face. “Let’s just say that I was tying up a couple of loose ends.”

Zuko didn’t really get what she meant, but he could tell Mai didn’t really want this conversation to continue, and so he shrugged and let it slide.

“Hey, everyone!” Ty Lee’s bubbly voice from behind them. “We’re getting ready to leave! You ready to board?”

“Ty Lee?” Mai’s voice held a questioning note. “I thought… don’t you want to rejoin the circus? After all, the reason that Azula asked you to come along is already over and done with. You don’t need to go back to the Capital.”

“Yeah, well…” Ty Lee glanced at the ground, looking oddly guilty. “I mean, I thought about it a little, and I decided it couldn’t hurt to stay by Azu – I mean, go back to the capital. At least for a while,” her expression brightened. “And I get to spend more time with you guys too! Isn’t that great?”

“Wonderful,” Zuko replied as he strode up the gangplank of the ship.

Later, he sat on the deck of the ship watching the waves splash against the cold steel of the vessel, thinking. It had been about an hour since they’d left port, and the Earth Kingdom had long since vanished from view. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Azula talking with the captain of the ship. About what, he hadn’t the slightest idea.
The view didn’t really interest him. It wasn’t like he hadn’t seen more than enough of the ocean over the past three years.

Almost without knowing why, he stood and began walking into the hold of the ship.

The interior was wider and less stuffy than he had expected. After a moment’s reflection, he realized that a flagship intended for use by the crown princess (and prince) of the Fire Nation would have more comfortable furnishings than the obsolete troopship he had been sailing the world in for the past three years.

He heaved a sigh. So many things had changed.

So many things. Even things he had subconsciously always taken for granted.

Eventually, he found his way to another unremarkable steel door. Beyond it lay the area reserved for the holding of prisoners.

Well, prisoner. If not for Azula specifically requesting it, they wouldn’t have put prisoners on the same ship transporting Fire Nation royalty.

For a moment, he almost just reached out to shove the door open, marching into the room and sitting down in front of his Uncle, glaring at him for a long moment before saying, “We need to talk.”

Because they had to. They needed to talk. Zuko needed to ask Uncle just what he had been thinking.

But he didn’t. Zuko continued staring at the door for several long seconds before shaking his head and walking away again, a snarl on his lips.

They had to talk. But Zuko still wasn’t sure what to say. He knew what he wanted to ask, but would he actually receive an answer? And if he did, would it be the answer he was looking for? What would he do with the knowledge once he knew? Would it be something that he could use to get a lighter sentence for Uncle?

Then maybe you don’t want to know that badly. Or maybe you have a guess at the answer and you’re afraid to find out it’s true. Azula’s voice sounded in his mind.

“Damn it, Uncle…”

(X)

“You’re too soft, Zuko…” Azula murmured to herself as she walked through the corridor towards the holding cell. It hadn’t been hard to see that Zuko had been in a bad mood for most of the day, and given that she had caught sight of him drifting in the general direction of this room several times before shaking his head and walking away, it wasn’t particularly difficult to simply connect the dots.

Still, she supposed the three years spent alone with Zuko would always have rendered this a complex emotional issue for Zuko. Her brother had always thought too much with his heart.

A scowl deepened on her face. Her Uncle had to have known that, but he had still turned against them with no word of explanation.

“Of all the lies and deceit that I have seen you engage in over the years, I never thought you would lie about your own brother to invoke my aid.”

“Who’s the one who really betrayed Zuko in the end, Uncle?” she muttered to herself as she pushed
open the door to his room.

Iroh sat cross-legged in the centre of his cell, eyes closed in apparent meditation. The guard on duty jerked up in surprise at Azula’s sudden appearance, throwing up a hasty and sloppy salute.

“Wait outside,” she said without looking at him. “I’ll call you when I’m done here.”

“As you command, your highness.”

As the man left the room, Azula pulled up a chair and settled down on it, arms folded as she stared at her uncle. Even though he hadn’t budged an inch since Azula had entered the room, she knew he was fully aware of every detail.

A long silence stretched out between the two of them. Finally, Azula was the one to break it.

“Well,” she said without preamble. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Another long silence.

“Come now, Uncle. Playing coy? I might have expected such childish antics from Zuko, but I thought the Dragon of the West would be more mature than that.”

There was a long, slow exhalation from Iroh before he opened his eyes, looking into Azula’s face, “And what is it that you want me to say, then? There are many things we could talk about.”

“You’re right,” Azula’s laugh was mirthless. “Let’s start with something simple, then. Why did you do it? And don’t give me some philosophical nonsense line. Are you on the side of the Avatar?”

He gazed up at her, his eyes dark. “I desire peace for this world.”

She frowned, “And you think helping the Avatar would help achieve that? After we’ve already conquered Ba Sing Se? At this point it’s just a matter of subjugating the Water Tribes and the war is –”

“A peace earned only through force,” Iroh cut her off. “A peace formed only by us forcing our way on others. That is no true peace.”

“So that’s what it is,” Azula glared at Iroh. “You’re a traitor to the Fire Nation.”

“Call me what you want,” Iroh closed his eyes again. “It is my choice whether I accept such judgments.”

“Really? Then what else am I supposed to call you? It’s been laid in stone for a century. The Avatar is the enemy of the Fire Nation and –“

“The Avatar is the enemy of Sozin and all who would follow his path,” Iroh snapped with a vehemence that honestly surprised Azula. “Before this war few Fire Nation rulers would have butted heads with the Avatar, let alone ordering his destruction based entirely on his existence. But now the Fire Nation has become so set in its way that it cannot allow a being that is literally the embodiment of Balance to exist. Tell me, do you still think this is a proper state of affairs?”

Azula didn’t reply to her uncle’s question, glaring silently at him instead. Finally she let out a deep breath, “Well, that’s that, then. So much for trying to get you off lightly or anything like that.”

Iroh’s own snort was disbelieving, “You’ll forgive me for being dubious about any supposed mercy you have to offer me, niece.”
She bared her teeth. “Don’t think for one second that I actually care about what happens to traitors like you, Uncle. But we both know how Zuko would feel if you…” she trailed off. “You know what, forget it.”

At the mention of Zuko, Iroh had shifted his gaze, staring down at the corrugated metal of the floor. Shaking her head, Azula stood to leave, “I guess continuing this conversation is pointless. It’s not like you actually care about how Zuko feels anyway.”

“You have no right to say something like that,” Iroh’s voice was calm, but it still caused Azula to draw to a halt.

“Don’t I,” her voice was soft as she half-turned back to face him. “You’ve been nothing but cruel to Zuko, Uncle. How am I supposed to interpret that?”

Iroh’s eye narrowed, “Cruel?” his voice was soft, but with an edge of steel in it.

Azula wasn’t deterred. “Oh? What else am I supposed to call it when you’ve been stringing him along for three years, Uncle! You never had any intention of letting him capture the Avatar! He trusted you, Uncle!” her voice was rising in volume and intensity, and she didn’t really care to bring it back under control. “He trusted you, and relied on you, and now you’ve taken all that trust and thrown it back in his face!”

“Those three years were meant to guide him-”

“And even assuming your nonsense holds any water, you ‘guided’ him so well that no one was more surprised than Zuko when you turned on us! Excellent work, Uncle. You were so incompetent you couldn’t even corrupt him properly.” a sad bitter laugh came from Azula as she shook her head and turned away from Iroh. “You know what, Uncle? As far as I’m concerned, you’re no better towards Zuko than Father ever was. At least he was straightforward about what he wanted from his son.”

She didn’t wait for his reply, quickly stepping out of the room and indicating that the guard should re-enter the room. As the door clanged shut behind her, Azula let out a long sigh.

“You know, you shouldn’t eavesdrop. You might hear answers to questions you didn't want to ask.”

From the shadows, Zuko emerged, looking sullen.

“… I’m sorry,” Azula said after a moment of silence. “I don’t think you should have heard that.”

“It’s fine,” Zuko closed his eyes, doing a miserable job of trying to act nonchalant. “It doesn’t matter anymore anyway.”

“Does it?” Azula shook her head and began walking away from the holding room. “That conversation told me something very important.”

“… It did?”

“I referred to the Avatar in the present tense when I started to talk about him. But Uncle didn’t consider it odd, and in fact he did the same,” Azula’s frown deepened. “But he knows as well as I do that he took a lightning bolt to the back.”

“But, wait, that means…”

“That means Uncle might have expected the Avatar to be able survive that wound. How, I don’t know, but no one ever accused Uncle of being too forthcoming with information,” she turned back
to face Zuko. “Given what he might know, and what we don’t, we might have to assume the Avatar somehow survived after all.”

Zuko’s eyes widened. “But that’s… But I…”

Azula smiled at him. “Don’t worry your pretty little head about it, Zuzu. There’s nothing concrete yet. I’ll just need to get our intelligence network to do more digging. For now, we’re returning to the Capital. You’ve earned this much, Zuko.”

Not waiting for Zuko to respond, Azula strode up to the deck of the ship.

(X)

Several weeks later, Ty Lee stood on the lookout post.

Well, ‘stood’ would have been pushing it. She was currently in a handstand, maintaining her balance against the gentle rocking of the ship on the ocean waves.

She didn’t really mind getting assigned lookout duty like this. It gave her something to do. Mai had been spending more and more time with Zuko lately, and given how mopey Zuko had been near the start of the journey, Ty Lee hoped that the time spent was paying off, instead of having the net effect of making the both of them even grumpier.

Azula had been… Azula, except even moreso. Constantly vanishing into her private room to figure out plans and devices that only she knew about. Ty Lee had been so bored she had even considered asking Azula about those, but had ultimately decided against it. Even assuming Azula would deign to answer her, the explanation would probably make her head spin anyway.

So that left tasks like these. Which was fun in its own way. After all, it let her keep a good look out for –

She blinked. Was that…?

Hastily she flipped upright, bringing up one hand to shield against the glare of the sun. It looked like… It was!

“Everyone!” Ty Lee hollered. “Land ahoy!”

They had returned. At long last, they were back in the Fire Nation.

(X)

Azula sighed as the carriage ground to a stop. Finally. The trip to the Lotus Gardens had been enjoyable enough in its own way, but the actual travelling had been nothing but unbearable tedium.

Well, at least that was over and done with. Time to hop into a hot bath, and then a soft, comfortable bed.

At that moment, she noticed her mother’s wry gaze. Following it herself, she let out a tiny snort.

“Let me, Mother,” she said, a smirk on her face.

“All right, but gently now.”

Reaching over, Azula seized Zuko by the shoulder, shaking him once and waking him up from his slumber.
“Huh? Whuzzat?” he sputtered, bolting upright.

“Wake up, Dum-dum,” she said primly as she opened the door to the carriage ahead of the footmen coming up to her and jumping onto the ground below. “We’ve arrived home.”

Chapter End

Thanks for reading. Please review.

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